

Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II

John W. Dower, Paperback edition published by Penguin Books Ltd., London, August 2000, 688 pages, £12.99. Japanese translation published by Iwanami Shoten Publishers, Tokyo, March 2001, two volumes, ¥2,200 each.

By Ikemi Kiyoshi

When the Japanese translation of this Pulitzer Prize winning book by a history professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was published, all of Japan's four leading newspapers with nationwide circulation – *Asahi*, *Mainichi*, *Yomiuri* and *Nihon Keizai* – carried reviews applauding it for giving an objective description of the events during General Douglas MacArthur's rule of Japan following the end of World War II and offering today's Japanese much to think about.

During the six years and eight months covered by Professor Dower's book from Japan's surrender in August 1945 to the restoration of its sovereignty in April 1952, the country perhaps experienced more changes than during any other comparable period in its history. He not only traces all the historical events in amazing detail, but answers numerous questions which are still puzzling both Japanese and foreigners alike: what kind of exhaustion and despair struck the Japanese people after the surrender, how their fundamental mentality changed almost overnight from one of ultra-nationalism and hatred of Americans and their allies to one of unequivocal praise of MacArthur and the democracy propagated by him, how the nation accepted demilitarization and democratization as "gifts from heaven," why MacArthur decided against trying the Emperor for his war responsibility, how the war criminals were tried by the Allied forces, how Japan's present-day constitution was written, and much, much more.

Writing for the *Asahi*, Professor Ian Hideo Levy of Hosei University says the book revives the "inner voices," the voices and thoughts of the Japanese of all walks of life in the postwar years – celebrities and ordinary people, men and women, adults and children – in a clear and vivid manner to the surprise

not only of "outside" readers but also of those who lived through that period as "insiders."

From the first chapter on Japan's surrender on Aug. 15, 1945, to the Epilogue titled "Legacies/Fantasies/ Dreams," he says, the book describes the true feelings of both "insiders" and "outsiders," touching on the deep roots of the uniqueness of the Japanese people.

Ikezawa Natsuki, writing for the *Mainichi*, praises the author's "in-depth analysis without prejudice," and says the book gives clear answers to fundamental questions related to the immediate postwar period. "When I read the book," he says, "I felt as though a dense fog blocking my views was swept away by a breeze, revealing magnificent scenery."

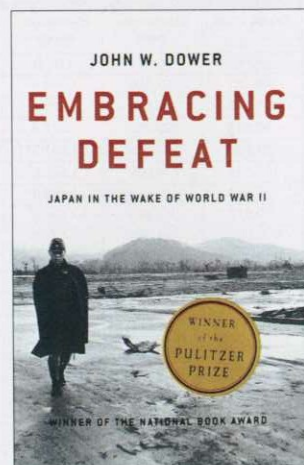
He says Dower was able to maintain an excellent balance between the intentions of the conquerors and the reactions from the vanquished, primarily because the author was an American and not a Japanese.

He concludes by saying that the book provides a basis for objective thinking, particularly to those rightists in Japan who are seeking to restore the prewar ideology centered around the Emperor.

Professor Yamamoto Hirofumi of the University of Tokyo writes in the *Yomiuri* that Dower's book is a "powerful epic" of the Japanese people. It is a matter for regret, he says, that this type of book has never been written by a Japanese author.

Perhaps, he adds, if a Japanese had written about how the Emperor was exonerated from war crimes and how the Japanese people's sense of morality was paralyzed in the immediate postwar years, the whole discourse would have become so emotional that the book would not have been well received like *Embracing Defeat*.

Only by learning from a full-scale history book such as Dower's, he says,



can we expect more objective discussions with calmness.

Professor Hashizume Daisaburo of the Tokyo Institute of Technology writes in the *Nihon Keizai* that the book thoroughly verifies what actually went on behind the stated principles of the occupation forces and what began to grow at the bottom of the confused minds of the Japanese people.

He thinks that the bottom line of Dower's book is to question what has long been regarded as the "correctness" of the American occupation policies and of Japan's postwar systems. In this connection, Hashizume says the author points out that the military rule by the United States helped to preserve some of Japan's prewar systems and expresses serious doubts about the legitimacy of the Tokyo Trials.

At a time when Japan and the United States face the need to restructure their bilateral relations including the security arrangement, he says, this book is useful in bringing people's minds to the most fundamental issues.

There seems to be no doubt that *Embracing Defeat* by John W. Dower is worth reading by any non-Japanese who has any degree of interest in Japan and its people, as well as by Japanese who are thinking of the past and future of their own country, as the author says, "The lessons and legacies of defeat have been many and varied indeed; and their end is not yet in sight."

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