

On the Stump

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

The scene is so outwardly familiar: the small-town candidate in shirt-sleeves making the ritualized pre-election rounds. He greets everyone, listens, and reflects just the right level of concern. On this particular day, he has been asked to make the opening remarks at a local junior baseball tournament, where a sizable crowd of parents—potential voters all, of course—has gathered. As he works his way through the crowd, I watch and listen and wait for those moments that just might crystallize into telling images. Some of the crowd is at first taken aback by the appearance in their midst of a large foreign person liberally festooned with cameras, but the initially open, obvious curiosity usually soon abates, and I can concentrate fully on my quarry. I am following him on an assignment to cover the world of a young Japanese politician tackling the campaign trail for the first time.

Readers are certainly aware that it is not the function of this journal to introduce or endorse Japanese candidates for political office, so with that in mind, I must of course refrain from mentioning this candidate's name, the political party of which he is a member, or the district for whose representative Diet seat he is campaigning. Suffice it to say that this district is in central Japan, has an economy that is roughly divided between agriculture, fishing, and light to medium industry, and parts of it are undergoing traumatically rapid urbanization. There is an accelerating evolution from an older economic base to a newer one, and aspects of it are of great concern to the voters: land development, taxes, ecological impact, and—above all—a gnawing insecurity about the depth of the government's commitment to the voters' needs.

The candidate himself has much in his favor: he is a graduate of the law faculty of prestigious Tokyo University—a qualification almost *de rigueur* in the world of mainstream Japanese politics—and therefore has a strong and supportive network that reaches into the realms of politics and business; he also has deep family roots and connections in the region. But to conjure these together into an appealing and ultimately successful campaign effort that will pull in the nec-

essary votes, he has retained the services of a Tokyo-based public relations expert—a “spin doctor” in current American parlance—specializing in the arcane art of local Japanese electioneering.

Over the past week, I have watched this candidate work tirelessly from dawn till midnight. He has the energy; he has the drive. We have had numerous chances to speak informally, and I have found him to have an inquisitive razor-sharp mind. He has the ability and intellect. He understands that the new world around us changes on a daily basis, and that old formulas will not work against the barrage of new challenges. But in any country, the stratigraphy of settled solutions is usually set in stone; change does not come easily. For Japan, however, it is axiomatic that what worked so well in the past, while she struggled to climb out of the ashes and ruins of a cataclysmic defeat, will not serve her now that she stands as one of the world's leading nations amid swirling geopolitical and economic tides that were unimaginable just a decade ago.

I watch as the candidate hunkers down to talk with some of the school-age baseball players. He asks about their studies and the sports they like. The young players are shy at first, addressing him as *sensei* (a term written with the characters meaning ‘born before’ and usually used to address teachers, professors, and doctors), but when the subject comes around to the game at hand, there is an immediate rapport. The parents standing nearby are watching the scene.

“*Sensei*, if you go to the Diet in Tokyo, will you still come back to watch our games?” asks one youngster with a cap and glove that are just a little too large. The new candidate faces yet another task in an uneasy age.

Michael E. Stanley, born in California in 1947, studied cultural anthropology and archaeology, and has been a photoessayist based in Japan since 1979. He is currently an instructor at Tama University.



Reforms in Japan a Success or Not?

