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The Saving of Yosemite

The news recently carried stories of the Secretary of the Interior's success in thwarting a Japanese firm from taking control of Yosemite National Park. The Secretary, by some timely Japan-bashing, got the Japanese corporation to sell back its rights at a very reduced fee. Elation was expressed by some over this great victory.

The action of the Secretary of the Interior was clearly prophetic. Anyone with half a brain would know what the Japanese had in mind. They would certainly remove Yosemite, rock by rock, tree by tree, waterfall by waterfall, and mountain by mountain to Japan, and there, nestled at the foot of Mount Fuji, it would create one of the great tourist attractions of all time. Global sightseers would no longer even be interested in coming to the United States, and tourism, like television sets, cameras, and binoculars, would become another Japanese monopoly.

This kind of situation had to be avoided at all costs, and extreme measures were probably needed. On the other hand, there are those, like this editor, who feel the cost was very high. The idea that the Japanese, with a noted record of efficiency in management, long-range point of view, and high quality of merchandise, would take over from the Yosemite Park and Curry Company (which had in general done a good job) was indeed attractive. The park organization might actually run like a Japanese car—low maintenance, high efficiency, and excellent service. The average visitor to the park would only note that it was running well and would not realize that the profit was going to a Japanese corporation instead of to the who-cares-about-profits-we're-just-acting-for-the-national-good U.S. corporation. Therein, of course, lies the rub. The Japanese corporation would probably make a lot of money, and some people would resent that, but again, the conventional wisdom may be wrong.

If the Japanese made a lot of money at Yosemite, they might think that they could make money in other operations of the U.S. government, and one of the first that comes to mind is the U.S. Postal Service. A Japanese takeover of the Postal Service might be the last chance for the American people to get their mail on time, or even at all. The postal rates are going up again, racing ahead of the cost of living index by leaps and bounds, at the same time that mail delivery services keep going down. This inverse correlation probably has its origin in the wonderful managerial practices of the U.S. government. The chairman of the commission that sets postal rates was asked whether or not there had been an examination of the efficiency of the Postal Service before the current hikes were approved, and he replied that that his commission was not authorized to investigate efficiency. Their job was to look at the figures and say whether the actual expenses justified the increase. Separating those who are paying the bills from those who are running the operation is a management device that I am sure would send shivers up the spine of any intelligent Japanese businessman, but it fits in perfectly with the savings and loan fiscal policy of the U.S. government.

The only hope for the average American who wants to receive anything but junk mail on time is for a selfish Japanese corporation to assume responsibility and make "unconscionable" profits. Thus a reversal of the Yosemite decision might lure the Japanese into running the Postal Service, and they might even be encouraged to take over the Internal Revenue Service, where the inefficiencies are probably even more glaring than at the Postal Service. Alas, the Yosemite episode is likely to deter the Japanese from trying any further to make sense out of U.S. government operations. The most obvious solution to the Yosemite mess is to compensate the Japanese for our insulting behavior by giving them the Postal Service and letting them run it with their usual management skills. If the Japan-bashers win, there is still perhaps one last desperate way out of this situation. The Yosemite Park and Curry Company must have much less to do than it ever had, and it has an organization of appreciable size that has actually made money in a bureaucratic atmosphere. Therefore, if worse comes to worst, it is conceivable that the Postal Service and the Internal Revenue Service can be turned over to the Yosemite Park and Curry Company. The average postal worker would probably prefer to work for an efficient corporation of any nationality but, politically, conservatism and provincialism will always triumph over innovation and magnanimity.—DANIEL E. KOSHLAND, JR.