

Bashing Japan/Bashing America

President George Bush's mission to Japan last week began as if it were the most serious trade mission ever mounted from the United States, but it proved predictably a flop.

WHEN US President George Bush left Washington for an Asian tour ending at Tokyo, he said his mission was to expand free trade in the Pacific rim in order to create "jobs, jobs, jobs" for US workers — particularly in the automobile industry. In fact, the White House went so far as to blame Japan for the United States current economic recession. But by the time the trip was over, Bush had merely succeeded in making the US automobile industry look to all the world like the dying giant it is. Bashing Japan did not work.

After days of what were apparently tense negotiations with Japanese prime minister Kiichi Miyazawa, Bush (the herald of free-market trading) won a Japanese promise to buy an additional 20,000 US-built automobiles in 1994. Not only does such an agreement smack of a managed market, but it also raises an embarrassing question: why would Japanese consumers want to buy US cars when their own are better and less expensive? True, some Japanese buy luxury cars from Detroit as a matter of status, but not in numbers sufficient to affect trade policy, and certainly not sufficient to create jobs in the US automobile industry.

In short, the emphasis Bush placed on selling cars to Japan was a mistake (as was his decision to travel in the conspicuous company of the chairmen of the three US automobile companies) and the results of his negotiations are a joke. The chairman of General Motors (GM), who is closing 21 plants and laying off 74,000 workers, wants to sell more GM cars in Japan, but seems not yet to have figured out that they need to be built with the steering wheel on the right-hand side. He said GM might reconsider if its market share were high, but he is putting the cart before the horse. Then, upon returning home, Chrysler chairman Lee Iacocca had the audacity to say, "We do not have idiots running General Motors, Ford and Chrysler". On the record of this trip, who will believe him?

Bush's major error in planning his trip to Japan lay in failing to select leaders of the best in US industry as his unofficial ambassadors. Where were the heads of the pharmaceutical companies that do millions of dollars in trade with Japan on the strength of their high-quality products? Where were the scientific and business leaders of the biotechnology industry, who represent a vital link to the future of international trade? Where were the people from the US computer industry, which is still at the intellectual forefront, even if Japan has succeeded brilliantly

at capturing the consumer market?

Perhaps one of the brightest (but least acknowledged) accomplishments of Bush's trip was a computer trade agreement that will give US companies the opportunity to compete in Japan for the sale of personal and minicomputers, as well as mainframes. Industry experts estimate that the agreement could be worth as much as \$2,000 million in sales and is far more important than a meaningless plan to foist 20,000 cars on Japanese consumers who may well refuse to buy them. Consumers in Tokyo already have expressed resentment at Detroit's presumption they will buy American cars.

For all its supposed weaknesses, the US position in science and technology research remains strong and should have been the centrepiece of the Bush trip for economic as well as diplomatic reasons. Instead, Bush chose to lay his prestige on the line for Detroit, which does not deserve it. Bush has described his dramatic fainting spell and illness at Miyazawa's banquet as an embarrassment, but there is no embarrassment in getting the flu. The embarrassment is in failing to put the right science and technology issues on his agenda. Next time, Bush would do well to consult his science adviser, his competitiveness council and even his trade representative — Mrs Carla Hills was conspicuous by her absence from Tokyo — if he wants to avoid embarrassing himself, not to mention the United States. □

The planet vanishes

Last summer's planet around a neutron star seems to be a computational artefact.

THE letter on page 213 from Andrew Lyne and M. Bailes at Jodrell Bank will occasion great disappointment to all kinds of people. Last July, the same group described what seemed to be the first incontrovertible evidence of a planet associated with a star other than the Sun. To be sure, the circumstances were unusual: the planet was in orbit about a neutron star, recognized by its rapid pulsation in the millisecond range. And the evidence, while unambiguous, was circumstantial; there is no sense in which the planet could have been 'seen'. Its existence was, rather, inferred from the periodic variations of the times at which radio pulses were received at Jodrell Bank. At different times over an interval of three years, the time at which radio