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A few months ago, an American ambassador offered an observation that ought to be chiseled across a marble pediment somewhere, atop grand Greek columns. He is stationed in Africa, but insert the word “we” in his statement would yield a universal truth. “Sudan cannot move into the future,” the envoy told a reporter, “unless it comes to terms with what it’s done.”

Too bad this astute ambassador does not serve in Japan. Is there another nation so unsettled about its past--and whose future is so intimately tied to the resolution of that past? For all its frantic economic activity over the past half-century--its postwar “miracle”--Japan has made itself a power without purpose. It shuns any major role in global security. It is as impotent politically as it is potent economically.

More than half a century after its defeat, Japan continues to stand oddly apart in the world, especially from its unforgetting neighbors. The exception, of course, is the United States. Just as Japan’s twin imperatives--reckoning with the past and making progress toward the future--cannot be separated, neither can postwar Japan and postwar America. Both have much to come to terms with.

For 25 years now, Tokyo and Washington have done little but hurl complaints and accusations at each other--over trade imbalances, currency exchange rates, the sharing of security burdens. But behind the bickering, Japan and the U.S. are as closely intertwined as any nations on earth. Since Douglas MacArthur established Washington’s authority in downtown Tokyo on Sept. 7, 1945, America has tugged and twisted Japan’s approach to everything from defense to education. Indeed, the U.S. was critical in setting Japan’s

current course, and can still influence the country's future path. But what's needed now is to avoid any such exercise of influence.

A healthier bilateral relationship is inevitably a more distant one. Prolonging Japan's over-dependence on the U.S. would risk seeing the ties turn increasingly bitter until even friendship would be jeopardized. But that does not have to happen, providing Tokyo and Washington can look backward and forward with the same clarity of vision. "America as teacher, Japan as student; America as superior, Japan as inferior--that's the psychology that came out of the war," says John Dower, a professor of Japanese history at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "It has colored the relationship ever since, but it's time to move on. It's long past time that we see each other as equals."

America was many things when it occupied Japan in the autumn of 1945: confident, generous, convinced of its place. It was not, to put it mildly, modest. After a beginning infused with the idealism of the New Deal, Washington "reversed course," as the Japanese put it. To help contain an assertive Soviet bloc, the U.S. locked the Japanese in time--and Japan into the American security system. This created a kind of Japanese schizophrenia. The postwar "peace constitution," written into law in 1947, disarmed Japan and encouraged the pacifism that endures among ordinary Japanese today. But the security treaty enacted five years later allowed U.S. bases to remain on Japanese soil--so making Japan a foot soldier in Washington's Cold War crusade.

The Japan that emerged from these years is the profoundly confused nation of today: obsessed with economic growth, politically dysfunctional, extravagantly corrupt, incapable of making decisions, leaderless, a nonparticipant in international affairs, tied in knots as to its past--to say nothing of its future. It is the Japan, in short, about which Americans miss few chances to complain. But in every complaint there are echoes of a peculiarly American habit of mind. Call it "history without memory." Americans have a great notion of their place in the second half of this century. It is a tale with clean narrative lines, lots of sweep and heroism. It is not altogether inaccurate. But the renderings are too often short on human detail--the facts, events and consequences that reside in memory. Like television, history without memory confines Americans to a sort of eternal present. They are especially weak in remembering what they did to other people, as opposed to with or for them.

The trait makes for peculiar perspectives. The U.S. was irate when, in 1990, Japan contributed only a check (though a considerable one) to the Persian Gulf War effort. Few noted that Tokyo dithered because the constitution Americans imposed in 1945 bars Japan from collective security actions. The U.S. is appropriately appalled at the running sewer of corruption in Nagatacho, Tokyo's political quarter. But these are Washington's boys, after all--political descendants of the wartime elite restored to power when the U.S. decided at the outbreak of the Cold War that stability and loyalty in Tokyo were more important than New Deal democracy. For decades, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency covertly funded its conservative favorites in Japan, making indignation a tough act to sustain.

Trade gripes? One despairs of listing them all. Washington's first spat with Tokyo was over textiles in the early 1970s, and they have since run through everything from baseball bats and skis to beef, cars, car parts and, more recently, 35-mm photographic film. Even amid Japan's current economic malaise, it looks as if Tokyo can neither control the export mill nor loosen its bureaucratic grip on the domestic economy. It's a monster, all right, a Frankenstein, but it is in no small measure America's Frankenstein.

This Japan--which Americans don't remember helping to create--is now coming unglued. The problems began with the first signs that the Cold War was over, and they have gained momentum ever since. The Japanese economy has started to look like a malfunctioning machine for which there are no spare parts. Nagatacho is out of balance, careening toward no one knows quite what. A decade ago this autumn, I first arrived in Tokyo. There have been nine governments since then, and countless parties and coalitions have formed and fallen apart.

It is not an entirely bad thing that Japan is something of a mess. So it was just after the war, a work in progress seeking the best way to govern itself and run an economy. So it is again. All the questions the Japanese struggled with 50 years ago are still on the table. Once again Japan is due for a round of creative destruction--and then renewal.

Yet the Japanese are ill-prepared for the passage that is upon them. Neither bureaucrats nor politicians nor ordinary citizens are practiced in operating the levers of democracy. They must feel their way along a wall in the dark. But so must Americans. The U.S. has shown the way for 50 years and will for a few years more. But what will Americans think and do as their familiar, cooperative Japan rediscovers itself and goes its own way? For that, in the end, is what is in store.

The biggest change to come is neither political nor economic, but psychological: the Japanese are learning to think for themselves, an endeavor much discussed these days in newspaper columns and books in Japan. They are learning to make decisions based on their own judgments, not those of any group or community or corporation or political party. They are learning the habits of democratic citizens in a nation where such customs have yet to take root.

Consider Maki, a town of 31,000 on the Sea of Japan. Last summer its voters were asked whether they wanted a nuclear power plant built in their midst. It was the first public referendum in Japanese history, and Tokyo, along with the national power company, campaigned vigorously to sway the good citizens of Maki their way. In years past, this would have been a piece of cake: our leaders know best, Maki's voters would have assumed. Maki rejected the plant, but that is only part of the story. The real significance lay in the extraordinary effort Maki's people made to do something they had never done: to manifest their individual views publicly.

That such first have come so late in this century is another legacy of America's postwar decision to "reverse course." The Japanese well understood, just after the war, that their failure to think and act as individuals had kept democracy from their grasp--and led them

into tragedy. The debate during those years revolved around something they called *shutai-sei*. It means “subjectivity,” the individual autonomy any working democracy needs at its core. The notion of *shutai-sei* got lost during the Cold War years, but something very similar has begun to reappear. “Only now have the Japanese begun to build something like a civic culture,” says New York psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton, a student of Japan for more than three decades. “A kind of democracy-mindedness has already begun to change the prevailing psychology, and with it there is an aversion toward the remaining authoritarian institutions.”

It is a stirring moment, but not an enviable one. As Lifton puts it, Japan is “seething within,” and much of the seething is directed at the postwar Japan that the U.S. shaped. At this critical juncture, Americans are ill-served in their preference for bold strokes over the details lodged in memory, for it keeps them from understanding the Japanese. “We’re terribly impressed with Japan’s achievements, but they’ve come at great cost,” Lifton says. “We tend not to look at the underbelly beneath the veneer, and the underbelly is pain, confusion and resentment.”

The U.S. ought to applaud as the Japanese dig their way out of the past. But the message so far has been mixed at best. Japan must “do more,” Americans say; it must take a “global role.” But Japanese checks, accompanied by nothing more than a muttered “Me too,” are handy to the U.S.--a superpower that can no longer afford its status. Americans are all for reform in many shapes and sizes--“Unhand that economy!” they’re forever exclaiming. But every time the U.S. asks Japan to buy more American products, the demand lends implicit support to the undemocratic ethos by which bureaucrats direct the system.

The embarrassing reality is that Americans seem not at all certain about what kind of nation they want Japan to be. It’s embarrassing because they have always imagined themselves to be unambiguous on this point: they want a democratic Japan, the more democratic the better. Do they really? Impertinent question, many will say. But travel 1,000 km south from Tokyo and it will not seem so. If Okinawa is any guide, a more democratic and autonomous people will want to live in a more autonomous nation--an idea the U.S. does not yet seem comfortable with.

Three-quarters of the American military facilities in Japan are crammed onto Okinawan soil. They occupy a fifth of the prefecture’s usable land. There is much debate over whether these installations are necessary in the post-Cold War world, but the important point is that Okinawans have opposed the U.S. bases for many decades. They hinder economic development, are noisy and polluting, and bring crime and accidents. Last year, a month after the vote in Maki, Okinawans held their own referendum. Nine out of ten voters opposed the presence of U.S. forces. Come May, 3,000 landowners will refuse to renew leases on territory the U.S. bases occupy. Anticipating this, Tokyo has just pushed through a law that effectively deprives the refusers of their property rights.

Okinawa could be a moment of true arrival for the Japanese. Tokyo may well show itself ready to preside over a democracy, a civil society, instead of just an unsovereign economic machine. By resolving the Okinawa situation in a calm, democratic fashion, Japan could

offer evidence that it does indeed deserve a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, its abiding ambition. Instead, Okinawa reveals only that Japan is not ready for such a privilege. The dilemma brings the nation face-to-face with its lingering dependence upon the U.S. But Okinawa also demonstrates that the U.S. is not ready for the Japanese to join the world, either. The U.S. is, if you will, dependent upon their dependence. Americans are not yet ready for a democratic Japan, a Japan that speaks for itself. If Japan were democratic, American troops and planes would no longer be there.

To join the world, the Japanese will have to do many things. In the end they will have to discard the postwar constitution and write one of their own. They will have to rethink the old security treaty--as some two-thirds of them now want, according to numerous opinion surveys. In short, they will have to put the postwar era behind them and enter the post--postwar age--or as the Japanese like to say, become a "normal nation."

Normal nationals are not so reluctant to acknowledge their past as Japan is. Others ordinarily accuse the Japanese--its leadership more than its citizens--of "historical amnesia." But this is a misnomer. They remember well enough. The Japanese elites simply do not want Japan to take its proper place in history. They suffer the inverse of America's problem--so let's call it "memory without history." The symmetry is appropriate, for the U.S. made it possible for Japan even to contemplate refusing to sign the logbook of history. Americans did this when they excused Japan: when they declined to consider the emperor as a responsible party to war and when they restored the wartime elite in Tokyo, those whose political heirs now govern Japan.

The U.S. can help the Japanese in their pursuit of normality, encouraging them in the right directions and displaying understanding as they find a direction of their own. More than any other country, the U.S. is in a position to urge responsibility upon Japan (for Tokyo is somewhat comfortable in its dependence). Americans can help Japan get past its past, too. The barb at the end of the hook is that there is only one way for Americans to move forward in these matters: by beginning to remember.

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### **Those Nasty Japs Again: War Memories and the Movies** by Sheila K. Johnson

My husband is a specialist on Japanese politics and international relations, so I showed him a recent review of Bruce Beresford's new film, "Paradise Road," and asked him whether he wanted to go see it. "It's all about a Japanese internment camp for English, Dutch, and American women and children in Indonesia during World War II."

“Sort of a ‘Shoah’ for my side of the world,” he sighed. “Actually, I’m tired of all that endless rehashing of atrocities in both cases.”

I know what he means. Margaret Mead once wondered aloud to me how long the Germans were expected to stay on their knees, asking for forgiveness: ten years, an entire generation, or forever. But of course the Japanese haven’t been quite so apologetic about their behavior in China and elsewhere.

It so happens that I have written a book about how Americans over the past fifty-seven years have viewed Japan and the Japanese as revealed in our popular culture. So I suggested that perhaps we should go see the film for that reason. Is it to be regarded as further evidence that Americans are still obsessed about the war in the Pacific, and that wartime prejudices and stereotypes still persist today?

“Well, Beresford is an Aussie,” my husband pointed out, “and many Australians do still feel strongly about World War II. Some of their women were even forced to become ‘comfort women,’ sex slaves for the Japanese Army.”

So perhaps this film will do well in Australia. Perhaps it will do well in Holland too. I myself am Dutch by birth, and my mother’s younger sister was caught in Indonesia when the war broke out. Her husband was killed when his ship was torpedoed in the South China Sea, and she spent the war in just such a camp in Java. When she returned to Holland in the fall of 1945, we--who thought we had suffered quite a lot under the German Occupation--could see what a terrible time she must have had. She was gaunt, had a complete nervous breakdown, and even today, as an 80-year-old lady, bears some of the physical and mental scars of her internment. But would she want to see this film? I rather think not.

“I think you’re secretly worried,” I said to my husband, “that this film may not be politically correct. Even the ads for it are very coy, and the word Japan is never mentioned. Instead the film is described as a ‘true story about a little-known chapter of World War II, about a group of women who triumph in the face of adversity.’ At least ‘Empire of the Sun,’ and some of Zhang Yimou’s recent films deal with Japan’s war in Asia in a more forthright way. After all, these things really happened. Santayana tells us that those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

“I agree it’s high time that Australians, Dutchmen, and even Americans started talking about what happened to them--just as the Chinese and Koreans have. But I personally can’t handle Hollywood on any of these subjects.”

Our discussion had clearly reached an impasse. Perhaps, I thought, the answer is to let the market-place decide. If this film strikes a broadly responsive chord in American audiences, then they’re still prepared to see the Japanese as torturers and barbarians. And that has reverberations, even if very muted, for our current trade and security relations. And if the movie bombs (no pun intended)? Well, then perhaps the majority of Americans really has

lost interest in a rerun of 'Bridge on the River Kwai' (1957) or 'Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence' (1983). Let sleeping dogs lie. Let the past bury the past. That sort of thing. And if the Chinese, the Aussies, the Koreans, and the Dutch still want to scratch their wounds . . . that's their privilege, isn't it? So I am waiting curiously to see how many people want to see Glenn Close suffer and still look beautiful. Believe me, my aunt did not look beautiful when she came home-and she was only 29.

**SHEILA K. JOHNSON** is the author of *The Japanese Through American Eyes* (Stanford University Press, 1988) and helps her husband, Chalmers Johnson, run the Japan Policy Research Institute. This article first appeared in the Los Angeles Times, April 30, 1997.

### **New and Important Sources on Japan's Memory without History**

Alan Brown, *Audrey Hepburn's Neck*. Pocket Books, 1996, paperbound. This novel won the 1996 Kiriya Pacific Rim Book Prize, worth \$30,000, for the best book published that year on an Asia-Pacific subject. The film, which is in production, should have a powerful impact. It concerns young Japanese and Americans in Tokyo today, but the flashback at the end, on comfort women, is devastating.

*American Missionary Eyewitnesses to the Nanking Massacre, 1937-1938*. New Haven, CT; Yale Divinity School Library, Occasional Publication No. 9, 1997, \$20. 73 pp. plus approximately the same number of pages of photo reproductions of typewritten and handwritten notes, letters, and appeals to the Japanese Embassy, Nanking, which are now housed in the Yale Divinity School Library. This is by far the most important documentation on the Rape of Nanking to be published in recent times.

*Japanese Book News*, No. 17 (Spring 1997), published by the Japan Foundation. Pages 9 and 10 of this issue detail the most important new works in Japanese on Japan's wartime culture, defenses of Japan's war aims, soldiers' perspectives, and the war crimes of the 731st Regiment.

Hata Ikuhiko, "The Flawed U.N. Report on Comfort Women," *Japan Echo*, Autumn 1996, translated from *Bungei Shunju*, May 1996. A distinguished historian's hair-splitting defense of the wartime 'comfort women' system of military brothels and his attack on George Hicks's book *Comfort Women* (W. W. Norton, 1995), which JPRI distributed to its members.

Nora Okja Keller, *Comfort Woman*, Viking, 1997. Powerful novel by a Korean-American journalist based in Hawaii.