Letters

Japan's View of the United States

Philip H. Abelson's editorial on *The Japan That Can Say No* ("America bashing," 8 June, p. 1173) was discussed at the 21 June meeting of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE)/USA Subcommittee on Scientific Supercomputing. We find it an excellent précis of the book. The subcommittee has prepared an analysis and comment on this book from an American high technology viewpoint. Retranslations of selected sections from the original Japanese document were used to understand the nuances of meaning. In some cases, careful retranslation reveals that the first English version referenced in the editorial is misleading (*1*).

The report states, in part, that

> Many commentators and analysts in the United States have assumed Mr. Morita's views are representative of many prominent Japanese businessmen. They continue to analyze his comments in this context despite statements he has made, subsequent to the initial burst of publicity, which attempt to disassociate Japanese business, in general, from these views. Comments on Mr. Ishihara's views are often placed in the context of his political ambitions—he is reported to have a desire to be Prime Minister. Neither Morita nor Ishihara speaks in any official capacity for the government nor for the people of Japan. However, a careful examination of their semiprivately held views [they did not expect their book to be translated into English] reveals a mindset vis-à-vis the United States which should be considered in the formulation of U.S. technological policy. This is especially true if it should turn out that their mindset is common to others in Japan who more directly affect Japanese technological policy. This is the environment in which U.S. policies affecting high technology, in general, and supercomputing systems and their components, specifically, are evolving. . . . Many CEOs recognize the truth of the scathing critique of the American system provided by Mr. Morita. But they are not in a position as individual industrial leaders to do anything that will affect the very structure of the ground rules under which they operate. This must be done in the halls of Congress and in the Executive Branch of Government. It must be done in such a way as to strengthen those areas in which America is weak and to preserve those areas in which American is strong. Anything less belies our heritage.

It is late in the history of human development for Japan to argue that the United States must make allowances for Japan's inability to open its markets because Japan has saddled itself with an antiquated distribution system. It is also inappropriate for the United States merely to threaten the closing of American markets to Japan unless it has the fortitude to carry through in a dramatic way on the threats. As James Fallows argues (*2*), Japan and the United States need to do each other a favor: they each need to create a crisis to which the other's cumbersome political system must react immediately. Numerous commissions, boards, and task forces have made cogent analyses of and powerful recommendations about these subjects (*3*). We must also remember that our greatest tool to encourage better outcomes in relations with Japan is access to our market. We should use that tool to encourage responsible behavior to our mutual benefit.

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REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Copies of the analysis and the retranslation may be obtained from Deborah Rudolph, IEEE/USA, 1828 L Street, NW, Suite 1202, Washington, DC 20036–5104.
2. J. Fallows, *Washington Post*, 4 March 1990, p. C1.
3. President's Commission on Industrial Competitiveness, *Global Competition: The New Reality* (Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1985); President's Commission on Industrial Competitiveness, *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Defense Semiconductor Dependency* (Defense Science Board, Washington, DC, 1987); *Semiconductors: A Strategic Industry of Risk* (National Advisory Committee on Semiconductors, Arlington, VA, 1989).

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Foot Dragging on Metrification

In August 1988, President Reagan signed the Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act. This act amended the 1975 Metric Conversion Act, stating that by 1992 all federal agencies must, to the extent economically feasible, use the metric system of measurement in their purchases, grants, and other business. Congress views metrification as important because most world trade involves metric products. Consequently, our reliance on the English system of weights and measures (such as inch, pound, or pint) compromises our international competitiveness and limits the market for our products. It also puts us out of step with the rest of the world. Indeed, the United States is the only industrialized nation with a nonmetric measurement system. Only two other countries in the world (Liberia and South Yemen) do not use metric measurements. Since the U.S. government is the world's largest buyer of all goods (including furniture, clothes, food, and fuel), metrification of the U.S. government would stimulate metrification by all Americans. This would have far reaching benefits because the metric system is much simpler to use than the English system of measurement.

Unfortunately, the U.S. government is doing a poor job of converting to the metric system. A recent report (*1*) issued by the General Accounting Office (GAO) states that "federal agencies have not demonstrated a commitment to conversion," despite the fact that governmental officials consider the conversion "inevitable."

The GAO report concludes that "serious difficulties may delay or prevent a timely and comprehensive conversion to metric." It's certainly not because the metric system is difficult to learn. Indeed, even illiterate curbside vendors in other countries understand the metric system, and U.S. citizens have no trouble working with metric-based items already common in our society (such as 35-millimeter film, 2-liter bottles of soda, 60-watt light bulbs, and 10 kilometer—"10 k"—runs). I conclude that lack of governmental leadership is a major reason for our stalled progress toward metrification, and I call on governmental agencies to meet the mandate of the amended Metric Conversion Act by implementing use of the metric system within 2 years.

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REFERENCES

1. *Metric Conversion: Plans, Progress, and Problems in the Federal Government* (Report to the Chairman, Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, U.S. House of Representatives, by the General Accounting Office, Washington, DC, 1990).

Cleaner Air

Philip H. Abelson's 18 May editorial, "New technology for cleaner air" (p. 793) aptly describes the integrated gasification combined-cycle process (IGCC), demonstrated at the Cool Water Project in California, as an attractive alternative to conventional coal-fired power plants that use scrubbers. It is no coincidence that today more than 50 large utilities here and abroad are actively studying IGCC as an environmentally superior, and potentially more economic, way to produce electric power in the 1990s and beyond.

Cool Water's success has sparked the utilities' interest, and the Electric Power Research Institute was a major player in the project. But so were the other financial participants—Southern California Edison, Texaco, General Electric, Bechtel, and the Japan Cool Water Program Partnership. Looking to future markets, all played a part.

It might also be noted that Cool Water was partially funded (in the form of a price guarantee on the syngas produced) not by the Department of Energy, as the editorial seems to suggest, but by the U.S. Synthetic

Fuels Corporation. The corporation also partially funded similar IGCC technology—the Dow Syngas Project, which is in operation at Plaquemine, Lousiana.

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Postdocs at Stanford

Recently, a letter from three postdoctoral fellows at the Stanford University School of Medicine, Clint Makino, Jeffrey Karpen, and Markus Meister (8 June, p. 1176) criticized the Stanford University School of Medicine's policy of classifying postdoctoral fellows as students. I shall not comment on the wisdom of federal policies that tax tuition grants, but I sympathize with the fellows' frustration and concern upon learning that routine waivers of tuition are now to be treated as taxable income.

Stanford University's decision 15 years ago to classify postdoctoral fellows as students, rather than employees, was made after thoughtful deliberation and was intended to ensure equitable and fair treatment of fellows, who are a valued and numerically substantial component of our medical center's community of scholars. In many medical schools, fellows' status and benefits depend totally on their sources of stipendiary support; and being neither faculty, nor students, nor staff, they represent for all practical purposes a largely disenfranchised group of migrant workers. For example, while fellows paid through sponsored research grants might enjoy health benefits comparable to the coverage offered regular employees, others with individual fellowships, whether from American or foreign funding sources, most often are "on their own" in financing health insurance for themselves and their families. Such disparity in access to fundamental benefits is, in our judgment, inequitable and poses substantial potential risk to the affected individuals.

Stanford's decision was made to treat all fellows alike, and I believe they have benefited from the policy in significant ways. There may be some disadvantages to this policy, including fellows' disdain for the very idea of being designated "students"; but on the margin, I believe the benefits significantly outweigh the disadvantages and they should not be dismissed summarily.

My colleagues and I are distressed by the current situation, and we are actively studying the options that might be available for ameliorating the financial burdens on our postdoctoral fellows. As we proceed with this inquiry, we shall be sure to communicate our findings and our conclusions to the involved faculty and fellows.

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Erratum: In the Perspective "The human genome and other initiatives" by Bernard D. Davis and colleagues (27 July, p. 342), several sentences and a number were incorrectly printed. The first two sentences in the third from the last paragraph on page 343 should have read, "Although all the goals of the HGP, except for the complete sequencing of the human genome, are clearly worthwhile, there is concern over its competition with other research for funds at a time of financial stringency, and doubt that its scientific benefits justify its rapid expansion and its organization in the pattern of big science. The broadness of the dissatisfaction is illustrated by the virtual unanimity of the departmental faculty that is endorsing this statement." In the next paragraph, the second sentence should have read, "However, it is not obvious that these activities justify support for the HGP at a level equivalent to over 5% of all other biomedical research."

Erratum: The map accompanying the article "Amazon biodiversity" (News & Comment, 15 June, p. 1305) should have been credited to Conservation International.