

Talk by Dr. George Packard

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2010 marked the 100 year anniversary of Edwin Reischauer's life, a life which was dedicated to the promotion and establishment of Japanese-American relations. Born to missionary parents who were teaching at Meiji Gakuin University in Japan, Reischauer attended school in Tokyo until the age of 17 where following his graduation from high school he studied at Oberlin College in the 1920s then at Harvard University as a China scholar. Upon the outbreak of WWII, employing his fluency in the Japanese language Reischauer worked as a Lt. Colonel in the US Army decoding intercepted messages from the Japanese navy.

In the wake of WWII, in a time when anti-Japanese sentiment was rampant, Reischauer began a narrative of Japan that flew in the face of conventional wisdom of that time. In the narrative Reischauer presented Japan as a nation, culture, and people worthy of study and scholarly research. Through his evaluation of the Tokugawa period as a time of ferment of peace for 250 years at a time when Europe was at war, he depicted the Japanese as a civilization of sophistication, order, and peace.

In 1945, the decision on how the American occupation should treat Japan was at the forefront of debate. At that time two opposing views emerged. The first view was for a hard and long occupation that punished Japan, forced the emperor to abdicate, and implemented austere de-industrialization measures. The alternative was for a short and benign occupation under the belief that the Japanese were capable of being peaceful torch-bearers of democracy upon departure of the military. Reischauer was an advocate for the latter and was instrumental in the fruition of that view turning into policy.

In that same year Reischauer returned to Harvard and assisted in founding the East Asia Program. The students he trained during his tenure later went on to become the eminent scholars of East Asia in American universities.

The year 1949 brought the victory of Mao Zedong and Communist China. Taking a distinctly different approach to general understanding Reischauer publicly argued for American recognition of Communist China. Until his deathbed he firmly believed that had US given immediate recognition, the Korean War or US involvement in the Korean War would never have occurred.

1958 was the peak for political influence and power for American intellectuals. The epicenter raged along the Charles River in Cambridge Massachusetts between MIT and Harvard. Touted by

prominent scholars such as Hans Morgenthau and Henry Kissinger, the concept of triumphalism emerged as an explanation of American primacy. However, Reischauer taking the opposing viewpoint argued that America was not triumphant but rather ignorant of the most important part of the world--East Asia.

John F. Kennedy's ascension to the White House marked Reischauer's nomination to the post of Japanese ambassador. His interracial marriage to Japanese noblewomen, Haru Matsukata, was a point of contention used by opponents to impede nomination proceedings however, they were overcome and in April 1961 Reischauer returned to the country of his birth as ambassador. Ambassador Reischauer set out to accomplish three things. First, end the United States occupation mentality and instill within the US citizens living in Japan that they were not conquering heroes but rather guests in a sovereign country. Secondly, curb the US military control and power. Reischauer feared that in the face of impending war, US military base presence would be futile if Japanese citizens protested military action through extreme measures such as laying on the tarmac. Reischauer thus started agitating for the reversion of Okinawan bases to the Japanese military and began the discussion that resonates with relevance to this day. Third, he raised the profile of Japan in Washington and began organizing and lobbying for as many statesmen and members of Congress as possible to visit Japan. Reischauer was furthermore critically instrumental in organizing Bobby Kennedy's talks at Waseda during his presidential campaign. Reischauer's desire to strengthen the political ties between Washington and Tokyo were one of the greatest legacies of his ambassadorship.

Reischauer's commitment to US-Japanese relations was evidenced in an incident in his second to last year as ambassador. In 1964, the year of the Tokyo Olympics, a deranged Japanese youth bypassed embassy security and stabbed Reischauer in the thigh with a rusty kitchen knife as he was walking to the car, piercing his femoral artery. He was immediately taken to the hospital and given massive blood transfusions. Running a dangerously high fever and in critical condition, Reischauer personally composed a note to the Japanese press clamoring outside his bedroom window waiting for a statement. The note stated, "I feel closer to the Japanese people than ever now that I have so much of their blood in me." Despite the precariousness of his own physical health Reischauer's foremost concern was that US-Japanese relations be left unaffected by the incident.

The greatest asset an ambassador can have is to possess a strong cultural, historical, understanding and knowledge of the country they are in and a strong tie to the White House. Reischauer

had those qualities and forever changed the face of the US ambassador post to Japan. While he led a life marked with tragic events, a wife who died at an early age leaving behind three young children to raise on his own, war between the two countries he loved most, contraction of hepatitis from the blood transfusion used to treat him when he was stabbed, he however was a man whose enduring overwhelming spirit pulled him to overcome tragedy. Reischauer was a prolific scholar and statesman with strong personal attachment, respect, and love for Japan, who fought tirelessly to have Americans see Japan through his eyes. His spirit of perseverance and legacy lives on in the US-Japan relations as we understand and see it today.

Question and Answer:

*During his lifetime, were Reischauer's attempts to educate American intellectuals on Japan successful?*

The field of Japanese studies is small and bifurcated with animosities. Reischauer's theory on Tokugawa modernization exists today however strong opposition persists.

*Reischauer advocated for more civilian control over policy towards Japan. Why is civilian control more important than in the past and what changes do you expect from civilians who are given more control?*

US citizens have relinquished too much power to the Pentagon giving them large checks and free reign over foreign policy. Obama appointed as his major advisor for national security affairs a four-star marine general, exemplifying a loss of oversight of citizens in foreign policy. Through measures such as a wise persons commission, American citizens must regain their hold on the United States' foreign policy relationship.

*What was Reischauer's view on recovering the Japanese economy in the 1950s and 1960s?*

Reischauer was thrilled at Japan's economy recovering so quickly, especially since he believed that the creation of a strong middle class was a precondition for Japan becoming a peace loving democratic country.