

The Other Japanese Occupation

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by John W. Dower

John Dower's War Without Mercy and his Pulitzer prize-winning Embracing Defeat have established him as the pre-eminent American historian of twentieth century Japan.

[This article was written for Tomdispatch.com, a weblog of the Nation Institute, which offers a steady flow of alternate sources, news and opinion from Tom Engelhardt, long time editor in publishing and author of [The End of Victory Culture](#) and a new novel, [The Last Days of Publishing](#). The article also appeared in The Nation June 20, 2003.]

As we enter a dramatically altered world, both internationally and domestically, it is only natural that we look to history for bearings, points of comparison, glimmerings of the familiar. In these predictable uses of the past, "Japan" has emerged as a small trope for both horror and hope. Thus, September 11 became our generation's Pearl Harbor (headline writers across America turned, almost instinctively, to "Day of Infamy!"). Our new global enemies have been declared an "axis of evil" (with North Korea presumably replacing the Japan of the 1930s). And now we have the sanguine scenario of the democratization of "occupied Japan" after World War II as a model for post-hostilities Iraq.

None of these analogies withstand serious scrutiny, and looking back at occupied Japan should really remind us both how fundamentally different Iraq is from the Japan of 1945 and also how far the United States itself has departed from the ideals of a half-century ago. Liberalism, internationalism, serious

commitment to human rights, a vision of economic democratization in which the state is assigned an important role -- these were watchwords of the Americans who formulated initial policy for occupied Japan. In the Bush administration, they are objects of derision.

There are, in any case, several other midcentury Asian occupations that may deserve closer analysis when evaluating U.S. policy today. Two of these -- in Okinawa and South Korea -- were conducted under the same American "supreme command" that presided over the occupation of Japan proper. A third, surely the most suggestive and provocative, is the Japanese occupation of Manchuria that began in 1931 and soon extended to China south of the Great Wall and eventually to Southeast Asia.

Okinawa and South Korea are instructive as reminders that where security concerns were paramount from the start, the United States turned its back on serious "democratization" of the sort initially introduced to the greater part of Japan. Coveted by military strategists as a great stationary aircraft carrier off the coast of Asia, Okinawa, Japan's southernmost prefecture, was immediately turned into an enormous U.S. military installation. Although the occupation of Japan formally ended in April 1952, Okinawa remained a U.S. colony until the early 1970s, when sovereignty over it was returned to Japan. The sprawling, grotesque complex of U.S. bases remains.

In South Korea, as in the northern half of that tragically divided country, autocratic rule followed ostensible liberation from Japanese colonialism in 1945. Stability and

anticommunism were the bedrock of U.S. occupation and post-occupation policy, and it took decades before the people of South Korea themselves succeeded in throwing off America's client regimes and establishing a more democratic society.

It is the almost forgotten interlude of Japan as an occupying power in Manchuria and later China, however, that poses the most intriguing analogy to the creation of a new American imperium today. Obviously, there are enormous differences between the two cases. Imperial Japan was not a hyperpower when it launched its campaign of accelerated empire-building in 1931. Its propagandists did not spout the rhetoric of democratization, privatization and free markets that fills the air today. Domestically, Japan operated under the aegis of a real emperor, rather than behind the shield of an imperial presidency.

Still, the points of resonance between the abortive Japanese empire and the burgeoning American one are striking. In each instance, we confront empire-building embedded in a larger agenda of right-wing radicalism. And in each, we find aggressive and essentially unilateral international policies wedded to a sweeping transformation of domestic priorities and practices.

Scholars are only now beginning to fully appreciate how perversely "modern" imperial Japan's mobilization for war and accelerated expansion actually was. Self-styled patriotic renovationists not only seized the initiative in calling for a "new order" abroad and "new structure" at home but also made it clear that these goals were inseparable. Their exhortations were bold and articulate. They did not hesitate to employ subterfuge, intimidation and *fait accompli* to achieve their ends. They forged potent alliances of corporate, bureaucratic and political interests, while vesting unprecedented power in the military. And they mobilized popular support domestically through masterful manipulation of

a newly emergent mass media.

In retrospect, we tend to dwell on the hubris and madness of these men. Their short-lived empire is dismissed as little more than a "dream within a dream," to borrow a Japanese phrase, but this is too simple. In their passing moment of devastating triumph, these right-wing radicals not only changed the face of Asia in unanticipated ways but also permanently transformed Japan as well. And their grand concerns, aspirations and accomplishments find eerie echo in much of what we behold in U.S. policy today. Regime change, nation-building, creation of client states, control of strategic resources, defiance of international criticism, mobilization for "total war," clash-of-civilizations rhetoric, winning hearts and minds, combating terror at home as well as abroad -- all these were part and parcel of Japan's vainglorious attempt to create a new order of "co-existence and co-prosperity" in Asia.

It is testimony to the peculiar power of the silver screen that Bertolucci's 1987 epic *The Last Emperor*, winner of an impressive nine Academy Awards, managed to fascinate moviegoers without restoring the Japanese quest for hegemony on the Asian continent to popular memory. The new stage of empire in Asia began in 1931 when Japan, which had long exercised neo-colonial control over Manchuria in collaboration with local warlords, seized the region in the wake of a bogus *casus belli*. (Elements in Japan's Kwantung Army blew up railway tracks controlled by the Japanese near Mukden, and blamed this on indigenous forces.) The following year, the puppet state of "Manchukuo" was established under the regency of Pu Yi, the "last emperor" of the Manchu dynasty that had ruled all of China from 1643 until 1912. In 1933, Japan withdrew from the League of Nations in response to condemnation of its defiant unilateralism.

This exercise in what we now euphemistically refer to as regime change was subsequently extended to China south of the Great Wall, where the eruption of all-out war in 1937 left Japan in control of the entire eastern seaboard and a population of some 200-million Chinese. In 1941, bogged down in China and desperate for additional strategic resources, the imperial war machine advanced into the colonial enclaves of Southeast Asia (French Indochina, the Dutch East Indies, America's Philippines colony and Great Britain's Hong Kong, Malaya and Burma). The attack on Pearl Harbor was in today's terminology a pre-emptive strike aimed at delaying America's response to this so-called liberation of Asia.

"Liberation" was the consistent byword of Japan's advances -- liberation from warlords, guerrillas, "bandits" and generalized chaos in Manchuria and China proper; liberation from the uncertainty and rapacity of the global capitalist system in the wake of the Great Depression; liberation from the "Red Peril" of Soviet-led international Communism and the "White Peril" of European and American colonialism. In the grandest of ideological formulations, Japanese propagandists evoked the image of a decisive clash between "East" and "West" -- Manichean hoey as seductive then as it is today.

While the takeover of Manchuria initially produced deep anxiety in Japan, this was soon dispelled by a great wave of patriotic solidarity. ("A hundred million hearts beating as one" was the analogue to today's "united we stand.") Propagandists evoked the same rhetoric of mission and Manifest Destiny that had animated European and American expansionists. They even appropriated the language of the American Monroe Doctrine by defending the seizure of Manchuria as part of creating a new "Monroe sphere in Asia." It was acknowledged that control of Manchuria would guarantee access to strategic raw materials (notably iron and coal), but the greater objective was, of

course, peace and prosperity. The establishment of Manchukuo, it was declared, would bring about an unprecedented "harmony of the five races" (Japanese, Chinese, Manchus, Mongolians and Koreans). Beyond this, and of far greater significance, Manchukuo was envisioned as a perfect pilot project for establishing a political economy consistent with the most basic ideals of the radical right-wing agenda.

The evocative catchphrase of those heady days was "Manchuria as ideology," and the ideology embraced was on the surface very different from that trumpeted by the hard-core ideologues of a new American empire today. In the wake of the Depression, which had savaged Japan like the rest of the world, the very notion of "free markets" and unrestrained capitalism was, to put it mildly, unpalatable. In this milieu, Manchukuo was seized upon as an ideal opportunity to introduce a new model of "state capitalism" or "national socialism."

Even this great difference, however, does not diminish the many points of similarity between the Japanese and the American cases. As always, the devil is in the details, and the most interesting details concern the manner in which adoption of a positive policy abroad was accompanied by a sweeping reordering of the domestic political economy. Like the United States today, governing circles in imperial Japan were riddled with factionalism. Out of these internecine struggles, elements associated with the military emerged as dominant, led by the "Control Faction" (*Tosei-ha*) associated with General and later Prime Minister Tojo Hideki.

The Control Faction's name had a dual origin. It implied controlling other factions, including more hotheaded rightists. More important, it signaled a dedication to harnessing the economy, and society as a whole, to the ultimate objective of creating a capacity to wage "total war." The "total war" concept had captured the imagination of military planners

since World War I. The "Manchurian incident" of 1931 made it possible to put these plans into effect.

Politically, mobilization for total war entailed military domination of domestic as well as international policy. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs -- Japan's counterpart to our State Department -- was shouldered aside. Economic ministries and agencies became handmaidens to military demands. The Home Ministry -- roughly comparable to the Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security -- intensified its role in domestic policing and the suppression of "dangerous thoughts." (The 1930s also witnessed a number of home-grown terrorist incidents in Japan, involving assassinations of prominent figures and, in 1936, a major attempted coup d'etat.) The elective Diet or parliament became a rubber stamp. Communists and leftists in great numbers publicly recanted their criticism of the imperial state and declared themselves to be devoted to bringing about "revolution under the brocade banner" of the emperor. The mass media, hamstrung by formal censorship, also practiced self-censorship. Once the war machine had been put in motion, and a "blood debt" to the war dead established, it was inconceivable not to support the emperor's loyal troops.

Economically, mobilization for total war was particularly striking in its modernity -- a notion that overturns the once fashionable argument that backwardness and "feudal legacies" precipitated Japan's drive for control of Asia. The national budget was tilted overwhelmingly toward military-related expenditures. The decade following the seizure of Manchuria witnessed what academics now refer to as Japan's "second industrial revolution," marked by the takeoff of heavy and chemical industries. A massive wave of mergers took place, not only in the industrial and financial sectors but in the

mass media as well.

Prior to the 1930s, the modern Japanese economy was dominated by four huge zaibatsu or conglomerate-type business combines (Mitsui, Mitsubishi, Sumitomo and Yasuda). After the takeover of Manchuria, the "big four" became major suppliers of the military, major beneficiaries of development projects in occupied areas, major actors in the suppression of a nascent labor union movement, and major contributors to the consolidation of a domestic "dual structure" characterized by increasing disparities of wealth and power.

At the same time, the 1930s also witnessed the emergence of a technologically innovative corporate sector known as the "new zaibatsu" (*shinko zaibatsu*) that was primarily devoted to military contracting and empire-building. Like the big four -- and like the cutting-edge U.S. corporations clamoring to get in on the gravy train of today's "war on terror" -- these new zaibatsu worked hand-in-glove with the military and cultivated what we now call crony capitalism. By war's end, the six largest new zaibatsu (Asano, Furukawa, Nissan, Okura, Nomura, and Nakajima) accounted for more than 16 percent of paid-in capital in mining, heavy and chemical industries, while the share of the big four had increased to more than 32 percent. When all was said and done, "national socialism" proved very hospitable to aggressive privatization.

Within the civilian ministries, the counterpart to the military hawks and innovative new zaibatsu was a loosely linked cadre known as the "new bureaucrats" (*shin kanryo*) or "renovationist bureaucrats" (*kakushin kanryo*) -- accomplished technocrats devoted to wedding the new order abroad to new institutional structures at home. Adversaries and factional opponents may have denounced these men as rogue bureaucrats -- or rogue capitalists, or rogue military -- but the rogues were in the saddle.

Although we speak of a military takeover of

Japan in the 1930s, electoral politics and most functions of civil society continued through war into the postwar era. Tojo himself was eased from power, in proper parliamentary manner, in 1944. No one could stop the machine he and his fellow right-wing radicals had set in motion, however, until the war came home, culminating in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Japan's was a short ride as empires go, but the devastation left in its wake was enormous.

Despite the deepening quagmire of occupation

and empire, Japanese leaders and followers alike soldiered on -- driven by patriotic ardor and a pitiful fatalism. It was only afterwards, in the wake of defeat, that pundits and politicians and ordinary people stepped back to ask: How could we have been so deceived?

We are in a better position to answer this now.

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