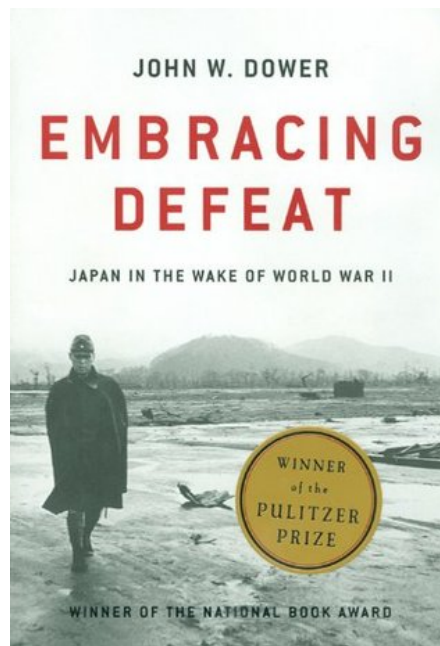




Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II

John W. Dower

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Winner of the Pulitzer Prize, the 1999 National Book Award for Nonfiction, finalist for the Lionel Gelber Prize and the Kiriyama Pacific Rim Book Prize, *Embracing Defeat* is John W. Dower's brilliant examination of Japan in the immediate, shattering aftermath of World War II.

Drawing on a vast range of Japanese sources and illustrated with dozens of astonishing documentary photographs, *Embracing Defeat* is the fullest and most important history of the more than six years of American occupation, which affected every level of Japanese society, often in ways neither side could anticipate. Dower, whom Stephen E. Ambrose has called "America's foremost historian of the Second World War in the Pacific," gives us the rich and turbulent interplay between West and East, the victor and the vanquished, in a way never before attempted, from top-level manipulations concerning the fate of Emperor Hirohito to the hopes and fears of men and women in every walk of life. Already regarded as the benchmark in its field, *Embracing Defeat* is a work of colossal scholarship and history of the very first order. John W. Dower is the Elting E. Morison Professor of History at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is a winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for *War Without Mercy*.

Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II Details

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From Reader Review Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II for online ebook

Stuart says

Quite simply the most in-depth, perceptive and brilliant study of the post-war US occupation and reconstruction of Japan after World War II. Even with almost 600 dense pages of academic but well-written erudition, it's not easy to tackle how Japan was transformed from a brutal imperialistic aggressor into a docile, cooperative, contrite and eager anti-Communist ally of the US, and how the decision to preserve the Japanese Emperor as a symbol of both Japan's rich cultural heritage and its new peaceful role in the post-war world was a crucial decision by MacArthur and the GHQ. The effort to transform Hirohito from the symbol of Japanese militarism into a symbol of peace and acceptance is truly an amazing feat, and how GHQ worked with the post-war Japanese politicians and bureaucrats is equally impressive. The discussion of how the GHQ's reconstruction policy was then warped by the effort to contain Communism in Asian is also something you won't find in many other works. The book is a treasure of details on every conceivable aspect of the occupation and reconstruction strategy as it unfolded, so I won't attempt to describe it here.

Actually I read this book back in 1999 when I was a JET in Shimane Prefecture, Japan, and it has colored and deepened my perceptions of Japan in the ensuing 15 years of living here in Japan. The JET program was started by Prime Minister Nakasone in 1987 during the Reagan Administration at the height of tensions over trade imbalances, ostensibly to "increase mutual understanding between the people of Japan and the people of other nations" by sending English-speaking college grads to rural Japanese junior and senior high schools to serve as cultural ambassadors and assistant English teachers. So my perceptions of the program were very much affected by Embracing Defeat, because to me the JET program was a clear extension of the Japanese government's efforts to present a positive front to the youth of its Western allies and trade partners, to demonstrate good faith in "opening" the country to foreign youth, and also to expose Japanese students to Westerners. What I found very telling was the programs' emphasis on only inviting college graduates from English-speaking countries, and its total exclusion of youths from other countries in Asia, Europe, Africa, South America, etc. Because, frankly, Japan has still not been able to kick its admiration and aspiration to be like other Western countries, much more than neighboring Asian countries.

(for reasons why Japan has been with this way ever since the Meiji restoration, see my review on War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War) .

And I experienced again and again during my 3 years on the JET program how much Caucasian foreigners were treated extremely kindly and warmly, while at the same time ethnically Asian foreigners, despite being raised in English-speaking countries, receiving a much cooler and more ambivalent welcome. To wit, many Japanese still look up to Westerners, and in many cases look down on other Asians. Of course this is a generalization, but ask any white foreigner in Japan and they can tell you they receive different treatment from Asian foreigners (not to mention the tens of thousands of native Korean residents of Japan who have lived here for several generations but are NOT granted citizenship despite this).

To be fair, I think Japan has made major strides since the early days of the program, incorporating CIRs (Coordinators of International Relations) from various countries including China, Korea, Russia, Germany, France, etc to work in local government offices promoting "international relations", and I also served in that capacity for two years and had an amazing, life-changing experience.

And yet in light of the continued tensions with China and Korea over war crimes, comfort women, reparations, trade friction, and recently ocean and air territory, it's clear that Japan has yet to fully establish

equitable relations with its Asian neighbors even over 60 years after WWII ended. And now that China is an economic powerhouse in the region and flexing its might, the relations among the US, China, Japan, Korea and the ASEAN nations get more complicated by the day.

S. says

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize; Winner of the National Book Award. John W. Dower is a named history professor @MIT, Japanologist, Japanophile. Won a slew of slightly less prestigious awards; wrote a Yoshida Shigeru biography. (Yoshida was from an old samurai family; had American contacts before the war, and after the defeat, was installed by the Allied Command as 'rehabilitated' and anti-Communist.)

Embracing Defeat is very tightly, elegantly written. explains culture of "decadence/defeat = kyodatsu" (exhaustion) that set in after war, and reception of defeated culture through adaptation to culturally and values foreign occupier. black markets, reception of returning soldiers, street life and censorship (difference between 'free speech' promulgated, but not to coy criticism of occupying authorities, communism still out); un-deification of Emperor; modern Japan born. the title is slightly subversive--it implies the Japanese *wanted* defeat, which is probably a bit strong. it's fairly clear a Japanese victory would have resulted in loss of Hawaii and some of the Alaskan islands, even possibly the Panama Canal zone (depending on how big the American defeat was).

as with many people and books, the greatest strength is the possible weakness. Dower proclaims the relationship between Japan and the US is "almost sensual." is this characterisation confirmable? is this scientifically valid or falsifiable? how can a relationship between two countries rather than two individuals be "almost sensual?" and if the US military base presence on Japanese soil is sensual, then who should be paying for what and why can't anyone achieve release?

however, if you prepared to accept the Japanese-American relationship as sensual, then you may conclude a writer whose has a distinct personality or strong view of the world is precisely the best person to appreciate Japan. to that degree, MacArthur, whose star falls lower and lower among historians, was ideal for everyone, USA, Japan, Asiatics, whoever, as "one distinct personality" to rule Japan. he had definite ideas, and then when he was gone, he was definitely gone.

that is the first point about Embracing Defeat. second is:

very good coverage of trial; Pal and the Filipino judge added at last minute to prevent appearance of "victor's justice"; ironically at this time, Republic of China justice was about to be overthrown

chapter of contents:

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2. Gifts from heaven
3. Kyodatsu = Exhaustion
4. Cultures of Defeat
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10. Descending Partway from Heaven
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15. Victor's Justice
16. What do you tell the dead?
17. Engineering Growth

okay now on to Goodreads itself. it has actually been more than four months since I've joined, and the website has definitely increased my reading, as well as focused it. being a East Asia traveler and contract worker, I don't have the luxury of good free libraries to acquire books, I actually have to be pretty careful about the investment, since five good books at \$20 each would be a bundle. separately, I've grown to appreciate some of the culture and personalities surrounding this now Amazon-owned website. it's a book like this, however, that shows some of the more interesting people have to be sought out.

the main reviewer on this is *not* highly social, or highly ranked by GR user lists. but she reads a good mix of social history and non-fiction, and keeps her reviews open without adding lots of contacts on the website. so sometimes there's gold out there--just gotta search it out.

#2 reviewer on the book is a US State Department veteran who has quite a few words to say about nation building... a Western cowboy eccentric, Earle himself is *exactly like the kind of foreigner you find in some deep country bar in Japan*, somehow completely of the place and out of it at the same time. Earle's own take on Iraq was apparently half-accidental; after a lifetime in the foreign service, he was reactivated to nation build and then apparently everyone who's worked with him is like, okay, Rob, you're right, but what are we going to do about it? a pure think-tank bureaucrat, so to speak.

and then the list goes on.... an israeli military buff who five-stars every military history book he's read (hundreds)... a black American write-a-holic and part-time japanophile whose books all earn the comment "didn't she already say this?" (bwahahah)... various other rogues and gentlemen comprising a true gallery of the expat types you meet in Japan.

so there we go: you can twenty minutes in Japan just reading the reviews on this thing, eventually discovering every crank and loony inhabiting the country (dispersed with all the normals, of course). so, a classic example of how the world is microcosmed in Japan itself, an insular island country.

since this is a fairly obscure book and likely few people will read this review, I guess it's safe to say that after learning East Asian languages and participating in various foreign cultures *as an apparent native*, the only real value to come out of this experience is a total and relentless hatred of foreigners. the first thing ching wong fook comes up to your face and with saliva drooling out of his mouth attempts to close his "shanghai mba university -approved contract and mutual profit deal" with you, okay, it's funny, it's a cultural experience. now the second time, you're starting to notice that he's speaking a very sing-song language chow bao fook ming took ring look fuk meng.

the third time you're ready to hide his body in a convenient dumpster.

Japan teaches you these things. teaches you insularity.

look at this gang of weirdoes and quacks who have read this book. an afro-american artist who has the misfortune to be born into a highly extroverted and verbal society and hence her works are constant repetitions of the same point. a state department eccentric whose theories are repeatedly rubbished by his

colleagues. all the Japan "experts" who have come out of the woodwork. one japanese girl. there's no point to theory. they hate you! trust me! when I was speaking fluent Japanese to them with a good accent, they didn't even bother to ask my nationality. they just went on and on about how much they despise and hate foreigners. this goes for koreans too. pure blood, hermit kingdom koreans want nothing but to keep their ivory-clear bloodline absolutely free from foreign influence. the north korean, the japanese, the south korean: all the same.

the chinese, i am happy to report, are not racist. they don't care about mixed blood. they have chinese with 80% white appearance; they have chinese with about 30% black appearance. there's an entire province of india they're claiming is chinese (it's indians who look vaguely mongolian). no, the flaw of the chinese is the language itself.

ching look fook ming teng wang reng.

this is me: sarcastic expression on my face.

do they stop?

do they ever consider i'm not one of them?

no. response is always

feng feng took ming bao bao le

even the ones who spoke english were just offended by my superior attitude and disdain. but no matter what I did, there's 1.4 billion of them and only one of me. christ what a nightmare.

that is my japan-china-korea experience. after years of language study, i can now pass for native in any of the three countries. and I hate them all!! bwahahaahahah

USAUSA USA !

anyways.... although I'm tempted to rewrite my post-war europe review (a/k/a "staying alive"), I figure why not, today is Monday 7 May 2013, and I have about 96 hours before I can confirm overseas visas and whatnot. a czech guy once explained freelancer life to me "110 hours of hurry the hell up and then 3 weeks of absolute silence." if you're a salaried individual, if you're an hourly worker, there are social situations that mold themselves around your life (happy hour; weekend specials). when you freelance, when you work when work becomes available, you find yourself oftentimes free for weeks at a time, and then when a social relationship is taking off, suddenly the contracts flow in.

/whine

/complaints of the expat life

to seriously address the fundamental thesis of the work, that like, Japan's "embrace" of its defeated semi-colonized situation is itself a symbiotic and mutually-beneficial affair, well, yes, there is something to this point, in that if we polled modern japan and asked, do you want a u.s. pullout, the sentiment would be no. similarly, americans do not want out of Japan. maybe korea. maybe iraq/afghanistan, but japan--no, japan is a fun assignment, a place to recuperate, an exotic foreign locale where the women are available. there's no domestic american sentiment to pull out.

that said, whether the relationship is mutually beneficial or desired as an absolute and not as a negative is a far more esoteric and subtle question. on some level, the Japanese would like just the rest of the world to go

away. but then, American sometimes feel like that. so there, are plenty of issues to discuss here, and not quite as much contact as readers about the other may think. one is going to go through one's whole life and interact only rarely with the other side of the american-japanese relationship.

Maria says

Dower delves into the Japanese and American sources to reconstruct and explain the 6 years of American occupation after World War II. From Hirohito to MacArthur, democracy and emperor worship, writing a new constitution, war crimes and guilt; this book explained prevailing sentiments and consequences of decisions made high and low.

Why I started it: I'm trying to learn more about the history and culture of Japan. I was eager to pick up a book about the Japanese perspective and experience starting in August 1945.

Why I finished it: You have to be impressed with a history that has over 90 pages single space of endnotes, and is still readable and enjoyable. I listened to the audio, pausing at the end of the chapters to peruse the pictures. Side note: The more I learn about MacArthur, the more I question his status as a great man and general.

Robert says

John Dower's comprehensive study of the years during which the Japanese lived under American-led occupation is undoubtedly the masterwork from which many PhD studies have derived. It's a fascinating account of a devastated people wrestling with Japan's responsibility for the horrors that occurred before and during WWII's conflicts in the Pacific.

There's too much here to describe in detail. I'll highlight some points that I found particularly intriguing and capstone them with a general observation: This massively researched book offers a splendidly balanced account not only of the political side of defeat but also the social side of defeat.

On the social side:

--It is fascinating to read about the extent to which the Japanese read themselves, even when they were on the verge of starvation, in the post War years. Books, newspapers and magazines played a huge role in nourishing and drawing together a defeated people

--Dower is fair-minded and clear in exploring the Japanese people's sense of bewilderment at losing the war. Their leaders told them they were winning...over and over again...for years...so defeat was totally disorienting.

--Both the rural populace and the fire- and nuclear- bombed urban populace are duly addressed. The rural populace lived in essential ignorance and found itself vaulted upward in terms of national importance as Japan faced post-war food shortages. Yes, millions of rural folk participated in the war effort, but during the war, and afterward, relatively few came back...and were in any condition to give an accurate account of what had happened.

--The social glue that held Japan together, i.e., the emperor and his court, really was a relatively new phenomenon, less than a hundred years old in its current form.

--The Japanese adapted ingeniously to the requirements of the Occupation: providing prostitutes, housing, and subtle measures of linguistic misdirection and misinformation when it suited them.

--Could any proud country not secretly believe it had been "betrayed" and that in some sense a handful of

imperial advisors, military leaders, and industrialists were the ones "responsible" for Japan's war effort and its defeat? Of course not.

--The Japanese took one particular lesson from the U.S.'s use of the atom bomb: they were laggard in science and engineering. As we have seen in the sixty years thereafter, the Japanese have remedied much of their deficiency, but of course they do not have nuclear weapons, only nuclear power plants.

--Japan was then, and remains, home to large populations of Koreans, Chinese, and other Asian peoples. Said folk were not then, nor are they now, fully protected by the rights accorded Japanese citizens.

On the political side:

--Post-war planning both within Japan and among the American-led occupation (read: MacArthur et al) revolved around "saving" the emperor from being blamed and being forced to step down...and/or being tried as a "Class A" war criminal. The thinking was that the entire society would crumble into anarchy without some continuing form of imperial guidance, albeit symbolic. The account of Hirohito in this book certainly makes clear that he was quite culpable, had long been involved in war-planning, and was a rather remote, somewhat self-deluded individual--nothing like a Western "leader" in the Churchill, FDR, etc.

--The war crimes trials that sentenced a relative handful of ranking Japanese to execution or imprisonment were slapdash. Sometimes all eleven judges were on the bench, hearing testimony; sometimes only seven were on hand. Many of the judgments rendered could be turned slightly to incriminate other national leaders (both within Japan and in other capitals). Translation and interpretation often were deficient. This was an exercise in justice that some of the non-U.S. jurists found appalling, starting with the fact that the U.S. had already decided the emperor must not be held accountable.

--There are a few chapters on the making of Japan's post-war constitution and its remarkable provision that Japan will not engage in war or maintain a defense establishment. As you probably know, Japan does have an entity called the Japanese Defense Force. This is something that essentially emerged with U.S. encouragement as the Cold War got colder and the U.S. welcomed some strength on the island of the "100 million" (Japan's approximate population).

--The Japanese constitution is more liberal and protective of rights than the U.S. constitution.

--The conservatives were the shrewdest and longest-lived of Japan's political actors in the post-war era. (Only recently has a party other than the Liberal Democratic Party held sway in Japan's parliament.)

--For years after accepting Japan's unconditional surrender, General MacArthur almost never traveled in Japan, met Japanese citizens, or took advice from experts close to him--many of whom had no Japan expertise to draw on. (They were "functional" experts; not Japan experts. If they were Asian experts, they tended to have focused more on China than Japan,) He lived in splendid isolation from his own proconsular dominion.

--It is quite amazing how pro-American Japan quickly became. Was this caused by U.S.-fostered democratization? It would be difficult to deny that, partly because prior to defeat in WWII Japan was such a stratified, rigid, closed society (even within the ranks of the "pure" Japanese.) The U.S. and others pushed open a lot of doors through insistence on democracy, citizens' rights, etc.

In sum, this is the kind of long historical book that is interesting in particular because it gives so much weight to the social realities, not just the political realities. It is a sweeping study. But you have to be interested in Japan to enjoy reading it. Otherwise it would be too rich in detail and fine distinctions to hold your interest. In other words, it's not for everyone.

Max says

WWII left Japan decimated. Millions had died; millions were disabled, sick and starving; millions were stranded overseas facing reprisals; millions were missing including countless children; and millions were homeless, without family, without jobs, without anything. In the largest city, Tokyo, 65% of homes had been destroyed, in the second largest, Osaka, 57% and the third largest, Nagoya, 89%. Industry had been obliterated leaving few places to live or work. Those with the least suffered the most as their homes easily fed the huge fires from incendiary bombings. And Japanese culture exacerbated the plight of the already disadvantaged. Those who had lost their families, including children, were shunned, as were the many women who no longer had a man. Returning soldiers were looked on as failures and brutes as their atrocities became known. Returning enlisted men took reprisals on their former officers for the abusive way they had been treated during the war.

Hunger, lack of housing and poverty persisted for years after the war ended, leaving a widespread feeling of despair and victimization. People lived packed together in old train stations and shantytowns. Just finding a time and place to go to the bathroom was difficult. The search for food alone could occupy half of a person's time. People sold whatever they had including their bodies just for food. Prostitution proliferated to service the hundreds of thousands of American GIs. Many women found this the only way to get by. Crime was rampant. The black market was endemic not only providing necessities but American goods often procured from GIs.

To alleviate this deprivation, Mac Arthur and the US administrators did little; rather they focused on demilitarization, prosecuting war criminals and democratization. The prevailing power structures in both government and industry were broken up. Authority was decentralized. Statements supporting war and subservience to the state were stricken from school texts and replaced with statements extolling democracy. Elections were held and woman given the right to vote, something unthinkable before. Japanese society was to be radically changed.

MacArthur was the new autocratic leader of Japan. He kept aloof from the populace only dealing with a few top leaders. American Japan experts and those who spoke Japanese were considered tainted and excluded from MacArthur's staff. However China experts were welcome, their views shaped by Japanese atrocities in China. American administrators lived in "Little America" set in one of the few undamaged sectors of Tokyo. They lived a life unimaginable for most in the US in refurbished large houses replete with Japanese servants. The administrators were instructed in what passed for psychology at the time. They were told that the Japanese were a people that conformed to a herd mentality requiring authoritarian rule; that not all Japanese were "monkey men" and they could be made to be almost like a regular person, a John Doe, however they called the Japanese version "Joe Nip." MacArthur's staff looked askance at their wards with these preconceived notions.

Ordinary Japanese looked on MacArthur as a father figure who had freed them from oppression and brought freedom. The intellectual community's response was more complex. Most had been complicit with the military regime and thus had lost respect of the people. However, the communists now had credibility for having defied the emperor; freed from jail they began espousing their cause. They saw democracy within the confines of Marxist doctrine.

Communism appealed to many citizens. Labor unions began organizing with strong communist backing. GHQ (US General Headquarters) and SCAP (Supreme Command for the Allied Powers) became alarmed at communist influence and the emperor was seen as useful in combating its rise. Demonstrations became

organized culminating in one of 250,000 called “Food May Day” in 1946. As the Communists gained political power, GHQ organized the “Red Purge” in 1948. By 1949 GHQ had weeded out many thousands of activists from labor and the Japanese government. Conservative Japanese leaders would now hold power for the rest of the century.

Since MacArthur deemed the emperor necessary to lead the “herd”, Hirohito’s image had to be separated from those of leaders who would be held responsible for the war. As 1946 began war criminals were identified for prosecution. While the emperor’s former prime minister and closest adviser were included, the emperor was not. The emperor’s involvement in the war was kept hidden. MacArthur intervened ensuring damaging testimony against the emperor would not be presented. Back in the states many were calling for Hirohito’s scalp, but MacArthur cabled army Chief of Staff Eisenhower that Japan would disintegrate without the emperor. He claimed the emperor was essential if the US didn’t want to have to bring in more troops and administer the country directly. Washington deferred.

GHQ began an information campaign to purify the emperor and vilify his former cohorts. The new Japanese leadership concurred in this strategy. SCAP advised the emperor and Japanese supporters on how to proceed. They dressed the publicly awkward Hirohito in civilian garb and sent him on tours to meet the people to humanize him in a public relations campaign. MacArthur even called the emperor “sir” which he called no one else. The emperor had gone from god to mortal, from leader of a holy war to a symbol of democracy. Many Japanese especially ex-servicemen felt betrayed, believing the emperor should accept responsibility for the country’s destruction and that he should share their own plight.

Next came writing a new constitution. Discarding a conservative Japanese government draft, GHQ wrote one in secret in a week with three values provided by MacArthur: The emperor symbolically leads the country; Japan stays completely demilitarized; peerage is abandoned and a parliamentary democratic system is established. GHQ threatened to have a referendum on it if the government did not accept it. The government adopted it with minor changes in 1947. Unlike prior documents this was translated into simple Japanese. Booklets explained the law to the populace who generally accepted it.

GHQ established an extensive censorship program. At its height, the Civil Censorship Detachment had a staff of 6,000. Censored were all books and magazines, major daily newspapers, brochures, pamphlets, movies and thousands of radio scripts. Hundreds of thousands of private phone calls were monitored. Over 300 million pieces of mail were spot checked. Foreign materials were censored before they could be distributed. Prohibited was any defense of the Japanese war or war criminals, disparaging remarks about America, its war conduct including the atomic bombing, its occupation or its allies or the reconstituted Hirohito. Any reference to censorship itself was also prohibited. The 1946 John Hersey novel, *Hiroshima*, a best seller in America, was not allowed in Japanese until 1949. Even Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* was reviewed before being allowed in translation. Japan was being isolated from much of what was widely available in America and the rest of the world. Communist and leftist rhetoric was targeted particularly after the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. Left leaning media outlets were shut down, accompanied by a massive purge of “ultra-leftists” from Japanese media, government, labor and business.

The Japanese version of the Nuremburg trials, the Tokyo Tribunal started in May 1946. Unlike Nuremburg it had eleven judges from many different countries, most of which suffered Japanese atrocities in the war. Only a simple majority was required to convict. The defendants, all former leaders, were accused of “crimes against peace”. In late 1948, a majority decision sentenced seven to the gallows, sixteen to life, one to twenty years and one to seven. Those receiving death sentences were hung, the rest were all released by 1956. Who was indicted was often arbitrary as many ostensibly equally guilty were ignored, most notably the emperor protected by GHQ.

Most Japanese were concerned with who lost the war not the war’s impact on foreigners. The Japanese felt guilty because their family members, their countrymen died in vain. The immensity of their country’s

atrocities made it difficult to honor fallen or returning servicemen. Again this was not so much out of sympathy for the victims as it was a loss of respect for the perpetrators and the long shadow they had cast over all of Japanese society. The search for reasons for the loss of the war found an “acceptable” answer, science. The Japanese saw themselves as too technologically backward to have won. America had the atomic bomb, clear evidence of the importance of technical superiority. Thus moral, structural and political failures of Japanese society could be ignored with this simple one word answer. This answer led to Japan’s focus on high tech following the occupation. Science wasn’t the only answer offered. Leftist’s blamed failed leadership and capitalism in a Marxist take on the war. Perhaps the most fascinating answer was philosopher Hajime Tanabe’s Metanoetics. Tanabe, who had studied with Heidegger in Germany, combined the Buddhist concept of “absolute nothingness” with Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. He believed neither war nor any other pursuit of hegemony or riches could solve Japan’s problems. Only each individual deriving meaning from reflection on everyday life would build a better society, not striving for glory and rewards. Tanabe was influential, but Japan embraced the first answer, science, and its incumbent rewards.

MacArthur and America’s occupation became less idealistic and more pragmatic by 1949 with the fall of China, the Korean War, and Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. In what was tagged in Japan as the “reverse course”, SCAP supported right wing conservative leaders and dropped charges against suspected war criminals. As America anticipated the need to rearm Japan to fight communism, it gave up on establishing a pure democracy. Supplying the American war effort in Korea with what were called “special procurements” reignited Japan’s economy. SCAP had idled much of Japanese industry when it broke up the consortium of family owned large corporations known as zaibatsu. This had kept the economy from recovering, but Americans felt the Japanese were getting what they deserved. The silver lining was the opening for many smaller companies. Some went on to make it big, for example, Nikon, Canon, Honda, Sony and Komatsu. The large banks were not broken up. They became the basis for the new Japanese industrial oligarchy known as keiretsu. The American occupation left a legacy of centralization and government implementation of economic policy. Now the keiretsu and government led by American favored conservative capitalists could work hand in hand to plan Japan’s economic revival.

Dower’s book was at times fascinating and at times a bit of a slog, but it was definitely worthwhile with three themes I found important. First it helped clear up misconceptions about the Japanese people and their culture. Common are racist views from cruel and heartless based on WWII atrocities to conformist and blindly loyal. Dower shows these easy characterizations to be superficial. The Japanese appear much more diverse and complex with behavior dictated by their circumstances. Second, the book said much about American foreign policy - arrogant, alternately idealistic and opportunistic. MacArthur’s autocratic administration shifted goals quickly to reflect America’s political imperatives of the moment. An altruistic effort to establish democracy gave way to pragmatism and the red scare. Instead of a bastion of peace Japan was now expected to be an arsenal in the fight against global communism. Japan became a pawn in America’s game. American expediency overrode moral values, just what America saw in Japan before the war. Third, Dower showed how the occupation led to the Japanese miracle of the 1960’s and 1970’s. The family owned zaibatsu were dismantled a new more efficient oligarchy, the keiretsu, established. Building on an occupational legacy of centralized economic direction, government and industry could now work closely together without the need to fund a large military. This led to the well-coordinated economic trajectory that took a decimated country to one that would dominate world markets with products from Toyota cars to Sony electronics.

Tony says

EMBRACING DEFEAT: Japan in the Wake of World War II. (1999). John W. Dower. *****.

This is the best history I have read about the post-war period in Japan under American occupation forces. Although somewhat dense, the book examines the many varieties of how the Japanese coped with the loss of the war and with their new status as a subject people. This work won the Nobel Prize for general non-fiction in 2000. The author is currently a professor of history at MIT and has published many works on the Far East. It is amazing to me how quickly the Japanese people adapted to their loss in WW II. Once having gotten over the extreme shortages of food, housing and clothing, they very quickly turned their attention internally and learned what their loss really meant. Their attitudes towards their leaders quickly turned to ones reflecting their sense of betrayal and loss. Throughout all of this self-flagellation, however, they remained true to their emperor, Hirohito. The biggest shock in most of their lives was when their emperor went on the radio and announced to the general public Japan's unconditional surrender. The Japanese had never heard their emperor's voice before, let alone seen him. Upon the arrival of the occupation troops under the command of General MacArthur, the Japanese began to slowly regain their sense of humanity and hope – although this took a relatively long time. The key role played by MacArthur in the successful occupation of their country from 1945 to 1950 was his distance from the people. He rarely left his headquarters building, preferring instead to govern through his staff. His role, much like that of the Wizard of Oz, was what the people were used to in their relationships with the emperor. The author examines almost every aspect of the sociological changes that the country went through in a manner that the average reader can relate to. This is a slow reading book, but one that is worthwhile. Highly recommended.

Diane says

The defeat was Japan's in WWII. The author describes the Japanese response to finding themselves a defeated nation, occupied by the the U.S. from 1946-1952. Although it was a long read, 564 pages, I found it well worth sticking with it. Each chapter was filled with such interesting stories and facts. The author dealt with such subjects as the Japanese having to digest their defeat after they had been told they were winning the war, the Emperor's admission he was not a god (a muddled confession!), the realization that their dead had died for nothing, and finding out about the horrors their military had inflicted on other Asians. They endured the occupation by McArthur and the U.S. occupational forces--initially with relieve and optimism when democracy was introduced, then with cynicism when there was an about face and democracy was curtailed as the Cold War began. They endured the U.S. censors, their double standard, and their racism. Not to say there were not positives during the occupation. I think the Japanese, all in all, benefitted from the occupation. I couldn't help finding myself comparing the Japanese occupation with that of Iraq's. They are actually somewhat alike, including the writing of the consitituion by Americans, although I'n not sure if the Iraqs accepted the one written for them by.. Bremmer, I believe. The Japanese constitution, at least in 1999 when the book was written, still remains the one the U.S. wrote for them.

Mikey B. says

Before defeat, and after defeat

In the top photo Hirohito is in military uniform. After the surrender, in the photo with Douglas MacArthur, the uniform was discarded

This is a masterful account of Japan after their surrender in August, 1945. It is very nuanced, pointing out both positive and negative aspects of the U.S. occupation and how the Japanese coped and adapted. And the primary problem for most Japanese was food. Many were already mal-nourished before the surrender – and their struggle continued. Millions of returning soldiers and civilians from China and Korea added to the problem.

Hovering over all this, chameleon-like, is the Emperor Hirohito. Due to his reverence by the Japanese people he was spared of any involvement in causing and making war. War against China in Manchuria that started in 1931, a vicious racist war in China proper that started in 1937, and the war in the Pacific and Southeast Asia (Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia...) that commenced in December of 1941.

Hirohito managed to transfer himself from the head of the Imperial Japanese Army to become the Emperor of peace and a new Japan that was to have non-militarism as a basis of government. There were many outside Japan that put him in the same category as Hitler and Tojo (and there were some who thought that way in Japan too).

Douglas MacArthur was now the new supreme leader of the U.S. occupation forces in Japan. His main concern was to protect the Emperor from any type of tarnishment as a war leader. He went so far as to tell all the Japanese being prosecuted as war criminals to deny (lie) of Hirohito's culpability in the war. MacArthur feared that if Hirohito were removed from the throne, Japan would descend into chaos. There is truth in this; many Japanese revered the Emperor as a deity. On a few occasions Hirohito considered abdicating, MacArthur told him not to.

Hirohito tried to humanize himself by emulating the British monarchy and going out amongst his people now and then. He never did deny that he was a deity, keeping some of his God-like aura.

Page 278 (my book)

Hirohito was also, as it turned out, resilient and malleable, blessed by the heavens – and by General MacArthur more particularly – to survive and prosper, while all around him, his loyal subjects were denounced, purged, charged with war crimes, even executed. The emperor's role in Japan's aggression was never seriously investigated. He was dissuaded by the Americans from acknowledging even moral responsibility for the repression and violence that had been carried out in his name and with his endorsement... the occupation authorities chose not merely to detach the emperor from his holy war, but to resuscitate him to the center of their new democracy...if the nations supreme secular and spiritual authority bore no responsibility, why should his ordinary subjects be expected to engage in self-reflection?

Page 179

Renovation and iconoclasm [in Japan] were strains as deeply embedded in consciousness as were the reverence for the past or acquiescence to the powers that be. For almost a century the Japanese had been socialized to anticipate and accommodate themselves to drastic change. When World War II ended, they were well prepared – not merely by the horrors and manifest failure of the war, but also by socialization of the past and even the psychic thrust of wartime indoctrination – to carry on the quest for a “new” Japan. In other words, it was entirely “traditional” to find pundits gathering soon after the surrender to engage in a “roundtable discussion” on “changing the world”. What changed, and drastically so, was how men and women now chose to define what that new world should be like.

The occupation caused a tremendous overhaul of Japanese society. When the Japanese government modified their constitution the Americans said “not good enough”. So a small U.S. staff worked to make a new, much more liberal constitution. It granted equal rights to women (something the U.S. constitution does not do), it allowed trade unions, educational reform, removed patriarchy, allowed more freedom... During the occupation there was an astounding growth of new periodicals, newspapers, movies, and new radio shows.

Political prisoners, mostly communist or left-wing, were released from prison.

But there were restrictions, no criticism of the occupation forces or the Emperor was permitted. The author discusses how this lack of freedom to “question” the role of the Emperor and the emasculation of a “free press” led the Japanese readily to see themselves as victims, but not as victimizers. The top military cadre was blamed for the defeat – and the Emperor was removed from that clique. Also when China became communist in 1949 the Japanese atrocities in China became more and more overlooked. Communism was now the new enemy and Japan was needed as a buffer to stop the advancement of Soviet and Chinese forces. This also made the U.S. side with the right-wing in Japan.

This is a comprehensive examination of many aspects of Japan after the war. And it was then that the great Japanese companies like Toyota, Sony, and Nikon started to build up their vision of a future far different than what had recently occurred. Japan is obviously a country that is able to re-invent itself.

Liam says

56% of the way through and I give up - the book is so dry, I can't bear to finish it. It reads as a collection of essays placed end-to-end, which in my opinion is the worst way to write about history. The amount of research and work that has gone into the book is regardless very impressive, and a staggering achievement, but I just cannot read it, which is a shame as it is a subject I dearly wish to learn more about.

Nooilforpacifists says

Simply among the most spell-binding books ever. Arranged topically, Embracing Defeat proceeds both topically and chronologically from the end of the war to the signing of the peace treaty. The two most riveting chapters tell how fewer than 10 lawyers on MacArthur's staff (none experienced in Constitutional law) wrote Japan's post-war Constitution in under a week. One of those lawyers was a woman (she died in 2013)--she's responsible for Japan's strong woman's rights protections. On the other hand, of course, that same team wrote "Article 9" which, to this day, limits Japan's military to a purely defensive role, thus forcing the country to remain dependent on U.S. protection from, say, China. It's all explained.

John says

Because I've not read other writing of any kind or description on WWII in the Pacific, I can't comment on the content. I can only describe my experience of reading this particular book. In sum, Dower's book is a brilliant, entirely engrossing historical narrative that fully merits reading and consideration. I would expect such a book to have garnered as many awards for exemplary historical scholarship and writing as there are organizations to present them.

I can just barely begin to imagine the quality of life for the Japanese, apart from the highest reaches of the elite, during the early years of occupation. Imagine a country entirely encapsulated and isolated from the rest of the world. The Japanese could not travel internationally. A very few foreigners were granted entry visa. The Japanese received no news from the outside world apart from the accounts that US censors had approved prior to publication. Of course, television and the Internet didn't exist. Every form of expression, apart from private conversation, I suppose, was censored. Then chaos reigned. Those in positions of power seized and

funneled military stores into the black market. Government funds disappeared into private hands. Then began the transvaluation of all values, repeatedly - if anyone there cared to notice or could be distracted from the unrelenting struggle to survive from one day to the next in an environment of starvation, malnourishment, homelessness, inadequate clothing, non-existent medical care, etc., etc. You name it, and the Japanese didn't have it - apart from an abundance of some rot-gut concoction that induced oblivion after three drinks.

And then the struggle to create a new state, society and culture.

And then to discover that Cold War politics dictated that the US "reverse course," demanded that the Japanese become a bastion of anti-communism, to be rearmed, under the threat of nuclear annihilation should they forget their "rightful place." The mind boggles.

But I really don't want to become curious about any of this. I have enough trouble as things stand now keeping up with the Transcendentalists, the Bolsheviks and the Stalinists, Bloomsbury, and Henry James. After all, I have promised myself that I will read every word of Thoreau's Journal in 2014. So I really do hope that I won't read Bix's biography of Hirohito, even though the USPS just delivered a copy to my address.

Nancy Regan says

Last September Japan's never-amended 1947 constitution was reinterpreted to expand the authority of its self-defence force so that it could come to the aid of Japan's allies if they were attacked. That this was effected by reinterpretation rather than amendment, that it was not supported by a majority of Japanese citizens, and that the US was cheering the "clarification" from the sidelines will not come as a surprise to anyone who has read Dower's exceptional, and exceptionally readable, history of the US postwar occupation of Japan.

Dower's highly-refined sense of irony equips him admirably to illuminate the most ingenious paradox of Japan's adoption of democracy by fiat, freedom of expression amid heavy censorship, and widespread culpability for war crimes heartily endorsed by the Teflon former-deity who set the conflict rolling. But the irony takes a backseat to even-handed analysis, balanced reporting and a well-built foundation of impressively researched sources.

The book was a natural choice for the nonfiction Pulitzer in 2000. It is an eminently worthwhile read fifteen years later.

AC says

I posted some comments under updates (<http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>), and so will not add a special review here. Suffice it to say, this is a book of real depth and intelligence, and is fully deserving of the many awards and prizes it won. Anyone who's interested in Japan (that's you, Jimmy...lol), or in the turns and events of the Postwar period, will gain immeasurably from reading this volume. One point that came through loud and clear is the degree to which the U.S., and its ideals, were distorted by the Cold War. Dower describes how in 1952-1953, panicked by events in Korea, Dulles and his Administration pushed to rearm Japan -- just seven years after the end of WWII - and how it was the

Japanese, and the conservatives in power there at the time, who stopped it. The height of folly and irresponsibility -- traits that have dogged Republican administrations and Congresses since the death of FDR.

Pamela says

This is not the book to read if what you are looking for is the typical history of the Occupation Forces in Japan. This is a Japanese story. It tells the story of how the people of Japan managed to assimilate defeat and what it meant to them, how the occupation changed the nation, if it did, and the effect it had on both defeated and conqueror.

Dower does this in a series of chapters that encompass everything from the food shortages and initial starvation, the rise of black markets, the establishment of brothels and the rise in prostitution, the literature both intellectual and obscene that began at this time, to the games that children developed which reflected the lives of the adults and the post-war problems of survival. Each chapter is written from the Japanese view; how they reacted to events and changes in their lives, and not from the American position or the post-war Japanese government. Dower covers every area of post-war Japanese life: labor, employment, male/female social relations, education, women's rights, recreational pastimes, and religion to show the progress of the swift turn to democracy, ordered by the occupiers, by a previously traditional, militaristic and obedient nation.

While I believe this book was meant for a general readership it tends to read more like a textbook and contains such detailed information that I found my mind wandering at times. The author also uses a lot of \$2.00 words where a 50 cent one would do and some pretty high sounding metaphors for a history book. For example, "*Japan— only yesterday a menacing, masculine threat— had been transformed, almost in the blink of an eye, into a compliant, feminine body on which the white victors could impose their will.*" Otherwise, it's an excellent, scholarly account of the occupation of Japan from 1945-1952 - which lasted longer than the war itself.

BookishStitcher says

Well written and fascinating book. The first couple of chapters had wonderful historical pictures quite often, but then there suddenly weren't any pictures anymore. That's why it loses a star for me.
