The Chrysanthemum and the Eagle

Sato, Ryuzo

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America Is a Country of Rules. As I travel back and forth between Japan and the United States, I always feel that the first country is too homogeneous and the second is too pluralistic. In Japan, for example, it is easy to chat with the cab driver on the way to Narita Airport. From the opening conversational gambit about the weather to queries about my destination, the conversation flows smoothly and naturally with no hesitations or awkward silences. A dozen or so hours later when my plane lands in America and I disembark, I again take a taxi. My first thought as I get in is “Is it safe to ride in this cab?” The next is “What sort of person is this cab driver? Will he try to overcharge me?” Tired after the long flight, I am particularly sensitive to the difference between my taxi experiences in Japan and those in

between being able to relax and carry on
an ordinary conversation and having to be wary and
watchful in dealing with the cab driver.

I have been traveling between the United States and
Japan on a regular basis for more than thirty years, but
I have never become inured to this feeling. Most taxi-
cab drivers in New York and Washington are immi-
grants. A few may be native born, but the majority are
from places like India, Puerto Rico, or Egypt. They of-
ten speak with such strong foreign accents that I can-
ot understand what they are saying. Because we have
no common topic of conversation and share no feelings
of affinity, a sense of guardedness inevitably prevails in
our dealings with one another. This is not necessarily
because I am Japanese. Everyone in the United States
has his or her own culture and lifestyle, and one cannot
expect Americans to communicate with each other as
easily as Japanese do.

The idea that Japan is somehow different has cur-
rently become popular in America; it would be more
appropriate to say that Japan is too much the same.
Few countries are as homogeneous as Japan. The
United States, on the other hand, is the most diverse
country in the world; no culture is more varied. Now
that these two countries, which are so diametrically
opposite from one another, have begun to call each
other odd, it will not be easy for them to find a com-
mon ground.

In Japan it is commonly accepted that Japan is in-
habited by people whose ancestors from time imme-
memorial were also Japanese. The Japanese—and per-
haps only the Japanese—tend to think that just as
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The "Americans" that the Japanese have in mind are those people whose ancestors came over on the Mayflower or the Native Americans who were once masters of the American continent. The truth is, of course, that the United States is a country where people of a seemingly infinite variety of ethnic backgrounds and cultures mix together to form what has been called a "salad bowl" and that an American is anyone who has U.S. citizenship. If the Hispanic population continues to increase at the current rate, someday more than half the U.S. population may not speak English. This sort of thing is beyond the comprehension of most Japanese. How ironic that a nation that is composed of many different races and that freely absorbs minor differences should call Japan "different."

Naturally, rules are necessary in a community of such diversity. And those rules must be absolutely explicit. Bringing together people of different cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds and divergent lifestyles demands rules that are perfectly clear to everyone. They cannot be understandable only to people of Italian or Spanish descent but must act as the greatest common denominator for people of all backgrounds and help to level their differences. They must be based on the premise that they will be universally intelligible and universally obeyed. The rights and obligations of American citizens are set down in the Constitution. Contracts govern interactions between individuals. This dependence on written codes of behavior is what I mean when I say "America is a country of rules."

In contrast, Japan is a country without an explicit set of rules or, perhaps more accurately, a country that does not need such rules. In a homogeneous soci-
ety, where complete understanding can be achieved through monosyllables, the rules governing communication and other ordinary activities do not need to be set down in writing or even explicitly articulated. Someone who submits a contract to be signed or proposes a set of rules to be followed runs the risk of being frowned upon for "alien" or "unsociable" behavior. In general, Japanese feel strongly that it is a not a virtue to prescribe rules. This is a major difference between the United States and Japan.

Japanese also feel more comfortable with vagueness and ambiguity than Americans do. When American children study English in school, they are always urged to "be precise" and "use the exact word." Clarity and precision in the expression of ideas may be considered virtues for the speaker or writer of English, but they are not prized by the speaker or writer of Japanese. Out of respect for the feelings of others, Japanese have a strong tendency to put themselves in the other person's position, to try to imagine how he or she might feel, and then to gear their own speech and behavior to fit these views. Avoiding forthright assertions of opinions is a traditional strategy for preventing conflict in a homogeneous society. This preference for oblique forms of expression is reflected in the Japanese language, which does not normally specify gender or number or require that sentences have definite subjects and thus lends itself perfectly to an indirect approach. In international exchanges, however, vague responses that mean neither "yes" nor "no" are no longer acceptable. Japanese negotiators must be able to take a firm stand and present their case convincingly to the American side.
America is a notoriously litigious society. People go to court on any pretext to settle a dispute. In Japan, on the other hand, arbitration is the preferred method for resolving disagreements. Settling an issue once and for all by completely crushing the opponent is not regarded as admirable behavior even by the victor. Out-of-court settlements, mediation, and compromise—each motivated by a spirit of conciliation—are typically Japanese ways of resolving conflicts. Although this attitude seems to be gradually changing, the underlying belief that litigation is somehow not entirely proper still remains. Americans, however, will marshal all the forces at their disposal behind an argument in an all-out effort to win. A conciliatory spirit signifies lack of effort.

If in Japan it is considered bad form to argue, in the United States arguing in the process of reaching an agreement is both the fair way to settle a dispute and a sign of good faith. Seen in this light, the various pressures brought to bear on Japan, such as the Super 301 clause and the Gulf War contributions question, have not been instances of Japan-bashing but rather attempts to make Japan do the “right” thing according to American sensibilities. Although Japan should not overreact to these pressures, it sometimes does. In addition, Japanese bureaucrats and politicians sometimes do not understand what America really wants Japan to do.

The fact that the Japanese are not accustomed to arguing has certainly been a major handicap in exchanges between Japan and the United States. From childhood, Americans have been taught to convince others of the rightness of their assertions and feel no
discomfort in doing so. Because this is not the Japanese way, it tends to confuse Japanese officials, who then give a confused response when confronted by American demands. Japanese officials have often bumbled things because they are unfamiliar with the negotiating process. Overreacting to American attacks about how different Japan is, they have been known to make statements such as “the Japanese people can’t eat too much beef because their intestines are too long” and are then forced into an even more untenable position when the American side responded, “Then, the Japanese are different not only in the way they think but physiologically as well?” Given its propensity to make absurd remarks like these, it is no wonder that the Japanese side is not taken seriously when it tries to make the quite valid point that America’s trade deficit would still not go down even if Japan acceded to all America’s demands.

The U.S. government wants Japan to be “fair” and to “play by the same rules.” It must also convince Congress and ultimately the American people that it is succeeding in these efforts. As the world heads steadily toward a single global market, the game cannot be played if the rules are different from one country to another. The United States, to use a popular image, has said that Japan should not get into the boxing ring wearing only a fundoshi (loincloth) and attempt to wrestle sumo-style.

In the past, diplomats needed only to speak each other’s language, but that is no longer the case. Today’s diplomats have to be tough negotiators. Unfortunately, Japanese diplomats are not provided with this sort of training. For the most part, they are gentlemen who speak excellent English; in other words, they are lan-
guage-oriented diplomats of the old school. Thus, whenever Japanese–U.S. relations start to unravel, bureaucrats from MITI or the Ministry of Finance must invariably step in. This confuses their American counterparts.

Ministries and agencies in Japan operate independently of one another. With a few exceptions, Japanese bureaucrats do not move from one ministry to another in the course of their careers. Just as a Japanese businessman remains with one company throughout his working life, a civil servant stays in one branch of the government until retirement. This system inculcates an intense loyalty to one's ministry that can often lead to open conflicts with other ministries in areas where interests overlap. If one ministry encroaches upon the rights and privileges of another, a tense situation is likely to develop. When Japan negotiates with America, there is a flurry of activity, and after some fierce infighting between MITI and the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs often gets pushed out into the cold. Members of the Diet can also become involved. As a result, the American side often does not know with whom it should negotiate.

Japanese officials, for their part, sometimes use gaiatsu, or “foreign pressure,” to their advantage. Policymakers, for example, may secretly desire the reform of certain traditional practices, such as restrictions on rice imports to protect domestic rice farmers, and are glad to meet American demands. Publicly, however, the officials object to the demands, using the United States as a scapegoat, to give the appearance that the reform is being forced upon Japan by international pressures alone.
“Me” Society versus “We” Society. Every society has unwritten rules that govern life in that society. Who makes those rules? Generally speaking, the behavior of the people that society holds in highest esteem serves as the basis for the rules of that society. In America and Japan, however, the rules originate from fundamentally different groups.

Japanese rules are clearly “made in Tokyo,” the center of Japan’s political, economic, and cultural life. Rules and trends originate there and eventually spread through the rest of the country. This means the rules are progressive as far as the rest of the country is concerned, but conservative for the more radical elements of Tokyo society. An obvious example is provided by the rules of marriage. Today, in both Tokyo and the rest of the country, love matches have replaced arranged marriages as the social norm. This custom clearly originated in Tokyo. Several years ago marrying for love was considered vulgar in the countryside. Those who wished to escape this rule eloped to Tokyo, where love matches were socially acceptable. As the practice of marrying for love began to spread throughout the country, the more progressive couples in Tokyo began to live together without getting married. This practice has yet to be universally accepted, even in Tokyo. My point is that, for the most part, Japan’s rules are decided in a particular area, namely, the city of Tokyo.

By contrast, although trends tend to develop in major U.S. cities, especially those along the East and West coasts, particular groups of progressive people make the rules in America rather than one particular progressive place as in Japan. In the matter of marriage,
living together before marriage has become accepted behavior among well-educated Americans. Many people in respectable positions in the United States live with their prospective spouses before they get married. This practice is widespread and has none of the taint attached to common-law marriages in Japan. Because it has been socially acceptable for the past decade or so, the couple quite normally attends even the most formal social functions together. While this progressive behavior is displayed by the better educated, professional classes, attitudes toward marriage do remain conservative among the great majority of American families. But the feeling that a woman is somehow at a disadvantage without a legal marriage no longer exists, at least among America's educated elite.

In short, in America the better educated tend to be the social trendsetters, and it is only a matter of time before their rules spread to the rest of society. Progressive intellectuals were in the vanguard of movements to eliminate racial and sexual discrimination from American society. In general, educated American women have the same pride and self-esteem that characterize only the most outspoken proponents of the women's movement in Japan. In this area, there is an enormous difference between U.S. intellectuals and their counterparts in conservative Japan. Americans with high levels of education tend to be relatively liberal with respect to interracial marriages, homosexuality, and other lifestyle preferences. These ideas are slowly being accepted by the public as a whole, making the United States a much more liberal society, in general, than many other countries. On the other hand, better educated Japanese are much more conservative
than their American counterparts, and their ideas have permeated Japan, making it a relatively conservative society.

The granting of independence to teenage children is another area in which Japanese and Americans are very different. America’s elite has imitated the custom of the British ruling class in sending its children away from home to prep schools and colleges. Each fall high school students enter America’s Ivy League colleges or the prep schools that prepare them for these colleges. These boarding schools perpetuate the traditions of the English “public” school system, providing a rigorous, well-rounded education that inculcates a sense of noblesse oblige. In U.S. society, the higher the family income the greater the likelihood of growing up in a nuclear family and being treated as an independent adult upon reaching the age of eighteen. Such a lifestyle is, of course, associated with freedom and progress. Being independent does not mean that an eighteen-year-old earns his or her own way, however, so the independence a college student enjoys is not independence in the true sense of the word. Prep schools and Ivy League colleges are private schools, the tuitions for which are among the highest in the world. American parents have the thankless role of paying huge sums of money for their children’s education without being able to intervene in their daily lives. Perhaps that is one of the burdens of noblesse oblige, but I cannot help feeling that it is also the breeding ground for America’s self-centered “me-first” culture.

As a society reaches economic maturity, nonetheless, this is probably the direction it will take. In that sense, although Japan has indeed become rich, compared
with the United States, its level of social maturity remains very low. Most Japanese college students live at home with their families, and twenty is the legal age of maturity—the age at which Japanese young people acquire the legal right not only to vote, but to smoke and drink. The whole concept of “independence” is quite different in Japanese society, which from an early age inculcates the importance of a group-centered “we-ism” rather than the self-centered “me-ism” of American society. I suspect that a feeling of disdain for Japan for its perceived social backwardness is implicit in the Japan-is-different argument. An acquaintance of mine who spent a short time in Japan told me that the Japanese she had met (mostly women) were twenty years behind Americans. “They are all pleasure-seeking, living for the moment, absorbed with fashion and material well-being,” she complained.

A Shift from the Atlantic to the Pacific? In December 1988, the *Economist* carried an article entitled “America, Asia and Europe: The Pleasures of Three-Part Harmony,” which discussed the role of Asia and Japan in American history and speculated about the future. To summarize some of its main points: In 1917, the population of the United States was a hundred million people, 90 percent of whom were whites of European descent. Trade with Europe at that time accounted for 50 percent of America’s entire volume of trade. Seventy-two years later, the population of the United States had increased to 250 million people, of whom 75 percent were of European descent, 12 percent were black, 8 percent had emigrated from Latin
America, and 5 percent from Asia.* In that period trade with Europe had dropped to 20 percent of the total, while trade with Asia had jumped to 37 percent. Thus, although Americans of Asian descent accounted for only 3 percent of the total population, 37 percent of America’s volume of trade was with Asia.

The proliferating links between America and Asia have caused some to speculate that the United States is shifting away from Europe and toward Asia, as Asia emerges as a force to be reckoned with. In 1988 Joel Kotkin and Yoriko Kishimoto published a book called _The Third Century: America’s Resurgence in the Asian Era_. In the first two hundred years of its history, the authors point out, the United States was built by people of European origin, but in America’s third century the country’s nation-builders will be Americans of Asian descent. Proof for this surmise can be found by examining the activities of Asians in America. Though only 3 percent of the population, Asian-Americans play a significantly larger role in many areas of American life than their actual numbers would suggest. Students of Asian descent make up 25 percent of the student population at UCLA. Approximately 14 percent of the students at Harvard University are of Asian origin. This book concluded that Asia can be expected to play a more forceful role in American life.

Will the Asian era really come about? I have serious doubts on this matter. The fact that Americans of Asian origin account for only 3 percent of the population is not the only problem. First, the rule makers in U.S.

*The figures for minorities in the 1990 census are substantially the same: 2.9 percent for Asian-Pacific Islanders, 12.1 percent for black Americans, and 9 percent for Hispanics.*
society are still predominantly Americans of European descent. In the past Asian-Americans have obediently followed these rules, or been forced to follow them. Secondly, there has been little or no visible effort on the part of Americans of Asian descent, especially those of Japanese descent, to make their own rules and to convince the rest of America to accept them as universal values.

Although I have lived in the United States for more than thirty years, I know of no instances when Japanese-Americans, or Japanese nationals working in America, took any action to head off or attempt to resolve today’s Japan–U.S. frictions. Every December the topic of Pearl Harbor comes up; it is even dragged in to support current arguments that the Japanese cannot be trusted. Japanese-Americans just listen to these remarks in silence. In America, turning the other cheek is by no means regarded as a virtue. A response such as “Remember Hiroshima and Nagasaki!” or “Apologize for confiscating the property of Japanese-Americans and sending them to internment camps!” would not harm U.S.–Japan relations. On the contrary, the fact that Japanese could argue with impeccable logic on these issues would win them greater respect. Moreover, the United States, unlike Japan, is a country where it is possible for ethnic power to be represented in government. It is both a loss to Japan and a matter for deep regret that Japanese-Americans have initiated no significant political activities on behalf of their country of origin.

Jewish Americans provide the best example of political activism of this kind. Although they account for less than 3 percent of the Americans of European descent,
Jewish Americans have forged a strong link between the United States and Israel. That Israel, with a population of only 4.4 million people, has been able to maintain its independence though surrounded by Arab countries with more than a hundred million inhabitants is due to America’s pro-Israel policy and the strong support it receives from the American Jewish community. Jews have a strong ethnic consciousness that has been nurtured both by their religion and by a two-thousand-year history of persecution. Their social and political activism is perfectly compatible with their patriotism as Americans and their love for their ancestral homeland.

Japanese-American soldiers fought against great odds on some of the bloodiest battlegrounds of World War II. They and their families suffered many hardships during the war; many were interned and their property was confiscated. America has now admitted its mistake and paid compensation, but there are other areas in U.S.–Japan relations in which Japanese-Americans can take part. They should emulate their Jewish-American neighbors and speak out boldly to protest American policies that are unfavorable to Asia. The more conspicuous their efforts, the more careful American politicians will be in their words and actions toward Japan. An American politician who made a detrimental remark about Jews would be committing political suicide. Yet Japan-bashing and slurs against Japanese bring in the votes.

America is a country where, in theory, any ethnic group can exercise political power. The majority of U.S. presidents, beginning with George Washington, have been of British ancestry. John F. Kennedy and Ronald
Reagan were two popular presidents of Irish-American origin. Michael Dukakis, who ran against George Bush in the 1988 election, is a Greek-American. Because no one of Greek origin has ever been elected president, wealthy Greek-Americans backed Dukakis wholeheartedly. Although Dukakis was not popular in the South initially and his popularity fell even further during the primaries, he was able to run for president at least partially because of the solid financial support he received from Greek-Americans. Conversely, Richard Gephardt dropped out in the middle of the 1988 campaign because he had no group to put up the money for him.

When I see ethnic power at work, I cannot help feeling chagrined at the weakness and passivity of Asian-Americans, especially Japanese-Americans. Religious Jewish men and boys wear yarmulkes on their heads, proudly calling attention to their difference. Japanese-Americans, on the other hand, try as hard as possible to hide their otherness and blend in. I think these efforts are counterproductive. Of course, Japanese-Americans have their reasons for doing so. During the last world war, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, they experienced discrimination and persecution because of their Japanese background. The memories of how they were suspected of being spies and sent to internment camps are probably still fresh.

Even under wartime conditions, the confiscation of property and forcible internment of noncombatants who hold American citizenship are inexcusable actions. America has formally apologized and paid reparations, but no amount of money can remove the fear Japanese-Americans have that in another crisis Ameri-
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cans will not hesitate to trample on their rights or the rights of any other group of ethnic Americans whose country of origin is at war with the United States. Perhaps this fear has deprived Japanese-Americans of their ethnic and political cohesiveness and made them hesitate to support Japan. If Japanese-Americans were a bit more like Jewish Americans or Italian-Americans, American politicians would be hesitant about attacking Japan. Japan—U.S. frictions might then take a different shape, and many of them, at least, could be averted.

Whatever their personal feelings, Japanese-Americans have not organized to speak out on behalf of Japanese interests. Having devoted themselves entirely to becoming Americans, they are not emotionally oriented toward Japan. In fact, quite the opposite is true. In light of these facts, I cannot agree with the view that America’s third century will be an “Asian era.” The only way Japanese-Americans seem able to express their loyalty to the United States is by cutting off all ties to their ancestral homeland. Ironically, this absolute and exclusive commitment to a single group is a painfully Japanese trait. At best, a single-mindedness, at worst, a parochialism—it has always been both a plus and a minus for Japanese on both sides of the Pacific.

The Indirect Route to Happiness. The article in the Economist raises this question: Although clearly the United States has made the shift from Europe to Asia as far as its economy is concerned, have the American people been able to bring their emotional reactions into sync with this change? The answer is clearly “no.” As one indication of America’s abiding Eurocentricity, the article cites the results of a UNESCO survey of the
countries in which American university students had studied in 1985–86. Britain came first with a commanding 29.3 percent; France was next with 13.7 percent; Spain was third with 8.8 percent; Italy and West Germany were fourth and fifth with 7.8 and 6.1 percent, respectively, for a top-five European monopoly. Despite all the talk about economic ties and partnership with Japan, only 2.5 percent of American students abroad went there to study. The rate for China was a mere 1.7 percent, additional proof that Asia is not popular with young Americans. Japan rated even lower than Mexico (4.2 percent) and Israel (4.0 percent). Although the percentage has improved, only 5.1 percent of Americans studying abroad in 1990–91 went to Japan.

Expense, of course, is one factor in determining a student’s choice of overseas destination, and language is another. Certainly a common language accounts for much of Britain’s popularity with American students. Although the number of students studying Japanese at U.S. universities has been steadily rising from 2.34 percent in 1986 to 3.86 percent in 1990, they still represent only a tiny fraction of the U.S. student population. In short, Americans do not have as much interest in Japan as Japanese think they have, and the country has little appeal to the young people who will be tomorrow’s leaders. Foreign study is not sight-seeing; it indicates a commitment to learn something firsthand about the culture of another country. The low percentage of students who are interested in studying in Japan is indicative of the feeling among American students that there is little they want to learn from Japan.

The Economist article also presented figures on tourism for 1987. That year 6.2 million Americans went to
Europe, and 4.8 million people from Europe visited the United States. Only 2.3 million Americans traveled to Asia, while 3.3 million Asians came to the United States. These figures tell the story. In comparison with Europe, Asia has limited appeal for Americans even as a tourist destination. Why, despite the deep economic ties, do Americans have so little interest in Asia and especially in an economic superpower like Japan? Why don’t students want to study there? The *Economist* article cites “kinship, familiarity and values.”

Needless to say, modern civilization originated in the humanistic thought of Western Europe. Most importantly, the concept of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” is the cornerstone upon which American culture has been built. In Japan, however, there is a long-standing tradition of prizing certain qualities, such as loyalty and honor, even more than life itself. Although the samurai warrior class was abolished more than a hundred years ago, its moral code still lives on in the Japanese people. The Japanese have also traditionally regarded the denial of the self, or selflessness, as a virtue. They attach more importance to the well-being of the whole than to the liberty and happiness of the individual. The pursuit of liberty and happiness on an individual level, therefore, takes low priority.

Japanese are known for suppressing their individual desires for the sake of the group or groups they belong to because they realize that the group is the source of their happiness and security. Once upon a time, the group was the village community or the nation; today it is the corporation. When a Japanese man enters a company, he is supposed to work hard for that com-
pany, even at the sacrifice of his immediate personal liberty and happiness. The type of person who, American-style, considers his or her own life and liberty of primary importance is the “nail that sticks out and must be hammered down.”

It is easy to understand why Americans feel that the Japanese attitude toward life negates or slight the values that they prize most. Americans look at Japan and see workaholics who spend an hour and a half to two hours a day on packed commuter trains and then work overtime. What is worse, the Japanese do not consume the goods they make but produce them for export. Their income goes straight into savings accounts, the total of which had reached 800 trillion yen in 1992, twice the Gross National Product. They are forced to pay the world’s highest prices for rice and beef and cannot buy even a home the size of a “rabbit hutch” because land prices are so absurdly high that the value of metropolitan Tokyo alone is equal to that of the entire United States. Americans accept these stereotypes at face value and conclude that Japanese capitalism has flourished at the cost of human life, liberty, and happiness and is thus clearly different from capitalism in the West.

Attaining something of value can be achieved by different routes, however, and the difference between Americans and Japanese boils down to their respective preferences for “direct” and “indirect” routes. Most Japanese work longer hours than their American or European counterparts, who put in eight hours a day, take a two-day weekend, and have at least two weeks of vacation a year. Most Japanese are willing to work overtime or on holidays if it means better business for
their company. At first glance, they seem to be giving up the inalienable human right to liberty. Viewed in a broader context, however, they are simply pursuing their liberty and happiness by indirect means through the intermediary of their corporation.

In Japan an employee of a major company traditionally has not had to worry that he might one day receive a letter from his boss saying that business has gone into a slump and production has to be cut, so he is out of a job. He might have to take a pay cut or work fewer hours, but, as long as he makes no major mistakes in his work, his job is secure. He and his family have access to company welfare and medical services at any time. Company housing may even be available, and though the rooms may be rather small, the rent will be extremely cheap by market standards. The trade-off for larger, more comfortable premises is the savings he can make since he does not have to spend a large portion of his income on rent or upkeep.

The various rewards in life that people in the United States and Europe have to acquire directly by sheer drive and individual effort are often provided to Japanese workers indirectly through the organizations they belong to. A Japanese company may maintain a summer cottage in the mountains or a golf club membership for employee use. Or it may make available at reduced prices tickets to concerts or sports events or even provide the opportunity and the financial means to travel or study abroad. Japan is often described as a company-oriented society, and Japanese employees are known for identifying with their corporations. The reason that corporations have loomed so large in Japanese life is that they are an important medium through
which ordinary Japanese have attained happiness in postwar times.

Instead of showing how similar goals can be achieved by totally different means, however, over the last several years the American media have preferred to focus on those aspects of Japan that are most alien and alienating to the American public. At the time of Emperor Hirohito’s death in January 1989, for example, American television and newspapers showed Japanese sitting on the ground outside the Imperial Palace overwhelmed by grief. Media reports that these people, or others like them, might commit hara-kiri implied that Japanese feelings toward the emperor are quite different from popular feelings toward the royal families of Europe. Although there were only a few such people, close-ups of them certainly presented a strange sight and helped perpetuate the mistaken impression among Americans watching that this was how all Japanese felt. Because such sights evoke unpleasant memories of the war, they only increase Americans’ sense of incompatibility with Japan. In general, the U.S. media tend to be uninformed about Japan, and their sensationalism—if not downright malice—and their utter lack of discretion are obviously harmful to U.S.—Japan relations.

In Japan people seem to be pleased that kokusaika (internationalization) has become an English word, but hara-kiri and kamikaze entered the English language at a much earlier date. Although such words may fade into the background when U.S.—Japan relations run smoothly, when relations are troubled, phrases like “kamikaze businessman” immediately surface. The Japan-is-different argument can all too easily degenerate
into a racist slur, a fact that Japanese—and Americans—would do well to remember.

**America: Living up to Appearances**

*Racial Prejudice.* As a result of the devaluation of the dollar under the Plaza Accord, America has been reinstated as the world's number one exporter. Germany is second and Japan third. Before the Plaza Accord, West Germany stood first, America second, and Japan third. Thus, although Japan has been criticized worldwide for exporting too much, in fact it trails both the United States and Germany. Why then is Japan singled out for criticism? Why is there no German-bashing?

When I asked American friends about their feelings on this matter, one of them, Professor Richard Zeckhauser of Harvard University, offered some very interesting opinions. There is no Germany-bashing for at least four reasons, he told me. The first is that Germany contributes its share to the international public good. As a member of NATO during the cold war, it made a constructive contribution to world defense, especially to the defense of Europe. Secondly, the German market is thought to be more open than Japan’s. Thirdly, German products are not as conspicuous as Japanese goods. Certainly, there are fewer BMWs and Mercedes-Benzes than Japanese cars on U.S. highways, where an American driver will often find a Toyota on the right, a Nissan behind, and a Honda in front. Japanese products also have a more prominent profile because almost all of them are in the consumer electronics field. Although Germany exports a significant number of parts to the
United States, they are hidden within American-made goods and, therefore, are not openly labeled "made in Germany." Consumer goods by their very nature, on the other hand, have to be conspicuous.

Zeckhauser's final point was that the American people understand the Germans. By this he meant that both Germans and Americans are the direct heirs of the Western European cultural tradition. To go even further, both America and Germany belong to the bloc of mature capitalist countries that pursue life, liberty, and happiness. Their brand of capitalism is quite different from that of Japan, where people work too hard, consider business more important than life, and sacrifice their individual liberty and happiness to the interests of their companies.

It would be easy to label this attitude "racial prejudice" as Shintaro Ishihara does; it would also be easy to say, as he did, that "the United States bombed German cities and killed many civilians but did not use atomic bombs on the Germans. U.S. planes dropped them on us because we are Japanese." This sort of statement, however, does not help matters one bit. On the other hand, as even Ishihara acknowledges, "Caucasians created modern civilization." Japan's first order of business should be to give more thought to the concept that lies at the heart of modern Western civilization, that of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

*American Humanism.* America is a far more democratic country than most Japanese realize. Where life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are concerned, it is absolutely uncompromising. Japanese frequently complain
that the United States has no right to criticize Japan or to meddle in the human rights violations of other countries while doing absolutely nothing about its own problems with drug addiction and homelessness. Americans have by no means ignored the homeless problem, however, as most Japanese seem to think. From a Japanese perspective the situation is clear. If Americans make such a fuss about human rights, why don’t they provide for their homeless people so they can live in a manner more befitting human beings? The homeless may not wish to be provided for, however, and under America’s thoroughly democratic system, their wishes must be respected.

Manhattan has several shelters that offer clean beds and showers. But when the homeless are taken to such facilities on a bitter cold winter night, someone inevitably complains that the right of the homeless to sleep on the streets or in the parks is being abrogated. In America, even suffering is considered a basic human right if it is a person’s choice. The homeless intensely resent being restrained against their will. Anyone foolish enough to propose that the wishes of crazy people should not be respected exposes himself to a blast of criticism from most Americans. City officials must determine how to leave homeless people alone out of respect for their wishes, yet at the same time protect them without incurring the wrath of volunteer organizations and citizens’ groups.

In October 1987 New York City began implementing a program to remove mentally ill homeless people from the streets and forcibly provide them with medical and psychiatric care. One of the first people to be picked up and placed in Bellevue Hospital Center was
a woman named Joyce Brown. Within a few days Ms. Brown with the help of a lawyer from the New York Civil Liberties Union took legal action against the city. Although her doctors argued that she was a chronic schizophrenic who required medical care, in January, eighty-four days after she had been institutionalized, a judge ordered that she be released.

In front of my house in New York is Washington Square Park, where quite a few homeless people live on a permanent basis. If the temperature drops below freezing, the law allows the city to forcibly put these people in a shelter and keep them there. Because sleeping outdoors when the temperature goes below freezing clearly constitutes a danger to the lives of the homeless, taking them to shelters is not considered a violation of their rights. Under state law, however, a decision by doctors to hold a patient involuntarily for more than sixty days must be approved by a judge. Many doctors complain about the inflexibility of these rules which protect the human rights of those who have mental illnesses—illnesses that could be regulated if they were treated. In Japan such a situation would be regarded as a clear case of taking liberty too far.

Some time ago I buttonholed several American friends and asked them this question: "What do you think about the homeless problem? Don't you think it would be better for the police to forcibly detain the homeless in a clean, comfortable place, even against their wills, to protect their lives?" If I were to ask this question of my Japanese friends, almost certainly all of them would say "yes," but nine out of ten of my American friends said "no." Americans have an almost ab-
normal fear and abhorrence of the exercise of centralized power in violation of individual liberties. They are extremely wary of anything that suggests totalitarianism. Nullifying the rights of the homeless is viewed as merely the starting point. With that much authority, the police could easily come to have powers like those of the Gestapo.

The United States is indeed the champion of the concept of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” To an American accustomed to this sort of radical individualism, Japanese-style group consciousness must inevitably seem “different.”

*The Values of a “Salad Bowl” Society.* Japanese think they have a monopoly on the distinction between ideal appearances (*tatemae*) and real motives (*honne*), but a similar distinction exists in America. The difference between the two countries is that in Japan surface appearances are often attractive but bear little resemblance to reality, whereas the United States constantly tries to live up to its ideals. The most striking example is America’s handling of the racial problem.

The United States is based on the ideal of building a society free of all discrimination. Progressive American intellectuals have pushed this ideal to the top of the country’s agenda and made it a national ideology. If America is a country that has been greatly troubled by racial problems, it is also the country that has made the greatest advances in this area. Looking back to the days when blacks were slaves, when people of color could not vote or hold important positions in society, when women and people with disabilities were discriminated against, it is clear how tenaciously America
has adhered in recent decades to the ideal of equality. In reality, of course, American society is still riddled with prejudice, but the United States has made great progress in eradicating discrimination. Japan tends to underestimate the magnitude of America's efforts to live up to its ideals.

During the more than thirty years I have lived in America, I have watched closely and experienced for myself the way Americans have tackled this challenge. When I was thirty-six, I was made a full professor at Brown University, an Ivy League school with a two-hundred-and-fifty-year history. No foreigner of that age could ever hope to be appointed to a full professorship in Japan. In fact, for a long time such an appointment would have been inconceivable in America as well. Despite the reputation the United States now has for scouting out young talent, at one time no Asian, no matter how gifted, could have hoped to attain the position of professor with tenure at a first-rank university. Once the United States decided to eliminate discrimination, however, it made a determined effort to do so.

Many Japanese corporations that have located in the United States have been hit with law suits arising from their treatment of women or their failure to hire African-Americans. These suits are the result of Japanese ignorance about how determined America is to eliminate discrimination. The Japanese know little about the reasons for America's resolute efforts to live up to its ideals. Because the United States is a "salad bowl" composed of many ethnic groups, it cannot function smoothly without a shared system of universal values. Shintaro Ishihara's statement that America dropped the atomic bomb not on Germany but on Japan because of
racial prejudice could only have been made by someone who was unaware of the money and energy the United States has expended on its racial problem.

Despite America’s strenuous efforts to eliminate racism, the Japanese complain that America is prejudiced against people of color. Prime ministers, cabinet members, and influential members of the Diet have made statements to that effect. Naturally, these comments infuriate Americans, especially when these same prime ministers and cabinet members have made negative remarks about African-Americans and other ethnic minorities. The United States has officially apologized to the Japanese-Americans for their internment during the war and even paid them reparations. Americans justifiably question the right of Japanese to talk about discrimination in the United States when Japanese immigration laws demand that fingerprints be taken of any foreigner residing in Japan for more than three months.

Every nation has taboo subjects that it prefers left untouched. In America racial prejudice is one such taboo, a problem Japan has been too ready to discuss. As I mentioned earlier, in any skillful dealings with America there is one other button that also must never be pushed—the one marked national security. These two issues must be treated with great care. Manhandling either will provoke anger. The book The Japan That Can Say “No” was profoundly guilty in this regard. Part of what it had to say was well thought of by some Americans, but because it simultaneously touched on both of these taboo subjects, it angered many congressmen and, on the grass-roots level, the members of many minority groups.
Democrats and Republicans were equally enraged by the comments on national security in *The Japan That Can Say “No.”* But it was members of the Democratic party, which controls the Congress, who reacted most strongly to the sections on racial prejudice. By antagonizing the entire Congress, the book did tremendous damage to U.S. political strategy vis-à-vis Japan. Before the book appeared, a precarious balance had existed between Congress, which was inclined to attack Japan, and the administration, which tried to smooth over problem areas. But once the pirated edition of the book had been circulated, Congress was given free rein to attack Japan openly. That it is risky to accuse America of racial prejudice is clear.

America sometimes goes too far in the pursuit of its ideals. There is something strange, for example, about telling a university department that it can appoint a professor provided the candidate is black or a woman or a person with a disability. But the employment of visible minorities is a symbol of America’s efforts to live up to the ideal of equal opportunity. American universities submit reports to the government detailing how many of their professors are black or women, and funding or financial aid is granted on the basis of these reports. Universities that employ many women and members of minorities, so I’ve heard, receive government assistance for taking the initiative and putting the country’s principles into practice. This is clearly going too far. It is also true, however, that without such efforts, no visible progress would be made.

The Social Security net that the U.S. government generously provides to protect the weak has contributed enormously to the national deficit. America’s ef-
forts to help the disadvantaged went too far and under-
mined the American economy in the process. That is
how far the United States will go to live up to its ideals,
and it is foolhardy for Japanese who are unaware of
that fact to blithely accuse America of racial prejudice.