

# A Sense of Responsibility

By *Hatakeyama Noboru*

THE accident occurred at midnight on December 28 years ago. A United Airlines cargo plane crashed into a mountain 25 miles north of Salt Lake City in the United States. The snow was so deep that it was difficult to recover the dispersed articles and the bodies of three crew members who had unfortunately been killed. The following May, when the tenure of my position in Chicago was about to end, I received a letter from the United States Postal Service (USPS), which said as follows: "The enclosed is a card we recovered from a cargo plane that crashed on Dec. 18, 1977, 25 miles north of Salt Lake City." There was a signature of a USPS official of the Salt Lake City office. It was a Christmas card from a Japanese close friend of mine. The envelope was damaged and the picture of Mt. Fuji on the card was miserably stained. The spotted mud on the envelope eloquently told the bitter fortune of this Christmas card that had waited five months to be recovered from a mountainous area of the United States until the snow had melted.

I was deeply moved by the strong sense of responsibility of the USPS. The United States has not privatized its postal service. The cumbersome task I mentioned above was carried out by a public corporation.

In Japan, the so-called postal privatization bills were passed through the Diet last October amid a big political drama. Although the bills were passed by the House of Representatives by a narrow margin of five votes on July 5, 2005, they were rejected in the House of Councillors by a wide margin on Aug. 8.

Later on the same day, Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro dissolved the House of Representatives to directly seek the public's opinion through a general election. There was strong opposition to this move even within the ruling parties, who pointed out that it would

be wide of the mark to dissolve the House of Representatives since the chamber which opposed the bills was not the House of Representatives but the House of Councillors. However, in Japan, the House of Councillors cannot be dissolved according to its Constitution. In the election campaign, Koizumi focused on only one issue, the privatization of the postal services, to make the public understand what they would be voting on. The general election was held on Sept. 11, and it turned out to be a landslide victory for Koizumi's Liberal Democratic Party. In light of this situation, the postal privatization bills were passed by the House of Representatives on Oct. 11 and by the House of Councillors on Oct. 14. Based upon this new law, a holding company will be established. All the stocks of this holding company will be held by the Government of Japan until October 2007 and more than one-third will be retained even after October 2017. Under this holding company, four subsidiaries of postal savings, postal life insurance, postal services and over-the-counter services will be established. Although all the stocks of the first two subsidiaries are supposed to be sold by 2017, the stocks of the latter two will be retained by the holding company even after 2017. This means in the case of postal services and over-the-counter services, the influence of the Government of Japan will remain to some extent.

Under such circumstances it would be a delicate judgment whether the postal services subsidiary would take the trouble to recover a post card buried under the snow for five months due to a cargo plane accident and deliver it to the intended recipient. If it does, it would surely move the recipient as I was moved, but the auditors of the subsidiary might complain that such activity would not help to make profits. Of course this kind of case requiring a delicate judgment would rarely happen.

The biggest issue would be how many post offices across Japan can stay in business so that the so-called universal postal services can be maintained. Whether they are completely privatized, or remain under some Government control, I strongly hope that the sense of responsibility on the part of the postal service will never disappear. **JS**

## COMING UP

"New Trends in Japan" will be the theme of the next issue of Japan Spotlight. What kind of things and places are now on boom in Japan? Through the analysis of these "New trends," we will elucidate a vivid picture of the present Japanese society and its culture. Our writers will also examine Japan's changing social structure, social stratum and consumption patterns.

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