

Nagoya American Studies Summer Seminar
International Relations Workshop I
July 29, 2007, 13:30–15:30

KAN HIDEKI

SEINAN JO GAKUIN UNIVERSITY

Presentation: “Elbert D. Thomas: Forgotten Internationalist Missionary, Scholar, New Deal Senator, Japanophile, and Visionary” by Iguchi Haruo
Comments by Hayashi Yoshikatsu

Hayashi’s comments and questions:

1. In relation to Iguchi’s remark on “American tutelage” to guide Japan towards more peaceful behavior in the late 1930s, Hayashi asked why Thomas thought this was possible.

Iguchi’s reply: In the late 1930s, Thomas’s view was “more of wishful thinking.” His thinking was that war would be disastrous, so that Japan should conform to international norms to avoid it. He hoped that such persuasion combined with pressure would make Japan behave more peacefully. Given the lack of evidence to prove it, the general impact of Thomas’s activities in the years 1935–36 must be analyzed by gathering more documents.

2. During the war Thomas urged the Japanese to follow the ideals laid down by the Meiji constitution. It seems, however, that his reform principles and ideas had changed from returning to the Meiji constitutional system to making Japan conform to the US-led world order based on liberal democracy. If so, why did his change of ideas take place in such a short period of time?

Iguchi’s reply: During the war Thomas did not articulate what sort of reform should take place in Japan after the war, leaving the status of the Emperor and the power structure open-ended. However, he was not the same person after the war. He did advocate the dissolution of the zaibatsu as well as the need to change the Meiji constitution.

3. Concerning Japan’s decision to surrender, Thomas referred to “the decision by the Emperor and the willingness of the Japanese people to embrace surrender based on their trust of Americans.” Hayashi asked Iguchi to clarify why Thomas regarded Japanese trust of Americans as one of the major reasons for surrender.

Iguchi’s reply: Thomas’s remark was made in 1948, so he was reading back to the past in the context of the “reverse course” as well as what was happening in

mainland China. In 1948, it seemed to him that many Japanese tended to trust the Americans and it was a major remaining factor in Japan. Thomas did not mention anything about the Soviet factor in Japan's surrender but he did mention that the Emperor paid attention to the atomic bombs as a factor.

4. Iguchi mentioned that Thomas's perception of Japan and the Japanese reflected humanitarianism and missionary internationalism that overlapped with Wilsonian internationalism. Hayashi wanted the presenter to elaborate more on the relationship between the two aspects of internationalism.

Iguchi's reply: Thomas was a member of the Academic Society specializing in international law. He believed that respect for international law and the rule of law were important in creating international order and stability. He was also interested in promoting American ideas and ideals abroad. In this sense, his internationalism overlapped with the elements of Wilsonian internationalism.

Andrew Rotter's questions:

1. Rotter inquired if Thomas was reading the anthropological literature like Ruth Benedict's about the Japanese that was used during the wartime by policymakers to understand the enemy. Their work was historically to suggest that the Japanese had a singular, particular culture, often fomenting a certain approach to Japan.

Iguchi's reply: Thomas's view of the Japanese was that they had a different culture and their own view of the world. However, he also believed that the Japanese had commonalities with others. In 1943 he spearheaded a movement in the US to save Jews in Nazi Germany, which put President Franklin D. Roosevelt in an awkward position. He argued that Washington should intervene in the German concentration camps. He was also concerned with the predicament of the Japanese-American citizens during the war. These activities had to do with his humanitarianism.

2. Did Thomas have any influence on James Byrnes, Joseph Grew and Harry Truman? Did he matter in making policy toward Japan? In this connection, what is the role of a biography? Are individuals involved in policymaking overmatched by institutions or cultures? Do individual activities reflect anything about large intellectual or social trends? Does Thomas stand for anything?

Iguchi's reply: As for Thomas's relationships with the key policymakers, he needs to further look into archival materials. But a biography is relevant for a better understanding of US foreign relations. His paper focused more on the Thomas's discourse and thinking rather than the impact of his activities upon the decision-making process. However, his presentation about Thomas was part of his larger project to paint continuity and discontinuity in US-Japan relations through such figures as Kenneth Colegrove, Edwin O. Reischauer, and Mike Masaoka.

Questions and comments were also raised from the floor but unfortunately there is no space for introducing them here. Some of them were similar to

Hayashi's or Rotter's, otherwise, answers can be found by reading Higuchi's paper. However, a couple of questions from the floor are worth mentioning.

1. The "Japan hands" tried to promote the mythical idea as if the "real Japanese" exist. They also tried to find in the activities of the Japanese-Americans Citizens League, a model minority who were forced into the concentration camps but nevertheless loyal to the US. It seems that Thomas was also a member of one of those political coalitions who tried to promote an idea of the "real Japanese." The assumption here is that if they were given their chance, Japan would become non-threatening to the US and the world. This kind of image has a strong class component, given the background of those who tried to promote it.

Iguchi's reply: Thomas had his own idea of "model Japanese." He believed that the middle class Japanese would be more open to the outside world. He thought during wartime that most Japanese and Germans are good people and that a majority of the Japanese would not follow the small minority of the military in control of wartime Japan. Get rid of the Japanese perpetrators and put the middle class people back in charge of politics, and then a strong middle class Japan would bring stability and order to the world.

2. Iguchi pointed out that Thomas in the 1930s regarded Japan as a stabilizing force in Asia. What did he think about Japanese imperialism in Korea and Taiwan? Was he going to leave it the way it was or did he have any proposal to change things?

Iguchi's reply: Thomas was not necessarily critical of Japanese imperialism in Korea and Taiwan in the 1930s. However, when the Roosevelt administration was moving toward decolonization of Asia, Thomas went along with the president's policy including Korea and Taiwan. On the other hand, Thomas was critical of Japanese imperialism in China beginning with the Manchurian Incident in 1931.

As Rotter commented, and others would agree, Iguchi's paper showed that Congress tended to be neglected in the study of US foreign relations and that it reminded us of the importance of the role of Congress and Senators like Elbert Thomas.