



The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

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Looking Back at the Occupation -- The US and Japan over 60 Years

by Gavan McCormack

The U.S. occupation of Iraq has become ever more chaotic.

For three years and nine months to August 1945, the US and Japan fought bitterly and without quarter. By then, much of Asia lay waste, Japan's cities were rubble and its people on the brink of starvation. Today, a new generation scarcely remembers that Japan ever fought against America, has never known poverty or want, and can hardly imagine that time when their parents and grandparents reviled British and Americans as "beasts." Much of what is taken for granted today -- a close relationship with the United States, capitalism, democracy and prosperity -- is a tribute to the legacy of the Occupation that followed the defeat.

General Douglas MacArthur, who took over and ruled Japan for almost five years as Supreme Commander of Allied Powers, won a victory over Japanese hearts and minds even more remarkable than that won by American artillery and aircraft over the Japanese imperial army. Two photographic images engrave General Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers, on the Japanese memory: one of him exiting the plane that first brought him to Japan's Atsugi airfield, relaxed and confident, puffing on his corn pipe, and the other a month later, hands on hips and casually dressed in open-neck shirt, standing beside and towering over a tuxedo-clad Emperor Hirohito, the commander-in-chief of the defeated Japanese forces and semi-divine leader of the nation. MacArthur's casual posture was evocative of the new power relationship.

The Allied occupation was the subject of long and careful planning in Washington and, unlike Iraq today, its legitimacy was accepted on all sides. With the Imperial Army dissolved, and millions of weary, defeated soldiers drifting back to their villages in conditions of semi-starvation, there was virtually no resistance. The conquering American (and allied) troops came to Japan bearing chewing gum, candy, and a cheerful insouciant faith in their mission to democratize the country. Former occupation soldiers look back nostalgically on those years. Some found themselves purging Japan's bureaucracy or political system, helping organize labor unions or elections, reforming the land tenure system, policing the black market or censoring newspapers and books. One Australian army captain ran the railway system of Western Japan, with his own train for business visits to Tokyo or for weekend fishing trips to the Japan Sea.

By and large the Japanese experienced the occupation as benevolent. Even the Communist Party welcomed the occupation forces as liberators. In six years in Tokyo, General MacArthur received half a million letters, praising his wisdom and forbearance, making suggestions on policy, offering him presents of grapes or persimmons, rice cakes, chestnuts or chestnuts, a salmon, a rare canary, a bear skin, some lacquer bowls; women eager to bear his child offered themselves. Many thought him a kind of god.

Countless American customs and cultural symbols were translated, from jazz and boogie woogie to Donald Duck, Blondie and Dagwood. In time they were absorbed, indigenized, and Japan began to refract back to the world a distinctive, yet universally appealing culture of anime, electronic games, manga and karaoke. MacDonald's and Starbucks came to Japan, but Japan countered with the global spread of sushi culture.

Japan today has been profoundly shaped by the policies and experiences of those occupation years, yet it now looks back with some misgivings, whether MacArthur himself, the war crimes trials, the peace constitution, or the emperor. After he was withdrawn by President Truman in April 1951, MacArthur told Congress that the Japanese people were like 12-year olds compared to the mature, adult Europeans and Americans. They had the innocence of children, he implied, but given American guidance they could develop. In retrospect, his policies are appreciated, but his condescension rankles.

The war crime trials conducted in Tokyo in 1946-48 are now widely seen as examples of "Victor's Justice." While the misdeeds of the defeated Japanese enemy were punished, the devastation of Japanese cities, including Hiroshima and Nagasaki, was ignored, diminishing the moral credibility of the trials in Japanese eyes and setting a precedent for the countless cities that were to be bombed with impunity in subsequent wars. Resentment of the selectivity of the trials allowed the view of Japan as victim to balance, and for some outweigh, that of Japan as aggressor, and no Japanese court has ever endorsed the findings of the tribunals or tried any Japanese citizen for any war-related action. The crimes of colonialism, including sexual and other forms of slavery, were also ignored by the colonial powers that presided at Tokyo, and those matters continue today, unresolved, to bedevil Japan's relations with the region.

Furthermore, despite the view, especially strong in Australia but widespread in all the allied countries, that the emperor should be indicted and punished as a war criminal, the US authorities not only exempted him from any interrogation but positioned him at the centre of the postwar Japanese state, as bulwark of a conservative, anti-communist and pro-American Japan. It was much as if the US in 2003 were to have said that the one thing it would demand of post-war Iraq was the continued power of Saddam Hussein. The US government decided early in the war that its interests would best be served by retaining the emperor as a bulwark of a conservative, anti-communist and pro-American Japan, rather than trying and punishing him.

The constitution's most famous clause, Article 9 banning war and the use of force or threat of force in international affairs, is also a MacArthur imposition. Ironically, however, no sooner had the ink dried on the document than the US government came to regret it, repeatedly urging revision so that Japanese forces could fight alongside the Americans -- in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq. In today's post Cold War, post September 11 world, the US assigns Japan the role of "Great Britain of the Far East," i.e. as the crucial political and military ally of the US in the Asia-Pacific region. It is no role for a peace state.

The US government does indeed appreciate the fact that Japan under Koizumi, like Britain under Blair, and unlike France and Germany, offers uncritical support for US objectives in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere. Yet unease about this, and anxiety about the future, is on the rise in Japan. A senior member of Koizumi's own party (and former deputy Prime Minister) has even used the word *zokkoku*, vassal state, to describe the relationship, and increasingly people wonder does Japan find favor just because it is obedient. How would the US respond if it were to behave like France or Germany? For Koizumi's Japan, which now actively campaigns for a seat on the UN Security Council, to be seen as merely a second American voice on global affairs is an embarrassment.

Ironically, the constitution, in a sense "MacArthur's constitution," was embraced by subsequent generations in Japan especially because of its "peace" clause, even as the US government and conservative Japanese politicians have long been committed to getting rid of precisely that clause. For the Americans, it quickly became an inconvenient obstacle to getting Japanese forces to fight on the American side in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq, and on the Japanese side it has been an inconvenient embarrassment to those who long for Japan to attain full "Great Power" status. Today, however, despite the "peace" clause, Japan spends more on its military than any country other than the US and, although its forces have yet to fire a shot in combat, the restraints on its use are slowly being lifted. And the "peace state" prescription is under unprecedented pressure both from Washington and from conservative or nationalist Japanese.

Today, this hybrid, imperial, "peace state" democracy of Japan installed by General MacArthur almost 60 years ago nears a major fork in the road. Like

Britain, it faces the dilemmas of an island country struggling to come to terms with its adjacent continent and to overcome its assumptions of uniqueness and superiority. Elites worry again about the rise of China and the threat of a nuclear-armed North Korea, hanker for recognition as a political as well as economic superpower, and feel that the option of full alliance with the US might guarantee that future. Japanese elites hanker for "greatness" even under such an ambiguous guise as full partner and ally of the US, but the Japanese people have yet to make clear what path they will choose.

Gavan McCormack is a coordinator of Japan Focus. His most recent book is [Target North Korea: Pushing North Korea to the Brink of Nuclear Catastrophe](#). This is the third in a series of brief articles on the sixtieth anniversary of the dawn of the nuclear age, the end of World War II, and the start of the occupation of Japan. Posted February 14, 2005.