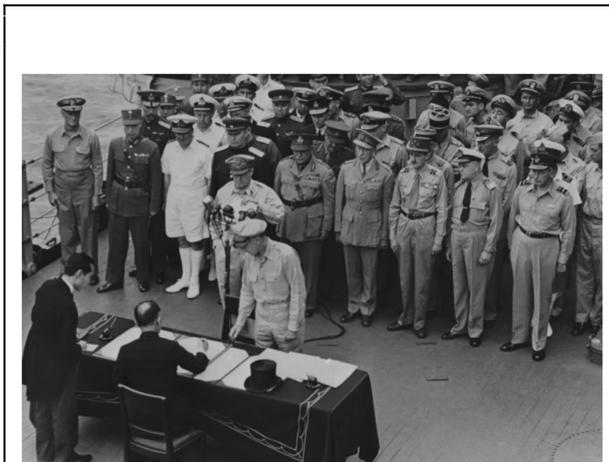


# Japan and the United States: Reflections on War, Empire, Race and Culture

## John W. Dower in Conversation with Patrick Lawrence



**Shigemitsu Mamoru signs the unconditional surrender papers for Emperor Hirohito, thus committing Japan to accept the Potsdam Declaration, August 14, 1945. (AP Photo)**

**The groundbreaking historian of Japan talks about the challenges of scholarship during rapidly changing times.**

Introduction by Patrick Lawrence

John Dower, who is now emeritus professor of Japanese history at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was an essential influence during my years as a correspondent in Japan. I (and I know numerous others) considered him a giant in his field, one of the few scholars who were required reading for anyone with a serious commitment to covering a nation notorious for its opacity, its complex history,

and the ideological shroud Americans draped over it during the Cold War decades. Dower held fast against that corruption of scholarship in everything he wrote over a career that now spans five decades.

I rank Dower with the late Chalmers Johnson and Herbert Bix as one of the great Asia scholars of his generation. His subject was never Japan so much as questions of war, race, self-and-other, and the perspectives of others as these emerged during the Pacific War. Dower's first masterpiece, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, was published in 1986 and lifted the lid on the astonishingly raw racism that infused American war propaganda just as much as it did Japan's.

The book also signaled Dower's future trajectory. He has never lost his habit of exploring popular culture, media imagery, and the like to get at history's true core. Nor has he ever ceased insisting on the need to see from the perspectives of those considered "others." This culminated in *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*. An account of the Occupation years as the Japanese experienced them and another of Dower's masterpieces, it won a Pulitzer Prize when it was published in 1999.

Like Johnson, Dower eventually became one of those scholars who apply themselves to questions beyond their scholarly specialties. In *Cultures of War: Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, 9-11, Iraq* (2010), Dower makes superb use of his many years of trans-Pacific explorations on a global scale. In 2017 he published *The Violent*

*American Century: War and Terror Since World War II*, a title that requires no explanation.

I had wanted to interview Dower for years as part of a series of extended Q&A exchanges I have conducted over the course of many years. When we finally met in the dining room of a Boston hotel, late in 2017, the occasion was even more exceptional than I had anticipated. There at the table with Dower sat Herb Bix, whose *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (2000) was another groundbreaking masterwork (and another Pulitzer winner). Anyone who knows the Asia scene will understand what an extraordinary moment this was.

Bix's interjections during our exchange are marked. As always, I thank Michael Conway Garofalo for his conscientious work transcribing the audio recording.

**Patrick Lawrence: John, I see a remarkable trajectory in your work. It's not quite right to say you began strictly as a Japanist, in that village studies and such topics were not what you were after. You were a student of the Pacific War, primarily, and then the postwar surrender settlement. But from there your work, especially the recent books, has opened up to subjects far broader than Japan. *Cultures of War* seems a culmination of that. Japan was a kind of springboard, I would say. Do you agree, and if so, was this your design from the beginning?**

**John Dower:** I don't think there was ever a grand design. I don't think early in our careers I could have projected where we would end up and where things would take us. My initial attraction to Japan began when I went over when I was 20, as a college student for a summer. This was 1958, and my initial attraction was aesthetic. I was very drawn to the visual cultures of Japan—the landscaping,

the painting, and other things. I didn't really understand what I had seen, so I came home and did a very general program in East Asian studies at Harvard. My background was literature. Japanese literature's what really attracted me.

**PL: It's indeed extremely rich.**

**JD:** I started graduate work at Harvard in 1965. That's when Herb Bix came, too—and when the Indochina war was heating up, although I was extremely nonpolitical at the time.

At Harvard the expectation was that I would do a PhD on a writer named Mori Ogai, who was famous as a literary figure in the Meiji period [1868–1912]. Mori Ogai was fascinating because, as you know, when you're immersed in a culture like Japan, partly you become immersed in the culture and partly you become immersed in rethinking your own culture. It's never that you go to Japan and just become a Japanophile; you also are reflecting on your own culture.

**PL: Japan as mirror. I came to that realization myself over time.**

**JD:** Japan as a mirror. That was a period when “national character” and cultural difference were very strong. National character studies came up in World War II, with “Know Your Enemy” and the “national character” of the Japanese. You always, in national character studies, focus on what makes people different from you. You don't dwell on similarity, you dwell on differences. It's not just Americans or Westerners who are ethnocentric. Japanese love to do this: “What makes us different?”

**PL: “Americans or Germans or whoever do this or that because that's what Americans or Germans or whoever do.” That has always been my summary of the national character argument, which of course I reject.**

**JD:** It's called *nihonjinron* in Japanese. [*National-character studies based on Japanese uniqueness. Literally, "the theory of the Japanese."*]

I had lived in Japan a number of years by this time. My wife was Japanese, I had a child who at the time was less than 2 and speaking only Japanese. Herb came back the same year. He, too, was married to a Japanese woman. I had spent a great deal of time with my wife's family—lots of siblings, mother and father—and I didn't spend my time thinking about how different these people are from me. I had no sense of us/me, self and other, of a big divide. And I also had no sense that they were all the same, that you could generalize about the Japanese, because I couldn't even generalize about my in-laws' family.

**PL: You've anticipated my next question. If I wanted to describe your work in a single phrase—there's no need to, but if I had to—I would say your irreducible theme is exactly what you just said: self and other.**

**JD:** It's self and other, but it is trying to see the many similarities between ourselves and others. I began by loving the culture. One of my first books is called *The Elements of Japanese Design*. I love Japanese culture and I love the distinctiveness of it. I was always interested in how much we share. The sharing is not just positive and soft, big phrases like "we all love and grieve." It becomes more precise. They behave badly or atrociously in war; so do we. I never was seeing "them and us." I always tried to see myself and others in a comparative way.

**PL: This is a very essential point.**

**JD:** But suddenly Herb and I are in the midst of the anti-war movement. I had no politics and I came from a fairly conservative family. And those were the years that shaped us.

I said to myself, "Wait a minute." As students we read about this horrid war with Japan that

ended only 20 years ago. We talk about Japan engaging in such atrocious behavior—the Rape of Nanking, the abuse of prisoners, and so on.... And here we are two decades later: America is in its second war in Asia. When we looked out as young people, we said, "How do you explain this? How do you explain that America and Japan are such close friends now and that war was so bitter back then? How do you explain the fact that what America is doing in Vietnam is very similar to what Japan had done in China and Manchuria?"

**PL: Again, a very significant recognition—part of what one means in saying "Japan is a mirror."**

**JD:** "I can't get this by studying literature," I said to myself. That's when I switched to history. And Herb thought the Occupation of Japan was an interesting period. I had never thought about the Occupation. But that's where you can get the bridge between prewar-postwar, enemy-friend, how you can be such bitter enemies and then become truly close friends.... Now Japan was supporting the US in this atrocious war. So that's when I switched and took up the Occupation. It seemed too big a theme at the time, so I focused on Yoshida Shigeru, the postwar prime minister, because he bridged the prewar period and the postwar period and he was conservative. He became America's man in Japan....

I'm pretty naive politically at this time, but the [Indochina] war was appalling.... In the Harvard community of people related to Asia, all sorts of people were saying—we're now around 1966 or so—this is insane and we've got to stop it....

**Herbert Bix:** The Freedom House Statement, do you remember all of that? [*The statement was an effort by conservative scholars to enlist support for the war.*]

**JD:** People were saying, "Those who really know Asia know we've got to be there and fight

the Commies.” That wasn’t what we were hearing, and that’s when I became active and said, “Well, let’s mobilize.” That’s when we organized. Around the country what was happening in the Asian field was the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, and we spoke up. At Harvard we mobilized and we eventually did a little book. I was part of an editorial group of five or six...

**HB:** Tom Engelhardt... [*Engelhardt was a fellow graduate student who went on to a long career in publishing. He now publishes and edits [TomDispatch.com](http://TomDispatch.com).*]

**JD:** It was called *The Indochina Story*, and we put in all the expertise we could mobilize. We demanded “total, complete, and immediate withdrawal” and we came at it as scholars. Here’s what I didn’t understand: When Herb and I were trained as historians and specialists in Japan at Harvard, no one ever taught us historiography. No one ever taught us what in Japanese is known as *mondai ishiki*, which is problem-consciousness [*putting questions in historical and social context*]. How do you think about these things?

Those of us in CCAS really upset some of the older scholars. The key at that time, when Herb and I came up in the late 1960s and were being trained, was Modernization Theory. Modernization Theory was all about how Japan was the appropriate model for the less-developed world, not China. It was a very ideological theory. How everyone was converging to the same capitalist model, and so on. I didn’t buy all that.

**PL:** **There are a lot of ways you show Japan to be a kind of postwar template. You just mentioned one: Modernization Theory cast Japan as the model to be emulated. You find patterns there that come through over many years. Can you talk about that?**

To take one example, I love the dialectic you identify in wartime propaganda: To demonize

an enemy is to idealize oneself. In the case of Japan, the diabolic superman and the underdeveloped, incompetent weakling are merely two forms of the same exercise in dehumanization. We, it is implicit, are strong and thoroughly humane.

**PL:** **Please talk about Japan as a prewar and post-Cold War template or paradigm. It’s illuminating to recognize it and follow it through postwar history. People may not understand this very well.**

**JD:** The model when we were coming up was that Japan was on the right track and was a model of capitalist development. This meant you studied modernization and how Japan became Westernized, industrialized, internationalized, and so on. The 1930s and 1940s in Japan were dismissed—either as an aberration, or you simply weren’t encouraged to study that period. You were encouraged to study trends that led to the modern, successful, more democratic Japan, and this was done in the name of empirical, “value-free” scholarship. We were saturated with the rhetoric that Modernization Theory was this entirely pure thing.

**HB:** And to climb out of it, to rid ourselves, we had to embrace concepts such as imperialism.

**PL:** **Japan studies during the Cold War is the absolute classic case of scholarship corrupted by ideology—and far from least at Harvard.**

**JD:** Well, you never talked about imperialism involving the United States, so it didn’t ring true to people like me and Herb. In glorifying the modernization of Japan, you were also glorifying the whole trajectory of Western development without discussing imperialism or colonialism or racism or any of those things. Things were missing.

We were doing this at a time when the civil-rights movement is making us aware of

racism—the deep racism of America. But racism as a subject of study concerning America and its view of others, or Japanese racism vis-à-vis others—these were not proper areas of study.

Because I tried always to see things in different ways, it was easy to talk about white racism vis-à-vis nonwhite peoples, white supremacy, and so on. But to get at Japanese racism vis-à-vis others and how it's different, whether they're looking at Chinese or whether they're looking at Westerners—those questions were what struck me as unanswered.

**HB:** Another key notion that arose among us was that American war crimes should come to center stage, and we have to look at American war crimes just as we have to educate ourselves about racism. Because we knew very little about the literature of race in America.

**JD:** I think that's true, because if you were coming up, as Herb and I were, and you were into Japanese history, and I into the Occupation, you get into the war crimes of the Japanese. That's a very complex subject. Is it victors' justice? Is it genuine justice?

But then you look at the American war crimes in Vietnam. Had Japanese top leaders in the '30s or early '40s pursued policies the US was implementing in Vietnam, they would have been condemned as war criminals. So all of these questions, I think, led some of us to step back and say, "How do we understand these matters in a truly comparative perspective?"

**PL:** **Not to diminish anything else you've done, but Chapter 7 in *War Without Mercy, "Yellow, Red, and Black Men,"* is the pithiest piece of writing you have ever done, in my view, because it draws together the question of race in Africa, in slave-owning America, and across the Pacific in Asia. This wasn't remarked upon before 1986 [*when War Without Mercy was published*].**

Anyway, next question. *Empire and Aftermath*, [1979], your book on Yoshida. [*Yoshida Shigeru, Japanese premier, 1946-47 and 1948-54, who negotiated Japan's postwar settlement with the United States.*]

**JD:** Inspired by Herbert Bix, that book.

**PL:** **When I was a correspondent in Tokyo we used to talk about the "Yoshida Deal," as shorthand. I'll have to simplify it here, but it came down to the surrender of some aspects of sovereignty in exchange for very advantageous economic and trade arrangements. When I was covering Southeast Asia, an earlier time, I used to call it the "Cold War Contract"—you saw it everywhere, in Singapore, Indonesia, and elsewhere. Do you see Japan as the Cold War pattern-setter here?**

**JD:** It's sometimes called the Yoshida Doctrine and was basically that Japan's future lies in a close alliance with the United States. In Asian Studies it's often referred to as the San Francisco System, and it goes back to the San Francisco Peace Conference in 1951, when Yoshida was prime minister and countries around the world gathered to work out the terms by which sovereignty would be restored to Japan, which had no sovereignty between 1945 and '52.

The deal on the part of Americans was: We'll support you in a peace treaty with many countries—48, 49, depending on whether you count Japan—but the quid pro quos are several. You must agree to enter a bilateral security treaty with the United States. You must agree to house American bases indefinitely. You must agree to rearm Japan in the anticommunist crusade. You must agree, as it became clear, not to establish relations with the People's Republic of China, but on the contrary, to engage in the containment of China. All of these agreements exclude Okinawa, because Okinawa will be retained as a major American

neo-colony.

But nobody in our field used words like “neo-colony” at that time, so the phrase that I used in the Yoshida book that really upsets Japanese government officials, foreign ministry officials, and more establishment officials in the US was “subordinate independence.” The San Francisco System locked Japan into a relationship with the US that was one of subordination to Cold War US policy. This is true of almost all relationships the US establishes, but in the case of Japan it’s egregious.

**PL: That was my point. Your phrase “subordinate independence,” with many variations in detail from one circumstance to the next, describes the American approach to all Cold War alliances.**

**JD:** Yes. But it was particularly egregious, because what America and our conservative populists in the Japanese government agreed to was to sacrifice Okinawa. What they did to Okinawa is really, really horrendous.

**PL: With echoes today, of course.**

***Embracing Defeat* seems to stand as a kind of capstone achievement, the most penetrating work you’ve done on Japan and the Japanese. In *War Without Mercy*, you hint it was over 20 years from conception to publication. What were you after? What made you decide to go so deeply into a kind of national psychology at so specific a moment in the nation’s history? The ambition of that book is extraordinary. You’re purporting to explain how people’s feelings and attitudes evolved. I’m very interested to know what made you do that and what you were attempting to get done.**

**JD:** Let me preface this with one of my regrets in life. My working title for the book that came out as *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*, and it did take a very long time to

write, *Starting Over*. When the book was done, the publisher’s publicity people came in and said, “No, you can’t use that title because it sounds like a guidebook for people who have just undergone divorce.” So I dropped the title and we ended up with *Embracing Defeat*, but the real title, which I wish I had used—and the regret is that I didn’t think of it then—it should have been titled *Starting Over in a Shattered Land*. It was the “starting over” that interested me.

I had worked on *War Without Mercy* before that. I had done quite a bit of work on the atomic bombs before that. I used to lecture on the bombs and Hiroshima. And the book that became *Embracing Defeat* was probably the most gratifying book I had written, because all of the early chapters are about the Japanese. They’re not about the Americans coming in and giving the Japanese democracy or something—as in standard accounts of the Occupation.

By this time I was fascinated by the diversity of Japanese society. Everyone talks about Japanese homogeneity. But people like Herb and I were more sensitive to the diversity. It goes in every single level. It’s not just left and right or radical and conservative. It’s gender, it’s status, it’s urban and rural.

**PL: It is the making human of those not previously understood as three-dimensional people—in the Japanese case previously dehumanized people. It’s something we Americans need to do in many, many cases—a 21st-century task. This is among the things I found so good in the book.**

**JD:** When I got into *Embracing Defeat*, I probably took the most pleasure in writing that book because it was people who were struggling to make a new life and a better life. In the process of doing that, they reflected on what went wrong. “What is it in the past that we’ve got to avoid?” You don’t do this if you

win. Americans don't come out of World War II and say, "Let's have some self-reflection about our own culture."

**PL: There's a wonderful book called *Culture of Defeat* by Wolfgang Schivelbusch. He talks about this. All the victor has to do is say, "We got it right, let's continue what we were doing." The defeated need to say, "What did we do wrong? Our worldview didn't prove out." The defeated emerge as a stronger people because they had to go through this process, while the victors don't have the benefit of... what's my word?... self-examination.**

**JD:** And so the lack of self criticism of the West: "It was a good war." I think it was a good war in fighting Nazism. I think it was a good war in that you had to fight against Japanese aggression. But it was also a horrid war in many ways, which ended, of course, in strategic bombing and nuclear weapons.

In doing *Embracing Defeat*, I spent a great deal of time going over massive materials with my wife. We would read together. Yasuko, when World War II ended, was 9 years old. She remembers the war years, and she lived through the Occupation. So this was not just abstract history to her. We would sit down and go over materials and just chat. What's going on? What do we need to find more of?

I was trying to see it through the eyes of the elites, but the eyes also of ordinary people coming from all sorts of directions. Not necessarily all idealists or optimists or good people, but people really striving to make a new society.

**PL: Perfect, John. To see from the perspective of others: another 21st-century imperative.**

**JD:** I was impressed, and I hope that came through in the book. Because their energy and

diversity and complexity, and the conflictual nature of the society and the ambiguities of American policy and the double standards of the war crimes trials and the double standards of America's preaching about democracy while we have a Jim Crow America—all of this came out.

I think something happened in that book such that I could wrestle with the kinds of things I wanted to, which were pop culture, ordinary people, grassroots as well as elite activities, and do it from Japanese perspective and then bring the Americans in on it.

**PL: We're talking about method now, and it happens to be my next question. Only when I read *Embracing Defeat* did I realize that you'd long had a preference for everyday materials as revelatory of history. Radio broadcasts, films, cartoons, editorials, memoirs, notebooks, army manuals. When I reviewed *Embracing Defeat* I invoked the Annales school, and now I have a chance to ask you: Can you talk about method in your idea of writing history?**

**JD:** I think I'm more of an intuitive writer than a methodological writer. I actually really came out of literature, as I mentioned, and some of the concepts influenced me. I use the word "tragedy" a great deal. I have a sense of contradiction, a term we're not supposed to use anymore since Marxism has been discredited.

*Empire and Aftermath*, the Yoshida book, was my first, and I was doing traditional history. I was deep in the diplomatic archives, I was reading Yoshida's letters, I was reading written materials mostly from elite individuals or institutions and putting it together as policy.

When I got into *War Without Mercy*, I said, "There's a whole realm here of more visceral types of hatred, racism, idealism, and so on. I want to wrestle with those things, too, but I've got to go to different kinds of sources. I think

as we've worked, Herb and I have been sensitive, in the postwar period in Japan, to a vigorous antimilitarism, antiwar sentiment. That didn't come because the Americans gave them a constitution that said "no war." It came because they were sick of war and they thought about why it had happened. They mistrusted military leaders. They mistrusted those solutions. You couldn't get at that sentiment at the upper levels because they had made the deal with America and accepted the San Francisco System. So both of us became sensitive and associated and identified with Japanese who were critical of both Japanese history and contemporary Japan.



**A man stands in a sea of rubble before the shell of a building in Hiroshima on September 8, 1945. (AP Photo / Stanley Troutman)**

**P L:** You use these terms: "race words," "hate words," "race imagery." In *War Without Mercy*, they come over effectively as instruments of war. Does war always have a connection with race, whether real or imagined?

**John Dower:** I would say that you cannot deal with almost anything without the element of race and racism entering the picture. It colors so much. It colors, deeply stains American

politics, obviously to the present day.

I really do love working with language and listening to language. Because I was now thrown into doing history, I was fascinated first with the racist dimensions of American language in the Second World War. It was very, very embarrassing. But what interested me when I got into the racist dimensions is that it isn't that lower classes, uneducated classes, non-cosmopolitan people are racist—it permeates the society right up to the very top. Winston Churchill was as racist as you could get. It's up there at the very top.

**PL:** And race consciousness exists independently of the war. You make quite a specific point about this: "We must understand that war merely brings to the surface what was already there."

**JD:** War brings it to the surface in various ways. One of the ways is denigration of the enemy, but another is completely failing to understand their attitudes and capabilities, so it leads to terrible intelligence failures because you look down on them. This has been true over and over again. So we saw in World War II, we saw it in Korea, we certainly saw it in the Indochina war, and we see it now.

I've written now and read a lot on the "war on terror," and the condescension with which others are perceived and the failure to understand their capabilities, feelings, or intentions is just staggering—to the point where you then get into a critique of so-called rationalism, because you see underlying this deep prejudice and animus.

The word that's tricky, but a word that I think about a lot, is "empathy." People get confused. They say if you have empathy that means you approve of what the other person does. Empathy is *understanding* where they're coming from, it's not just saying it's good. This is very lacking in life in America, and certainly lacking in white male patriarchal America.

**PL: You remind me of Richard Perle [*the conservative intellectual associated with the George W. Bush administration*] after 2001. “Decontextualization” was his word: Any effort to understand terrorism is to sympathize with it. Crazy, simply crazy.**

**JD:** That’s the attitude. Instead of simply saying, “They are uncivilized, savage, brainwashed people,” to say, “Why are they doing this? What makes a young man give up his life like that? What are the conditions?” And the conditions are very complex.

**PL: We’re now in “self-and-other” territory again. I want to talk about what used to be called “pan-Asianism.” A lot of Westerners never register the extent to which Asians take Asian-ness, or non-Western-ness, as a point of identity. What are your thoughts about that?**

**JD:** I would be very careful about using “pan-Asianism” as an effective analytical concept. I think it’s an effective ideological concept, but if we look at Asia today, I don’t think Japanese really feel kinship to Chinese, despite the propaganda of pan-Asianism. If you look at the tensions among Asian peoples today, that identity of pan-Asianism is less than that of nationalism.

**PL: I’m corrected on the use of the term.**

**JD:** But I think there is a sense of identity among all groups, whether it’s national, cultural, religious, ethnic, tribal—and they can be pumped up. When Herb and I became graduate students and modernization theory was the vogue, much of it was Westernization. What we were told to read was: Look how they copied Western constitutional law. Look how they adopted, you know, *Rokumeikan* [*a building in Tokyo identified with a period of uncritical cultural borrowing from the West*] and all the Western culture. Look how they adopted Western music. Look how they went to the West and studied science. Look how they

established international contacts.

But one aspect that the Japanese, in particular, learned from the West was imperialism.

**PL: Almost no one understands this. The Japanese empire was an act of imitation.**

**JD:** They learned from the West that to be a great power you had to have an empire. The key was power. They learned from the West that nationalism is the glue to hold a society together. When they did the Modernization Theory, it was an idealized view of the West—the West was exceptionally progressive, the West was exceptionally moral. That didn’t jibe with me.

Many people in Asia, indeed, came and learned from the West and came to love the West. And why not? You know, there was great pop culture, there was more freedom for many of them. There were many things to admire in the West. But at the same time there was, and is always, a sense of one’s own identity being preserved and enhanced. And that’s, of course, what we saw in Japan in the 1930s and early ’40s: the whole sense of Japan as the Yamato race, pan-Asianism, the new order in Asia, their sense of uniqueness. We see this even more strongly now in China.

**PL: It’s a chicken-and-egg question: You seem to suggest—it might be in *War Without Mercy*—that Japanese notions of superiority were actually prompted in some measure by Western notions of superiority. And that Japanese notions of race consciousness were in some measure a response to Western characterizations of the Japanese. Which came first?**

**JD:** You’ve got to picture that Japan was essentially a secluded and isolationist country until the mid-19th century. It was divorced from the world, so it did not really see itself as a nation among nations because it did not have international relations until the mid-19th

century. When it sees itself in this situation, it realizes, “We have to emphasize our national identity to hold our people together and to pump up our own identity vis-à-vis others. At the same time, we have to adopt much from the West, because they’re technologically more advanced, in many ways politically more progressive, and there are many attractive things to adopt.”

But the sense of identity comes when they are thrown into the international world, and it’s a predatory, imperialistic world.

**PL: So there is an element of response in it.**

**JD:** They’re responding to a predatory world. In the case of China, whenever we talk about China we go back to the First Opium War in 1839–42—what Chinese never stop talking about as the humiliation of China. And it has been only recently that China is strong enough to really stand up. When Mao comes into power, he says, “Now, at last, China has stood up.” But it has only been very recently that China has said, “We will not only stand up but we will be assertive.” This is why you see all of the current talk about Chinese identity and so on.

Returning to your original point, I don’t know. I’d have to think about this. It’s a mistake to put it just in terms of “Asianism” or Asian countries. It’s a response. Almost everywhere, you have to find identity to stand up against threats. And identity is also a sense of “Who are we?”

**PL: That question can be posed only in the presence of another. If there’s no other, you don’t have to ask it.**

**Herbert Bix:** The other doesn’t have to be an exterior other. It can arise from the inequalities in any society.

**PL: Going back to Chapter 7 of War**

**Without Mercy again, you suggest that the myth of racial superiority underlies all of the familiar conflicts between races—white vs. black in Africa and then during slavery in America, white vs. Native Americans, white vs. Asians. You treat these as elements of a single phenomenon, as if to suggest we’ve lived through half a millennium of history defined by racial animosity. Where are we now in all of this?**

**I’ll add, in my view, parity between West and non-West is one of the absolutely essential imperatives of the 21st century—an inevitable, irreversible feature. This is why I attach the importance I do to China and also to Russia. I wonder if you agree.**

**JD:** Well, Russia is your example alongside China. The Slavic identity and the Chinese identity, which is always very romanticized, just as anyone’s identity. You said half a millennium. If you go back to Western expansionism in the last 500 or so years, the West was indeed dominant. We were technologically more powerful. We Westerners created this vast global imperium. I think it’s taken a fairly long time before people really looked into how vicious that Western imperium was, whether it’s Britain or Germany or Belgium.

**PL: Don’t forget the French.**

**JD:** The French. It was really vicious. It’s taken a long time even to recognize those people and what was done to them, because the West, in its own language, was always a civilizing force. The White Man’s Burden, the Kiplingesque notion of bringing civilization to savage, barbaric, backward people. So there was always, in the Western experience with nonwhite, non-Christian countries, a sense of Western cultural supremacy, of civilization versus barbarism.

**PL: My question about parity is to ask: Do**

**you think what you just described is now coming to an end?**

**JD:** I think it's coming to an end to the extent that now Western hegemony is declining. As Western hegemony declines, we see this now in an assertive Russia and particularly in the rise of China and other countries. And we see it to some degree in the degeneracy and present disarray of the United States. That is sort of marking the end of a period in which the arrogant Western sense of superiority has become challenged.

**HB:** Another question: Do you think that the Damocles sword of climate change has undermined, or is in the process of undermining, dichotomous ways of looking at the world?

**JD:** If we look at the present situation of the world, there are two great things: One is climate change and one is nuclear weapons. We haven't done well on either one. Right now I'm reflecting on nuclear bombs because I'm writing a preface to the section of *Cultures of War* called "Ground Zero 1945, Ground Zero 2001," so I'm just trying to think about this.

The US has promoted the arms race. Obama, in whom we invested so much hope, has made a disastrous step in the wrong direction with this nuclear modernization. It's a disastrous step in American nuclear policy. We have not had a nuclear war, but it is still alarming.

So if you look at where Western hegemony and where US leadership since World War II has taken us, it's taken us into a world that's threatened now by climate change—in which the US has become absolutely appalling—and into a world in which the whole threat of nuclear weapons is at a new level.

When I've come back to Japan, for example, I used to lecture a lot about Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I used to admire the peace movement and the antimilitarism movement in

Japan, and I admire those who are still in it. But 10 years ago, if someone asked me about Japan I would say there's not a chance Japan would become a nuclear power. Popular opinion won't support it. I would not say that now. I think we're now in a situation—and this is the US that's pushed nuclear modernization—where we've got a whole new level of thinking about nuclear weapons as battlefield weapons, small nukes.

If you read the media now, and this wasn't true even five years ago, they're all saying, "Will Japan go nuclear? Will South Korea go nuclear?" America has a president who at one point said they should maybe do that. In Japan the force is pushing in that direction. So I think we're looking at a world in which Western and US leadership has faltered.

**PL: I want to turn again to *Cultures of War*, a book I look upon as a quite significant departure following *Embracing Defeat*. What do you mean when you say war is a culture, in and of itself?**

**JD:** I thought a lot about that. It's a hard thing to grasp. When you come up in a field like Japanese studies or area studies or just in popular political rhetoric, culture is usually defined in terms of national culture, national character. So you say "clash of cultures," "clash of civilizations," and that's the rhetoric that we tend to rely on. And then you get back into what we talked about earlier: self-and-other, the great differences between oneself and another. You tend to focus, almost always, on the superiority of the self and the inferiority of the other.

In American rhetoric, this really has gotten carried to an extreme in the concept of American exceptionalism. It permeates much American discourse or conversation. We are exceptional in our power, we are exceptional in our virtue and morality, we are exceptional in being a supporter of a rules-based society, and so on. So this kind of thinking of self-and-other

is what gets us into this whole notion of how different we are.

Because I've spent so much time working on Japan, when I went back to study the US and what it was doing in the Middle East—or before that, what the US was doing in Indochina—I was more and more struck with how the behavior of the Americans in policy-making, and often militarily, was similar to the behavior of the Japanese and other peoples; that war itself created its own internal cultures, and those cultures involved wishful thinking, they involved hubris, they involved failure to seriously empathize with the enemy to the point of understanding them, they involved totally failing to comprehend the capabilities of others because you look down on them. And in the practice of war, I found so many things that were similar. So I was trying to break away from the us-and-them in traditional national culture, the clash of cultures.

When 9/11 happened, there was a spate of articles saying, "This shows that Islam has no respect for innocent human life," and you had a cultural explanation. And I said, "What are we talking about?" As if the Judeo-Christian culture, the Greco-Roman culture, the whole history of the West—particularly, as Herb says, for the last five centuries or so—has been one of atrocities, of massive slaughter of individuals.

I thought it was a classic example: Immediately we get a cottage industry, which continues to this day, about terror bombing. But it's always non-state Islamist terror bombing and there is no point of reference. There is no point of reference.

**PL: To take your question, what are we talking about? Are we merely repeating the pattern? I have to read the press all the time, and I think about the things you expanded upon in *War Without Mercy*, and say to myself, "Once it was the Japanese, now it's more subtle, but it's Muslims." Are**

**we simply repeating the pattern? Is there some source of optimism here? I have trouble finding it sometimes.**

**JD:** I think we've repeated a lot. When 9/11 happened, one of the striking things, which I do write about in *Cultures of War*, is the immediate American response was to compare it all with the Japanese. Headlines say "New Day of Infamy," "New Pearl Harbor," "Islamist Kamikaze," and on and on. George Bush does "Mission Accomplished" off an aircraft carrier off San Diego, which is exactly modeled on MacArthur taking the Japanese surrender on the *Missouri*. And you can go on.

Then they go in to occupy Iraq. Someone called me up once—this is in 2003—and said, "I'm going to Iraq. I'm reading your book." I said, "What?" He said, "Well you're sort of basic reading for all these people. They're all getting on the airplane with *Embracing Defeat*." See? The Occupation of Japan.

At that point I wrote a number of pieces saying you can't compare these two countries. But we did. The Islamists are non-Christians, they're nonwhite, we call them savage, we group them all together as if they're a single monolithic culture, and I think we keep looking through these very simplistic distorting lenses.

**PL: You just mentioned terrorist bombings. I want to put this in the context of the history you explore. There are Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there are the bombings of German and Japanese cities prior to those events, and you seem to assert these acts during World War II marked a significant breach in what was acceptable in war: purposeful attacks on civilian populations. It's a grim insight. Do I understand your point correctly saying that this was the beginning of what we have now?**

**JD:** It is not exactly the beginning of what we have now. When I did the early book, *War Without Mercy*, I was very interested in reading

what the Americans, the British, the League of Nations, were saying about the bombing of cities and civilians by Germans and Japanese. So you've got Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, the League of Nations, the State Department, whomever, and in the late 1930s, very early 1940s, before Pearl Harbor, you get these statements about how deliberately targeting noncombatant men, women, and children is beyond the pale of civilization, and this is how we know that we are confronting a savage and barbaric enemy.

Then, of course, very quickly once the US gets into the war, the US and Britain change their policy until by the end of the war they are deliberately targeting densely populated urban areas. We can't get numbers on how many they killed, but it's over a million people in Germany and Japan together that are killed in these air raids. We are engaged in—and you can find it in the record if you go into it—terrorizing the enemy. Because of what happened in World War II, people have come up and said, number one, we're fighting total war, which means everyone is the enemy, and number two, we understand the psychological dimensions of war, and psychological warfare tells us that to destroy the enemy morale, it helps to attack the enemy populations. That which will weaken morale, in total war, becomes a legitimate target, as well as soldiers and armies and navies and war-related installations. We get into this mindset, so there was a real sea change. And it ends in the atomic bomb.

World War II ends and five years later we're in Korea. Almost no one knows, but in Korea the US drops four times the tonnage of bombs it had dropped on Japan and kills millions of people. Then we move on to Vietnam and the US drops 40 times the tonnage of bombs that had been dropped on Japan. Forty times the tonnage of bombs, and we killed millions of people. In reaction to that, two things happened: One thing is public revulsion, because television has entered the picture and

mass media has come in. This is what triggered us when we were graduate students. We had come back and we were watching this on television, saying, God, they're setting little children on fire.

The revulsion of the public coincides, beginning after Vietnam, with what's called the Revolution in Military Affairs. The Revolution in Military Affairs reflects computers' and personal computers' coming into warfare. That is when we move into precision weapons, smart weapons. Since then, and certainly since 1991 and the Gulf, we have placed more emphasis on avoiding what we call collateral damage to the extent possible. So you're not getting deliberate saturation bombing the way you did up through the war in Indochina. They've changed the tactics and the number of civilians killed by direct bombing is still in the thousands, but it's not in the millions.

**PL: Ironically, now that it's down to precision bombs and drones, there are many fewer casualties, but we are actually perfectly aware of the identities, names, ages of children and everything else when a drone hits a Muslim family in the Middle East.**

**JD:** Also, in our new age of social media, those civilians we are killing—and I'm not even talking about the civilians that have been displaced by our policies in the Middle East; there we're into hundreds of thousands, and if we get into losing their homes we're into millions and millions from our destabilizations—we still rely on air power. Trump has jacked it up from what Obama was doing. Obama was bombing loads of countries. He's a great disappointment in many ways. But Trump has jacked up the number of bombing raids in the Middle East.

Even though the number is smaller, even though they may be killed by drone attacks, they become publicized and they inflame rage. The policy is still relying on air power, relying

on this brute force, and it is counterproductive. We get what Chalmers Johnson called blowback, more and more.

**PL: People argue—James Baldwin, for example—American foreign policy is, at its core, white supremacist. One can see the argument. And you make a very good study of the difference between American attitudes toward Germany during the war and toward Japan. Where do you land on this question of the racist element in American foreign policy?**

**JD:** I do not think all Americans are racist. I would never, ever say such a thing. But I think that racism has been a bedrock phenomenon in America and American politics. It's been deliberately played up politically, particularly by the Republican Party.

**PL: But racism as an underlying set of assumptions in US foreign policy, yes. For example, living in Tokyo, American officials still talk to the Japanese in ways they would never dream of addressing a French official.**

**JD:** That's correct. I remember when I was living in Japan way back when. They were having a party at the American Club and one of the wives politely said, "Why don't we invite some foreigners?" [Laughs]

Racism continues to be a strong element, very powerful, to the present day in American outlook on the world, in explicit prejudices, and in subtle underlying attitudes that lead to a whole realm of crude colloquial words. I traced those in *War Without Mercy*: the "gook" that goes from the Philippines at the turn of the century to World War II to the Korean War to the Indochina War. If you get this at the level of the Middle East, "sand niggers," that's very revealing. You've got "ragheads." There is a contempt and a mistrust of them. Culturally, in their religion, in their color, in their practices, they are alien to us and inferior. All this goes

together.

There are many idealistic aspects in American policy, and it had a role to play, maybe, in peacekeeping in various ways. But there's a real hubris in American policy. American exceptionalism—that we are more virtuous and we are more powerful, of course, and more civilized than any other country in the world—it plays, if not consciously, certainly subconsciously, in all our relations. And I think the person who is on the receiving end of this is completely sensitive to this.

**PL: "Strategic imbecility." Nice phrase, from *Cultures of War*. Going back to my earlier thought about parity, any effort to preserve the West's position of superiority indefinitely into the 21st century is precisely imbecilic. Do I understand your meaning of this phrase properly?**

**JD:** I think I may have borrowed the phrase from Samuel Eliot Morison, who was the great American naval historian who wrote a multivolume history of the US Navy in World War II. He was himself a commissioned officer and was a Harvard professor. He wrote an article about Pearl Harbor that said it was absolute strategic imbecility on the part of the Japanese, because they made no attempt to understand America or how it might respond.

When I read that phrase I was working on *Cultures of War* and I was reading voluminous stuff about the Bush administration and the neocons and how the policy-making went on at the upper levels of government that led to the "war on terror," the invasion of Afghanistan, the insane invasion of Iraq, and the mess we're in in the Middle East to the present day. The same elements of hubris, wishful thinking, irrationality, delusion, denial, were present in the two cases. I quote a line from Herb's book *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* where he was talking about the irrationality of the highest levels of decision-making in Japan.

What's stunning about this, Patrick, is these guys are very smart, in theory. You don't get to be secretary of state or vice-president, in theory, if you haven't spent a lot of time studying the world and learning things. And yet, everything in the response to 9/11 was imbecilic. It was almost all imbecilic. So that's where I said, "Wait a minute." I'm not denying that the Japanese were imbecilic in taking on China first and then the Western world. That was strategic imbecility. I'm not rejecting Morison. I'm just saying it's not much different from what we saw all these years later with this incredible bureaucracy.

The thing that fascinated me when I did the work on *Cultures of War*, one of the things I hadn't realized I would find was, when you went beyond the top levels of policy-making in Washington—to the military, the majors and colonels in intelligence, and the CIA people in the somewhat lower levels, and the State Department intelligence people—they were writing things saying, "You're crazy to attack Iraq. This is madness." I was writing a few op-ed pieces—they were writing stronger and better stuff than I was writing but they had to keep it quiet. It never makes it to the top.

There's this kind of myth of America having this fantastic intelligence apparatus that collects so much data and feeds it up and you can make informed decisions, but it doesn't work that way. People come in and they act on their passions or their gut reactions or their prejudice or their incredible it's-going-to-be-a-cakewalk-in-Iraq kind of language.

**PL: I remember in 2003 so well, the comparisons with Japan began even before the March 2003 invasion. I remember saying to myself, "Are you kidding?" Of what I understood of the Japanese Occupation, there was an enormous amount of preparation beforehand, including bringing in the social scientists, the Ruth Benedict crowd and all that, to**

**figure out how it was going to go. There was none of that in Iraq. None. [Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* is considered a classic wartime study of Japanese society.]**

**JD:** It was a very, very imbecilic policy.

**PL: You came to Japan by way of aesthetics. I wonder if you know this wonderful little book by Isozaki Arata, the architect, called *Island Nation Aesthetics*. I will not do it justice in my summary, but he talks about how the isolation of island-dwellers is a determinant of identity: who they are, what they value, how they understand themselves in relation to others. The question is geography as destiny.**

**Now, relatively speaking, Japan is a small place and America is a very large place, and we're not an island. But we're very large and also quite isolated. I find our isolation more and more a determinant in our inability to grasp realities in the 21st century. Are you at all with that thought?**

**JD:** Well, yes, but I think we're getting again into the difficulties of comparison. I think it gets complicated. Japan is a small island nation. Every Japanese book begins with "Japan is a small island nation." It actually protected Japan. They were invaded once by the Mongols back in the 13th century, but until the Americans invaded Japan it was pretty invulnerable. But when that small island nation was a closed country, before the modern period [1603-1868], the phrase in Japanese is *sakoku*, "closed country," and that was the policy of feudal Japan up until the mid-19th century. That is the insular consciousness of the Japanese.

When they opened to the West, Isozaki seems to be saying, that that is always with the Japanese, their sense of being a small and vulnerable island. There's no question that in

that period of isolation they developed superb aesthetics—oh my God, architecture, graphic arts, ceramics, everything. When Japan is thrown in the world in the mid-19th century, it really has to understand and study everywhere in the world. They have to know the world they're going into.

So they actually learn much more about the outside world than, for example, I did as a young man growing up in Providence, Rhode Island, in the 1940s and '50s. So the Japanese have a keen sense of others. Someone like my wife was going to music classes where the entire room was surrounded by the busts of Mozart, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, and everyone. She knows Western music way better than I do. She knows Western literature in translation way better than I do. They are much more cosmopolitan, and their cuisine has got everything from around the world.

America is a big country, but it has had this security. I would say, despite its global role, you can argue that America is an insular country also in many ways.

**PL: Exactly my point.**

**Patrick Lawrence** is a longtime columnist, essayist, critic, and lecturer, whose most recent books are *Somebody Else's Century: East and West in a Post-Western World* and *Time No Longer: America After the American Century*. His website is [patricklawrence.us](http://patricklawrence.us).

**JD:** Someone like Trump is almost a cartoon example of this insularity.

**PL: Are you an optimist or a pessimist? I often ask this when concluding an exchange such as ours.**

**JD:** I'm not too optimistic. I just picked up a Harvard alumni magazine the other day and opened it and there's a message from [Drew Gilpin] Faust, the former president of Harvard, and in the first paragraph or two it says that a recent survey shows that 59 percent of Republicans and some other percent of Republican-leaning independents believe that higher education is worthless.

**PL: It may not say it all, but it says a lot.**

**JD:** I don't know. What we have done, what we've struggled to understand all these years, is held in disrespect. The act of struggling is held in disrespect now.

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