

# Japan's Suicide

By *Iokibe Makoto*

"When pushed to the limits of their endurance, Americans become obsessed by killing and Japanese are drawn to suicide." The author of this statement is none other than Edwin O. Reischauer, who once owned the house in which we are currently living. While I can certainly see the truth behind this observation, which was made by a man who was so deeply conversant with the nature of both the American and Japanese people, I find myself strangely shocked at the realization that, if what he claimed is true, if ever the United States and Japan were to go to war with each other, Japan would undoubtedly be slaughtered and destroyed by the United States.

The eminent authority on Chinese studies, Yoshikawa Kojiro, once asked the question, "What is the difference between Japanese and Chinese cultures?" Seeing his students struggle to come up with an answer, he told them, "Japanese novels contain no politics, and in Chinese novels, there are no double suicides." I was also jolted by these words, which reveal a strong contrast between the Chinese, who are so deeply political in nature, and the Japanese, who are so deeply emotional. They gave me the impression that, whenever Japan and China are at loggerheads with each other in the political and diplomatic arenas, there is no way that Japan could win.

Ishihara Kanji, a brilliant military general of the prewar Showa era (1926-1945), also proclaimed, "Diplomacy is

not the Japanese people's forte. This is because the Japanese are virtuous." Ishihara was probably the only soldier to see a war with the United States as a "clash of civilizations" and to seriously plan for war with this concept in mind. His statement reveals his belief that Japan should resign itself to losing to the United States in the diplomatic arena, and instead pursue a military and moral advantage, staking its future on such an advantage. One could say that it is not only Japanese novels that have no politics; Japan's military affairs are

also lacking in politics. Can Japan safely continue its voyage through the waters of international relations while still lacking the political wisdom, that is, the ability to make judgments with a broad perspective?

Generally, the Japanese people are seen as hard-working, cooperative, passive, quiet and polite. In any country, there are many different types of people, so it would be wrong to oversimplify, but in general, this view is probably an accurate one. In contrast, Americans are positive about everything and able to firmly assert and express themselves. Some Japanese even say that Westerners are aggressive, but that we Orientals are mild and gentle. Does that mean, then, that all Orientals are as quiet as the Japanese? The Chinese certainly are completely different. The Chinese have a reputation for being forward-looking about everything, willing and able to express themselves, and have an air as though they are swallowing the entire world. These attributes are in strong contrast to the Japanese, and are actually closer to the nature of the American people. Koreans still cling to the Confucian morals of bowing to one's seniors and superiors, but when they come out from behind those kinds of hierarchical relationships and go out into the world, they can put up quite a good fight competition-wise. They seem to be much better equipped to exercise international leadership than the Japanese. I was impressed recently when I saw that

Photo: REUTERS • SUN



Yokota Shigeru and his wife Sakie, whose daughter Megumi was abducted to North Korea, address a news conference in Tokyo

Koreans were successful in having a street in Broadway in New York nicknamed "Korean Avenue." Certainly, the area to which it refers does have a number of Korean-related facilities, but even if there were as many or more Japan-related facilities in a particular area, I doubt very much whether the Japanese would be able to do the same thing.

In other words, both the Chinese and the Korean people are far from the image of the humble "Oriental" that most Japanese possess. It may be that the Japanese people are the only ones that are so "Oriental." At a pinch, the Thai people may be similar to the Japanese in their gentleness and consideration of other people's feelings, but even the Thai people do not seem to like collective consensus as much as the Japanese and seem to be more individual and uninhibited in their actions than the Japanese.

There are, however, times when even the Japanese become ardent, even wildly emotional, about diplomatic issues. For example, virtually the entire Japanese media seem to be taking an extremely hard-line stance towards the recent issue of Japanese nationals being abducted and taken to North Korea. Not long before that, considerable anti-American sentiment was generated when the Ehime Maru, a Japanese fisheries training vessel, was rammed by a U.S. submarine and killed nine Japanese (most of them were high school students) in 2002. In both of these cases, public opinion was fueled by the fact that human lives, "which are more precious than the world," were stolen. No matter what the era, it is the values society considers to be particularly precious that influence the mass media. In the postwar period, when pacifism was seen as the ultimate value, the furor over such issues as the question of whether Japan should negotiate for peace with all the Allies (overall peace) and the 1960 Japan-U.S. Security Treaty unfolded scenes in Japan that were almost like the eve of revolution. After the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry in 1853, in the prewar years, when total indepen-



Thousands of demonstrators against the war in Vietnam gathered in Central Park

dence from the superpowers, the abrogation of the unequal treaties and advancing in victory in the imperialistic international political arena were seen as the most important things for the Japanese nation, public opinion of a hard-line stance against the outside world was the norm and became firmly established in Japan. Dissatisfaction with the terms of the Treaty of Portsmouth led to the Hibiya Incendiary Incident (1905), and the killing of Japanese nationals on the Asian continent invariably gave rise to ardent calls for the dispatch of Japanese troops. Such was the state of things in prewar Japan.

Of course, such a tendency to become emotional over diplomatic issues is not unique to the Japanese. In any country, emotions run high when issues that concern sovereignty, territory, honor and the lives of that country's people arise. In Korea and China, people often become particularly emotional and indignant towards Japan due to events in the past, but anti-American sentiment is also quick to flare in the event of an incident. In China's case, however, where there is still a strong authoritarian regime, the government is able to keep a tight rein on public opinion.

Public opinion in the United States can also be very fervent. The public

fury at the beginning of the Spanish-American War in 1898 was talked about for many years afterward. The "Remember Pearl Harbor" of World War II, the anti-communist hysteria represented by McCarthyism during the Cold War, the anti-Vietnam war movement, the war against terrorism in the wake of Sept. 11 – in all of these, public opinion has been so fierce as to be practically uncontrollable. While not quite as all-encompassing, the prewar movement in the United States to exclude Japanese immigrants, and the focus on Japan's "peculiarities" that was generated by economic friction in the postwar period, eventually culminated in the Federal government being forced to act, so it must be said that they were certainly out of control.

Surprisingly, however, when public opinion overheats in the United States over a diplomatic issue, that public opinion actually conforms closely to the country's own national interest. The Spanish-American War was a war that could easily be won, and the overheating of public opinion did not lead the country astray. On the contrary, wars that result in such massive military gains despite being such a "splendid little war," as was the Spanish-American war, are a rarity. The excitement of public opinion helped the hesi-

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tating U.S. government to embark on a war that would greatly benefit the nation. In the great wars with Germany and Japan in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the American public exercised self-restraint about pressing the government into joining the wars too early, allowing the government to make a careful and considered decision. When it reached the stage when the United States had no alternative but to fight, however, public support was overwhelmingly in favor of joining the war and morale was high. Public support for anti-communist policies was strong during the Cold War, but once the war being waged in Vietnam by the American government was seen to be against the national interest, the movement opposing that war increased, and this prevented the United States from heading into ruin.

There is a world of difference between this kind of attitude of the American people and the kind of exclusive, out-and-out support exhibited by the Japanese public for Japan to adopt a hard-line foreign policy position during the war between China and Japan (1937-1945). In terms of the United States' intervention in Yugoslavia, and particularly in the war against Afghanistan, and possibly Iraq, since Sept. 11, it appears that American public opinion is rushing headlong into war without any kind of brakes being applied. In addition to their anger at the indiscriminate terrorist attacks, Americans probably realize that they could win these wars with extremely small losses to their own side. At the very least, they believe that they would not require disastrous spending for these wars. While American public opinion seems to go from one extreme to another, surprisingly, the American public also seems to be able to make instinctive judgments about the overall national interest. Even public opinion appears to be naturally equipped with a "sense of national interest," which may lean towards the killing of others but would never fall into the trap of suicide.

This is supported not only by the government's pursuit of the national interest but also by the large number of private-sector think tanks in the United

States. Academics, intellectuals and experts are always appearing in the media, one after another, and repeating the same for-and-against arguments over and over again. In the process, the wildly fluctuating emotions of the public are reined in and coached by facts and reason.

What would have happened if the Japanese government had been swayed by the public opinion that led to the Hibiya Incendiary Incident and decided that its victory in the Russo-Japanese War would be meaningless unless huge territorial gains were made; if, for example, it had decided to refuse to sign the Treaty of Portsmouth until its demands for the territory of Siberia east of Baikal were met? Probably, without having to wait for the Pacific War, Japan would have been ruined by the Russo-Japanese War. The authoritarian Meiji government, while agonized by public opinion, held fast to its position and agreed to the Portsmouth Treaty. What would have happened if the Japanese government had listened to the opinions backing peace negotiations with all the Allies in 1951 and protests against the 1960 Security Treaty revisions, and had refused a quick peace or abrogated the revisions to the Security Treaty? It seems likely that Japan would not have enjoyed the security and economic prosperity that it did during the Cold War period. In both these cases, there was ample reason for public opinion to be enraged, but the direction in which such wild emotions were headed was contrary to Japan's national interest and contained an element of a self-destructive impulse. They were the noble acts for justice by public opinion obsessed with the aesthetics of destruction; in this regard, they were similar to the famous raid by the 47 Samurai. This kind of emotionalism is fatally lacking in a "sense of national interest." Being swayed by such emotion would result in the Japanese people being plunged into great tragedy once the initial excitement cools. Without realizing it, the people would be drawn towards a suicidal impulse.

In such cases, the authoritarian government, supported by the Liberal

Democratic Party's (LDP) overwhelming majority and the bureaucratic organization, withstood the pressure of public opinion, no matter how strong, and did whatever it could to protect the national interest. Now, however, that overwhelming LDP majority and the unassailable bureaucracy no longer exist. The Koizumi Cabinet is based entirely on the support of public opinion that is excessively emotional and highly erratic. Unlike the authoritarian governments of the past, the Koizumi Cabinet has not been provided with the foundations with which to forge ahead in the face of dissenting public opinion. To proceed calmly with normalization negotiations with North Korea no matter how much the media stir up public emotion over the abduction issue will not be possible. The only path open to Prime Minister Koizumi Jun-ichiro is to convince the Japanese public that, despite the abductions, drawing North Korea into the international community is essential to Japan's overall security. Even for Koizumi, who is blessed with the kind of eloquence that is so necessary in this age of mass democracy, this is no easy task at a time when public emotions are running so high.

In recent years, the media have started to lean heavily towards the notion that ratings and readership are everything; they are emotional and will do anything to gain popularity. In an age when the bureaucracy-led "top-down modernization" phase has ended, Japan is sadly lacking in both the quantity and quality of private-sector experts needed to cultivate the required level of social awareness of the issues. Unless several think tanks and a population of several thousand public intellectuals that can pose alternative proposals to the government are formed, Japanese diplomacy cannot hope to attain stability at a high level. JTI

*Iokibe Makoto is a professor of history at the Graduate School of Law, Kobe University. He was the president of the Japanese Association for Political Science (1998-2000), and is currently a visiting scholar at Harvard University.*