

# Japan pays for success

I heard a most interesting story during a recent trip to Japan which may or may not be true. To me, it sounds quite believable.

Just after Japan surrendered on Aug. 14, 1945, American troops landed in Tokyo and made a bee-line for the national bank. There, the Americans expected to find not only Japan's gold reserves but the bullion taken from China, the Philippines, Malaya, Hong Kong, Indonesia and Singapore.

But there was no gold. Shortly before U.S. troops arrived, the Japanese government had gone to a small number of leading citizens and given them the great hoard of gold for safe-keeping. The gold was duly hidden away until the U.S. ended its occupation of Japan. Then the gold's private guardians returned it to the government where it was used as the financial base for Japan's economic reconstruction. Most significantly, in spite of the gold having been in private hands for years, not one ounce was missing.

Japanese, as often noted, are among the world's best examples of civic virtue. Last week Japan's new Prime Minister, Noboru Takeshita, dropped in to visit the U.S. and Canada. The main point of his visit was to defuse mounting anger over Japan's being too successful, too industrious and too thrifty from customers who were none of the above.

Japanese work harder and longer than North Americans. They approach even the smallest task with a purpose and intensity we would find manic. Japanese save more than they spend and don't live on the high wire of consumer credit. They take pride in their work, invest in research, take risks and are very patient.

Inside Japan, they compete furiously; outside, they usually work together to dominate foreign markets. The government is run by competent, business-oriented technicians who help create the social and economic climate that makes Japan so successful. Japan's politicians do not spend much more than they take in taxes and do not raise money by creating inflation.

North Americans don't work as hard as they used to, produce inferior goods, take little pride in their work and bitterly resent sharp competition.

ERIC  
MARGOLIS



Their politicians, many of whom ought to be selling used cars, have managed to debauch once mighty economies by reckless spending, over-regulation and crude vote-buying.

As a result, the U.S. and Canada are in debt up to their ears and are now, after the stock crash, facing the unhappy realization that you can't live forever on credit and hot air. Of course, it's far easier to blame the busy-bee Japanese for our problems than our own laziness and squandering.

But since the customer is always right, PM Takeshita had to promise that Japan would import more goods from North America, try not to work so hard, spend more and save less, increase borrowing, run up inflation and cut exports. Such is the curious price of success.

Whether Japan manages to degrade its own economic performance remains to be seen. Western pressure has, it seems, succeeded in forcing Japan to begin correcting one of its quite real transgressions, namely the wilful blocking of imports. Japan's door will inch open a bit more — just enough to prevent North Americans from slamming their own doors on Japanese imports.

Pressure from the western alliance has also had the salutary effect of pushing Japan into shouldering a greater share of the security burden. Takeshita's strong debut at the recent Manila conference where he assured Asian nations of firm backing and financial support received insufficient recognition in the West. Still, Japan has a long, long way to go before it will be accused of pulling its weight in the western alliance. Here, Japan needs a lot more prodding and nudging.

Takeshita's trip to North America did, I suspect, succeed in lessening some of the anti-Japanese rhetoric coming from Washington and Ottawa — at the government level. In spite of strenuous efforts by Tokyo to improve its tattered image, there is still a high and even growing level of resentment in North America toward Japan — one that is being increasingly reciprocated by Japanese.

All sorts of old humbug is being dusted off by those who still make a living from World War II, mixed up with plain old racism and envy. Certainly, the Japanese are not lovable; highly successful people rarely are. But watching them being accused in the West of everything from anti-Semitism to kamikaze trade methods is ludicrous, a sad testimony to our own feebleness and sloth.

Japan-bashing will, of course, go on. For our politicians, it's almost as safe an issue as attacking South Africa.

Those with long memories may recall how, during the 1930s, similar charges were leveled against Japan — and how such nonsense helped create the fevered atmosphere that led to the U.S. embargo of Japan and, ultimately, its entry into World War II.