Saving Face to About Face: American Immigration Policy and the Decline of American-Japanese Relations

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Immigration has been a core, and often controversial, aspect of the United States since the nation's inception. All Americans, excepting those of complete Indigenous ancestry, are descendants of immigrants, and for this reason, the United States has always had unique cultural ties to other countries. Immigrants are often the only exposure to another culture that natives of a country receive, and for better or for worse, immigrants often shape how their home country is seen in their new land. However, immigration, and the resulting cultural and ethnic ties between the US and other countries, are not usually studied by historians of foreign relations even though immigration plays a role in shaping foreign policy.[1] The interplay between immigration and international diplomacy can be crucial, as the example of the relations between the United States and Japan between 1900-1930 reveals. At the turn of the century, the United States and Japan enjoyed cordial relations, but by the end of the time period, the two countries seemed openly hostile towards one another. What accounts for this change? Some scholars at the time such as William L Holland, executive secretary and editor of the *Far Eastern Survey,* and Ellen Churchill Semple, the first female president of Association of American geographers, claimed that pure geographical and demographical realities created this downturn in Japanese-American relations.[2] However, their argument is incomplete and underestimates a more fundamental component: racial attitudes. American immigration policy, forged by changing and increasingly racist attitudes towards the Japanese, contributed to hostile relations between Japan and the United States. Racially motivated immigration policy catalyzed the decline of Japanese-American relations as proven by the impact of three events: racist school policies in 1906 San Francisco impacting national decisions, President Woodrow Wilson's refusal to accept a racial equality clause in the charter of the League of Nations in 1918, and the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924.

Japan, Predisposed To War?

The decline in relations between the United States and Japan is sometimes seen as an inevitable byproduct of Japanese expansion, brought upon by a Japanese need to acquire resources her land lacked. Japan's lack of farmable land and inability to sustain its growing population led it to look beyond its borders for its citizens to emigrate. Japan, while being an extremely beautiful country, replete with natural wonders and gorgeous landscapes, drew a poor hand regarding natural resources. According to the CIA World Factbook, only 11.7% of the country's land is arable, and it has "virtually no natural energy resources."[3] In fact, they are the largest importer of coal and natural gas in the world, and second largest importer of oil in the world.[4] Those statistics come from today, with modern technology available for discovering oil and natural gas reserves. In a time before modern technology, the ability to access the Japanese reserves would have been reduced. These factors meant that Japan has always been a nation dependent on imports. Between 1900 and 1930, the Japanese population, while growing slower than previous decades, was still increasing at a rate that exceeded the capacity of Japanese agriculture to supply for.[5] Therefore, some observers like Tatsuo Kawai his 1938 piece, *The Goal of Japanese Expansion,* have concluded that Japanese imperialism between 1900-1930 primarily involved expansion into areas that had key resources needed by the Japanese.[6] Scholars like Kawai argue that expansion

into the Korean peninsula and later Manchuria was also fueled by a Japanese need for a stable supply of food. Furthermore, according to another expert, Jon Thares Davidann, Japan had been unable to support herself with domestic agricultural products since about 1919, and the vaunted industrialization of Japan had only made her "more dependent" on imports than ever before because almost all domestic agricultural products were used as raw material for industry.[7] Support for these theories can be gleaned from Americans living in Japan in the 1900's, who observed that many citizens felt a need to leave the homeland. For example, an American pastor living in Japan during this time, Galen Wheeler, wrote that Japan was pressed by a "great socio-economic problem...whose solution she thinks is expansion."[8] From this perspective, Japan's domestic economic situation laid the foundation for future imperialism, which in turn, increasingly caused the United States to distrust the Japanese.

To fully understand this interplay between immigration and foreign relations, a broader, if only cursory, understanding of the historical power dynamics among world powers in East Asia must be considered. In the 1880s Japan sought to cement her influence in Korea, a country traditionally dominated by China. China under the Qing responded to increasing Japanese influence in Korea with aggressive posturing; the two sides escalated the conflict until 1894 when the tensions finally boiled over into war.[9] The Japanese quickly beat the outdated Chinese army and established themselves as a new imperial powerhouse. However, the chief benefactor of the declining Chinese influence in Korea was not the Japanese. Western pressure, particularly from Russia, forced the Japanese to cede new territory gained from the War, most notably the vital naval base of Port Arthur.[10] The Japanese, and perhaps rightly so, felt cheated of their fairly won gains.[11] The Sino-Japanese rivalry for influence in Korea had resulted in total Japanese victory, but not the corresponding rewards in the Liaodong peninsula, resulting in a general Japanese resentment at the seemingly hypocritical nature of Western powers.[12] These Western powers demanded that China submit to their authority, but when a nation outside of their "club" asserted its influence over China, all the Western powers loudly protested.[13] Furthermore, their victory had created a new rivalry, one between Russia and Japan. Russia was increasingly worried about Japanese influence in Korea, and the potential threat to the Sino-Russian military bases of Port Arthur and Vladivostok.[14] Thus, the seeds of the Russo-Japanese War were laid in the Sino-Japanese War. After Russia was humiliated by the Japanese during the war, the Japanese emerged as the preeminent Asian power. The victory caused some Japanese to believe they could "whip any country in the world."[15] Now, Western powers even considered Japan as an "honorary" civilized nation according to professor Rotem Kowner.[16] By the end of the Russo-Japanese war, the Japanese had managed to "[swing] public opinion" behind them, and President Roosevelt considered them a potential ally in the Pacific.[17] However, as Kowner also notes, within thirty years, the image of the Japanese in the United States devolved into that of "murderous villains, rapacious invaders" and "subhuman little yellow men."[18] How did relations between the two countries manage to deteriorate so quickly? To claim that the change comes solely from Japanese aggression is only part of the equation. What is often understated is the role of American racist policies, which gained traction from the turn of the century to the mid 1920s.

The Land of the Rising Threat

The first major break in American-Japanese relations happened as an inadvertent side effect of the Japanese victories in Asia. By crushing Russia and China, Japan had done too well. Gone were the images of Japanese soldiers as effeminate men, and in their stead, the Japanese armies were compared to the fabled forces of Prussia, with Japanese leadership being assigned fabled Prussian counterparts like Von Moltke the Elder and Bismarck.[19] Americans on the West Coast of the United States felt threatened by these stunning Japanese victories. This fear of Japanese might, combined with the increasing Japanese-American populations on the West Coast helped to spur racist attitudes against the Japanese. [20] The increasing tension came to a head in 1906 when the San Francisco Board of Education voted to segregate American and Asian schoolchildren.[21] Though East Coast publications and politicians scorned the "infernal fools" in California, the damage was done.[22] Japanese media began to spread bellicose messages, including the usually pro-Western publication, the Mainichi Shimbun which stated:

> Stand up, Japanese nation! Our countrymen have been humiliated on the other side of the Pacific. Our poor boys are girls have been expelled from public schools by the rascals of the United States, cruel and merciless like demons. At this time, we should be ready to strike the Devil's head with an iron hammer for the sake of the world's civilization…. Why do we not insist on sending ships?[23]

Furthermore, Americans in Japan, such as a *Washington Post* correspondent in 1906, noted that in his nineteen-year stay in Japan he had "never seen the Japanese so agitated" as they were when the news of racist policies in California reached Japan.[24] President Theodore Roosevelt, who had privately complained about the "popular jingoists" in the media and in San Francisco, despite also claiming that the Japanese were "unsuitable immigrants," was presented with a situation that had the potential to boil over into armed conflict.[25] Roosevelt was not an advocate for racial equality, but he considered the Japanese to be a potential ally or potential enemy in the Pacific, and he wanted to ensure that the Japanese were the former, and not the latter.[26] Therefore, when presented with the difficult task of either alienating his constituents or the Japanese: he chose to compromise. In an action unsanctioned by the US government, Roosevelt made a private deal with the Japanese government. Roosevelt would prevent federal exclusion of the Japanese, and the Japanese government would stop issuing visas to prospective immigrants. Therefore, he dealt with the crisis in a way that he hoped would preserve the dignity of both nations, thereby preserving peace in the Pacific.[27] He hoped to accomplish this in a deal known as the "Gentleman's Agreement.[28]" As longstanding goal of the Japanese government was to prevent "outright discrimination" against Japanese immigrants, because the Japanese public would not accept being treated as inferior, the government engaged in what professor of International Relations at Hitotsubashi University Tadashi Aruga calls "face-saving diplomacy."[29] Both countries hoped to preserve relations between the two nations, but, as professor Aruga argues "popular political" attitudes spread far faster than politicians for both nations could "manipulate" them.[30] "Anxiety and Apathy" amongst the masses altered the relations between the two nations more than "High Society" did.[31] The damage to relations between the two nations had already been done, and despite Roosevelt's efforts, the West Coast of the US would continue to openly advocate for anti-Japanese policies, and the Japanese public knew that the majority of their countrymen in America would not be treated as equals or respected.

Separate and Unequal

The San Francisco school episode, while not fatal to US-Japan relations, revealed the first major crack in the two nations' relationship, a crack which would only be exacerbated by lingering racist attitudes in the United States and feelings of wounded pride on the part of the Japanese. Over the twelve years between the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1906 and the end of the First World War in 1918, the two nations would slowly but steadily drift further apart, even as they fought on the same side in the war. World War I slowed any large shift in their relationship, as both were involved to some degree in the fight against the Central Powers. Japan led the fighting against German territories in the Pacific and China while protecting the vital sea routes connecting the UK to their colonies in India and further east. The next major crack in relations would not come until the peace negotiations after that great conflict and during the debate surrounding the proposed League of Nations. Here again, discrimination played a role in igniting resentment. Though on the other side of the world from the heaviest combat in the First World War, Japan had fought. She had joined the *Triple Entente* in its war, and she had remained in the war from the 1914 to 1918, fighting longer than the United States had. While Japan was rewarded with some of the former German Asian and Oceanic holdings, she was treated as an auxiliary party with the US, who only fought a part of the war, was treated as a more important member of the alliance then Japan.[32] Despite the refusal of Western powers to recognize the Japanese claim to an Asian sphere of influence or to treat them as equals, Japan did not break with the *Entente* and supported the establishment of a League of Nations by American President Woodrow Wilson.[33]

Japan remained party to the charter partly because they wanted to add a racial equality clause to the charter of the League of Nations, a clause that would prevent the type of discrimination Japan feared.[34] This goal had been in place for several years. In 1915, Japanese Primer Shigenubo Okuma declared the Japan would "gain equality" as soon as possible.[35] Therefore, when the First World War ended, Japan felt they had their opportunity to end "racial prejudice."[36] Japan proposed their racial equality measure to the charter of the league. Woodrow Wilson opposed it, and prevented its enactment.[37] Both Wilson and the American Congress at large (whose members would have to ratify the charter of the League), were not proponents of racial equality on a global stage. Wilson was a famous advocate for racial segregation, and he supported the idea that individual states should have an ethnically homogeneous population.[38] As early as 1912, he stated in a letter to the ex-mayor of San Francisco that "[he] stood for a policy of national exclusion," for all races that do not "blend with the Caucasian."[39] It seemed clear to Japan that even Wilson, the ideologue whose new doctrine seemed to promise a new post-war world, one where Japan would participate more fully in world affairs, was rejecting them on racial grounds. Once again, the Western Powers had slammed the door on Japan just as she was about to join their ranks. Once again, it seemed to Japan that Western "imperialists" were "conspiring" against them.[40] The elder statesman of Japan, Okuma, predicted that the "peace of the world" would be threatened were the "injustice" not corrected.[41] Okuma believed that the Western nations had unfairly rejected the Japanese proposal because of "perverted feelings" of supremacy. The Japanese would not stand for such an insult. As Okuma predicted, the Japanese began to believe that the fabled liberal values of the West were nothing more than an illusion, and that the problem of racism would not be solved through Western bodies and processes.[42]

About Face: The Japanese Exclusion Act of 1924

The final break in Japanese-American relations came via an act of Congress, which outraged the Japanese by formally and publicly banning them from immigrating to the United States. Although Congress had been bypassed by President Theodore Roosevelt in the Gentlemen's Agreement, it later had refused to ratify Wilson's 1919 League of Nations, and in 1924 it would enact legislation explicitly addressing what was by then commonly called the "Jap" problem.[43] Tensions between Japanese and Americans on the West Coast had not simmered down after 1906, and the isolationist attitude of the country in the 1920s saw anti-immigrant opinions spread beyond the Western states. Therefore, the American Congress, the body most designed to reflect the American populace's position on issues, decided to ban all immigration from Asia in 1924. Unlike earlier situations, this one was not a local school board refusing to allow a relatively small number of Japanese attend public schools--it was the American federal government banning all Asian immigrants. The decision of Congress to enact such legislation came about through pressure brought on by white Californians who feared rising Japanese populations in the state. Valentine S. McClatchy, the former owner of the Sacramento Bee newspaper, in his testimony to Congress supporting the act stated, "it is only a question of time when the Japanese will exceed the whites" in total population in California.[44] Despite McClatchy's statistics being proved false, and members of Congress stating on the record that his statistics were false, McClatchy's fear mongering was powerful.[45] Fear of Japan and the Japanese was no longer confined to the West Coast, and McClatchy's testimony stoked already burning flames of racial tension. McClatchy argued that the Japanese population was increasing faster than other Asian races because the Japanese could bring wives with them. Though not all Americans or U.S. congressmen supported the bill, McClatchy and others like him managed to round up enough support to get the bill through Congress. The bill was enacted, and on May 26, 1924, all Asian immigration to the United States, including from Japan, was banned. McClatchy had succeeded in passing an openly racist bill through the political elite who had, twenty years prior, been the staunchest advocates for Japan.

This shift in congressional thought reflected a broader shift throughout the country, a shift that the Japanese did not fail to take notice of.[46] Though Chinese immigration had been banned since the 1870's, this was the first time the Japanese, the "civilized" Asians, were banned from immigrating to the US. Although the bill did not single out Japanese immigrants, the public in Japan called it the "Japanese Exclusion Act" and believed that it was another racially motivated attack upon them by the United States.[47] Mass protests against the bill were held in Japan, and along the West Coast and in Hawaii. Some Japanese even began to cast Americans as barbarians, whose country had not even existed when the great Japanese Shoguns built their nation. The sides now viewed each other as extreme, racist, caricatures; the insidious, diminutive yellow "Jap" and the uncultured, American oaf. Reconciliation seemed impossible, and even if President Calvin Coolidge had wanted to interfere on behalf of Japan, as President Roosevelt had done earlier, he could not ignore a constitutionally granted power of Congress. Furthermore, Coolidge, along with most of America, had retreated into an isolationist shell. America in the 1920's looked within, not outward, and immigration to the United States was dramatically reduced during the 20s. American racism and nativism experienced a renaissance during the decade, and the Japanese were not exempted from the list of targets. The revocation of the Gentlemen's Agreement was the last straw for Japan, and the response reveals just how powerful the reaction

to racially-fueled policies could be. According to Davidann, Japan had dealt with the West's "immoral hypocrisy" for too long.[48] Furthermore, Japanese began to consider May 27th, the day Coolidge signed the bill as a national "Day of Humiliation," and military troops "clamored" for action in Japan, while several civilians committed suicide to protest the bill.[49] The "grave consequences" promised by the Japanese ambassador in response to the bill, would not yet be seen, but the relationship between the two nations was altered for the worse.[50]

Although Japanese-American relations were not shattered by the Immigration Act, the relationship became a rivalry by 1924. Both Japanese and American officials began to see each other as their respective chief obstacle to dominance in the Pacific.[51]In 1938, the United States, alarmed at Japanese expansion into China, cut off oil trade with the Japanese, and less than a year later, Japan bombed the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, and the two nations were at war.

Facing History: Facing Ourselves

The breakdown in Japanese-American relations cannot be explained by geographic or demographic data alone. True, the situation within Japan may have created a climate uniquely suited for the type of expansionist behavior that Japan engaged in, but neither the climate nor the expansionism can truly explain why Japanese-American relations declined. In 1906, well before imperial Japan became a reality on the map, the Japanese and American publics were already suspicious each other. The United States, or at least San Francisco, had created this breach due to racially motivated policies regarding public schooling. Further slights of Japan on the part of the United States after WWI only convinced the Japanese decision makers that the West would not treat Japan as an equal, and nor would they accept Japanese dominance over the lands she claimed. Japanese officials came to mistrust the United States not through any one single event, rather it was a process of 30 years that led to an eventual rupture in American-Japanese relations. The situation may have been an explosion waiting to happen, because of geographic and demographic issues, but the buildup to that explosion was the long fuse of racially motivated immigration policies. The best comparison that can be made to American-Japanese relations is that of a boiler. The pre-existing conditions are comparable to the boiling water, and the boiler safety valve is immigration to America. Each racist American immigration policy slowly closed off the safety valve, until eventually, in 1924, it was fully closed. Though it would take until 1942 for the two nations to come to blows, the fuse for the combat that would play out over the Pacific during the Second World War was lit and burning long before any gunshots were fired.

Immigration and its affects are often ignored when discussing foreign policy, but they should not be. How foreign nations are viewed by the public is deeply tied to immigration, as immigrants are representatives of their countries of origin. Interestingly, not all the public views immigrants with racist attitudes—not then and not now. Racism is not a monolithic entity. It is vital for us to remember that fact and to combat racism. Immigration policy is an opportunity to create a bond that ties nations together based on a mutual understanding that the countries will protect each other's citizens. Alternatively, immigration policy can destroy relations between countries, and turn slights, perceived and real, into conflicts that kill millions.

[1] Michael G. Davis, "Impetus for Immigration Reform: Asian Refugees and the Cold War," *Journal of American East-Asian Relations* 7, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 1998): [Page 170], JSTOR.

[2] Ellen Churchill Semple, "Influence of Geographical Conditions upon Japanese Agriculture," *The Geographical Journal* 40, no. 6 (December 1912): JSTOR.

[3] "Japan," in *The CIA World Factbook*, CIA World Factbook.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Government of Japan, "Population and Population Growth," table, 2008, accessed March 18, 2019.

[6] A. E. Hindmarsh, review of *The Goal of Japanese Expansion*, by Tatsuo Kawai, *The American Journal of International Law* 33, no. 4 (October 1939): 753.

[7] Jon Thares Davidann, "Cultural Diplomacy in US-Japanese Relations 1919-1941," *The American Historical Review* 118, no. 3 (June 2013): https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/118.3.823.

[8] Masuda Hajimu, "Rumors of War: Immigration Disputes and the Social Construction of American-Japanese Relations," *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 1 (January 2009): JSTOR.

[9] Rotem Kowner, "'Becoming an Honorary Civilized Nation: Remaking Japan's Military Image during the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-1905," *The Historian* 64, no. 1 (Fall 2001): JSTOR.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Hajimu.

[13] Kowner

[14] Ibid.

[15] Hajimu.

[16] Kowner.

[17]Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Kiyo Sue Inui, "The Gentlemen's Agreement. How It Has Functioned," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 122 (November 1925): JSTOR.

[21] Hajimu.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Tadashi Aruga, "Reflections on the History of U.S.- Japanese Relations," *American Studies International* XXXII, no. 1 (April 1994.)

[26] Simon Strunsky, "Theodore Roosevelt and the Prelude to 1914," *Foreign Affairs* 4, no. 1 (October 1925): JSTOR.

[27] Davidann.

[28] Inui.

[29] Aruga.

[30] Hajimu.

[31] Haijmu.

[32] Thomas W. Burkman, "Japan and the League of Nations: An Asian Power Encounters the European Club," *World Affairs* 58, no. 1 (Summer 1995): JSTOR.

[33] Paul Gordon Lauren, "Human Rights in History: Diplomacy and Racial Equality at the Paris Peace Conference," *Diplomatic History*2, no. 3 (Summer 1978): JSTOR.

[34]Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Hajimu.

[38] Lauren.

[39] Hajimu.

[40] Lauren.

[41]Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Davidann.

[44] Immigration Act of 1924, H.R. 7995, 68th Cong.

[45] Committee on Immigration, Japanese Immigration Legislation, S. Doc. No. 68-2576, 1st Sess., at 174 (Apr. 21, 1924).

[46] Davidann.

[47] Aruga.

[48] Davidann.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.

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