

# America Then and Now

By *Iokibe Makoto*

It was 25 years ago. Accompanied by my wife and two children (a three-year-old son and a nine-month-old daughter) I began a two-year research sojourn at Harvard University in August 1977.

The late 1970s were the days of President Jimmy Carter. Wounded by the Vietnam War, the United States was at its lowest ebb since World War II. Meanwhile in Japan, Ohira Masayoshi defeated incumbent Prime Minister Fukuda Takeo in the Liberal Democratic Party's preliminary election to become the new prime minister. I still remember clearly, in a lecture that he gave at Harvard, Professor Edwin Reischauer discussing with some emotion the appearance of Ohira, with whom he had had a close relationship since the professor had served as American ambassador to Japan. Japanese politics were still in turmoil with the "40-day struggle" and other problems, but the economy had rebounded from the recession caused by the oil crises and had embarked on a global export offensive. Its robustness at the time was enough to even irritate the Americans.

Now, a quarter of a century later, I have returned to the same place. The little babies who made our home in America such a lively place are now, naturally enough, grown man and woman with careers of their own. The only one of our five children to accompany my wife and I this time is our youngest daughter, who is in the third year of junior high school. Our own circumstances have changed, and Japan has also changed, but even so, having come back to the same place, I have found much to be surprised about in the specific ways that the United States has also changed. In this respect, I have been given the opportunity to make a fixed-point observation of the United States and the Japan-U.S. relationship.

From that perspective, I will first focus on the changes in American society as observed on the streets.

The America of the 1970s was, in a nutshell "attractive, yet awful." What exactly was so "awful"? Public safety had deteriorated horrendously, and not only the areas off Boston's entertainment district, but even some vicinities of Harvard University were considered dangerous. Late one night, a friend of mine who dared to live there despite its notoriety, received a visit by robbers who repeatedly attempted to knock down the side door, and left my friend and his family trembling with fear. I, myself, had the experience of being chased down a street at night near the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in the Mall in Washington D.C. by a screaming attacker, and running for my dear life down the subway stairs. I was also surrounded by young boys asking for money at Dupont Circle early one evening. Coming out after a musical show in New York's Times Square at 11 o'clock at night, one was too scared to take the subway or catch a taxi, yet walking home was considered tantamount to a death wish.

While the people who opted to commit robberies were undoubtedly in the minority, in the eyes of the serious Japanese, there were many things about American society in general that caused us to shake our heads in bewilderment. Take, for example, frequent errors at cash registers and on bills. This was probably due to a combination of lack of basic numeracy skills, carelessness and rare attempts by some unscrupulous people to defraud customers intentionally. Many times, we were given the run-around when we took problems to government agencies or administrative offices. Calling it short of racial prejudice, when I would complain to American friends about how rudely for-

eigners with poor English were treated, they would shake their heads and agree that bureaucrats were dreadful and everyone has had such experiences. The problem appeared to be a combination of lack of competence in and willingness to work. The way construction sites seemed to only inch forward, the rampant drug use among young people, the deterioration of school education and the frequency of shoplifting by staff as well as customers. When such is the situation in the front lines of society, how could America even hope to compete with Japan? A popular joke at the time – "American cars assembled on Mondays and Fridays soon fall apart" – seemed more real than funny.

Having said this, there were so many things about America that were so attractive. Both my family and I loved America. What was it that we loved? The magnificence and beauty of its nature were overwhelming. I remember the breathtaking beauty of the autumn leaves in Vermont, where every mountain we drove through revealed a never-ending landscape of bright red. There were many neighborhood parks, which comes in very handy for parents of young children. Unlike Japan, going on an excursion didn't mean having to sit in traffic jams that refused to move on the way home. Most highways were also toll-free. The social system was that good things were readily available for everyone to enjoy. Beef, fruits, ice cream and other delights were so abundant and inexpensive. Though a little run-down, city streets and houses were spacious and splendid. I was particularly surprised that the municipal library even lent out frames of great paintings for people to hang in their living rooms. In short, the social infrastructure was so outstanding, and it cannot be helped for me to realize that the Japanese society had nowhere near its accumulation or abundance.



While high crime rates and slipshod work were conspicuous on the one hand, I was also very impressed by the openness and kindness of the American people. Whenever I was at a loss on the street, without fail, someone would come up and offer to help. The volunteer spirit was widely honored by many people. There were respectable people in the universities, libraries and the NARA who would assist you very patiently and without any signs of discrimination against foreigners. If one wanted to learn something, one could always attend classes offered by universities or cities, regardless of the age, as well as participate in various groups. Women from Japan in particular, my own wife included, seemed to come alive in America. The way in which people listen carefully to the opinions of others, respect their freedom and praise other people's uniqueness with such delight (which is the exact opposite of Japanese society's tradition of "striking down the protruding nail") is, I believe, one of the most important attributes of American society. Even amidst its general social deterioration, the spirit of valuing freedom and opportunity, and of optimism and encouragement seemed to be intact.

While fascinated by such American traits, reasoning within their hearts that it would be very difficult to live in this society, and for their children's sake, Japanese returned to Japan, which they believed was safer and had a better educational system. That, I believe, was the average sentiment in the 1970s.

This was when the United States was under attack from the "rising sun" export offensive of the Japanese economy. Criticism of Japan was growing stronger, and economic friction had become a daily occurrence. Amidst this pitiful decline of the American economy, a confident statement made by one young Harvard economist, who was well versed in Japanese affairs, left a deep impression on me. While discussing trends in the global economy with some colleagues, he said, "After having heard all of the arguments, I would still buy America's stock." Was this statement simply a reflection of

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*New York's Times Square is no longer a dangerous place – New Year's Eve celebrations in Times Square*

typical American egocentrism, patriotism and confidence? Or was it an extraordinarily realistic analysis that also took account of America's latent potential? I had the impression that perhaps the confidence of the young elite may indeed spawn that potential into a reality. It was a comment that, as things progressed, I found myself recalling on many occasions.

Even after I returned to Japan in 1979, I made short trips to the United States almost every year. Each time I returned to the familiar territory of Harvard during the 1980s, the streets became cleaner and brighter, and I felt that America had picked itself up from the bottom and was making a revival. In comparison, however, the Japanese economy of the 1980s was continuing to make even more remarkable leaps forward, and appeared to be on its way to overtaking the United States. For many years after the war, the yen was valued at ¥360 to the dollar. When I was there in the 1970s it was around ¥230, and after the Plaza Accord in 1985, it changed to the level of ¥120. Can we say that this roughly reflected the overall economic situation between Japan and the United States? Under the surface, however, the United States in the 1980s, through tax cuts and deregulation, sought to regain its economic vitality, revitalized competitive princi-

ples, regained its severe approach, nurtured venture businesses and prepared major strategies for global restructuring based on the information technology revolution. These would blossom in the 1990s, taking American stock prices to unprecedented heights. Conversely, unable to successfully make these adaptations, Japan, after the economic bubble burst, plunged into a 10-year-long recession. While the 1970s were America's "lost decade," the 1990s were Japan's "lost decade." While the 1970s were the golden age of the Japanese economy, the 1990s were the American economy's second golden age since World War II.

After experiencing these disparate circumstances, how will the economies of the United States and Japan converge? With such questions, I live in America once more.

The most striking impression I get after returning from my long absence is how safe and clean this town has become. The once dangerous areas near the university have been redeveloped, and sparkling new buildings have sprung up. New York's Times Square is still bustling after the musicals are over until late into the night, with groups of people strolling home in all directions. Putting aside the issue of terrorism, in everyday life, American society is safe once again. The recent economic downturn is apparently causing some unemployment problems, but I do not get the feeling that society will fall into disarray again.

With proper maintenance, America's houses and towns have always been spacious and splendid. The potholes on the roads can sometimes be horrendous, but the degradation of the 1970s seems to have been almost completely overcome.

There are, of course, still many problems that have not been improved. Calculation errors and over-charging are still everyday occurrences. It is hard on people like me who lack the persistence to carefully check and complain. Recently, when I parked my car on a metered sidewalk for two hours (\$1), I came back to find a parking ticket with an \$18 fine, even though there



were still seven more minutes left on the meter. Although I am normally quite lazy, I felt obliged to send the ticket back to the police, accompanied by a letter of complaint. I wait with eager anticipation to see whether the police will back down or whether they will come back with even more forceful measures.

This, too, was something different from 25 years ago. Back then, receiving a parking ticket was nothing worth worrying about. Some sarcastic Japanese would say, discard them as *Tanzakus*, or strips of paper to write wishes, and hang on trees for the *Tanabata* Star Festival in July, prior to going back to Japan in the summer. Overwhelmed by the sheer number of infringements, the authorities never had enough time to enforce the fines. Nowadays, however, everything is strictly computer managed, and it is no longer possible to cheat. Not long after arriving here, I let a parking meter expire at a tourist spot known as Concord, and was slapped with a \$5 fine. When I sent in the \$5, I received an additional notice of a \$2 penalty because I had exceeded the 21-day deadline for paying the original fine. As this shows, America has become much more efficient, and neglecting these things could be disastrous. Now, the only way to avoid paying a fine is to contest them with evidence.

This is not only about parking infringements. For example, when you apply for a department store member's card or apply for some kind of qualification or benefit, a credit check is performed on you instantaneously. Even having a gold credit card was not enough. They are all connected to large-scale computers owned by private-sector investigation agencies, and until I obtained a social security number (government identification number for taxation and other purposes) and a state driver's license, I was often rejected. Even at airports since Sept. 11, a local driver's license is required to avoid strict security checks where even shoes are removed.

Twenty-five years ago in America, information provided by people were

seldom verified, which led to rampant deceit and fraud. Today, that same America has transformed itself into a society in which computers are widely used to check everything and to distinguish between those who can be trusted and those who cannot.

Recently, when I was listening to the radio in my car, a commentator was complaining about how American children lacked even basic geographical and historical knowledge. But when he indignantly stated that this kind of travesty was inconceivable in Japan and South Korea, I could not help laughing. The image of Japan as having a superior system of elementary and secondary education is still alive and well in the United States. When I told American junior and senior high school teachers that this was no longer the case and that the decay of our school system was a serious problem in Japan as well, they replied, even if that were true, Americans did not want to hear it. Apparently, they were in the midst of a major fight to gather community and political support for educational reform, emphasizing the Japanese model as their powerful example. On the other hand, few Japanese realize that American education is becoming stricter and more serious. It is true that in America, children below junior high school are allowed much freedom and spontaneity, but once they reach senior high school, those children aiming for reputable universities study with quite an intensity. They have nothing resembling Japan's cram schools here, and they rely totally on their study at school and at home. Perhaps children grow more than in the Japanese system, where so much emphasis is placed on exam techniques. The leap during high school education is so extraordinary that it warrants consideration.

The cost of education, including good private schools, is astoundingly high. My daughter attends a local public high school, so it was only when we enrolled her in a six-week intensive English summer camp that we gained a real appreciation for how expensive education in America can be. Nevertheless, the experience seemed to

have provided her with one of the best times of her life. Maybe after the course, many people can justify in their mind that the costs are not necessarily high in relation to the quality of service. In terms of educational opportunities closer to home, I think it may actually be less expensive in America than in Japan. Not only are the aforementioned social education courses offered by universities and cities very substantial, one can obtain excellent personal instruction from expert teachers in almost any field, from music to art to sports. These fees are around the same as those for home tutors in Japan. Hence, many Japanese fully enjoy cultural activities that suit their individuality and interests while living in America.

There is a new problem that rarely existed 25 years ago. When the husband's work is completed after a few years and it's time to go back to Japan, increasing numbers of wives and children are opting to stay in America. Whereas before, even though they may not have wanted to leave America, most families went back to Japan in consideration of their children's education and safety. Now, America is safe, and many people want to stay in this country precisely for the sake of their children's education. Not only wives and children are staying behind with the husband's consent. It is not uncommon to see cases of wives divorcing and living here with children. America is certainly very attractive. But has Japan become so unattractive? It sure makes me ponder. Just as the 1970s America was resurrected, new life must be breathed into the Japan in the new century. Finding ways of doing so should be the great challenge Japan must now grapple with. JJI

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