Northwest Orient

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001

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He has been called “the most admired American in Japan since MacArthur.” A hale and vigorous 80, Michael Joseph Mansfield is the oldest American diplomat on active service anywhere in the world. He was appointed Ambassador to Japan in 1976 by President Jimmy Carter, not long after he had retired from a distinguished 34-year career in Congress—a record 16 of those years as Senate Majority Leader. He was reappointed in 1981 by President Reagan, and is thus one of the few—if not the only—senior diplomats to hold so major a post under opposing administrations.

“Mr. Mike” was a young man in the Marines when he first saw Japan, in 1922 when a ship carrying him from a tour of duty in the Pacific put in to port at Nagasaki. When he returned to his native Montana, he was a coal miner with a seventh-grade education and a consuming interest in the Orient; in the middle of the Great Depression, his ever-supportive wife, Maureen, gave up her job as a school teacher in Butte, cashed in her insurance policy and put her husband through the University of Montana at Missoula. He earned his high school diploma and his A.B. at about the same time, went on to take a Master’s degree, and later did postgraduate work at the University of California. For eight years, he was a teacher of Far Eastern history and political science.

Elected to the House of Representatives in 1942, he made foreign relations—and especially the Orient—his legislative specialty. “Most of the time,” he observes, “I was almost alone in the House and Senate in showing an interest in this part of the world.” A presidential representative to China in 1944, he went on to serve on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and to chair the Subcommittee on Far Eastern Affairs, visiting the People’s Republic five times. Out of this experience came the firm conviction that we stand on the threshold of the Pacific Century—when the focus of world affairs is shifting to the nations that rim the eastern sea.

Q: You’ve often said that America’s relationship with Japan is “the most important bilateral relationship in the world, bar none.” How does that relationship stay afloat, when ordinary people on one side—the American side—know so little about the people on the other?

A: Well, I think as far as the government is concerned, and some of the press, that the idea is beginning to take hold; the importance of that relationship is becoming more apparent. One only has to look at the demographic trends in our own country, and the trade figures in this part of the world, to begin to get an idea of the shift in this direction—the Pacific Basin, which includes Japan and East Asia—and the economic potential involved. When you have a two-way trade amounting to about $63 billion, which was the case in 1982, and compare that with two-way trade totaling $42 billion in 1975 for all of East Asia including Japan, you have an idea of just what this area means, of what its potential can be—and will be. Walt Whitman in the last century said in one of his poems, “Westward, ever westward to Oregon,” but I think if he were alive
Japan now puts a great deal of money and effort into presenting itself to the world, into appeals for understanding. But most people — yourself included — seem to feel that when they try to make their point of view known, they come out very stilted and unconvincing. What are the cultural reasons for this? Is this always going to come hard for the Japanese?

A: No — I think it will improve in time. But they have been an insular and isolated people for many centuries. They have been able to accommodate themselves to other cultures, but while this has been a quick process on the surface, it has been a much slower process underneath.

Q: Why do you think the Japanese are difficult to understand from the outside?

A: The Japanese have done a lot of things in support of us, for example, that have never yielded a broad-based understanding for them in the United States or in the world at large ... I don't think they have to hire American PR people; they have very good people here [in Japan]. Some of the firms they use, like Dentsu, have connections with American public relations firms. They do spend a lot of money, I understand, through the administration back here, and through the Embassy in Washington, but the results are not apparent.

Q: What were your expectations of this job when you first came, and how have they worked out?

A: I didn't think it was going to be as difficult as it was — and still is. It wasn't until I had been out here about half a year that I began to see the problems that were looming on the horizon: trade, primarily, and defense to a minor extent — because there I think the progress has been steady and significant over the past 13 years. I very much appreciate what they've done, despite the obstacles which they've had to overcome under Article IX of their Constitution, the need for a consensus of sorts, the reactions of their Asian neighbors, the basic antimilitarism of the Japanese people, and the austerity of the budget from which they had to work.

It's been a difficult but very interesting six and one-half years. I've learned a lot; I had a lot to learn. And I think it will be very interesting and difficult for the next decade, because when you develop an economic trade relationship as we have, there are bound to be difficulties from time to time, obstacles to overcome. I want to do my best while I'm here to reach compromises and solutions to these difficulties, so that this relationship can grow in strength, can become more durable, and be in place for the next century to bring about the de-

...
development of the Pacific Basin—which will mark the beginning of the Pacific Era.

**Q:** What do you think served you best in the ambassadorship from your experience in the Congress? Does this job require the same kinds of political skills?

**A:** No skills. It was just a matter of recognizing that there's a lot I don't know, that no one can become an expert in a particular country or area—and that the Japanese really don't understand themselves any more than we do. They have less excuse, because they are more homogeneous; and we have more of an excuse because we're so diverse in our population. But in the Congress I worked on the principle that all Senators should be given the same consideration: those with the greatest seniority, and those who had just come into the Senate; Republicans as well as Democrats. I tried to treat the other Senators as I'd like to be treated, and I've approached the Japanese in the same way. I think in both instances, the results have been worthwhile.

**Q:** That's a very different attitude from the attitude here, where seniority is everything—where people are treated differently according to their ages.

**A:** That's true, but maybe that's one of the reasons why I'm accepted out here: seniority and age.

**Q:** Do you think that has something to do with the way you've been so well accepted? That you are seen as an elder statesman?

**A:** How well accepted remains to be seen. But it hasn't hurt. Getting back to something you said a moment ago, about the Japanese not understanding themselves. You've said that Japan is "much stronger, more successful and more influential than many Japanese themselves recognize." Just how do the Japanese see themselves, and their role in the world, from your perspective here after six and a one-half years?

**A:** They're loath to come on to the world stage—but they have no choice, because they are dependent upon the rest of the world for their survival. Maybe that's a little too strong, but not too far off the mark, because they have nothing in the way of natural resources except people—which is a tremendous resource if used right.

My own state of Montana is the closest in size to Japan among the fifty states in the Union, and we're 4,000 square miles bigger. Our popu-
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A: Yes, and I think it’s not a bad trait. After all, I am a *gaijin* — an outsider. I am a guest in this country, and they treat me as a guest. Of course, I’m favored over a lot of my fellow citizens, but that goes with the job and the responsibility.

Q: How do the Japanese react to your being from Montana? Does that mean anything to them at all?

A: It’s beginning to mean a little something to them, and out of it has come the development of a sister-state relationship with Kumamoto prefecture. I had nothing to do with it – it was developed by Governor Sawada of Kumamoto. Now we have good agricultural exchanges; we have exchanges between the University of Kumamoto and several of the Montana higher educational institutions. I have never pushed Montana, because my job is to represent the United States as a whole; but Montanans have been coming over here in the hundreds each year – a pretty expensive proposition, but they’re coming — and they’re impressed.

I think most people are impressed when they come to Japan. They can’t help but admire the security of a country where you can walk any street of any city at any hour and feel perfectly safe, where civility and courtesy are normal and not something you have to dredge up, where you have a good relationship between the police and the neighborhood. The Japanese have to live on a basis of the group concept because their living conditions are so crowded; they have to make do with what little they have, and they’ve been very successful at it.

Q: There are competitive years ahead, in the relationship between the United States and Japan; there are conflicts now, and differences of opinion. What do you think ought to be done, especially on the American side, that isn’t being done already, to make sure that we will be talking to each other on some foundation of mutual understanding?

A: I think we have to get away from trying to blame Japan as a scapegoat for our own economic errors. Japan can and should open its own markets to give us the same opportunities here, generally speaking, that we give them in the United States. Japan has been the chief beneficiary of the international trading system, and therefore has to assume a greater degree of responsibility if it wants that system to continue. But
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we have to look at the motes in our own eyes as well, and recognize that many of the difficulties we've had to endure, economically speaking, have been of our own making. You can't cure ills which are largely our responsibility by pointing the finger at someone else.

Q: Economic differences can work themselves out when both parties know who they're talking to — when they have some kind of feel for each other's culture and ways of thought. Do you feel satisfied at this point with the kinds of institutions, the kinds of money being spent, on cultural exchange between the two countries?

A: No, I'm not — but I think the Japanese are doing a lot more than we are. They have about 1,200 or 1,300 students in our universities; it's my understanding that we have about 500 out here. Frankly, I doubt if we have more than 100 real students, in the sense of people trying to learn Japanese as the Japanese are trying to learn about us. Our country has always taken too much for granted; and let other countries come to learn about us and our diversities, but we haven't been too keen on learning about others. The Japanese have a drive; English is just as difficult for them as Japanese is for us, but they force themselves to learn. They know what has to be done, and they are making a real effort.

I think some progress has been made on our side, but a lot more needs to be done. And one of the best ways to bring about better understanding is through exchanges of all kinds: cultural, business and trade union, Diet-to-Congress, farm groups, friendship groups. Those are the things that count, because you get down to the people.

Q: Do you find that a little ironic?

A: The Japanese are always talking about their shimaguni konjo — their "island mentality" — but it sounds as though you are saying that Americans are more insular in their attitudes.

Yes, more self-satisfied. We've been a lucky people. We've inherited a new continent; we were top dog in all respects after the Second World War. Now things are changing; we're looking to and depending more on our friends—we have to. This isn't a bad thing; it brings about a greater degree of equality, and greater degree of interdependence. We're all neighbors, one with another, whether we like it or not, so we'd better accommodate ourselves to it.