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 conflict. But by 1950—a mere 5 years later—they had become fast friends and military partners, the best of allies in the Pacific!

How did this happen? What explains the paradoxical shifts marking the history of U.S.-Japan relations? Was it culture? Or a result of experience?

America first crossed paths with Japan in 1853 when Navy Commodore Matthew C. Perry steamed into Edo Bay with his 4 “black ships” to force the Japanese to open their doors. Weak and divided, they had no choice but to comply. Following Japan’s Meiji Restoration (1868) and the U.S. Civil War (1861-65) each side built a modern nation with an industrial economy. Next came conflict, resulting in Pearl Harbor, World War II, and 2 atom bombs. After 1945 the U.S. occupied Japan, followed by a vast trade expansion that built the largest overseas trade relationship in world history. A new Japan-U.S. security treaty in the 1960s has tied Japan’s future to the U.S. foreign policy.

A history like this is unique … and instructive. Why would countries so distant with cultures so different become such firm allies? How did mutual hatred during WWII turn into a grand 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 thrives, making superb goods (autos, optics) and exporting pop culture around the globe (Pokémon, anime). The Rising Sun still poses a strategic conundrum for America in the Pacific.

Course readings come from half a dozen paperbacks plus 2 novels. Brief oral reports required. 2 midterm exams. 12-page paper. No final exam.