

Memories of Mike Mansfield

One Man's Role in the Evolution of the U.S.-Japan Relationship

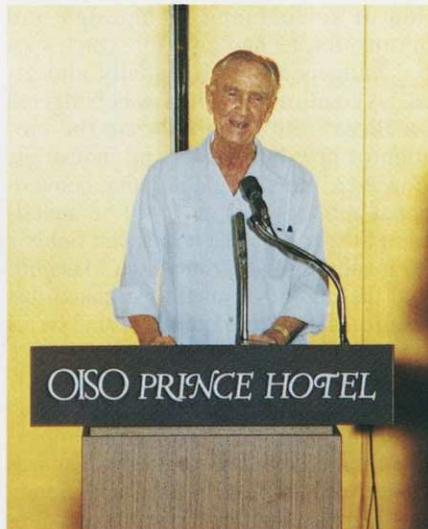
By Yamamoto Tadashi

When Mike Mansfield died at the age of 98 on Oct. 5, 2001, those Japanese who had known him well felt that an era in the U.S.-Japan relationship ended with his passage. Mansfield was an institution in the U.S.-Japan relationship, and he is remembered by many of us in Japan in association with his involvement in different phases of the evolution of that relationship. I, for one, had the privilege to work with him closely on several occasions, and was persuaded and encouraged by his famous statement that the "U.S.-Japan relationship is the most important bilateral relationship in the world, bar none."

I met Mansfield for the first time in September 1967, when he came to Japan as a keynote speaker for the 1st Shimoda Conference (the Japanese-American Assembly) that was widely regarded as the first major non-governmental policy dialogue between Japan and the United States. Mansfield was the Senate Majority Leader then, and I was serving as the executive secretary for the conference on the Japanese side. The fact that a leading political figure such as Mansfield would come to Japan for a private forum along with six Congressional members (including Senator Edmund Muskie, later presidential candidate, and Congressman Donald Rumsfeld, now Secretary of Defense) was big news in Japan. More importantly, it heralded a new phase in the U.S.-Japan relationship. As the final report of the conference stated, the bilateral relationship at that time was going through a process of "complete liquidation of the unfinished business of the war," and was "entering a new era." Japan, with its "remarkable economic development and rising national self-confidence," was seeking a "participation in international affairs that corresponds more appropriately to her position in the world."

In fact, the initiative by the American side to hold such a conference reflected

Photo : Japan Center for International Exchange



Mike Mansfield giving a speech at the 5th Shimoda Conference

its recognition that a policy dialogue to enhance broad-based mutual understanding among opinion leaders in the two countries – beyond the governmental contacts and negotiations – was essential for sustaining and improving the bilateral relationship. Mansfield's arrival in Shimoda as a keynote speaker was a gratifying sign to many Japanese that Americans were taking Japan seriously as an independent and "equal partner." Nevertheless, the relationship still could not have been described as "mature" at that point. Hundreds of left-wing demonstrators turned up at the site of the conference and taunted us as "running dogs of American imperialists." The Japan Socialist Party stopped two of its Diet members from attending the conference just one day before it was to convene, claiming that Japan could be dragged into the Vietnam War by having such a dialogue.

I also remember Mansfield for his invaluable assistance and encouragement in launching a political exchange program between the two countries in

the following years after the 1st Shimoda conference. Several Congressional and Diet members – notably Congressman Tom Foley, later speaker of the House and ambassador to Japan – responded to Mansfield's call and made it possible to hold this privately sponsored exchange as a regular program that is still continuing to this day. In encouraging me to promote such an exchange, Mansfield emphasized that this important bilateral relationship requires a close relationship between politicians, as has been evidenced by other relations such as the U.S.-U.K. relationship and the U.S.-German relationship which, according to Mansfield, had been buttressed by strong networks of mutual trust among the legislators of these countries.

Mansfield returned to Shimoda for the 4th Shimoda Conference in September 1977, 10 years after his appearance in the first meeting. He had just arrived as the new ambassador to Japan. Upon his arrival at the conference, he declared to me that "I have come here to sit, listen and learn" and made it known that he would not intervene in the dialogue. He indeed never spoke up once except for a memorable one-liner, "Oh made it!" He was announcing to the Japanese participants that Japanese baseball player Oh Sadaharu had just hit his 756th home run, surpassing the record set by the American home run king, Hank Aaron.

As Mansfield listened to the dialogue between the two countries, he must have noted how substantially it had changed during those 10 years. In both countries, and more broadly in the international setting, there had been many shifts: the U.S. disengagement from Vietnam and the growing uncertainty with regard to its commitment to Asian security; the U.S. recognition of China and the return of that country to the international community; the substantial increase in the relative size of the Japanese economy despite the set-

back of the oil crisis; and the inflation, recession and accompanying unemployment in the respective economies.

In the face of these changes, there was a great deal of soul-searching going on in both countries regarding their respective roles in a rapidly changing world, and there was a keenly felt need to redefine the bilateral relationship in the broader international context. The U.S.-Japan economic relationship was increasingly discussed in a multilateral context. Japan was timidly moving away from its exclusive focus on the U.S.-Japan relationship and was searching for its own international role. The appointment of a major political figure like Mansfield as American ambassador to Japan seemed to reflect the United States' acknowledgement of Japan's elevated place in the world. His appointment was also seen as a sign of continued American support and goodwill toward Japan. The figure of Mansfield quietly listening to the discussion at the 4th Shimoda Conference was a reassuring sight for many Japanese leaders, who would go on to work with him as a trusted friend and ally for over 11 years during his tenure in Tokyo.

Mansfield's tenure as ambassador to Japan was not without some serious difficulties. By the time he attended the 5th Shimoda Conference in September 1981, the trade tensions between the two countries were becoming quite serious. The summary of the discussions at that conference noted that "both American and Japanese participants expressed deep concern about the potentially serious political fallout of a record Japanese trade surplus." Economic issues in the relationship clearly had become a matter of great public concern in both countries. Around that time, Mansfield traveled widely throughout Japan, preaching his gospel of free trade and encouraging an expansion of domestic demand and the opening up of the Japanese market. At the same time, he kept telling Americans that Japan is a very important consumer of American agricultural products. He cautioned the U.S. government against harsh rhetoric over the trade disputes, even chiding an American negotiator for his arrogant

attitude during negotiations with a Japanese economic minister, and vehemently attacked certain American revisionists for citing cultural factors as impediments to trade with Japan. He handled many sensitive situations in the bilateral relationship with skill and dignity. Many Japanese recall the picture of Ambassador Mansfield bowing deeply in front of Japanese officials in a very traditional Japanese manner at the time of a collision between an American submarine and a Japanese fishing boat.

Even after he returned to Washington, he continued to be a trusted advisor to many Japanese – myself included – who would visit his office at Goldman Sachs seeking his advice on diverse issues related to the bilateral relationship. It was quite obvious that he was keeping up with developments in both countries that could affect the bilateral relationship. He reportedly continued to worry over international developments and their implications for the U.S.-Japan relationship in recent years, even after he was becoming less involved in public activities and even though his wife's condition had started deteriorating.

I have thought quite often about what it was that made Mansfield such an important figure in the U.S.-Japan relationship and made it possible for him to play such a critical role during the period of transition of this bilateral relationship. One clear factor was his deep conviction about the importance of the U.S.-Japan relationship as a vital pillar for the American presence in Asia. The second factor was his sense of fairness in handling the thorny issues in the relationship, which made him more persuasive, particularly on the Japanese side. Third, and related to that, he had an optimistic and contagious view that there is no conflict that cannot be resolved as long as both parties continue to deal with it in a sincere and serious manner. Fourth, he allowed Japanese, who had been gaining in self-confidence and self-assertiveness, to seek their own answers without appearing to be patronizing or intrusive. His advice to Japanese was usually given in very few words – typically in the form of "yup" or "nope" – but that advice

always carried a great deal of weight. Fifth, his seniority and stature made it possible to say whatever he felt strongly about to both American and Japanese leaders, and he was listened to with great respect. He reminded many Japanese of how old samurai warriors of the feudal era might have looked and behaved. Sixth, to many Japanese, his love and respect for Japan's culture and tradition was obvious, and for that reason, they were willing to listen to the harsh words he uttered toward Japan at times. And finally, his personal attention made people feel important and very close to him. His routine of serving coffee by himself to the guests visiting his office is legendary, and many in Japan were led to believe Mansfield was their personal friend, which in fact was the case most of the time.

It is amazing how one individual could contribute so much to the relationship between two major nations. One might say that this was possible because that relationship was in a transitional process, evolving from a patron-client relationship to one of equal partnership, and that it would not be possible in the much more complex and pluralistic situation presently facing both countries and the world as a whole. Nevertheless, there is much that Mansfield's followers and friends can emulate in their efforts to sustain and improve the U.S.-Japan relationship. We have to accept the fact that, with the passing of this giant, an era has come to an end. But there are still many on both sides of the Pacific who share the conviction of Mansfield on the paramount importance of this bilateral relationship. The era we are entering will require the close cooperation of those who have learned so much from Mike Mansfield and who have been touched by his generosity and friendship. JJI

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