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Mission: Impossible

ASSIGNMENT: TOKYO: An Ambassador's Journal. By Armin H. Meyer. Bobbs-Merrill. 396 pp. $10.95

By DON OBERDORFER

ON JULY 15, 1971, the United States Ambassador to Japan was having a haircut in his office while listening to an Armed Forces Radio broadcast of a presidential public statement from the U.S.A. When the voice of Richard Nixon via satellite announced the breathtaking news of the U.S. diplomatic turnabout on China, Ambassador Armin H. Meyer thought at first it must have been a slip of the tongue. When he realized that Nixon wasn't kidding or mistaken, Meyer stopped the barber in mid-cut and began placing urgent calls to the State Department.

He recognized instantly that the news would have "seismic impact" on Japan, America's senior ally in Asia and China's neighbor—particularly if Tokyo's leaders were as much in the dark as he himself had been. The high State Department officials at the other end of the transpacific call were of little immediate help, since they did not seem to know much either. Finally word came that Secretary of State William Rogers had given warning to the touchy Japanese—but only minutes before the earthshaking announcement.

Armin Meyer's formal title during his 1969-72 service in Japan was "Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary" from the President of the United States. As he dryly writes toward the end of his book-length memoir, "it was an inaccurate appellation." In fact, he never had a private conference with the President during his tenure, was excluded from summit meetings between Nixon and Japanese Prime Minister Sato, was kept in ignorance of major U.S. decisions affecting Japan and learned of U.S. moves in crucial negotiations with his clients through press leaks—from the Japanese side to the Japanese press. The hapless Meyer writes as if he were undaunted by the indignity of it all. At one point he notes mildly that "the Embassy in Tokyo might have played a more useful role."

For the most part Meyer's memoir is a ponderous recital of issues and trends during his tour of duty as senior U. S. representative in one of the nation's most important diplomatic posts. His analysis is unsurprising and his literary style seems

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Woodcut by Shunsho (circa 1770)

to have been issued along with his flag and water carafe by the General Services Administration. Nevertheless, *Assignment: Tokyo* (which might better be titled, *Mission: Impossible*) is a valuable document for those who wish to understand the degradation of the U.S. diplomatic service at the hands of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger during Nixon's first term in office. The passages revealing what Meyer and the State Department knew—and more important, what they didn't know—are alone worth the price of the book.

A month after the China shock Meyer heard, again on the radio, that Nixon planned an economic statement in a few hours and, once again, the State Department high brass had virtually no information. Just 25 minutes before the public announcement of sweeping domestic and international measures with massive effect on Japan, Washington called back with an urgent request for Prime Minister Sato to make immediate telephone contact with Secretary Rogers. The hookup was no problem, but Sato doesn't speak English. By the time an interpreter could be located, Nixon was clearing his throat to begin his public statement.

Even worse in many respects was the two-and-a-half-year (*Continued on page 2*)

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struggle between Washington and Tokyo over textile imports. The U.S. Embassy in Tokyo had no role in the negotiations and, by Meyer's account, often had to rely on the Japanese press for information about what was going on. American emissaries and would-be emissaries—some authorized and some unauthorized—shuttled in and out of Tokyo to see the Japanese while

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the embassy remained uninformed. Groping to guess at U.S. textile policy—again, a mystery so the State Department—the embassy at one stage actively promoted an idea for settlement that had been adamantly rejected weeks before at the White House.

A career Foreign Service officer with prior experience centered in the Middle East, Meyer seemes to have been a spur-of-the-moment choice for the Japan assignment. His record in Tokyo is generally considered undistinguished, but given the secretiveness of U.S. policy at the time it would have been difficult for anyone to shine. Kissinger was running U.S. foreign policy on major questions, with the State Department and American embassies often in the dark. When Meyer tried to break through the wall by sending a letter direct to Kissinger, a copy leaked to the State Department. Secretary Rogers was greatly irritated and tried to have Meyer relieved, the former Amabassador indicates.

Whatever the merits or demerits of Armin Meyer as a Tokyo hand, his account serves as a benchmark in the decline of the U.S. diplomatic service. The confusion and cross-purposes in the Tokyo Embassy illustrate the hidden costs of the Nixon-Kissinger secret spectaculars. With the departure of Nixon and the shift of Kissinger to Secretary of State, embassies these days are said to be better informed about the policies they are supposed to advance. But nobody is sure how long the new era will last.

The former U.S. Ambassador to Japan writes of his experience neither in sorrow nor in anger, but with matter-of-fact exposition. It has been his lifelong credo, so he writes, to "accentuate the positive; don't accept the negative." He had to swallow a great deal to keep this creed during four years in Tokyo as a plenipotentiary when, in his own words, "my powers were not always 'pleni.' " ☐