# Part 3: Matsuoka allies with Nazis

ditor's note: This is the **d** third in a three-part se-Yosuke Matsuoka, who became the foreign minister of Imperial Japan.

BY FINN J.D. JOHN Then Yosuke Matsuoka accepted his appointment as Imperial Japan's foreign minister, it was the fulfillment of a dream for him. The gregarious 13-year-old who had been informally adopted into Portland opium smuggler William Dunbar's household back in 1893 had come a long way in 47 years. He had become a national hero in Japan and was by far the single most famous Japanese person in the world internationally and almost certainly the most famous University of Oregon alum-

It should have been a triumphal time for him. And while it did have its moments, Matsuoka's year in the chair as Japan's top diplomat was a real pivot point in his life. The mistakes he made as Foreign Minister — crucial strategic mistakes that ironically came disguised as huge foreign policy wins — would define Matsuoka and his legacy forever, and not in a good way.

The first of these, and the biggest, was the pact with Nazi Germany — the Tripartite Pact.

The pact was signed on Sept. 19, 1940, bringing Japan officially and irrevocably into the Axis. Japan was now, for better or (much) worse, an ally of Nazi Germany.

Instead of respecting Japan's resolve and working to defuse tensions to prevent getting drawn into a two-front war, the Americans grew alarmed, sensing that they were being closed in upon. Instead of sending Franklin D. Roosevelt packing as punishment for allowing this setback to occur, they rallied around him and started getting ready for the upcoming fight. Instead of making it harder for Roosevelt to sell assistance to England to the American public, the pact made it easier.

There was something else that Matsuoka did, too, that he soon bitterly regretted — although it was one of the diplomatic master strokes of his career. In April 1941, while visiting Hitler in Berlin, he induced Hitler to do a little bragging and get carried away while talking about what Germany might do in a war with the United States.

"Germany would wage a vigorous war against America with U-boats and the Luftwaffe, and with her greater experience ... this would be more than a match for America," he told Matsuoka.

That's when he said it, proudly and publicly — a single sentence that would literally seal his own fate, along with Matsuoka's and that of both their countries:

"If Japan gets into a conflict with the United States, Germany on her part will take the necessary steps at once."

With that, Japan had the personal pledge of the Nazi dictator that if war came — Germany would be in it and on their side.

But as Matsuoka quickly learned, that was a sword that cut two ways. It turned Japan into a tripwire that the Roosevelt Administration could tug on to



Photo courtesy Japan War Art

posite direction," he said. "You

are facing each other and neither

side is willing to yield his right of

way. Soon becoming impatient,

the American will clench his fist

and sock you in the jaw. Taken

by surprise you may lower your

head and let him pass by. Next

time when you meet him on the

same path, he will simply raise

solution."

his fist. He considers that the best

He continued: "On the other

hand, if you do not retreat the

first time, and engage in a coun-

terattack, the American will be

he is doing. So recognizing, he

will become your best friend."

vid Lu, Matsuoka's biographer,

writes, "This was the America

of cowboys, of confrontation at

And this image of the bygone

era acquired in the still-under-

developed Pacific Northwest

United States."

was to govern Matsuoka's think-

ing when he negotiated with the

As evidenced by the fact that

he was still thinking this way in

1945, after it was all over and his

"punch the cowboy and he will

become your pal" strategy had

Matsuoka never really learned

failed again and again and again,

high noon and of the Wild West.

shocked and take another look at

you. 'Well, this fellow knows what

Responding to this quote, Da-

A postcard from Imperial Japan showing Yosuke Matsuoka meeting with Benito Mussolini in Rome in January 1933.

bring a reluctant America to the aid of the beleaguered British.

As far as I know, there isn't any direct evidence that Roosevelt's people started tugging on that tripwire. But, given the circumstances, it would be contrary to human nature and the nature of diplomacy if they didn't. And in the months that followed, Matsuoka clearly thought they were doing exactly that.

Matsuoka's tenure as foreign minister ended three months later, in July 1941. Convinced the U.S. was trying to bait Japan into war, he'd become something of a loose cannon, and had lost the confidence of army minister Gen. Hideki Tojo, who by now was the real power in the Japanese government. Prime Minister Konoe accordingly dissolved the cabinet and reformed it without Matsuoka.

Konoe's government only lasted a few months after that. Tensions with the United States got worse and worse. Tojo got more and more bellicose. Finally, in October, Konoe took the hint and resigned.

He was replaced with Tojo. And, of course, Tojo took the country straight to war, taking special care to make sure the Nazis would back Japan up as their fuhrer had pledged to do. As, of course, they did.

On the morning of the Pearl Harbor attack, Matsuoka heard the news on the radio, like everyone else. Initially he was exhilarated, but a day later the situation had sunk in a bit more. "The Tripartite Pact was my worst mistake," he told a visitor. "I had hoped to prevent the United States from entering the war."

Matsuoka spent the war years struggling with the tuberculosis that would shortly kill him. By the time the two atomic bombs had been detonated on Japanese soil, he was in obvious decline.

And so the war ended with Japan utterly supine, and with Matsuoka nearly on his deathbed. He finally succumbed to his tuberculosis at age 66 in June 1946 while in prison, awaiting trial on charges of war crimes.

Yosuke Matsuoka was a product of his time. But more than that, he was a product of another time, and another place — of the late 19th century in one of the roughest, least-refined parts of the American frontier: The shanghaiing-era Portland waterfront.

And it showed. Just after the war's end, a Japanese reporter asked him what Americans were like. This was his response:

"Now assuming that you are walking on a small path in a field, which is so narrow that only one person can pass through, and an American comes from the op-

And yet: Is it possible that the crafty old diplomat was actually right?

Certainly not in his own lifetime, but in ours, Japan has become many Americans' favorite foreign country. In fact, according to Gallup's annual World Affairs poll earlier this year, 82 percent of Americans regard Japan "mostly favorably" or "very favorably." This puts Japan in fourth place, behind France (84%), Great Britain (86%), and Canada

As the rawness of the wounds of the war has faded to a memory, a certain admiration and respect for an uncommonly gutsy old adversary remains. In fact, that analogy of the American cowboy and his Japanese new best friend sitting side by side at the bar in a saloon, each with a shiny new black eye, having a beer together — that actually seems pretty spot-on, doesn't it?

There is something else Matsuoka was long-term right about, too, and this is where this story actually gets a little spooky. It was a famous speech, one that he gave in Geneva in 1931 as the League of Nations debated what to do about the Manchuria Incident (the invasion by rogue Japanese army officers, you'll remember). Matsuoka stood before the world on that day, and this is what he said:

"Humanity crucified Jesus of Nazareth 2,000 years ago," he declaimed. "And today? Can any of you assure me that the so-called world opinion can make no mistake? We Japanese feel that we are now put on trial. Some of the people in Europe and America may wish even to crucify Japan in the 20th century. Gentlemen, Japan stands ready to be crucified! But we do believe, and firmly believe, that in a very few years, world opinion will be changed and that we also shall be understood by the world as Jesus of

Sources

Agony of Choice: Matsuoka Yosuke and the Rise and Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1880-1946, a book by David J. Lu published in 2002 by Lexington Books; "Yosuke Matsuoka: The Far-Western Roots of a World-Political Vision," an article by Masaharu Ano published in the Summer 1997 issue of Oregon Historical Quarterly; "Americans Rate Canada, Britain, France, Japan Most Favorably," an article by Megan Brenan published on news.gallup.com on March 14, 2022

Nazareth was."

This speech was not well received, especially by serious Christians who felt it was borderline blasphemy, if not worse. But in Japan it was a sensation. Translations were printed and distributed. The speech was used in schools' English-language programs alongside Shakespeare. A phonograph record was made of the speech and sold in shops.

And again, looking back on that speech from 1945, it sure must have looked like that had been just a lot of hot air, liberally spiced with bitter irony. Japan had been "crucified" indeed, on a cross not of gold but of uranium, and for what?

But by 1962 it actually made some sense. In fact, if someone had brought it to Nikita Khrushchev's attention during the Cuban Missile Crisis after he made the conscious decision to risk being ousted as leader of the Soviet Union by reaching past the big red button on his desk and picking up the phone instead — a decision that has to have been influenced by the spectacle of Japan's burning cities and radiation-ravaged people and the gut-wrenching journalism of John Hersey in his eyewitness account of Hiroshima after the bomb — maybe Khrushchev would have understood, and agreed with, Matsuoka's sentiment.

It is entirely possible, if not likely, that Japan's atomic sacrifice saved the world from nuclear holocaust 17 years later.

The argument goes like this: Hiroshima became a sacrificial lamb on that day and a few days later Nagasaki became another, giving the world a small taste of what nuclear holocaust might look like in the era of multi-megaton hydrogen bombs. After seeing that film footage and reading those eyewitness accounts, no one would ever be able to think of nuclear war in purely abstract terms again. No one would ever be able to hold national pride in one hand, and thermonuclear war in the other, and think for one second that they were of similar value.

And that is a gift the whole world received in 1945, paid for in full with the blood of Japanese innocents. The gift they bequeathed us was a visceral demonstration of why such weapons must never be used again. And we may never know if we owe those innocents our own lives. But it seems likely, doesn't it?

So, maybe — just maybe — we would all be dead today and our beautiful planet a scarred and smoking cinder if it hadn't been for an incompetent drug smuggler on the old shanghaiing-era Portland waterfront taking a little Japanese boy into his household, 130 years ago. And if that's not the "butterfly effect," I'd just like to know what is.

■ Finn J.D. John teaches at Oregon State University and writes about odd tidbits of Oregon history. His book, Heroes and Rascals of Old Oregon, was recently published by Ouragan House Publishers. To contact him or suggest a topic: finn@offbeatoregon.com or 541-357-2222.

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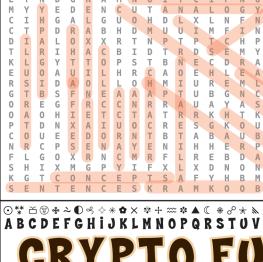
# **Puzzle Solutions**

## Guess Who? Answer: Teri Hatcher

# **WORD SCRAMBLE**

Answer: Covers

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