

ISSA Proceedings 2006 - Prime Minister Mori's Controversial "Divine Nation" Remarks: A Case Study Of Japanese Political Communication Strategies



The 2000 general election was of great significance because it would decide the direction Japan was to take in the twenty-first century. Prior to the general election, on the funeral day of his predecessor, Obuchi Keizo, Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro made a toast at a party of the pro-Shinto parliamentary organization. In his speech, Mori described Japan as a “divine nation,” and sparked controversy across the country. To play to the pro-Shinto religious side, Mori did not just magnify Japan’s pride and self-regard, but also intensified the sentiment of its national identity by calling in Japanese cultural uniqueness (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983).**[ii]** For his pro-Shinto audience, Mori’s cultural assertiveness and defiance was a common sense support for the traditional values of Japanese society. To the public ear, however, the strong-sounding words sounded very conservative. Mori’s pronouncement adversely affected public trust both in his cabinet and in his leadership of the ruling coalition consisting of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), new Komeito, and the newly-born Conservative Party. Controversy over his “private” remarks at the party spread from the political sphere to the public sphere. Troubled by the emotional trauma of loss for more than a half century after World War II, many Japanese people questioned his capacity as the Prime Minister.**[iii]** Following a decade of dissatisfaction with empty promises of administrative reform in the 1990s, public cynicism now seemed to run so deep that public desire for strong leadership appeared to seek even authoritarian alternatives.

In this paper**[i]**, I observe the social, political, and historical context in which the nationwide backlash against Mori’s calling Japan “divine” circulated in concert with a particular mood that was influencing opinion polls. Observations of the

contexts of his “divine nation” remarks will provide a more realistic picture of the two-fold quality of Japanese polity, in which everything has a front “*tatemae*,” the pretense designed for public acceptance (i.e., *de jure*) and a back “*honne*,” the actual intent of the private self “I” (i.e., *de facto*). For that purpose, I would explicate first how the news reported his “private” remarks and questioned his genuine intent, and then examine how Mori attempted to defend the controversial phrase “divine nation” by shifting the issue from his “mistake” of advocating Shinto religious ideas to the public’s “misunderstanding” of his remarks. This includes his implicit, but strong censure of the news media that made his private comments public. Mori’s strategic approach to publicly explaining his questionable remarks failed, but the sympathy vote for Obuchi saved him from having to resign.

Prior to examining the controversy, I explain the context in which Mori was attacked by the opposition parties and the general public for having “hawkish” views.

1. *The Context*

Mori’s toast, delivered on May 15, 2000, at a party held by the Shinto Seiji Renmei parliamentary league (consisted of pro-Shinto Diet members) at Hotel New Otani in Tokyo, was extemporaneous. Its purpose was to pay tribute to those Shinto priests who for a long time had supported the LDP members in their respective electoral constituencies.**[iv]** In his toast, Mori called Japan the “nation of the *kami* centered on the emperor”: “I would like people to acknowledge that Japan is the divine nation with the Emperor at its center. Everything we have done in the last 30 years has been done with that in mind.”**[v]** In front of Shinto leaders and pro-Shinto lawmakers, he made a respectful gesture toward Shinto religious ideology. By creating a friendly atmosphere among his immediate political associates, Mori sought to strengthen his relations with Shinto LDP supporters for the 2000 general election.**[vi]** Here he ignored the importance of making a clear distinction between his public obligation as Prime Minister and private matters. Especially, his choice of Shinto religious terminology exposed his particular political views to public scrutiny. To the public, his yearning for Japan’s prowess under a divine Emperor appeared to have troubling echoes of Imperial Japanese military power and its devastating results. On the whole, Mori’s “private” remarks ended up being reported in political news coverage, and then criticized by opposition leaders as well as subjected to negative national attention.

Prime Minister Mori's description of Japan as a "divine nation with the Emperor at its center" caused a series of political and public attacks on his personality. At first, he overlooked the political and public backlash against his "divine nation" remarks. His belated response missed an opportune time to mute growing consciousness-raising as well as to restore his image of ineptness played up in the news coverage. The growing criticism affected his initiative in keeping the tripartite ruling coalition united. The leaders of New Komeito and the Conservative Party, Kanzaki Takanori and Ogi Chikage, publicly expressed their concern that the Prime Minister's choice of language might have an adverse effect on the election, and even on their political alliance. Prior to his formal apology delivered on May 19, 2000, Mori privately apologized to the leaders of those two coalition partners for his "mistaken" performance that caused the political fiasco.**[vii]** Both of the leaders accepted his explanation along with his pledge to be more careful not to offend anyone holding different political views (Mori sets June 25 poll amid resignation calls 2000).**[viii]**

Even members of his cabinet voiced misgivings and puzzlement about Mori's mishandling of the situation. Implicitly Chief Cabinet Secretary Aoki admitted that Mori's remarks were indiscreet, saying that the Prime Minister should have been more careful about the choice of language in his capacity as the nation's top political figure.**[ix]**

2. *Analysis*

In an age when the domination of television and print media has turned the world into a kind of global village, politicians must address the whole nation as a single audience *whenever* they speak. That is, they have great difficulty advocating specific ideas because they must take into consideration many different kinds of people simultaneously. In the case of the controversy over his verbal "mistake(s)," Prime Minister Mori already lost control over his initial performance when he gave the toast at the occasion to celebrate the Shinto Seiji Renmei parliamentary league. Since he was a newsworthy person as the national leader of the second biggest economic power in the world, the foreign and domestic media highlighted the Shinto religious implications of Mori's "divine nation" remarks. With the weapon of ridicule, the media characterized Mori as a nationalist, constitutional revisionist, and traditionalist who was making common cause with conservative political circles.

2.1 *Reactions*

One of the most serious failings that Mori made was the internal/external audience problem. In terms of political communication strategies, he failed to clearly distinguish between a public obligation and a private matter. [x] In addition, he did not take into account the current political situation in which politicians can no longer separate content, wording, or the possible implications should their words find their way to the public ear from the meaning of the words themselves. Mori trained with the Waseda debating club to be a good speaker. Among old-fashioned politicians, he could be also seen as a skilled orator: "In a classical sense, Mori knows how to get ahead. He has been very good at associating with people" (Jottings 2000). As intimacy communicates involvement in the private sphere, his "sense of getting ahead" played a key role in creating the inclusive "we" among his immediate audience. Yet, in the wider public relations context, Mori was often accused of making insensitive comments and careless remarks. In fact, Mori was known more for loose lips than oratorical skills among voters. Hence his "divine nation" remarks at the thirtieth anniversary of the foundation of the Shinto Seiji Renmei parliamentary league were shocking, but not surprising. Through the choice of pro-Shinto religious terms, he presented a view of the world that could be shared by his immediate audience; he identified his ways of viewing the world with those Shinto priests and pro-Shinto Diet members (Jottings 2000). For the general public, therefore, he failed to adapt to the dominant social attitudes and values. His mutual feeling of oneness with a pro-Shinto audience created division from the national audience. Later Mori consistently claimed that he merely expressed his goodwill by calling on Japanese cultural uniqueness in what would be sometimes called "folkloric," "traditional," and "religious" language (See Anderson 1991).

The mass media highlighted the phrase "divine nation" as another "slip of the tongue." In a series of his political blunders, the news media drew attention to the implications of "divine nation" that reminded many of Japan's past militarism and imperial rule. In the news, the questionable remarks were soon called Prime Minister Mori's "remarks on Japan as a divine nation" (*kami no kuni hatsugen*). This sound bite changed political issues into a political event in which news became confused with theater and theater with news. [xi] For the "news theater" stage, the media focus on his audience contributed to increasing attacks on Mori's political performance rather than on his economic policy (Brustein 1974, p. 7). In order to keep out of the news, or at least keep as quiet as possible, Mori initially applied avoidance tactics by canceling his weekly appearance at question

time, and even at the regular debate in the Diet with the opposition parties, for two weeks after making the controversial remarks.

In terms of his insensitive or slanderous remarks, **[xii]** one issue that the national media kept questioning was whether Mori was capable of leading the nation. In the months prior to taking office as Prime Minister, Mori was criticized for his discriminatory comments on Osakans, AIDS patients, Americans, and Okinawans. He described Osaka as a “spittoon” and “a dirty city that thinks only about making money.” In January, reflecting on the difficulties of campaigning in his opponent’s constituencies, he said, “During my first election campaign, when I was visiting farmers, all the farmers in the field ran away as if someone with AIDS was knocking on their doors.” In February, he asserted that the American people had all “bought guns” in preparation for the Y2K (shortened for the Year 2000 computer problem) bug “because when electrical power fails in the United States, the gangs and murderers come out. Such is the American society,” alluding to what had happened during the blackout in New York on July 6, 1999. In April, he charged that school teachers in Okinawa, who strongly opposed the government’s new policy of requiring the national anthem and flag at functions, were “controlled by Communists” (Sims 2000). Immediately after his characterizing Japan as “divine,” the media started to call Mori a “gaffe-prone Prime Minister” (*zekka shusho*) based on the proverb “Confine your tongue, lest it confine you.” **[xiii]** A few days later, on June 3, Mori talked of the “national polity” (*kokutai*), another obscure phrase glorifying Japan’s unique status under the divine Emperor. **[xiv]**

A second critical question concerned whether Mori would turn the clock back to Japan’s military supremacy in Asia. The “divine nation” sound bite worthy of headline news echoed throughout state Shintoism as a voice against the current Constitution of Japan, especially Japan’s postwar pacifist stand in its Article 9. In resurrecting the state ideology, Mori’s nostalgia conjured up a mythic cord to the lost Japanese authenticity. In response, the leaders of the four opposition parties criticized Prime Minister Mori whose remarks recalled Imperial Japan’s war rhetoric and created anxiety among its Asian neighbors and their peoples. Those political opponents raised doubt about his qualifications as a national leader orienting the country and as a world politician presenting Japan’s vision on the international stage. They also pointed out that the Japanese and other Asian peoples shared a strong antipathy toward Imperial Japanese militarism so as to become disturbed and uneasy about the implications of the “divine nation” phrase

used in wartime rhetoric. More clearly, the news media at home and abroad delivered critical warnings that Japan's new militarism seemed set to emerge. In political news coverage, the opposition camp cast suspicion that Mori would make common cause with current neo-nationalistic moves to revive Japan's militant nationalism.

To end their bickering, the DPJ and other opposition parties united to create an axis of confrontation against the tripartite ruling coalition. For the opposition camp with no shared ideology, Mori's "divine nation" remarks and other verbal "mistakes" offered great opportunities to make a case against the coalition government. They immediately criticized the Prime Minister for violating the constitutional principles of the sovereignty of the people, the separation of Church and State, and freedom of religion and conscience. For national appeal, DPJ President Hatoyama said, "His [Mori's] reasoning flatly rejects the constitutional principle of sovereignty that resides with the people. If Mori tries to alter the Constitution in such a backward manner, we [shall] never allow it. We would be forced to topple his Cabinet" (Mori defends remark about "divine nation" 2000). Fuwa Tetsuzo, the JCP Secretary, also contended that "I cannot help but feel shocked by the way in which Prime Minister Mori's mind has been polluted to such a degree by the notion of a divine nation, such as that which existed before World War II. I demand that he step down immediately" (Mori defends remark about "divine nation" 2000). Within a few days, these opposition parties held a joint meeting of their Diet Affairs committees at the top level, and agreed to demand Mori's resignation. In spite of contesting views on foreign affairs and domestic issues, they cooperated in taking over control of the government, which also necessitated a unified vision (Minshuto faces hurdle at next general election 2000).

A third area of questions was related to the upsurge of neo-nationalism. Mori's calling Japan "divine" seemed to resonate with the ideological phrase "spirit of love of the country" (*kuni o ai-suru kokoro*) promoted in reforming the "Fundamentals of Education Law" (*Kyoiku Kihon Ho*). This neo-nationalist slogan reminded many Japanese of the wartime militarist slogan "patriotism" (*aikokushin*) inscribed in the "Imperial Rescript of Education" (*Kyoiku Chokugo*) that aimed at training the Japanese people to be a shield for their country and to sacrifice their lives for it. Interestingly both slogans consist of the same three Chinese characters "love" (*ai*), "country" (*kuni*), and "spirit" (*kokoro*). Known for

his special expertise in education, Mori consistently advocated the need to reevaluate the wartime educational rescript for recovering lost Japanese virtues. As the conservative-leaning national daily Yomiuri Shimbun stated when pointing out Mori's earnest concern about educational reform as one of the distinctive characteristics of his cabinet (Coalition coordinates campaign pledges 2000),**[xv]** Mori addressed one of his educational ideals in his first policy speech: "education should be aimed at fostering honorable persons rich in creativity" (Shasetsu 2000). Here he made no reference to the current education law that resulted from reflecting on Imperial Japanese education that helped connect patriotism with militarism. In addition, the promotion of educational reform was included in the slogan for the election campaign adopted by the ruling parties, "Putting an End to Five Sources of Anxiety," that focused on the problems of peace, welfare, education, public safety, and economy (Coalition coordinates campaign pledges 2000).**[xvi]** In response, political and public objections to Prime Minister Mori displayed skepticism about his popular campaign for reforming the existing educational system.**[xvii]**

Given a basis for a serious challenge, the political protest against the ruling coalition confronted the old-fashioned, indirect rhetoric echoing the LDP power structure. However, such reactions against Mori's "divine nation" remarks gradually disappeared in three main directions. First, the Emperor stands as the national icon of cultural unity for the nation of Japan. The sound bite of "divine nation" thus mixed a nationalistic consciousness with a cultural nationalism linked to the issue of Japanese identity - a sense of who "we" are (Oliver 1989, p. 229). The phrase was not so negative for many people. Second, the opposition parties confronted Mori with his lack of strong leadership; however, the opposition failed to deliver an uplifting, alternative vision attractive to voters. On the one hand, the confrontation appeared to be a political clash between Japanese "conservative" (*hoshu*, represented by the LDP, which supported the constitutional revision) and "liberal" (*kakushin*, represented by the Socialist Party, which changed its name into the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in July 1996, and opposed the constitutional revision). On the other hand, despite the collapse of the cold-war ideology, the confrontational axis of political ideology over Japan's postwar pacifism remained. Last, the general public began expressing deep dissatisfaction with the old style of "closed-door" or "behind-the-scenes" politicking, which followed Japan's long-held practice of seniority merits consideration (The view from Monday 2000). While the decision over whether

Mori would stay or go still rested in the hands, not of the Diet, but of the LDP Old Guard, the voting in the election was more likely to rely on the good personal qualities of (party) leaders than on the electoral system which was tied with narrow, local interest groups.

2.2 *Self-Defense*

Facing public cynicism about his trustworthiness, competence, and stand on issues, Mori strove to differentiate the real - and critical - issues from his personal credibility and to shift attention to reflections on a sense of Japanese-ness "*which is generally known, but cannot be articulated*" in homogenizing the Emperor into Japan (See Black 1988, p. 148; Simmel 1950, pp. 107-78; Canetti 1984, pp. 290-96; Foucault 1980). Designed for public consumption, his apologetic gesture focused more on alleviating fears among members of the ruling coalition who warned of a possible negative effect on the outcome of the general election than on explaining the "divine nation" remarks. In the public eye, his justification was not convincing in as far as it claimed that his genuine intent had not been the same as was expressed by his words when taken at face value. His public apology thus resuscitated questions about the implications of his controversial remarks as well as about his subsequent crisis management. Short of delivering the needed image of openness, honesty, and forthrightness vital to an apology, his simple disavowal was also taken as arrogant. Furthermore, along with his ineffective justification, he kept refusing to retract the controversial phrase in order not to alienate the conservative, pro-Shinto base. Faced with declining public approval ratings and political pressures inside and outside his own party, Mori was forced to apologize in order to rebuild rapport. For national public relations, Mori issued an apology first to the Diet, and then to the people. The first occasion was in front of the House of Councillors on May 19, 2000. A week after that, he was again demanded to arrange a special televised press conference in order to speak directly to his national audience. While making a gesture to restore public trust in his credibility, Mori never gave in to the demand for retracting his words "divine nation." Since the rise of political and public criticism, Mori stood up for the controversial phrase by claiming that nothing was wrong with it. At the Diet as well as on television, he reiterated his claim: "If my remarks caused any misunderstanding, that was not what I intended. I apologize, even though what I really meant was different from how my words were taken" (Mori calls press conference over remark 2000, May 25; See also Nakamoto 2000). In his national appeal, Mori continued to insist that he had no intention to

revive the state ideology of Imperial Japan or to violate the fundamental constitutional principle of popular sovereignty. Instead of retracting the controversial phrase, he attempted to dissociate his genuine intent from the historical, negative implications that were clear to the public ear. His consistency with pro-Shinto religious ideas conveyed a strong message to conservatives with strong prewar associations.

Part of a serious difficulty for Mori was that he was simply unable to deliver the political leadership and the narrative that would rescue him from the backlash. He remained stuck in old-fashioned politics based on a coalition of powerful interest groups. In other words, he relied on traditional Japanese modes of political communication in which politicians could misrepresent facts, or protect their own feelings, thoughts, and opinions from public concern. Hence Mori failed to see the importance of effective communication with the public for his own advantage. In trying to explain his “divine nation” remarks, Mori first claimed that the occasion of calling on the cultural uniqueness of Japan under the divine Emperor was his private matter. He then said that the goal of his original speech was not to reclaim Shinto religious ideology, which takes on a nationalist fashion and believes the Emperor to be “a living deity” (*arahito-gami*), but to reconfirm forgotten Japanese virtues. For that reason, Mori argued, he mentioned various religions besides Shinto religion in the original speech: “It is important to speak out about the need to worship gods of any religion, or the Buddha, at school, at home, and in society, from the standpoint of cherishing the state of Japan.” While stressing that the speech had no emphasis on any specific religious dogmas, he also claimed that his focus was on an educational design to internalize the sacred embedded in the existing social order. Mori called for the “efforts of individuals to live together in society and to bind themselves to their agreed rules” (Douglas 1975, xiii). Furthermore, he drew national attention to his critical comments on the high rate of juvenile crime and the collapse of social morals, emphasizing that “[h]uman life is a divine gift to us, and therefore we must take good care of our lives.” By combining religious values with moral customs in the practice of everyday life, Mori defended the controversial phrase “divine nation” against being attacked by opposition leaders and public criticism. Even in his public apology, Mori repeatedly claimed that in his reference to *kami* he did not mean to evoke militarist Japan’s wartime creed, but to emphasize the Emperor as a single national icon (See Mori defends remark about “divine nation” 2000). Despite his emphasis on “our” bonds of communal sharing in leading “us” to restore “our”

lost virtues, the critical question remained why he used the wartime slogan. In fact, Mori chose the Shinto religious terminology for his original pro-Shinto audience in order to give reassurance that they and their religious belief were worthwhile especially in reforming the current educational system. He intended to show his respect and honor for what his target audience, the Shinto political group, believed in.

The term *kami* stands for the divinities like objects of nature, such as mountains, that are worshipped in Shinto traditions. Until modern times, Shinto (literally, “Way of the gods”) referred more to a loose collection of folklore culture like ancestor worship than to a specific religion. In the late nineteenth century, political ideologues began to make use of Shinto as a symbolic means to invent the nation-state. In the process of unifying the nation under state Shintoism, they defined the Emperor as the leading *kami* as well as the divine being of worship. Even after Emperor Hirohito renounced his divinity on January 1, 1946, for Shinto devotees, the Emperor remained a holy being. In his use of the Shinto religious terminology, Mori conveyed to his original audience the message that sovereignty should rest with the Emperor. Moreover, the advocacy for religious education made his voice more identical with Shinto religious ideology, and thus ended with offending those who held different beliefs and opinions.

When his “private” remarks became public, the country as a whole recognized how rich and influential with cultural, historical significance the wartime slogan “divine nation” still remained. Mori later apologized for causing public “misunderstanding” by describing Japan as a “divine nation with the Emperor at its core”: “I am sorry if I caused any misunderstanding and I offer my apologies” (Mori apologizes over “divine nation” remarks” 2000; See also Mori calls press conference over remark 2000, May 24). During the televised press conference at his official residence at 4 PM on May 26, he once again offered his sincere “apology” for any “misunderstanding” caused by the controversial remarks: “I feel a deep sense of remorse (for causing any misunderstanding).” In his apology, he also repeated that he had no desire to revive the state system: “I have no intention at all of seeking the revival of the state-backed Shintoism of the prewar era.” However much Mori made efforts to dissociate the controversial phrase from Shinto religious ideology to win back public trust, the symbolic power of the phrase could not be trivialized. For many who knew how such religious terms as “divine nation” were once used so purposely, his apology was viewed as trying to

deceive voters. **[xviii]**

What made his position worse was that Mori consistently refused to retract the controversial phrase (Opposition slams Mori for lack of retraction 2000). In order to maintain his favor among pro-Shinto LDP supporters, he apologized only for causing a miscommunication, and not for any misstatement, thus raising public cynicism about his apology. In his public apology, Mori implicitly accused the public as well as the media of misunderstanding his “divine nation” remarks. What he attempted here was to clearly distinguish his pro-Shinto audience and his private matters from his national audience and his public obligation. In confronting the backlash, Mori answered the question of whether he had an intention to deify the Emperor during a plenary session of the House of Councillors, on May 19:

The way in which the Emperor is defined has changed with the times. I only meant that the Emperor is now the symbol of the state and the unity of the people. I did not mean to say anything that goes against the idea that sovereignty rests with the people (Mori offers apology for “divine nation” gaffe 2000; See also Political pulse 2000).

Mori first redefined his intent when using the controversial phrase to be one of calling for Japanese cultural identity, and not for Imperial Japanese military glory. Then he claimed that he believed in Japan’s postwar democracy and Constitution, and that, therefore, he had not intended to mislead the country. His rhetorical strategy of dissociation did not help reassure the country, but dragged him down. As a matter of fact, Prime Minister Mori never got rid of being attacked as conservative, nationalist, and traditionalist; he was presented as failing to take responsibility and accountability for his “mistaken” remarks. His control over the tripartite coalition thus became weakened, but it did not reach the point of overthrowing his coalition government yet.

3. Conclusions and Implications

In order to compensate for his own unpopularity, Mori made the best of sympathy voting for the late Prime Minister Obuchi. Even on the defensive, Mori continued to address Obuchi, and presented himself as the appropriate choice at least in light of cultural practices that show consideration for the seniority meritocracy. Even in his “divine nation” remarks, Mori emphasized his close ties with former Prime Minister Obuchi, who was his longtime political rival as well as his Waseda University classmate, by addressing him as “Mr. Obuchi” (*Obuchi-san*: 6 times),

“Prime Minister Obuchi” (*Obuchi-Sori*: once), and “Premier Obuchi” (*Obuchi-Shusho*: once). In addition, whereas the Prime Ministers usually elaborate on their own positions on particular issues in a political communication, Mori offered no new policy agenda; instead, he vowed that he would carry on Obuchi’s plan for Japan’s economic recovery and reforms. For instance, Mori pledged to continue the current economic policies:

It’s like an order from heaven. Mr. Obuchi and I have been friends for more than 40 years. I feel my heart torn to pieces when I think of it. I can hear his voice saying, “I leave things to you.” What is important is to take care of what he had wanted to do, and had been concerned about (Mori says appointment “mandate from heaven 2000).

By taking into account the unusual situation in which he succeeded Obuchi in office, Mori promoted public recognition of continuity.**[xix]** Concerning his questionable succession, Mori repeated, “It’s like an order (or the mandate) from heaven,” using the same expression he had used when describing his surprised feelings about his sudden promotion in his inaugural press conference (Mori says appointment “mandate from heaven 2000). On the pragmatic level, his reappointment of all the members of the Obuchi cabinet to his own strengthened the impression that the Mori cabinet would be in place just until the general election.**[xx]** Furthermore, as Obuchi, hooked up to life-support systems, had just passed away, Mori played on the deceased national leader’s image to increase public sympathy, and thereby made criticism raised against the Obuchi government as well as against his own government look inconsiderate.

For attention-getting news coverage, Mori set the general election to be held on the deceased Prime Minister Obuchi’s birthday, June 25, 2000. The LDP campaign strategists thus defined the election as a “battle to avenge Obuchi’s death” to turn public sympathy into support for the LDP.**[xxi]** In the 1980 general election, the LDP had once won a landslide victory based on sympathy votes for the death of then Prime Minister Ohira Masayoshi, who had suddenly died during the election campaign. In this regard, it was obvious that the LDP members expected the death of Obuchi to bring similar surging effects to the 2000 election. As his party sought to take advantage of public sympathy over the death of his predecessor on May 14, 2000, to sway popular votes, Mori also sought to retain his hold on political power (Death of Former Premier creates ripples in preelection politics 2000). Mori consistently stated that he was continuing the overall policies

initiated by the Obuchi cabinet, so that he could take advantage of public sentiment over Obuchi who died before he could achieve all his political goals. Even in the “divine nation” sound bite, Mori continued to underscore the regret that Obuchi might feel about missing the Group of Eight Okinawa summit meeting in July, the success of which he had set his heart on: “It was fateful that I heard the death of Prime Minister Obuchi as I was about to leave for the ceremony (of the Japanese children summit in Okinawa Prefecture).” In reflecting on what Obuchi attempted to accomplish, Mori presented himself as the legitimate heir who was carrying out Obuchi’s living will. On the whole, Obuchi’s death enabled Mori and the LDP to draw sympathy votes at the election.

NOTES

[i] Pache Research Subsidy I-A-2 for Academic Year 2005 funded by Nanzan University assisted the research to work on this paper.

[ii] The Japanese used to believe that they were a chosen people, directly descended from the divine Amaterasu. Historian E.H. Carr (1962) put it into the following words: “Our country, as a special mark of favor from the heavenly gods, was begotten by them, and there is so immense a difference between Japan and all other countries of the world as to defy comparisons” (What is history? (New York: Knopf), p. 128).

[iii] According to the Yomiuri Shimbun survey, 50.9 percent of respondents said they did not support the Mori cabinet mainly because they were not able to trust him. While stressing this disturbing result that such a great percentage of Japanese people could not trust their country’s top leader, the journal’s editorial urged political parties to regain public trust in national politics (“Editorial: Return political focus to issues,” The Daily Yomiuri (May 27, 2000): 6).

[iv] This paper uses the word Diet, instead of the Congress, as a reference to the Japanese national legislature, following the Japanese official English translation of national political body.

[v] All the quotations of Yoshiro Mori’s “divine nation” remarks in this paper are based on the text “Mori shusho aisatsu zenbun (The entire speech text given by Prime Minister Mori)” placed on <http://jinja.jp/jikyoku/kaminokuni>.

[vi] During his nine-day tour of the Group of Eight (G8) major nations for the Okinawa summit in July, 2000, Mori informally mentioned the timing of dissolving the lower house (“Mori hints at June 25 general election,” The Daily Yomiuri (May 2, 2000): 1). During the NHK (Nihon Hoso Kyokai) TV program recorded on May 13, Mori said the next House of Representatives election would likely be held on

June 25 (“Mori: June 25 likely for general poll,” The Daily Yomiuri (May 14, 2000): 1).

[vii] At the time, Kanzaki mentioned that New Komeito might start considering its withdrawal from the current partnership with the LDP: “Though he must still be unsure of himself as he became Prime Minister only about a month ago, we want (Mori) to take to heart his responsibility as prime minister and choose his words more carefully” (“Mori remarks deal heavy blow to leadership role,” The Daily Yomiuri (May 19, 2000): 2).

[viii] In contrast to foreign coverage, Japanese newspaper articles are rarely named mainly due to the censorship procedure within each newspaper company. In this paper, therefore, a longer reference suggests a citation of an English article circulated in Japan.

[ix] Even if Mori meant to symbolize Japan’s long history and culture, such an expression as “divine nation” took a nationalist tinge intimating the Emperor’s status as “a living god” (“Editorials / Prime Minister’s ‘divine nation’ gaffe,” The Daily Yomiuri (May 17, 2000): 6).

[x] Politicians often make controversial remarks in closed, informal meetings with small groups of colleagues, bureaucrats, or news reporters. Often they become surprised and embarrassed, mainly because they view their remarks as private so as not to be publicized.

[xi] Due to its time constraints, television uses modes of synecdoche to view political values, attitudes, perceptions, and sometimes personalities in the political scene, and shapes the responses to the political world. It was on May 18 when he officially approved a plan to dissolve the House of Representatives for a general election on June 25 (Mori sets June 25 poll amid resignation calls 2000).

[xii] Japanese politicians have often made “indiscreet” remarks and used “violent language” (bogen) at the local level, which ended up in international and national news coverage.

[xiii] Just like Mori, former Prime Ministers Takeshita and Obuchi were the alumni of the same debating club at Waseda University. As to his public speaking ability, Takeshita was known for using easy-to-understand words, but his sentences as a whole did not make any sense. Obuchi was known for “poor vocabulary” (bocya-hin). As prime minister, Obuchi was characterized as “having all the pizzazz of a cold pizza,” and his personal image of mediocrity gave him the name of “vacuum prime minister” (“Jottings,” The Daily Yomiuri (April 6, 2000): 3).

[xiv] In a speech to the Ehime Prefecture LDP Association, Mori objected to the

possibility of the Japan Communist Party (JCP) joining the ruling coalition, remarking “how can the national policy (kokutai) be preserved?” (“Mori shusho shitsugen mitomeru” (Prime Minister Mori admitted that he made a misstatement), *The Asahi Shimbun* [Morning ed.] (June 5, 2000): 1; “Editorial,” *The Asahi Shimbun* [Morning ed.] (June 5, 2000): 2).

[xv] Concerning the plan for educational reform, one of Mori’s aides said, “among all of the issues that he inherited from former Prime Minister Obuchi, [this] is the most suitable issue with which Mori can show his originality” (“Mori Cabinet to tackle tough issues left by Obuchi,” *The Daily Yomiuri* (April 6, 2000): 3).

[xvi] The coalition campaign slogan also echoed Mori’s advocacy of “Japan’s renewal” in his first policy speech, calling up the “realization of a renewed Japan.”

[xvii] Mori’s policy speech more or less echoed the policy speech delivered by Obuchi in January, 2000. There were two main reasons. First, the fiscal 2000 budget had already passed the Diet with deliberations on bills related to the budget left for future discussion. Second, all ministers from the Obuchi Cabinet were reappointed to the Mori Cabinet.

[xviii] For members of his faction, the current catchphrase was “aggressive defense” (Mori calls press conference over remark 2000, May 25).

[xix] While describing his newly-born cabinet as “a cabinet for the rebirth of Japan,” Mori emphasized it would continue the policies of former Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi in his first policy speech delivered at the Diet on April 7, 2000. He then made frequent use of references to his predecessor like “honoring the wishes of the former Prime Minister.”

[xx] Prior to Mori’s inauguration, it was certain that the general election was to take place since the four-year term of the current House of Commons would expire in October, 2000.

[xxi] The LDP even set forth the joint Cabinet-Liberal Democratic Party funeral service for former Prime Minister Obuchi on June 8. This was deliberately calculated to draw sympathy votes in the 2000 House of Representatives election on June 25 (“Obuchi funeral timing eyed with suspicion,” *The Daily Yomiuri* (May 17, 2000): 3).

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