

A New Era for Policy Intellectuals and Japan-US Exchange

Kin-ichi Yoshihara

President, Asian Forum Japan (AFJ)

Good morning, my name is Kin-ichi Yoshihara from Asia Forum Japan (AFJ) in Tokyo. We are all delighted to be able to meet with you today. I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to all of you for taking time out of your busy schedules to provide us with this valuable opportunity to meet with you today.

Thank you very much.

I would like to begin my remarks today by expressing my gratitude for the warm support extended not only by many friends in this country, but also by the federal government, in the wake of the earthquake and tsunami that struck northeastern Japan on March 11th. Thank you sincerely, from the bottom of my heart.

Also, this has been a year marked by many natural disasters, and I would like to express my condolences for the Americans who died in the tornadoes and flooding that hit your country this year. Was your district affected in any way? I sincerely hope that the disaster-hit areas will recover as quickly as possible, and that the victims will regain their ease of mind.

In 2010, AFJ implemented the “Japan-US Exchange to Develop Policy Intellectuals” project. The project sought to open up new possibilities for bilateral exchanges, by transcending the existing framework of arrangements dominated by American and Japanese experts, in order to forge a new bilateral network based on richer interaction between policy intellectuals between the two countries.

Daniel Bell defined policy intellectuals in the narrow sense as, “specialists and advisors, attached to elites or government, utilizing their knowledge for the purposes of policy and action.” Dramatic changes in the political arena, however, have transformed the image of the policy intellectual. The 2010 project served to underscore this change.

Today, policy intellectuals are of as people “who use governmental, legislative, electoral and other methods of influence to establish political principles.” As a result, the community of people who are included in the modern definition of policy intellectual has broadened to include politicians and their staff, journalists, university scholars, think-tank researchers and grass-roots activists.

Part of the background for this change is the advent of social media, and the way in which the Obama campaign, the Tea Party movement and others have used it. Harnessing the power of social media to encourage wider participation in political movements has resulted in a remarkable diversification of the policy-intellectual community.

In a recent article, Google Chairman Eric Schmidt dubbed the locus of social media “the interconnected estate.” Traditionally, the mass media has been called the “fourth estate,” taking its place alongside the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. The social media, then, may represent a “fifth estate.”

In this article, Mr. Schmidt points out that the interconnected estate poses a challenge for governments and corporations, namely that they will be forced to engage NGOs, grass-roots activists and ordinary citizens—given new prominence as members of the interconnected estate—on a much deeper level in the realm of the political process and corporate activities than before. This new reality dovetails with the knowledge that AFJ has gained on “the diversification of policy intellectuals” as a result of its program, and implies the arrival of a new era.

Much can be gleaned from the way in which the American political system readily absorbed the societal changes brought about by the arrival of this new era, and there are numerous potential implications for the stalled US-Japan relationship, as well as for social and political arrangements in Japan. What, then, would be helpful in revitalizing the US-Japan relationship and Japan's political system? Moving forward, our task is to design exchange programs that appeal to a younger generation savvy to the new realities, and to foster and capitalize upon policy intellectuals who are armed with social media options that allow them to think outside the traditional box.

Given the current state of Japanese politics, fostering a cadre of policy intellectuals in Japan is a pressing issue. If such a mechanism were in place, it would be enough to allow us to break through the current stagnation of Japanese politics. I hope that there will be plenty of discussion on this issue today.

Once again, thank you for your time today.