

## The Japanese Power Game —What It Means for America

By William J. Holstein  
Published by Charles Scribner's Sons  
1990; New York  
339 pages; \$22.95

Start with page 261 and read to the end. Since you have skipped about 70 % of the book, you have time to read the last four chapters five or six times. You have time to think about what Holstein is saying and to internalize it. Do it. This is the part where he tells you what America should do to meet the Japanese challenge. This is where he stops complaining about how different the Japanese are and suggests that we be "more like them."

In the first part of the book, Holstein goes through all of the standard arguments about how Japan is never going to change, how Japanese values and practices are so different from Western ideals, and about how Japan demands special treatment. This is the missionary section—not for readers who know a little more than the average American does about Japan. This part is for amateurs.

For example, he says that it is virtually impossible to break the establishment's hold, but the "establishment" that he cites is one forged by Kakuei Tanaka—the same Tanaka who never got past sixth grade and was perceived as the ultimate outsider until he got inside. (He was certainly not part of the University of Tokyo alumni club that Holstein says is at the heart of the underlying decision-making structure.) For example, he says that the Japanese are so group-oriented that they shun those "who go abroad to help Japan administer its global interests." Yet just a few pages earlier, he had written how companies encourage employees to get married by making this a criterion for "a prestigious foreign posting."

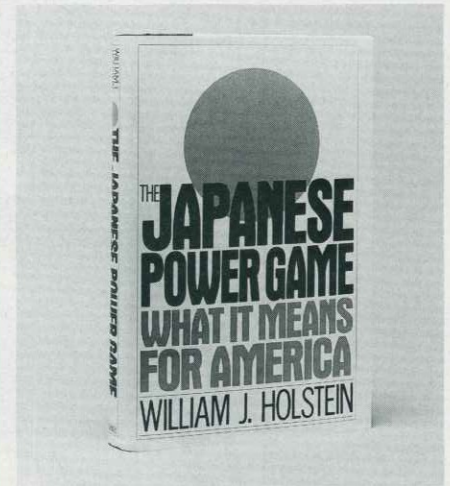
Most importantly, he persists in identifying things as "Japanese" when they are not in fact only Japanese. After noting that there were many predictions of a political upheaval last year and that this revolution did not come to pass, he writes, "There's

not the slightest hint that Japanese who proclaimed fundamental change were attempting to lie or deceive. There are several possible explanations. One is that the Japanese, like the Chinese, have a different concept of truth. If they want something to happen, they proclaim that it is, in fact, happening." The implication is that Americans would not do that. That we did not have, for example, the sight of a president (as Richard J. Barnet recently wrote in *The New Yorker*) "acting as if it were 'morning in America' even as the sun was setting on major American industries, farm communities, and distressed cities." That the spin doctors are all Japanese.

He says there is very little difference among the Liberal Democratic Party leaders, conveniently ignoring how little there is between the two American parties. He decries the powers of incumbency in Japan while forgetting that 97% of the incumbents were reelected in the latest U.S. midterm election. He laments that the Recruit scandal did not produce any lasting changes in Japanese society while forgetting that the Watergate scandal had about the same impact on American politics.

It is true that he admits that many of the shortcomings he sees in Japanese society—the power of money in politics, for example—also exist in the United States. But he contends that the differences of degree are so great as to make the situation quantitatively different. In fact, I suspect he is spending a lot of time comparing what he sees as the Japanese reality with what he perceives as the American ideal—that he is forgetting that Americans are also quite good at distinguishing *honno* (what I say) and *tatemaie* (what I do) and at *tsukaiwake* (which he translates as situational ethics). Although he admits that there is considerable overlap, the tone of these early chapters is that Japan is fundamentally different and cannot be dealt with in traditional ways.

Once he gets this out of his system and sits down to ponder U.S. responses, however, he is very readable and very reasonable. He recognizes that Japan is no more likely to change overnight than the United States is. He recognizes that many of the values that have worked so well for



Japan (e.g. hard work and a willingness to defer gratification) are not entirely alien to the American mind. And he recognizes that the two countries are too interdependent to allow them the luxury of going their separate ways. Thus he suggests that America quit the negative advertising about Japan and start to work getting its own act together. What does this entail?

Basically, it is a call for "economic patriotism" that includes a greater emphasis on teamwork, a systematic effort to maintain a degree of technological independence, a need to get smarter about Japan and to pay more attention to what is happening in Japan, and the imperative of improving the educational and industrial infrastructure. These are all sound policies. He is saying that the United States does not need new laws. It does not need new institutions. What it does need is the will to get up off its duff and start trying harder. And this is a policy that depends upon each and every person.

It cannot be mandated by administrative fiat. That is why it is worth rereading those last few chapters and internalizing their admonitions. Americans have got to work harder and smarter if they expect to prevail. Japanese have made considerable sacrifices to get where they are. Are Americans willing to make similar sacrifices?

Frederick M. Uleman  
President, Japan Research