

Teaching From *Embracing Defeat*

An Interview with John Dower

By Kathleen Krauth and Lynn Parisi

John W. Dower is the Elting E. Morison Professor of History at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His most recent work, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (W. W. Norton and The New Press, 1999), has received international critical acclaim from the academic community, the media, and the general public. A long list of awards for *Embracing Defeat* includes the American Historical Association's 1999 John K. Fairbank Prize, the 2000 Bancroft Prize awarded by Columbia University, the 1999 National Book Award, and the 2000 Pulitzer Prize. In achieving such broad acclaim across specialized and general audiences, Professor Dower's work has focused new attention on the historical context of contemporary Japan.

Embracing Defeat continues an exploration of questions about war, peace, and justice in Japanese history and U.S.-Japan relations that has characterized Dower's career and his previous works, including *Empire and Aftermath* and *War Without Mercy*. In this work, however, Dower moves in new directions. While he reexamines "big" questions of history, such as the decision to retain the imperial institution, Dower also taps into rich resources of popular culture and personal writings to analyze issues and events as perceived by ordinary Japanese. In so doing, he offers a new narrative of the occupation as an essentially Japanese experience lived by real people.

We met Professor Dower in the spring of 1999. As part of our initial work to plan the summer institute, "Japan 1945–1989: Recreating a Modern Nation," we had just read *Embracing Defeat* and knew that Dower's research and analysis could be critical and exciting topics to explore with high school teachers in the institute. We invited John to give the keynote address for the institute; he joined the program for two sessions, engaging us in his research questions and analysis.

During our institute follow-through in the 1999–2000 school year, we were impressed by the number of institute alumni incorporating *Embracing Defeat* into their instruction on the postwar period. Dower's discussions and his book had both challenged institute participants to engage their students with important questions of this period—how bitter enemies can become friends and allies, how democracy develops, how the experiences of ordinary people change our perceptions of events—and provided them with rich new primary sources for doing so. Our interview with Dower for *EAA* is an outgrowth of our 1999 institute participants' response to *Embracing Defeat*. We invited Professor Dower to talk with us about *Embracing Defeat*, the evolution of his own research on war and its impact in Japan, and particularly, his thoughts on secondary-level teaching on this and related topics.

—Lynn Parisi and Kathleen Krauth

Photograph of John W. Dower by Mark Ostow
Paperback cover photo: Hiroshima, September 1945. National Archives.



JOHN W. DOWER

EMBRACING DEFEAT

JAPAN IN THE WAKE OF WORLD WAR II



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When it came to trying to understand the response to defeat in Japan after World War II, I felt it necessary to try as best I could to talk about “everyone.” That meant not only the top politicians and capitalists and bureaucrats and intellectuals, but also ordinary men and women. It meant children and young people as well as adults. I wanted to see if I could make a start at understanding what war, defeat, occupation and starting over meant for individuals in all walks of life—the people who don’t provide us with conventional “scholarly” records.

Children orphaned during the repatriation of Japanese civilians from Manchuria arriving at Tokyo’s Shinagawa station in December 1946, sixteen months after the surrender. Photo: Asahi Shimbunsha.

Lynn: John, first we want to congratulate you on the recognition you have received for *Embracing Defeat*. When we first approached you in fall 1999 about an interview for *Education About Asia*, *Embracing Defeat* had not yet received the National Book Award, Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction, or the many other awards. We know that your schedule has been especially busy this past year, in part due to the positive response to your book, and we want to thank you for taking time for this interview.

In talking to you about *Embracing Defeat*, our perspectives are that of precollege staff developers and secondary-level history teachers. Consequently, we want to ask you about how your work questions and enriches historical narratives of the occupation period and U.S.-Japan relations for teachers designing instruction, and for their students, as well as how it challenges our thinking about Japan and the Japanese people.

Kathy: The impact of the occupation on postwar Japan and U.S.-Japan relations has figured into your previous writings. What was your impetus to undertake this new research for *Embracing Defeat*?

JWD: For much of my career, I’ve been interested in the broad question of how two countries that had been such ferocious enemies in World War II—the United States and Japan—were able to emerge as close allies and friends. That is, how could they move so quickly from war to peace, from truly virulent hatreds and racial animosities into a period of cooperation, collaboration, amity, and all sorts of personal friendships at many different levels? When I began looking at these issues as a graduate student, I approached the topic through the elites and the formal record. That was the way you did history back in the 1960s and into the 70s—you looked at formal documents and official records and the activities of the ruling groups. It was a good way of getting at certain areas of policy making and power. But it left out a lot.

As the years passed, my interests moved much more in the direction of social and cultural history—that is, trying to understand national and international interactions and changes at every level, including the grassroots. In *Embracing Defeat*, I look at Japan and the Japanese people in many different ways. In effect, I’m challenging the very concept of “Japan” and saying that there are really many Japans, just as there are many Americas.

Kathy: Your response leads directly to our next questions. Can you comment on your approach to this period and the sources you used, including expressions of popular culture? How does your approach differ from previous narratives of this period?

JWD: When I came to this project, I said to myself: “I want to get at the Japanese experience of defeat and occupation.” And then I asked myself: “Who are the Japanese?” But once you ask this seriously, it is really like asking who are the Americans. If someone comes up and inquires, “what are Americans like?”, it’s only natural to respond “who are you talking about—men, women, old, young, north, south, rich, poor, people of color, white people?” This is just as true of Japan. You can’t really talk about Japan; you have to talk about “Japans.” And you can’t talk about “the Japanese” as if we still adhered to the old wartime cliché about seeing one and thus seeing them all. You have to talk about a great diversity of people. This goes against the popular notion of a harmonious and homogenized Japanese populace, just as it breaks down the notion of a monolithic “Japanese culture.” In fact, there are many cultures and many people.

So, when it came to trying to understand the response to defeat in Japan after World War II, I felt it necessary to try as best I could to talk about “everyone.” That meant not only the top politicians and capitalists and bureaucrats and intellectuals, but also ordinary men and women. It meant children and young people as well as adults. I wanted to see if I could make a start at understanding what war, defeat, occupation and starting over



I don't speak of the culture of defeat. I speak of cultures. I address revolutions taking place at many levels. There is revolution from above coming from both the American victors and from certain Japanese elites—and full of contradictions, as the very notion of “revolution from above” implies. There is a whole chapter on “embracing revolution”—that is, on how Japanese in all walks of life responded to often radical reforms.

Cartoon by Katō Etsurō. The reformist agenda introduced by the occupation force was a “gift from heaven” welcomed by the populace. The cannisters being parachuted in by the victors to a joyous reception read “democratic revolution.” From Katō's 1946 booklet *Okurareta Kukumei*, published by Kobanotosha.

meant for individuals in all walks of life—the people who don't provide us with conventional “scholarly” records. Once I had formulated the question this way, I had to consider how to pull it off—how to get at this gamut of personal experiences. And this led me to look at a wide range of sources that are still a little unconventional, at least in mainstream historical writings on Japan. These included cartoons, films, jokes, slogans, letters to newspapers, poems by ordinary people, children's games, best sellers, pulp magazines, ordinary everyday language—all of which underwent rapid and extraordinary changes after the defeat.

There were visceral things that the official record simply doesn't convey. Colloquial and even vulgar language, for example. In serious historical writings of the very recent past, for instance, one simply didn't introduce crude words. This was regarded as reflecting negatively on the seriousness or elegance of the scholarship itself. This is a rather perverse variation, indeed, on the notion of guilt by association, for much of our human experience—at all levels of society—is conveyed in that kind of language. I also examined subcultures like the prostitutes who serviced the American occupation forces, and the vigorous black market that was the real economy of Japan from 1945 to 1949. I looked at “cultures of corruption.” I asked what games children were playing. One of the “keywords” in my own mind as I researched and wrote was *voices*. I tried to uncover and listen to as many as I could—and then let them speak for themselves in the book.

Lynn: *Would you comment further on “multiple voices?” The titles of many of the chapters and sections of Embracing Defeat are pluralized (Shattered Lives, Cultures of Defeat, Revolutions, Democracies, Guilts, Reconstructions), underscoring this fundamental perspective of your book—that there is no single or uniform Japanese experience of occupation, but rather, many stories. What do the experiences of “ordinary” people add to our understanding of Japan, particularly in this period? How do the varied experiences and voices presented in Embracing Defeat challenge assumptions about the occupation period?*

JWD: What I did in structuring the book, as you note, was basically pluralize things. In other words, I don't speak of the culture of defeat. I speak of *cultures*. I address revolutions taking place

at many levels. There is revolution from above coming from both the American victors and from certain Japanese elites—and full of contradictions, as the very notion of “revolution from above” implies. There is a whole chapter on “embracing revolution”—that is, on how Japanese in all walks of life responded to often radical reforms. “Revolution” also manifested itself in various forms “from below”—not only in dynamic movements involving organized labor and the communist and socialist parties, but also spontaneous demonstrations by housewives and shop-floor workers.

Sometimes, as with “democracies,” I am trying to suggest inherent tensions and contradictions that have carried over to the present day. I see the emergence of genuine democratic consciousness and activism in these years. At the same time, this is boxed in various undemocratic ways. This leads me to introduce the notion of “oxymoronic democracy”—“imperial democracy” under the emperor, for example, and “censored democracy” in which the Americans promoted free speech while themselves engaging in censorship of the Japanese media. “Bureaucratic democracy,” reflecting the occupation command's own *modus operandi*, is another such example of democracy in a box.

Overall, however, I am arguing that, in a great many ways, the Japanese embraced not just the end of a war that had come home, but—more subtly and yet dramatically—the opportunity to start over and create a more democratic and non-militaristic society. I emerged with admiration for the vigor of people at all levels, but particularly the so-called non-elites, and how they wrestled with how to start over in a shattered world. Huge numbers of Japanese struggled intelligently with building new private lives as well as a new society. Without understanding this, we really can't understand the nature of democratic and anti-militarist sentiments in contemporary Japan. The energy and iconoclasm I found at so many levels really repudiates the stereotype of a people socialized to acquiesce to authority and incapable of governing themselves.

Kathy: *We have been talking about the stories of ordinary people—history “on the ground.” Embracing Defeat also re-examines major national and international policy issues of the period. One of these is the issue of Emperor Hirohito. In perhaps the most controversial part of Embracing Defeat, you argue that the Allied retention of Hirohito and the imper-*

Teaching From *Embracing Defeat*—An Interview with John Dower



I think Hirohito's retention created problems that continue to the present day. Why? . . . Hirohito and the new postwar constitutional monarchy "symbolized" many things that are not democratic. One is monarchy itself, and the whole oxymoron of imperial democracy. The throne remained a symbol of hereditary privilege. It also remained a symbol of patriarchy.

Hirohito's most memorable public appearances prior to the surrender involved reviewing the imperial forces from his handsome horse, White Snow. Photo: National Archives.

ial institution was probably the biggest missed opportunity by the Americans. Please comment on this policy's repercussions for postwar Japan:

JWD: I think a number of aspects of the book are controversial. "De-homogenizing" the Japanese is controversial, and so is my critique of the Allied war crimes trials. But you're right—the most controversial argument is probably the way I treat the decision to retain Emperor Hirohito on the throne. Here I am introducing a line of argument we can find in Japanese scholarship: the neglected "third alternative" for dealing with the sovereign who had reigned since 1926, through two decades of aggression abroad and repression at home. One alternative was to bring Hirohito to trial for war crimes—alongside the top-level loyal officers and officials who *were* brought to trial. A second alternative was to retain him as a new kind of "symbol emperor" under a new constitutional system—which is the policy actually followed.

The third alternative was to use Emperor Hirohito to effect the surrender, and then have him abdicate under some sort of assumption of "moral" responsibility for the disastrous war. In fact—and I document this in considerable detail—the issue of abdication came up concretely on three occasions following the defeat. It arose first in 1945–6, after the surrender had been smoothly carried out; then in late 1948, when the Tokyo trial of "Class A" war criminals came to an end; and finally, in late 1951 and early 1952, when the occupation was drawing to a close. On all three occasions, the possibility of abdication was raised on the *Japanese* side. It had supporters among individuals close to the throne (including the emperor's own uncle and younger brother), as well as other conservatives who believed that Hirohito had a moral obligation to take responsibility for the millions of loyal subjects who had died fighting in his name. Every time the Japanese side came to General MacArthur or other top occupation officials and asked, "do you think he should abdicate?", the Americans said "no, absolutely not. We need him for stability. We need him as a bulwark against social unrest and communism in Japan." And so Hirohito continued on the throne—his reign did not end until 1989, long after every

other famous wartime leader had passed away. General MacArthur even took to publicly calling him the *leader* of postwar democratization. And the usual view is this was a wise decision. The emperor had always been a pacifist at heart, the story went, and now was in a position to lead his people into an epoch of true peace and democracy.

I am critical of this. I think Hirohito's retention created problems that continue to the present day. Why? Under the new Japanese constitution that the Americans fathered in 1946–7, sovereignty was given to the people for the first time. Until then, there was no such thing as a Japanese "citizen." All were "subjects" under the emperor. Popular sovereignty was a truly radical reform—as was renunciation of the "right of belligerency" that also was formally proclaimed in the new constitution. Under the new charter, the emperor was identified as "the symbol of the State and of the unity of the people."

The problem really lies, as I see it, in the ambiguity of the "symbol emperor" concept. It is imprecise. It is almost, one might say, ambidextrous. It is an empty vessel that can be filled with any number of conflicting interpretations—and when Hirohito was allowed to stay on as sovereign, the more conservative connotations of this imperial "symbol" were personified and thereby strengthened. I think we have to step back and ask, "What, in full, did Hirohito symbolize as emperor?" The answer is not simple. I would agree that he became a symbol of Japan's transition from war to peace, and that is not negligible. At the same time, however, it takes a vivid imagination indeed to see the august inheritor of a divine kingship as a symbol of democracy.

On the contrary, Hirohito and the new postwar constitutional monarchy "symbolized" many things that are not democratic. One is monarchy itself, and the whole oxymoron of imperial democracy. The throne remained a symbol of hereditary privilege. It also remained a symbol of patriarchy. One of the little puzzles of the occupation is why the Americans, even given their enthusiastic support of the monarchy, allowed the Japanese to retain the rule that only males can succeed to the throne. This wasn't even a "traditional" practice in Japan, for there had been empresses in earlier times. The patriarchal rule of succession was

One of the things I think we must do as teachers and educators is understand that “democracy” is an on-going struggle. These rights and liberties, freedoms and values, have been evolving over time and are always in the process of being struggled over and worked out. In my view, Japan has emerged as one of the strong democracies of the postwar period.

Women voting, for the first time, in the general election of 1946. The granting of woman suffrage was sometimes referred to as “the vote received from MacArthur.” Photo: Kyōdō Tsūshin (Kyodo News Agency).



adopted only in the late nineteenth century, when the Japanese set out to make the throne the pivot of a modern nationalism; but the American reformers, who were so zealous in other areas, let this stand—with obvious dire consequences today, when the heir apparent and his wife are under enormous pressure to produce a male heir. And, of course, the throne remained a racial symbol as well. Japanese sovereigns did not intermarry with the royalty of other nations, races, or cultures. No Japanese sovereign was more closely identified with the virulent ideology of “Yamato race” superiority than Hirohito. This was the very essence of the “Imperial Way” indoctrination that marked the first two disastrous decades of his reign.

At the same time, the American decision to absolve Hirohito of all responsibility whatsoever for the horrendous war that had been waged in his name, and with his close personal involvement—even of *moral* responsibility—undermined serious public debate about war responsibility in Japan until his death in 1989. On this critical issue, Hirohito’s retention may be said to symbolize an *irresponsibility*—a *non-accountability*—that continues to the present day. And finally, with support from the Americans and continuing as formal Japanese policy to the present day, the intimate records of Hirohito and the Imperial House in general are closed to outside scrutiny. Here we have a perfect symbol of secret governance, or, in our present-day parlance, non-transparency.

All this runs counter to the grassroots spirit of “peace and democracy” that I found impressive in the years immediately following defeat. At the same time, the lingering taboos on discussing Hirohito’s war responsibility play into the hands of those present-day conservatives and neo-nationalists who seek to sanitize the record of aggression and atrocity that took place under Hirohito’s aegis between 1926 and 1945. To have made the emperor the “symbol” of the country—and to have retained Hirohito as the preeminent embodiment of what that symbol implies—has warped domestic debates on Japanese identity in unfortunate ways. This is apparent in contemporary right-wing rhetoric, in which “postwar democracy” is a pejorative term and the ideal Japan is defined in much the same language that characterized Hirohito’s first two decades as sovereign: as an “emperor-centered land of the gods.” Us *vis-a-vis* Them, with

little in common, little to share; this is hardly an auspicious way to define one’s identity in the twenty-first century.

Lynn: You argue convincingly that Japanese from all segments of society were ready for change and thus embraced the defeat and the changes introduced by the occupation forces. Yet many Americans adhere to the idea that because Japanese democracy was imposed from outside and is practiced differently than in the United States, Japan is not a true democracy. Most Americans recognize that the occupation staff drafted Japan’s postwar constitution and that it was adopted reluctantly by the Japanese government; but how and why did the Japanese make this constitution their own during the occupation and postwar period?

JWD: Many Japanese I talk to nowadays also feel that they don’t have “true” democracy. I agree. But Americans don’t have a perfect democracy either. Who does? We have to step back and say, “wait a minute, we can’t judge Japan by rarefied ideals that we and others haven’t attained, or don’t practice, either.” One of the things I think we must do as teachers and educators is understand that “democracy” is an on-going struggle. These rights and liberties, freedoms and values, have been evolving over time and are always in the process of being struggled over and worked out. In my view, Japan has emerged as one of the strong democracies of the postwar period. It has a free press. It has strong protections of law. Its electoral system is no more corrupt, or no more ruled by big money, than ours is. Proportionally, it has as many—or more accurately, as *few*—women in its parliament as we do in our Congress: around 11 or 12 percent. It even has socialist and communist parties, and in this regard, a greater range of political debate and choice than we do. Japan is also a genuinely nonmilitaristic society, as far as such a society can be said to exist today. It is a flawed democracy, and it is always being pushed in the direction of creeping remilitarization under the eagle’s wing. Still, much of what we see is admirable—a far cry, indeed, from the authoritarianism and militarism of prewar Japan.

Now, what can we say about the constitution? Shortly after the war ended, the victorious Allied powers led by the Americans announced a policy of “demilitarization and democratization” for Japan. Basically, the Americans said that the Meiji

Teaching From *Embracing Defeat*—An Interview with John Dower

鎖は切断された
——しかし、我々はこの鎖を断つために一滴の血も汗も流さなかつたことを忘れてはならない。



General MacArthur called in the head of Government Section in his occupation command and said, “Look, they are not going to do what is necessary. We’ll write a model constitution for them.” MacArthur gave Government Section one week to do this, and their draft eventually became the national charter that governs Japan to the present day.

One of Katō’s numerous renderings of the liberation brought about by early occupation policies, giant American shears cut the chains that had held down “the people,” while old-guard power brokers and militarists flee in the background. The specific reference was to SCAP’s “civil liberties” directive of October 4, 1945. From Katō’s 1946 booklet *Okurareta Kukumei*, published by Kobunsho.

Constitution of 1890 was “feudalistic” and fundamentally undemocratic. It restricted human and civil rights. It did not give sovereignty to the people. It did not establish separation of powers, and allowed the military and other antidemocratic elements to usurp authority. Early on, the Americans told the Japanese government to change the constitution; and the government, which was very conservative, set up a committee of legal experts to look into the matter. Predictably, they came up with minor and essentially cosmetic proposals for revision. And so General MacArthur called in the head of Government Section in his occupation command and said, “Look, they are not going to do what is necessary. We’ll write a model constitution for them.” MacArthur gave Government Section one week to do this, and their draft eventually became the national charter that governs Japan to the present day.

The constitution the Americans birthed, that so-called MacArthur Constitution, is also known as the Peace Constitution. It is a very progressive document, with three distinguishing features. It establishes popular sovereignty and defines the emperor as “symbol” (rather than “sacred and inviolable,” as in the Meiji Constitution). It renounces belligerency as the right of the state (not only in the famous Article Nine “no war” clause, but also in the preamble). And, thirdly, it codifies an impressive list of civil and human rights (even including what Americans would refer to as an “equal rights” provision, explicitly stipulating that men and women are equal before the law).

This constitution came into effect in 1947, after extensive discussion in the Diet, or parliament. To the present day, not a word of it has been revised. As can easily be imagined, it has long been a major target of conservatives, who argue that it is an alien document that does not reflect true Japanese spirit or sentiment. In their view, this is simply the most blatant and embarrassing of many egregious acts of cultural imperialism imposed by the victors upon the vanquished.

My argument in *Embracing Defeat* is a little different from this standard view. I make a distinction between the Japanese government and the Japanese people. While the government and the committee it appointed to look into revision were very con-

servative, there were many drafts being produced by private groups in 1945 and early 1946. When the Americans announced that Japan should revise its constitution, different organizations and political parties, and even some individuals, devoted themselves to writing what they thought would be a good new national charter. The Americans had access to the results of all this activity and, with few exceptions, these drafts were decidedly more liberal than anything the government was willing to entertain. Obviously, there’s a lesson in this for all of us who deal with Japan, whether as educators or writers. That is, we must be careful not to take whatever the government says or does as representing “the” Japanese perspective. That is the fallacy of a monolithic “Japan.” Where constitutional revision was concerned, right from the beginning there was a conspicuous gap between the conservative government and grassroots opinion.

I also trace out how, in the process of being translated by the government, changes took place in the American draft. It actually went through several versions, and then was debated for over one hundred sessions in the parliament. The legislators introduced some changes, including progressive ones, and the public followed these debates closely. One of the most far-reaching constitutional “reforms” actually stemmed from an initiative outside the political process, when an informal group of individuals successfully urged that the revised constitution be written in language everyone could understand. This was a truly revolutionary grassroots proposal. Up to that point, official documents were written in a formal language called *bungotai* that differed from everyday Japanese and was difficult for the average person to understand. With this reform, which came entirely from the Japanese side, the entire corpus of written law eventually became more accessible. These things went back-and-forth in closely watched ways. None of this challenges the fact that the Americans wrote the basic draft. But it calls attention to the other side of the picture—to the fact that there was much more Japanese input than is conveyed in the usual story of the constitution being forced on a passive and reluctant populace.

Right from the beginning, the Americans assumed that the Japanese would in time make revisions in the new charter as

they deemed appropriate. They never did. Not a word has been changed since it went into effect in 1947. Why? Not because it is a perfect document, but because a large percentage of the Japanese people still cherish the basic ideals of democracy and anti-militarism that the constitution so clearly exemplifies. For over half a century, this has been *their* constitution. Nothing in the law prevents them from changing it. I would anticipate that there will probably be changes made in the near future. If nothing else, the on-going dilemma of maintaining military forces under a constitution that clearly seems to prohibit this is pushing sentiment in that direction. But they will never go back to anything resembling the conservative, absolutist type of constitution they had previously. Despite its undeniable genesis in Government Section, the so-called MacArthur Constitution did—and still does—reflect ideals embraced by a great many Japanese.

Lynn: *You devote several chapters to the war crimes trials in Japan, which is also controversial. The Tokyo War Crimes Trials as you have discussed them seem to offer a powerful historical analogy to help students examine contemporary controversies over international crimes and justice. What do the Tokyo War Crimes Trials tell us about the issue of war crimes trials generally and international war crimes trials today?*

JWD: Two chapters in the book address war crimes and war responsibility. One, titled “Victor’s Justice, Loser’s Justice,” looks at the way the victorious Allied powers conducted war crimes trials of Japanese, and the way in which Japanese, particularly at the elite level, actively contributed to these trials. The second chapter, titled “What Do You Tell the Dead When You Lose?”, looks at such concepts as “guilt” and “repentance” entirely from the Japanese side. This is another example of my attempt to understand defeat and occupation as a Japanese experience, not a Western one, or one defined in the vocabularies of the victors.

Where the Tokyo trials are concerned, my critical approach is conveyed in the notion of “victor’s justice”—but the spin I give this is to note how much the showcase trials in Tokyo actually coincided with the interests of Japanese conservatives. The most obvious example of this is the purely political decision to exclude the emperor from the trials. Not only was he not indicted, he was never interrogated. More egregious yet, the American-led *prosecution* took care to ensure that the emperor’s role was never mentioned negatively in the course of the trial. There were other deplorable omissions as well, such as the American decision to cover up the activities of the notorious “Unit 731” in Manchuria, which had conducted gruesome medical experiments on prisoners. In this instance, the Americans secretly granted immunity from prosecution to the scientists involved in exchange for information about the details of these ghastly experiments. They also chose not to address the terrible exploitation of tens of thousands of so-called *ianfu*, or “comfort women,” who performed sexual services for the imperial forces. In other words, in many respects “victor’s justice” actually involved *covering up* the true nature of Imperial Japan’s war crimes.

The other side of “victor’s justice” is more familiar. I do support the ideals that lay behind the Nuremberg and Tokyo war

crimes trials—namely, that aggressors should be accountable for their deeds under international law. But the Tokyo trial was terribly flawed in many ways. The high-level former officers and officials brought to the dock in Tokyo (there were twenty-five of them at the end of the trial) were a rather arbitrarily selected “representative” group. There was a high level of whimsy involved in the very process of deciding who would—and, *ipso facto*, who would not—actually be indicted for “Class A” war crimes. The accused were then tried for having committed “crimes against peace”—an important legal concept indeed, but one which did not exist in international law before the war ended in 1945. This is what we call *ex post facto* law. As legal scholars often point out, it violates the basic legal precept that “without a law there can be no crime, without a law there can be no punishment” (*nullum crimen sine lege, nulla poena sine lege*).

The key charge in the Tokyo trial was that Japan’s leaders had been engaged in a conspiracy or “common plan” to commit aggressive war that dated back to 1928. Every act thereafter, every response to developments abroad—to global Depression, anti-Japanese activities in China, whatever—was simply part of a master plan to commit aggression. No serious historian today would accept this argument, but “conspiracy” was the key to the prosecution’s case. In addition, defendants were found guilty of committing crimes like breaking treaties or abusing prisoners. They had indeed done so, but so also had some of the victorious nations represented on the bench. The argument here, of course, involves the perception of “double standards” on the part of the victorious powers. Where “crimes against peace” or “crimes against humanity” are concerned, for example, the Japanese could (and still do) bring up Allied behavior such as the American terror bombing of civilians that culminated in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or the abuse and killing of a huge number of Japanese POWs by the Soviet Union (which only entered the war in Asia in its final week, and did so in violation of its neutrality pact with Japan).

The charge of double standards goes far beyond this. Even as the Japanese defendants in Tokyo were being found guilty of “aggression” in Asia, the British, French, and Dutch—with American support—were forcibly attempting to reassert control over their colonial possessions there. The Soviets were clamping an iron hand on eastern Europe, China had plunged into the final, violent vortex of its civil war, and the wartime Allied alliance—serenely represented all together on the bench in Tokyo—had been sundered. The Cold War was in full swing—while, in Tokyo, the prosecution was still blithely arguing that when the Japanese defendants asserted that they had been sincerely concerned by the threat of the “Red peril” in Asia, this was merely self-serving propaganda and inadmissible as a legitimate defense. The majority judgment at the Tokyo trial endorsed this argument. And, of course, none of the nations that sat in judgment of the Japanese and Germans over a half century ago subsequently dreamed of allowing the ostensible precedent of international accountability to be applied to itself.

This poses serious challenges to us as concerned citizens and educators today. Japanese neo-nationalists have seized upon the flaws and hypocrisies of the Tokyo trial to throw a smoke-

Teaching From *Embracing Defeat*—An Interview with John Dower



The favorite Japanese epithet for the enemy was “devilish Anglo-Americans.” Then, with the defeat and surrender, all this essentially disappeared on both sides. The invading American force turned out to be largely composed of big, confident, well-fed men who were frequently generous and kind . . .

The most effective “gifts from heaven” purveyed by occupation troops were often the simplest: sweets, cigarettes, and chewing gum, accompanied by offhanded friendliness. “Give me chocolate” became a catch phrase for the approach children adopted toward the conquerors within days after the first GIs arrived. Here schoolchildren crowd around a soldier passing out candy from his jeep in September 1945. Photo: National Archives.

screen over the truly aggressive and atrocious behavior that Imperial Japan did engage in. Non-Japanese commonly condemn these critics out of hand, dismiss them as irresponsible “deniers” of Japan’s war responsibility. But this is only half true; and those who hold the Tokyo trial up as some sort of irreproachable judgment of history are also “deniers” in their own way, refusing to acknowledge what a bad trial this was, and what a conundrum it has bequeathed to us.

Kathy: *How might educators bring these issues into the classroom?*

JWD: I would hope that educators might be able to turn these polemics about and use the Tokyo trial as a case study for examining any number of issues that concern us today. This would include not just the engrossing problem of “war and memory” in contemporary Japan, but also broader issues such as the language of “law” versus the language of “history”—why, that is, the black-and-white, admissible-or-inadmissible, guilty-or-innocent language of the courtroom is rarely compatible with the vastly more ambiguous and intricate analyses of the historian. Or one could use the trials as a basis for addressing the volatile issue of hypocrisy and double standards in international relations—the challenge, indeed, of doing “comparative” history. Obviously, for anyone interested in whether it is possible to mount serious international war crimes tribunals today—and I myself support this in principle—there is a great deal to be learned from the *negative* lessons and legacies of the Tokyo War Crimes Trial.

The other side of this coin, as I approach it in *Embracing Defeat*, is to look at how the Japanese themselves addressed the concepts of guilt, responsibility, repentance, and atonement. It is only natural that these words meant something different to them than they did to the victors. We rarely put ourselves in other people’s shoes, however, and try to see the world as they do. For Americans, for example, the Japanese were “guilty” of the treacherous attack on Pearl Harbor, and “guilty” of the Bataan Death March and the larger practice of seemingly systematic atrocity this symbolizes. This is understandable, but it doesn’t get us very far. As educators, certainly, we must face

the fact that before all else, all people mourn their own war dead. We Americans certainly do this, and dramatically so, in monuments such as the Vietnam War Memorial, where the only dead that matter are our own, and the nature of the war itself is banished from representation.

Approximately three million Japanese were killed in the course of the war in Asia and the Pacific, including close to a million civilians. The numbers are imprecise. In part, it also depends on whom you choose to count. (Do you include the huge number of Japanese *civilians* who died trying to return from Manchuria in the terrible winter of 1945–6, for example, or the many tens of thousands of POWs who died in the Soviet gulags?) When you win, you can tell the dead that their sacrifice was not in vain. There can be a sense of closure. But what do you tell the dead when you lose?

People all over Japan faced this question in the wake of the defeat—especially teachers, who had to return to classrooms with many empty seats and discuss the defeat in *positive* ways. There were many different responses, of course. But several general themes emerged, at least in my own listening to these voices. Most obvious is the general sense of *victimization* on the part of most Japanese—and here we have a theme that is surely of general interest in our own classroom discussions today. Doesn’t virtually everyone tend to see themselves as “victims,” and rarely as “victimizers”?

In postwar Japan, “victim consciousness” has played out in negative ways insofar as it overshadows collective acknowledgment of how brutally the emperor’s soldiers and sailors victimized others. What I found more provocative and interesting, however, was the positive and constructive directions that such consciousness took. Put oversimply, most educators, alongside a great many public intellectuals, accepted the fact that the war had been both stupid and immoral. At the same time, they argued that those who died had believed they were fighting for a noble cause—the defense of their country, for example, or the liberation of Asia. They, and the Japanese populace as a whole, were victims—but victims of *whom*, or of *what*?

The answers came at many levels. The Japanese, it was argued, were victims of war itself; or of their own leaders, who had led them so disastrously; or of their own ignorance, for having allowed themselves to be misled. The way to avoid this in the future was to create a country devoted to peace—and this in turn required establishing a society in which open debate and political participation would prevent irresponsible and militaristic leaders from ever seizing control again. At the same time, this would give those who survived a consoling message to convey to the dead: that they had not died in vain, for a better nation would arise from the ruins. Only in this way could one atone for the terrible war.

This is subtle—and, to me, quite fascinating, for it helps explain the deep commitment to “peace and democracy” that arose in Japan in the wake of defeat. As a pedagogic device, it is also a way of getting a more intimate sense of how others may use a common experience (here “World War II”) or seemingly common words (“guilt,” “repentance,” “atonement”) in different ways. And, once again, the Japanese case can be used very effectively as part of a project in comparative studies—set alongside, for example, the American South after the Civil War, or the Germans after World War II, or the Americans and the Vietnam War.

Lynn: *Thus far, we have talked about Japanese experiences of the occupation. Throughout Embracing Defeat, you remind readers that the occupation was a dynamic and multidirectional process. Most readers are probably more familiar with the impact that the occupation forces had on Japanese political, social, and economic institutions; but you have emphasized that the victors were also altered by the defeat during the occupational process. How were Americans, and U.S. foreign policies, changed as a result of the Allied occupation of Japan?*

JWD: Another big question, and here we get into a different dimension of “doing history.” We really don’t do much “diplomatic history” any more, in the old, elitist sense of just looking at top-level formal documents. But there are still many historians who work on U.S. “foreign policy” or such relying primarily on the English language alone, and who tend to focus on “the American impact” abroad in one form or another. It’s a valid and important area of inquiry. We still have a lot to learn about America’s enormous political, economic, and cultural influence—its seemingly voracious “hegemonic” expansion, if you will.

In *Embracing Defeat*, however, I made a concerted effort to get away from seeing these international and intercultural relationships as a predominantly one-way street. I see the period of defeat and starting over as a fundamentally *Japanese* experience—and as an experience, moreover, that cannot be separated from the huge material and psychological impact that the war itself had on Japan and its people. I approach the “occupation” as a truly dialectical interaction, and a multidirectional one as well—moving in all sorts of directions, horizontally as well as vertically. As a result, it is full of contradictions—and full of surprises.

I am well aware that terms such as “dialectical” and “contradiction” are out of fashion these days. It’s too bad. They can help us open certain doors of perception. Be that as it may, we

might begin with the way the war shattered not just Japanese lives, but wartime stereotypes on both sides as well. Virtually every American wartime commentator agreed that the war in Asia was more vicious than that in Europe, and certainly more saturated with outright racial hatred and invective. In American and British eyes, the Japanese were subhuman. Most commonly, they were derided as “monkeymen.” In turn, the white men were demonized in Japanese propaganda. The favorite Japanese epithet for the enemy was “devilish Anglo-Americans.” Then, with the defeat and surrender, all this essentially disappeared on both sides. The invading American force turned out to be largely composed of big, confident, well-fed men who were frequently generous and kind (and certainly not remotely as rapacious as Japan’s own occupation forces had been throughout Asia), and the erstwhile bestial Japanese proved, in defeat, to be not only courteous but also remarkably receptive in many circles to the kind of reforms the Americans had in mind. Almost from the very outset, this established the ground for an epoch of very complex give-and-take on the part of victor and vanquished.

At the level of court circles and the government, the Japanese side also was very quick in recognizing the Western fascination with monarchy. Americans, they discovered, love celebrity. They love royalty. They are really quite easily bought off by access, however ephemeral, to the exotic and the luxurious. I have a humorous riff on this in the book, where I talk about the various activities that the Imperial Palace sponsored for high-ranking members of the occupation forces—moon viewing parties, for example, and cherry blossom viewing, and, most popular of all, “imperial duck hunts.” Virtually “everyone” who was anyone got invited to these affairs—including, appallingly enough, even the chief prosecutor in the Tokyo War Crimes Trial. Usually they all came away with a little souvenir embossed with the imperial chrysanthemum crest—a treasured memento, years later, of a passing moment when they, too, trod on royal ground.

At the middle echelons of the occupation command, the Americans were seduced by geisha parties and the like, and by receiving elegant “Oriental” gifts. There is a whiff of corruption in all this, of course. One of the sardonic popular sayings among Japanese looking for business contracts with the occupation forces, for example, was that the key to getting them was the “three Ps”—petitions, presents, and parties. The larger picture, however, is entertaining and instructive. We observe how the Japanese went about conquering the conqueror, and we behold an astonishing, and remarkably rapid, transformation of useable stereotypes: from beast to courtier/geisha, and from demon to patron/benefactor.

The more familiar transformation of images and relationships came with the Cold War and was less entertaining. We tend to define the origins of the Cold War in terms of the U.S.-Soviet confrontation in Europe, but of course the Asian dimension of this involved the victory of communism in China. As China emerged as the new Asian enemy in American eyes—a new “Orange Peril,” as it were (both Yellow and Red)—yesterday’s Japanese enemy quickly became regarded as an essential Cold War ally. Japanese conservatives played the anticommunist bogey to the hilt, and within a few years it had become clear

Teaching From *Embracing Defeat*—An Interview with John Dower



I was trying to capture the multiple voices of Japan, and trying to recreate what I see as a complex, heterogeneous society with real people who are not exotic—people to whom we can relate because they are wrestling with problems we all struggle with in one way or another, at one time or another. War, peace, loss, starting over, asking what a “good society” might be, focusing on private as opposed to public lives—all of this.

“Blue-sky” black markets flourished in every major city. In this 1946 scene near Tokyo’s Ueno station, vendors are selling metal household utensils. Photo: Asahi Shimbunsha.

that they were destined to be America’s new “Free World” clients and partners in Asia.

From 1947 on, the Americans began to retreat from the radical agenda of “democratization” they had introduced in the wake of defeat. By late 1949, they were collaborating with the conservative government in promoting a McCarthyist “Red purge” of communists and other “troublemakers” in the ranks of organized labor in public enterprises. Before the Korean War broke out on June 25, 1950, the Americans were already discussing remilitarization and permanent U.S. bases in post-occupation Japan with the Japanese government. Within days after war engulfed the Korean peninsula—Japan’s tragic former colony—the Americans moved not only to initiate Japanese rearmament, but also to extend the “Red purge” to the private sector, including the mass media.

This became known as the “reverse course” in the Japanese media, and it created an anomalous situation that has carried over to the present day. When the occupation ended in early 1952, the United States was firmly allied with the conservative elites in politics, big business, and the bureaucracy who had been least receptive to the early reform agenda. The conservative prime minister Yoshida Shigeru, who was the Japanese counterpart to Konrad Adenauer in postwar Germany, was the prime symbol of this. On the other hand, those who were most outspoken in defending the early occupation ideals of “demilitarization and democratization”—and most adamant in opposing any revision whatsoever of the “Peace Constitution”—were now also the most outspoken opponents of the Cold War U.S.-Japan relationship.

There is a lot of gray in all this. The political left had serious problems and liabilities of its own in postwar Japan, and the conservatives were hardly ogres. In the decades that followed, they built a prosperous economy—and, indeed, one characterized by more equitable income distribution than is the case in the United States. Perhaps most interestingly, it was the conservatives—led initially by Yoshida—who successfully resisted U.S. pressures for more rapid remilitarization both during and after the Korean War. Still, one conspicuous legacy of the reverse course and America’s vigorous patronage of the conservatives ever since has been the essential

persistence of “one-party” control of the Japanese government ever since late 1948, when Yoshida got back in the saddle.

There’s another pernicious legacy too, and that is what I call the “binational” sanitization of Japanese war responsibility. Once China replaced Japan as the perceived enemy in Asia, and Japan’s remilitarization within the *Pax Americana* became a basic U.S. policy objective, the last thing leaders in Washington and Tokyo wished to see publicized was how atrocious and irresponsible the old Imperial Army had been. Non-Japanese talk a lot about a Japanese “cover-up” of its war responsibility, but I would qualify this on several counts. First, a great many ordinary Japanese, including the mass media as well as a substantial cohort of courageous scholars, have publicized Japan’s war crimes in great detail over the course of the last three decades—including the Rape of Nanking, the murderous experiments of Unit 731, and the terrible abuse of the *ianfu*. Second, where “amnesia” and outright sanitization have occurred at the official level ever since the late occupation period, it is important to keep in mind that this has jibed with official Washington interests. The constructions of “memory”—like the manipulations of Cold War intrigues more generally—are more contorted than we usually acknowledge.

Lynn: *Your research and analysis connects so many complex issues and questions—about the occupation period for Japan, as well as broader international policies and events. We have only touched on some of these issues. Do you have suggestions for how teachers might address some of these issues in their classrooms?*

JWD: I think you always try to help students see things through the eyes of others—to get as close as we can to the actual words and deeds of others as well as “ourselves.” This doesn’t mean excusing what one sees or hears. I’m not promoting some kind of moral relativism. But I do think we have to teach young people to think critically, and comparatively—to listen carefully to a range of “voices.”

If we are dealing with young people in the classroom, it certainly makes sense to try to expose them, where possible, to intimate examples of the thoughts and experiences of individuals close to their own age. This works across national,

cultural, and class boundaries; and, indeed, it also works across time. This is a bit off-track from our conversation, but one of the books that university teachers of Japanese history usually find extremely effective with non-Japanese students is the translation of Natsume Sōseki's 1914 novel *Kokoro*. Sōseki is modern Japan's most beloved author, and a reissue of his "collected works" actually became a "top ten" best seller in Japan for three years immediately following the defeat. *Kokoro* is probably his most popular novel. It deals with love, friendship, betrayal, suicide, generational tensions within a family, and is narrated in part by a young university student who is none too sure of the meaning of life. It's amazing how such a book can cross the boundaries of time and place.

We have access to the early postwar Japanese perception of World War II through vivid intimate writings available in translation as well. Two of the most searing novels dealing with the Japanese experience in World War II, for example, are Ooka Shōhei's *Fires on the Plain*, about dehumanization and death in the Philippines, and Ibuse Masuji's *Black Rain*, about a young girl who dies of radiation sickness from the atomic bomb. Another well-known reflection on the war is Takeyama Michio's *Harp of Burma*, which presents, in simple story form, a Buddhist notion of repentance. All of these novels are extremely readable, and all have been made into Japanese feature films that are available in video with English subtitles. Teachers could pair these with, for example, the best American novel to come out of the Pacific War, Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, which also exists as a film. Or, again on the Japanese side, it is possible to get at the atomic-bomb experience through animated films such as *Barefoot Gen*, which originated as a comic book that is now available in an English-language version.

It is a little harder to come up with "intimate" everyday materials from the immediate postwar period. That is part of the reason why I found it so imperative to try to recreate as many "voices" as possible in *Embracing Defeat* (and to present them, in some cases, in snippets or vignettes that might be lifted and photocopied by teachers!). There are some good Kurosawa films that capture the ambience of the period—especially *No Regrets for Our Youth* (1946), *Drunken Angel* (1948), and *Stray Dog* (1949). Dazai Osamu's 1947 novel *The Setting Sun* is a decadent little gem. The best fictional recreation of American and Japanese interactions during the occupation period itself is Donald Ritchie's witty and neglected *Where Are the Victors?* (originally published in 1956 under the title *This Scorching Earth*). For a smart and now all-but-forgotten memoir by the wife of an American officer in occupied Japan, teachers might find useful Margery Finn Brown's 1951 book *Over a Bamboo Fence*.

The challenge, in any case, is always to break through the stereotypes of "East" versus "West" and, where the Japanese in particular are concerned, the stereotype of a peculiar, and peculiarly homogeneous, people. They are not peculiar, and they are not homogeneous. The problem here is that the Seen-One-Seen-Them-All cliché is not just a product of racist stereotyping. It's entirely true that we can find the notion that "a Jap is a Jap is a Jap" in wartime American writings. (General DeWitt, who headed the wartime incarceration of West-coast Japanese Americans,

said this.) It is also true that the most popular characterization of the Japanese by the purported Asia experts in the United States and Britain during the war was that they were "an obedient herd." But the other side of this is that it is always possible to find some Japanese "expert" who says essentially the same thing. In wartime Japanese propaganda, the analogue to "the obedient herd" was "the hundred million"—as in "one hundred million hearts beating as one" (*ichioku isshin*), perhaps the most ubiquitous self-caricature of the war years. Present-day Japanese ideologues, often posing as academics, still love to evoke this homogeneous Yamato-race imagery. Consensual as opposed to conflictual. Group-oriented as opposed to individualistic. A vertically-oriented as opposed to horizontally-oriented society. It's hokey—on both sides of the equation.

Someplace—I can't remember where—I call this "collusive Orientalism." The other side of the coin, naturally, is "collusive Occidentalism," the colossal myth of an individualistic and democratic "West." We've got to come back, as teachers, to the human, the personal, and the individual in various societies and circumstances—and to the acknowledgment of "plurals" that I started off talking about here in our conversation (cultures, traditions, *Japans*). It's more true to life. It's more interesting. And we can do this most effectively if we recognize that "popular" as well as elite cultures must be brought into the discussion—and that all this must be placed in the context of constant, often turbulent, historical changes.

Kathy: *Embracing Defeat* has received wide recognition, including the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and the Bancroft Prize. As a final question, John, why do you think the book has had such appeal to a broad spectrum of readers?

JWD: It won seven or eight prizes, which was gratifying and also thoroughly unexpected. With the exception of one of these—the Fairbank Prize—the competitions had nothing to do with writings on Asia per se. I'm not sure how to explain this, but I imagine—I hope—that it has something to do with everything we've been talking about here. That is, I was trying to capture the multiple voices of Japan, and trying to recreate what I see as a complex, heterogeneous society with real people who are not exotic—people to whom we can relate because they are wrestling with problems we all struggle with in one way or another, at one time or another. War, peace, loss, starting over, asking what a "good society" might be, focusing on private as opposed to public lives—all of this. But I'm not concerned with just evoking high ideals, which isn't very realistic. I also deal with despair, corruption, decadence, hypocrisy, whimsy, humor, and plain raunchiness. I suppose I've broken some of the taboos that usually encumber academic writing on such subjects as the emperor and the war crimes trials. The book is something of a kaleidoscope.

I imagine that giving "the Japanese" many voices is what caught people's attention. I was trying to convey a sense of both complex dynamism and accessible complexity. It's something of a cliché to say that popular English-language books on Japan usually fall into one of two categories—either atrocity or exotica (*The Rape of Nanking* and *Memoirs of a Geisha* are the most recent best-seller examples of this). *Embracing Defeat* is written for a general audience, but defies this rule. Most everything in the book comes as a bit of a surprise. This sort of social/

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cultural/political panorama isn't so rare in the fields of European and American history, and that may be what caught the attention of the various prize committees. Whatever the explanation, they certainly surprised me by their generous response.

Lynn: John, you have been very generous in sharing your research and reflections on *Embracing Defeat*. Do you have any final thoughts you would like to share with Education About Asia readers?

JWD: Just one thing, perhaps. When all is said and done, I would hope you can factor "Japan" and "the United States" out of what I have been saying, and still see why this subject so engaged me. It addressed issues that we all confront, or should confront, as citizens and educators—war and peace and social justice; defeat and starting over; racial stereotyping and its modulations; cultural complexity and transcultural transcendence; human foibles; pluralism almost everywhere we look. Of course, what I wrote about was peculiar to a certain time and place. But in the big picture, I don't think it was "peculiarly Japanese."

It's tempting for all of us to speak of Tradition or Culture with a capital "T" and a capital "C"—and from this, of course, to speak about East and West and how never the twain shall really meet. I am not trying to belittle the so-called Great Traditions like Buddhism and Confucianism and Christianity. They also fascinate me. But I don't find them monolithic either. I do think they are wide open to genuinely comparative (and not just "contrasting") analysis. Beyond this, I think that when you approach any society, you should look for pluralized and uncaptialized and constantly changing "cultures" and "traditions." You can open new vistas this way. Whole new worlds.

Kathy: You have done a remarkable job of capturing those perspectives in your book and in our conversation. Additionally, your comments today have offered a wealth of ideas to help teachers enrich and expand teaching about this complex period. On behalf of Education About Asia readers, Lynn and I again want to thank you. ■



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Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II by John W. Dower is now available in paperback from W. W. Norton and Company.