

The Legacy of Commemorative Disputes: What Our Children Won't Learn

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In light of domestic terrorist acts such as the sarin gas attack in Tokyo and the bombing in Oklahoma City, as well as increased trade friction between Japan and the United States, citizens of the two countries have had their attention diverted from what only a few months ago seemed like an issue that might severely strain Japanese-American relations—ceremonies to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bombs and the end of World War Two. The most publicized dispute concerned the virtual cancellation of the ambitious Smithsonian exhibit at the U.S. Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. As the controversy fades in the minds of most people, historians still need to ask what the legacy of this and other commemorative disputes will be for this generation, and, even more importantly, those yet to come.

What went wrong with the Smithsonian exhibit and other commemorative ceremonies? What are the lessons to be learned? And finally, as mentioned above, what is the legacy of these commemorative disputes? As we examine events surrounding the fiftieth anniversary of the nadir of relations between Japan and the United States, let us not forget the positive bonds that have developed between the nations since then, and how important it is to world peace that relations remain positive between the two economic superpowers. The past year has been an emotionally charged one, in which various groups from Japan, the United States and Europe have clashed over how the end of World War Two should be commemorated. At the heart of the controversy are differing perceptions as to what should be commemorated, how this should be done, and who should be involved. Some of the tension is inherent in the commemorative process itself, but the situation has been exacerbated by mistakes, miscommunication, and divisive tactics on the part of politicians and the media.

Japan has witnessed a number of significant struggles concerning war and remembrance. These include contests between conservative and moderate politicians as to whether an apology for wartime activities is necessary; arguments among historians, veterans' families, and conservative groups over the construction of a War Dead Peace Memorial Hall; and disputes involving various foreign groups and the Japanese government concerning compensation for forced prostitution (Korea, China and the Philippines), forced military service (Taiwan), and the inhumane treatment of prisoners of war (Britain, Australia and the Netherlands).

In the United States the division over commemorations has been primarily between veterans' groups and conservative politicians and journalists, on the one hand, and historians and museum officials on the other. The most publicized dispute was over the Smithsonian exhibit, but a commemorative stamp debate and terminology arguments also provided additional fuel to the fire.

In Europe, there was also considerable debate over wartime commemorations. A Polish historian found himself arguing with Jewish concentration camp survivors on the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz; former British POWs fought to gain admittance to official government ceremonies; beleaguered Russian veterans protested their treatment by government officials even as gala commemorative ceremonies took place nearby attended by world leaders; and Germans (who were on the losing side and thus did not approach the ceremonies in the same fashion as the victorious Allies) revealed in a recent poll that 40% of their population over sixty-five believe that the forced evacuation of Germans from Eastern Europe after the war was as bad as the events of

the Holocaust. In spite of these controversies, the V-E ceremonies of May 8th generally proceeded smoothly. As the New York Times noted, "It was a day to seek the best from the past."

Let us now turn our attention to the events of the last year that have set the stage for the coming August commemorative ceremonies. These events are inherently more complicated, because they involve not only the ending of World War Two, but the dropping of atomic bombs and the beginning of the Cold War. The best place to begin is with the Smithsonian exhibit, which initially attempted to examine all three of these issues.

What began as a noble effort by Air and Space officials at the Smithsonian in 1993 to commemorate the end of World War Two, ended with virtual cancellation of the exhibit in late January 1995 and the subsequent May resignation of the museum's director. What happened along the way, and was the outcome doomed to failure from the beginning?

The exhibit was originally entitled "The Crossroads: The End of World War Two, the Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War," but later changed to "The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War Two." Initially, it was to include the first public display of the Enola Gay, the airplane that dropped the atomic bomb over Hiroshima, and artifacts from the victims of the atomic bombs from Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Trips were made by Smithsonian officials to Japan to receive permission to borrow and display photographs and personal possessions. At the same time, an advisory committee of historians was busy preparing draft manuscripts for the exhibit. Copies of the manuscripts began to circulate, igniting controversy in the summer of last year that has continued to this day.

The controversy grew out of a decision by Smithsonian officials to focus on three areas that are clearly spelled out in the original title of the exhibit: the end of World War Two, the atomic bombs, and the origins of the Cold War. This put Smithsonian officials at odds with veterans' groups, who saw 1995 as their last real opportunity to commemorate the glory and bravery of the American military effort in World War Two while the participating soldiers are still alive. It created what my colleague at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, Edward Linenthal (who was also a member of the Smithsonian exhibit's historical advisory panel), refers to as a "tension between commemorative voice and historical voice."

Historians and Smithsonian officials wanted to use the occasion to analyze in broad historical terms why the war ended as it did and the implications that the use of atomic weapons had on the development of the subsequent Cold War. Veterans' groups wanted instead to concentrate on the use of the atomic bombs to end a savage war quickly and to save American lives. This was, after all, the reason that President Truman had given for using the bombs in the first place. Veterans' groups were not necessarily interested in what they considered "politically correct historical revisionism" fifty years after the fact. Besides, they were there and the historians were not. They knew the bombs saved their lives. For fifty years the crew members who dropped the bombs had been thanked by literally thousands of American soldiers who were convinced that they would have died in an invasion of mainland Japan. Their military superiors and even their President had told them this was so. Balancing this view with the efforts of historians to present a macro-level interpretation of the war's end and the use of the bombs that included disagreement between U.S. military and political leaders, Soviet entry into the war, and consideration of the tremendous amount of money and energy poured into the project to develop the bombs was the difficult task facing Smithsonian

officials.

Relatively early on museum officials decided to drop the Cold War aspects of the exhibit and concentrate solely on the end of the war and the dropping of the atomic bombs. Even within the new limited framework, however, there remained numerous areas of contention between the two sides. As the media became involved, so did politicians in both the United States and Japan, and the situation became even more complicated. In the battle for public opinion, the veterans' groups gained considerable support from the U.S. media and various conservative politicians, while the historians came to be supported by peace groups and the media and politicians in Japan—which in effect made their job even more difficult, as the issue of patriotism was pushed to the forefront.

Passions raged and tempers flared as the debate dragged on into early December 1994. At that point two other events added fuel to the fire—the commemorative stamp controversy and the anniversary of Pearl Harbor. The stamp controversy grew out of long-planned efforts by the U.S. Postal Service to create a set of ten commemorative issues to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war. The last stamp in the series entitled “World War II-1945: Victory at Last” bore the picture of an atomic mushroom cloud and an inscription below which read “Atomic bombs hasten war’s end, August 1945.”

The stamp in general, but the inscription in particular, offended the Japanese, and many Americans as well. The Japanese government officially protested to the State Department. Motoshima Hitoshi, at that time Mayor of Nagasaki, echoed the thoughts of most when he said, “It is truly terrible that they could be so heartless. Beneath the mushroom cloud, hundreds of thousands of non-combatant women and children were killed or injured on the spot....The atomic blast was a case of indiscriminate massacre.” A U.S. Postal Service spokesman responded that “Our purpose is to provide a comprehensive history of events of World War II and we are not making a value judgment on any of those events.”

Fortunately, a number of people, including President Clinton, objected to the insensitivity of the stamp and its message, and the White House put pressure on the Postal Service to redo the design. The stamp was almost immediately replaced by one showing President Truman preparing to announce the end of the war. While most applauded the move, some, like a letter-to-the-editor writer in Wisconsin, lashed out that “The wimps in the Postal Service should hang their heads in shame for not printing the mushroom cloud stamp....If any servicemen who died in that war could see how we are bowing to the Japanese, they would wonder why they made the sacrifice. But then it is no wonder that the stamp was not printed. Look who is our president—a waffling draft dodger and leader of a bunch of crooks and connivers who are, or were, running our country.”

Just as the potential stamp crisis was averted, the fifty-third anniversary of Pearl Harbor arrived. This seemed quite appropriate, since most Americans appear incapable of speaking of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki without immediately following it with “Well, what about Pearl Harbor?” Soon after the Pearl Harbor anniversary, a journalist with the Chicago Tribune argued in a syndicated column that the decision to drop the atomic bombs “must be seen in its historic context and as the excruciating calculus that it was. The blame for its hellish destruction must lie not so much with those who used the bomb as with those who created the situation in which it seemed the lesser of evils. This is the truth the Japanese have refused to accept. This is what Americans must understand in defending against attempts to write this country’s history to mollify

the Japanese. Pressures to distort history are increasing.” As examples, she cited Japanese pressure to withdraw the commemorative stamp and Japanese involvement in the Smithsonian exhibit. She continued by arguing that “it’s a serious mistake to keep letting the Japanese impose their self-serving perversions of history on this country.” The columnist concluded by stating that “This country has an obligation to the millions of Americans who fought in World War II to tell the truth about the war and its causes, its horrors and its acts of courage. Japan must do the same.”

To prove her point, she ran a follow-up column in January 1995, which offered a sampling of veterans’ responses to her original article. She prefaced the piece with the following reminder to historians. “Distorting history while those who lived it are still alive is infuriating. Just ask the veterans who fought the desperate, deadly battles of World War II.”

Not surprisingly, the veterans spoke of the intensity and savagery of the final campaigns of the war, and especially of how grateful they were to be alive today. Comments included: “I am one of the millions of men alive today and am a father and grandfather because of the dropping of the atomic bomb.” “P.S. I’m the wife who typed the letter. I’m glad he’s here, too.” “When word got around [to American forces on Okinawa] that the bombs had forced a Japanese surrender, we knelt in the sand and cried. For all our manhood, we cried. We were going to live! We are going to grow up to adulthood after all.” “I lived that war from Day 1, Dec. 7, 1941, to its final act....Finally a few days after the second bomb, we went into Nagasaki Bay...to bring out our POWs. When we first observed the devastation, we felt sorrow for the Japanese. However, when we saw the beaten, broken, skeletal bodies of our men, we were enraged.” Uniformly, these veterans and their family members were outraged at the so-called “revisionist history” of the planned Smithsonian exhibit.

This leads me to the question of history, and who is most qualified to write it. Are the personal accounts of soldiers the most reliable because they “were there?” Did soldiers understand the political and economic implications of American and Japanese policy that led both sides to war? Are public pronouncements by decision makers of the day the most truthful histories? One would be hard pressed to receive any support for this argument. Even the best historians of a half century ago would have to revise their assessments based upon the sheer volume of private and public documents made available in the intervening years. Why is it then that people continue to believe in the sanctity of uninformed eyewitness accounts and historical analysis of the day? What is it that causes history written today about events fifty years ago to be labeled “revisionist”—or even more damning—“politically correct?” The nature of history is that it evolves as new information becomes available and new constructs are employed.

Everyone seems to be clamoring for “truth in history” or “events placed in true historical context.” What exactly does this mean? Let’s examine some of the areas of controversy surrounding the end of World War Two and the dropping of the atomic bombs and try to determine why the contending factions have taken their respective positions.

Examining reactions to the originally proposed Smithsonian exhibit will help clarify the contending views. Herman Harrington of the American Legion reacted angrily to the original exhibit plans, saying that “All World War II veterans and the Enola Gay have been prostituted to make a political statement about the horrors of atomic warfare.” Charles Sweeney, who piloted the plane that dropped the bomb on Nagasaki, echoed this statement. “I can’t believe that they would create such an abomination. You know, it’s certainly unAmerican, and it’s...derogatory of...American culture,

and I would add...that it might be close to treason.” On the other hand, Linenthal countered that “Most members of the [Smithsonian historical] advisory committee thought the original exhibition script was a fair-minded attempt to describe the complexity of the decision to drop the bomb on Hiroshima; the consequences of that action; and the fact that the bomb brought about the end of the war and the beginning of the nuclear age.”

After five revisions of the text, the veterans’ groups were still not satisfied. William Detweiler, national commander of the American Legion, was quoted as saying, “The exhibit still says, in essence, that we were the aggressors and the Japanese were the victims.” Historians were equally outraged. According to a November 1994 article in the New York Times, “a group of scholars sent a letter to the secretary of the Smithsonian...calling the changes ‘intellectual corruption’ and a ‘historical cleansing.’” Barton Bernstein of Stanford University and a member of the advisory committee said, “In the present version, there is no clear statement that there is controversy surrounding the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and that leaves Americans impoverished intellectually.” Martin Sherwin of Dartmouth College and the advisory committee added that the revised text “has nothing to do with history, as it is known by serious historians.”

What are the differences that have divided the two groups and led to the significant scaling back of the exhibit? First of all, the veterans’ groups found the original exhibit too sympathetic to the Japanese. They said it made heroes out of the Japanese and devils out of the Americans who dropped the atomic bombs to end the war. Particularly offensive in their eyes was a quote from an early draft that read “For most Americans, this war was fundamentally different than the one waged against Germany and Italy—it was a war of vengeance. For most Japanese, it was a war to defend their unique culture against Western imperialism.” Taken out of context, the quotation does seem unfair to American veterans, and hearing only this passage, many became visibly upset. Although the segment may have been poorly written and should have been reworked, it certainly was a very minor glitch in an otherwise well-balanced text of over 400 pages. What was needed, the veterans argued, was more context, more background as to how the war began and unfolded. The request for greater context again seems reasonable, and background information was included in later drafts. What most veterans clearly meant when they referred to “context” was to go back to Pearl Harbor. How could one understand the use of the atomic bombs without the context of Pearl Harbor, the Bataan Death March, and the concentration camps and forced labor of Southeast Asia and the Pacific? One could just as easily counter, however, that we need to go back even further to the mid-nineteenth century, in an attempt to analyze Western imperialism in East Asia, the Opium Wars, extraterritoriality, Perry and the unequal treaties? Historical context can obviously mean different things to different people.

One of the biggest disagreements concerned the projected casualty figures cited in the event of an invasion of mainland Japan by American forces. The original museum text, citing recent research by historians, significantly reduced the number of projected U.S. losses in the planned invasions of southern Kyushu in November 1945 and Honshu in March 1946. Total death projections were eventually determined by the historians advisory group to be as few as 63,000. Veterans’ groups, quoting British Prime Minister Winston Churchill for one, cited figures closer to a million for the combined operations, based on fierce fighting at the end of the war at Iwo Jima and Okinawa. In my opinion, both sides wasted too much energy debating this particular point. The real issue is that for American servicemen who had fought in the Pacific or were being transferred from other

operation theaters, anything that would prevent an invasion and bring a quick end to the war was a welcome relief. With the war already over in Europe for three months, no one wanted to be the last one to die in the concluding stage of the Pacific campaign.

While servicemen on their way to Japan and their families back home in America surely were glad to see the war end, did it take atomic bombs to ensure the war's rapid conclusion? The veterans' groups responded in the affirmative. As a corollary, they insisted that the only reason the bombs were dropped was to save American lives. That is what they felt personally and that is what their President publicly assured them at the time. The historians, on the other hand, argued that the issue was much more complex, and that factors such as the Russian entry into the war and the money and commitment invested in the project also were important. The veterans' groups adamantly refused to budge on this issue, and said that anything that argued against the bombs being dropped to end the war and save American lives would not be allowed in the text. Quotations from General Eisenhower and Admiral Leahy were thus stricken from the text because they provided differing viewpoints.

The issue of Japanese as victims was a problem in the original physical exhibit as well as the text. The veterans' groups felt that too many articles belonging to women and children were being shown, so a shredded school uniform and a badly disfigured school lunch box were removed. Also taken out were rosaries melted together by the bomb at Nagasaki. After considerable debate, the number of artifacts scheduled to be displayed was reduced one-third by the American side. This, understandably, angered Japanese officials who saw Smithsonian administrators as reneging on their earlier promise to present a balanced view of the war's end and replacing the original exhibit with one that attempted to legitimize the use of atomic weapons. While officials in both Hiroshima and Nagasaki were weighing decisions as to whether or not to allow the artifacts to be displayed in their reduced form, the issue was resolved for them when the exhibit was effectively canceled at the end of January.

Eighty-one members of Congress threatened to withdraw financial support of the Smithsonian, if it did not agree with the interpretation of the veterans' groups. The Congressional group also asked for the resignation of Martin Harwit, the director of the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum, because it said he refused to make the necessary changes in the exhibit. A meeting of the Smithsonian's board of regents and congressional hearings on the controversy were both scheduled for January 30.

At its meeting the Smithsonian announced that the exhibit scheduled for May (and eventually opened in late June) would be scaled back considerably. It would consist solely of the display of the fuselage of the Enola Gay and an accompanying video of the plane's crew. A decision concerning Mr. Harwit's job as director of the Air and Space Museum was postponed. In light of the Smithsonian's decision, Congressional hearings were put off until May.

With Senate hearings and the threat of possible funding cuts looming on the horizon, Michael Heyman, Smithsonian Secretary, announced in February that he was commissioning an independent study of the management of the National Air and Space Museum by an outside agency. The study was scheduled to be completed within a year. Heyman was quoted as saying "We need to distinguish between opinion and fact. We need to contribute to light rather than heat. And we need to avoid 'instructing' people or telling them how to think." Although Heyman professed continued support of the Air and Space Director, the tone of his remarks left little doubt that Harwit's position was

more tenuous than it had been prior to the announcement.

It came, therefore, as no surprise when Harwit announced his resignation on May 2, citing “continuing controversy and divisiveness” over the Smithsonian exhibit. A scapegoat had been found to take responsibility for the failure of the exhibit, but too late to salvage the project.

Senate hearings began in May with veterans testifying on the 11th, followed by Smithsonian officials and historians on the 18th. Ted Stevens, Republican Senator from Alaska and Chairman of the Senate Rules Committee, opened the hearings on the 18th with the comment that the hearings “will provide the Smithsonian with the public forum necessary to explain what went wrong with their management practices, and what steps have been taken to correct the revisionist and ‘politically correct’ bias that was contained in the original script.” With these introductory remarks, the tone of the committee hearings had been set.

As the Director of the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History, noted in her summary of the hearings, “The real loser in this hearing was history. None of the Senators seemed to really understand that history is not static but is constantly being refined as both the questions that are asked and the primary sources that are available allow a more comprehensive and accurate view of the past to emerge.”

Before the two contending groups in the Smithsonian controversy go their separate ways for the summer, with veterans deservedly basking in the glory of various commemorative celebrations (V-E Day, Memorial Day, V-J Day, fifty-year reunions, museum displays, air shows, military history conferences, television documentaries, Veterans Day, etc.) and historians continuing their broad-based analysis of the events of 1945 (teach-ins, academic conferences, seminars, books, articles, etc.), let us reflect a final time on what went wrong in the specific instance of the Smithsonian exhibit and what lessons can be learned.

Smithsonian officials, historians, veterans, the media and politicians all deserve some blame for the failure of the exhibit. Smithsonian officials began an ambitious project without anticipating possible hostility to their efforts. In light of the controversy surrounding the fiftieth anniversary of Pearl Harbor and the opening of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., they should have understood that there needed to be early involvement on the part of veterans’ groups, because of the commemorative nature of the exhibit. Working drafts of the exhibit’s text were made available to various sources, even finding their way to Japan for translation. This made it difficult to alter the text once the media began to publicize the specific contents. What was in many ways a very balanced effort to deal with the issues of 1945, became ridiculed when a few passages were taken out of context. When Smithsonian officials finally did bring veterans’ groups into the process, they should have never allowed them virtual veto power over the exhibit’s artifacts and text. In retrospect, officials also tried to do too much too quickly. To focus on the dropping of the atomic bombs, the end of World War Two, and the beginning of the Cold War was too ambitious a task, especially on the occasion of the fiftieth—and probably final—major commemoration honoring the soldiers who fought in World War Two. Early planning failures, the circulation of working drafts, and eventual abandonment of control over the exhibit, all helped contribute to the failure of the exhibit. By the end, the Air and Space Museum Director was forced to resign and Smithsonian officials found themselves parading meekly before congressional hearings in an effort to retain future funding.

Historians, especially those associated with the Smithsonian's advisory committee, also have to share some of the blame. Although, as I stated earlier, I believe the original text was, in general, an extremely well-balanced account, there were clearly passages that could have been rewritten to show greater sensitivity to the veterans without altering the intended meaning. Admittedly, compromise was made difficult by certain unacceptable demands on the part of some veterans to censor history to meet their own narrow views, but historians seemed bent on trying to monopolize the moral high ground in the debate, occasionally using inflammatory rhetoric to defend their position. This made it almost impossible to achieve compromise on even lesser issues. As depicted in the media, both Smithsonian officials and historians often came across as ivory tower academics, out of touch with the feelings of the common people.

Veterans' groups, for their part, were even more outrageous in their attacks on the opposition, and did very little to bring honor to their cause. They rightfully objected to certain passages in draft texts, but then bullied their way to become censors of the exhibit's artifacts and text. They had no right to expunge legitimate historical material simply because it differed from their interpretation of events. It is understandable that veterans' groups perceived 1995 as possibly the last opportunity to honor their fallen comrades and receive recognition for their own sacrifices while they are still alive, but there will be numerous other occasions for commemorative events this year. Veterans' groups argued for a sanitized view of history to be displayed at the National Air and Space Museum; instead their behavior helped ensure virtually no history at all would be available for visitors to see. They, therefore, must shoulder a great deal of the blame for what their children and grandchildren will not have the opportunity to learn about 1945 and its impact on their lives.

The media's role in the Smithsonian controversy was little better than shameful. From national newspaper and television accounts to local coverage, the media deliberately pitted Smithsonian officials and historians against veterans to achieve sensational stories. Not only did the media take passages from the Smithsonian text out of context, but on occasion it even falsified sections to fan the fire of controversy. As an example of coverage on the local level, I gave a thirty minute interview to a television crew, offering what I considered to be a balanced and objective view of the general controversy. What ran on the local news was a twenty second clip, taken out of context, focusing on whether or not I felt that veterans held an accurate view of history. The local station promoted its piece with the statement, "University professor at odds with local veterans." Clearly all it intended to do was find controversial material from a historian to pit against statements by local veterans. It encouraged dissention where there was, in reality, little, in order to create a controversial story for its news program. On numerous occasions the media, both national and local, deliberately provided misleading information to the public in an effort to encourage indignation and resentment among the general population.

For politicians, the decision to support veterans' groups over Smithsonian officials and historians was an easy one. Invoking terms such as "historical truth," "patriotism" and "honor," conservative members of Congress, especially after the Republican gains in the November 1994 election, jumped on the bandwagon to demand the cancellation of the Smithsonian exhibit and the resignation of Air and Space Museum Director. Controlling as they did the purse strings to Smithsonian funding, they knew they would be in a strong position when Senate hearings began in May. It did not help that four of the six members of the Senate Committee were veterans, and that none had seemingly any concept of history as an evolving search for truth.

In summary, some of the tension in the Smithsonian debate was inherent (the “historical” versus “commemorative” voice), but most of the blame for the exhibit’s failure has to be attributed to a series of mistakes, miscalculations and miscommunication on the part of Smithsonian officials, historians, veterans, the media and politicians. The collapse of the Smithsonian project was far from inevitable, but it was, unfortunately, quite predictable.

While the events surrounding the demise of the Smithsonian exhibit were unfolding, other incidents occurred, both in Japan and between Japan and the United States, that further complicated the issue of fiftieth anniversary commemorations in the two countries. In general, the Japanese have had a difficult time coming to terms with their role in World War Two. Most have rejected the militaristic mentality that led to war and have embraced the no-war clause inserted into their post-war constitution by American occupation authorities. The basic attitude from the 1950s on has been to put the war behind them and get on with the task of rebuilding the country through economic growth and political stability. Economic success has been achieved, but some would argue at the expense of ignoring past responsibilities for military aggression and the inhumane treatment of people, especially their Asian neighbors.

Japan has for years made great efforts to commemorate the suffering of atomic bomb victims, while at the same time refusing to acknowledge its aggression that contributed to the opening of hostilities and the eventual bombing. While Americans see the atomic bombings as the final act of a brutal war, Japanese have focused on the bombings as the beginning of the nuclear age and the need to ensure that such an act never occurs again. Americans tend to equate Hiroshima and Nagasaki with Pearl Harbor, while Japanese think more in terms of Auschwitz and the inhumanity of man to man.

In the past two years, since the end of Liberal Democratic rule, Japanese leaders have taken considerable strides to address the issue of Japanese responsibility for the war with their Asian neighbors. Prime Ministers Hosokawa, Hata and Murayama, as well as Emperor Akihito, have made concerted efforts to apologize to Korea and China for past Japanese aggression. Finally, in June of this year, the Japanese Diet passed a resolution—albeit not a very forceful one because of conservative opposition—expressing remorse, but not apologizing for Japan’s actions in World War Two. Admittedly, the Japanese still have a ways to go in this regard, but progress is being made.

This progress has been somewhat offset, however, by highly visible incidents that continually remind people of Japan’s inability to come to grips with its role in the war. The so-called “comfort women” issue, in which Asian women were used as sex slaves by the Japanese military, is still causing bitter controversy in Korea, China and the Philippines. In addition, it seems that every few months a cabinet-level official blurts out that Japan was not an aggressor in the war, but merely a defender of Asia against Western imperialism. Over the past year, the Justice Minister, the Director General of the Environmental Agency, and the International Trade and Finance Minister have all made remarks along these lines.

The most obvious example of Japan’s inability to come to terms with its war role is the sanitized view of World War Two carried in its government-sanctioned history textbooks. Efforts have recently been made to deal with this issue as well, and they are long overdue. While it may be comforting to forget the bad things that happen to you and get on with your life, the Japanese have done so without providing their children and grandchildren with an honest appraisal as to why things got so bad to begin with.

As Japan readies itself to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War Two, the primary emphasis will be on ceremonies at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but it also has its own controversy similar to the debate surrounding the Smithsonian exhibit. The Japanese government is trying to open a national memorial hall to commemorate World War Two, but it is running into opposition on a number of fronts, and the building will probably not be ready this year. The opposition to the building of the War Dead Peace Memorial Hall is led on one side by historians and pacifist groups and on the other by Yasukuni Shrine officials. Yasukuni Shrine is where Japanese war dead, including Class-A war criminals, are enshrined.

Last August representatives from Japan's largest historians' groups asked the government to scrap the plan for the memorial because management of the hall is to be entrusted to the Japan War-Bereaved Families Association, consisting of relatives of Japanese war dead. The association claims that Japan did not fight a war of aggression and that Japan has no responsibility for World War Two. Suehiro Sakae, Vice Chairman of the association, states that "Many people and the mass media say that all the Japanese people before and during the war were like devils, denying all the history of Japan. But that's not true and we'd like to preserve the correct history of Japan." Representatives of Yasukuni Shrine oppose the hall for far different reasons than the historians. They say they fear the government will acquiesce to the historians and turn the hall into an apology for war victims in other countries. The shrine's newsletter of last June claims that the government is incapable of creating displays showing "objective views of history."

This sounds very familiar, doesn't it? Government commemorations of World War Two in both the United States and Japan are being opposed on one side by historians and on the other by groups speaking out on behalf of veterans. The veterans' support groups insist that soldiers of the war should not be regarded as devils, that victims should not be glorified, and that "objective" and "true" histories are not possible given the biases of present-day historians. Again, this brings us back to the inherent tension between historical and commemorative voice, and the struggle between those who study history and those who experienced it.

Other incidents have also arisen between Japan and the United States that have clouded fiftieth year commemorations. Already discussed in the "Introduction" to this issue of CROSSROADS are accounts of angry letters written by American veterans to former Mayor Motoshima in the aftermath of statements he made in November 1994 and March 1995 about the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. These incidents were followed shortly thereafter by two more controversies: Japanese protests of the use of V-J Day to signify the end of the war in the Pacific and President Clinton's refusal to apologize for the United States' dropping of atomic bombs on Japan.

Japanese leaders argued that the end of the European campaign was called V-E Day, not V-G (Victory over Germany) Day. To ease Japanese feelings on the issue, Clinton agree to redub V-J Day "End of the Pacific War" Day for observances this summer. Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating also jumped on the bandwagon by proposing to rename August 15 V-P Day (Victory in the Pacific). The decisions drew howls of protest from American and Australian veterans who argued that Japan had been the only aggressor in the Pacific (as opposed to German, Austrian and Italian aggressors in Europe).

Just when Clinton was being accused at home of caving in to Japanese demands over the V-J Day controversy, he was able to somewhat diffuse the issue by refusing to apologize to Japan for Tru-

man's decision to use the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In an April 7 speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Dallas, Texas, Clinton was asked whether the United States should apologize for the bombings and whether Harry Truman had acted correctly in ordering the bombing missions. His answer was "No, and based on the facts he had before him, yes." The audience applauded, veterans cheered, and Prime Minister Murayama responded that "I would have been happy if attention had been paid to Japanese feelings." It seems that whichever side Clinton took he had detractors, but with domestic elections not too far away, he could ill afford to upset conservative voters any further. The incident did, of course, make it considerably more difficult for Murayama to appease his conservative critics back home in Japan, as he was attempting to extract his own apology concerning World War Two.

Just as it appeared that Japanese-American relations might sour even more over planned commemorative ceremonies this August and September, domestic terrorism in both countries helped place the controversy in proper perspective. The Japanese were diverted by the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system and Americans by the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

Even these tragedies, however, did not entirely mask the ill will that had developed over the fiftieth anniversary commemorations. In May, President Clinton ordered sanctions to be imposed on high-priced Japanese cars imported into the United States if Japan did not positively address certain American complaints regarding perceived trade barriers in the automobile industry by the end of June. The media and politicians in the United States immediately began to resurrect the vocabulary of the commemorative disputes and raise fears of a growing trade war. "War" seemed to be the issue still on everyone's mind. Political cartoonists had a field day depicting Japanese and American airplanes dropping "trade war" bombs on one another. One cartoon had Clinton dressed as Truman speaking with a mushroom cloud rising behind him which read "100% tariffs." The victims of the nuclear bombing were U.S. consumers, workers and auto dealers. Clinton is quoted as saying, "It was the only way to end the war with Japan. I'm sorry if innocent people were hurt." The terminology not only exaggerated the trade difficulties between the two nations, but trivialized the pain and suffering of atomic bomb victims in Japan. A mean-spirited rhetoric evolved which not only made it less likely that Japan and the United States would settle their former differences, but that the present trade friction would be even more difficult to resolve. A last second compromise managed to avert the crisis, but not before unnecessarily harsh threats had been exchanged by the two parties.

It is a shame that issues on both sides have prevented Japan and the United States from dealing with their differences over how World War Two should be remembered fifty years after the fact. Following are some of the factors that have led to differing perceptions of World War Two commemorations:

- 1) Debate over what should be commemorated - As has been seen in the planned exhibits of the Smithsonian and the War Dead Peace Memorial Hall, there are a number of conflicting issues, such as historical reevaluation, the honoring of veterans, the dropping of atomic bombs, the end of World War Two, and the beginning of the Cold War.
- 2) Appropriate analogies - As mentioned earlier, Americans tend to link the dropping of the atomic bombs to Pearl Harbor, while the Japanese compare it to the Holocaust.
- 3) Apologies for wartime behavior - Japan's Asian neighbors demand an apology for wartime

aggression and atrocities, while Japan itself seeks a U.S. apology for the dropping of the atomic bombs.

- 4) Attendance at commemorative ceremonies - Conflicting domestic and international pressure makes it difficult to satisfy demands of the various groups (veterans, POWs, war victims, historians, politicians, etc.) who want to attend.
- 5) Display of atomic bomb photos - Most U.S. military photographs of the atomic bombings show the utter destruction of buildings and vegetation, while most photos displayed by the Japanese concentrate on human suffering inflicted by the bombs.
- 6) Coming to terms with wartime roles - Japan still has a long way to go in terms of admission of wartime aggression and atrocities, and the elimination of sanitized textbooks. The United States has proven with the Smithsonian exhibit that it cannot withstand scrutiny of its decision to develop and employ the atomic bombs.
- 7) Consideration of feelings - Conservative Japanese politicians have recently made a series of statements that clearly have outraged their Asian neighbors, while Americans have offended Japanese sensibilities with the mushroom cloud stamp, Clinton's failure to apologize for the bombings, and the comments that grew out of the failed Smithsonian exhibit.
- 8) Commemoration of winning and losing - Japan lost the war. Obviously, commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of 1945 means something quite different to the Japanese than it does to Americans. While American veterans reflect upon their glory days and memorialize fallen buddies in grand ceremonies, their Japanese counterparts also mourn their dead comrades, but in small, unpublicized reunions. For most Americans, August 1945 is a time to remember; for most Japanese, it is a time to forget.

In spite of the differences which make the commemorative ceremonies this summer a difficult time for both Japan and the United States, the lessons of 1945 need to be passed on before it is too late. Too many children have been born in post-war Japan without learning anything of the Pacific War other than that the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were victims of atomic bomb attacks. Government-sanctioned textbooks have for too long hidden the total picture of the war. Japan will remain a prisoner of its World War Two image until it can acknowledge its role in the war and settle matters with its Asian neighbors.

The United States has let an excellent opportunity go by the boards with the failure of the Smithsonian exhibit. The Smithsonian is the national showcase of America's history and it was the natural site to hold an exhibition celebrating the momentous events of 1945. For reasons already discussed, it failed to do so. The losers are the American children who now have nothing more than a fuselage and a brief video to explain what happened fifty years ago.

The legacy of the failed commemorations is that our children will not learn the lessons of the past. How long can we allow them to live in ignorance? It is both a sad and dangerous situation. We have an obligation to prepare them to be future leaders, but how can we do this when petty differences are allowed to close our national theaters of history? All parties involved need to understand what has been lost, and resolve not to let it happen again.

Lane R. Earns. "The Legacy of Commemorative Disputes: What Our Children Won't Learn."
Crossroads: A Journal of Nagasaki History and Culture, no. 3 (Summer 1995), 99–119.