



The Obuchi-Clinton Summit: A Surprisingly Effective Performance

By Ayako Doi

One nuisance visiting foreign leaders have to put up with in Washington is the rude habit of White House reporters who ignore them and zero in on the President over whatever is Topic A. The Clinton-Obuchi news conference last Monday was no exception. Topic A was, of course, Kosovo. But in a curious way, the focus on the Balkans actually worked to enhance Japan's stature, rather than to diminish it.

The reporters' focus gave Obuchi a chance to say that Tokyo had just pledged \$200 million to help Albania and Macedonia deal with the flood of Kosovar refugees. Clinton's praise of that generosity helped remind reporters that Japan, as a U.S. ally and a member of the G-8, is "on our side."

No Whining. Instead of whining about the fact that Russian envoy Viktor Chernomyrdin's sudden visit forced Clinton to cut short his time with Obuchi, the Japanese leader used it to demonstrate Tokyo's interest in the Yugoslav crisis by inviting him to Blair House for a chat the next morning.

In a way, Kosovo helped Obuchi present an idealized picture of U.S.-Japan relations: two adult countries sharing common values, working together for peace, each doing that at which it excels — America exercising political and military leadership; Japan providing aid to deal with the humanitarian crisis.

By most assessments, Obuchi's U.S. tour, which began in Los Angeles, was the most successful of any by a Japanese prime minister in recent memory. Mercifully, he and Clinton managed to avoid the cloying "Bill and Keizo" bon-hommerie of the kind that former President "Ron" Reagan put on with ex-Prime Minister "Yasu" Nakasone in 1983. Indeed, both men did their best to focus on common interests and tuck disagreements neatly under the rug.

That extended to atmospherics. The White House put on one of the most handsome state dinners of the Clinton presidency. Obuchi charmed the guests with some self-effacing humor and people skills. At one point he explained that he first visited the U.S. as a steerage passenger on the Queen Mary, and hung around Washington in a \$1.50 a night YMCA room, hoping to meet then-Attorney General Bobby Kennedy. That he finally did so, gave him his first political ambition. He added that this trip was better, because not only did he see some important people, but "this time my room is free." Later, he got out of his chair and, as is Japanese custom, began pouring sake for the guests — who soon joined in. Unprecedented, but an effective formality-breaker.

Congeniality. Obuchi's congeniality also worked well in Chicago, where he chatted with college students, threw out a ceremonial ball at a Cubs game, and spontaneously delivered a greeting to the fans.

Some savvy groundwork by his media handlers also paid off. Before he left Tokyo, Obuchi posed for a *Time* Asian edition cover as a pizza deliveryman, sending the message that he's not the "cold pizza" depicted in an American report as he took office last year. As he arrived in Los Angeles the New York Times carried an op-ed piece under his name that delivered a clear message: Japan is finally changing, and even if the economic numbers get scier, they're part of the process of making it a normal country.

Real Substance. Perhaps most important to his success, Ambassador Kunihiko Saito told reporters, was that Obuchi arrived with gifts of real substance. In the nine months since he took over a country that seemed on the brink of collapse, he has managed to get a handle on the banking crisis, put together a major stimulus package, and won a Diet compromise on new defense guidelines. The Americans, said Saito, "rightly recognized his accomplishments."

Of course the chant from the chorus is that Obuchi has merely set up ways to work these problems, and has yet to produce tangible solutions. If the economy doesn't really recover soon, or Japan fails to support U.S. forces in a regional crisis, his reputation as an unlikely leader but one who can deliver, will vanish.

Beyond that, say Japanese analyses, the real reason Obuchi got such a warm welcome was that a president bogged down in Kosovo, and finding relations with Russia and China ever more difficult, didn't need a fight with an ally. The reverse side to that coin is that a change in America's circumstances could cool relations just as quickly as they warmed last week.

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