

SECRETARY POWELL: AN AMERICAN SAMURAI?

In the cinematographic history of any country there are some unforgettable characters who embody that society's core cultural values. Kambei, the leading character in Akira Kurosawa's masterpiece, "Seven Samurai" (1954) — a film that still influences directors half a century after its release — is such a hero for the Japanese people. The veteran samurai, the central figure of this work of art, exquisitely personifies the spirit of Bushido — the code of ethics of the samurai — which is still embraced and cherished by the Japanese nation.

In the mind of many of my compatriots, Secretary of State Powell recalls, for various reasons, the image of this samurai leader. First of all, there is a striking resemblance in the facial structures of Powell and Kambei (played by Takashi Shimura). More importantly, the two men's personalities project similar values.

"Seven Samurai" is about some farmers, viciously and periodically raided by cruel bandits, who hire seven "ronin" (masterless) samurai to defend their village. The setting is Japan's medieval Period of Warring States, an era marked by chaos, mistrust, cruelty, deceit and despair. Against this backdrop, the film portrays heroic humanism underpinned by courage, justice, benevolence, honor, fealty and self-denial. The power and beauty of this masterpiece, some critics say, lie in the contrast of the values of that historical era with those held by the seven masterless (and therefore

considered "losers" in those days) samurai, the movie's heroes.

These values are most fully exemplified in the taciturn Kambei, their leader. Kambei survives the fierce battles with the bandits and successfully defends the farmers and their village, but four samurai are killed. "And again we lost," says Kambei in the coda of the movie, one of the most moving and meditative single lines in modern Japanese cinematography.

Kambei's values are drawn from the code of ethics forged through such war-torn periods that recurred intermittently throughout Japan's medieval history from around the 10th century until the nation was pacified under the Tokugawa Shogunate in the early 17th century. These values came to be known as Bushido, the Japanese version of chivalry.

Powell and Kambei

Why does Colin Powell remind us so much of Kambei?

First of all, the world in which we now live is all too similar to the society inhabited by Kambei and the six other samurai in the film: one marked by chaos, violence and fear. The Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and their aftermath, in particular, take us back to the pre-modern warring days of the film. At the very least, they remind us of the existence of medieval, Hobbesian elements in our post-modern, globalized world.

Second, Powell's personal background has clearly shaped a man of strong character. Born in Harlem, New York, to an immigrant family from Jamaica,



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By HIRO AIDA

F O C U S

the young Powell fought in a jungle-like society, not only in the mean streets of New York, but also in the Army. He survived the Vietnam War as a young officer, and experienced several other wars fought by America, including the brief 1989 Panama conflict and the 1991 Persian Gulf War. While most people in developed countries have been living in a peaceful and comfortable modern world, Powell has seen life in some of the most dangerous, anarchic parts of the globe. These experiences entitle him, I believe, to be called a samurai-warrior.

Third, consider Powell's personal way of life and his attitudes toward it. Contrary to popular American belief, the samurai is not a gory killer-warrior. On the contrary, he embodies the aggregate of values called Bushido, which constitute a way of life. The first time I read the *Washington Post* piece by Bob Woodward last November about "Powell in the Icebox," an excerpt from his book, *Bush at War*, I was immediately struck by a sense of familiarity. The story described the secretary of State as not being able to square his relationship with the president. Responding to his deputy, Richard Armitage, who prodded him to request a private meeting with the president as other principals did, Powell reportedly said that if President Bush wanted to see him, he was always available. He also said that he saw the president all the time at meetings, where he was able to express his views.

This is a typical samurai attitude, which the Japanese treasure. Seeking a private meeting with your boss without being asked is not graceful, at least in the Japanese culture. If you have something to say to your boss, you must be able to say it, whether in public or private. So why not in public? Powell's attitude also reflects another trait highly valued in Bushido: taciturnity combined with stoicism.

I am sure many of my compatriots were struck with the sense I felt when they read that excerpt from Woodward's book: here is a "real man."

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Another aspect of Powellian Bushido is his reluctance to be a warrior. It was well-known that he was hesitant to go into the Persian Gulf War in 1991 when he was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I repeat, the samurai is not a bloodthirsty warrior. He may kill but only when he needs to do so to save a life — or something more precious than life, such as honor. Being a reluctant warrior is quite samurai-like.

Principled Stands

Related to this is a strong sense of duty, which is also very important in the Bushido value system. It is obvious that Powell sees his role as the top United States diplomat who helps sort out international conflicts, no matter how difficult they are, through peaceful means. He seems to believe that even hinting at the use of force would be "undiplomatic" and therefore inappropriate, though he has to do so from time to time. Some say, "once a soldier, always a soldier." But his credo as secretary of State could very well be, "no matter how long I was a soldier before, as a diplomat, my diplomatic mission must be accomplished."

For these reasons among others, Secretary Powell appeals to the traditional sense of values, which is a sort of aesthetic mannerism, held dear by the Japanese people. The more he is besieged in internal debates of the administration by the so-called hard-liners — or "sharks," as some call them — the more Powell gains the empathy of the Japanese. As the film makes clear, samurai are often doomed to be losers, and the Japanese see beauty in the samurai's principled defeat.

Nor are such debates limited to international questions. We also saw how principled Powell was in his recently expressed views on the issue of the University of Michigan's affirmative action practices, even though his point of view did not prevail within the administration.

Being a dyed-in-the-wool Japanese conservative, I feel this conservative administration is full of revolutionaries or revolutionaries-turned-conservatives, not true conservatives. Revolutionaries are vocal while conservatives are taciturn. Revolutionaries love to see blood while conservatives hate it. For me,

Washington sometimes looks like a world in the looking glass.

So Edmund Burke, the true conservative, might have been right: "The age of chivalry is gone: that of sophisters, economists and calculators succeeded." Not only here but also in Japan and, maybe, everywhere. So, I am afraid Powell might be on the losing side on more issues in the future, too.

Finally, aside from Powell's public demeanor, I hear much about his tenderness toward officials working under him. During my time in Washington, I have learned that such solicitude is rather unusual in this highly political town teeming with ambitious people.

The Roosevelt-Bush Connection

Inazo Nitobe (1862-1933), Japanese academician-diplomat and author of the book, *Bushido — The Soul of Japan* (1900), argued, "No matter how different any two cultures may appear to be on the surface, they are still cultures created by human beings, and as such have deep

similarities." He also said, "The heart of the Japanese people will never change, no matter how things may seem to change on the surface."

It is a well-known story in Japan that President Theodore Roosevelt was so moved by Nitobe's book (originally written in English, not Japanese, by the way) that he gave copies to his friends. It is even said to have prompted Roosevelt to actively mediate peace talks ending the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese War. In fact, the 1905 Treaty of Portsmouth that resulted won him the Nobel Peace Prize.

Nitobe later became under-secretary of the League of Nations, created to avoid the horrendous bloodshed seen in World War I. The League eventually failed, in part due to non-participation by America and in part due to Japan's military adventurism.

Since it is often said that Theodore Roosevelt's work inspires President Bush, I hope one day he will more fully understand the spirit of Bushido that his secretary of State typifies. ■

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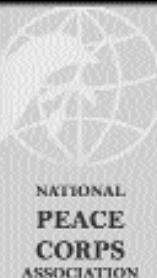
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