

The Election of President Obama and the John Manjiro Grassroots Exchange

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1. John Manjiro Whitfield Commemorative Project for International Grassroots Exchange

On April 4th 1987, their Majesties the Japanese Emperor and Empress (Crown Prince and Princess at that time) on the occasion of their visit to the United States visited a private house in Fairhaven, Massachusetts. The house was the house in which William Whitfield was born. He was the whaling master who, out of good intentions and human love, took home the 16 year old ship-wrecked fisherman John Manjiro to the United States and gave him an American education. John Manjiro was a sensible and very diligent person and in recent years it has been widely recognized that the knowledge and experience he gained during his stay in the United States enabled him to exert immeasurable influence on the leaders of the Japanese feudal government just before the opening of the country, and the then emerging leaders of the Meiji Restoration. Furthermore, the friendship between John Manjiro (Manjiro Nakahama) and William Whitfield's families that has been fostered across international borders for so many years has moved the hearts of many people.

The John Manjiro Whitfield Commemorative Center for International Exchange was established in 1990 when the then Secretary General of the Liberal Democratic Party Ichiro Ozawa learned about this lasting friendship between the two families. For the past 18 years, unique exchange programs have been carried out, in which nearly 200 Americans visit Japan one year and similar number of Japanese visit the US in the following year. Those exchange programs include a four or five day long stay with volunteer host families in both countries. The exchange program has fostered a kind of a family-like relationship among the participants in spite of the fact that participating members are different every year (though there are several participants who have taken part a number of times.) This has helped to expand mutual understanding on a grassroots level between Japan and the United States.

We believe that it is very important for people participating in such exchange activities, as well as for all Japanese people who are somehow involved in the US-Japan relationship, to deepen their understanding on how American society has undergone

changes until the day Barack Obama was elected as their President.

We might further say that every country in the world is interested in why the people of the United States came to elect Barack Obama as their leader and in which direction the United States will be heading for as a result of this election. After all, the world is in the midst of a historical change in which the United States is definitely going to be one of the major actors both economically and politically.

2. President Obama and his diverse family background

No other President in the United States has had a family background as diverse as that of President Obama.

His father Barack Obama Sr., a Luo, was born in the province around Lake Victoria in Kenya. He acquired scholarship from the Tom Mboya Fund, established in memory of an eminent Luo political leader in Kenya, and reportedly funded by President John F. Kennedy of the United States, and went to the United States to attend the University of Hawaii. There, he met and married Ann Dunham, but before the formal marriage, she gave birth to Barack H. Obama, who later became the President of the United States. However, Barack Obama Sr. already had a pregnant wife in Kenya at that time. Later, he left Ann and his son to attend Harvard University in order to continue his studies in the United States, this time under a scholarship program funded by well known African Americans such as Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte and Jackie Robinson. There he married Ruth Nidesand and after receiving a Master's degree in economics from Harvard returned to Kenya. Upon his return, he served as an economist in the Kenyan Government but losing a leg in a traffic accident and a conflict with President Kenyatta brought his career to an end. He spent the rest of his life in obscurity and passed away at the age of 46 in a car crash.

As for his mother, Ann Dunham, President Obama himself states that it was she who exerted the greatest influence on the growth of his personality and that even today the sense of value his mother imparted him serves as a touchstone in dealing with matters in the world of politics.

She was an anthropologist and a specialist in rural development born in Kansas, but according to some sources she had English, Irish, German and Indian Cherokee heritage. Her father joined the US Army after the Pearl Harbor attack and her mother worked for the Boeing Company. After the war the family moved from place to place in the West and finally settled down in Seattle where her father worked as a furniture

salesman and her mother became a vice president of a bank. They moved to Hawaii in 1960. Ann attended the University of Hawaii and at the age of 18 married Barack Obama Sr. and gave birth to President Obama. She was three months pregnant at the time of their marriage.

Ann devoted herself to child raising for a while after Barack Obama Sr. left them to go to Harvard. She then went to Seattle to attend the University of Washington and thereafter returned to Hawaii to enroll at the University of Hawaii where she received a Bachelor's degree in mathematics as well as a Master's and Doctor's degrees in anthropology. She married Lolo Soetoro from Yogyakarta, Indonesia and moved with her son Barack Obama Jr, to Indonesia. After staying in Indonesia from 1967 to 1970, Ann sent her son back to Hawaii to stay with her own mother who was vice president at the Bank of Hawaii and to study there on a scholarship. Though Ann once returned to Hawaii following her second divorce, she went back to Indonesia after a few years and devoted herself to support Indonesia's human rights, women's rights and social development on grass-roots levels. However in later days she suffered from ovarian cancer and returned to Hawaii where she passed away at the age of 59.

President Obama's stepfather Lolo Soetoro received his Master's degree from the University of Hawaii, and returned to Indonesia with Ann and Barack to serve in the army and later worked for Mobil Corporation. It is said that his way of thinking became more American than Ann herself. He and Ann had one daughter, and later divorced. Later, Lolo married an Indonesian woman and had two children. He died from cancer at the age of 52.

3. The election of President Obama is an extension of the long term transition undergone by the American society.

President Obama's family background appears to be exceedingly heretical viewed from the traditional American way of thinking and yet in a sense it truly mirrors the major changes the United States has been experiencing almost every hundred years.

When the United States gained its independence in 1776, it tried to part itself from the old European world and under the slogan of "Freedom and Equality", an ideology born in Europe, it called out for the elimination of European interference. Yet the leaders of the time held value standards that concurred with the European paradigm and their interest focused mainly on Protestant whites of Anglo-Saxon ancestry and very little on races.

The focus of the Civil War in 1860 was placed on the emancipation of slaves, yet historically it led to the integration and unification of the states that had existed relatively independently in America and gave birth to a country as strong as the great powers in Europe. The Mexican-American War started in the 1840s, followed by the occupation of Hawaii, the success in forcing Japan to open its borders and the annexation of the Philippines, Guam and, Puerto Rico. The United States gradually became a semi-colonial imperialistic nation along with the European Central Powers in the Asian Pacific Region and eventually clashed with Japan, which was also aiming to secure its position as a Power nation, on issues concerning China. With the United States rising to a moderate imperialistic power, it was wise of Japan to have come to terms with it and to have opened up its country to the United States, and later to other foreign nations towards the end of the Edo Period, instead of insisting upon its traditional futile exclusionist policy. There is no doubt that the advice that John Manjiro gave to the then Japanese leaders based on his experience in the United States contributed extensively to its decision.

After the second World War, the European countries had to give up their position as colonial imperialistic nations, whereas the United States strengthened its military as well as political influence over nations of other ethnic groups. It was done on the pretext that the US was fighting against the socialist power led by the Soviet Union but in a sense the United States, in order to protect the ideology held up by the country, sought the cooperation of Western countries that supported the American ideology and tried to prevent the powerless new emerging countries from coming under the control of Soviet Imperialism. It exercised its power in order to keep them under the influence of the American "Empire", as Yoshinori Yamamoto, professor emeritus of Tokyo University, states.

In 1961, the American people elected John F. Kennedy as their president, the first Irish-American President. In those days, the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik caused an emotional outburst of strong feelings of fear and enthusiasm among the American people vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. I was studying in the United States towards the end of the 1950s and could sense directly the uprush of such emotions. I was then a member of Yale Russian Chorus and joined its performing tours around several universities in the eastern part of the US, and the reaction of young students towards anything Russian was tremendous. I also heard President Kennedy deliver his inaugural speech and saw a long parade right in front of me on snow covered Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington. I cannot forget, even today, the scene in which the general public were giving such enthusiastic cheers to the young President who was trying to respond to

their expectations.

President Kennedy felt a sense of crisis and that if nothing was done to change the situation the new emerging countries in the world would fall into the hands of the Soviet Union and the ideals upheld by America would be defeated. He initiated many drastic policies to confront the increasing Soviet threat, one of them being so-called “air lift” strategy for the newly emerging countries which widened their opportunities to receive an education in the United States. President Obama’s father participated in this program.

Of course many people in countries that had recently gained their independence did accept the universality of the ideology held by the United States. Yet they emotionally rejected the enforcement of an ideology originally based on the European paradigm as well as the application of a double standard in the execution of it. The people who had been put under the control of other nations over the years of European Colonialism still retained strong memories of those days and as a result were partially forced into emotional anti-American activities despite the goodwill of the American people who believed in their noble ideology. Of course such antipathy towards major powers was also directed towards the Soviet Union, but because of the issue concerning Israel, anti-American sentiments among the Middle East Islamic nations became deep rooted and stronger. In the early 1990s when I spent two years in Egypt, which is said to be one of the most pro-American Middle East country, I could strongly feel, even then, the undercurrent of anti-European and anti-American sentiments flowing among the general people.

In the United States, too, people were aware that there was psychological resistance among developing nations towards the United States, as it did not hesitate to take imperialistic actions if deemed necessary. This awareness was strengthened by the country’s defeat in the Vietnam War and the sense of despair prevailing in the country thereafter. The United States had been advocating democracy based on freedom and equality in their relationship with European countries but there was growing doubt as to whether this democracy as it stands could pass throughout the world.

It was in the 1970s when I was stationed in Washington that President Jimmy Carter, the first president to be elected from the deep south for a long time, started diplomacy based on the principle of human rights with the Islam and Socialist Countries. Yet his policy toward the Soviet Union as well as the Middle East failed. Eventually President Reagan’s hardline policy toward the Soviet Union brought confrontation between the two countries to an end. On the other hand, as a result of the influx of Hispanic and Asian people into the country, people started to have a

growing interest not only in problems related to African Americans or Native Americans but also in those concerning Hispanic Americans and Asian-Americans and even problems concerning reparations to be paid to Japanese-Americans who had been put up in concentration camps in the US during World War II. When I resided in Los Angeles as Consul General and later in Washington as Deputy Chief of Mission in the middle of the 1980s, I could see such changes taking place everywhere in American society, together with increasing awareness of self identity of Hispanic and Asian-Americans as well as African Americans. A typical example was an outburst of anger and emotion against the irresponsible words of discrimination spoken by some Japanese leaders who did not try to understand the pain African-Americans had been suffering for many years. Political moves had also reflected such changes in the American society.

However, these political movements had been stalled by an unexpected terrorist attack against the United States at the heart of the business center of New York on September 11 2001. The Bush government rightfully enforced drastic measures against terrorism, but harsh accusations by neo-con leaders of extremist Islamic terrorists had given rise to widespread suspicion against Muslims in general. Yet the Bush Administration itself ran against a snag when it became clear that there was a discrepancy between their noble cause for and the reality of the Iraq invasion.

The big economic crisis dealt the final blow. The subprime mortgage case unveiled the untrustworthy nature of the current monetary system centering around the American business which had been the main supporter of the Bush administration. At the same time the collapse of exorbitantly high commodity prices previously supported mainly by speculation also created a strong doubt about the current business system and the widespread credit crunch that was about to create world-wide economic chaos. People's confidence in the Republican Administration's economic policy weakened rapidly, and led to the defeat of John McCain, the Republican candidate.

The Americans, having witnessed the Iraqi War and the big economic crises, strongly feel that there are limitations as to what the United States alone can do by itself in an age of multipolarized world politics and globalized economy, however strong its military and economic power might be. Consequently, they are trying to gradually steer the ship of America in the direction of cooperation with the rest of the world.

There is no doubt that the family background of President Obama is unique and he has a background which might seem different from that of the traditional American leaders. Yet if you look at it in detail, he is a typical American who, as he himself states, has received great influence from his mother and grand mother and has inherited the

traditional American way of thinking which has prevailed in the changing American society of the 1960s. He is seen to be a character who pays high respect to all Americans including African-Americans and who has inherited strong pride and self-respect from his father as well as high intellectual faculties from his parents.

4. His Experience in Kenya and Indonesia

I myself resided in Kenya for 2 years in the late 1960s and had a chance to learn about the country. I also spent 3 years in Indonesia in the late 1990s.

My experience in those countries tells me that we have to pay attention to the fact that although Barack H. Obama has an African-American father, he is not a descendant of African slaves as many of the African-Americans are. His father comes from a Luo ethnic group. The Luo group is an ethnic group of high self esteem that fought intensively against the British colonial army with the Kikuyu ethnic group in the so called MauMau Revolt. In fact, Mombasa was a loading port of slaves but it is the pride of Kenya that not a single Kenyan became a slave. President Obama's father worked for the British army and was converted to Islam from Christianity during those days.

President Obama lived with his mother and step father in Indonesia for 4 years after his parents' divorce. His step father, also a man of self-esteem, was from Yogyakarta, site of former capital of Solo Dynasty, and his father and brother had been killed by the Dutch forces during the war of independence in 1940's.

These nations are showing extremely warm reactions towards the United States that has elected President Obama, who has inherited the blood of such ethnic groups full of pride and must have received great influence from them. When Barack Obama was elected President of the United States, people in Kenya went wild with such an excitement that a national holiday was taken. People in Indonesia also reacted very enthusiastically to his election. These two countries are particularly influential countries among those which had been under the colonial rules and are still holding the trauma of the colonial days. Also, in both countries the Islamic religion has a strong influence on the society.

Whether the American people like it or not, such a family background of President Obama will generate, though gradually, growing expectations towards the United States among the nations formerly under colonial rule and the Islamic countries.

No one knows what kind of foreign policy President Obama is going to put forward under these situations, but there would be nothing strange even if his policy will have a

different tone of color from those hitherto. The problem would be as to what extent the American society, in which conservative thinking and power still remains, can accept such new changes. If President Obama is too hasty in pursuing such changes, the same tragedy that fell upon President Kennedy may possibly be repeated.

5. The Road to a society in which multiple ethnic groups coexist

The 20th century was said to be an era in which nationalism was a main driving force with key roles being played by nations, respectively composed of a single ethnic group or at least limited number of ethnic groups holding the main power. Now in the 21st century, a different system is being sought after.

Particularly in the United States, people have worked in perseverance over so many years to transform the country in which only a limited number of ethnic groups had overwhelming power and influence over the other groups, into one in which multiple ethnic groups have equal right and power. And they have succeeded. The election of President Obama may symbolize a big step forward in this respect.

Today many other countries are trying to take the same road but are failing or encountering many difficulties. The EC is making slow but steady advance towards a community of nations in which multiple ethnic groups coexist together. But the Soviet Union has failed in its attempt. China, India and other newly emerging countries composed of so many different ethnic and religious groups are still confronted with many difficulties.

There are three factors that can be said to have led the United States to elect Barack Obama as their President and to successfully follow a path towards a national community in which multiple ethnic groups can coexist.

The first factor is the traditional ideology of America that constitutes of freedom, equality, spirit of humanity and hope for the future, also called the American Dream. There certainly had been a time when these American ideals, freedom and equality in particular, were discriminatively applied to only certain limited groups of people. However, it carries universality in its fundamental concept, particularly with regards to the spirit of humanity in America. It is something more than merely a spirit shared by every Christian country. In the United States the spirit of humanity is put into practice universally and in large scale. I myself took part in many fund-raising activities in various places in the United States and was deeply impressed by the fact that this spirit of humanity has penetrated itself deeply into the whole American society. Professor

Akira Irie, when talking about American diplomacy pointed out that the United States' adherence to an ideology which is universal in its nature is very important. It is noteworthy that this American ideology has been inherited through all generations in spite of the fact that the country has undergone a multiple of changes. It was also one of those findings John Manjiro had made during his stay in the United States.

The second factor can be said to be the political system of the country which allows and incorporates such changes. Moreover, the system was not provided from the outside, rather built by its own people, who gave much thought to it and who made their own choice. And the American people have great confidence and pride in it. This kind of originality and flexibility in the political system can not be witnessed in the communist system of the Soviet Union or China, nor in the Japanese political system after the Meiji Era. The ideologies which form the basis of political systems in these countries were imported from the outside world, not born from their own people. Furthermore, in those countries, whenever changes fit to the age were called out for, not only were references are made to foreign precedents and questions are asked whether such changes concurred with preceding examples. When those searches are exhausted in vain, reforms from inside the society counted in many cases on violence overthrowing the then existing political systems.

The third conceivable factor is the fact that the Obama team made efficient use of the newest information transmitting-receiving medium, the Internet. It is well known that candidate Obama made a great success in collecting contributions in small lots via the internet. But what deserves more attention is the fact that as a result of this, many people who hitherto did not go to the polls went to cast a vote. The use of this new communication medium promoted a better understanding among those in the society who were discontented with the present state of things and were resigned to non-action. They started to understand that the United States has a flexible political system under which the society can be changed through the election. Many people tried to realize their wishes by casting a vote in a large scale. This was something which had never happened before.

It is not difficult to imagine what would have happened in the country which is undergoing serious recession and where the gap between the rich and the poor is widening, if such up-to-date communication medium had not been constructively utilized by the right leader.

In the ages when such means were not available, certain radical elements took to violent means and tried to attain reform by revolution. Even in countries where such communication media is widely available, if they do not have a flexible political system

or if the leaders are not aware of the importance of such communication media, large scale demonstrations are staged in response to appeals made via the internet by certain agitators, as seen in Thailand, China or India.

In Japan, though terrorism has not occurred, attention is only directed on the agitation activities via the internet, resulting in signs of government control over the Internet. What is needed in Japan is not regulation or strict control but constructive utilization of the Internet, not bureaucratic but wisely by prudent leaders.

6. Directions for Japan to go

After considering such matters, answers to the question of what kind of reform Japan should undergo to revitalize itself as a nation in the 21st century, which is expected to see great changes as a result of the election of President Obama come to me.

Co-existence and mutual prosperity of multiple ethnic groups will be an absolute proposition in the world of the 21st century and although the United States' influence on other nations by force will relatively weaken, its reputation as a country in which a multiple number of ethnic groups co-exist will continue to rise.

Japan is still a national community in which a specific ethnic group is treated with priority over others and Japan cannot nor should not hasten to become a national community in which increased multiple number of ethnic groups should be invited to co-exist and share mutual prosperity, by allowing a large inflow of immigrants in a short period of time.

Yet Japan could set forth an ideology universal in nature, become a country which other ethnic people feel drawn to and build such a society which makes them feel they want to live in together with other ethnic people and see to it a gradual increase of immigrants or at least far larger number of visitors should be encouraged from outside. And it is quite possible and foreseeable that consequently Japan's power of influence will be strengthened.

Interest in maintaining peace and safety through the preservation of nature and the environment as well as in the overall security of mankind is growing in Japan. Amidst such rising interest, we would want to have Japan push forward an ideology that would catch the world's eye. Yet such ideologies can not be formulated by the Japanese people alone by themselves nor by just reading books. People have to mix with those of other countries and in doing so appreciate once more their real worth as well as rediscover the wonderful aspects of their country. And this will lead to the birth of a new ideology.

Having been an occupied country over far larger number of years than any other nations which have been defeated in the Second World War, a strong sense of being a defeated country has taken root in the minds of the Japanese people. Now the time has come for Japan to pursue its own ideology. An ideology is not born from a vacuum. It is born from history and tradition, and from the path people themselves have come along. And it must fit for active interchange and dialogue with people belonging to other national communities. Take for example the Emperor System of Japan. It was given a rather self-conceited interpretation as can be seen in the word “Hakko Ichiu” which means putting the whole world under one roof. But how about taking it as a symbolic representation of respect and love for the ancestors and the natural environment which is commonly held by every ethnic group.

When we think about Japanese people intermingling with those of other countries, there is nothing more important than our relationship and exchange with the United States which has had great influence on Japan ever since the end of the Edo period. There might be no need to reiterate the importance of maintaining a good relationship with the United States with which Japan has been experiencing frictions repeatedly, in spite of the fact that the two countries have strengthened their economic mutual inter-dependence and have enjoyed mutual benefits. But what has to be stressed even more is that if Japan is to survive in the 21st century in which it is expected to deepen its relationship with many other ethnic groups in countries all over the world, it will be very important for Japan to experience success together with the United States in years to come.

In that sense, though it might sound like arguing from a self-centered angle, the John Manjiro Whitfield Commemorative Project for International Grassroots Exchange will become even more important in the future and not less.