

Concerning the Yasukuni Shrine Problem

An Address to the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan on August 13, 2001

I have enjoyed being a member of this distinguished Club since 1959 – for 42 years. I have diligently paid membership dues for 40 years. For the two missing years, the Club generously exempted me from contributing the dues after I was invited to share with the members my humble thoughts over professional luncheons on two occasions.

Today, I have been asked to discuss the problem of Yasukuni Shrine, as there is intense controversy both inside and outside Japan over Mr. Koizumi's announced intention of paying homage at the shrine. First I would like to point out– that this problem is a relatively new, going back at the most 26 years, but mainly for 15 years.

When I joined this distinguished Club, no member would have bothered about the Emperor honoring the shrine by his visit, or of our prime ministers paying homage there. In those days, there were members who covered the birth of Manchukuo, or who were survivors of HMS *Repulse* when she went down off the Malay coast, and there were many who reported the war in the Pacific. To them, how a nation honored its war dead was up to each nation. The Emperor Showa personally paid homage at Yasukuni Shrine on eight occasions after the termination of hostilities of the Second World War in 1945. He visited the shrine in November, 1945, October, 1952, October, 1954, April, 1957, April, 1959, October, 1965, October, 1969, and November, 1975.

Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida paid homage at the shrine five times between 1951, a year before Japan regained independence, and 1954; Nobusuke Kishi did so twice during his three years and five months in office; Hayato Ikeda, four times during his term of four years and four months; Eisaku Sato, 11 times in seven years and eight months; Kakuei Tanaka, five times during his two years and five months; Takeo Miki, three times in two years; Takeo Fukuda, four times during his two years;

Masayoshi Ohira, three times during his one year and seven months; Zenko Suzuki, eight times during his two years and five months; and Yasuhiro Nakasone went 10 times between December, 1982, and August, 1985. If Mr. Koizumi keeps his word, — which I believe he will, — that he intends to pay homage at the Yasukuni Shrine the day after tomorrow, he will be the first premier to do so since Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto went to the shrine in August, 1996. Mr. Ohira, incidentally, was a devout Christian.

The current controversy over the Prime Minister's visit to Yasukuni Shrine stems from a number of thorny issues. One has to do with the principle of separation of state and religion as set forth in the Constitution. Under this principle, those who oppose worship at Yasukuni Shrine by cabinet members contend that the government is prohibited from associating in any manner with religion. However, the current controversies were brought about mainly by strong opposition to Mr. Koizumi's announced intention to pay homage to the shrine raised by the governments of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Korea. Their basis for opposition is that the so-called "Class-A war criminals" who were tried by the so called Tokyo International War Tribunal were enshrined there as deities among the war dead.

In my view, the statements of both China and Korea amount to interference in our internal affairs. How a nation honors its war dead should be decided by that nation only. I am deeply worried that such tactics practiced by the two countries could seriously harm our relations with them. According to a number of recent public opinion surveys, more than 50 percent of those polled support the Prime Minister's visit to Yasukuni Shrine.

The fact is, I doubt the sincerity of the two countries in raising opposition to our Prime Minister's visit to the shrine. The recent upsurge of anti-Japanese sentiment in the two countries has been orchestrated by these governments exploiting the text book and Yasukuni Shrine issues for domestic consumption. Why, let me ask, did not the two governments protest when Prime Minister Ohira worshipped at the shrine in April,

1979, after the shrine added the so-called Class-A war criminals as deities in 1978? The Japanese news media widely reported the fact that the shrine had incorporated the so-called Class-A war criminals as deities a year before, two days before Mr. Ohira went to the shrine. As you know, these “war criminals” were executed by the victors or died while they were incarcerated. Prime Minister Ohira stated at an Upper House session on June 5 of that year: "I believe that the eventual judgment of the Class-A war criminals and the Greater East Asia War should be delivered by future history." During the same year, Prime Minister Ohira returned to the shrine twice and paid homage at the shrine. And yet both China and Korea remained silent. China was then under the leadership of Chairman Mao Ze-dong while Korea was lead by President Pak Jong-hee.

In those days, the Chinese were supporting the U.S.–Japan Security Treaty and urging Japan to increase defense spending, which had been maintained under one percent of the GNP since the Miki Cabinet. We were their “strategic partners” then. President Pak, as a graduate of our wartime military academy, understood Japanese culture well.

And then there are among the Japanese people those who like to take an anti-Japanese attitude, just like many Americans found it to be modish to be anti-American in the heyday of the Vietnam War. The first prime minister to define his visit to Yasukuni Shrine as a “private” affair was Takeo Miki, when he met the press at the shrine. Mr. Miki liked to pose as a liberal. Until then no one drew a difference between “official” and “private” visits. It is still a perplexing distinction. To date, Prime Ministers Miki, Fukuda, Ohira, and Hashimoto defined their visits to the shrine as “private.” Only premier Suzuki refused to make that distinction.

It is a very odd distinction. It touches upon the question of freedom of religion. Mr. Koizumi has been one of the worshippers at Yasukuni Shrine for many years. Should he be prevented from offering prayers at the shrine, regardless of his public status? Does he not have every right to practice his faith?

Yasukuni Shrine was founded in 1869, a year after the Meiji Restoration, by Imperial command at its present site. It was established for the worship of the divine spirits of those who sacrificed their lives for the country. It was then called "Shoukonsha"(or Inviting the Divine Spirits Shrine). The shrine was renamed Yasukuni Jinja (Yasukuni Shrine) 10 years later. The name "Yasukuni," meaning "peaceful country," was bestowed upon the shrine by Emperor Meiji. Among the enshrined deities are over 2,460,000 war dead, each of whose name has been recorded, from the civil war at the close of Tokugawa Period to the Second World War. The enshrined are not limited to soldiers but also civilians who died in defense of the nation, such as nurses.

In dealing with the question of the inclusion of the spirits of the so-called Class-A war criminals, I must point out that a majority of the Japanese people did not recognize the validity of the so called Tokyo Military Tribunal immediately after Japan regained independence under the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1952. In August, 1953, the Japanese Diet unanimously revised the existing law that provided financial assistance to the families of the war dead and to those who were injured or suffered other ailment in the war, including the families of the victims of the so-called war criminal trial held by the Allies. Thus those who died or suffered confinement under the war-crime trials were treated the same as those injured or killed by the war. Further revisions of the law were made in 1954 and 1955, by which the length of time in the Allied-controlled prisons was regarded as time serving in official duties. Consequently, legal prejudice against the so-called war criminals was removed. It was, let me point out, reasonable to treat those who were executed by the victor's trials as war dead, since the state of belligerency continued until the moment of conclusion of the peace treaty.

An overwhelming majority of the Japanese people did not accept the so-called war-crime trials conducted by the Allies. As soon as Japan regained her independence, petitions were sent from across the country to the Diet asking for the release of so-called war criminals who were serving prison sentences. The Japan Federation of Lawyers Associations

led the campaign to free so-called war criminals held in prisons by submitting a recommendation to the government to that effect, five weeks after Japan recovered independence. The Japanese government was placed under an obligation to oversee execution of the sentences imposed upon the so-called war criminals by the Peace Treaty. But more than 40 million people had signed the petitions. The Lower House in August, 1953, adopted a resolution calling for the immediate release of all men serving sentences as so-called war criminals. Diplomatic negotiations with the signatory nations of the Peace Treaty ensued. As the result, all “Class-A” prisoners were released by the end of March, 1956, and all “Class-B” and “Class-C” prisoners were released by the end of May, 1958.

At least up to the early half of the 50s, the members of the Diet, including leftist and rightist Socialist Parties, did not recognize Japan’s alleged war guilt. Many of them believed that Japan had cause to fight the last war.

Today, I believe that there is an international consensus among informed citizens that the Tokyo Military Tribunal was a victor’s justice. To those of you who take an interest in the Tokyo Trial, I strongly recommend reading Judge Radhavinod Pal’s verdict and Professor B.V. Roling’s posthumously published view, *The Tokyo Trial and Beyond*. Dr. Pal and Dr. Roling represented India and the Netherlands respectively among the 11 Allied judges at that trial, which some consider a shameful injustice. Judges Pal and Roling’s words testify to the gross injustice committed at that trial.

A word about the Yasukuni Shrine. It was a state shrine until Japan’s defeat in the last war. Shinto was the state religion as the Anglican Church is the “official church” in Britain. A bill, the “Yasukuni Jinja Hoan” (The Yasukuni Shrine Bill), was submitted to the Lower House by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party with a provision for reinstating and providing government financial support to the shrine. The bill was repeatedly submitted to the Lower House until 1974, but it failed to be enacted because the deliberations of other important bills were given priority. The bill was therefore withdrawn.

It may be asked: Why are the Chinese and the South Korean governments waging a campaign to stop our Prime Minister from paying homage at the Yasukuni Shrine? Why are they whipping up anti-Japanese sentiments at home? Communist China is, we know, undertaking a large-scale military buildup with a reported design to obtain hegemony in Asia. The Chinese rulers know that continuation of the monopoly of power by the Chinese Communist Party can be achieved only through establishing hegemony in the region. No one in China truly believes in communism today. Therefore the regime is trying to replace communism with nationalism. Japan has become an expedient target. The Chinese media is full of unrealistic accusations against Japan, alleging resurgence of Japanese militarism and claiming that the Japanese are preparing to invade Asia again. In the case of South Korea, Mr. Kim Dae Jung is facing an impasse after the bankruptcy of his dubious “Shoeshine” or “Sunshine Policy” towards North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il. His popular support is plummeting. With the Korean economy going downhill, it seems that Mr. Kim Dae Jung initiated an anti-Japanese campaign in an attempt to recover popular support.

Therefore the current anti-Japanese hysteria being waged in China and South Korea has no historical roots. The relations between Japan and China-Korea resemble those between Christian Europe and Islamic Middle East. The Islamic world was more advanced in knowledge and wealth than Christian Europe until Europe regained its vitality with the Renaissance that ended the Dark Ages. It was ironic that at the same time that the Middle East was forced into 400 years of a dark age after the region was conquered by Ottoman Empire beginning in the early 16th Century, the Reformation began in Europe. The Arab still remembers his past glory when Europe was still a backward society. The Chinese-Korean historical perception towards Japan is quite similar. It seems they cannot tolerate a Japan that is far more advanced than her former mentors.

At the root of the Yasukuni Shrine problem is the U.S. occupation policy towards Japan. Through ignorance and the arrogance of power, the U.S. occupation forces “separated” Japan’s native religion and the state.

Shinto, to repeat, was our state religion just as the Anglican Church has official status in England. Japan today is the only country, with the exception of communist nations or a Confucian country like Korea, which disassociates religion from government functions. Non-religious observance is rigorously imposed on ceremonies conducted by the central and local governments. Do you think that, if Japan were a Christian nation like the Philippines, the Americans would have imposed upon Japan a godless separation of religion and state?

Lastly, I am afraid Shinto is not well understood abroad. Among so-called developed nations, Japan is the only country where the native ancient religion survives. Shinto is polytheist, animist, and nature-oriented. We worship trees, rocks, hills, etc. Shinto is a primary religion. It has no holy scriptures, no rigid doctrine, and no prophets. There are millions of gods. Any dead person becomes a *kami*, or god. Perhaps *kami* should better be translated as “holy spirit” rather than “god.” It is very different from Abrahamic religions under which God and man are separated. Shinto is, may I say, a religious vision of the ancient Japanese kept alive to date with little alteration.