

# What Next for Number 29?

By Daizo Kusayanagi

Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu's September visit to the United States was widely billed as a courtesy call, and the Japanese media predicted that it was unlikely anything substantive would come of his talks with President George Bush—an opinion that was shared by most Japanese as well. Yet even though these expectations were borne out and the trip was more show than substance, both Kaifu and the Japanese public came away impressed by America's thoughtfulness.

For example, when Kaifu visited Massachusetts Institute of Technology after his talks with Bush, he was presented with a football jersey with the number 29 printed on the back. Kaifu was very pleased with this gift, and there is no doubt that the Japanese who saw this on TV were also impressed. The number 29 has special meaning for Kaifu.

## Wish came true

Kaifu was 29 years old when he was first elected to the House of Representatives. Arriving in Tokyo, he was assigned living quarters in Room 29 in Building 6 of the Diet dorm. A little while later, Kaifu gave a speech at his alma mater, Waseda University, in which he said, "Twenty-nine is my lucky number. And with your support, I hope to be prime minister in another 29 years." Much to the surprise of not only his supporters but Kaifu himself, this is exactly what happened. At age 58, Kaifu became prime minister. Knowing all of this, the Japanese public was impressed that the welcome accorded Kaifu included a play on his number 29.

For over a thousand years, the Japanese have been superstitious about numbers, ritualizing all of the numerical milestones of their lives. For example, it is the custom that relatives gather together to celebrate seven days after a child is born. Likewise, someone beginning training in judo or the tea ceremony was supposed to start on the sixth day of

the sixth month of his or her sixth year.

When Japanese get older, they have a series of celebrations to look forward to—at age 60, 70, 77, 80, 88, 90 and 99. Politicians and wealthy businessmen book hotel banquet rooms for these parties, people of more modest means invite friends and relatives over to the house, and those senior citizens without any surviving kin gather to celebrate under local community auspices.

When Kaifu took office, cynics joked that his administration would probably only last 29 days, but not only did he make it past the 29-day mark, he was presented with the number 29 jersey during his trip to the United States. And the fact that his "29" luck seemed to be holding has led many Japanese to believe that Kaifu might be able to deal with the United States. Of course, there is no solid basis for this belief. Anybody with even a high school education can see that the whole show was staged. Still, the very fact that they thought to stage this show may in itself be significant.

For centuries, the byword in Europe has been that "it is not what you know but who you know." In Japan too, it is frequently the skillful use of your personal network of contacts, both private and professional, that enables you to attain your objectives with a minimum of wasted effort. This is especially true in international business, where a casual acquaintance can easily develop into a valued friendship that will help you understand a foreign culture better. The literature is full of such cases.

This January, soon after Emperor Showa passed away, Shigeharu Matsumoto, chairman of the International House of Japan, died at the age of 90. His autobiography, *Shanghai-jidai* (Shanghai Days), gives a surprisingly detailed account of his network of friends in the United States, Britain, Germany, Italy and China.

He filed vivid reports on the subject of Sino-Japanese relations during the six

years (1932–38) that he served as Shanghai bureau chief for the Domei News Agency. Since his reports were always well grounded in what the Chinese thought or did, he was frequently the only person reporting on some stories. Although this established his reputation as a journalist, it also made him very unpopular with the Japanese military. Yet Matsumoto was able to avoid the same herd-psychology articles that the rest of the Japanese press was running because he had so many friends in China.

These were Chinese that he had met in 1924 at Yale University, where they were all studying under the historian Charles A. Beard. It was about this same time that hatred for Japan began to surface among the Chinese, and Matsumoto found himself engaged in nightly debates with the Chinese exchange students on the Japan-China problem. Matsumoto and the Chinese agreed that the situation was grim, and they pledged to do their best to improve Sino-Japanese relations once they got into political or diplomatic positions of power.

## Personal touches

There are probably countless similar stories involving Americans and Japanese, even in just the short time since the end of the war. And the closer the friendships, the more likely they are to involve personal touches such as Kaifu's "29" jersey.

When it comes to formal negotiations between the two nations, however, both sides seem to have completely forgotten how to use these personal relationships, even though they should be their most valuable diplomatic asset.

Edward Seidensticker, who is respected in Japan for his understanding of Japanese culture, recently complained that, despite the many years he has spent in Japan, the U.S. Embassy has never asked his advice. If the U.S. government had made Seidensticker an adviser to its ne-





gotiating team, it probably could have devised a winning strategy easily. Instead, we face negotiation gridlock as Japanese attitudes have hardened in resentment at the American negotiating attitude of speaking loudly and threatening big sanctions.

A decade or so ago, the Japan-United States Economic Relations Group was able to carry out its discussions in an atmosphere of familiarity and friendship. No more. Today, the main players in the negotiations this fall are people who have never even met each other. The only contacts they have are across the negotiating table. When bureaucrats meet, they base their arguments on statistics—digitalized hard evidence.

Determined to convince the other side of the justice of their position, they launch into their presentations marshaling impressive reams of supporting statistics. And when things do not turn out the way the United States hopes they will, the U.S. negotiators charge that all of these problems are rooted in Japan's unwillingness to abandon its cultural peculiarities—which is basically the same thing that Karel van Wolferen and James Fallows have said—and threaten to invoke Super 301 unless Japan caves in. There is no room for compromise. Why is it that the two sides refuse to draw on the wealth of personal friendships that could solve these problems and instead resort to

quibbling over what the statistics mean?

Along with this propensity to build fortresses of statistics, many people have noticed that symposiums and conferences on U.S.-Japan relations have recently become very boring. Most of these discussions have deteriorated into a set-piece exchange by the assembled economists and other scholars and there is no longer any real give-and-take of debate. Instead, they are not so much discussions as they are minilecture series as people talk past each other. There is only an assembly of speakers, and no meeting of minds.

## Always right

Some observers have argued that the post-Vietnam "me-ism" has spread all the way to the intelligentsia and that more and more people are more interested in presenting their paper and leaving than they are in any real exchange. Yet according to Masataka Kosaka, a Kyoto University professor with many American friends, the real cause of both the negotiators' statistic-dependency and the decline of the classic debate is not me-ism but the Potomac Syndrome.

In other words, people who work in Washington tend to assume that the rest of the world revolves around America. An updated version of the Ptolemaic theory that the sun and stars revolve around the Earth, this Potomac theory

puts America at the center of the universe and takes it for granted that America is always right, and it is only a short step from there to assuming that the rest of the world should eventually bow to American hegemony.

Of course, Washington is not the only capital afflicted with this kind of thinking, and Japan has its own version in the Nagata-cho Syndrome. In fact, it could be argued that things are even worse in Japan than they are in the United States, as seen in the assumption that all roads lead to Tokyo. While Washington has its Ptolemaic astronomy, Tokyo has its astronomical land prices—prices so out of touch with reality that it has been estimated that the Imperial Palace grounds alone are worth more than the whole of Canada.

The reports out of Washington said that Bush and Kaifu have agreed to work together on global environmental problems, but maybe that is not the most important problem they face. Maybe they should start by finding a cure for capital myopia. ■

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

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