Kiyoshi Kurokawa speech to the ACCJ
Tokyo American Club, Tuesday, February 8th 2011

PART 1: Kurokawa as ACCJ Person of the Year – what does that mean?

Thank you, Mike. Good afternoon everyone.

When I first heard the ACCJ had named me Person of the Year, I was pleasantly surprised.

But as I thought about it… I wondered: why would the ACCJ do this?

Surely, the Chamber's mission is to advance American business interests by cultivating relations with powerful interests in Japanese society: politicians, bureaucrats, business leaders like Keidanren and leading academics.

Well… I'm on the record saying 'straight, thus often rude things' about the establishments.

So I wondered: how could it advance ACCJ interests to honor a maverick like me? Was this a brave move… or a foolish one?

In the end, I decided this was actually a smart and generous move.

I don't flatter myself that this is about me as an individual. It's an endorsement of what I have been saying and doing.

ACCJ members can tell that what I say makes good sense, because most of it is self-evident to anyone outside the Japanese system.

It is a generous move because it shows that you care more about the long-term health of this society than currying favor with entrenched interests.

It's smart because… although you may not be citizens of Japan… you are certainly stakeholders in our society.

I know many of you have lived in Japan for 10 years or more. Your success depends on Japan being a vibrant society, a dynamic market and a dependable ally.

You want to see Japan back on its feet.

To me, this is indeed smart, generous… and, yes, maybe a bit brave. So I thank you for this honor… and for your engagement in Japanese society.

In return, I've volunteered as an "ambassador" for the ACCJ this year – opening doors and making introductions wherever I can. Today, I've invited several distinguished guests, who I hope will join the Chamber.

PART 2: What is Kurokawa saying, anyway?

I told you that I've said some rude things about people in various positions of power. But I haven't told you why I act in such an un-Japanese manner.

So what is the argument behind all this?

Japan is a country with great native strengths. We are a serious and hard-working people who like to do things right. Most of us are honest and compassionate. We have amazing craft skills.

Since the Meiji Era we have proven our ability to adapt and learn new skills.

When we work together and point in the right direction, we are capable of miracles. Our postwar economic growth stands as an example to the developing world.

We are eager to participate in the global community... and we have a lot to offer the world in arts, science, technology, medicine and every other field. We have tremendous potential.

But we are not living up to our own potential. For 20 years now – 20 years! – we have been drifting with no sense of mission or purpose. We may well have lost the potential talents of a generation or two.

Meanwhile, all our neighbors are racing ahead. So it's time for us to face up to some tough and fundamental questions.

Why do we continue to drift?

My own diagnosis... is... that we drift because we have produced – at all levels of society – a system that very effectively inhibits change.

It starts in kindergarten and elementary school ... where we stamp out any non-standard qualities in our children: rebelliousness and other forms of deviance, but also creativity, ambition and appetite for risk.

Through junior and high school we teach our young that rote memorization in pursuit of top marks is what matters most in life.

Post-secondary education, which – like high school – is devoid of interactivity. We don't learn to debate. We don't learn to think critically. We only learn to memorize, regurgitate and conform.

This pressure on our children comes from all sides: from anxious parents and schools alike.

As a teacher I see this all the time, and it makes me angry. When doors open for bright kids to study abroad... they shrink from amazing opportunities... because often Mom says it's too risky.

In this harsh economy, our kids, just like their parents, have become more and more risk-averse. So they go to job interviews in identical suits… giving identical answers to predictable questions.

It they manage to get a job, they're so grateful… they don't question what they're told: don't rock the boat; don't take risks; don't try to change anything.

After 10 years, all their youthful spirit is safely extinguished. They're happy to ride the escalator in an orderly fashion.

There is no pushing and shoving to get ahead… because skills and achievement are not what get you promoted. Keep your head down and take no risks – that's the key to success.

What happens when people like this get to the top of the escalator?

Knowing only how to follow, they have little concept of leadership… no appetite for risk… no faculty for critical thinking or debate… nor ability to form policy.

They have only an instinctive ability to move toward consensus. And where does consensus form? ----- Around the status quo, of course!

That's why we see at the top of Japanese society – in government, industry and academia – nothing but paralysis.

Some say all this is the natural and traditional way of Japan – that the status quo is our destiny. I emphatically reject that point of view.

The great advances of the Meiji Era were not made by people wedded to tradition. Our postwar miracle was not achieved by people afraid to try something new.

When we've done great things… it has come from our ability to adapt and innovate.

The problem is that we very deliberately used the fruits of our postwar miracle to create, at all levels of society, structures that are impervious to change.

We are… the victims of our own success.

But this construct, this social paradigm, is not who we are… it is not our inherent nature nor our tradition… it is what we have become.

PART 3: What I learned in America

Until 1969, I was immersed in Japan's postwar social paradigm.

As a medical doctor and graduate of the University of Tokyo I could look forward to life-long security as a member of the nation's elite.

At age 32, all I had to do was ride patiently up the faculty escalator.

But I accepted an offer to go for two years to Philadelphia as research associate at the University of Pennsylvania medical school, and then on my way back, moved to Los Angeles to work at UCLA for one year.

And that experience changed my life.

When my three years were up... I shocked my colleagues and family with the news that I planned to stay in America... despite having no future prospects there.

"You're crazy," they told me. "You'll lose your place in the hierarchy."

And by all conventional measures it was crazy. I burned my bridges and traded a secure path for an uncertain future.

I had to start over from zero, learning English and re-doing the exhausting process of qualifying for a medical license.

But I was extremely fortunate to have many American friends and mentors who helped me overcome all the obstacles.

Coming from Japan, the American academic environment was a pleasant shock.

At Todai, we would nod seriously at whatever the senior professors said – even if it was obviously stupid. At Penn and UCLA, professors were treated with respect... but no one was afraid to challenge what they said.

In Japan, we avoid debate because it's confrontational. But in America I learned that debate – and logical argument – is the key to learning... and the way to dig for truth.

You can't just accept what you hear. You have to kick it from all sides to see if it holds up. Once you learn to see issues from every perspective, you begin to think both logically and creatively.

If all this sounds stunningly obvious to you... it's not at all obvious in Japan. In this country, many stupid decisions are made by consensus... because no one at the table has the guts to say, "Excuse me, but that is... BS or '*bullshit*'."

Meritocracy was another eye-opener.

In Japan, you get ahead by keeping your head down… never taking risks. In the States I found that you're judged by your achievements. You need to be heads-up at all times… and work like hell, but you enjoy it, because you know it is for you.

If you reach the top of the medical pyramid in Japan, you're sure to be the graduate of an elite university who has patiently waited his turn until the retirement age of 60 or so. In America, in the same position, you may find a 45-year-old woman from India who got there through sheer brilliance and hard work.

Once I got the hang of this system I was able to thrive. And my skill as a medical doctor in an academic institution advanced much further than if I'd stayed put in the Japanese system. Within 10 years, at age 42 and thanks to the support of my friends, I was able to become a full professor in the faculty of medicine at UCLA.

That never happens in Japan.

Some might argue that our Japanese way of doing things is better suited to our nature. Based on my own experience, I think that's utter nonsense. Our Japanese system merely ensures a consistent level of mediocrity.

America was very good to me… and I enjoyed living there. But after 15 years I began to miss my homeland. And it was an exciting time: Japan was at the beginning of reaching its height of its wealth and economic power.

That made it hard to refuse an offer from Todai in 1983: to come back as an associate professor., and not a 'professor'. But since I wasn't sure I could fit in, I started with a two-year commitment.

At a time when Japan was walking tall and Americans were studying Japanese management methods, it was hard to tell people here they were doing things the wrong way. Especially at Todai, where people are very confident in their opinions.

But by that point I was a product of my experience in American medicine – accustomed to debate and intolerant of anything but the highest standard.

So, to the annoyance of colleagues, I went about dissecting sacred cows… challenging the profession to meet the global benchmarks in our field. But fighting with the old guard was pointless.

By contrast, teaching the young is energizing and inspiring. And it was my students who really energized me. They were brilliant and full of enthusiasm… and it broke my heart to watch the system grind them down. So I fought for them.

Gradually, it emerged that many colleagues were ready to embrace change if someone would lead the way. So instead of going back to the U.S., in 1989 I was made full professor and department chairman…

Somehow – annoying though I was – I made it back on to the escalator and into a department chair eight years before I turned 60, Todai's retirement age.

This strengthened my resolve, so I continued my efforts to shake up the medical establishment. And a year before I reach my retirement, I was given the opportunity – as dean of medicine at Tokai University – to shake up an entire medical school.

This was 1996, just as the internet was taking root. The web allowed us to connect students to the world of medical knowledge. And e-mail gave me the chance, as dean, to correspond directly with students whom I sent abroad for clinical clerkship. Almost 20 out of a class of 100 in their junior year.

I might have served out my time at Tokai and gone into a comfortable retirement... but for a door that opened on a whole new career.

In 1997, I was elected to join the Science Council of Japan; elected as vice president in 2000, then from 2003 as president.

With counterparts around the world – such as the U.S. National Academy of Science – we worked to coordinate global efforts to tackle the big scientific questions facing humanity, such as climate change, global health and genetic research.

Through this work, I saw the potential Japan has in science – and the obstacles that prevent us from achieving it. So, in a very un-Japanese way I began speaking out.

Someone must have heard... because two weeks after my Science Council term ended in 2006... I got a phone call from the new Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe. He made me Special Adviser to the Cabinet, first such person as a scientist.

Since then, I've been an evangelist for change. What I say does not please everyone. But in our current circumstances, more and more are willing to listen.

We need to fundamentally change the way we make decisions – in government, business, medicine and academia – replacing timid consensus with bold debate.

Across the board, we need to develop leadership and entrepreneurial skills.

We need to change the path of advancement – replacing the single-track, hierarchical, seniority escalator with a competitive ladder.

Above all, we need to rebuild our education system from the ground up.

We need an education system that nurtures and cultivates leaders and entrepreneurs: independent thinkers.

To do that, we must stop suppressing the natural creativity, the curiosity and the ambition of our children.

It's not rocket science. We can make great strides in 10 years – the time it takes for a child to go from middle school into the workforce.

We can get even quicker results with college freshmen – many of whom still have a pulse left after high-school.

But where are we going to get the software for all this?

Where are we going to learn how to debate, how to think critically and creatively, how to be entrepreneurs? Where are we going to learn how to change?

PART 4: What we need from America

About the time I returned to Japan, Ambassador Mike Mansfield famously said, "Japan is America's most important relationship – *bar none*.

This was big news: the first time the U.S. had ever given Japan anything like public respect. Every newspaper had a little box explaining the meaning of "bar none."

Whether or not the same is true today, let me say this: America is, *now more than ever*, Japan's most important bilateral relationship – [ダンゼンに].

America has been the most reliable source of "gai-atsu" in modern Japanese history. And America remains the best source for the kinds of change we need.

This time, however, we can't rely on the U.S. to send a fleet of Black Ships. We have to seek out the best of America by ourselves.

Fortunately, America is willing to teach this to anyone with good SAT scores.

As President Obama noted in his recent State of the Union, more foreign students go to universities in America than any other country. And for good reason.

American colleges teach exactly the skill-set our youngsters miss out on: critical thinking, creative problem-solving, entrepreneurial ambition, et cetera.

If only we could send just five percent of young Japanese to US colleges and universities… we could change our mindset almost overnight. And that's not so far-fetched.

Look what South Korea is doing. With one-third of Japan's population, Korea has nearly 250,000 young people studying overseas – and nearly 70,000 in the U.S.

Per capita, this is equivalent to Japan sending three-quarters of a million students abroad – and 200,000 to the United States.

The sad reality is that less than 30,000 young Japanese are now enrolled in U.S. colleges – and the number is shrinking.

Behind this, we have parents who see overseas study as risky and employers who fear returnees "won't fit in."

As a result, our monocultural companies are going to face Korean rivals driven by globally savvy young managers, fluent in English, with U.S. degrees in business, science and engineering.

Who would you bet on to win?

Fortunately, our young people have another chance for global exposure that doesn't require leaving home – and the ACCJ is at the center of it.

In the 1980s, Japanese graduates wouldn't even consider working for a foreign company. Many feared prospective fathers-in-law would reject a fellow who worked for some dubious alien outfit... like IBM or Exxon.

But in the '90s, young Japanese began to discover that the best foreign firms offer greater scope for advancement to those with brains, skill and ambition.

Meanwhile, Japanese women found they faced fewer barriers at global companies.

So today we have more and more Japanese employed by American companies. And in this I see a great chance for ACCJ members to do well by doing good.

You can scoop up Japan's best and brightest if you offer a career path that is clearly different from domestic rivals.

Tell students not to show up for interviews in those clone suits... and to forget their rehearsed answers. Recruit the kids who've made the effort to study overseas... and the ones with weird hair.

Once you've hired them, put great effort into opening their minds and unlocking their creativity. In their first year, assign them to work anywhere but Japan.

Until now, I think Japan has tolerated foreign direct investment as a reciprocal necessity to open doors overseas for home-grown companies.

We need to break that mindset... and embrace the positive input foreign investors bring to our society.

Already, that has profoundly affected attitudes on women in the workplace. And I hope it's eroding the paradigm of seniority based promotion of single-track, hierarchical 'fragile' male society.

ACCJ members: we need you in Japan. We need your entrepreneurial energy. We need the new ideas you bring us. We need you to challenge our fixed thinking.

We need you to be engaged in our society. So I want to offer you an opportunity to engage... to get involved in tackling the challenges I've outlined today.

A small group of us have launched an initiative we call "Impact Japan." I invite you to visit us at www.impactjapan.org

Very briefly, our aim is to change Japan... by cultivating a new generation of leaders, thinkers, doers and entrepreneurs.

If you get involved, you'll find yourself in the company of some of the most dynamic, forward-looking and committed people in this new country.

The origins of Impact Japan serve to illustrate the tremendous depth of our bilateral relationship. This is not an initiative of any government. It is the brainchild of individual Japanese and Americans working together.

Let me leave you with a thought about the real significance of the Japan-US relationship. I'm not the first to say this, but it's a thought that deserves to resonate:

That our two peoples were able to go... in the span of one lifetime... from the bitterest enemies that ever were... to the best of friends... is the clearest testament... to the greatness of both the United States and Japan.

Thank you.

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