Bringing Democracy to Japan

To the Pacific basin has come the vista of a new emancipated world. Today, freedom is on the offensive, democracy is on the march.

--Gen. Douglas MacArthur September 2, 1945

The Occupation

In July 1945, shortly after Germany had surrendered, the Allied leaders met at Potsdam near Berlin to discuss postwar policies. Among these was the decision to occupy the Japanese homeland once victory had been achieved in the Pacific. The Allies also agreed that the occupation should bring about the complete disarmament of Japanese forces and the trial of Japanese war criminals. The Potsdam Agreement further called for democratic reforms in Japan's government. Finally, the Allies declared that the occupation would end only when all these conditions had been achieved and "a peacefully inclined and responsible government" had been established in Japan.

Immediately after the Japanese announced their decision to surrender, Gen. Douglas MacArthur was appointed the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers to oversee the occupation of Japan. Although he was technically under the authority of an Allied Powers commission, MacArthur took his orders from Washington. Rather than establish an American military government to rule Japan during the occupation, MacArthur decided to employ the existing Japanese government. To do so, he would issue various direct orders to Japanese government officials but allow them to manage the country as long as they followed the occupation goals developed in Potsdam and Washington.

MacArthur realized that imposing a new order on the island nation would be a difficult task even with Japanese cooperation. It would be impossible, MacArthur believed, for foreigners to dictate radical changes to 80 million resentful people.

Having decided to keep the Japanese national legislature (the Diet), the cabinet and the bureaucracy in place, MacArthur next faced the question of Emperor Hirohito. The Russians and British wanted Hirohito tried and hanged as a war criminal. MacArthur advised Washington against needlessly angering the Japanese by destroying the sacred symbol of their emperor. MacArthur later wrote in his autobiography: "...I would need at least one million reinforcements should such an action be taken ... Military government would have to be instituted throughout all Japan, and guerrilla warfare would probably break out."

At his first meeting with MacArthur, Hirohito assumed full responsibility for the wartime actions of Japan knowing that this admission could mean his execution. Eventually the U.S. and other Allied powers agreed with MacArthur not to treat Hirohito as a war criminal, but one condition was mandated.

On New Year's Day 1946, four months after the occupation had begun; Emperor Hirohito renounced the belief that he was a divine or godlike being:

The ties between us and our people have always stood upon mutual trust and affection. They do not depend upon mere legends and myths. They are not predicated on the false conception that the Emperor is divine and that the Japanese people are superior to other races and fated to rule the world.

These words, while shocking to most Japanese, smoothed the way for the more than six years of occupation that were to come.

Certain aspects of the U.S. occupation policy carried out by MacArthur were very harsh. Wartime Prime Minister Tojo and six other leaders were tried and hanged for war crimes. The policies dismantled and abolished the Japanese military establishment and banned 200,000 military and civilian leaders from holding any public office, including the majority of existing Diet members. The large industrial monopolies that had
fueled the war effort were broken up. Even government support for the official Japanese religion, Shinto, was eliminated.

At the same time, MacArthur promoted the development of democracy in Japan. He suspended Japanese laws restricting political, civil and religious liberties. He ordered the release of political prisoners and abolished the secret police. He announced a general election to be held in April 1946, only seven months following the surrender. He also called for the Japanese Diet to pass a new election law to provide for free democratic elections, including, for the first time in the history of Japan, the right of women to vote. In addition, under MacArthur’s direction, the growth of labor unions was encouraged, large landholdings were broken up and the education system was reformed.

Surprisingly, all of these developments were accepted and in some cases even welcomed by the Japanese. Of course, Japan was under the control of armed U.S. troops. Still, the ordinary Japanese, seeing death and destruction all around, seemed to conclude that the old way of doing things had failed. War and a humiliating defeat had made Japan ripe for revolutionary change.

A New Constitution

The Meiji Constitution of 1889 concentrated actual political power in the hands of a small group of government leaders responsible to the emperor, not the people. From 1930 to the end of the war this governing group was dominated by the military.

Before 1945, democracy as we know it had little chance to develop in Japan. No free elections or real political parties existed. Women were denied equal rights. From an American viewpoint, although the Meiji Constitution listed a number of individual liberties, few were meaningful. For example, even though free speech was protected by the constitution, the government prohibited what it considered “dangerous thoughts.”

Early in the occupation MacArthur saw the need to drastically change the Meiji Constitution. In his autobiography, MacArthur argued:

We could not simply encourage the growth of democracy. We had to make sure that it grew.

Under the old constitution, government flowed downward from the emperor, who held the supreme authority, to those to whom he had delegated power. It was a dictatorship to begin with, a hereditary one, and the people existed to serve it.

MacArthur communicated his views to the leaders of the Japanese government who formed a committee to rewrite the Meiji Constitution. After four months’ work, by February 1, 1947, the committee had produced a revision with only minor word changes. For instance, in the rewrite the emperor became “supreme” rather than “sacred” as in the old constitution.

MacArthur refused to accept the Japanese revision. He gave his own people the task of writing a "model constitution" which would then be used by the Japanese in preparing another revision, which he wanted completed before the Japanese general election scheduled just two months away. He saw the election as a test of whether the Japanese people would accept democratic changes in their political system.

The job of writing MacArthur’s "model constitution" fell to the Government Section of his General Headquarters. A team, of about a dozen Army and Navy officers (all with special training in government) plus a few civilian experts met secretly to discuss, debate, and write their model for a new Japanese constitution. The team members used a 1939 edition of a book on world constitutions as their main reference. Most of the final wording was drafted by three Army officers, all lawyers. This "constitutional convention" lasted a total of six days.

The resulting constitution borrowed from the British system in establishing a cabinet and prime minister who was responsible to the elected Diet. The guarantees of individual rights included wording similar to that found in the American Bill of Rights. One part, guaranteeing equal rights, even went beyond the legal protections Americans enjoyed at that time. Other provisions sounded like they had come from the progressive policies of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. For example, workers received the right “to organize and to bargain and act collectively.”

Perhaps the most unique part of the "model constitution" was the "no-war clause." According to Article 9: "...The Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes." Article 9 went on to abolish all land, sea and air military
forces. This article was included as the result of a suggestion made by Prime Minister Shidehara to MacArthur. Shidehara believed that this provision would show the rest of the world that Japan never again intended to wage aggressive war.

To the Japanese people, however, the most radical change from the Meiji Constitution was the removal of the emperor as the source of all government authority. In the "model constitution" the people, acting through the elected Diet, were supreme. MacArthur decided to preserve the position of emperor, but merely as "the symbol of the State and of the unity of the people."

The Japanese government leaders were shocked by the radical changes proposed in the "model constitution." In particular, they found it hard to accept the idea of "rule by the people" which conflicted with the Japanese tradition of absolute obedience to the emperor. After disagreeing among themselves, the Japanese cabinet went to the emperor. On February 22, Hirohito ended the deadlock by commanding that the "model" become the basis for the new constitution of Japan. "Upon these principles," Emperor Hirohito said, "will truly rest the welfare of our people and the rebuilding of Japan."

On March 6, the Japanese cabinet accepted the new constitution. This was followed by statements of approval by Emperor Hirohito and Gen. MacArthur who later called the document "the most liberal constitution in history."

The constitution was widely publicized and enthusiastically discussed by the Japanese people, especially during the days leading up to the April general election. When the Diet met during the summer of 1946, the newly elected legislators debated and then voted final approval. Japan's new democratic constitution went into effect on May 3, 1947.

Has Japan's democratic constitution been a success? MacArthur himself called it "probably the single most important accomplishment of the occupation." Others have since criticized MacArthur for unnecessarily forcing the Japanese to renounce their political traditions and accept democracy too rapidly.

In 1952, the American occupation of Japan ended. The Japanese were again an independent people free to run their country as they wished. Since then, the Japanese have changed or done away with a number of the reforms instituted by MacArthur. One reform remains firmly in place: the "MacArthur Constitution." For 40 years it has never been revised or amended. In the words of Japanese scholar Sodei Rinjiro: "Clearly the constitution has sunk its roots among the people."