

The Crowbar and the Lizard

By Daizo Kusayanagi

Spring has come with the speed of a base runner shooting for an inside-the-park home run, the cherry blossoms have bloomed a week early, and the summer's dragonflies are flitting among the greenery. Life in today's Japan gives one the feeling of riding an express train that is not even slowing down for the stations. It is not only the seasons that pass so quickly, but prime ministers as well. Almost everyone thought Takeshita would hold out until after the July summit in Paris, but his resignation too came much earlier than expected.

The only time things slowed down was in the designation of Takeshita's successor, when it took nearly a month and a half before the party finally settled on Foreign Minister Sousuke Uno. And then it was back to the normal frenzied rush as Uno was elected by the Diet on a Friday, appointed his Cabinet that evening, and gave his inaugural policy speech the following Monday.

Yet not even this political upheaval will have major reverberations throughout Japanese society. In fact, the day that Takeshita announced his intention to resign, April 25, both the yen and the Tokyo stock market finished higher than they started. When NTT Chairman Hisashi Shinto was arrested for alleged bribery, the yen dropped by ¥1 to the dollar, and the day it was disclosed that Recruit donated ¥30 million to a Takeshita-sponsored party, the yen fell ¥0.6. From this, one would have expected that the prime minister's resignation would have been an even bigger jolt to the market, and the fact that the yen actually gained strength probably reflects the feeling that we are turning the corner on the scandal-induced gloom and uncertainty.

But perhaps not. After all, indictments mean that the problem has been isolated, and what is identified can be treated. It is noteworthy that the yen did not budge from its exchange rate of ¥293 to the dollar when Kakuei Tanaka was arrested in the Lockheed scandal, this despite the

fact that he was a very recent prime minister and still a kingmaker within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party.

There is a phrase in Japanese which translates literally as "letting it flow with the water" and expresses the feeling that past events should not remain to haunt one forever. Even if a woman finds out that her husband has been cheating on her, as long as he repents and promises never to do it again, she is probably willing to let bygones be bygones. This same forgiveness extends to politics and history as a whole. From a legalistic non-Japanese standpoint, this may seem to be a very irresponsible and irrational way to act, but it is how most Japanese handle their problems.

Another characteristic way of solving problems is known as "cutting the lizard's tail off." Since lizards have an amazing capacity to generate new tails, a lizard caught in a trap will not hesitate to tear off its own tail to save its life. Japanese groups—especially political groups—have adopted a comparable behavioral quirk.

But even given this tendency, it is unusual for as many cabinet ministers and bureaucrats to quit in midterm as have during Takeshita's tenure. No sooner had Takeshita taken the reins of government than Representative Koichi Hamada, chairman of the Budget Committee of the House of Representatives, quit in a storm over some abusive statements he had made, and the same day Hideyuki Aizawa, chairman of the Judicial Committee, quit over revelations involving stock purchases. Three months later, Seisuke Okuno, director general of the National Land Agency, resigned in the aftermath of his public claims that Japan had no aggressive intent in the war with China. Then in the summer of 1988, director general of the Defense Agency Tsutomu Kawara stepped down in the wake of the collision between a submarine and a fishing boat off Yokosuka.

In the fall, Masaaki Fujita, president of the House of Councillors, resigned for

health reasons. At the end of the year, Finance Minister Kiichi Miyazawa resigned over his inability to explain his financial relationship with Recruit adequately, as did Justice Minister Takashi Hasegawa when it was revealed that he had also received political contributions from Recruit. At the beginning of this year, Ken Harada, director general of the Economic Planning Agency, stepped down when it was revealed that he had accepted political contributions from a Recruit affiliate. Altogether, this comes to a total of eight politicians quitting in midterm.

Restorative powers

If this had been a battleship, the *LDP-Marū* would have been limping along after eight direct hits, but Prime Minister Takeshita just continued dropping one liability after another in an effort to save the lizard's life. But then, all of a sudden, on a summer-like spring day, it was discovered that the lizard's head was in the trap, and this too Takeshita lopped off. This may have seemed a bit drastic for Takeshita, but for the LDP—which is the real lizard—Takeshita's decapitation was really another form of tail-cutting, because a new tail—the next prime minister—would soon be in place.





So these two unique characteristics, the ability to forgive the past and to drop liabilities, give Japanese politics unique restorative powers. President Kennedy once remarked that working with the Washington bureaucracy is like wrestling with a feather pillow. The same is true of trying to get things done in Japan. That did not matter when Japan was a minor player on the international scene and its internal politics mattered little to other countries. But times have changed. The little lizard is now Godzilla.

Japanese are more worried about Carla Hills, the new U.S. Trade Representative, then they are about the domestic political turmoil. Her personal history and talents are well-known among Japanese, but her personality is still an unknown quantity. The only thing we have to go on is the speech she made accepting her appointment as USTR, when she referred to her "handshake and crowbar" philosophy. Speaking to the Senate Finance Committee on February 27 on her approach to bilateral trade negotiations, Hills said she would always aim for amicable solutions based on a handshake, but if that proved impossible she would not hesitate to use a crowbar to pry the markets open. President Bush seemed to like this attitude, and at her swearing-in ceremony actually

presented her with a real crowbar, which she playfully brandished. Also present at this ceremony was Takeshita, who gazed intently at Hills during her speech. I wondered what thoughts were going through this typically reserved Asian man's head as he scrutinized the aggressive American woman.

Even though Hills may have achieved her present position by making the most of a privileged upbringing and her own personal drive, I get the feeling that she is dangerously overconfident. Ex-chairman Stephen Gabbert of the U.S. Rice Millers' Association, when he heard that Hills had been appointed USTR, is supposed to have said he felt sorry for the Japanese and European trade negotiators.

Closing doors

Japan has no choice but to be prepared for a number of crowbars in Japan-U.S. negotiations, but, as in *Aesop's Fables* of the wind and the sun, if Hills gets off the plane at Narita with too big of a crowbar, Japanese politicians will simply shut the door on her. Not just politicians but the Japanese people as well would react negatively to uncompromising American negotiating tactics. This is not because economic success has made Japanese arrogant but because of distaste for Am-

erica's "speak loudly and carry a big crowbar" philosophy.

For example, the book *Yen!* by Daniel Burstein has been widely read by thoughtful Japanese and offers fresh perspectives such as, "Just as our (American) values must undergo change, we must also be willing to question some of our long-held economic beliefs." Although I agree with his calls for strengthening the dollar, cutting government spending and reducing the dependence on foreign capital, no Japanese could help but be irritated by his call for America to pressure Japan into investing more in the developing countries. Along with this, he says it should be made more difficult for non-Americans to acquire U.S. assets.

Many Japanese bought U.S. Treasury bills in full awareness that exchange fluctuation would wipe out the interest spread, and many Japanese companies have been productive, tax-paying members of U.S. society. Yet Burstein chooses to ignore these facets and to criticize Japan for not doing enough in its official development assistance.

When human beings reach puberty, they tend to idolize popular singers and movie stars and look on their commonplace relatives with disdain. The same could be said of a society. Until the 1970s, Japanese society idolized and attempted to emulate American culture. Japanese returning home after having studied in America had nothing but criticism for Japan's culture and nothing but praise for America's. But Japanese society today is outgrowing its adolescence.

Americans may not have any qualms about their adversarial attitude toward Japan, but it makes Japanese very uncomfortable. America may want to vent steam, but its tantrums are scalding Japan. Using a crowbar to bash a lizard could have some undesirable effects. ■

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

Daizo Kusayanagi is a free-lance writer and has authored numerous books on economic and social problems. He frequently appears on TV as a commentator.