

U.S.-Japan Relations In an Election Year

By George R. Packard

We are approaching once again a unique American ritual: the climax of a presidential election season, with all of its shrill appeals to nationalism, sharp denunciations of opponents, and breathtaking over-simplification of issues. Actually, our campaigns begin almost immediately a new president is inaugurated, and last almost four years; no other nation indulges in such self-punishment. Election day is November 6.

A vast majority of the American people, finding politicians bores, if not outright scoundrels, tends to ignore the campaign in its early stages. It has been said, not wholly facetiously, that voters do not give concentrated attention to their choice until the World Series has been completed in October. Be that as it may, a declining percentage of registered voters actually goes to the polls each time we have a presidential election, and many observers feel that this may result from an overdose of political rhetoric and too few promises actually kept by the politicians once in office.

The entire House of Representatives and one third of the Senate will be elected in November, in addition to a president, a large number of governors, as well as state, county, and municipal legislators and executives. And whether or not the average voter is interested, he or she will be bombarded by the news media with stories about these "horse-races" and paid political advertisements.

There was a time, in the not too distant past, when candidates for national office would focus almost exclusively on domestic issues. Except for 1916 when Woodrow Wilson promised to keep the U.S. out of World War I, 1940 when Roosevelt pledged to keep us out of World War II, and 1964 when Johnson pledged to keep us out of Vietnam, the issues have tended to revolve around the state of the economy—jobs, prices, growth.

Shifting focus

This year, however, the tendency to focus on issues close to home may be changing. Or, to put it in another way, the U.S. economy, like those of all the advanced industrial democracies, has become so dependent upon international economic conditions that international questions may come to dominate political debates.

In this new and uncharted terrain, the role of Japan appears destined to become an important element in the discussions. Once almost entirely and benignly ignored by the American press, Japan is now in the news virtually daily.

The coverage is generally limited to items about economics, trade and high technology these days, and much of it is reasonable and apparently accurate. In an election year, however, the media give special attention to special interests, whose well-financed, well-organized spokesmen can make themselves heard over the din. This means that the U.S.-Japan relationship tends to suffer somewhat from charges and countercharges which serve special needs and thus obscure true national interests.

Japan's successes a useful stimulant

In the serious recession of 1981-82, when the bilateral trade balance between the United States and Japan showed unprecedented surpluses for Japan and unprecedented deficits for the United States, and American unemployment figures rose above 10%, it was only natural that industries injured by imports from Japan would turn to politicians for recourse and that politicians would, in turn, propose a variety of measures, some quite protectionist, to alleviate distress among their constituents. Thus we saw the passage of

domestic content legislation in the House of Representatives, and an upsurge of interest on the part of President Reagan in pressing Japan to open its markets still further to American exports.

It was in this period that the charges of "unfair" Japanese trade practices began to be heard throughout the land and a variety of books and articles about "industrial policy" began to appear. The U.S. media and publishers, who had earlier been generally complimentary about Japan's management techniques, quality circles, investment in human resources, dedication to R&D, and successful co-operation among government, business and labor, now began to point ominously toward the challenge or "threat" of Japanese achievements. NBC devoted a 30-minute documentary to the "high-tech shoot-out" between the U.S. and Japan. Headlines warned of the growing threat of world domination in certain products by the Japanese. Politicians put forward a variety of schemes for "catching up" or for "stemming the tide."

Fortunately, President Reagan was steadfast in his adherence to the principles of free trade, in his friendship for Prime Minister Nakasone, and in his own economic policies, which today are bringing about a resurgence of growth, a sharp drop in unemployment (7.8% at this writing), and a new optimism about holding the line on inflation. Serious problems remain—a huge budget deficit, and too large a deficit in bilateral trade with Japan—but tempers have cooled and Congress appears more willing now than it was two years ago to give the president a chance to negotiate. While the issues of Japan's alleged "free ride" on defense, trade surpluses and advances in high technology will be discussed, the focus seems to be swinging toward healthier channels, such as the question of how to restore America's competitiveness in the next decade. In short, it would appear that

George R. Packard is dean of the School of Advanced International Studies of Johns Hopkins University. He served as a special assistant to the U.S. Ambassador to Japan, Dr. Edwin O. Reischauer, 1963-65, and later as chief diplomatic correspondent for Newsweek magazine, executive editor of the Philadelphia Bulletin and deputy director of the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars of the Smithsonian Institution before assuming his present post in 1979.

Japan's successes may serve as a useful stimulus to our economy.

Keeping partisan politics in perspective

This does not mean, however, that the problems in the U.S.-Japan relationship will miraculously disappear. We must face facts. A surge of Japanese exports into the U.S. does create real pain. Whether these export surges are "fair" or not, the fact is that they do put Americans out of work and cause politicians to act. We came dangerously close in 1982 to the opening of a floodgate of protectionist legislation, and I worry that, in the next downward cycle of our two economies, there could be real potential for demagogues to start us back down the terrible road of the 1930s toward mutual re-creations and outright hostility. It is precisely in relatively good political weather that we should be preparing for the next storm.

The fact is that the U.S.-Japan relationship has grown so massive, so deep and so multi-faceted that trade, while perhaps the most visible aspect, is far from the most important aspect over the long haul.

Trade, by itself, tends to be neutral in determining how nations view each other. Mutual investment does not prevent nations from confronting each other. It is worth recalling, perhaps, that Britain and Germany traded and invested more with each other than with any other nation right up to the time they went to war in 1914.

U.S.-Japan trade has to some extent improved mutual perceptions. Polls show that Americans in the 1930s considered Japanese products to be shoddy and cheap; today, almost all American consumers own a Japanese product of some kind and respect Japanese workmanship.

Even so, the mere possession of a Seiko watch or a Canon camera does not insure that its American owner will (a) stand up and be counted when the political chips are down or (b) truly understand



Democratic presidential candidates: Jesse Jackson (right), Gary Hart (center) and Walter Mondale

the extent and importance of the U.S.-Japan relationship.

What is needed, in my view, is a much broader public understanding on both sides of the Pacific of the benefits that accrue from good relations between the U.S. and Japan. Put quite simply, they form the essential base for the exciting economic development spreading around the rim of the Pacific Ocean. As long as we continue to share a common view of the world, of the need for maximum free trade, open access to markets, raw materials, and investment opportunities, open sea-lanes of communication, economic growth, and higher standards of living for peoples living in dignity and increasing freedom, the future of the Asia/Pacific region is very bright indeed. Building upon this bilateral base, both the U.S. and Japan can play a historic role in assisting the People's Republic of China to modernize under peaceful conditions.

How do we build this broader base of public understanding? How can we prevent the voices of special interests from dominating the whole dialogue? In short, how do we keep partisan politics in perspective?

Building a broader base of public understanding

First, I think it is essential that we do what we can to educate and inform the media in both countries on the larger importance of the U.S.-Japan partnership. On the American side, we must try to train reporters in the Japanese language and immerse them more deeply in Japanese culture. While many American editors and TV news directors may not yet have woken up to the fact, there is an

enormous appetite for news and understanding of Japan among American citizens. Whenever I give a lecture on Japan these days, I find large, eager audiences asking well-informed questions about Japan's educational system, arts, women, sports, leisure pursuits, and so on. I believe that much more could be done through skillful television programming to bring home to American citizens that the Japanese people are not all relentlessly engaged in building automobiles or "targeting" American industries for the purpose of putting Americans out of work. The American public needs to understand that family life in Japan is not so different from their own—that we share an interest in how to raise children, how they should be educated, whom they should marry, etc.

The Japanese press, while far better at understanding our language and customs, needs to be more balanced in its coverage of Washington politics. Too often, as I see it, they tend to play up the silly ideas of a single Congressman who wants to pass a piece of protectionist legislation, even when the bill has no chance of passage. In addition, Japan's press corps would do well to get out of Washington and New York, and report more on the lives and thoughts of "real" Americans.

At leadership levels, Americans and Japanese need to work much harder at forming the kind of personal relationships that tend to tide Americans and British over their worst crises. Even after almost four decades of what George Kennan once called "an unnatural intimacy," we still tend to treat each other in our official dealings with a kind of stiffness and formality that inhibits rather than facilitates the settlement of disputes.

I think we have matured somewhat in the past decades. Economic issues tend to be treated less as affairs of national honor and more as precisely what they are: disputes between private interests which need not and must not poison the entire relationship. Japan, because of the many unique aspects of its culture, society, and business arrangements, must make massive new efforts to open up its own markets if it wishes to retain its access to other nations' markets throughout the world. Americans must learn more about entering the Japanese market. Perceptions count at least as much as facts in international relations, and there remains a strong perception in the American Congress that Japan is doing "too little and too late" as it grudgingly liberalizes. The Japanese government could do far more to head off adverse political and legislative measures in this election year by a bold, sweeping and generous move rather

than by a series of tiny, halting steps which in the end might lead to the same outcome, but which would fail to bring the full measure of credit and trust which they would deserve.

Education a key

In education, we are making progress on both sides of the Pacific, but we still have a long way to go. On both sides we need to train specialists in the language and culture of the other, but even more important, we need to see that these well-trained specialists are hired, promoted, and listened to, whether they are working in the public or private sector.

At a more basic level, we Americans must undertake a massive job of changing the curriculum and world outlook to account for the role of Japan and all of Asia in world history and modern interna-

tional relations. It is all too easy, even for our college graduates, to complete their formal education without any serious exposure to the cultures of Japan or China.

Having said all this, I remain optimistic, which I suppose is an essential attribute of an educator. As I see young Japanese and American graduate students tackling the tough economic and political questions on the international scene today, I become more and more convinced that our intimacy is "natural" rather than "unnatural." Despite the fact that we have totally different cultural legacies, there is an unspoken sharing of values and emotions about the kind of future both sides hope to create. I observe Japanese students arguing vigorously with each other in front of classes where many other nationalities are represented. I observe Americans and Japanese enjoying each other's company in relaxed and informal settings and imagine that life-long friendships are being forged. I see more and more young Americans taking the plunge into the study of Japanese, and I note that Japanese students are steadily improving in their ability to articulate difficult ideas in English.

I know that beef and citrus and "VANS" and yen liberalization will dominate the talk between our leaders in this election year, and that new issues will arise from our massive and unprecedented economic relationships in coming years. They are important and they must be resolved with sensitivity to the political realities on both sides.

Both nations are undergoing a resurgence of nationalism, and I view this as healthy and natural. My understanding of modern history is that nations behave worst when leaders arise who can exploit feelings of inferiority, humiliation, or isolation. The healthy kind of nationalism represents justifiable pride and self-confidence, which in turn can permit magnanimity in relations with others. Given renewed efforts to educate ourselves—and a new generation—about the human and social aspects of the other side, there need be no fear that narrow economic interests will carry the day. ●

Photo: WWP



U.S. President Ronald Reagan addresses a Joint Session of Congress and the nation in a televised speech.