

## EAA INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT ANGEL

INTERVIEWED BY LUCIEN ELLINGTON

Japan Considered, created by University of South Carolina political scientist Robert Angel in 2004, is an online “one stop educational shopping site” for busy teachers, professors, students, and anyone who wants access to a concise, yet solid, variety of English language resources on Japanese domestic politics and the nation’s international relations. In addition to excellent links and interviews, Japan Considered also features Angel’s regular podcasts on significant events in Japanese politics. The shows are lively and informative. Japan Considered may be accessed at <http://www.japanconsidered.com/>.



**Lucien:** Bob thanks so much for agreeing to do this interview. Could you tell our readers how you became interested in Japan, and, in particular, Japanese politics in the first place?

**Bob Angel:** Thanks, Lucien, for the opportunity to describe the *Japan Considered* project and provide your audience with some thoughts on teaching about Japan.

I have been going back and forth to Japan for about forty-five years now. I first arrived there for a two-year stay at the age of eighteen as an enlisted member of the US Air Force. During my military stay, I was not particularly valuable to the Air Force, so they allowed me time to travel around Japan, especially Kyūshū. In Japan, I learned what a curious eighteen to twenty-year-old could about the terrain, the people, and how they lived. It was quite an experience for a country boy who had never been far from northern Appalachia! My travels in Japan made such an impression on me that I became determined to pursue a career somehow related to Japan and to maintaining a strong US-Japan relationship.

After completing my military obligation and kicking around a few years, I ended up as an undergraduate at Columbia University—and then a graduate student. I selected Columbia because of the reputation of their curriculum in Japanese politics, and their incredibly rich programs in Japanese history, culture, and language. Why they selected me remains a deep mystery.

I spent nearly nine years at Columbia, including a year of intensive language study at the Stanford Center in Tokyo and a year of dissertation research in Tokyo a few years after that.

In March 1977, I left Columbia for Washington, DC, to assume the presidency of the US-Japan Trade Council, an organization funded by Japan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The organization focused its efforts on international trade-related public relations and lobbying. With the help of a superb staff—some inherited, some recruited—I redefined the Council’s mission and reorganized it into the Japan Economic Institute (JEI).

From lobbying, our primary efforts turned to providing American readers with current, accurate information about economics and politics in Japan, with the assumption that more and better information was certain to improve the bilateral political environment. Whether it actually did or not is difficult to say—but the effort was

fairly well received, both in Washington and in Tokyo. It was a great privilege to be able to work in Washington and Tokyo at that time. Most of my work involved persuading Japan’s government to continue to support the institute financially and to maintain close ties with those in the US government who wanted to preserve a healthy bilateral relationship. The people who actually mattered in the US-Japan relationship, in many cases, were not famous congressional representatives, senators, or cabinet secretaries, but senior congressional aides and lower- and middle-level White House staffers. It was a country boy’s dream come true! Dreams end, however, and in 1984 I resigned the presidency of JEI and returned to Columbia to complete my long-overdue doctoral dissertation. Professor Jim Morley was, for me, as he has been for so many others, the ideal dissertation guide—he was patient, but firm, in his expectations, and a model of what is meant by the word “teacher.”

After completing my dissertation and receiving my PhD, I taught one semester at the University of Alabama, just to see if university teaching worked for me. I had a wonderful time, and as a result ended up here at the University of South Carolina, where I was hired as an area studies Japan specialist to teach graduate and undergraduate courses on Japan’s domestic politics and foreign relations. I have been here ever since—for more than twenty years—enjoying life in the Midlands of South Carolina. It is a great place to live and to raise a family.

**Lucien:** Your *Japan Considered Podcast* is really impressive; if you don’t have a background in radio, you fake it really well! You’ve also done a nice job with the links on the home page. Anyone who visits the Web site will quickly learn that you have put an enormous amount of time into creating an excellent and unusual educational tool. Please elaborate upon the genesis of *Japan Considered*. Why did you decide to invest a major amount of time on this kind of endeavor, instead of focusing on the more conventional stuff that academics do, such as writing books and monographs?

**Bob Angel:** My concept for the project actually developed a few years ago during a hospital stay. For the first time in my life, I was confined to a hospital room for more than one day. Well, there was plenty of time just to think, since I was not able to read or see people

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other than family for a while. That environment somehow encouraged me to ask the “Big Questions of Life” that are best reserved for just such occasions.

Since our department at the university seemed to have lost interest in area studies training, I spent the past few years working primarily on other things, including creation of the John C. West Forum on Politics and Policy, a Web-based civic leadership incubator intended to encourage undergraduates to pursue careers in public service. Well, that's not bad work, but not really what I was best suited to do, so I decided then and there to better use my time doing what I'd been trained to do—interpret political and international Japan for the American audience.

But how? Columbia, South Carolina, is a wonderful place to live, but it is not Tokyo or Washington, DC! Well, Lucien, the answer came from my experiences with the West Forum, where I invested considerable time learning the computer and the Web site construction skills necessary to create and maintain the West Forum Web site. Why not apply those skills to Japan-related information and see what happens? The *Japan Considered* project happened. I then consulted with Japan-specialist friends around the country by phone and email, and shamelessly used their ideas and suggestions, almost always without attribution!

Professors Dennis Yasutomo of Smith College and Edward Lincoln of New York University were incredibly patient and helpful. Neither is especially interested in computer technology, but both—from quite different perspectives—knows what the attentive American observer of Japan wants and needs to know. They each made dozens of suggestions, and many have been implemented in the site. Without their advice and encouragement, the project would have sputtered out long ago as one of those nice ideas that is impossible to implement. They both, of course, deny any responsibility for the specifics of the outcome—and that is very sensible of them!

To build the *Japan Considered* Web site, I began with a collection of pages that provided links to especially useful English language sources about Japan's government and international relations. The project was very broadly defined. There are plenty of “link farms” these days on the Web, and quite a few directly relate to Japan, so it did not seem useful to duplicate those efforts. I scoured Japan-related English language Internet resources for just a few of what seemed to be the most useful sites. Useful, that is, for the non-specialist on Japan. Japan specialists may find some of the links convenient, but non-specialists searching for quick, reliable information about Japan will find even more that is useful, I think. The next step was to organize the links according to subject.

Next, I added a paragraph or two describing and evaluating the links. Most folks who create Web sites like this are sensible enough not to do that—it is a lot of work, and inevitably, personal biases make the job more difficult. Responses so far, however, have been encouraging.

We then developed a series of interviews with English-speaking individuals who have made significant contributions to the study of political, economic, and international Japan—folks with careers in

academe, government, and journalism. This part of the project has been extremely labor-intensive, but also has attracted considerable interest and comment. As of late 2007, there are sixteen interviews on the site, with such Japan experts as Ezra Vogel from Harvard and Jim Morley from Columbia, as well as interviews with Japan specialists in other lines of work than the academy, such as senior defense affairs consultant Gregg Rubinstein, and professional translator Tom Coffey. I conducted most of the interviews using Skype-phone, which records them directly into the computer for transcription and editing. The photos and short sound clips add a bit of color and feeling to each interview, I hope.

The latest undertaking has been the *Japan Considered* podcast. The podcast is a weekly audio program that broadcasts over the Internet or through iTunes. Each show runs between twenty and thirty minutes. Transcripts of each program are available on the *Japan Considered* Web site for those who prefer reading to listening, as well as for Internet search engines that index the content. Each week the podcast considers the longer-term significance of recent events in the news as they relate to Japan's domestic politics and international relations. It's not a comprehensive news program, it's an effort to explain the longer-term significance of current events for Japan's domestic politics and international relations in normal, jargon-free language that everyone can understand. We try to address “big questions” in down-to-earth language that makes sense to most everyone. That is the intention, anyway.

**Lucien:** Please give our readers a preview of *Japan Considered*, including examples of the range of topics you address in your podcasts and other kinds of related content they will find on the Web site.

**Bob Angel:** The *Japan Considered* Web site at <http://www.japan-considered.com> is easy to navigate. Information on the front page is linked to each section of the project, beginning with the most popular ones. There are ten categories of information in a second box, including statistics, the police system, the bureaucracy overall, the legislature, and more. *EAA* readers may find the “Statistics” link the most useful for quick reference to those hard-to-find numbers. Everything is in English.

The weekly, or near-weekly, podcasts, Lucien, cover much broader ground. They are driven by recent news events about Japan's domestic politics and international relations. My intention is to select news items that have long-term significance for explaining how Japan's domestic politics and the conduct of international relations works.

Transcripts of each program—back to early 2006—are available free of charge on the Web site. There is a huge volume of information, and I continue to look for a useful indexing tool that will make it easier to find. Until then, the best way to research a specific topic is to search through the transcript topics presented at the top of the page. It's not ideal, but will have to do until something better comes along. Google's web index has been very kind to *Japan Considered*, so it usually works to find a topic simply by doing a Google search that includes “Japan Considered” or “JapanConsidered.”

**Lucien Ellington:** *Bob, most of our readers are not Japan specialists. They usually teach survey courses such as government, economics, and world history, where inclusion of content on contemporary Japan is an option. One thing I like about your podcasts and other aspects of Japan Considered is that you have created a good teaching and learning tool for our readers and their students, while serving the needs of specialists as well. However, given the recent media attention devoted to China and India, can you make a case that a high school government teacher who is preparing a comparative politics unit, or a university instructor in world history who has a segment on post-war Asia, might consider also including content on Japanese politics and government?*

**Bob Angel:** Well, Lucien, I am delighted to hear you say the site is a good teaching tool. Content has been created and maintained primarily for the “attentive reader,” rather than for Japan specialists. All of the materials—podcast transcripts and audio files—are intended for exactly the sort of audience you describe. A teacher with limited class preparation time should be able to access the site easily and find useful facts and interpretation related to Japan. That can be important when assembling similar resources for several countries and being responsible for good interpretations of political institutions!

You raise an important point about the popularity of Japan studies. It does seem that countries go in and out of fashion in the US. You and I have lived through a few cycles of interest in Japan. I recall that American interest in Japan at all levels was raised to artificially high levels during the late 1970s and 1980s by the perception that Japan represented a serious economic threat to the United States. Then, a bit later, the notion that US businesses should learn Japan’s “secrets” became popular. Well, that is a little healthier, I suppose. Japan and the United States have very different cultures, but we share fundamental political and economic values that maintain the importance of a bilateral relationship for both countries. The Japan-

ese have always been better at recognizing that importance. That understanding motivates them to put more effort into understanding us than we put into understanding them—and that is something we should try to rectify. I have all but given up on Americans (in large numbers) learning to speak and read Japanese. The alternative is to provide accurate and useful information in English.

**Lucien:** *Those of us who pay attention to current political developments in Japan certainly took note of the late July 2007 Upper House elections where the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), for the first time in history, lost its position as the largest party in either the Upper or Lower House. These results almost certainly were a factor in Prime Minister Abe’s resignation, even though he was having health problems. Do you care to go out on a limb and prognosticate as to whether this event is a “sea change” in domestic Japanese politics? Is it more symbolic than substantive?*

**Bob Angel:** I wish I were competent to answer that question, Lucien. The significance of the Upper House election outcome is a tough one to predict responsibly. There is, I think, both substantive *and* symbolic significance. And in politics, of course, symbols or perceptions can be more important than substance, especially in democratic systems.

In September 2005, then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi led the LDP to its greatest victory ever in the Lower House election. This incredible outcome was completely unanticipated by those of us who make a living out of watching and interpreting Japan. That victory, I believe, was based on the continuing interest of the Japanese public in genuine political reform—especially reforms that reduce the importance of the under-the-table flow of money from special interests and the power of the LDP faction leaders in the nation’s politics. Everyone knew that was what Koizumi’s postal system reform initiative was all about—and they voted LDP in large numbers.

Last summer, we saw the LDP go down in flames in an Upper House election. The Democratic Party of Japan did not “win” that election; the LDP “lost” it—a consideration with importance for

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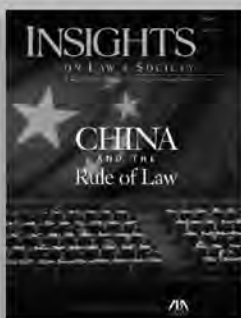
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post-election political activities. Japan's Upper House is nowhere as important as the Lower House, even though the LDP late July loss inspired some commentators to describe the Upper House as more important than is actually the case.

In terms of substance, the LDP loss means the Upper House, in some situations, will be able to considerably delay LDP-proposed legislation that the Lower House has already passed. Since half of the Upper House membership must stand for election every three years, this situation will continue, at least until the next Upper House election. However, the news is not all good for the DPJ either. The DPJ leadership cannot afford to be perceived by Japan's attentive public as manipulating their current majority in the Upper House for selfish political purposes and ignoring important public interests. There is a fine line there, with motivation to cooperate on both sides.

The LDP Upper House loss in late July 2007 also reduces the chance that the LDP can pass legislation that requires a two-thirds majority in both Houses of the Diet. Most immediately, that is a constitutional revision—which has been a long-standing LDP objective.

If that is not enough, the LDP loss and the now existing DPJ majority in the Upper House allows the DPJ to initiate investigative hearings to which they can call almost anyone involved in the issue as a sworn witness. This could prove to be an important political tool for the DPJ, *if* they have the courage to use it, since the Lower House could, in retaliation, call investigations of their own.

On the symbolic level, of course, the LDP has demonstrated that it can lose national elections, and lose them badly—elections they had every right to win. This has to encourage potential supporters of the DPJ, as well as the DPJ membership itself. This is a powerful motivator for collective effort.

The July 2007 Upper House loss for the LDP was important—very important. Even the most sympathetic observer of Japanese domestic politics must conclude that the loss was caused more by ineffective leadership at the top than anything else. Shinzō Abe, in

the end, just didn't have what it took to steer his party on a prudent course. He tried. He did his best. But, as so many of the pundits said at the time, he relied too heavily on old friends in his cabinet lineup. Perhaps most importantly, he relied on the senior positions in the *Kantei*, or the Prime Minister's Official Residence—an institution similar to the White House. He became what I have called a Populist prime minister, but one who had difficulty communicating his policy objectives and intentions to Japan's public. He allowed his chief cabinet secretary and chief political aide far too much discretion in managing the *Kantei*, and he did not recognize the cost until it was too late. During his steady loss of public approval, the LDP traditional factionist leadership proved incapable of removing him from office, which led to these results.

In the end, I suspect that the July 2007 election probably does not represent a sea change in Japan's domestic politics—it is more of a wake-up call to the LDP, and in the past the LDP has been good at listening for those wake-up calls. We will have to wait and see. Of course, the DPJ can hear that same alarm as it rings in the next room. If they manage their good fortune skillfully, they will be able to learn from the LDP's mistakes. However, that may prove difficult because of Ichiro Ozawa's decision to rely so heavily on national trade union support in that last election. That support will not have come free. Bills remain to be paid—and some of them are not only unappealing to Japan's overall public, but also quite contrary to the general direction of reform that was established and used so successfully by Koizumi in the 2005 election.

Lucien, thanks again for the opportunity to meet your *EAA* readers. They can reach me through the *Japan Considered* Web site by sending a message to RobertCAngel@gmail.com. I look forward to reading their suggestions for improvements in the *Japan Considered* project—especially suggestions that will make it more useful for teachers. ■

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