

Ryoichi SASAKAWA

President, Japan Shipbuilding Industry
Foundation

A man of varied interests, inexhaustible energy, immense financial resources, and an extensive network of important friends, Ryoichi Sasakawa is one of Japan's best known political fixers and power brokers. His exploits receive much attention in the Japanese and foreign press, which has provided a fairly detailed picture of his career and activities. Operating from the headquarters of the Japan Shipbuilding Industry Foundation, he runs a huge political and philanthropical empire. Sasakawa, 81, has amassed a vast personal fortune from business dealings over the years, but he finances his various activities mainly from the profits of the Japan Motorboat Racing Association, a legalized gambling concession whose gross income in 1976 reportedly equaled Japan's entire defense expenditures for the previous fiscal year.

Billed by the Japanese press as "Godfather Sasakawa," he heads scores of organizations ranging from the Japan Disabled Veterans Association and the World Union of Karatedo Organizations (he is a devotee of the martial arts) to the Japan Science Society. He is Tonga's honorary consul general in Japan and is said to have been instrumental in persuading that island nation to turn down a Soviet proposal to build an airport there. He is founder and chairman of the Japan-Philippine Association, and allegedly counts President Ferdinand Marcos among his good friends. An active promoter of Japanese relations in the Middle East, Sasakawa organized the Japan-Oman Association, and according to press reports he prides himself on having advanced Japanese interests among Arab oil sheiks by gifts of classic Japanese pornography. On a different plane, he donates extensively to worthy charitable causes through the Shipbuilding Industry Foundation or the Motorboat Racing Association, including millions of dollars to various UN organizations, 150 flowering cherry trees to New York City in 1979, and countless medical and social welfare operations both in and out of Japan. For all of these "meritorious services," Sasakawa was the recipient of the First-Class Order of the Sacred Treasure in 1978.

Beginning with his association in Sugamo Prison with fellow war criminal Nobusuke Kishi (Prime Minister during 1957-60), Sasakawa has had contacts with many of Japan's leading conservative politicians over the years. Because of the immense sums of money at his disposal, he has been able to dispense

a lot of financial support in the political world and is owed a lot of political favors. Stories abound of his influence in the intricate process of selecting prime ministers, and he is reported to take considerable pride in the power he wields through his political networks and the organizations he heads, whose combined membership is said to total 12,000,000.

Some of Japan's more orthodox rightwingers apparently regard Sasakawa as more of a businessman than a political ideologue; for his part, Sasakawa says he prefers to be called a humanitarian. He does have a number of firm political convictions, however. He has little use for the present Japanese constitution and democratic system and once said that the Diet was "full of stupid questions and stupid answers." He has called for constitutional changes to allow for rearmament and a larger role for the military. An admirer of Mussolini, Sasakawa has compared him to the old samurai of Japan and has called him the "perfect fascist and dictator."

A native of the Osaka area of apparently humble origins, Sasakawa began his long career as the organizer of Kokusui Taishu To (Nationalist Masses Party), a rightwing nationalist group that was involved in several political assassinations during the 1930s. This, plus a short stint in the Diet during the war years, earned him a little more than three years in Sugamo Prison as a suspected war criminal, although his case was never actually brought to trial. He is reported to have marched proudly to jail accompanied by a brass band playing martial airs and bearing banners wishing him success. Released from jail in 1948, he soon launched into the motorboat gambling business and began to dabble in rightwing politics. He began to attract national attention during the 1960s as organizer of Kokusai Shokyo Rengo (International Federation to Defeat Communism), through which he apparently developed contacts with South Korean religious fundamentalist Sun Myung Moon and his Unification Church. Sasakawa later established the World Anti-Communist League, which eventually expanded throughout Southeast Asia. He gave up the presidency of Kokusai Shokyo Rengo in 1972 to devote himself to "sound education for youth of the whole world." A great admirer of the traditional Japanese moral values--decorum, discipline, filial piety and patriotism--he deplores the influence of the Japan Teachers Union in "mass producing rotten children." He has done his best to improve things through his Blue Sea and Green Land movement, which provides facilities for children to develop their minds and bodies away from the insidious grip of the JIU, and by sponsoring television spots admonishing young viewers to do one good deed a day, conserve natural resources, and respect their parents and their flag.

Sasakawa's most recent exploit, not yet resolved, involves the financing of efforts to recover a Czarist warship sunk in the Tsushima Strait between Japan and Korea during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. Preliminary claims that the ship contains billions of dollars' worth of gold and platinum have evoked demands from the Soviets for return of the ship and its contents. Sasakawa, who appears to be enjoying the controversy, has announced that he is willing to restore the contents of the ship to the Soviets if they will return the four islands off northern Hokkaido seized from Japan during the final days of World War II.

Flamboyant and possessed of a good sense of theater, Sasakawa thrives on publicity and apparently finds his extensive public exposure useful as a smokescreen for his other activities. He likes to talk about his underworld connections and his female conquests. Sasakawa has a younger brother and three sons, all of whom have held positions in his various enterprises.

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