Study Questions: New Year’s Day Taika Reform Edict

The Taika Reform was a series of edicts, issued during the Taika era (645–650), that were a major stepping-stone in the development of the Japanese political structure. Japan had been a confederation of elite families or clans, called *uji*, that did not have a very strong allegiance to the imperial family. After the defeat of one such *uji*, the Soga, the Taika Reform edicts issued by Emperor Kōtoku and Prince Nakano-Oe, who would later reign as Emperor Tenchi, were aimed at weakening these *uji* through adopting a Chinese-style government to strengthen imperial authority by curtailing the independence of the *uji*, which controlled various regions of Japan. Although edicts were issued in 645 and later, the edict issued on New Year’s Day of 646 was the first one to call for a major overhaul of the Japanese government and served as the basis for future reforms over the next sixty years, ending with the Taihō Code in 702.

1. In the twenty-first century, Japan is a single unified nation. In the seventh century, though, the nation consisted of various enclaves, with power diffused throughout numerous ruling clans. To what extent did the Taika Reform edict help consolidate these clans into a national polity?

2. What role did contact with China have in the consolidation of Japan into a more unified nation? How did Chinese Confucianism influence Japanese thinking during this period?

3. In the modern world, the words *bureaucracy* and *bureaucrat* often have negative connotations, implying excessive regulation, red tape, and government functionaries who assert their authority over citizens. The Taika Reform edict, however, calls for the establishment of a bureaucracy and a hierarchy of government officials. Why did the reigning authorities believe that imposing this system of government would be good for Japanese society?

4. In the wake of the American Revolutionary War, the United States was governed by the Articles of Confederation. Many American leaders believed that the articles were too weak, for they left too much power in the hands of the states and not enough in the hands of the central government. The result of these concerns was the Constitution. In what ways might the situation in the United States in the 1780s be regarded as similar to that of seventh-century Japan?

5. Imagine yourself as a member of an *uji* family. How do you think you would have reacted to the Taika Reform edict? Write a letter to the imperial government in which you outline your reactions to the various provisions of the edict.