TREATY OF KANAGAWA

Although he is often credited with opening Japan to the western world, Commodore Matthew Perry was not the first westerner to visit the islands. Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch traders engaged in regular trade with Japan in the 16th and early 17th centuries. Persistent attempts by the Europeans to convert the Japanese to Catholicism and their tendency to engage in unfair trading practices led Japan to expel most foreigners in 1639. For the two centuries that followed, Japan was almost completely isolated from the outside world.

The same combination of economic considerations and belief in Manifest Destiny that motivated U.S. expansion across the North American continent also drove American merchants and missionaries to journey across the Pacific. During the 1800’s many Americans believed that they had a special responsibility to modernize and “civilize” the Chinese and Japanese. In the case of Japan, missionaries felt that Protestant Christianity would be accepted where Catholicism had generally been rejected. Other Americans argued that, even if the Japanese were unreceptive to Western ideals, forcing them to interact and trade with the world was a necessity that would ultimately benefit both nations.

By the mid 1700’s the American whaling industry had pushed into the North Pacific and sought safe harbors, assistance in case of shipwrecks, and reliable supply stations. A number of American sailors had found themselves shipwrecked and stranded on Japanese shores, and tales of their mistreatment at the hands of the unwelcoming Japanese spread through the merchant community and across the United States. Yet by the mid-1800’s, there were several economic reasons why the United States became interested in establishing contact with the Japanese. First, the opening of Japanese ports to regular trade would create tremendous (and unique) economic opportunities for U.S. businesses. Second, the annexation of California created an American port on the Pacific, ensuring that there would be a steady stream of maritime traffic between North America and Asia. Finally, as American traders in the Pacific replaced sailing ships with steam ships they needed to secure coaling stations. These would provide places where ships could stop to take on provisions and fuel while making the long trip from the United States to Asia. The combination of its advantageous geographic position (close to China) and rumors that Japan held vast deposits of coal increased the appeal of establishing commercial and diplomatic contact with the Japanese.

In 1852, Millard Fillmore, thirteenth president of the United States, sent an expedition in an attempt to break down Japan's seclusion. He chose Commodore Matthew Perry as its commander and government representative giving him broad powers. Perry was assigned five steam warships and four sailing vessels; his instructions were to arrange for commercial relations and to negotiate a treaty.

Perry's expedition left Hampton Roads, Virginia, in November, 1852. A number of gifts for the Japanese Emperor were carried aboard, including a working model of a steam locomotive (train), a telescope, a telegraph, and a variety of wines and liquors from the West, all intended to impress upon the Japanese the superiority of Western culture and the technological prowess of the United States. Eight months later, in 1853, Perry led four of his warships into the forbidden waters around Tokyo and entered Edo Bay in a display of military force. The Japanese, many of whom had never seen steamships before, were greatly impressed. Perry was determined to avoid the mistakes of other Western diplomats. Under strict orders to use force only if absolutely necessary, he acted with confidence and insisted on dealing only with the highest officials. At first, representatives of the bafuku, or military government, demanded that the ships proceed to Nagasaki, the only port at which Westerners were permitted to have contacts with the Japanese government. Perry refused to be intimidated or to leave Edo Bay until he was assured that the dispatches he carried, including a letter from the president of the United States to the emperor of Japan, would be delivered in the appropriate quarters. When the Japanese finally promised that the emperor would receive the U.S. treaty proposals, Perry steamed away, but not before he informed the emperor's agents that he intended to return in the spring of 1854 with a larger force and with the expectation of a favorable response.

As promised, Perry returned the following spring with an even larger squadron to receive Japan’s answer. The Japanese grudgingly agreed to several of Perry’s demands, and the two sides signed the Treaty of Kanagawa on March 31, 1854. According to the terms of the treaty, Japan would protect stranded seamen and open two ports for refueling and provisioning American ships: Shimoda and Hakodate. Japan also gave the United States the right to appoint American representatives to live in these port cities, a privilege not previously granted to foreign nations. This treaty was not a commercial treaty, and it did not guarantee the right to trade with Japan. Still, in addition to providing for distressed American ships in Japanese waters, it contained a most-favored-nation clause, so that all future concessions Japan granted to other foreign powers would also be granted to the United States. As a result, Perry’s treaty provided an opening that would allow future American contact and trade with Japan.

Although Japan did not open its ports to modern trade until 1858, once it did, it took advantage of the new access to modern technological developments. Japan’s opening to the West enabled it to modernize its military, and to rise quickly to the position of the most formidable Asian power in the Pacific. At the same time, the process by which the United States and the Western powers forced Japan into modern commercial interaction, along with other internal factors, weakened the position of the Japanese leadership resulting in long-lasting changes in the government of Japan.

KEY TERMS:

**Commodore:** A naval rank - an officer in command of more than one ship.

**annexation**: bringing an area under the control of a larger country

**maritime**: connected with the sea, especially in relation to seafaring trade or military activity

**seclusion**: the state of being private and away from other people - isolation

**formidable**: inspiring fear or respect through being impressively large, powerful, or capable