

Turning Point 2005

By Shozaburo Kimura

"A taste of the 21st century." This is how one leading company hawks its wares, and everybody seems to have jumped on the 21st-century bandwagon. Yet I wonder if the 21st century will really be the idyllic wonderland that most people like to think it will.

No country anywhere has ever enjoyed a history of constant prosperity uninterrupted by starvation or devastation. Ups and downs are inevitable; for the individual, the company and the country. There is a turning point in the affairs of everyone and everything. Even the United States, which seemed blessed with unlimited potential and where never was heard a discouraging word, turned a major corner with its disaster in Vietnam. Today, Japan is said to be the industrialized country with the best economic record. When will our turning point come?

Perhaps the year 2005—early in that glorious new century that all Japanese are looking forward to—will be such a turning point. There are a number of reasons for thinking so.

Lessons of history

Writing in *Figaro Magazine* not long ago, the French conservative hero Prince Michel Casimir Poniatowski suggested that the 19th century was the European century, and the countries of Europe made colonies of the non-Euro-American lands. Now it is predicted that the 21st century will be the Pacific era, and this time the countries of Europe are fearful that they will themselves be colonies. What, he asked, can Europe do to prevent being subjugated?

To be sure, the century from the early 19th century until the early 20th century was an era of European globalization. In this period, the countries of Europe possessed such overwhelming technological

strength that the non-European world had no way of striking back, and Europe also dominated the world economically and militarily.

Yet when the dust had finally settled over the battlefields of World War I, global suzerainty had shifted from Europe to the United States. America had learned from Europe and, working hard, had developed a scientific and technological strength beyond any that Europe had known, as well as the ability to dominate economically and militarily.

Road to malaise

Yet "the American century" lasted only about half as long as the European one—only about half a century. With its fiasco in Vietnam, the United States has followed Europe down the road to malaise. Japan is another cause of this distress. After World War II Japan learned from the United States, worked hard, and, in some areas at least, has achieved a scientific and technological capability outstripping America's, plus the commensurate economic strength.

The more that science and technology spreads worldwide, the shorter the period that any one country can use its scientific and technological strength and economic might to dominate the rest. Already there are a number of new Pacific-rim nations determined to carve out a better future for their peoples and working hard to develop the requisite capabilities. Sooner or later, these countries will catch up with and overtake Japan. There is no stopping this process. Should Japan refuse technological transfer and capital credit to these countries and break off all personal contacts with them for fear of being bettered, the resultant friction would eclipse anything seen between Japan and the Euro-American countries. Japanese products

would be scorned everywhere, and Japan would slowly slip into obscure poverty.

Just as the European success story lasted a century and the American dream half a century, I expect Japan's turn on center stage to last about 30 years. Thirty years from when? In the last decade or so since economic growth slowed worldwide, Japan has won considerable praise for being one of the more successful performers. Perhaps 1975 would be an appropriate place to start counting, and that



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puts us very close to a Japanese turning point in the year 2005.

At that time, the internationalization that started in response to a cacophony of demands rivaling those of the mid-19th-century Black Ships will be going full-scale, the graying of the population will be here, and there will be increasing numbers of foreign workers in Japan. Assuming there are no abrupt changes in these trends, Japan will surely be at a major turning point.

Whether this will be a turning for the better or for the worse will depend on how much internationalization and cross-

flow of people takes place, how well we conquer our aversion to aging and create work-sharing structures benefiting young and old alike, and whether or not society is able to place the same value on free time or leisure as it does on work.

All three of these trends are secretly discerned by many Japanese economists and opinion leaders as spelling ruin for Japan. Yet in truth, they are our salvation.

One of the main reasons that the Roman Catholic Church has been able to maintain its dignity and authority throughout the ages is that it was also able to recognize and coopt people of ability

regardless of their geographical or class origins. The church's grip on new agricultural and industrial technologies helped, but even more important was its ability to stay in touch with farmers, burghers and nobility and to head off any coalition of anti-Catholic forces. Japan has been at the other extreme, and it is little wonder that it has been the brunt of fierce attacks and ostracism.

Working and saving

In Europe and America, corporate layoffs start with the young, society values experience, and older people have a strong voice in the community's affairs. In Japan, the company coldly starts its "personnel reorganizations" by dropping those older people who have given so much of themselves to the company. Although it is true that this Japanese coldness—a coldness so accepted that it has gone unremarked even by the Japanese themselves—is the source of much of society's vitality, middle-aged and older Japanese are beset by anxiety and this anxiety about how they will survive their declining years impels everyone to inordinately high savings rates.

The higher the yen goes, the more efficiency is pursued, the harder people work, the higher the yen goes, the more impoverished each person feels in the face of a seemingly affluent economy, and the more heated the international friction becomes. Is there no way out of this vicious circle? There is. But whether or not we will be able to find it and build a better Japan in the 21st century will depend on whether or not we are able to relax and enjoy our free time the way other people do around the world, whether we can develop the wisdom the future needs and live our lives not for the morrow but for the day after tomorrow. ●

(This is the last of a series of six essays by Mr. Kimura.)