

EXCERPTS FROM THE LETTER FROM EMPEROR MEIJI
(MUTSUHITO) TO PRESIDENT ULYSSES S. GRANT, ON THE
IWAKURA MISSION, 1871

Introduction

In 1871, the fledgling Meiji government dispatched a mission of almost fifty high officials and scholars to travel around the world, including extended tours of the United States, Western Europe, Scandinavia, and Russia. The Iwakura Mission (named after its leader, Iwakura Tomomi, 1825-1883) spent almost two years studying the political, economic, social, legal, and educational systems of the developed world as potential models for the modernization of Japan.

The leaders of the mission also attempted to begin the renegotiation of the "unequal treaties" — the exploitative diplomatic and economic agreements imposed by the Western powers on Japan in the 1850s, although governments in America and Europe were not yet willing to relax any of their privileges in Japan.

This letter from the Emperor Meiji (Mutsuhito, 1852-1912; r. 1867-1912) was presented to U.S. President Ulysses S. Grant (1822-1885) when the Iwakura Mission visited Washington, D.C.

Document Excerpts with Questions

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Excerpts from the Letter from Emperor Meiji (Mutsuhito) to President Ulysses S. Grant, on the Iwakura Mission, 1871

Mitsuhito, Emperor of Japan, etc., to the President of the United States of America, our good brother and faithful friend, greeting:

Mr. President: Whereas since our accession by the blessing of heaven to the sacred throne on which our ancestors reigned from time immemorial, we have not dispatched any embassy to the Courts and Governments of friendly countries. We have thought fit to select our trusted and honored minister, Iwakura Tomomi, the Junior Prime Minister (*udaijin*), as Ambassador Extraordinary ... and invested [him] with full powers to proceed to the Government of the United States, as well as to other Governments, in order to declare our cordial friendship, and to place the peaceful relations between our respective nations on a firmer and broader basis. The period for revising the treaties now existing between ourselves and the United States is less than one year distant. We expect and intend to reform and improve the same so as to stand upon a similar footing with the most enlightened nations, and to attain

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the full development of public rights and interest. The civilization and institutions of Japan are so different from those of other countries that we cannot expect to reach the declared end at once. It is our purpose to select from the various institutions prevailing among enlightened nations such as are best suited to our present conditions, and adapt them in gradual reforms and improvements of our policy and customs so as to be upon an equality with them. With this object we desire to fully disclose to the United States Government the constitution of affairs in our Empire, and to consult upon the means of giving greater efficiency to our institutions at present and in the future, and as soon as the said Embassy returns home we will consider the revision of the treaties and accomplish what we have expected and intended. ...

Your affectionate brother and friend,

Signed

Mutsuhito

Countersigned

Sanjō Sanetomi, Prime Minister

Questions:

1. As expressed in this letter, what are the Emperor Meiji's aspirations for Japan's future? How will these aspirations be attained?
2. How would you have responded to this letter as President Grant? Would you have been swayed by the Japanese arguments for treaty revision? Why or why not?
3. How do the sentiments in this letter relate to the goals of the Meiji government as expressed in the Charter Oath of 1868?