6.1 AMERICAN DREAMS FOR A NEW JAPAN

Allied troops began to arrive in Japan in late August 1945, and the Occupation officially started upon the formal surrender on 2 September. The Japanese had feared brutal Allied reprisals, but were greatly reassured by the surrender-acceptance speech from the man who was to head the Occupation, US General Douglas MacArthur. MacArthur stressed the importance of putting aside hatred and of looking to a future of peace. He also expressed his confidence in the Japanese people to rebuild their nation and regain their dignity.¹

His men did not let him down. There were inevitably a number of cases of brutal treatment,² but in general the Occupation troops showed kindness towards their former foe. The Japanese, for their part, were extremely co-operative. As a result, the scale of the Occupation forces was soon able to be reduced from 500,000 to just 150,000.

Obviously, in addition to the immediate and serious practical concerns of food and shelter,³ the people of Japan were in a state of confusion and anxiety. Their indoctrinated faith in Japan’s divine superiority and invincibility was now seriously undermined. So too was their faith in their political and especially military leaders. Many Japanese felt anger, disillusionment, and a sense of betrayal towards those leaders. Some even had negative thoughts about Hirohito, though not so much towards the imperial institution itself.

MacArthur reassured the Japanese not only by his speech, but also by his manner. Now in his mid-sixties, he had been a general since the age of 38—at the time the youngest ever in the history of the United States. He was a man born to lead, a man dignified and self-assured, firm but benevolent, and possessed of an almost messianic conviction of his own
God-given destiny to shape history. He was in some ways reminiscent of the Meiji oligarchs in his mix of democracy and authoritarianism, and certainly in his conviction that he knew best what was good for the people he ruled. To a nation accustomed to being led, he was a welcome new leader. He was hailed by the Japanese as a new shōgun, Japan’s American emperor, even a god. His own men used to say tongue-in-cheek that if you got up early enough in the morning you could see him walking on the waters of the Imperial Castle moat, just a short distance from his headquarters.

In theory the Occupation was an Allied exercise and not merely an American affair, let alone a one-man show. MacArthur’s formal title was Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP). Of those Powers, China and the Soviet Union sent no troops to Japan, but British Commonwealth troops did play a definite if limited part in the Occupation, mostly confined to a zone in western Honshū. The four major Allied powers—the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union, and China—established an Allied Council late in December 1945 in Tōkyō, where they held fortnightly meetings. There was also a Far Eastern Commission of all eleven victor nations, which met in Washington from February 1946 to determine general Occupation policy that was then to be relayed through the Allied Council.

In practice, however, the Occupation was indeed almost entirely an American affair, and MacArthur was very much master of ceremonies. He dismissed the Allied Council as a ‘nuisance’ and the Far Eastern Commission as ‘little more than a debating society’. He wanted to get on with his job, and the plans he and Washington had in mind had anyway mostly been set in motion already.

Both Washington and MacArthur had plans not only for the functional dismantling of a militaristic and totalitarian Japan, but grander visions of the construction of a utopian new nation. Washington had started its planning as early as mid-1942, with considerable input from New Dealers. MacArthur’s plans seem to have come later, but fortunately were quite similar to those of his government.

Washington’s policies were often drawn up by ‘faceless’ figures in the State Department such as Hugh Borton and George Blakeslee. Borton in particular, a self-effacing man recognised for his knowledge of Japan but under-recognised for his role in rebuilding the nation, seems to have had a hand in most things relating to Occupation policies. These policies were for the most part relayed in a directive issued to MacArthur in October 1945. This was the Basic Initial Post Surrender Directive to Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers for the Occupation and