

This article, translated by the Asia Foundation from Japanese Voice, was published by the San Francisco Examiner on April 19, 1991. The author is professor emeritus at the University of Kyoto. We have not been able to learn his field of expertise.

America's Ethnic Achilles' Heel

By Yuji Aida

Oh wad some power the giftie gie us / To see oursels as others see us! — Robert Burns (1786)

[The editors of the *San Francisco Examiner* gave this brief preface to the article which we second: *This article is indicative of an influential minority viewpoint in Japan which some people may find offensive. We publish it to illustrate what is being said there.*]

TOKYO — Americans are proud of their melting-pot heritage. But as blacks, Hispanics and Asians gradually come to outnumber whites, that ideal will fade. Like the Soviet Union today the United States will have to deal with contentious ethnic groups demanding greater autonomy and even political independence. That could prove to be industrial America's undoing.

Many Americans, however, feign ignorance of the problem, partly because of the official ideology. The United States sees itself as a pluralistic, multiethnic society with a single national identity based on the principles of freedom and democracy. In fact, discrimination is rampant, but the illusion of equality is vital to maintain a sense of unity.

Nonetheless, it is only a matter of time before U.S. minority groups espouse self-determination in some form. When that happens, the country may become ungovernable.

Today, non-white groups are challenging the traditional order. Within the next 100 years, and probably much sooner, most Americans will be people of color. For the first time since the United States came into being, Caucasians will be a minority. Illiteracy may become widespread, and many Americans will not speak standard English.

Japan, too, faces major changes. A graying economic superpower, it may be a society of old people by the early 21st century. Because of our low birth rate, we might have to admit more foreign workers, skilled and unskilled, to provide basic services and keep the factories running. But these problems pale in comparison with the upheaval threatened by America's demographic evolution.

Do blacks and Hispanics, for instance, have the skills and knowledge to run an advanced industrial economy? If the answer is yes, America will maintain its vitality through the next century and beyond. But I'm skeptical.

To compete in a high-tech age dominated by microelectronics requires a disciplined, well-trained labor force. Brilliant inventors and innovative engineers are not enough. Workers themselves must be highly motivated and equipped to meet the stringent norms of standardization imposed by precision-perfect high-tech

manufacturing.

Blue-collar employees have to work steadily, day in and day out, at jobs requiring great concentration and manual dexterity. They must continually hone skills and improve personal performance and products through quality control.

Unfortunately, relatively few national groups meet these exacting requirements. I doubt that many African or Latin-American countries, for instance, will become high-tech societies in the foreseeable future.

***"Like the Soviet Union today
the United States will have to deal
with contentious ethnic groups
demanding greater autonomy and
even political independence."***

The history of industrialization holds important lessons for the United States. As African Americans and Hispanics gradually replace whites in the labor force, management positions and public administration, they will become responsible for corporate America. Do they have the right stuff?

Idealistic Americans say yes. They insist that if scholastic attainment, living standards and social status improve, blacks, Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans will be capable of assuming this burden.

Many Japanese intellectuals appear to agree, either because they believe in equality or are afraid of being labeled racists.

I would like to be optimistic, but frankly, the experience of the last 500 years leaves little room for hope. Blacks and Hispanics will not be able to run a complex industrial society like the United States unless they dramatically raise their sights and standards in the next 40 years.

Burdened with a handicap of this magnitude, how will the United States cope? Personally, I believe America's best bet for continued prosperity is to concentrate on those high-tech industries in which it has comparative advantage and revitalize the economy by developing agriculture.

With its vast human and technological resources, the United States could become a premier agrarian power — a giant version of Denmark, for example — and the breadbasket of the world. ■