

Whatever Happened to *E Pluribus*

By Daizo Kusayanagi

I keep an American silver dollar in my desk for sentimental reasons, and every time I see it, I am beset with a mix of emotions. For one, I see the motto engraved on the back of the coin—*E Pluribus Unum*—and remember the person who first told me what it means: Captain William Gordon of the First Armored Cavalry stationed in Yokohama.

With their ringing affirmation of the differences among people, these words were refreshingly new to someone like myself who had gone through Japan's wartime education system. When I visited New York for the first time in 1961, I was struck anew by the way so many different peoples, cultures and modes of expression coexisted in harmony. And I muttered to myself the Latin that I had learned over a decade earlier: *E Pluribus Unum*.

Fair slogan

When Shizuoka Telecasting asked me to think of a slogan for the '88 Shizuoka Prefecture International Sister Cities Fair that they were hosting last August, I unhesitatingly suggested "Let's love differences." There was no second or third choice. This was it. "Let's love differences." Happily, my suggestion was adopted and the phrase found its way into a welcoming speech by Shizuoka Telecasting President Y. Totsuka, receiving loud applause when it was repeated for emphasis at the speech's end.

No matter what our differences, we should recognize that these differences exist and agree to be different. Yet since we are not gods, we are more likely to seek to eradicate these differences or to submerge them to our own cultural patterns when we perceive the differences as disruptive or injurious.

A number of Japanese families play host to Asian students under a homestay program. This is, of course, a situation fraught with cultural differences. For example, while Japanese are in the habit of



bathing daily, some of these students do not bathe any more often than once every 10 days or so. Citing religious reasons, they sometimes go without bathing for a whole month. This is not so much of a problem in the winter, but the difference is readily noticeable from early spring until late summer.

The host families' first response is usually to try reasoning with them: "Japan is a very hot and humid country, the rooms are small and fairly closed, and the use of perfumes is not customary, so please bathe at least every other day. That is why the shower is there—so you can use it." But the students say that they have observed this religious custom for as long as they can remember and do not want to change now. Some of the girls have even broken down and cried.

There are only two alternatives when persuasion does not work—when the Japanese hosts are unable to get the person to adapt to local cultural mores. One is to find a suitable boarding house for the student and to get him or her to move there, with the Japanese side paying for the room and board. The other is to use perfumes and room deodorizers liberally, yet discreetly, around the house and to put up with the situation as best they can.

Acutely aware of the difficulty of toler-

ating cultural differences, I realize that toleration has to be a conscious effort precisely because it is so difficult to reconcile these differences. Thus part of my mixed emotions on seeing the *E Pluribus Unum* motto are based on the realization of how difficult it is to enable peoples to coexist in harmony despite their differences.

In those early postwar years when Captain Gordon told me what *E Pluribus Unum* meant, the world was not such a commingling of people and information; and today's interaction and interdependence—healthy signs that the world is moving toward a more open system—means that there will inevitably be increasing cultural friction over the clash of personal values.

This friction is evident, for example, in Japan-United States relations. One has only to look at the United Auto Workers (UAW) stance on wages for multiskilled workers. The UAW's position is basically that it represents de facto dumping by Japanese companies to not pay workers more money when they are responsible for a number of different tasks.

Personal discretion

This is an assertion that grates on many Japanese. It would seem to us that the worker would prefer a production system that leaves some leeway for personal discretion to one that limits him to a single task. Even people who are doing just one task in Japan have the opportunity for suggesting improvements, and this is the force behind the nationwide spread of QC circles.

Japanese industry has been working to foster multiskilled workers since well before World War II. When Japanese industry was still in its infancy, a number of leading European and American companies set up shop in Japan, and these factories encouraged multiskilled labor. I was raised in an industrial area, and a number of my friends were multiskilled workers employed at foreign-owned factories.

Unum?



Once they became competent, they were able to make their own tools and adjust the equipment for greater efficiency before they started to work. They were proud of this, and their skills were a major reason why Japan was the only Asian country to catch up with the Western industrialized countries so quickly.

So while the UAW sees multiple skills purely in terms of wages, the Japanese worker sees this as a question of self-fulfillment and personal values. Were the UAW position to campaign hard for the elimination of multiskilled workers at Japanese-owned companies in the United States, these companies would probably give in to the pressure of intolerance and reluctantly switch to using single-skilled workers. But would this be in the best interests of either America or Japanese-American relations?

The wave of the future is increasingly toward using robots in repetitious, single-skill manufacturing tasks. Even very small sub-subcontractors use robots now in Japan, and this is one factor in the predicted 21.8% increase in capital investment for the fiscal year ending March 31, 1989. The crucial thing here is that increased use of robots need not result in increased unemployment—and it does not do so in Japan because the multi-

skilled workers are able to supervise a number of different robots in different processes and to switch to non-robotized work. You do not need to be a Harvard Business School graduate to realize that there are two kinds of innovation: product innovation and process innovation. New and improved products represent product innovation; middle-aged women supervising robots at small Japanese sub-subcontractors represent process innovation.

Blocking innovation

By contrast, the UAW's anti-innovative position with its insistence on single-skill workers will probably result in robots' replacing single-skill workers. Naturally enough, the single-skill workers will resent this, process innovation will be retarded at these plants, and a production technology gap will open up between Japan and the United States. This production technology differential will then show up in the trade balance and friction over multiskilled workers at the factory level will escalate into friction at the international level. This is foolish—a bit like letting a common cold develop into pneumonia because you did not have the sense to recognize what was happening.

At the start of the Pacific War, the workhorse Japanese fighter plane, the Zero, was said to be about four times as combat-effective as the American F-6 fighter. In effect, a single Zero was able to take on four F-6s. Yet after the Battle of Midway (October 1942), the positions were reversed and Japan started losing four Zeros for every F-6 it shot down. One reason, of course, was that the Japanese Navy had lost most of its best pilots, but the main reason was that the American Air Force reverse-engineered the Zero to identify its weaknesses and to improve the F-6.

At the time, America was not interested so much in suppressing differences as in learning from them. This was an ambitious America. This was the America that we learned to respect and admire. Yet sadly, these emotions are fading as the America of *E Pluribus Unum* gives way to an America of "my way or else." ■

(This is the first of six essays by Daizo Kusayanagi.)

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