

Decades of leadership compared in Japan, Italy

Machiavelli's Children: Leaders and Their Legacies in Italy and Japan

By Richard J. Samuels
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Japan's political and economic development has often been compared to that of Germany, whose institutions served as models after the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Richard J. Samuels, however, has chosen to compare Japan to Italy.

Samuels' premise is that Japan and Italy began to industrialize fairly late in the game, at about the same time in the mid-19th century. Both had the same sorts of natural resources—or lack thereof—and both went through approximately the same stages of modernization. However, the choices of their leaders have made them very different places today.

Samuels examines four developmental periods: the 19th century, the early 20th century, the Cold War and post-Cold War.

In the 19th century Japan and Italy were anxious to consolidate and become members of the “club” of modern nations. Both exploited their monarchies and attempted imperialism to promote a sense of nationalism in their populations. Samuels examines Count Camillo Benso di Cavour, Hirobumi Ito and Arimoto Yamagata as the decisionmakers who were ruthless in leading their countries through this stage.

Once a sense of statehood was established in both countries, there was a need to build wealth, and the next set of leaders—Alessandro Rossi, Toshimichi Okubo and Eiichi Shibusawa—took their turns at leadership.

Samuels argues that in the early 20th century the choices of Takashi Hara and Giovanni Giolitti led to the decline of liberalism and ultimately paved the way for fascism.

The interim step was corporatism. For Japan, Sanji Muto, Nobusuke Kishi and Gisuke Ayukawa helped to develop the zaibatsu, as well as the uniquely Japanese cooperative style of capitalism and the notion of “firm as family” that arguably perseveres even today. Rossi and Giovanni Agnelli missed similar opportunities in Italy.

While Italy was floundering economically, Benito Mussolini seized a political opportunity to be Italy's “total leader” and lead his country along the Fascist path. Meanwhile, politicians struggled for significance in an economically ascendant Japan.

After World War II Japan and Italy were defeated nations that struggled with occupation and the need to rebuild and reestablish themselves.

Leadership in this period fell to Alcide De Gasperi and Shigeru Yoshida, men widely regarded as lone wolves. Perhaps this is because they had to maintain the goodwill of their constituencies while also playing to the desires of the United States. In each case this involved occupying the po-



Shigeru Yoshida in 1953

litical center from the right. This right-leaning centrism endured in Japan with the rise of the Liberal Democratic Party.

Samuels examines Kishi's role in developing the “1955 System” that kept the LDP in power until the end of the Cold War. Given Kishi's pre-war history and the fact that he was even jailed for war

crimes, it is quite remarkable that he could reemerge with such profound impact. It is a credit to his ability to build and finance coalitions, as well as to his ability to refashion himself according to the circumstances.

In Italy, Amintore Fanfani used similar skills of reinvention, and also employed corruption to finance it.

When the Cold War ended, normalcy became the goal in both countries. In Italy, this resulted in a backlash against corruption and organized crime that saw prosecutors displace politicians on the public stage while in Japan it has been the bureaucrats who have been discredited as the economy has languished.

Without the U.S.-Soviet dichotomy the choices between left and right have taken on new meaning, only to reveal that each end of the spectrum has always contributed to the definition of the other. Achille Occhetto chose to evolve toward the right to keep the Communist Party relevant in Italy while Tetsuzo Fuwa's choice was for purity of ideology for the Japan Communist Party, at the expense of political gain.

Did the right fare any better? Arguably not. In Italy, Umberto Bossi attempted to create a regional agenda in the north, while media magnate-cum-politician Silvio Berlusconi's nationalist push sought to discredit the bureaucracy and the judiciary, but backfired amid allegations of conflict of interest due to his media control. In Japan, Ichiro Ozawa tried to consolidate the power of a new “center-right” only to find his efforts frustrated by rivals for power and his own inability to consult his allies.

But meanwhile, Shintaro Ishihara governs Tokyo with a nationalist agenda that is immensely popular.

Samuels offers excellent comparative analysis of each time period and each grouping of leaders. Samuels argues convincingly that their leadership styles are not necessarily cultural or national. In both countries there have been those who missed opportunities, those who exploited opportunities and those who created opportunities.

This is the essence of leadership. It is also what makes this history so interesting.