

ESSAY

JAPANESE RACIAL ATTITUDES: A CHALLENGE FOR AMERICAN PLURALISM

*William J. Holstein**

Many white Americans have forgotten a racially offensive remark made by Japan's then Justice Minister, Seiroku Kajiyama, last year, but it has sparked a major debate among American blacks about the nature of Japanese perceptions and actions toward them. In a nutshell, the argument is whether the Japanese are another people of color and therefore allies, or whether they are just a new kind of exploiter who should be met with hostility.

Recognizing the stakes in this debate, the Japanese are pulling out all the stops to persuade the Congressional Black Caucus, the NAACP, and other Afro-American leadership groups of Japan's goodwill. Diplomats from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, business leaders from the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and top-ranking politicians from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party are involved in attempting to mollify American black opinion leaders.

What the Japanese are loathe to admit is that Kajiyama's remark about foreign prostitutes ruining good Japanese neighborhoods, just the way American blacks ruin good white neighborhoods is hardly an aberration in Japan. It is not just one man misspeaking himself. Then Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone and LDP party boss Michio Watanabe had earlier made remarks reflecting similar attitudes. All these comments are indicative of broad Japanese perceptions about race and pluralism, not only in their own society but in the United States as well.

At home, the Japanese attach a high premium to homogeneity, conformity, and purity. After having been isolated for hundreds of

* Author of *THE JAPANESE POWER GAME: WHAT IT MEANS FOR AMERICA* (1991).

years up until the 1850's, the Japanese to this day display a classic island mentality where outsiders are suspect. This is precisely the opposite approach from America's underlying philosophy, which although imperfect, encourages the intermingling of people from many different nations and ethnic groups. To enforce its concept of purity, Japan relies on informal yet systematic methods to prevent Korean residents, lower-caste Japanese called *burakumin*, and Asian immigrants from penetrating the best Japanese neighborhoods, recreation clubs, companies, and universities. The darker the skin of an Asian immigrant, the greater the Japanese disdain. Pakistanis, in particular, encounter a tough pattern of exclusion.

Foreigners are called *gaijin*, which simply means "outside person." *Gaijin* who live in Japan and attempt to penetrate Japanese society encounter firm resistance, but the several thousand American blacks and Africans who live in Japan face tougher resistance than white Americans or Europeans. Black American GI's, for example, have problems being admitted to some Tokyo discos and even American black journalists, academicians, and other professionals find themselves on the low end of the prestige ladder. "We must accept the hierarchy bestowed upon us by Japan, that whites are more readily accepted," J.E. Dash, President of the Japan Afro-American Friendship Association, said recently. The Japanese are also not committed to advancing black African interest, as South African leader Nelson Mandela discovered. In fact, the Japanese businessmen who did business in South Africa were treated as "honorary whites" in the heyday of apartheid.

As they expand in the United States, the Japanese are extending their values here. In a pioneering University of Michigan study, Robert E. Cole and Donald R. Deskins, Jr., document how Japanese auto plants have been located away from major urban population centers, apparently to limit the number of black workers. It is no coincidence that the Japanese chose to locate their plants in such places as Bloomington-Normal, Illinois; Lafayette, Indiana; Marysville, Ohio; Georgetown, Kentucky; and Smyrna, Tennessee. They were attracted by the predominantly white, rural, and non-unionized work forces of these areas.

Out west, Recruit, the high-flying employment services company, is under investigation in San Francisco for using a secret system of codewords to identify the ethnic background of Americans applying for jobs in Japanese companies. In another incident, Toyota Chairman

Eiji Toyoda once told former Massachusetts Institute of Technology President Paul E. Gray that, "the reasons Americans can't make good cars is that they are a mongrel race." (Gray recounted the remark at a luncheon I attended in New York. But after I included it in my book, Toyota hired high-powered public relations consultant Herb Schmertz to persuade Gray to recant. Toyota also denied that the remark was ever made. I stand by my account.)

All this is part of a clear and consistent pattern. I have had Japanese friends take me aside and try to explain that where the U.S. went wrong was in the early 1960's. In their view, the American competitiveness was sapped by allowing presumably less efficient black Americans into larger roles in factories and offices. That view also was reflected in a *Business Week*/Harris poll in late 1989 which found that forty-two percent of Japanese respondents cite "too many different minorities" as the leading source of American economic problems, far greater than any other factor.

Some American blacks who have come face to face with the nature of Japanese perceptions accuse American whites of fomenting these negative attitudes. On a call-in show on WVON radio in Chicago last year, one caller argued that American movies, television, and music depict blacks in stereotypical fashions, helping to shape Japanese perceptions. But this is an inadequate explanation for the root cause: the Japanese simply do not share a commitment to a successful American multiracial society. In Japanese cultural terms, the apologies that various Japanese have made do not imply actual regret. It seems increasingly clear the Japanese are not going to "join forces" with oppressed American blacks. Their contributions to black universities or to the NAACP are only crumbs to ease the pressure from the Black Caucus and other such groups.

Other African-American react with anger toward the Japanese themselves. "I have three Japanese cars sitting out in my front yard, and I'm embarrassed as hell," said one caller from Louisiana on a recent C-Span program. Some such American blacks are urging boycotts of Japanese-made goods.

But understanding how the Japanese have different views should not lead to a great wave of open hostility. It would only compound the problem. Furthermore, anti-Japanese and anti-Asian racism exists in the United States as well, from both blacks and whites. Hurling epithets across the great cultural chasm between America and Japan achieves little and risks much. Americans have been trying to persuade

Japan to “change” for decades, to little avail. The Japanese are a major world power and they see little reason to suddenly reevaluate their attitudes. They perceive that they are winning.

The best response for American blacks is to recognize that making America’s multiracial experiment work hinges on a growing economy where there are expanding opportunities—and resources—for all people. There is an American economic system in which both whites and blacks have a stake. That system is competing with Japan’s. Rather than fighting over a shrinking pie, the challenge is to make the American pie grow.

Few American blacks may choose to believe it, but after three decades of progress, however frustrating and hesitant, white and black Americans of many different income levels have some common economic interests. Just one example is the U.S. auto industry, which employs a disproportionate number of American blacks. It should not be perceived that working harder or smarter in a U.S. auto factory benefits only white Americans, nor should it be seen that buying an American automobile benefits only white Americans. We have reached the point at which both blacks and whites have a stake in enhancing the competitiveness of the U.S. economy in the face of intense Japanese pressure. That would be the kind of response that Japan understands.