In the first year of their war with Russia, the underdog Japanese scored victory after victory over their formidable enemy. The Battle of Mukden in March 1905 had seemingly proven decisive, but the adversary still had one final weapon that could alter the war’s course in their favor: the mighty Baltic Fleet. Meanwhile, despite many triumphs, by now Japan was on the brink of total material and financial exhaustion. With ammunition and other basic war supplies growing scarce, the empire’s ability to sustain a prolonged conflict was being stretched to the limit. Although munitions plants were operating around the clock, demand continued far to exceed supply. It was increasingly apparent to Tokyo’s leadership that the crucial question was not whether to end the fighting, but rather how and when to do so. Only through diplomacy would Japan be able to secure the fruits of the war that she had fought so hard. But even to begin talking about peace, Japan first needed to strike a crushing blow on the Russian tsar’s hopes by destroying his armada.

The final showdown between the two mighty navies took place on May 27, 1905, at Tsushima. When by the following morning its guns finally stopped firing, Admiral Togo’s ships had virtually annihilated the Baltic Fleet. As Russian vessels sank to the Tsushima Straits’ chilly depths, so did Nicholas’s hopes for reversing the war’s
course. Tokyo was confident that the stage was finally set for St. Petersburg to acknowledge defeat and negotiate a peace. The military phase of the war had come to an end and the battle would now be fought amongst the diplomats who convened in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, at the invitation of the U.S. president, Theodore Roosevelt in August 1905. Only a decisive victory at the bargaining table would ensure that the war with Russia had been a worthwhile endeavor.

Norman Saul has already examined America’s dealings with Russia during the Portsmouth Peace Conference in Volume One. This chapter will therefore study Washington’s relationship with Tokyo in the context of the talks. What were the Japanese government’s objectives and aspirations in her quest to win the diplomatic phase of the war? More important, what was President Roosevelt’s role? Did he indeed betray Japan by failing to disclose critical information that might have significantly altered the course of the negotiations? And, finally, are historians right in characterizing US-Japan relations right after the war as increasingly hostile. These are the questions this essay will address.

**The Path to Portsmouth**

Japanese peace overtures began long before the meeting at Portsmouth. Already in July 1904, with the Germans acting as intermediary, the ambassador to Britain, Hayashi Tadasu, sought a meeting with the influential Russian statesman, Sergei Witte, in a neutral county. The plan came to naught when it became clear that St. Petersburg was not yet seriously interested in peace. Although domestic unrest was beginning to trouble the Russian Empire, the situation on its Far Eastern front hardly seemed to warrant coming to terms

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6 The catalyst of this view was the documentary program aired in Summer 2004 by Nippon Hoso Kyokai. *Sonotoki rekishi ga ugoita*, June 16, 2004, episode no. 187.  