

Way of thinking at stake in U.S. 'boxing match'

By MUTSUYOSHI NISHIMURA

Japan and America may share values such as democracy, rule of law, freedom of expression and protection of human rights. But do we share the same national mentality?

If the Japanese people knew what is being debated among Americans in this year's presidential elections, they would realize just how different our two countries are. Furthermore, Americans are divided over almost all the issues.

In the Aug. 15 New York Times op-ed "Republican Extremism, Bad Economics", American Steven Rattner wrote that the extent of ideological divergence is the greatest in the past 120 years, and this is due to conservatives' moving even further to the right. Right-leaning conservatives are attacking the systems and principles that lie at the very foundation of the country.

They are calling on the government to stop collecting taxes that support the disadvantaged, to avoid budget deficits even for the purpose of stimulating the economy and to make investment returns and inheritances tax-free.

Deep down inside, Americans have always felt a fundamental sense of aversion toward government. "Freedom" and "independence" pertain to individuals and, as such, "work should not be relegated to the state." We know from experience that government and large organizations are apt to fail, so they should have no business meddling with us. The state is neither an ethical entity nor an object that elicits emotions such as love or hate. These are some common American views.

Such thinking is unfamiliar in Japan. The Japanese feel a strong sense of belonging to the state or group, and feelings such as patriotism are directed toward the state. Companies thrive on the fodder of employee loyalty. People live each day by intuition — sensing the "air" that hangs between people. The government is obliged to take responsibility for everything and to rescue the disadvantaged. This is the general mind-set of the Japanese. There is little similarity between this and the aforementioned American values.

Most Japanese are unaware of a writer who has had the greatest influence on Americans after the Bible. Her name is Ayn Rand (1905-1982). In 1991, the Library of Congress called her contemporary America's "second-most influential writer after the Bible." In 1998, when Random House/Modern Library conducted a survey on the "best 100 novels of the 20th century," her books were ranked first and second by general readers. Even more amazing was the fact that her two other works were also found among the top 10.

What does she have to say?

The message that comes through in her voluminous works is one in which human beings are rational decision makers who commit an immoral act that defiles their sense of value and ability when they entrust decisions to a group. We must therefore affirm individualism and egotism, and deny collectivism. Altruism, which praises service for others and self-sacrifice, must also be denied because it puts the collective will before individual free will.

In other words, there is little point in a life where one's actions are constantly being dictated by relationships with others.

We should hold fast to our morals and live a self-centered life to achieve our ideals. Such is the philosophy that exerts the greatest influence on the American people after the Bible. And thanks to such thinking, those who deny the role of the group — be it the state or government — have been able to keep their torch ablaze.

Naturally, the liberal camp is no less enthusiastic in opposition: Keep the state's involvement at a minimum? No way!

The government should provide its people with equal opportunities, a good education, more employment, new infrastructure, and give hope. Growth must be maintained even at the risk of running a budget deficit to realize social justice.

In reality, the gap between the rich and poor has widened, and the seriousness of the situation has been highlighted by the "Occupy Wall Street" movement.

The degree of capital accumulation in the background far exceeds the Japanese imagination. One researcher estimates that the value of assets held by the Rockefellers in the 1840s amounted to 90 times the present asset value of Bill Gates, while the Vanderbilts had assets amounting to 970 times more (from "Rulers of the American Economy" by Hirose Takashi).

Compared with such wealth, even the richest Japanese millionaire would be a mere ant trying to climb the Empire State Building. This is part of the value system that continues to move America.

As fellow practitioners of capitalism, the Japanese should be more

conversant on these things. Then again, Japanese and Americans have much in common as well. Townsend Harris, who lived in Japan at the end of Shogun era as the first U.S. consul general, commented that he found in Japan a "kingdom of honesty and simplicity."

There are many Americans, from the past to the present, who, full of friendship and generosity, have left a strong impression on many a Japanese. No doubt, most Japanese would be moved to read of the episode involving a host mother in rural Iowa, as recounted by Thomas L. Friedman in "Longitudes and Attitudes":

An Indonesian education minister recounted the time when he first went to rural Iowa as a high school student. He was "about the only Muslim within five hundred miles," yet his host mom got up with him each morning so that he would be sure to say his prayers.

"It taught me that even Americans who might never visit my country respect other religions and cultures," the minister said. It's doubtful the mom ever forgot the experience either, since it meant rising between three and four in the morning.

I sincerely believe that most Americans continue to show respect for foreign cultures and to serve others, just like that host mother in Iowa. However, it is also true that America is a country that sustains its vitality amid a boxing match between opposing opinions.

It is impossible for the peoples of Japan and America to share the same values; nor should that be the case. Japan nevertheless needs to understand the nature of the boxing match going on in America, particularly at a time when the greatest ideological divergence in 120 years is threatening to split the country.

Mutsuyoshi Nishimura is Japan's former ambassador for global environment. This article first appeared in a bulletin of the English-Speaking Union of Japan.

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