

Learn from Japanese, retired colonel says

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The Japanese studied American methods of manufacturing, including Henry Ford's method of mass production, and took it to a "higher level." Now American manufacturers are taking cues from successful Japanese manufacturers.

That's the assessment from retired U.S. Air Force Col. John Boyd, 65, an Erie native who says military strategies can be applied to economic battles.

Boyd, a 1945 graduate of Strong Vincent High School, returns Wednesday to his alma mater,

where he will give the commencement address to the class of 1992.

"We're taking cues from the Japanese. Now we're going to have to learn from them, and we are. You can't be arrogant in this business. There's always somebody else who's got an idea, and you'd better understand it," says Boyd, who now resides in Delray Beach, Fla.

"We got too comfortable with our methods. It's like a weatherman. Every once in a while, you've got to look out the door and find out what's going on," says Boyd, who has college degrees in economics and industrial engineering.

With some exceptions, American

manufacturers still trail the Japanese, "but we're doing better. But we've got a ways to go yet."

After World War II, the Japanese examined American methods of production and management with a critical eye.

"They read between the lines. As a result of that, they saw room for improvement They took it to the next level up. They developed flexible methods of mass production, called the 'just in time' system," he says.

Boyd describes the 'just in time' system — now a buzzword in American industry — this way: "What it really is, is you get what you want,

when you want it and in the amount you want it."

The system was invented by the late Taiichi Ohno, an engineer and later vice president in charge of production at one of the Toyota automobile plants.

For example, a Toyota would take 17 man-hours to complete, while a similar car made by General Motors would take 30 hours, he said. "They would put it out in a shorter time, but with higher quality."

Ohno's consultant, the late Shigeo Shingo, developed quick methods of changing dies so that adjustments in models could be made in minutes, rather than hours, Boyd says.