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The Rising East

BY RICHARD HALLORAN

Sunday, September 9, 2001

Some mortal enemies become blood brothers ... and, sadly, others don't

In Tokyo some years ago, a Japanese camera maker sought to explain why his compatriots were such eager photographers: Cameras were among the first luxuries that Japanese could have after World War II, they were cheap, the quality was competitive.

Then he became a bit philosophical: "You must understand that we Japanese want to have a record of everything -- marriage, children, sightseeing, even funerals. We are a very retrospective people and that's part of what makes us different from Americans."

"For you Americans," he said, "tomorrow is more important than yesterday. You Americans, you always look ahead; you never look back."

That assessment of Americans helps to explain the remarkable relations between Japan and America that have evolved since the San Francisco Peace Treaty was forged to bring a formal end to World War II. The 50th anniversary of that pact was celebrated in San Francisco yesterday with Secretary of State Colin Powell and Foreign Minister Makiko Tanaka leading the American and Japanese delegations.

A half-century ago, it was easier for the victorious Americans to put the war behind them and to look ahead, but that doesn't explain how blood enemies became allies. Nor does it provide a reason for that alliance enduring through economic quarrels, deep differences over security, Japan's amnesia about the war and, most of all, between peoples so distinctly different.

The treaty itself was a starting point, especially compared to the Treaty of Versailles after World War I. At the insistence of David Lloyd George of Britain and Georges Clemenceau of France, Versailles sought to punish

Germany, especially in economics. That led to the failure of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Adolf Hitler; 20 years later, Europe was engulfed in World War II.

In contrast, San Francisco stripped Japan of its colonial empire and armed forces but sought to cultivate reform in the nation's politics, to rebuild its economy and standard of living, and to bring Japan back into the community of nations. Keeping Japan on the U.S. side during the early days of the Cold War was part, but not all, of the American motive.

The five decades of amity between the dissimilar Japanese and Americans is striking when measured against the bitter quarrels around the world today. Catholic and Protestant in Northern Ireland worship God, only in different churches. Arab and Jew are both Semites who claim David and Abraham as common forefathers. Indian and Pakistani share cultures that are more alike than different. South Korean and North Korean differ only in politics. Yet they are all daily at each other's throats. Nobody hates the way brothers hate.

The differences between Japanese of the Shinto-Buddhist and Americans of the Judeo-Christian traditions are nearly endless. Japanese are an island people, far more homogeneous than the continental, diverse Americans.

Japanese take pride in social harmony, Americans in individuality. Japanese look to their obligations, Americans to their rights. Japanese seek consensus in making decisions, Americans decide in an adversarial fashion. The divergence extends to trivialities: Light switches in Japan are outside of a room, in America on the inside. Japanese toilet paper comes out over the top of the roll, American often from under the bottom.

Why, then, a half-century of alliance? The reasons are partly idealistic but mostly pragmatic. Japanese and Americans share the principles of democracy even if they practice it quite differently. Culturally, many Japanese are intrigued by the art, music and some of the lifestyles of Americans. A smaller number of Americans are drawn by what they consider to be the exotic nature of Japan.

Economically, Japanese and Americans share a drive for prosperity and rising standards of living and find them easier to achieve through trade, even with its competition, than by going it alone.

In security, the reality is that the Japanese and Americans have little choice in a dangerous world. Japan must rely on the United States for defense or undertake the enormous expense of acquiring an armed force commensurate with its population and economy. America needs a reliable ally to keep its forces deployed in Asia.

Underneath it all, there is still the wonder of an amicable era in which the divergent Japanese and Americans have gotten along, traveled, studied and done business in each other's countries, sometimes forming close personal

friendships. Some of us even marry one another -- but that's a story for another day.

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