



August 16, 2005

COMMENTARY

DOW JONES REPRINTS

Tokyo Needs Its Dresden Moment

By FUMIO MATSUO

August 16, 2005; Page A16

TOKYO -- Although Prime Minister Koizumi renewed apologies to countries that the Imperial Army had invaded and colonized, Japan observed the 60th anniversary of its World War II defeat yesterday with great political unease: First, there were the tensions caused by his gamble in dissolving parliament over the rejection of his long-cherished plan to privatize the postal service. On the diplomatic front, Japan's isolation in the six nation talks in Beijing continues -- as does China's opposition to Japan's bid for a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council.

However, in my opinion the most important cause of the uneasiness -- though invisible and unconscious, especially in younger Japanese -- is a thorn deep in the Japanese psyche: There has been no true closure with the U.S. over World War II. On the surface, U.S.-Japan relations are at an all-time high: Prime Minister Koizumi and President Bush share a strong friendship and Japan has been a loyal ally in the war on terror and has deployed troops to Iraq. Still, the thorn of WWII has to be removed to cement a true partnership for coming generations.

My conviction that we need a postwar settlement of accounts is triggered by memory of the way the city of Dresden marked the 50th anniversary of the Allied bombings that killed 35,000. I was surprised to see in attendance the military leaders of Germany's former enemies and representatives of the British Royal Family. It was clear that everyone had engaged in much back-stage diplomacy. Japan and the U.S., on the other hand, have never engaged in any meaningful discussion of their wartime actions, even though far more people (conservatively, 83,793) were killed by the U.S. firebombing of Tokyo on March 10, 1945, than in Dresden. This was the first of a series of indiscriminate bombings of 69 cities, including Hiroshima and Nagasaki by atomic bombs. According to Japanese government estimates, about 510,000 civilians were killed. Yet Japan and the U.S. have never held such a reconciliation ceremony.

I myself endured one of these raids as a 12-year-old. In July 1945, my family and I were evacuated from Tokyo to the western city of Fukui, which came under attack by 127 B-29 bombers. We took refuge by lying low in a sweet potato field when a cluster bomb fell towards us. Instead of dispersing above ground as intended, the bomb malfunctioned and splashed unopened into the paddy, sending up a muddy gush.

That intense experience was my first encounter with the U.S. As a journalist covering America, I have always wondered why Japan went to war with the U.S. and to what extent we truly understood America. Now I am haunted by the even greater question of why Japan and the U.S. have not properly reconciled their differences as Germany and its former enemies have.

* * *

With all this in mind, I have two proposals. First, a simple, humble observance, using the Dresden precedent, to mourn the deceased and call for permanent reconciliation -- what German President Roman Herzog referred to as "an expression of humane emotion dating back to the beginning of civilization" -- with President Bush laying a wreath at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial on his next visit.

By having the U.S. president respect the dead at the symbolic center of all bombing deaths, including the world's first nuclear attack, the thorn in our psyche might possibly be removed. There would be no need for remarks -- the mere presence of the president at the Memorial

would speak for itself by opening a new page of true mutual trust and respect. In reciprocation, Japan's prime minister should quietly lay a wreath at Pearl Harbor on the appropriate occasion.

Secondly, Japan should ask for changes in the placards on the restored B-29s that dropped the nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki -- Enola Gay at the Smithsonian and Bock's Car at Dayton's Air Force Museum. The placards explain that the aircraft dropped the bombs toward the end of the war but do not mention the estimated number of victims -- 140,000 at Hiroshima and 70,000 at Nagasaki. Listing the number killed is the least we can do to allow the dead to rest in peace.

Stating the number of victims is admittedly controversial. In 1995, the year of the Dresden Reconciliation, the Smithsonian organized an atomic bomb exhibit on the 50th anniversary of the end of WWII, but many Americans objected to any reference to the number of victims. Today these displays should be of little concern to Americans since Japan and the U.S. have become so much closer, particularly in light of the deployment to Iraq. Most Americans believe the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki saved lives on both sides by bringing a swift end to the war. That stance is not incompatible with listing the number of victims or having Mr. Bush mourn them. In fact, those actions would be a minimal requiem for the dead. I believe Americans will accept these facts.

Japan has much to do as well and Mr. Koizumi's actions yesterday may have begun the process. As the writer Max Boot pointed out in the Weekly Standard in December 2003, Japan's lack of remorse over its wartime actions has provided fodder for China and North Korea -- "who have caused far more suffering to their own people than the Japanese ever did" -- to stir up anti-Japanese sentiment that can be manipulated for domestic political purposes. For Japan to gain the proper level of recognition from its Asian neighbors, Mr. Boot urged it to "put to rest the ghosts of World War II."

We must heed that advice. As a starting point, Japan must face up to its past and its unfortunate war with the U.S. After we remove that remaining thorn, Japan will have to continue building a fitting sequel to our postwar success story -- the rejection of militarism and nuclear armament -- by admitting the simple truth to the rest of Asia that Japan started the war. From that start, we can begin to remove the thorns, one by one, between Japan and its neighbors, just as we are asking the Americans to pay respects to our war victims, and bring closure to a sad chapter in our history.

Mr. Matsuo is a former Washington bureau chief of Kyodo News Service.