



## Japan: Dealing With History

by Ralph A. Cossa

One of Prime Minister Koizumi's greatest future challenges will be to help Japan come to terms with its past. It is for this reason that he should honor his pledge to visit the Yasukuni Shrine on August 15, the 56th anniversary of Japan's World War II surrender.

Mr. Koizumi's controversial pledge to visit the Yasukuni Shrine - where the spirits of some 2.5 million of Japan's war dead over the past two centuries are enshrined - has caused even some of his closest supporters to challenge his wisdom, since enshrined among these millions who made the ultimate sacrifice for their country are 14 convicted WWII war criminals. Debate rages on, even within the ruling coalition, as to whether he should go in the face of near universal condemnation in the Koreas and especially in China (whose sacred principle of "non-interference in other's internal affairs" obviously does not apply to its own dealings with Japan). If he does go (and at this writing he appeared to be waffling somewhat), further questions have been raised as to whether he should do so in his "official" vice "private" capacity and on August 15 or some other less controversial date.

I think these are the wrong questions. It is not a matter of if, how, and when he should go, but what he should say once there. While many see the proposed visit as evidence of Japan being unable to deal with its past, the opposite is really the case. Not going to the shrine solves nothing; it merely postpones the reckoning. I believe Mr. Koizumi should visit the shrine for much the same reasons that then-President Bill Clinton (himself a Vietnam War protester) had an obligation to visit Washington's Vietnam War Memorial on Veteran's Day: not to glorify war or justify what he (and many others) saw as an unjust military campaign, but to honor those who sacrificed their lives for their country and, equally important, to help continue the healing process.

Visiting the Yasukuni Shrine - something Japanese prime ministers routinely did through 1985 - can be part of the healing process for Japan and its neighbors, if it is handled correctly. Prime Minister Koizumi has said that he wants to make the visit "to express heartfelt sympathy to those who became victims of the nation in spite of themselves." This is appropriate, but it is not enough. He also needs to express his own and his nation's heartfelt apology for the deeds of those "handful of war criminals" whose spirits reside among the "victims."

Japanese prime ministers have, of course, expressed profound regret before. In 1995, then-Prime Minister Murayama used the August 15 date to provide one of the clearest, most direct apologies to Japan's neighbors. More recently, then-Prime Minister Obuchi even put it in writing, at least to South Korea, during his 1998/1999 exchange of summits with ROK President

Kim Dae-jung, in return for a commitment from Seoul to put the past behind them - a commitment that is seriously unraveling as a result of the proposed visit and the earlier (and ongoing) controversy regarding a recently approved middle school history textbook that critics claim glosses over, if not glorifies, Japan's Imperial past.

Most Koreans and Chinese I have talked to would prefer that Koizumi not go to the shrine. But not all agree that a visit would automatically make things worse. As one senior ROK former ROK official told me, "if Koizumi states that the war was wrong and expresses official regrets for what Japan had done to Korea, China, and other Asian neighbors, it will help to lessen the tension ... [and] provide a possibility of more constructive dialogue in the future." A proper apology, especially if it made reference to unforgivable actions such as the forced enslavement of comfort women, could get the reconciliation process back on track. Since more Japanese schoolchildren are likely to hear or read about Koizumi's comments at Yasukuni Shrine than will ever read the disputed textbook (which only a negligible number of schools have thus far chosen to use), the right remarks could also deflect criticism about Japan trying to "glorify" its past.

Prime Minister Koizumi has already demonstrated that he is a man of considerable political courage. Rather than continue to skirt this issue, as many of his predecessors have done, he should go to the shrine on August 15 in his official capacity as prime minister and use that occasion to deal squarely with the past. Specifically, he should denounce war as a means of settling political disputes, while clearly acknowledging and sincerely apologizing for Japan's unconscionable World War II behavior and its earlier aggression against the Chinese and Korean people.

It is then incumbent on Japan's neighbors to accept his words and acknowledge, finally, that the Japan of today has earned the right to put its Imperial past behind it and, like all other nations, to be judged by its current and future actions and contributions rather than by the actions of a generation now several times removed.

*Ralph A. Cossa is President of the Pacific Forum CSIS [[pacforum@hawaii.rr.com](mailto:pacforum@hawaii.rr.com)], a Honolulu-based non-profit research institute affiliated with the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington and Senior Editor of Comparative Connections, a quarterly electronic journal [[www.csis.org/pacfor](http://www.csis.org/pacfor)].*