

The Agreement as Part of the Negotiations: Aggressive Strategy in Reporting by the U.S.

By Ishii Hayato • *Kyodo News Service*

"What is this, someone must have mistakenly distributed materials used during the negotiations." This was my initial reaction when I was handed the English statement regarding the U.S.-Japan agreement. This document was distributed at Geneva's Intercontinental Hotel at slightly after 6:00 p.m. on June 28, 1995.

Approximately one hour before the announcement, Kyodo News Service released a flash report stating, "The Japan-U.S. automotive negotiators have reached an agreement." The focus for the next article was thereby narrowed to describing details of the agreement itself, in particular, the question of numerical targets.

The printed statement, however, was blank where numbers should have appeared, and certain aspects were utterly contradictory; "Representative Kantor made an estimate," and "Japan took no part in calculating the estimate."

It was the most I could do to wait until the U.S. Trade Representative public relations secretary insisted, "Yes, it is the real one!" With that I rushed into the adjacent hall and while hurriedly translating the statement's text into Japanese, used my cellular phone to report in to Tokyo. That call was made at slightly past 12:30 p.m. Japan time and just before the deadline for the morning papers. Following the International Trade and Industry Minister Hashimoto and Trade Representative Kantor's joint press conference, both sides held official and unofficial press interviews and background information sessions.

Citing the inclusion of concrete numerical objectives, the U.S. emphasized the agreement as "based on results." Also, the U.S. side distributed an "Agreement Fact Sheet." This fact sheet was a detailed supplement that, depending on interpretation, indicated that the Japan side had agreed to set numerical targets. Finally, Deputy Secretary of Commerce Garten and USTR Legal Advisor Shapiro spent nearly an hour providing careful supplemental explanations. Of course, this session greatly affected the U.S. media, but, in my opinion, it was also especially influential to those Japanese reporters most "deeply dug into" the U.S. government.

While these press conferences were being held, President Clinton gave his own press conference in Washington. During the meeting, President Clinton stated, "The procurement of U.S.-made parts will increase by 50% to 9 billion dollars over the next three years." Later, when the text was finally organized, this 9 billion dollar figure did not exist. Despite being nothing more than an "illusion," President Clinton used this figure in a direct appeal to the American people.

For Japan, Sakamoto Yoshihiro, Vice-Minister for International Affairs at MITI, held a press conference at the Geneva headquarters. His explanation entailed, "We agreed not to agree." When one reporter inquired, "Did Japan win in these negotiations," Mr. Sakamoto tilted his head to one side and after a moment of consideration responded, "We did not lose." This answer sparked a burst of laughter among the reporters.

In retrospect Sakamoto's comment was quite significant. It was also extremely restrained when compared with the aggressive campaign for numerical targets waged by the U.S. Besides, the then Ministry of Transport Advisor Ochi Masahide's comment referring to the U.S. fact sheet as an "absurd document," Japan's overall counter argument on the point that both sides had agreed not to include numerical objectives seemed extremely weak.

If at this juncture, the Japan side had clarified their disagreement by issuing a statement such as, "The U.S. side's document is mistaken and must be recalled," Japan could have avoided irresponsible reports of a "deliberately ambiguous agreement," becoming mainstream news.

Presented by Chief Cabinet Secretary Igarashi Kozo as "We must avoid any misunderstanding, the numbers presented are estimates created unilaterally by the U.S.," the Japanese government's official reaction did not come until midday Japan time on June 29th. Moreover, the announcement was made in Tokyo.

Why didn't or why couldn't the Japanese government expose their partner's offense immediately? Could it have been because of a need to coordinate ministries and agencies

or offices and departments? If so, how very unfortunate.

It seems the U.S. considered how to announce the agreement as an important facet of negotiations. In terms of press conference location (the U.S. delegation stayed at the Intercontinental Hotel) and time (deadline for morning papers in Japan and afternoon in the U.S.), this was "information strategy." The U.S. made strategic use of the media with open, detailed and overwhelming information.

Personally, I dislike this style of calling something black when it is actually white or vice versa. However, beginning in 1992, my three year experience in Washington taught me that making slight changes to an agreement's content in its explanation to gain an advantage is fairly common practice. Also, the credibility and persuasiveness of such explanations depends entirely on the top official's ability to state the explanation directly in his or her own words.

In Washington, secretaries of state are often called to testify at public congressional hearings. They also have opportunities to state their opinions in speeches at various gatherings.

Particularly with commerce-related issues, we news agency reporters regularly cover Senate finance committee and House of Representative annual revenue committee public hearings. These are covered directly and reports on any important statements are filed immediately. Although I acknowledge criticisms of "single statement" articles, a slip of the tongue often reveals an official's true opinion or signals a change in government policy. For those of us who report the news, this is one source we cannot ignore.

Moreover, even if the statement is slightly incorrect, one given live by a top-level government official carries exceptionally more weight and influence than an announcement printed on a scrap of paper or received from government sources.

It is unfortunate that in Nagatacho or Kasumigaseki government officials are only seen reciting prepared speeches, not stating individual opinions for which they assume responsibility for thereafter.