
George R. Packard, formerly dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, offers a spirited defense of his academic mentor in this biography of Edwin O. Reischauer (1910-90), the most widely known twentieth-century Japan scholar in the United States. Packard, who also served as an aide during the latter portion of Reischauer’s tenure as ambassador to Japan (1961-66), emphasizes that this son of an American missionary family devoted his life to his own secular mission: the promotion of good relations between Japan, the land of his birth, and America.

As one of the pioneers of academic Asian studies, Reischauer followed a career path that no contemporary scholar could imagine replicating. Although his Harvard dissertation research related to a Japanese monk’s travels in Tang dynasty China, the months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor found Reischauer working in the Far Eastern Division of the State Department, futilely warning his superiors that pushing Japan into a corner with economic sanctions would lead to war. His linguistic abilities drew him into the military code-breaking operation during the war. Once it ended, he returned to the State Department and exerted some influence on occupation policy. Yet he chose not to pursue a government career, returning to Harvard, where he placed unusual emphasis on undergraduate teaching and writings aimed at a broad audience, rather than concentrating on original research.

In 1961, John F. Kennedy selected Resichauer to serve as ambassador to Japan despite his previous criticisms of American Cold War policies in Asia and his lack of rapport with Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Reischauer, working in tandem with his Japanese second wife, Haru, won favorable reviews on both sides of the Pacific for his service in Tokyo. Beyond public relations triumphs, Packard emphasizes the significance of Reischauer’s efforts to pave the way for the return of Okinawa to Japan (achieved in 1972) and his behind-the-scenes work that contributed to the 1965 establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea.

However, two events that cast shadows over the rest of Reischauer’s life occurred during this period. The first, his stabbing in 1964 by a deranged Japanese youth nearly cost him his life, and a tainted blood transfusion caused him to develop hepatitis C, greatly impairing his health. The second, the Vietnam War, created an unpleasant dilemma since
Reischauer had opposed both the initial U.S. involvement there and the subsequent escalation. However, in order to maintain his position and effectiveness, he publicly defended Johnson Administration policy. Consequently, young anti-war scholars viewed Reischauer as a pillar of the Cold War establishment and made him a primary target of their revisionist attacks.

Ironically, the deceased scholar whom the left-wing critics put forth as the anti-Reischauer – E. Herbert Norman – had been a childhood friend and apparently the two maintained a mutual respect despite their divergent historical interpretations. Reischauer took an optimistic view, seeing Japan’s modern history – excepting the aberration of the “dark valley” created by the rise of militarism in the 1930s – as a story of progress toward democracy. Norman, influenced by the Japanese Marxist interpretation, saw the militarism of the 1930s as the logical outcome of a feudal past and an incomplete Meiji Revolution that left feudal remnants dominant after 1868. Admirers viewed Norman, a Canadian diplomat who leapt to his death from a Cairo building in 1957, as a tragic victim of repeated investigations into his youthful affiliation with the Communist Party. The personal nature of the revisionists’ attacks stung Reischauer, but he did not respond in kind.

Packard’s research benefited from access to others close to his subject and to material edited out of Reischauer’s published memoir. However, the book is marred by some careless errors. Oberlin College graduate John Mercer Langston was not the first black congressman (p. 27); Congressman Walter Judd represented Minnesota not Wisconsin (p. 131); the Marshall Mission to China occurred in 1945-46 not 1947-48 (p. 132); Richard Nixon hardly “soundly defeated” Hubert Humphrey in the closely contested 1968 election (p. 242); Theodore White could not have witnessed any part of the Nanjing Massacre since he did not arrive in China until 1939 (p. 265), and the claim that until that the assault on Reischauer “No foreign dignitary had been attacked in Japan since May 1891” (p. 205) overlooks the well-known attempt on the life of China’s Li Hongzhang in 1895.

Overall, Packard makes a strong argument that Reischauer was correct more often than not in his judgments concerning Japan and made important contributions to Japanese-American relations. However, as Reischauer’s critics no doubt still see him as an unredeemed Cold Warrior and an apologist for Japan’s right-wing, his diplomacy and historical interpretations will surely remain controversial. The significance of Reischauer’s efforts in promoting and popularizing Asian studies through his “rice paddies” course