

Chapter 1

The JET Program and Its Implications

Speaking in 1956, President Dwight D. Eisenhower declared “If we are going to take advantage of the assumption that all people want peace, then the problem is for people to get together and to leap governments . . . to work out not one method but thousands of methods by which people can gradually learn a little bit more of each other.”¹ His words were offered on the occasion of the establishment of the Sister Cities program and were delivered during a period when the bloodshed of World War II was still front of mind and the Cold War was just beginning to take shape as an ominous new threat to world peace. Although the international environment of today is much changed, the person-to-person dynamics to which he referred are still at the center of state-sponsored international exchange programs worldwide.

If the goal of such exchanges is to engage people in the creation of “thousands of methods” to promote internationalization, then the Japanese government’s Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program must be considered a significant contemporary example of such efforts in action. Established in 1987 and described by its sponsors as a “grass-roots international exchange between Japan and other nations,” the JET Program has more than 60,000 alumni worldwide.²

I am one of more than 30,000 Americans who have participated in the program since its founding. When I joined JET in 1993, my grandfather—who had served as a naval officer in the Pacific fleet during World War II—expressed amazement that his granddaughter was being welcomed deep into the heart of what he had known as enemy territory. When I arrived in the Japanese countryside, I was greeted by elderly community members who likewise expressed incredulity that an American had been deposited in their little corner of the world. Just as my grandfather had shared his war-time memories, so too did they relay theirs. My Japanese neighbors’ stories

included having learned how to sharpen bamboo trunks into lethal spears for use in attacking any American soldier who might have dropped from the warplanes flying overhead. When I told them that those Americans might have been my grandfather or his friends, we marveled at how dramatically the interactions between our two countries and their peoples had changed in the intervening years.

It is taken for granted that these kinds of personal interactions take on some kind of broader significance as they play out again and again among thousands of individuals in the course of a government-sponsored exchange program. Indeed, certainty about the consequence of such interactions comprises the core justification for all kinds of exchange programs worldwide. Nevertheless, demonstrating a connection between individual program participation replayed a thousand times over and more broadly perceived positive foreign policy outcomes for program sponsors is a difficult task. *The JET Program and the US–Japan Relationship: Goodwill Goldmine* summons the evidence to make exactly that argument vis-à-vis the JET Program, suggesting that for the US–Japan relationship in particular, JET has generated a wealth of informed opinion about and receptivity toward Japan with implications for the country’s place in the international environment.

The JET Program and the US–Japan Relationship attempts to tackle two sides of the exchange equation, examining not only Americans who have participated in the JET Program over the last thirty years, but also the ways that those alumni are positioned to influence interactions between the United States and Japan on multiple fronts. The result is a study of the JET Program in the American context that may also serve as a model for examination of other exchange programs and their outcomes.

As I make final revisions to this manuscript, I am struggling through jet lag from a recent trip to Japan where I accompanied a group of top US collegiate journalists on a study tour of the country to which I was first introduced through the JET Program. Destined for careers in American media, the nine young people with whom I traveled might be considered indirect beneficiaries of JET. My extended time on the ground in Japan twenty years ago influenced the way in which I led the group from Kyoto to Hiroshima to Tokyo. It certainly shaped the stories I told during the journey. And it surely affected my expression of hope to them that the trip would be only the first of many that they will make to Japan throughout their lifetimes.

In these ways, it seems I am much like many of the American JET Program alumni whose insights are incorporated in this volume. My interest in Japan endures more than twenty years after returning home, and I am pleased when the opportunity arises to introduce others to the country. In a foreshadowing of Joseph Nye’s writing about soft power below, I can see that as a young college graduate, I was a willing receiver of all that Japan had to offer through

JET. Now, as a university professor, I appreciate having the occasional opportunity to serve as an interpreter of the country for friends, family, and students who are experiencing it for the first time. If these sentiments play out across even a fraction of the total population of alumni, then after thirty years, this Japanese public diplomacy effort has indeed created a goodwill goldmine.

THE PUBLIC DIPLOMACY CONTEXT

Asserting the JET Program to be a successful international exchange program requires discussion of the Japanese government's efforts within the broader context of public diplomacy and soft power. Public diplomacy is understood to be "a government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and current policies."³ Accordingly, one of the results of a successful public diplomacy effort can be seen as the generation of soft power. But as scholars caution, the process of soft power creation requires more than one-way message delivery. The term's originator, Joseph Nye, argues that soft power production depends "upon the existence of willing interpreters and receivers."⁴ As alluded to above, and as demonstrated in the pages that follow, evidence that JET Program alumni do indeed serve as willing interpreters and receivers vis-à-vis Japan is plentiful, and it is on these grounds that *The JET Program and the US-Japan Relationship* makes the argument that JET is a profoundly successful public diplomacy program for Japan.

In a much-cited taxonomy, historian Nicholas Cull identifies five types of activities relevant to public diplomacy: listening, advocacy, international broadcasting, cultural diplomacy, and international exchanges.⁵ These activities are implemented with different time horizons and scholars have grouped them into approaches designed to achieve results in the short, medium, and long term.⁶ Exchange programs are categorized as relational or person-to-person diplomatic efforts undertaken for the long term. This is in contrast to short- and medium-term efforts identified as mediated public diplomacy and designed to exploit the benefits of paid, owned, and earned media content targeted to foreign publics.⁷ As noted elsewhere in this volume, the Japanese government's public diplomacy efforts span these three time frames, but JET is the country's premier long-term enterprise.

Public diplomacy is a tool in a sponsoring nation's foreign policy toolbox, wielded in the service of developing relationships with foreign publics in hopes of creating an environment more amenable to attaining the country's foreign policy goals. But exchanges focus on the "development of people,"⁸

something that typically unfolds below the radar of traditional foreign policy analysis. Program sponsors rely largely on anecdotal evidence that the efforts have helped facilitate development of “intellectual, commercial and social relationships [that] can build upon a nation’s reputation, and enhance the ability of that nation to participate in and influence regional or global outcomes.”⁹ Benefits, to the extent they can be identified at all, are thus generally viewed as indirect. Difficulties associated with corraling this evidence contribute to the relative rarity of rigorous studies focused on exchange programs.

Still, some scholars do assert direct connections between exchange programs and foreign policy, arguing that they “are not just for an individual’s personal fulfillment . . . They also have national security and policy objectives.”¹⁰ This argument places exchanges squarely in the realm of foreign policy, rendering them a legitimate focus of study in that context. Indeed, the potential for exchanges to yield hard power effects has led diplomatic historian Paul Kramer to call for their formal study as a factor in foreign relations.¹¹

Researchers writing about exchanges maintain that they are a quintessential form of public diplomacy since they are built on the kinds of interpersonal contacts that are recognized as the core of relational diplomacy.¹² An ideal international exchange program, one leading scholar has argued, takes place “before the host nation is already familiar for the participant, and . . . it offers opportunities that the participant can utilize for their own personal and/or professional benefit afterwards.”¹³ In this way, as another writer suggests, the effects of international exchanges ultimately appear somewhere on the “personal growth to policy objective continuum.”¹⁴

For sponsors, the dedication of resources to international exchanges is increasingly seen as a good bet in contemporary international politics. As one researcher has observed, “What people believe can shape or constrain the agency of a political actor and their ability to effect change.”¹⁵ By conceiving of public diplomacy tactics as attempts to influence what foreign publics believe, exchanges can thus be seen as an important means of attaining foreign policy goals. Giles Scott-Smith does not hedge on this when he observes simply that “Exchanges may be a form of soft power, but a form of power, however diffuse, they remain.”¹⁶

Despite the immediate relevance of exchanges to international politics, Scott-Smith points to the second-class status typically accorded to them in the study of diplomacy. He notes, “The interpersonal nature of the exchange experience, coupled with its inherently private character, have caused this field to be largely written out of the documentation of diplomacy and its conduct in the public realm. What exchanges represent are a form of private international relations, a diffuse interchange of people, ideas, and opinions

that are generally so lost in the myriad of global social contacts that their worth is often questioned.”¹⁷

Senator William Fulbright, founder of the US-sponsored exchange program that bears his name, described the multifaceted benefits associated with sponsorship of and participation in exchange programs. He noted that alumni of the program he helped create were “scattered throughout the world, acting as knowledgeable interpreters of their own and other societies; as persons equipped and willing to deal with conflict or conflict-producing situations on the basis of an informed determination to solve them peacefully; and as opinion leaders communicating their appreciation of the societies which they visited to others in their own society.”¹⁸ This kind of feel-good language no doubt attracts participants to take part in exchanges and provides excellent talking points for politicians who seek to support the programs. Such observations further bolster not only the argument that sponsors have serious geopolitical motivations that are often well served by promotion of these programs, but also that exchange programs deserve serious attention as a foreign policy tool.

While the policies that public diplomacy is intended to support may be “short-term by design,”¹⁹ there is value for countries in having mutual understandings and long-term relationships with savvy foreign publics who can process and interpret future policies for themselves, their spheres of influence, and potentially their own governments. It is therefore useful to view exchange programs as efforts undertaken by nations as insurance policies for the future. It is certainly helpful to have a cadre of exchange program alumni, for example, who are favorably disposed toward the host country in a general sense. But the true value of such a community emerges in times of trouble when a nuanced understanding of the host country is important for more than promotion of study of the language, consumption of cultural products, or tourism.

With respect to recruitment of participants for exchange programs, an emphasis on youth is common, and that is not accidental. As scholars have noted, “There are key moments when people are most likely to be influenced in ways that effect long-term change . . . those moments tend to take place between the ages of 15 and 25.”²⁰ But even when exchange programs have left young members of foreign publics favorably disposed toward the host country’s foreign policy priorities, it is necessary for the sponsoring nation to proceed with caution. Members of foreign publics must always be made to feel they are acting autonomously with respect to the sponsoring nation. In other words, advocacy on behalf of the one-time host country is most effective when it is organically generated. For American JET alumni, the desire to promote Japan in various ways, although certainly supported by Japan, has come from the former participants themselves and not at the suggestion of

their former host. This key factor is highlighted in *The JET Program and the US–Japan Relationship*'s discussion about alumni activity and is instrumental in making the case that JET has succeeded as a public diplomacy effort.

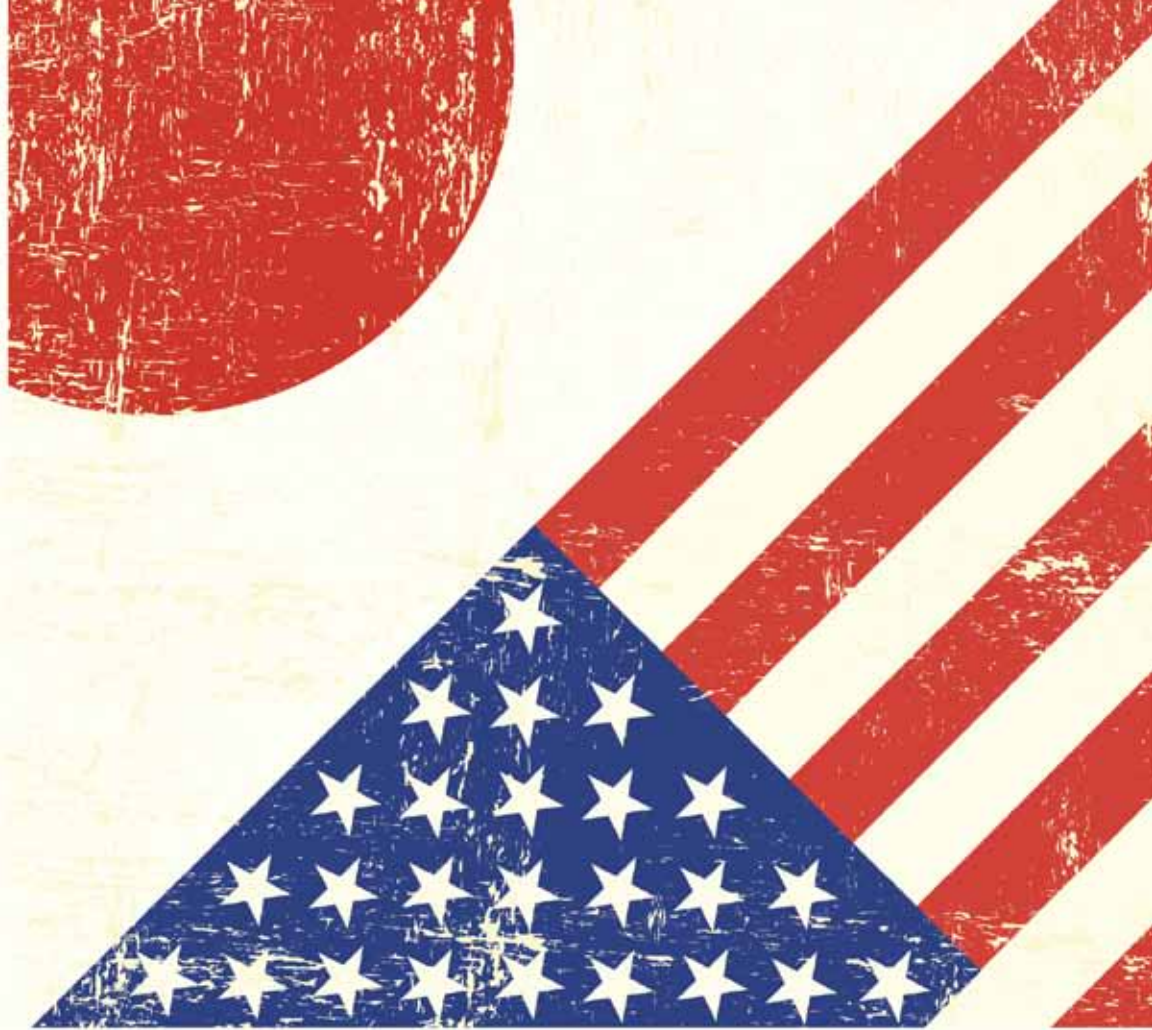
THE JET PROGRAM'S PAST AND PRESENT

The JET Program has few peers in terms of size, scope, duration, and degree of official commitment when compared to exchange efforts undertaken by other countries. Program materials capitalize on these characteristics, proclaiming that the endeavor has “gained high acclaim both domestically and internationally for its role in enhancing international understanding and for being one of the world’s largest” exchange programs.²¹

Despite bearing all the hallmarks of a government-sponsored public diplomacy effort, the JET Program is better known among scholars and others as an English language education program and has more frequently been studied as such. Still, the hard power ramifications of JET have never been lost on its Japanese sponsors. In a 2002 article discussing aspects of the program’s history, David McConnell quotes a Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) official who told him “From the viewpoint of our ministry, it is a significant part of Japan’s national security policy that these youths go back to their respective countries in the future and become sympathizers for Japan.”²² Although the work presented here suggests that it may be more appropriate to describe JET alumni as “individuals with nuanced understandings of Japan” rather than as actual “sympathizers,” the point about awareness of the national security benefits to be derived from long-term sponsorship of the program is central to understanding how the program has persisted for three decades.

As noted above, the JET Program has more often been studied as a government-sponsored effort to improve English language education in Japan than it has as an explicit foreign policy endeavor. Studies focused on JET as an exercise in English language instruction have found JET’s performance unimpressive, perhaps diminishing the overall attractiveness of the program as a topic for research in other contexts. Origins of the program’s reputation primarily as an opportunity for English speakers to travel to Japan to teach the language can be found in JET’s early days.

Offered to the United States as a gift from the Nakasone administration to President Reagan in 1987 in hopes of minimizing bilateral trade tensions,²³ the JET Program is a large and longstanding state-sponsored international exchange program. The image of planeloads of young, curious college graduates descending on Tokyo every July for the last three decades is both a metaphorical and literal description of the size and scope of the effort. Every summer, thousands of young people from the United States and dozens of



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Goodwill Goldmine

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