

JAPAN SINCE 1945

By Paul E. Dunscomb

No American high school or young college student can recall when Japan appeared to be on the brink of displacing the United States as the leader of global capitalism. Yet, this challenge from Japan in the late 1980s prompted a real sense of crisis and loss of self-confidence among many in the US. Some Americans were bitter that a nation we had supposedly put back on the path to democracy and had militarily protected for several decades was now outcompeting us in important industries such as automobiles and electronics. Today, however, if young Americans think of Japan at all, they do so only as the source of pop culture products like anime or manga, or as a place which suffered a recent terrible earthquake and tsunami.

The story I wanted to tell was, first, how did the Japanese manage to go from a people primarily known for economic success to a people now known best as producers of popular culture or as the victims of nature? From 1945 through the 1980s, the Japanese pursued the goal of making their nation into a *keizai taikoku*, or economic superpower. But, of course, there's also the rest of the story: How and why the nation fell into such a prolonged series of political, economic, and social crises that the economy stagnated and China passed Japan to become the world's second-largest economy. This book provides a blow-by-blow account of these events. I think the thing readers in university or high school Introduction to World History or Asian Studies courses will find most surprising is that it was the very same things that made Japan so successful that later contributed to its decline.

However, in writing this book, I found myself confronting another question. We still call today's Japan "postwar Japan." Yet, if Japan's postwar period is defined in strictly political or economic terms, such as the prolonged rule of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), the presence of certain corporate structures, or guided development by powerful economic bureaucrats, then the postwar period has been over for a long time, perhaps two decades. Paradoxically, though, if one looks at the reactions of China, South Korea, or even the United States to certain actions on the part of nationalistic Prime Minister Abe Shinzo or the potential revision of Japan's "Peace Constitution," one quickly realizes that the postwar period is still very much alive.

I also examine how this other "postwar" perception evolved, the role Japanese and others played to cause it to linger so long, and what ways it might possibly be brought to an end. Young American students may be surprised to find that the United States has been an important actor in perpetuating this psychological "postwar" perception.

Since this historical perception influences Japan's relations with its neighbors in a region that has several potential flashpoints, the enduring nature of "postwar Japan" is important to understand.



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