

Goodwill Ambassador

The latest recipient of the Club's Distinguished Achievement Award, former US Ambassador John Roos reflects on his four years in Japan and the work of reinforcing ties.

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IMAGE YUUKI IDE

John Roos' resume is not lacking: a Stanford law degree, 30 years at Silicon Valley's preeminent law firm and a political track record dating back to his support of Walter Mondale's 1984 presidential bid.

But was it enough to equip him for the role of United States ambassador to Japan?

"No," says Roos, 64. "Nothing totally prepares you for the position. It helps that you've had the background that you've had, but the day-to-day responsibilities are different than what you expect.

"And then," he adds poignantly, "events overtake everything."

Roos' defining response to the circumstances of his ambassadorship between 2009 and 2013 would help both countries overcome historical impediments to jointly manage an unprecedented disaster. Such leadership earned him the Club's Distinguished Achievement Award, which he received during a June visit to Tokyo.

That Roos can now call the Club home (the award includes membership for three years) is just rewards considering he began his tenure with a concerted effort to understand the country on a level beyond the halls of political power.

"I wanted to listen much more than I spoke in the initial months," Roos recalls. "It was more important that I learn than I just talked, and we really did go on a listening tour."

Roos' official trips throughout Japan made him one of the most well-traveled ambassadors in the office's history. At one point during his itinerary of discussions with local



John Roos

leaders, a security officer informed Roos that he had unconsciously visited half of Japan's 47 prefectures.

"At that point, we said, 'Well, it'd be interesting to travel all over,'" Roos says. "In part because there are so many incredible parts to Japan, and in part because many [Japanese people] had never seen a US ambassador."

Roos would complete the prefectural circuit near the end of his ambassadorship, a footnote to his role in US-Japan relations. His visits to the city of Hiroshima, in particular, deserve more attention.

For six and a half decades, US ambassadors had conspicuously avoided official visits to the annual memorial ceremonies in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Personal visits, like the one Roos and his family made to Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Museum shortly after arriving in Japan, had always been considered separate.

A combination of his tour of the city's haunting monuments to that fateful day in August 1945 and President Barack Obama's stirring 2009 speech in Prague on nuclear disarmament spurred Roos to act.

He informed Washington of his intent to attend the 2010 peace memorial ceremony.

"There wasn't a lot of resistance to going," Roos says of the response from back home. "It was just that everyone

felt that if we were going to do it, it had to be done correctly."

Though the question of an apology caused plenty of hand-wringing in the American media, a 2016 *Japan Times* poll revealed that 62 percent of Japanese citizens neither expected nor desired any such admission. In addition, leaked diplomatic cables highlighted Japanese politicians' focus on moving forward rather than looking back.

On the morning of the 65th anniversary of the dropping of the world's first atomic bomb, the sun rose over Hiroshima's Peace Memorial Park. Roos sat quietly among the crowd gathered for the ceremony. In a commemorative book, he expressed contrition for all victims embroiled in the chaos of World War II. He made no public comment.

Small gestures, perhaps, but history will credit Roos with normalizing visits of American diplomats to Hiroshima and Nagasaki and for paving the way for Obama's historic visit to Hiroshima in 2016.

"Hiroshima and Nagasaki were probably the low points of the relationship between our two countries," says Roos. "Showing respect and acknowledging what happened is important for moving forward."

Roos' diplomatic worldview is governed not by transactional expectations but the mutual benefits of Amer-

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ican altruism. If his efforts to move the US and Japan beyond their belligerent past failed to communicate that to the world, his response to the catastrophic events of March 11, 2011 would make the point.

"When the earthquake hit," Roos recalls, "we felt the [embassy] building was going to come down."

Camped in the embassy parking lot, Roos received updates on the severity of the quake, the encroaching tsunami and the developing situation at the Fukushima No 1 nuclear power plant. Months prior, Roos had serendipitously requested evacuation briefings in the event of an attack from North Korea.

"I declared an emergency," Roos explains. "The president was informed, then the secretary of state. All that happened within a matter of minutes."

When Roos sat down that evening with Japan's foreign minister, he spoke for all of America.

"The message was: this crisis is so big and you're not only an important ally but a friend," says Roos. "We will do whatever it takes to help."

Operation Tomodachi was America's humanitarian response to the crisis. Dozens of naval vessels delivered emergency relief, while military personnel assisted search and rescue efforts throughout the Tohoku region.

Under Roos' direction, this rapid assistance would lead to the highest favorability ratings of the US by Japanese citizens in recorded history.

"[The 2011 disaster] was a good example of the US stepping up for an ally and for a friend that I think will pay dividends for decades," says Roos.

It's a diplomatic approach he hopes all successive US ambassadors to Japan will embrace and anywhere else the US aspires to strengthen ties.

"This is not a zero-sum game," Roos says. "These relationships are a win-win scenario and I think one of the things we're seeing now is that you absolutely cannot take them for granted."



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