

## CUSTOMISE, REPLICATE, NEUTRALISE: THE CONTINUING ADVENTURES OF A SEMANTIC VIRUS

**Political expressions** have a long history of altering the *zeitgeist*, usually by accident, sometimes by design. Nearly thirty years ago, when reports first appeared of US autoworkers taking their sledgehammers to Japanese cars and Detroit CEOs lobbied the Reagan administration for higher tariffs against Japanese imports, one such expression began appearing in comment on US-Japan relations.

“Japan-bashing” was created to meet a specific policy objective: to neutralise a wave of protectionism in the US. The Japan-bashing project was run by Robert Angel, from 1977-1984 President and CEO of the Japan Economic Institute, a bastion of the Washington Japan Lobby financed by Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

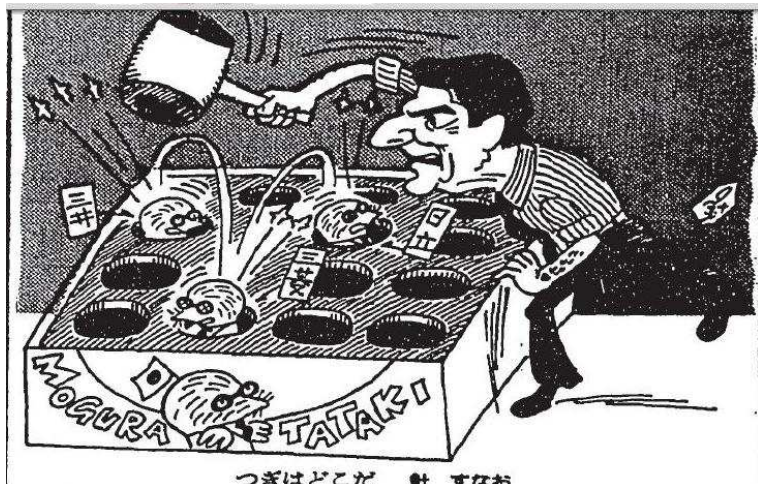


Angel took his *modus operandi* from the Israel Lobby’s use of ‘anti-Semitism’ to stigmatize its critics as racists and undermine their credibility. Then, inspired by ‘Paki-bashing’, a British expression for racist attacks on UK Asians, he came up with “Japan-bashing”.

In 1980 Angel began dropping Japan-bashing into talks, articles and briefings with the Washington press corps. With columns to fill and deadlines to meet, journalists were hungry for new phrases. As he tells it, Angel fed this appetite “by just repeating the expression as if it was a familiar term”. The aim was “to get them [journalists] to think that they thought of it themselves.”

Japan-bashing made what may have been its first, brief appearance in a British, not an American, publication, *The Economist* of February 21 1981, spreading to the US and Japan in 1982. American journalists took to the expression: Japan-bashing seemed to

them to go to the core of the debate on Japan. Possibly inspired by an August 1982 針すなお cartoon in the *Asahi* showing President Reagan playing “もぐら叩き” with Mitsui, Mitsubishi and Hitachi, Japanese correspondents began dropping ジャパンバッシン

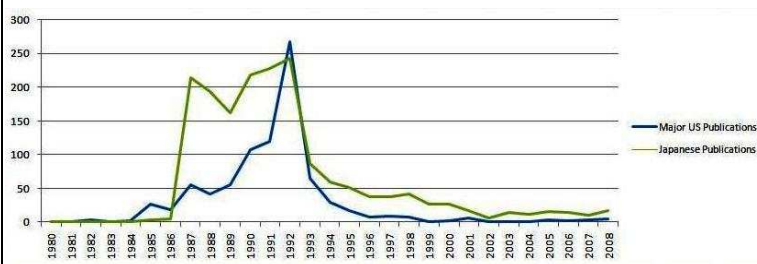


グ and 日本叩き into their despatches home.

### Bashing by numbers

How deeply did Japan-bashing penetrate the Japan-US media conversation? A survey of 8 major US publications (*New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, *USA Today*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Newsweek*) and three Japanese national dailies from 1981-2008 yields a nuanced picture.

From 1980-84, the incidence of Japan-bashing in this US press sample was negligible, with only 3 uses in *The New York Times* in 1982 and one mention each in *The Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal* in 1984. But from these lows, the use of Japan-bashing rose steadily: 27 in 1985, 98 in 1990, 108 in 1991, 233 in 1992 – the peak year – followed by a steep fall in 1993 to double figures, and single figures thereafter. A 1985-90 *New York Times*-CBS poll supports these findings. In 1985, only 8% of Americans were ‘generally unfriendly’ towards Japan but by July 1989 this figure had risen to 19% and by February 1990 to 25%.



Overall, the expression was used far more in Japan than in the US. In 3 Japanese newspapers (*Asahi*, *Yomiuri* and *Nikkei*) the use of 日本叩き and ジャパンバッシング rose faster and stayed

higher than US usage from 1986-92, although the Japanese papers' two peak years in 1986 (194 uses) and 1992 (243) were below the 8 US papers 1992 peak of 267. The *Asahi* (759 uses in 1984-2008) and the *Yomiuri* (591 in 1986-2008) each come close to the total uses in 8 US papers in the same periods. In 1980-2008, the *Nikkei*'s total is 698 compared to 858 for all 8 US publications. But at 1738 uses, the total available data for the three Japanese papers in 1980-2008 is more than twice the 8 US papers' total 858 uses. Even if we add 3 UK publications (*The Times*, *Guardian*, *Economist* and one Canadian, *The Globe and Mail*) to our sample, the total of 1074 uses on 12 English-language publications in 1980-2008 is still below the 1738 uses for our 3 Japanese nationals. And if we compare the two business papers in the peak period for the use of Japan-bashing 1985-92, the difference is even more pronounced: the *Nikkei*'s 487 uses more than quadruple the 109 in *The Wall Street Journal*.

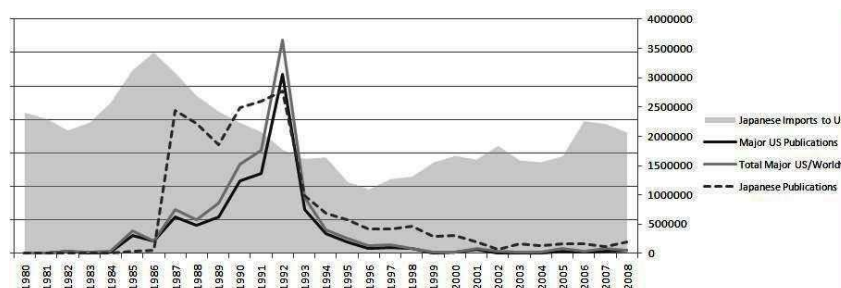
### Mixed messages

What can we learn from these figures? Angel created Japan-bashing to neutralise US protectionism. His expression had no ulterior purpose in Japan, (although Japan, being bashed, seemed to be the object of the expression). Overall, 日本叩き and ジャパンバッシング seem to have resonated in Japan more intensely than in the US, demonstrating the strong sense of aggrieved innocence felt by many Japanese reading about foreign resentment of their country's mounting trade surpluses. Just as in the US Japan-bashing carried echoes of wartime propaganda, in Japan the expression sat easily with the lingering narrative of national victimhood.

In May 1981, the new Reagan administration agreed a Voluntary Export Restriction (VER) quota of 1.68 million cars with Japanese automakers. It raised the VER quota to 1.85 million cars in fiscal 1984 and to 2.30 million cars in 1985. These were political decisions that the Republicans felt they could afford. Detroit was a Democrat stronghold. There were no Republican votes to be gained in the 'motor city'. Nevertheless, although in raising the VER quota the Reagan administration ignored Detroit, we cannot be sure that it did so to avoid the stigma of Japan-bashing.

Both in the US and in Japan the expression Japan-bashing was used much more *after April 1985, after*

the VER quota on Japanese car exports had twice been raised, not before. That Japan-bashing was used far more in the



US press when restrictions on Japanese car exports were relaxed than when they were tightened indicates that, four years after its creation, Japan-bashing ceased marching to Angel's orders. As the figures indicate, Japan-bashing went viral. And, as viruses will, it mutated into an all-purpose reflection of growing US resentment of Japan in general and of Japan's trade surplus in particular. Japan-bashing was never just about trade.

### **Bernays, Angel and their journalistic dupes**

In persuading the press to invest his propaganda message with their authority, Angel followed the example of the notorious 'father of spin' Edward Bernays (1891-1995). In the early 1950s Guatemala's democratically elected President Jacobo Guzman threatened to loosen the iron grip of Bernays' client, the United Fruit Co., on Guatemala. In response, Bernays orchestrated widespread US press discussion of the 'communist threat' in Guatemala and other 'banana republics'. In June 1954, aided by the CIA, a military coup

forced Guzman from power.

Twenty-seven years later, the purpose of the Japan Economic Institute was no secret in Washington and Angel was openly registered as an agent of Japan. And yet, even in the wake of Watergate, neither Angel nor his creation attracted suspicion. Journalists, those gallant unveilers of shady doings, proved only too willing to carry the Japan-bashing virus into the body politic. In 1992, when the journalist John Judis finally exposed the origins of Japan-bashing, Angel told him, “Those people who use [Japan-bashing] have the distinction of being my intellectual dupes.”

### Due for a comeback?

Last December, *The Times* of London discussed some Ford radio commercials broadcast

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAhNtDg4bOc>

(or here)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGLsfJTWEKs>



by a Georgia-based car dealer who blasted Japanese cars as “Rice ready, not road ready”. To *The Times* this ugly rant was a portent of renewed Japan-bashing, but it could also be interpreted as a sign of weakness: Japan-bashing no longer has the semantic power to deter criticism of Japan.

Today Toyota is Detroit’s sister city and Banana Republic is a cheerful upmarket leisurewear chain with stores just about everywhere except Guatemala. GM is on the brink of bankruptcy, and Japanese factories in the US and Japan are mothballed or on short time. In the integrated chaos of a globalized recession, protectionism is no longer an option. Meanwhile, Japan-bashing, the semantic virus created to neutralize protectionism, has become irrelevant. Whether or not it is dead is another question.

### References

Judis, John B. “Campaign Issues: Trade” in *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December 1992.

Lewis, Leo “Potential Failure of big US carmakers fuels Japan-bashing”. *The Times*, December 18 2008.