The American public has never had much of an appetite for the intricacies of Japanese domestic politics, but for a brief period during Japan’s political upheaval in 1993 the American press had a rare opportunity to educate the public about how Japanese politics really works. During this period, the press offered more extensive coverage of Japanese politics than ever before—and yet for the most part it fumbled this historic opportunity. Many commentaries wildly overestimated the prospects for rapid change, fueling a short-lived American love affair with Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa that led only to frustration in February 1994, disappointment in April, and utter confusion since last June. To make matters worse, this cycle of high expectations followed by disappointments further embittered an already fragile relationship between the United States and Japan.

What went wrong?

American journalists naturally tend to view Japanese politics through an American lens, but in this case the American lens produced some serious distortions. In the first place, the U.S. media portrayed the collapse of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in populist terms. That is, they viewed the upheaval as a rebellion of frustrated voters rather than the self-destruction of a ruling elite. Some papers gleefully heralded the newly discovered prowess of a Japanese electorate that had finally found the courage to “throw the bums out.” In fact, of course, if one includes the LDP defectors who shifted to the Shinseito and Sakigake parties, the “bums” from the old LDP fared better than ever in the July 1993 elections. But from the viewpoint of the average American journalist, elections are supposed to reflect voters’ preferences. So if the LDP lost the election, then that must mean that the electorate voted them out.

Then the American media really outdid themselves in their celebration of Japan’s new leader. Never before had the American press focused so much attention on Japanese domestic politics, and never before had the coverage been so uniformly positive. Papers described Hosokawa alternatively as “dynamic” and “bold,” “charismatic” and “visionary.” The New York Times portrayed him as a “fiery fighter for reform” (July 29, 1993). Newsweek called him “a telegenic samurai” (August 9, 1993). The Washington Post proclaimed a “rising sun of change” (August 31, 1993). The Los Angeles Times heralded his “ambitious grand design” for reform (September 5, 1993). The Christian Science Monitor described him as a “Clintonesque” figure, stressing that he was a popular southern governor with a mandate for change (August 2, 1993). And the Institutional Investor audaciously compared him to the Meiji Emperor: “Morihiro
Hosokawa, a scion of feudal lords from the south, [has] led an army of discontented voters into Tokyo this summer to topple another rotting ancien regime, that of the long-governing Liberal Democratic Party” (September 1993).

Given the American public’s habitual lack of interest in foreign politics, this media frenzy reflected more than the sheer historical significance of Japan’s first non-LDP premier in 38 years. Of course, no serious American newspaper could completely ignore the demise of a party that had ruled a major world power for so long. But the scale of attention and the abundance of accolades for the new leader suggest that something else was going on. American observers were instinctively attracted to Hosokawa because he seemed to represent everything they could have hoped for in a Japanese prime minister. He was infinitely more intelligible than a Kakuei Tanaka or a Shin Kanemaru. He spoke clearly, and he brought a more open and direct style to Japanese politics. And most important of all, he appealed to those values that Americans most cherish. He spoke of popular sovereignty, open debate, and free competition. He vowed to promote the rights of average citizens and the interests of ordinary consumers.

In addition, he stood for reforms that Americans had long advocated. He boldly promised deregulation, decentralization and market liberalization. Many American commentaries focused on this point: that Hosokawa represented our best chance for real change in Japan, for better US-Japan relations, and for an improvement in the trade balance. Since the U.S. government had not been able to get Japan to do what it wanted, perhaps this guy might do it for us. At the very least, Americans wanted to believe that he would.

But America’s “Hosokawa Fever” was to be very short-lived. The American press coverage of Japan’s political transition was particularly weak because U.S.-based writers supplemented the usual journalistic fare from Tokyo bureaus. That is, the story became so big that it gained substantial attention from writers who rarely focus on Japan. These non-experts committed some of the most egregious errors, while the reports generated from Tokyo were at least closer to the mark.

Against the tide of encomiums for Japan’s great new reformer, a few seasoned American observers also sounded a note of caution. They did not question Hosokawa’s intentions so much as his prospects for success. They stressed the formidable constraints on his ability to achieve meaningful political and economic reform. As it turns out, some of Japan’s harshest critics—the so-called “bashers”—produced some of the most perceptive commentaries on the political situation. Unfortunately, they tended to couch a fundamentally sound analysis in an unnecessarily critical or even sarcastic tone. James Fallows remarked that one should “smile” when one speaks of reformers in Japan (New York Times, August 1, 1993). Glen Fukushima declared that the promises of change in Japan “ring hollow” (Los Angeles Times, February 1, 1994). And Dutch journalist Karel van Wolferen wrote a characteristically acerbic piece in Foreign Affairs (September-October 1993) entitled “Japan’s Non-Revolution.” Despite some rhetorical excesses, these critics were right on the mark in their analyses of the daunting constraints that Hosokawa faced. Meanwhile, Hosokawa’s American fan club simply missed the point.
Within the U.S. government, “Hosokawa Fever” was somewhat more muted than it was on the editorial pages. Nonetheless, President Clinton clearly saw Hosokawa as a reformist soulmate, and as a real hope for change in Japan. State Department analysts viewed political change as a genuine opportunity for improved bilateral relations. They figured that, freed from the LDP’s commitments to various special interests, Hosokawa might be able to deliver on his promises. The business community hoped that Hosokawa’s deregulation program would open up new chances for U.S. exports to Japan, and they especially welcomed his commitment to consumer welfare. They assumed that promoting the interests of the Japanese consumer implied freeing him or her to buy lower-priced American products. And Hosokawa reassured his admirers by scoring some early points, issuing a direct apology for past Japanese military aggression in Asia and finally opening Japan’s rice market to imports, if only by a crack.

In terms of policy, the Clinton administration was ambivalent on how to deal with the new non-LDP government. On the one hand, government officials wanted to give Hosokawa some room so that he could work out his internal problems before asking him to make concessions to the U.S. On the other hand, they did not want to let up too much and give the Japanese government the impression that it could postpone market liberalization indefinitely. One American insider remarked that in the waning days of the Miyazawa administration, Foreign Ministry officials had begged the U.S. government to ease up on trade pressure, arguing that otherwise it might inadvertently contribute to the LDP’s downfall. And then under Hosokawa, these same Foreign Ministry officials pleaded with the U.S. government for some slack, this time arguing that pressure on trade issues might bring the LDP back!

To make matters worse, the Clinton administration had its own problems. It had taken too long to make some of the critical appointments in the executive branch and to formulate its Japan policy, and it lacked a top official with real Japan expertise. Furthermore, it suffered from a sort of ideological schizophrenia, wanting to get tough with Japan without violating principles of free trade. When it finally came up with a policy, it had a tough time selling the idea of using intervention to open markets—that is, managing trade in order to free it. The policy was vulnerable to misinterpretation and difficult to communicate to bewildered American observers, much less to unsympathetic Japanese bureaucrats.

The U.S. administration turned sour on Japan’s new political leaders rather quickly, as it became evident that Hosokawa would not be able to deliver much of substance for the United States. Gradual disillusionment then turned to bitterness in February of 1994, when Clinton and Hosokawa met in Washington and produced their “agreement to disagree.” At this point, even Hosokawa’s admirers in the U.S. press corps turned against him, conceding that the great reformer himself was tightly constrained in what he could offer the United States or the Japanese public. This initial disappointment was only followed by worse, in April, when Hosokawa resigned in the face of a political scandal. Some American observers were amazed he was involved in such dealings; others were simply disappointed that he gave up power so easily.
With the accession of the new coalition last May under a Socialist prime minister, tragedy turned into farce. American analysts have always had trouble grasping the world of factional rivalry and behind-the-scenes maneuvering, but with the new coalition the American media all but gave up on trying to understand Japanese politics. The present political situation in Japan defies American logic, but it also defies the Japanese logic of the LDP era. American newspapers thus have produced only a trickle of news about Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama, and they have all but ceased trying to explain what is really going on. For their part, U.S. government officials seem to have decided to proceed with their policy regardless of who happens to be in charge in Tokyo. Dazed by the rapid turnover in the Japanese leadership and burdened with substantial problems of their own, they have chosen to stop trying to adapt to Japan’s internal political affairs.

In recent months, two Tokyo-based reporters have proven that American journalists can get it right, producing powerful antidotes to the early celebrations of revolutionary change in Japan. James Sterngold offered a sobering analysis of bureaucratic resilience and even reported early signs of a “counter-reformation” (New York Times, January 3, 1995). Meanwhile, Teresa Watanabe’s two-part article documented the frustrations of those who seek rapid change in Japan (Los Angeles Times, December 25-26, 1994). In her analysis, Hosokawa emerges as a symbol not of hope, but of frustrated ambition.

With last month’s earthquake in Kobe, the American media once again provided extensive coverage of Japanese affairs. But in this case, of course, the lessons related less to politics and more to building codes, construction technology, and crisis management. For a good analysis of Japanese politics in the American press, the public will still have to search for quite a while.

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