

After Centuries of Japanese Isolation, a Fateful Meeting of East and West

When Japan's rulers finally let in Yankee trade and technology, they changed the history of their country and of the world

James Fallows

From the deck of the USS *Susquehanna* the sailors watched the sea around them fill with little boats. The *Susquehanna* and its sister ships—the *Mississippi*, the *Saratoga*, the *Powhatan*—had been traveling for more than half a year. From Norfolk, Virginia, they had sailed in the late fall of 1852 across the Atlantic, then down around Capetown, and across the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea. Through the spring of 1853 they labored northward past Macao, Hong Kong, Okinawa and the Bonin island chain—Iwo Jima and Chichi Jima—toward the main islands of Japan.

On the evening of July 8, 1853, they rounded a promontory and came to the entrance of the Uraga Channel, itself the entrance to Edo Wan, now known as Tokyo Bay. At the head of the bay, less than a day's sail away, lay Edo itself, Japan's largest city, insulated from foreign contact for nearly 250 years.

The Japanese guard boats that teemed around the American flotilla in the Uraga Channel were made of wood, with sharply angled prows. Sweating oarsmen propelled the boats through the ocean chop. Above the rowers' heads flapped the geometric- or floral-patterned standards of the Tokugawa shoguns who ruled Japan. The American sailors could not understand the shouts that came to them in Japanese. Yet every crew mem-

ber knew that in the past, uninvited visitors to Japan had often been jailed, tortured or decapitated.

As the lead guard boat approached the *Susquehanna*, the Americans peering down from the deck found, with relief, that they could make out a few familiar characters from the Roman alphabet, rather than the gracefully swirling *hiragana* of Japanese phonetic writing or the intricate *kana* ideograms the Japanese had adapted from written Chinese. As the guard boat drew closer still, sharpened crewmen sounded out the first word: "*Départez!*" The entire message was in French, not English. It said, "Depart immediately and dare not anchor!" The two nations that would become the main Pacific powers made their first significant contact in a language neither ally understood.

THE LENGTHENED SHADOWS OF TWO MEN

Japan's rulers had not in any way invited the encounter; indeed, the more imminent it had become, the more it filled them with dread. America forced the encounter on Japan for a confused tangle of reasons, many of which the American investigators did not honestly discuss among themselves. Yet the aftereffects of this moment prepared Japan for the most im-

pressive feat in its history, and one of the most surprising in the history of any nation. At the same time American interests were more shrewdly advanced by the man who sat hidden in his cabin on the *Susquehanna* than by other American leaders almost any time in U.S. history. Ninety years afterward, Japan and America would be at war, but that was not the fault of the two men who guided this encounter on a hot summer day in 1853: Mashiro Abe, in the shogun's council at Edo, and Matthew Calbraith Perry, in command of the vessels known today in Japan as *kurofune*, "black ships."

Matthew Perry, bearing the title not of Commodore but of "Commander in Chief, United States Naval Forces Stationed in the East India, China, and Japan Seas," was 59 years old when his fleet reached Uraga. For the era, that was old—especially for a man undertaking a prolonged voyage to an essentially unknown destination. Perry suffered from arthritis and other maladies that confined him to his cabin during much of the long trip. Even at age 25 he had been remarked on for his gravitas; as he grew older he took on the air of a mandarin. This demeanor proved a great asset. Like Douglas MacArthur, another American, too regal to fit easily into his home culture, Matthew Perry was well prepared

by training and temperament for negotiations in Japan. An aw-shucks, unassuming manner might be an asset on the American frontier, but not surrounded by little boats in Tokyo Bay.

Perry's career, indeed his whole life, was devoted to the expansion of the U.S. Navy. His older brother, Oliver Hazard Perry, had become a hero at the Battle of Lake Erie before Matthew was out of his teens. Matthew, by contrast, spent his early career in a peacetime navy "where members of a small clique of senior officers scrambled for the limited command opportunities, where feuding, backbiting, and even dueling were a way of life," as Peter Booth Wiley puts it in *Yankees in the Land of the Gods*. "During the navy's first fifty years, thirty-three officers were killed in duels." Perry's first important mission, in 1819, was to transport freed slaves to Africa during the founding of Liberia. He did not see combat until he was in his 50s, at the Battle of Veracruz in the Mexican War, as the nation kept expanding westward toward a second sea frontier on the Pacific.

One great struggle over America's maritime future turned on the relative future roles of clipper ships versus steam-powered vessels. By the 1850s the fast and graceful clippers had given America the lead in the shipping trade. But the British were outbuilding America in steamships, and by the 1840s, Britain's steam-powered Cunard line was winning the battle for passengers and valuable freight on the transatlantic route.

Steam power required coal, and at the time no ship was large enough to carry all the coal it needed to cross the vast Pacific. Clipper ships had to choose routes to China on the basis of favorable winds, but steamers could be more deliberate, following a "great circle" route up toward Alaska and then down the Japanese archipelago. With coaling stations along the way, the great circle route would be possible, and in 1851 Americans learned that Japan had deposits of coal. "The moment is near when the last link in the chain of oceanic steam navigation is to be formed," said Senator Daniel Webster of New Hampshire, not stinting on rhetoric, as he endorsed an American expedition to Japan. The point of this link

would not be to buy from the Japanese their own handicrafts and manufactures but to obtain a "gift of Providence, deposited, by the Creator of all things, in the depths of the Japanese islands for the benefit of the human family"—that is, Japan's coal.

The desire to expand a coal-using, steam-powered navy was not the only reason for the expedition to Japan. Beyond lay China, where Americans hoped to find markets to develop and souls to convert. For a century before the age of steamships, American whalers had worked the waters of the North Pacific surrounding Japan. Frequently the ships did not come home. American sailors stranded by typhoon or shipwreck had washed ashore in Japan since the late 1700s. Often they were executed; usually they were jailed; a few were forced to perform ritual disrespect to Christian symbols, for instance by walking on a portrait of the Virgin Mary.

GETTING THE JUMP ON DUTCH, FRENCH AND ENGLISH

These icons of the Blessed Virgin were leftovers from Portuguese Jesuits, who had proselytized in Japan for nearly a century before being driven out in the early 1600s. The shipwrecked Americans, mainly Protestants, found this ordeal less excruciating than the Japanese expected, yet news of such episodes, especially one involving the whaler *La-goda*, filtered back to America, where at a minimum they stirred a passion for better protection for whalers, and among some people a desire to make the "pagans" atone. "If that double-bolted land, Japan, is ever to become hospitable, it is the whale-ship alone to whom the credit will be due," Herman Melville wrote in *Moby-Dick* in 1851.

The British had won their Opium Wars against China. From the north came Russian vessels. Swarming around were the French and the Dutch. The expansionist U.S. Government watched these plans with care. Finally to establish America's presence first, the Administration of Millard Fillmore, in by far its most consequential step, commissioned the Japan Expedition and convinced

Matthew Perry to command it. For nearly two and a half centuries, since the great warlord Hideyoshi took steps that led to the policies known as *sakoku*, or "closed country," Japan's officials had isolated themselves from the world—and wondered apprehensively when the isolation might end.

In 1549 a Portuguese Jesuit, Francis Xavier, had come ashore on the island of Kyushu. Initially tolerated, even supported by some local noblemen, the Jesuits had in the next 50 years made tens of thousands of Japanese converts. By the end of the century Hideyoshi, weakened by a costly and failed attempt to conquer Korea, and chastened to learn that savage conquistadors had often followed the cross in Latin America, had expelled all missionaries. Soon, the Tokugawa shogunate launched its radical policy of seclusion. As far as possible, Japan and its leaders would function as if there were no world beyond Japan's seacoast. "So long as the Sun shall warm the earth, let no Christian dare to come to Japan," said the shogun's expulsion order of 1638. If contact with foreigners was unavoidable, it would be handled through an enclave of Dutch traders, concentrated in an island ghetto called Deshima, near Nagasaki in the far southern extreme of the country—hundreds of miles from the great, protected centers of Kyoto and Edo.

The sakoku policy worked for a while—indeed, for as many years as the United States has now existed as an independent country. Yet in the early 1800s, as Japan began its third century of near-total isolation, the strains were evident. "In 1642, the year Isaac Newton was born, the last Japanese priest had been crucified and Japan had closed like an oyster," one American historian has written. But the leaders who made the decision "could hardly guess that Japan, which went into seclusion as one of the two or three strongest nations on the globe, would emerge from it, centuries later, as a distinctly second-class power."

The same whalers and fishermen who were inconvenient when washed onto Japanese shores inevitably brought news of the Industrial Revolution and other advancements outside Japan. A young Japanese fisherman named Manjiro Na-

kajima was himself shipwrecked and picked up by an American whaler in 1841. Under Japan's seclusion law, it was a capital offense to leave the country—or to come back, if one had escaped. But after spending a decade in New England, under the name John Mung, Manjirō decided to risk returning to Japan.

The *daimyo*, or lord, of the southern province of Satsuma realized, as Samuel Eliot Morison puts it, that decapitating Manjirō would not only sever his head but also “would cut off an important source of information.” Instead, the *daimyo* sent him to Nagasaki, “where officials pumped Manjirō dry of everything he knew about the United States.” Among the facts Manjirō revealed (as Walter McDougall wrote in *Let the Sea Make a Noise...*) was that Americans were lewd by nature, and that in their country “toilets are placed over holes in the ground. It is customary to read books in them.”

Officially the Japanese rulers faced news of foreign developments with redoubled sternness. In 1825, as whaling traffic increased, the shogun issued an edict forbidding any foreign ship to land. When a foreign ship came into view, the order read, it was crucial to shoot at it first and ask questions later. “Have no compunctions about firing on [the Dutch] by mistake,” the order went on. “When in doubt, drive the ship away without hesitation. Never be caught off guard.”

Behind this bravado was a debate, based on very little information but heated because the Japanese felt the very survival of the nation was at stake. In the town of Mito, a day's walk to the northeast of Edo, the “Mito School” of theorists said that an increased threat required increased determination to resist. Japan must shore up its coastal defenses, girding itself for the inevitable battle to the death that would keep the foreigners away. “Today the alien barbarians of the West, the lowly organs of the legs and feet of the world, are... trampling other countries underfoot, and daring, with their squinting eyes and limping feet, to override the noble nations,” one such scholar wrote in 1825.

With such a foe, no compromise could be possible.

COULD JAPAN BEND WITHOUT BREAKING?

In the other camp were the Rangakusha, or “masters of Dutch learning,” so called after Holland's role during the closed-country years as the vehicle for all learning from overseas. A realistic assessment of the circumstances, said members of this camp, required Japan to bend so as to avoid being broken. They had evidence of weakness inside the country. Taxes, levied in rice, were becoming oppressive. In several centuries of peace the samurai class had grown large and dependent; in 1850 Edo alone supported some 17,000 bureaucrats, compared with 1,500 in Washington, D.C.

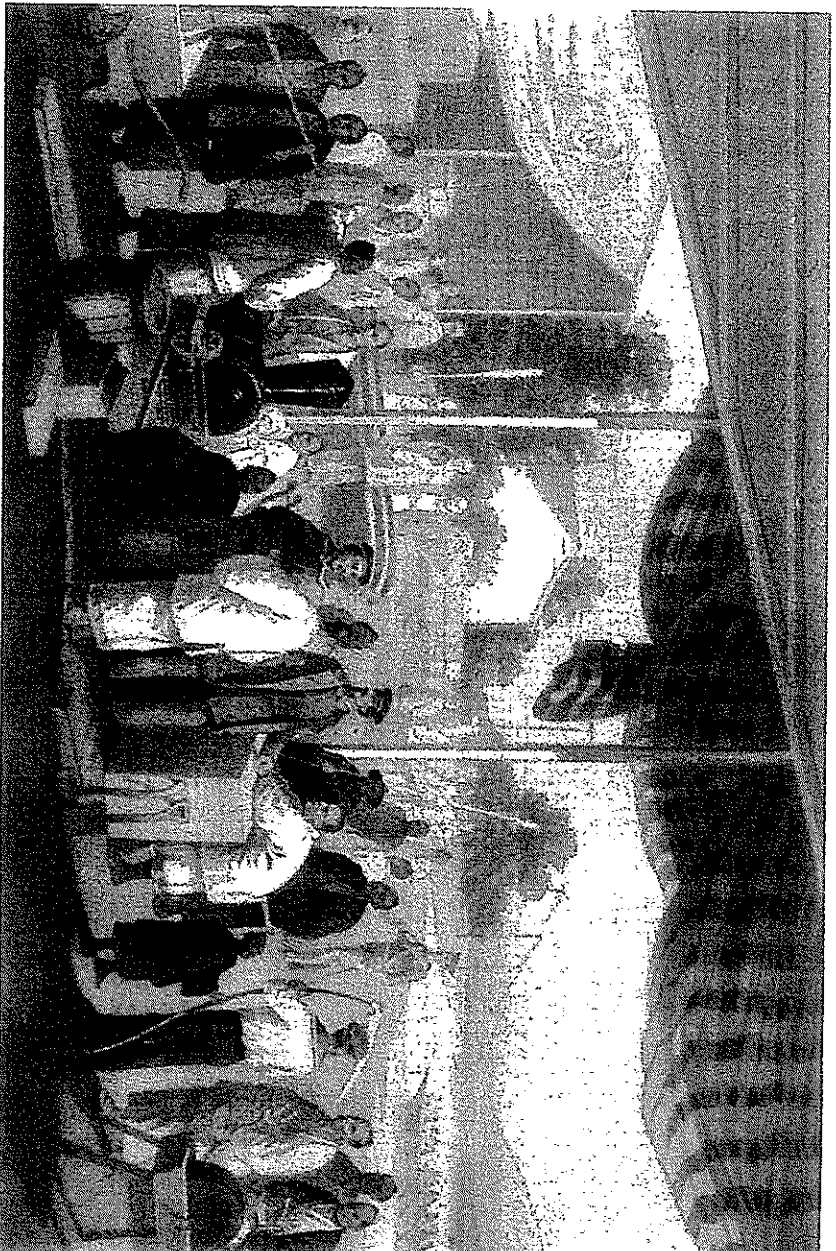
Evidence of the strength of potential invaders was even more dramatic. In 1846, seven years before Matthew Perry's arrival, Commodore James Biddle of the U.S. Navy had reached the mouth of the Uraga Channel. He had retreated with humiliating loss of face, after letting Japanese sightseers and officials inspect every inch of his ship and after accepting a letter from the shogun telling him never to return. Yet the shrewder Japanese officials of the era carefully noted the size and power of his ships, and of the American guns. Biddle's vessels represented destructive potential of a sort Japan had barely imagined.

Most of all the Japanese realists noticed what had happened to China—noticed, and were appalled. China was not just another country but the Middle Kingdom, the Central Country. Its emperor had historically referred to Japan's emperor as “your little king.” A new China had been carved up by Westerners, debauched by opium and left totally unprotected by either the Ch'ing dynasty or armed force. If the British and French could polish off China, what hope was there for little Japan—against Britain, France, Russia and the United States? Japan could try to enforce its seclusion law, said one of its very shrewdest leaders after the Biddle affair, but if “the foreigners retaliated, it would be a hopeless contest, and it would be a worse disgrace for Japan.”

This leader was Masahiro Abe, the senior counselor for the shogun's government. As the shogun was the power that ruled Japan in the emperor's name, so Abe was the strategist who made plans on behalf of the weakened shogun, Tokugawa Ieyoshi, who was in place when Perry arrived. Abe was a generation younger than Perry, only 34 years old as Perry's flotilla of Black Ships neared Edo. Raised in a scholar's family, he had through force of intellect made himself one of the shogun's most influential advisers while still in his 20s.

In the split between the hard-liners and compromisers in the shogun's court, Abe sided initially with the hard-liners. But after extensive consultation among the *daimyos* of Japan, he and his allies came up with a brilliant compromise. Japan would open itself to the Western traders—but only for a time—placing them just long enough to learn how to rebuild its own navies and arsenals. Nao-suke II, the most influential of all the *daimyos*, reminded the shogun that, even as Japan had earlier used Dutch traders as its bridge to the outside world, it was time to use the Americans and other foreigners as another, broader bridge. Across this bridge new discoveries could flow into Japan—providing the country, in the long run, with means to rearm itself, learn from outside technology, and ultimately “gain a complete victory” over the foreigners.

Some of the American politicians promoting the Japan Expedition had cast it in missionary terms, a chance to open the Orient to faith and flag. “I am sure that the Japanese policy of seclusion is not according to God's plan of bringing the nations of the earth to a knowledge of the truth,” Samuel Wells Williams, a missionary traveling with Perry as cultural expert and interpreter, wrote in his journal as the expedition neared Edo. Perry himself, pious enough, never described his duties in these terms. Instead he concentrated on how to deploy his men, his ships and himself for maximum effect. Before the trip began, Perry foresaw that his fleet's substantial armament “would do more to command their fears, and secure their friendship, than all that the diplomatic missions have accomplished in the last one hundred years.” In



United States Naval Academy Museum, Annapolis
 Of gifts given, those from Japanese were more decorative, while Perry's aimed to impress Japan with industrial might. Baby steam engine was biggest hit, but offerings included plow, scythe, grindstone.

a set of "Instructions" for the voyage, Perry said that the Commander "will be careful to do nothing that may [compromise] his own dignity or that of the country. He will, on the contrary, do everything to impress them with a just sense of the power and greatness of this country and to satisfy them that its past forbearance has been the result, not of timidity, but of a desire to be on friendly terms with them."

GIFTS TO SHOW A NATION'S STRENGTH

Like Masahiro Abe, Perry had studied the sad history of Commodore Biddle, who had been forced out of Edo Bay in 1846. In Perry's view, Biddle never recovered from setting his first foot wrong with the Japanese: rather than insisting on retaining a mysterious distance, he had let them climb onto his ship and, in

effect, imprison it with guard boats. Speaking of himself in the third person, in his memoir of the voyage Perry said, "The Commodore... was well aware that the more exclusive he should make himself, and the more unyielding he might be in adhering to his declared intentions, the more respect these people of forms and ceremonies would be disposed to award him." He would meet only with officials of "the highest rank" in Japan. He would make a threat only when he was absolutely certain he could carry it out.

Power could be demonstrated through generosity as well as reserve. Perry had prepared gifts to demonstrate the range of strengths his nation possessed. Editions of Audubon's *Birds of America* and *Quadrupeds of America* that had cost \$1,000 apiece—a decade's earnings for an average American family at the time. Champagne, perfume and mirrors.

Whisky, liqueurs, and small weapons from the Colt factory. And, most important, American machines: plows, a telegraph, a crude camera, even a nifty little quarter-scale steam-powered railroad train.

This was the man who appeared in the Uraga Channel in July 1853. He was not one to be driven away by instructions to "*Départez!*" Sweating alone in his cabin, unwilling to present himself prematurely to the crowd of Japanese, he issued his orders. The *Susquehanna* and sister ships were to repel, with all necessary force, any Japanese who attempted to board the boats. They would proceed up the channel, toward Edo, until their wish to meet a truly senior official, one who could speak for the ruler, was fulfilled. After the failure of the French message, a Japanese official had neared the *Susquehanna* and yelled out, in English, "I can speak Dutch!" To him the

Americans conveyed their wish to meet someone truly in command.

Throughout Edo, news of the Black Ships' arrival created near-panic. Some citizens fled, carrying their possessions to the countryside, fearing pillage and war. The shogun's council met to consider bleak-seeming alternatives. The usual reflexive responses to outside pressure—asking the foreigners to come back again in a few years, telling them to go on to Nagasaki, the only site where Japan had done business with foreign representatives through the sakoku years—seemed to have lost their potency. The Americans would not retreat—in fact, they kept sending surveying ships farther up the bay, ignoring Japanese assertions that this violated local law and saying that they needed to be sure about anchorages, for “the next time.”

As the governing council quarreled, Abe pushed them toward a decision: the Americans must be placated, at least for now. Perry had been asking to meet the emperor, that was out of the question, of course. Indeed, to this point the Americans were not even aware that a real emperor existed, hidden in Kyoto. When they said “emperor,” they were referring to the shogun; their official goal was to present him with letters from President Fillmore.

Clearly some meeting was essential, and so on July 14, after elaborate arguments over protocol, Matthew Perry himself came ashore at the town of Kurihama.

In retrospect this result seems inevitable. America was a country on the rise. Japan could not wall itself off eternally. Each party had a stake in negotiating reasonably with the other: Perry because he was outnumbered on the scene; the Japanese, because other Americans could come back and exact retribution if anything went wrong. But at the time it was very much touch and go. More than once Perry's men came to the brink of violent confrontation. Crewmen on the *Mississippi* had to level a loaded musket at a Japanese official's chest to keep him from climbing aboard. A small American survey boat, commanded by Lieut. Silas Bent, found itself surrounded by

three dozen Japanese guard boats. Bent prepared for hand-to-hand combat, instructing his small crew to fix bayonets—until the mighty *Mississippi* steamed into view and the Japanese retreated.

And so, on the night before Perry's scheduled landing in Kurihama, his crew members watched apprehensively from their decks as more and more Japanese troops filled the shore. Perry considered the possibility that the proposed meeting was really an ambush. After his surveys reported that Kurihama's harbor was deep enough, Perry ordered his gunboats brought in close to shore, where they could bombard the Japanese if anything went wrong. On the long night before the meeting, 250 American sailors were chosen by lot for the dangerous mission of accompanying their commander ashore. The Japanese worked through the night to prepare a pavilion for the meeting—and to increase the boats guarding the entrance to Edo Bay, in case the Americans were planning a sudden, treacherous assault.

On the morning of July 14, the American boats drew near to shore. Members of the landing party, dressed in their formal uniforms, were issued 20 rounds of ammunition apiece and carefully loaded their muskets and pistols. On the shore they saw three new pavilions, covered with the bright flags and standards of Japanese officialdom. Surrounding the pavilions were files and files of soldiers, armed with swords, bows and arrows, and a few antique firearms.

At 10 o'clock barges full of Americans began arriving on the shore. Miscalculations at this moment might have had historic consequences; long after the event, one of the Japanese commanders revealed that ten swordsmen had been hiding under the floor of a pavilion, with orders to leap out and slaughter the foreigners if they made the slightest aggressive move.

As their numbers grew on the beach, Perry's men formed a double line, through which their commander, arriving at last, marched toward the waiting Japanese. Ahead of Perry was a Marine officer walking with sword in hand. On either side of him were two of the largest

men from his ship, both black stewards, loaded with all the weapons they could carry and towering over every other person on the beach. Once Perry was safe ashore, tension eased a bit. He was met by two Japanese governors, to whom the stewards presented large rosewood boxes. Inside were small solid-gold cases, which in turn contained Millard Fillmore's letters requesting that Japan open itself to the world. The governors, in return, presented Perry with a letter said to be from Japan's ruler. When translated, it turned out to contain warnings that the Americans had broken Japanese law by landing in Kurihama and must not come back. Perry said that, with his mission accomplished, he was leaving Japan—but he would be back the next year to hear the Japanese government's response. With quite as many ships? the interpreter asked. “All of them,” Perry replied. “And probably more, as these are only a portion of the squadron.”

After the meeting in Kurihama, Perry had compounded Japan's sense of threat by sending surveying parties even deeper into Edo Bay. Then his departing fleet retraced the route it had taken toward Japan, visiting Okinawa and the Bonin Islands before stopping for repairs and refitting in Macao. He studiously ignored suggestions from Washington that he wait and assemble a much larger force before his return trip. Perry knew that French and Russian missions would soon be heading to Japan. He was suffering terribly from arthritis; a winter passage back to Edo would be dangerous and unpleasant. Yet to forestall all other navies and force action from the Japanese, Perry set sail northward from Macao in the middle of January 1854.

Back in Edo everything was still uncertain. What did the Americans really want? What compromise would be enough to make their warships go away? Suppose the shogun's government offered to give the Americans half the trading rights now monopolized by the Dutch? Or dragged out the negotiations themselves over five or ten years, after which time the Americans might lose interest or Japan might come up with a new plan?

FIGHT IT OUT OR FACE UP TO PROGRESS

Masashiro Abe had ordered Japan's coastal defenses fortified as soon as Perry's flotilla headed south after its first visit. He engineered the repeal of a law—enacted at the start of the sakoku era—that prohibited Japanese citizens from building seagoing vessels, and he opened negotiations with the Dutch about buying some steam-powered warships from them. All factions in Japan agreed that negotiations should be strung out as long as possible. Yet when the moment of choice arose, should Japan fight to the death, as influential figures like Tokugawa Nariaki, daimyo of Mito, were advocating? Or should it bow to the reality of superior force and instead plan for long-term survival, and future revenge?

The issue was forced in the middle of February when American ships arrived once more in the Uraga Channel. This time Perry's flotilla numbered three steam-powered frigates, seven ships under sail, and combined crews totaling more than 1,500 men. Overcoming bitter accusations that he was betraying Japan, Abe at last forced through a decision. Japan would greet the Americans with conciliation. It would accept a code of conduct for shipwrecked whalers and seamen. It would let the Americans obtain coal in Shimoda, near Edo, and trade with them at sites other than the traditional foreigner's ghetto in Nagasaki. It asked only for a transition period of a few years before the full agreement came into effect.

There were still points of detail to be negotiated—how many ports would be open to trade, what tariff the Japanese could impose. But under Abe's guidance Japan had given in. Matthew Perry, confined by disease and dignity to his Black Ship cabin, was ready by early March to deal face-to-face with his Japanese counterparts. On March 8 he came ashore at

Yokohama for a detailed, though still touchy, negotiating session.

On March 13 Perry went ashore once again for the first gift-exchanging ceremony. One by one he gave away the marvels of artistry and engineering he had stowed aboard his ships nearly two years before. The Japanese onlookers were entranced by the scale-model locomotive pulling a train. The passenger coach, complete with interior benches and curtains, was too small for human passengers, but samurai and shogun's officials took rides sitting on top of the train. In their turn, the Japanese offered gifts. But because they thought that valuable gifts might be insulting—suggesting the possibility of a bribe or the need to reply in kind—their gifts were modest, though artistic and of fine workmanship. Perry regarded them as trifling. More impressive were their mammoth sumo wrestlers. Perry watched as the *sumotori* strode in, heavy sacks of rice atop their heads. One of the wrestlers approached Perry, who accepted the invitation to punch the immense stomach and feel its strength. Samuel Wells Williams, Perry's missionary-interpreter, who was generally quite admiring of Japan and who deplored of his crewmates' insensitivity to foreign ways, nonetheless wrote in his diary that the spectacle demonstrated the clash of two cultures: the “success of science and enterprise” on the American side, the “brute animal force” on Japan's.

A final disagreement arose over Perry's desire to walk the streets of the capital city. Here the Japanese held firm: Perry could, if he chose, view Edo from the deck of his ship, but must not come ashore. Perry accepted, sailed to the top of Edo Bay for a look, and then, on April 14, headed south again.

Negotiations between Japan and the United States were just beginning. For most of the next decade an American counsel, Townsend Harris, would accuse Japanese officials of backsliding, dis-

sembling and attempting to evade the treaty's terms. More than a century later in the debate over trading issues, Japanese and American officials have assumed roles very similar to those first played in Uraga and Kurihama, with the Japanese debating the merits of acquiescence or defiance, and the Americans, far less powerful now, attempting to display impressive and intimidating force.

Perry's role in Japan was complete. It was to be a profound role and, though deeply unwished for by the Japanese, in the long run it had quite positive effects. Although Japan had been forced to make concessions and accept “unequal treaties,” it had avoided outright defeat—and had prepared for the rapid modernization that began with the Meiji Restoration of 1868. For this progress Japan could, with mixed emotions, thank Perry and the shock he delivered with the Black Ships.

Perry thought he would be lionized by his countrymen on his return, but he was not, in part because his countrymen were preoccupied with tensions over slavery that would lead to the Civil War. Retiring to his town house in New York, the Commodore worked methodically on his *Narrative of the Expedition*, which he submitted to the publisher at the end of 1857. Masashiro Abe, who had skillfully guided Japan through its greatest challenge of the 19th century, died while still in his 30s, a few months before Perry completed the manuscript. On March 4, 1858, shortly before his 64th birthday, Matthew Perry died at home, of rheumatism and heart failure. His cortege was led down Fifth Avenue by the men with whom he had sailed to Japan—the men, that is to say, with whom he had changed history.

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