



Honor the Dead, Not the War by Brad Glosserman

He did it again. Last week, Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro visited Yasukuni Shrine, where Japan honors its 2.5 million war dead. His visit, the third of his tenure as prime minister, set off the usual storm in Northeast Asia. The prime minister's motives were both banal and brave; he was driven by domestic political considerations as well as a desire to "normalize" patriotic sentiment in Japan. The fear that such visits are a prelude to renewed Japanese militarism is misplaced. Still, the sensitivity that surrounds visits to Yasukuni is a compelling reason to build a new war memorial, one that allows Japan to honor war victims without honoring war.

Shrine visits court controversy on two counts. First, the site honors Japan's war dead, which include convicted war criminals such as wartime Prime Minister Hideki Tojo, executed after the Tokyo trials. Pacifists and foreign governments argue that paying homage to the dead there also honors the governments that launched those wars. Second, some Japanese claim that, as a Shinto shrine, visits by government officials violate the constitutional separation of church and state. The inextricable links between the Imperial state and Shinto, the state religion during that time, also support the charge that the visits are another way of glorifying the militarist past.

The visit generated predictable reaction in China and South Korea. A spokesperson for South Korea's Foreign Ministry expressed the outrage: "Our government cannot understand the logic of those who say they pray for peace, but pay tribute to war criminals who destroyed peace."

For his part, Prime Minister Koizumi claimed that his visit - like the other two - was intended "to think about peace and hope we will never have war again."

That wasn't all the prime minister was thinking about. He had two other considerations in mind. The first is an electoral calculus. Koizumi faces re-election in September and the early visit fits in with typical campaign strategy by which a politician takes care of core supporters at the outset of a campaign - get them on board and then move to the center to attract more voters. Going to Yasukuni shores up support on his conservative flank. Significantly, Koizumi's promise to visit the shrine annually is one of the few pledges he has kept since taking office.

Timing also figured in foreign policy considerations. Although the visit was supposed to have been made on the spur of the moment, the prime minister's supporters have reportedly been planning the trip since December. They

calculated that it was better to go to the shrine while new leaderships in China and South Korea were in transition. The North Korean and Iraqi situations were also anticipated to have minimized the potential fallout. The strategy worked, to a degree. South Korean President Kim Dae-jung canceled scheduled talks with visiting Foreign Minister Kawaguchi Yoriko, but Kawaguchi still met with President-elect Roh Moo-hyun, who stressed that he seeks a "future-oriented relationship" with Japan.

If such crude calculations were the sole rationales for the visit and its timing, the prime minister would deserve no applause. But Koizumi's visits also reflect his desire to revise Japan's role in the region and the world. Achieving that requires a change in the perceptions of Japan by its neighbors and a "normalization" of patriotic sentiment in Japan. (It may be mere coincidence, but just before the shrine visit, the prime minister visited a similar war memorial in Russia. He could not help but notice how such observances are part of most state visits.)

Since taking office, the prime minister's policies have stood for the proposition that peace is worth fighting for; his government's support for the U.N. war against terrorism is proof of that. Yet if some causes are worth fighting for, then clearly, by implication, others are not. And even when that is true, those who fell in war should be honored, even if only to remind us of the horrors that must be avoided. That has been Koizumi's message during his visits to Yasukuni when he stresses the need for peace and the horrors of war.

The prime minister is working on two levels to break the link between honoring the war dead and glorifying war. The first is domestic: He is trying to raise civic consciousness of the need to believe in - and fight on behalf of - the state. The second aims at foreign audiences. He is trying to make such visits more "ordinary" and thus diminish their symbolic importance.

While the objective is an honorable one, there is still a problem in how it is done. Yasukuni Shrine is tied to Imperial Japan and the ideas it represented. The solution is not to give up on the need to honor the past, nor to whitewash history. Rather, Japan should establish a memorial that truly represents the peace-loving sentiment Koizumi has espoused on his visits.

Fortunately, such a plan exists. Advisers to Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda last year recommend construction of a secular government facility that would commemorate the war dead. The proposed memorial would honor soldiers killed in battle, Japanese civilians killed in air raids and other circumstances, foreign soldiers and civilians killed in wars

waged by Japan and even those who have died in peacekeeping operations in which Japan has been involved.

Conservatives have been outraged by the proposal. Some are angry because they support imperial Japanese ideals and - quite rightly - see the new memorial as a repudiation of them. Others see it as capitulation to the wishes of other nations and denounce such interference in Japan's sovereignty. The former view is blind to history; the latter is unrealistic.

The secular solution would defuse questions and sensitivities surrounding the presence of war criminals at Yasukuni. South Korea's President Kim has said that if a national cemetery existed that did not enshrine Class-A war criminals, "I would like to pay tribute." It would offer Japan a way to honor all victims of Japan's aggression without the taint of its militarist past. It would provide a focus for patriotic sentiment and offer a positive outlet for nationalism. It would take political courage to endorse and follow through on this plan. In other words, it is a perfect reflection of the image of himself and his nation that Prime Minister Koizumi holds.

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