



In Memory of Former Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro: My Sworn Friend for More than Sixty Years, a Selfless and Studious Person

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Endless affection and respect

Mr. Nakasone Yasuhiro (1918–2019) has passed away. I had known him for more than sixty years, and on the day of his demise, I said that his death brought as much shock as when my parents died. I have endless affection and respect for him.

Mr. Nakasone was eager to learn and always had policy in mind. Unlike many other politicians, he thought about the policies first, before factional affairs and management. He thought intensely about how to hone and realize these policies.

He also listened to what other people said and did not cling to fixed ideas, while strongly believing in his own philosophy. Otherwise, he could not have accomplished so much as a politician. When he was young, he was a fairly right-leaning politician but he transformed. He said of himself, “I am for modified capitalism.”

From afar, he looked as if he said what he wanted to say, but in fact he listened to other people and reoriented his own judgment. That is why he was called a weathervane.

Mr. Nakasone responded to that by asking, “What’s wrong with being a weathervane? I don’t mind turning my body as long as my feet do not waver. This way, I can read the direction of the wind.” That is probably right. Public opinion is like the wind, after all. You cannot be a politician if you cannot read the wind.

His lifestyle was simple and frugal, and he was a truly studious person. This remained unchanged throughout his life.

Three-hour study sessions every week

It was around 1956, soon after the establishment of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), when I met Mr. Nakasone for the first time at the direction of Mr. Shoriki Matsutaro (1885–1969), the owner of *The Yomiuri Shimbun* newspaper who became a member of the House of Representatives. Mr. Shoriki was very interested in nuclear power, believing it to be an important new source of energy. Mr. Nakasone also studied the peaceful utilization of nuclear power and socialized with Mr. Shoriki.



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Mr. Shoriki served as the first Chairman of the Japanese Atomic Energy Commission and the first Director General of the Science and Technology Agency. Mr. Nakasone also later acted as Chairman and Director General.

At that time, I was still a cub reporter, and Mr. Nakasone was a backbencher. One day Mr. Shoriki called me in and told me to “meet Mr. Nakasone.” However, I avoided meeting him, thinking that he was a hawkish, grandstanding person because Mr. Nakasone composed the “Kenpo Kaisei no Uta” (“Song for the Revision of the Constitution”), among other activities.

I was summoned again by Mr. Shoriki and when I told him, “I have yet to meet him,” he shouted, “Bloody idiot.” So, I scrambled to Mr. Nakasone’s office in the Diet members’ office building.

I assumed that a young Diet member would be having a drink somewhere in town at night. But Mr. Nakasone was totally different. He loved to study and was a great reader of books. He told me, “Let’s hold a study session.”

At first, we held study sessions with other people, like Mr. Ujii Seichiro (1926–2011), a journalist for *The Yomiuri Shimbun* newspaper and later president of the Nippon Television Network Corporation, and businessman Mr. Fukumoto Kunio (1927–2010). But before long, we decided to have reading sessions with just Mr. Nakasone and myself.

Mr. Nakasone rarely went to places like bars in Ginza or fancy Japanese restaurants. Instead, he held reading sessions with me, renting a room at the Hotel Kayu Kaikan, which closed in 1998.

He said, “Why don’t you come to my place?” so I went to the public dormitory for Diet members. It was an eight-mat room. He lived there with his wife and three children. When I arrived, he woke up a maid who put a tray on the futon with a bottle of sake and two cups. Then we had a talk over the bottle of sake.

One day he told me, “I’ve decided to move to a luxurious place, it’s like the Palace of Versailles, so please come visit.” However, it was the dormitory once again, and there were only three rooms. His three children lived in an eight-mat room, and he and his wife lived in a six-mat room. They used the four-and-a-half mat room like a storeroom.

He was a really simple, frugal, upright person.

Since I had graduated from university with a philosophy degree, I read many philosophy books. Mr. Nakasone later cited Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* as his favorite book. I also read various other books about politics, economics and history and conversed with him, exchanging opinions. “This is what I think. What do you think about this, Mr. Nakasone?” We talked for three hours every Saturday.

We almost always spent time reading books like this. That was how our association began.

His first cabinet post

Mr. Nakasone first became a cabinet member when the Cabinet of Kishi Nobusuke (1896–1987) was reshuffled for the second time in June 1959.

Mr. Tanaka Kakuei (1918–1993) served as a cabinet minister at the youthful age of 39. I assume that Mr. Nakasone, who was 41 years old at that time, had some sense of rivalry with Mr. Tanaka.

Mr. Nakasone belonged to the Kono faction, but he was unable to enter the Cabinet even if Mr. Kono Ichiro (1898–1965) recommended him, because the relationship between Mr. Kono and Mr. Kishi had worsened.

Coming up with a plan for him, I decided to bring Mr. Ono Banboku (1890–1964), vice president of the LDP, whom I had a close relationship with, into contact with Mr. Nakasone. However, as soon as Mr. Ono saw Mr. Nakasone’s face, he began yelling, “During the Shipbuilding Scandal (1954), you said at the budget committee, ‘Ono has taken a bribe,’ didn’t you?” He also brought up a story from Mr. Nakasone’s time in the opposition Kaishinto (Reformist Party, founded in 1952 and dissolved in 1954) before the establishment of the LDP.

Becoming worried, I mediated, “Take it easy, Mr. Ono. Put the past behind you. Isn’t that what the vice president of the LDP should do?” This brought Mr. Ono back to good spirits and he even said at the end, “Mr. Nakasone, you look like a prime minister.” This indicates that Mr. Ono was prescient.

As it turned out, Mr. Nakasone became a cabinet member as the Head of the Science and Technology Agency (Minister of State) and we became closer. At the time, we did not talk much about politics but talked a lot about science and technology.

At a Japanese-style pub with Robert F. Kennedy

Mr. Nakasone visited the United States in 1961 to attend the inauguration ceremony of John F. Kennedy and deepened his friendship with the Kennedy family, including the President’s brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy.

President Kennedy was also very popular in Japan. With the intention of inviting his brother first, if not the president himself, the Robert Kennedy Reception Committee was set up, chaired by Mr. Nakasone.

When Attorney General Kennedy visited Japan, Mr. Nakasone invited him to The Yomiuri Shimbun and, after that, took him to a Japanese-style pub in Ginza. Attorney General Kennedy also called himself a politician for the people and liked places like this. Truth be told, the other customers were all confederates [protective of the political status quo].

Mr. Nakasone and Attorney General Kennedy talked for more than an hour, standing up and leaning on the counter.

When he was a young member of the Diet, Mr. Nakasone visited the United States and gained the friendship of Henry Kissinger (later US Secretary of State) who was an associate professor of Harvard University. He told me that Mr. Kissinger’s English, with its heavy German accent, was difficult to understand.

From that time, Mr. Nakasone continued to get along with Mr. Kissinger, interacted with the Kennedy family, and got to know President Nixon as well.

Such efforts came to fruition in a close relationship with President Reagan after Mr. Nakasone became prime minister. It was a very big achievement of Mr. Nakasone’s, enabling him to strengthen the Japan-US relationship.

Great success in administrative reform

In the Cabinet of Sato Eisaku (1901–1975), Mr. Nakasone held key senior positions in the government and the ruling party, such as Minister of Transport, Head of the Japan Defense Agency (Minister of State) and General Council Chairman of the LDP. He formed the Nakasone faction in 1966, at the age of 48. He was the youngest of the faction leaders.

He fulfilled all the requirements to be prime minister, becoming Minister of International Trade and Industry in the Tanaka Cabinet and Secretary-General of the LDP in the Cabinet of Miki Takeo (1907-1988). I talked with him almost every day, including phone conversations, and came to be involved in various political situations.

I first thought that Mr. Nakasone would be able to become prime minister when Prime Minister Ohira Masayoshi (1910–1980) passed away in 1980 during the elections for both the House of Councilors and House of Representatives (1980). However, influential figures in the Tanaka faction such as Mr. Nikaido Susumu (1909–2000) reached an agreement to make Mr. Suzuki Zenko (1911–2004) the next prime minister. I had asked Mr. Nikaido, “Could you make Nakasone the next prime minister from the Tanaka faction?” but my request was rejected.

As the Tanaka faction had solidified their support behind a potential Prime Minister Suzuki, Mr. Nakasone wanted to become Minister of Finance. I conveyed this to Mr. Suzuki. However, he said, “I want Mr. Nakasone to become Head of the Administrative Management Agency (Minister of State).”

So, I suggested to Mr. Nakasone that “You won’t be able to do the things you say you want to do because the Cabinet is formed by other factions. It’s better to accept the position as Head of the Administrative Management Agency.”

Because he had already held such positions as Minister of Transport, Trade and Industry, Mr. Nakasone was probably unsatisfied with being Head of the Administrative Management Agency. Mr. Watanabe Michio (1923–1995), an ally of Mr. Nakasone, became the Finance Minister.

In hindsight, however, his becoming Head of the Administrative Management Agency at that time took on great significance. In a short while, the Nakasone Cabinet was born (1982) and vigorously pushed forward administrative reforms based on the Report of the Second Administrative Investigation Committee. Setting the goal of “financial reconstruction without a tax increase,” the Nakasone Cabinet gained the support of the public.

The Nakasone Cabinet made great achievements in the privatization of three public corporations (National Railways; Telephone and Telegraph; Tobacco and Salt Monopoly). The National Railways had a bad reputation because their customer service was poor. The privatization of these three public corporations could only have been accomplished by Mr. Nakasone. At that time, even when I met him at night, all he talked about was the National Railways and Telephone and Telegraph, saying that he wanted to do this and that.

From the Suzuki Cabinet to the Nakasone Cabinet

Although the Suzuki Cabinet achieved some visible results in administrative reforms, it had many problems in foreign diplomacy.

Relations between Japan and South Korea deteriorated significantly due to the history textbook issue and the huge amount of loans South Korea had sought from Japan. The Japan-US relationship was also in bad shape.

In 1981, the year after the inauguration of the Suzuki Cabinet, President Reagan was inaugurated in the United States. Mr. Suzuki visited the United States in May for a summit with the US president. In the joint US-Japan communique at that time, “the alliance between the United States and Japan” was clearly stipulated for the first time.

At the subsequent news conference, however, Mr. Suzuki carelessly commented that the alliance “did not have military implications.”

The Japan-US alliance is a military alliance. If the Japanese government describes it as not having a military nature despite that fact, the United States would obviously become upset. Various opinions about the interpretation of the Japan-US alliance came out of the Japanese government, and this developed into such a mess that Foreign Minister Ito Masayoshi (1913–1994) resigned.

In autumn 1982, rumors swirled about Mr. Suzuki’s running to be the leader of the LDP again. I told Mr. Suzuki, “Isn’t it finally time for you to step down and hand over the reins to Mr. Nakasone?” but he did not nod his head.

However, when Mr. Suzuki met Mr. Nakasone a little later, he said to Mr. Nakasone, “I want you to be ready for what comes after.” Mr. Nakasone called me after that and said, “I will be the next prime minister.”

I suppose that Mr. Suzuki wanted to tell Mr. Nakasone directly that he hoped for a smooth transference of power. Mr. Suzuki was good at keeping secrets, and Mr. Nakasone would not speak about it because it was a matter involving himself. I would not talk about it, either. So, this news was not leaked for a while. To the public, it looked as if the inauguration of the Nakasone Cabinet had been decided suddenly.

Mr. Nakasone did not say anything bad about Mr. Suzuki but praised him instead. He probably felt grateful for the peaceful transfer of power.

It was also essential to gain support from Mr. Tanaka. Though he was on trial for the Lockheed Scandal, Mr. Tanaka still held considerable power and wanted to make Mr. Nakasone the next prime minister.

So, I benefitted from the advice of Mr. Hayasaka Shigezo (1930–2004), a secretary to Mr. Tanaka. Mr. Hayasaka suggested that all Mr. Nakasone needed to do was go to the personal residence of Mr. Tanaka, bare his chest, and nakedly embrace him.

Mr. Hayasaka implied that if the idealist Mr. Nakasone wanted to be accepted by the pragmatic Mr. Tanaka, he needed to do that much.

I conveyed this to Mr. Nakasone. I told him, “All you have to do is go to his personal residence in Mejiro, hug him, and say ‘please.’ If you do this, Mr. Tanaka will be happy to jump at your offer.” Since I had often talked with Mr. Tanaka, I understood how he would feel.

Mr. Nakasone did exactly what I had suggested. He called me and said, “I really did hug him.” He told me that Mr. Tanaka said, “I understand. I will make you the prime minister.”

I did not expect that things would go that smoothly. In the first place, their political backgrounds were different. While Mr. Tanaka was of the school of Yoshida Shigeru (1878–1967), Ikeda Hayato (1899–1965) and Sato Eisaku, Mr. Nakasone was of the school of Hatoyama Ichiro (1883–1959) and Kono. However, Mr. Tanaka probably thought that it would be more beneficial for him if Mr. Nakasone felt an obligation to him.

Mr. Nakasone gained the support of the Tanaka faction at the LDP primary to elect the party president in November and won, receiving about 560,000 party member votes. He finally rose to the position of prime minister.

He improved Japan-Korea and Japan-US relations

Mr. Nakasone’s visit to South Korea in January 1983, the following year, was electrifying. It was the first time a Japanese prime minister had visited South Korea since the end of World War II.

At the formal dinner hosted by President Chun Doo-hwan, he gave a speech using some Korean words. At the subsequent party, he even sang a Korean song. It is said that some leading Korean figures were moved to tears.

Mr. Nakasone was a truly studious person and studied Korean furiously. I asked him where he had learned the Korean song, and he said that he memorized it in the bathroom by singing it loudly.

The economic cooperation issue with South Korea was also settled, and Japan-Korea relations improved rapidly. Bringing this as a gift, he also visited the United States. Mr. Nakasone said, “Japan and the United States have a common destiny, and will share both our joys and our sadness,” and earned President Reagan’s trust. These were extremely strategic acts of diplomacy.

He built personal relationships of trust with the leaders of other countries, including President Reagan, President Chun Doo-hwan, Hu Yaobang, General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and French President François Mitterrand. He became a rare figure who led the world with head-of-state diplomacy.

Inviting President Reagan to his country residence in Hinode, Tokyo, was an impressive act.

Mr. Nakasone thought that it was a fine villa, but it was not so splendid. It was many hours from the city center by car. It had electricity but not gas. Because it had only one small electric heater, it was warmed by a charcoal fire in the fireplace.

Given the simplicity of his life with his family in a single room in the public dormitory for Diet members, Mr. Nakasone did not know about luxury. His country residence was so simple and plain that I wondered if it was all right to invite the US President to such a place, and I imagine that President Reagan also must have been surprised.

However, President Reagan might have been fond of Mr. Nakasone’s simple, genuine nature. The relationship of trust between the leaders deepened, and Japan-US relations improved significantly. There is no doubt that this meeting was a major turning point.

On the 40th anniversary of the end of the Pacific War in August 1985, he visited Yasukuni-jinja Shrine in his official role as the prime minister for the first time. China strongly objected to this, and this incident weakened the position of Hu Yaobang, who was pro-Japanese and well acquainted with Mr. Nakasone.

After that, Mr. Nakasone voluntarily refrained from visiting Yasukuni-jinja Shrine. He said, “If I go to Yasukuni-jinja Shrine, it will hurt Hu Yaobang politically.”

The Nakasone Administration had considerable achievements in Japanese diplomacy, and the major factor for this was Mr. Nakasone’s valuing relationships of trust with the leaders of other countries. Mr. Nakasone valued *en* (an invisible link) with people. In domestic politics, he exercised his strong leadership, calling himself the “presidential prime minister,” and pushed forward the slogan of a “total reassessment of postwar politics.” His skill at managing people was probably what enabled him to achieve so much on difficult issues such as administrative reform.

He appointed influential scholars such as Mr. Sato Seizaburo (1932–1999), a political scholar and professor at the University of Tokyo, but they were originally the brains of Mr. Ohira. After Mr. Ohira died, he used them as his own.

He valued Mr. Gotoda Masaharu (1914–2005) in the Tanaka faction and appointed him as Chief Cabinet Secretary. It was unusual to appoint a Chief Cabinet Secretary from a faction other than the prime minister’s own.

When he achieved a crushing victory in the elections for both the House of Councilors and House of Representatives in 1986 after the so-called “dissolution brought about by playing dead,” discussions to extend the term of the prime minister emerged. Mr. Nakasone wanted to extend his term for two years and told me, “Would you go see Mr. Gotoda and gain his consent on the two-year extension?”

When I delivered this message to Mr. Gotoda, I got shouted at. “Has his head already swelled that big?” Mr. Nakasone accepted it and said, “That’s fine,” and the issue was settled by extending his term for a year.

Nevertheless, the Nakasone Administration became a long-lived administration with Mr. Nakasone being in office for nearly five years. Initially I did not expect that he would be in office for such a long time.

No interest in his own self-interest

Mr. Nakasone built a house after he first entered the Cabinet, but it was not that large. The hallways were so narrow that two people were unable to pass. He said, “This time, we have a large pond with fish,” but it was a small pond, like a miniature garden. Five or six goldfish and crucian carp were swimming there.

Around the time he finally came close to taking power, Mr. Nakasone’s daughter came to see me. She said, “We want to move to a larger house because many guests will come if my father becomes prime minister. However, my father insists that he doesn’t mind living in a small house.” I was asked, “Would you persuade him?”

Mr. Nakasone accepted my advice and tried to rent an empty house owned by Mr. Nagashima Shigeo (lifetime honorary manager of the Yomiuri Giants professional baseball team). However, I heard that when Mr. Nakasone asked, his request was turned down. Asking Mr. Nagashima for the reason, I was told, “I didn’t want to lease my house to a politician.” So, I said, “He is a politician, but he is my close friend. I want you to lease your house to him, thinking that you are renting it to my close friend.”

Mr. Nakasone was delighted, thinking that he had leased a big house, but it was not so magnificent a building. You could hear people speaking from one end to the other.

He was never concerned about his own self-interest, and had no such personal aspirations. His wife also became accustomed to the simple, frugal life.

Achievements fighting cancer

Another domestic accomplishment of the Nakasone Administration, along with administrative reforms, was the promotion of science and technology. Above all, Mr. Nakasone was among the first to draw attention to the significance of cancer research and launched the “Comprehensive 10-year Strategy for Cancer Control” in 1984. The National Cancer Center Hospital is in Tsukiji, Tokyo, but it has not always been such an outstanding hospital. It grew into a world-class cancer center after the Nakasone Administration.

Although I had prostate cancer in 1998, I have now fully recovered after undergoing prostate surgery under President Kakizoe Tadao at the National Cancer Center Hospital. Dr. Kakizoe is a pioneering expert in prostate cancer, and I am still alive thanks to the success of this surgery.

I was saved by the efforts Mr. Nakasone put into cancer treatment, and I am profoundly grateful for this.

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Born in 1926.

Graduated from the Philosophy Department of the Faculty of Literature, University of Tokyo. Joined The Yomiuri Shimbun in 1950. He assumed his present post after serving as Washington Bureau chief and editor of the Political News Department, President of The Yomiuri Shimbun Tokyo Headquarters, and President and Chairman of The Yomiuri Shimbun Holdings company. His publications include *Habatsu—Hoshuto no kaibo (Anatomy of Conservative Party Factions)*, *Daijin (Ministers)*, *Kunmei mo ukezaruru tokoro ari: Watashi no ririkesho (I do not take orders from anyone: My biography)*, and *Han-popurizumu ron (Anti-Populism Theory)*.
