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The American Occupation of Japan, 1945-1952

When the war ended, it was the common intent of all the Allied Powers to render Japan incapable of ever returning to the field of battle. "Demilitarization" was thus the first policy of the Occupation authorities and was accompanied by abolishing Japan's armed forces, dismantling its military industry, and eliminating the expression of patriotism from its schools and public life.

But the American government, which had led the Allied war effort and whose representative, General Douglas MacArthur, was named the Supreme Commander of the Occupation forces, felt that only a democratic Japan would be truly peace-loving. It was assumed that democratic countries like the United States and Great Britain were more peaceful than nondemocratic countries such as Hitler's Germany and prewar Japan under the emperor. But what makes a country "democratic"? Is a country democratic simply because of certain political institutions, like free elections and free speech? Can these political institutions survive if economic power is concentrated in just a few hands, and social structures like the educational system and the family preach unlimited obedience to authority?

The American government believed that establishing democracy in Japan involved change in all areas of Japanese life. Under MacArthur and with the cooperation of the Japanese, Japan undertook tremendous changes in just seven short years--the Occupation lasted from 1945 to 1952. The success of the Occupation can be judged by the fact that forty years later, Japan has not fought a war, is a close ally of the United States, and has not changed most of the important reforms made by the Occupation.

Political Changes: The most obvious changes were political. During the Occupation, Japan adopted a new constitution (sometimes called the MacArthur Constitution because of the major role Americans played in its drafting). This constitution was completely different from the Meiji Constitution of 1889.

- The biggest change was that it declared that sovereignty rested with the people, not the emperor. This is the political basis of democracy.
- The emperor was to continue as a symbol of Japanese unity and culture, somewhat like the Queen of England in Britain's democracy, but without any political authority whatsoever.
- The supreme political institution was now to be Japan's parliament, the Diet, which was to be made up of freely elected representatives of the people.
- Women were given equal rights under the new constitution, including the right to vote.
- Local governments were strengthened to encourage "grass-roots level" political participation.
- The constitution established many new civil liberties, such as the right of free speech, and the powers of the police were weakened and carefully regulated.
- Finally, the military forces were completely abolished and Article 9 of the new constitution forbade Japan to maintain an army or go to war ever again.

Economic Changes: To support these political changes, the Americans instituted reforms to make economic power in Japan more "democratic." In prewar Japan, two-thirds of the agricultural land was rented, not owned, by the farmers who farmed it. The farmers, who made up over 50 percent of the labor force, often rented the land from landlords who lived in distant

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