

"War is the Mother of Civilization": Reflections on the United States and Japan

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by Tsurumi Shunsuke

I lived in the United States from the age of 15 until I turned 19. When Japan went to war with America, I became a "hostile alien." In 1942, I was sent to a detention center -- a relocation camp.

I knew I was being detained unjustly, but fortunately I was treated fairly throughout my years of captivity. I was never tortured or abused.

In fact, I felt I was walking into a much worse prison when I returned to wartime Japan to find the nation completely in the grip of emperor-worshipping totalitarianism.

I recently saw on television a released Iraqi prisoner, a victim of abuse by U.S. soldiers. Recalling his humiliation, he said he wished he had died.

His comment made me see the United States as a far more redeemable nation than Japan. By releasing Iraqi detainees, the Americans knew they risked putting themselves in a compromising position because those who were freed would undoubtedly reveal information damaging to the United States. Yet, prodded by public opinion, the U.S. government has begun setting them free.

When President George W. Bush likened his

war to a crusade, I had to assume the United States was turning totalitarian. But its decision to release Iraqi prisoners signifies that some degree of democracy is still alive in that nation.

When three Japanese citizens were taken hostage in Iraq, certain high-profile Japanese politicians questioned the hostages' "sense of responsibility," while U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell stated that the Japanese people ought to be proud of the three.

Even though America's moral bankruptcy is deep, I still believe the United States will come to its senses sooner than Japan.

Even before the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Pope John Paul II was already warning Christendom against any religious war with the Islamic world. The Christian world is ignorant of Islam, the Holy Father cautioned. Going to war with an unknown people would drag everyone into a bottomless mess, he insisted.

Bush, on the other hand, styled himself as the leader of the "civilized" world and went to war -- a bona fide fool who never seems to doubt his own righteousness.

I recall an old slogan from a pamphlet distributed by Japan's now-defunct War Ministry. It said, "War is the mother of civilization."

As I am of the belief that not everything about civilization is "good," I must say this slogan is correct. It was through its war effort that the United States successfully developed strategic nuclear bombs and used them against Japan, an

enemy that was effectively on the verge of collapse. And that is what the Americans understand as "civilization."

The inhumane treatment of Iraqis by American soldiers suggests the latter's failure to see alien nationals as fellow human beings. Come to think of it, when Japan sent its troops to China in the 1930s, many Japanese soldiers held the Chinese people in contempt. Ordinary men, who would have remained good fathers and husbands under normal circumstances, brutalized, killed and raped innocent Chinese civilians and abused prisoners-of-war.

It is easy to condemn the Americans for their ignorance and prejudice toward anything Islamic, as revealed by the prisoner abuses. It is also easy to denounce the Americans' lack of remorse for their history of repeated massacres of native Americans.

But what about my own compatriots today? When they discuss problems concerning North Korea, how many really understand what it means to learn from history and respect foreign cultures?

Japan's history of colonialism and uprooting of colonial subjects from their homes forced people of Chinese and Korean origins to settle in Japan. And the Tokyo metropolitan government is now trying to force these people to sing the "Kimigayo" national anthem at school functions.

During World War II, I was shipped out to a southern front as an army interpreter. There, I witnessed the execution of a POW.

A colleague of mine was ordered to execute a Black captive. I had already made up my mind by then to kill myself if I should be ordered to kill someone. Ever since, I have continued to ask myself: "What if that order had been issued to me?"

The prison brutalities in Iraq came to light because someone blew the whistle. I, on the other hand, never ratted on my colleague who executed the African-American POW because I did not believe that justice could be served by the U.S. authorities trying war criminals.

The media are trying to find out whether the prisoner abuses in Iraq were systematic or the doings of aberrant individuals.

But even if the individual soldiers who are charged had been ordered to do what they did, could they not have disobeyed? I do not think anyone has asked this question yet.

Tsurumi Shunsuke, a philosopher-activist, graduated from Harvard University in 1942. In 1946, he started the magazine "Shiso-no Kagaku" (Science of Thought). He was also involved in the Beheiren citizens' movement against the Vietnam War. He contributed this comment to The Asahi Shimbun. International Herald Tribune/Asahi: June 17, 2004. Posted at Japan Focus on July 3, 2004.