In 1945, at the end of World War II, Japan and the United States were sworn enemies, hostile in word and deed after 4 years of bitter war and a decade of misunderstanding and disagreement. But by 1950—a mere 5 years later—they were fast friends and security partners, the closest allies in the Pacific!

How did this happen? What explains the paradoxical shifts that mark the history of U.S.-Japan relations? Is it culture? Or, a result of hard experience?

America first crossed paths with Japan in 1853 when Navy Commodore Matthew Perry steamed into Edo Bay with his 4 “black ships” to force the Japanese open their doors. Weak and divided they complied. After the Meiji Restoration (1868) and the U.S. Civil War (1861-65) each side built a modern nation with an industrial economy. Next, came conflict, producing Pearl Harbor, World War II, and 2 atom bombs. After 1945 the U.S. occupied Japan, and then a vast trade expansion followed, making the largest overseas trade relationship in world history. A new Japan-U.S. security treaty tied Japan’s future to the U.S. A history like this is unique … and instructive. Why would countries so distant and different become such firm allies? How did the mutual hatred of WWII give way to such a powerful commercial and military partnership? What of the future? Today China has passed Japan as the world’s #2 economy and top U.S. overseas trading partner. But, Japan still thrives, making superior good (autos, optics) and exporting pop culture around the globe (Pokémon, anime). The Rising Sun poses a strategic conundrum for America in the Pacific.

Course Readings will come from half a dozen paperback books plus 2 novels. Several brief oral reports. 2 midterm exams. 12-page paper. No final exam.

George Wilson is professor emeritus of History and East Asian Languages & Cultures. His interests center on Japan and the history of the Meiji Restoration. He is the author of “Patriots and Redeemers in Japan.” Four of his five books have dealt with Japanese history.