

Letter to My Japanese Friends: Reflections on the United States

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As the United States announced its intention to launch an attack on the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, Japan was one of the first of the “coalition of the willing” to raise its hand in support. In response to an upswell of pacifist sentiment in Japan similar to what emerged twelve years ago at the time of the Gulf War, the Japanese ambassador to the United States expresses his convictions about the leadership of the United States and American society based on his experience and contacts there.

Washington, D.C. is a city rich in nature. From my office window here at the Embassy of Japan, I look out on dense clusters of trees. I can also see a lot of trees from the official residence, where I play host to guests almost every day. The back garden of the residence is a gently sloping hill accented by a number of towering trees. In addition to our evening receptions, I sometimes have lunch in the residence with distinguished Americans. Depending on the time of year, I may look out the window and see brightly colored leaves, announcing the advance of autumn, or bare, leafless limbs, attesting to winter's arrival.

For me, a baseball fan, winter is the “off” season. In winter I long for those pleasurable times when I can steal away from my official duties to visit the ballpark, or when I am invited to throw the ceremonial first pitch. I arrived at my post in Washington in the fall of 2002. Soon thereafter, I was lucky enough to be invited by “Iron Man” Cal Ripken, a favorite among Japanese baseball fans, to throw the first pitch at the U.S.–Japan Collegiate Baseball Championship. As it turned out, that was the first time I had ever thrown a ceremonial pitch that struck the ground on the way to the catcher's mitt. “It was the same kind of one-bounce that a low Hideo Nomo pitch takes,” Mr. Ripken said graciously. “It's different from the kind of ball that falls to the ground for lack of momentum.” What a good man he is.

In the absence of baseball during the winter months, I enjoy bird watching. Some Americans refer to it as “birding.” I picked up this hobby a couple of years ago, with binoculars in one hand and a bird guidebook in the other. Even when my schedule is especially busy, I

may take a moment to look for birds in the garden early in the morning or in the evening while awaiting dinner guests. Sometimes, when I catch glimpses of birds not often seen in Japan, I quickly reach for my binoculars to confirm what I think I am seeing. No matter where I am in the leafy streets of this capital city, I can look up and almost always see a variety of birds. One example is the cardinal. Its eye-catching red plumage actually functions as a type of camouflage, and during the fall, the cardinal blends in with leaves of the same color. One can also spot woodpeckers of all sizes. From time to time, I see one type that looks very similar to the black woodpecker, an endangered species in Japan. Whenever I catch sight of one, I always say, "See you again next year!"

Baseball and bird watching. You may be wondering whether the Japanese ambassador to the United States does not have to attend to more important matters. But thanks to baseball, I have become friendly even with President George W. Bush himself. I do not often meet with the president, but when I do, we always discuss baseball. Baseball is one of his passions, not only because he was a team owner. After the September 11th terrorist attacks, President Bush threw out the first pitch when Yankee Stadium reopened on the 30th of October. As anyone who saw it on television will remember, he threw a mean fastball. Later I told him that I thought his pitch "gave hope and courage to the American people," to which he replied, grinning, "Just like Warren Spahn, don't you think?"

My friendship with Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor and her husband developed through bird watching. Ambassador Robert Zoellick, the current U.S. trade representative, and James Schlesinger, the former secretary of defense, are also birding men. I know many Americans who are fairly knowledgeable about birds.

Since assuming my position here, I have also met the leaders of President Bush's administration, members of the House of Representatives and Senate, state governors and legislators, and people in the judicial branch, including Supreme Court justices. I have spoken with members of the military, business leaders, representatives of various organizations, charity workers, university professors and students, journalists, religious figures, minority group representatives—including Japanese-Americans—and many others.

I do not always have much time to spend with any one person I meet, and sometimes, unfortunately, I can do little more than exchange greetings. Even something as simple as that, however, can be enough to leave a mark. My overall impression is that Americans, spanning a wide spectrum of race, religion, profession, and political ideology, are full of energy, serious, and polite. However, they seem much more serious now than they

were ten years ago. Even the patterns on their neckties seem more subdued.

I believe that the more somber, serious side I am seeing now has something to do with the events of September 11th. On that day, I was still in Tokyo. Shortly after officially assuming my duties in Washington in late October, I visited Ground Zero in New York. Fires were still burning, and an unfamiliar odor suffused the tragic scene.

Soon after that visit, I met with Vice President Dick Cheney. Twice during our fifteen-minute meeting, he said gravely, "I hope you won't underestimate the depth of the effect that September 11th has had on the American people." From his tone, he seemed to be saying that the events of that day had been indelibly inscribed upon each American, right down to their DNA.

Not long afterward, I saw a TV documentary that highlighted President Bush's long working hours during the two weeks immediately following September 11th. Until the day of the terrorist attacks, he had had a breezy, relaxed disposition. After September 11th, suddenly his countenance turned profoundly serious. The stark change was obvious to anyone who saw it. On the day of the terrorist attacks, the president was forced to fly around the country in Air Force One in order to avoid the perceived danger in Washington. Then, feeling that it was imperative to return, he headed back to the capital in spite of urging by his advisors to wait a while longer. At the first White House press conference after the terrorist attacks, the president uncharacteristically seemed overcome with emotion. The following Friday, at a ceremony at the National Cathedral and again standing at the top of a pile of debris at Ground Zero, the president gave addresses of encouragement to the



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people. On the same day, he met with family members of the missing and embraced them individually.

The United States has no king or emperor. The president serves as the nation's chief executive, but he may also be thrust into the role of the people's spiritual rallying point. This is especially true in times of national crisis. The sight of their president, shaken to the core by the terrorist attacks yet unbowed, helped the American people to overcome their shock and intensify their resolve to fight terrorism. It also helped a diverse nation to form a common recollection of that day.

In retrospect, the United States was brimming with confidence in the late 1990s. Enjoying an unprecedented level of affluence, many people reveled in their material comforts. The events of September 11th, however, brought the mood of giddy optimism to an abrupt end. As life's fleeting nature was brought home to them, people realized how quickly fortunes can change. They developed an impotent anger, directed toward the terrorists who had indiscriminately taken so many innocent lives. Furthermore, it gave them a chance to reflect on what was important in life. They realized that momentary pleasure, a large house, or even making a lot of money in the stock market were not their real goals. What was important was their families and living their lives day-to-day, safe from harm. The U.S. reasserted its priority to help parents protect the safety of their children and to ensure that the country can protect the safety of its citizens. That priority is the essence of the United States.

I believe that is why Americans appear to be more serious now than in the past. They take more time to reflect and think through issues and decisions. Put in these terms, the events of September 11th were momentous indeed.

The Weight of the Presidency

Well over a year has passed since the events of September 11th. On the one-year anniversary of the attacks, people across the United States recalled the shock they had felt on that day and mourned the loss of the victims. Now, three months after the anniversary, Washington is consumed by the question of war with Iraq. The war against terror continues, the North Korean issue is a serious concern, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to cause grave worry. But these days, many Americans are mainly focused on Iraq.

In Japan, the Bush administration's Iraq policy has been highly criticized. It has been labeled adventurist, unilateralist, and belligerent. According to this line of thinking, the United States is attempting to force its own values on others through the use of military force.

Americans are viewed as being sanctimonious, arbitrary, and of a dangerous mindset. Many Japanese think that Japan should not participate in any type of war against Iraq, especially one that is waged by a rash Bush administration in defiance of international opinion. This perspective seems to dominate large areas of the current discourse in Japan.

From my vantage point here in Washington, however, it is neither accurate nor justified. Those now serving in the Bush administration have acted since September 11th with the sole objective of protecting the safety of the American people. Naturally, members of the administration hold divergent opinions and certainly they have heated discussions. Nonetheless, battles over policy do not appear to be motivated by self-interest. Nor do different views within the administration necessarily mean that one group is more “adventurist” than the other, or that one faction is more “appeasing.” We can be certain that all parties understand the danger posed by Saddam Hussein.

Vice President Cheney, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz are all unusually earnest civil servants. Secretary of State Colin Powell and Deputy Secretary of State Richard L. Armitage are still the good soldiers they were in their youth. This administration has many talented people who, from my perspective, all work extraordinarily long hours and push themselves relentlessly.

Within the American administration, the president is the chief decision maker, and he alone bears the burden of this vast authority and responsibility. Even if the president’s heart is moved by his staff’s views, he cannot make visceral choices. When making decisions, the president must fully mobilize his intellectual resources and courage, bearing in mind the verdict that history will deliver. This is the weight of the presidency, that the president must bear alone.

President Bush’s critical decisions since September 11th do not represent “unilateralism.” Rather, they are reliable choices arrived at after grappling with the issues. It is likely that when people look back on this period from some future vantage point, they will conclude that Mr. Bush, the 43rd president of the United States, was exactly the man

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whom the times demanded. Consider the crisis centering on Iraq.

Japanese sometimes forget that the United States has already fought Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and it is still an enemy. Let us suppose that the Allies had observed a truce with Germany instead of formally ending the war in 1945. What if Hitler had managed to survive in power, and ten years later, flagrantly breached the conditions of the truce? Would the Allies have left him alone? Thinking in those terms, it is difficult to argue against the United States' hard-line position vis-à-vis Saddam Hussein. He has broken sixteen U.N. resolutions, invaded neighboring countries, used toxic gas against minority citizens of his own country, and is still suspected of developing nuclear weapons.

In pursuing its policy toward Iraq, the Bush administration has actually moved cautiously. For all of its bluster, it has taken care to follow domestic and international procedures. First, if it comes to that, Bush has congressional backing for the use of force against Iraq. The U.S. Constitution does not obligate the executive branch to get congressional approval for the use of military force outside American territory, and past administrations, both Democratic and Republican, have made use of this constitutional interpretation. However, any exercise of force against Iraq should have broad-based public support. Early on, President Bush recognized the necessity of such support, so he worked hard to earn the approval of Congress.

Next, the president used the recent midterm elections to address the Iraqi issue head-on and to appeal to the American people. Last autumn, senior Bush officials made the rounds of the TV political talk shows, emphasizing that firm steps are necessary in dealing with Iraq. Because of that and for other reasons, the Republican party was overall a strong winner in the elections. American voters still have a high level of trust in President Bush, and even many congressional Democrats support his Iraq policy. This is not to say that his policies are unopposed, but it does negate the contention that the government is making a blind rush to war without sufficient debate.

Third, the U.N. Security Council unanimously adopted the new resolution (1441 on Iraq, adopted 8 November 2002). Naturally, some speculated on whether the United States would take action against Iraq without consulting the U.N. However, with President Bush's approval, Secretary Powell, Deputy Secretary Armitage, and others have been engaged in tenacious negotiations within the U.N. Security Council. One result is that France, Russia, China, and even Syria voted in favor of this resolution.¹ Under this resolution, not even Iraq can accuse the

¹Resolution 1441, which calls on Iraq to fully disclose its weapons stores and comply with weapons inspectors, among other obligations. See <http://www.un.int/usa/sres-iraq.htm>.

United States of arbitrarily imposing a regime of unconditional weapons inspections.

Fourth and finally, it is my understanding that the United States has pursued discussions with its allies and friendly nations. The Japanese government has requested that the situation not be represented as a rift between the United States and Iraq. Rather, it should be portrayed as the global community on one side and Saddam Hussein on the other. I imagine that the European allies have formed a similar outlook. The United States listened to the views of other countries and made the necessary concessions to win a U.N. resolution, which was ultimately adopted by the Security Council.

No one knows with certainty whether these procedures will lead the United States to war or not, and the president probably has not yet made a decision. But no matter what he decides to do, Mr. Bush and other American leaders have been extremely cautious in moving forward. While the United States can sometimes appear to be a little rough and precipitous, it is definitely undergoing intellectual maturation.

The U.S. Does Not Want to Act Alone

After September 11th, the American worldview changed, but two fundamental points remain constant. First, the United States has no designs on any other country's territory, and will not use its anti-terror campaign toward that end. Senior administration officials' statements have made it clear that a war with Iraq would in no way be a "war for oil." Second, the United States will never become a "police state" in response to the threat of terrorism, as resistance to that idea runs too deep. But the United States and the president are grappling with yet another difficult issue.

Clearly, for the United States, domestic security takes first priority. The events of September 11th put an end to the myth of American invulnerability; they also led to the creation of the Department of Homeland Security. The most difficult issue in this area is how the United States will deal with countries against which it cannot exert any pressure. Some countries are willing to use international law as a shield to preserve and foster the threat of terror against the United States. No long-term solutions to this problem are yet in sight. Can the United Nations be relied upon to act against threats beyond the grasp of America's reach? Viewed from the American perspective, the United Nations is devolving into a loose framework that is drifting toward passive multilateralism. Some Japanese pundits point out that because

the United States designed the United Nations' structure, the U.S. must ultimately bear responsibility for it. I cannot go fully into that topic here, but there seems to be a desire among Americans for a return to the order that predated the United Nations, an order that would allow the United States to exercise its U.N.-recognized right to self-defense by and for itself.

The United States certainly does not want to act alone, but it faces realities that could tempt it to do so. For this very reason, the United States is keenly aware of the importance of relations with countries that value freedom, democracy, and thereby human dignity. American strength and principles are the two sides of the same coin. As academicians like Harold Lasswell and Myers McDougal posited long ago, the use of force is most effective when kept in the background as an implied threat, but any principle that is not supported by force is futile. I agree entirely, and I think that leaders in the United States view this problem not as Democrats or Republicans, but from a unified, nonpartisan perspective.

Mutual Trust and Shared Values

Considering the above, how should Japan relate to the United States? First, Japan must not underestimate America. Europeans and Japanese like to think that they understand the United States. They tend to dismiss it as a strong nation, lacking depth, and without a long history. Do the facts merit this view?

It is true that U.S. history spans a mere 220-some years. The United States has played a powerful role on the world stage for only the past 100 years. Viewed in those terms, its history is short. However, immigrants to America brought with them the long experience of their homelands, giving them a strong head start in nation-building. Considering only the past half-century or so, no country has garnered deeper and more involved international relations experience than the United States in its role as a superpower. It has waged war, engaged in world-changing diplomacy, and now has been subjected directly to acts of terrorism.

The leaders of this nation not only have become adept at managing crises, they have also parlayed this know-how into institutional memory. That represents a kind of unlimited power. During the past five decades, Japan often has been a hesitant actor in international politics. Now we must accurately take stock of the reserves of U.S. power.

Second, Japan must maintain a close relationship with the United States. Once in the past, Japan militarily confronted the U.S. and was

soundly defeated. The United States proved to be a formidable opponent then, and it is even more so now. Since it is inconceivable that our two countries will ever again face each other as enemies on the battlefield, Japan must maintain strong ties with the United States, while pursuing its own national interests. The two countries will continue to compete in many areas, including business, science and

technology, and sports; Japanese certainly do not want to lose to Americans in these areas. But the root of the U.S.-Japan relationship lies in maintaining an alliance built on mutual trust and shared values. This is the point of departure for everything else that follows.

Third, in order to maintain this close relationship the two countries must acknowledge the importance of their common experiences and build upon them. A strong U.S.-Japan relationship is not an abstract concept. Rather, it is the sum of citizens in both countries working in diverse and numerous settings to build a multitiered relationship. As Americans and Japanese visit each other's countries more often, contact between the two societies is also increasing. This growth in shared experiences fosters a relationship of trust. It must not be a one-way relationship, however. If we hold the United States in high regard, Americans must do the same for Japan. A healthy U.S.-Japan relationship can only be achieved on the basis of mutual trust and respect. This requires more effort from Japan and from individual Japanese citizens.

In December, cold weather strengthens its grip on Washington. A few days ago we experienced an unusually early snowfall. How will the global political situation and the Iraqi issue unfold? No one can tell. At the Embassy of Japan, we are redoubling our efforts to work with the members of the Bush administration as they strive so diligently to deal with the many serious issues that face the United States today.

Yet an all-consuming focus on work is not healthy for the body or the mind. Bush administration officials and the staff of this embassy are both overworked. While we must deal carefully and thoroughly with the problems posed by Iraq and North Korea, the current feverish level of commitment can only be maintained for so long.

If we hold the United States in high regard, Americans must do the same for Japan.

KATO

That is why I am looking forward to returning to the ballpark with my American friends when spring arrives and baseball starts up again. The same goes for bird watching. I enjoy spending time with my fellow enthusiasts, with their relaxed, easy smiles. I eagerly await the day when Americans, who have experienced such anxiety since the events of September 11th, can smile again to their hearts' content, and I look forward to long-lasting friendships with them as I work to fulfill my duties as ambassador.

About this Article

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