



Yamagata's Legacy

Japanese political inertia is internationally notorious. Yet few in or outside the country are aware of the powerful influence of a 19th century politician whose ideas arguably have paralysed any hope of Japanese reform

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A first column in a new magazine devoted to Japan. What better opportunity to bring to the attention of the world a neglected Japanese figure who ought to be remembered, along with Bismarck, Lenin, Mao, and the two Roosevelts, as one of the creators of 20th century political reality. His name, Yamagata Aritomo, may only register with those who have read Japanese history. Even in Japanese minds he may not be more than a shadow, dwarfed by Ito Hirobumi among the Meiji period architects of Japanese modernization. But he deserves to be known as the creator of what, in essence, has remained Japan's political system. In the end, what the world has been learning to think of as Japan's lack of political will, should be blamed on Yamagata. His legacy endures in a more immediate sense today than, say, Bismarck's legacy does in Germany.

The 'absence of political will' explanation is the most popular when foreigners in business, government, or the media try to make sense of Tokyo's conspicuous inability to act when situations cry out for urgent measures. This take on Japanese paralysis is easier to live with than my explanation for it: the fact that there is no Japanese government. That last notion is, of course, diplomatically not acceptable; and as long as a whole series of institutions exist in Tokyo that collectively have the label 'government' pasted on them it is not quite compelling either. It is nevertheless difficult to avoid the undiplomatic conclusion once you take a close enough look to observe that while Tokyo may choke with administration, practically no governing goes on there. As in most countries, bureaucrats administer, i.e. look after the day-to-day running of the country, and as everywhere else have political masters placed in control over them;

ministers and other parliamentarians who are expected to work out the political framework that should ideally guide administrative decisions. But there Japan stops resembling all other major countries.

While in theory Japanese cabinet ministers have much power, and will make a great show of it on the surface, in practice their power does not include the capacity for any significant steering of their ministries. The Japanese prime minister and his cabinet do not form a center of political accountability, they do not constitute an entity capable of shifting policy priorities for the country. Yamagata saw to that a century ago.

To be sure, Yamagata was born to political circumstances that make his huge mark on the world's political scene less than a miraculous feat. The confusion as to who, in the end, ought to have the right to call the shots in Japan goes back to several centuries of civil war in the dim past.

The Tokugawa military dictatorship, that ended incessant fighting, kept itself going for no less than two-and-half centuries through a system of remarkable political inventions (incorporation of the family into the power system, institutionalization of systemic hostage arrangements, and a Soviet-type nomenklatura avant-la-lettre). But it did not provide the institutional foundation for a modern state, along with ideas associated with the concept of a mandate for rule. The Meiji reformers, for all their acumen and enthusiasm, did not finish the job of creating those underpinnings either. Concern for their own politically privileged positions prevented them from constructing mechanisms enabling an uncontested transfer of power from one bunch of rulers to the next. Because of that failure, their oligarchy broke up into feuding elements, which

experienced ups and downs through decades of renewed militarism before settling down into a sort of confederation of agencies of governance; besides ministries also such entities as the police and the elaborate business bureaucracies. Yamagata had much to do with that later part of the story. His career was extraordinary by any standard. Until his star sunk in 1920, a couple of years before his death, he had been the single most powerful political boss for roughly a quarter century. During that period no prime minister was chosen without his consent. Yamagata's more easily traceable exploits alone ought to have earned him, rather than Ito, a regular entry in all the world's concise encyclopedias.

Yamagata was many things: chief of the army, minister of war, minister of justice, the head of the most powerful group of bureaucrats in the Naimusho, and (twice) prime minister. He started in 1877 by defeating the rebellion of Saigo Takamori, the most significant challenge to Meiji government. He then practically designed Japan's modern army and, inspired by a year-long stay in Germany, introduced a military conscription system. This was crucially important for the 'samuraization' of Japanese society; the spreading of samurai notions of strict obedience, duty and honor among all Japanese—accomplished by erasing all distinctions between samurai and common people and by militarizing school children. In 1890 he came up with a law that permitted only generals and admirals on active duty to serve in the military positions of the cabinet. Setting the stage for events that gained Japan its notoriety in the first half of the 20th century, Yamagata established a general staff that could command independently from the cabinet. Civilian interference in military affairs had thereby become impossible. He then managed to move from the military to the civilian bureaucracy, without losing his dominant influence among the generals and admirals. That placed him in position to design Japan's modern bureaucracy; rearranging several government agencies, especially the hugely powerful Naimusho and the police, in such a way that they became mostly tools for his purposes. Through thinking up regulations that eventually became the famous *Imperial Rescript to Soldiers and Sailors* issued in 1882—a code of national ethics hammered into the national consciousness—Yamagata also made a huge contribution to the *kokutai* ideology, which set up the country and its emperor as objects of religious devotion.

Most importantly, Yamagata remained obsessed, throughout his career, with fear that politicians might gain actual power. He saw it as his greatest task to ensure that the sacrosanct emperor and the military remained shielded from any parliamentary interference. Through mostly behind-the-scene maneuvering, he consolidated a system of governance in which elected politicians would be forever marginalized and neutralized. The lamentably neglected Canadian scholar of modern Japanese history, E.H. Norman (who for decades was pushed into academic oblivion by

Edwin O. Reischauer), summed it up: "Profoundly suspicious of popular opinion, he detested above all political parties of any stripe, even the most abject and reactionary. Any movement organized to represent the interests of people at large, no matter how inadequate or restricted, stirred his fiercest animosity."

The crucial moment for his single most decisive measure that created the fundamental Japanese political condition causing headaches today, came when Yamagata became prime minister for the second time in 1898. This followed the first cabinet formed by party politicians, under Okuma Shigenobu; the first-ever Japanese cabinet in which voters had had some influence. It was only allowed to last some four months. At that time moderate politicians were pleading for a system that would give them access to executive power. They believed that it was not good for Japan that only graduates of the law department of Tokyo University were considered for high appointment. Okuma had been very careful always to ignore such demands. But, after regaining the premiership, Yamagata spread false rumors that Okuma had made concessions to the disgruntled politicians, and convinced the country that politicians forming cabinets would threaten national stability. He then devised a series of intricate directives that established arrangements which ensured that, technically, the elected representatives of the people could never control the power of the 'emperor's bureaucrats.' These measures have made themselves felt up until today.

History repeats

Yamagata's effect on Japan was comparable to that of Otto von Bismarck on Germany. After the creation of Bismarck's German Empire, German politicians could hardly function as politicians, which caused the political vacuum that eventually allowed the rise of Adolf Hitler. As it happened Yamagata was in Prussia, Bismarck's base, at roughly the same time Bismarck made his politically momentous moves, and it is easy to imagine how Yamagata discovered a major source of political inspiration. But Germany today is not Bismarck's Germany anywhere close to the way that Japan is still Yamagata's Japan.

What would have become of Japan without Yamagata? It could well have evolved into the constitutional monarchy, comparable to those in Europe, which quite a few Meiji period intellectuals had in mind. Also, the bureaucrats would not have been able to hide behind an emperor whose innately benevolent political will they were supposed to be carrying out—an imperial political will that was non-existent as far as practical matters were concerned. While Japanese politics underwent huge changes in the 20th century, Yamagata's legacy prevented the formation of a coordinating center once all the elder statesmen of the Meiji period had died.

The lack of coordination when circumstances call for it has,

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of course, not gone unnoticed in Tokyo, now the need for drastic remedial action in the economy and other areas becomes ever more obvious. So, in January of this year the Japanese central government was reorganized for the ostensible purpose of stimulating politicians to initiate policy, instead of leaving that to career bureaucrats. But that new system was in effect for only a few days when already there was criticism in the air, about the concept of a 'politician-led bureaucracy' being misinterpreted. Politicians, especially ministers and a newly named category of 'senior vice-ministers,' appeared—horror of horrors—to think that they are in rivalry with bureaucrats over jurisdiction. A crucial institution for the relatively smooth operation of the Japanese system are the preliminary meetings of administrative vice-ministers (the top bureaucrats at the various government agencies) just before Cabinet meetings. Those day-before meetings by the top bureaucrats approve the agenda of cabinet meetings in advance. Actual cabinet meetings are a formality, during which the ministers put their stamps on prepared documents and are not expected to bring up any new business. If they do, and say anything interesting at all, the career officials are likely to instruct the media not to mention such 'irregular speech' that is not part of the scenario they themselves have written.

On January 6 this year, at the first meeting of the newly named senior vice-ministers, some participants insisted that the preliminary meetings of the administrative vice ministers should be done away with. Stern was the rebuke directed at them by Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Kosei Ueno. He asked the senior vice-ministers to remember that those preliminary meetings had been held since 1886, and that they were necessary "to maintain the Cabinet's integrity"; indispensable to the stability of Japanese politics. He probably did not know it, but he was talking about one of many inventions devised by Yamagata to keep politicians out of the real Japanese government. Quite automatically and as a matter of course, and not at all questioned by commentary in the papers, the official was protecting Yamagata's legacy.

The Japanese elite, shaped by the political tradition that Yamagata established, has a history that repeats itself. One could compare it to a speeding train. The country runs marvelously for quite some time, and everyone gets excited by the power and the speed and then, suddenly, it runs off the rails. This elite with a history of derailing the country can do some

things very well. It contains many members with tremendous talent for organization. It preserves a decorum that keeps the population at a respectful distance, even when people no longer believe in its benevolence. And, connected with these two talents, it manages to maintain an order in society that creates the illusion of political stability. But without any control from politicians with a mandate for actually governing, this elite suffers from severe myopia. In fact, it sometimes appears to be entirely blind. Blind also to the only possible beginning of the necessary reforms this elite has long conceded are absolutely necessary.

'Reform' has recently become an amuletic word in Japan. No politician or commentator would dare contradict the contention that it cannot come too soon if the country is to be saved; they could not oppose it any more than they could be against world peace or motherhood. But only a handful have realized that to accomplish any meaningful reform they must first overcome Yamagata's legacy. And Japanese would-be reformists in the LDP—which is always misidentified as Japan's perennial 'ruling party'; since Yamagata ensured that politicians would not rule—invariably end up helping the most powerful group of bureaucrats in the Ministry of Finance to implement precisely those adjustments that the career officials hope can return them to that wonderful status quo that existed before the unpleasant developments of the last ten years. They will not see that the undesirable situation of today has come about through their own half-a-century-old status quo policies. Without any true external supervision, these bureaucrats are not forced to remember that it actually is a policy they are trying to hang on to; something that could be (and ought to be) replaced by new priorities.

Whatever went wrong, Japan's bureaucrats cannot acknowledge that this could have followed from any bureaucratic mistakes. Because they are not required to explain what they are doing, and because self-preservation has consequently become their overriding priority—one equated with the preservation of an orderly society—the most powerful bureaucratic clusters have strengthened their 'immune systems' to a point where effective political interference for giving them a new direction would require their partial destruction. No group has yet emerged with the political wherewithal, the imagination and, especially, the courage to undertake that patriotic action of undoing Yamagata's legacy.