

Big in Japan: Japanese News Outlets Report from the Besieged Citadel of American Democracy

[Big in Japan is a weekly Japan Times column that focuses on issues being discussed by the Japanese domestic media organizations. The following column written by Mark Schreiber was published on January 30, 2021]

One of the oft-cited entries in Mao Zedong's famous red book of quotations begins, "A revolution is not a dinner party."

Nor, would it appear, is a revolution a Mad Hatter's costume ball. But one might not know it from the initial reactions in the Japanese media, which focused on the flamboyant garb of a certain individual who was part of the unruly mob that stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6.

How did the Japanese media react to these acts of mass civil disobedience?

Initially the coverage concentrated on the antics of a 33-year-old exhibitionist from Arizona, a self-described "QAnon Shaman," who pranced into the U.S. Senate chamber and posed for photographs while on the raised platform in front of Vice President Mike Pence's chair.

Web news site J-Cast News (Jan. 7) posted two color photographs showing the shirtless man's elaborately tattooed upper torso and ensemble that included a fur headpiece with buffalo horns, a bearskin cape, red-white-and-blue facial paint and an American flag attached to a spear — to which a worldwide audience reacted with a mixture of fascination and horror.

Shukan Shincho (Jan. 21) also ran a full-page photo, beneath the headline "The true nature of a Trump believer," and provided more details, beginning with his name: Jacob Anthony Chansley, aka Jake Angeli. He had already been covered in the media as a fervent worshipper of the now-former president.

"People dressed up like this are often seen at pro-Trump gatherings," said a journalist at a foreign news desk. "The man was identified from his home page and people contacted the FBI, which led to his arrest. He's a self-described shaman who believes in right-wing conspiracies." Arizona authorities say Chansley, a U.S. Navy veteran and author of two books, appears to have no record of criminal arrest.

A portion of the coverage of the attempted insurrection appeared as translated commentary from Americans, including Aera's (Jan. 25) one-on-one interview with former national security adviser John Bolton. But at least one Japanese reporter was embedded with the crowd that marched on the Capitol: A 55-year-old native of Kyushu, the investigative journalist writes under the name Masuo Yokota.

Shukan Post (Jan. 29) featured a dialogue between Yokota and media commentator Akira Ikegami, under the headline "Biden is America's weakest president."

"When I arrived at the rear of the Capitol building," Yokota said, "Trump supporters were already engaged in a fierce clash with the police, and I sensed passions of fanaticism and bloodlust in the crowd.

"The tear gas really hurt, and made it difficult to open my eyes, and then I heard someone shout: 'A woman's been killed. It's dangerous, let's get out of here!'"

“The mob had broken a small window at the rear of the building and began going inside, but I felt if I were to follow them I might not be able to get out unscathed. I stayed where I was.

“Some of the demonstrators who forced their way in had been sprayed with tear gas and I saw quite a few people sprawled on the floor.

“In my memo pad, I wrote, ‘This is the day American democracy died.’ The biggest problem was that all the attackers believed Trump had won the election.

“Their belief that the election was stolen from Trump, or why they cling to all those absurd conspiracy stories is something I find incomprehensible.”

The latter part of the discussion in Shukan Post shifted to future U.S.-Japan relations, on which Ikegami remarked: “As opposed to Trump’s unpredictability, Biden is a person with common sense.... As he places importance on relations between countries, I suppose the tasks of the Foreign Ministry will become easier.”

Not all reporting here portrayed Trump in a negative light. Writing in the conservative-leaning Yukan Fuji (Jan. 14), columnist Kazuyoshi Hanada advised the Japanese media not to cite news from America’s mainstream media verbatim, but “take reportage on Trump with a grain of salt.”

As far as Trump’s upcoming impeachment trial in the Senate is concerned, New Jersey-based journalist Akihiko Reizei told Spa (Jan. 26): “Provoking the attack on the Capitol constitutes a crime of insurrection. While such a thing is unprecedented as grounds for impeachment, for a president to repudiate democracy is a serious matter. On the other hand, they might be aiming to prevent Trump from running for office in the future. Both Democrats as well as some Republicans view Trump’s future candidacy for president as a threat. But unless 17 Republicans in the Senate vote with Democrats to give a two-thirds majority, they won’t get a conviction. Considering that a guilty judgment risks arousing Trump’s supporters, this also presents a danger for the new Biden administration.”

Writing in Shukan Asahi (Jan. 29), veteran commentator Soichiro Tahara opined: “The basis of democracy is to tolerate the existence of opinions that differ from one’s own. American voters who were disappointed by the Obama administration chose Mr. Trump, an anti-democratic person, as their president. With his guiding principle of ‘America First,’ Trump showed a contempt for democracy. And that made the tragedy on Jan. 6 inevitable.”

Shukan Bunshun (Jan. 28) explained what moved former California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, a Republican, to denounce Trump in a video that has already surpassed 38 million views. In strong language, the Austria-born Schwarzenegger went so far as to equate the attack on the U.S. Capitol with the Nazi-instigated mob violence against Germany’s Jews in the November 1938 incident known as the Night of Broken Glass.

From January 2017, Schwarzenegger had succeeded Trump as host of the long-running reality TV show “The Apprentice,” and Trump taunted him for the decline in viewer ratings that led to the network’s pulling the plug. Since then, there’s been bad blood between the two men. Schwarzenegger has been quoted in the media as how he himself fantasized on becoming president — an impossible feat, owing to his foreign birth. But still, even without running for office Schwarzenegger has hopes “to steer the Republican party in a more constructive direction.”

#####