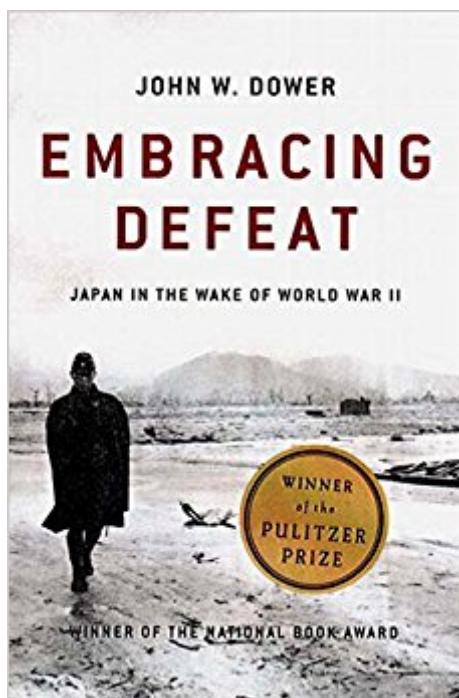


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# Embracing Defeat: Japan In The Wake Of World War II



## Synopsis

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*. 75 illustrations and map

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

*Embracing Defeat* tells the story of the transformation of Japan under American occupation after World War II. When Japan surrendered unconditionally to the Allied Forces in August 1945, it was exhausted; where America's Pacific combat lasted less than four years, Japan had been fighting for 15. Sixty percent of its urban area lay in ruins. The collapse of the authoritarian state enabled

America's six-year occupation to set Japan in entirely new directions. Because the victors had no linguistic or cultural access to the losers' society, they were obliged to govern indirectly. Gen. Douglas MacArthur decided at the outset to maintain the civil bureaucracy and the institution of the emperor: democracy would be imposed from above in what the author terms "Neocolonial Revolution." His description of the manipulation of public opinion, as a wedge was driven between the discredited militarists and Emperor Hirohito, is especially fascinating. Tojo, on trial for his life, was requested to take responsibility for the war and deflect it from the emperor; he did, and was hanged. Dower's analysis of popular Japanese culture of the period--songs, magazines, advertising, even jokes--is brilliant, and reflected in the book's 80 well-chosen photographs. With the same masterful control of voluminous material and clear writing that he gave us in *War Without Mercy*, the author paints a vivid picture of a society in extremis and reconstructs the extraordinary period during which America molded a traumatized country into a free-market democracy and bulwark against resurgent world communism. --John Stevenson --This text refers to the School & Library Binding edition.

The writing of history doesn't get much better than this. MIT professor Dower (author of the NBCC Award-winning *War Without Mercy*) offers a dazzling political and social history of how postwar Japan evolved with stunning speed into a unique hybrid of Western innovation and Japanese tradition. The American occupation of Japan (1945-1952) saw the once fiercely militarist island nation transformed into a democracy constitutionally prohibited from deploying military forces abroad. The occupation was fraught with irony as Americans, motivated by what they saw as their Christian duty to uplift a barbarian race, attempted to impose democracy through autocratic military rule. Dower manages to convey the full extent of both American self-righteousness and visionary idealism. The first years of occupation saw the extension of rights to women, organized labor and other previously excluded groups. Later, the exigencies of the emergent Cold War led to American-backed "anti-Red" purges, pro-business policies and the partial reconstruction of the Japanese military. Dower demonstrates an impressive mastery of voluminous sources, both American and Japanese, and he deftly situates the political story within a rich cultural context. His digressions into Japanese cultureAhigh and low, elite and popularAare revealing and extremely well written. The book is most remarkable, however, for the way Dower judiciously explores the complex moral and political issues raised by America's effort to rebuild and refashion a defeated adversaryAand Japan's ambivalent response to that embrace. Illustrations. Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the School & Library Binding edition.

Book Review: *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*. By John W. Dower. (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, Ltd, 1999. Pp 676. ISBN 0-393-04686-9) *Embracing Defeat* begins where the Pacific War ends. It is a detailed examination of Japan in the aftermath of the war. John W. Dower adroitly leads the reader through the arc of this history as Japan literally rises from ashes at war's end on August 15, 1945, and then guides us through the US Occupation period and beyond. Rather than a simple chronology, Dower organized his book into sections and topics that focus on the Japanese people, their sufferings, the rationalization of their defeat, and their adjustment to a "New Japan." Dower's organization provides the reader insight and sensitivity to the range of difficulties faced by a country devastated by war and left with unimaginable challenges to reconstruct a livable country. Clearly, Dower mastered his subject. The depth of the Japanese plight is borne out in sections with titles like "Shattered Lives," "Displaced Persons," "Stigmatized Victims," and "Mocking Defeat." Japan, a country that was an industrial power in the 1920s, had become a "fourth-rate nation" by war's end. (44) And while the allies' story may be explained in the word victory, Dower digs deep in his account of the diverse opinions, emotions, actions, and motivations held by the Japanese people, brought about by the word defeat. A further example of Dower's organization is that, although General MacArthur's name is frequently cited, he is almost never the central figure in the narrative. The view is clearly from and about the Japanese. Perhaps the most enlightening sections of Dower's work are the first few chapters which focus on the conflicted Japanese people. Japanese culture worshipped the Emperor as Deity, in a way comparable to the worship of Jesus Christ to the Christians. To die for the Emperor was deemed an honor to many. The abrupt end to the war and the devastating defeat was literally and figuratively a bombshell which was universally felt by the Japanese people. When Emperor Hirohito broadcast via radio that the war was over, that the war had been in vain, that Japan had been defeated, it was the first time nearly anyone in Japan had heard his voice. Dower tells us that at the time of Emperor Hirohito's radio broadcast on August 15, approximately 9.0 million people in Japan were homeless and that approximately 6.5 million Japanese were stranded in Asia, Siberia, and the Pacific Ocean area. (47, 48) Although Dower tells us that repatriation was an impressive accomplishment, many Japanese returned to a country they hardly recognized. Many adults who returned after years abroad found that their families had been shattered. Urban neighborhoods had been obliterated. (57) Many never returned. Returning soldiers were often stigmatized victims, according to the author. Many

who had been sent off to war with victory parties and chants of “100 million hearts beating as one,” were frequently viewed as pathetic outcasts. In some respects they had let the Emperor down. Onlookers dubbed their military uniforms as “defeat suits,” their shoes as “defeat shoes.” (170) Outcasts represented a large part of the population and included not only veterans, but the homeless, the hungry. Daily living was as hard as imaginable for the impoverished postwar survivors who received little sympathy. Dower characterizes Japanese culture as a harsh environment for outcasts. He states: “There existed no strong tradition of responsibility toward strangers, or of unrequited philanthropy, or of tolerance or even genuine sympathy toward those who suffered misfortune.” (61) The US Occupation began in late August and the formal surrender took place aboard the USS Missouri on September 2, 1945. General MacArthur, the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces (SCAP) was given unprecedented authority to bring order to chaos. SCAP’s mission was nothing less than to carry out the demilitarization and democratization of Japan. (77) While millions of Japanese were homeless and starving, initial SCAP orders seemed insensitive. They were “not [to] assume any responsibility for the economic rehabilitation of Japan or the strengthening of the Japanese economy.” The plight of Japan is the direct outcome of its own behavior. (529) Almost from the beginning though, this order began to soften; it would change dramatically over time. Dower shows us that over the six-year and eight-month US Occupation, the world changed; thus as new conflicts emerged, the relationship between the United States and her allies changed. These unforeseen changes altered the US-Japanese relationship during the occupation well beyond what could have been imagined in 1945. Amidst the human misery that was so visible in Japan in 1945 and 1946, SCAP proceeded with what must be considered a radical agenda for a victorious occupying power—the implementation of democracy and the development of a new Japanese constitution. “The Americans had long looked askance at the Meiji charter, deeming it incompatible with the healthy development of responsible democratic government.” This made the existing charter incompatible with the primary goals of the United States, its allies, and SCAP. (346) Initially, SCAP endeavored to work through an array of influential Japanese to revise the existing charter or encourage development of a constitution that would be consistent with liberal and democratic ideals required by SCAP and the Potsdam Proclamation. Dower discusses in great detail several unsuccessful Japanese attempts toward this end. The author cites that SCAP’s authority to impose a new constitution on Japan could be rationalized by its authority under Section 6 of the Potsdam Declaration, which stated, “There must be elimination for all time the authority and influence of those who have

deceived and misled the people of Japan into embarking on world conquest. Dower intimates that this was interpreted as requiring the establishment of constitutional protections against future abuses of authority. (347) Dower also cites Sections 10 and 12 as other sections of the Potsdam Declaration that supported SCAP's involvement in the establishment of a new constitution. After several months and seemingly frustrated, MacArthur and his top aides in Government Section [of SCAP] concluded that the [Japanese] government was incapable of proposing revisions that would meet the Potsdam requirements. (360) In February 1946 MacArthur ordered that Government Section draft a new constitution for Japan. This bold act, characteristically MacArthur, was an unprecedented act by an occupying power. Produced in secret in order to devise a way to give it Japanese authorship, this draft, with relatively minor changes, ultimately became the new Japanese constitution in May 1947. It was by all accounts an exceptionally liberal constitution which included reforms such as female suffrage, agrarian reform, and a highly controversial Article 9 which denunciated war. Dower demonstrates in many ways how the relationship between the vanquished Japanese and the allies represented by SCAP began to shift over time. The most notable of several examples was caused by the emerging Cold War. Initially, SCAP sought to foster reconstruction of Japan on a lesser economic scale and Section 9 forced demilitarization. But as Dower explains, Driven by Cold War considerations, the Americans began to jettison many of the original ideals of demilitarization and democratization that had seemed so unexpected and inspiring to a defeated populace in 1945. (525) Instead of breaking up big business and prosecuting prominent capitalists and bureaucrats, as Cold War fever mounted, Americans sought to reinvigorate the economy with Japan ultimately viewed as a first line bulwark against communism. In the vernacular of the times, this dramatic change was referred to as the reverse course. When the Korean War erupted on June 25, 1950, Japan and its US Occupation forces were nothing less than an asset against communist aggression. Moreover, the period leading up to the war saw the revitalization of key heavy industrial expansion in Japan which proved a boon to her economy. Dower tells us that during the Korean War period, American special procurements from Japan amounted to billions of US dollars in Japanese exports. These purchases continued for years after the end to the Korean War. Dower states: This prolonged windfall enabled Japan to increase its imports greatly and virtually double its scale of production in key industries. (542) Embracing Defeat is a most important contribution to modern Japanese history. On one hand it can be viewed as a capstone to Pacific War history for it does provide an insightful epilogue to the war. In another sense this work provides a genesis to the Japanese Miracle because it ends just as

Japan, Inc. is acquiring its economic footing. Dower's ability to aptly organize his abundant scholarship into very readable prose is also noteworthy. The book belongs on the shelf of any serious student of Japan, or for that matter, any serious student of twentieth-century history.

The scholarship and research is clearly manifested. It was my lunchtime reading. I use his time to tackle difficult subjects that require clear thought and reflection that is not always available in the evening. This history caught my interest because of relatives who fought in the war, whose opinions of the Japanese was always negative. This book provides a balance to those opinions. It also portrays the complexities of returning to the vanquished a sense of hope for a more rewarding future.

Beautifully written account of tragedy and resilience in a country destroyed by militarism. This book helped prepare me for a study abroad in Japan by giving me context of Japan's post-WWII occupation by allied forces. Dower investigated multiple aspects of Japanese society in the wake of defeat, from black market privateers to food rationing to the liberalization of print media in a country where the Emperor began to matter less and less to the average citizen. Dower's work continued through the burgeoning democratization movement that was imposed by US forces but also supported by Japanese citizens. I highly recommend this work to anyone who wants to know more about how Japan survived crushing defeat in WWII to become one of the most economically powerful nations in the world by the end of the 20th century.

Japan in the aftermath of WWII was full of contradictions, chaos and sweeping change. The American occupation that lasted from 1945 to 1952 forever changed the course of history in shaping Japan's future and consequently its role in the region and the world. The fate of Emperor Hirohito who was the subject of intense debate as to whether he was directly responsible for the war's atrocities, hung in the balance, with those favoring his preservation (including General MacArthur) in the name of Japan's long-term stability having won the day. Justice had been served, or had it? Scholars, poets, movie directors, housewives, philosophers, professors, all had a view and something to say. Through their eyes, we see what Japan experienced and felt and which direction it should (or shouldn't) go. Japan's economic and financial ascendency post WWII was a byproduct of a confluence of several forces a few of which are listed here: the Korean War which gave rise to 'special procurements' from Japan by the US military, the constraints imposed by 'demilitarization' which tilted production in favor of peacetime goods, the legacies of US policies established during

its occupation of Japan which abetted powerful conservative business and political interests in Japan, and Japan's single-minded determination to advance forward in science, technology and material advancement. John W. Dower is an erudite scholar of modern Japan. Anyone who is serious about learning about post WWII Japan should read 'Embracing Defeat'.

Engrossing, revelatory, detailed... I knew very little indeed about the post-war situation in Japan, and this book was a fountain of new information and documentation. Not "light reading," but nor would one want it to be, given the topic. Very highly recommended to anyone interested in post-war recovery, Japan in general, or the origins of what, for better or for worse, Japan is today.

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