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Wakamiya Yoshiyumi, Watanabe Tsuneo

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By Wakamiya Yoshiyumi and Watanabe Tsuneo

[Many older Japanese conservatives are deeply committed to pacifism as a result of their personal experiences in World War II, despite recent Japanese government efforts to assert the right to belligerence in the present and the legitimacy of Japan's wars in the 1930s and 1940s. Nonaka Hiromu, the former Secretary-General of the Liberal Democratic Party, retired from politics last year. But he still openly criticizes Prime Minister Koizumi's visits to Yasukuni Shrine, his foreign policy, and the LDP's planned revision of Japan's Constitution. He lost his cousin and uncle in the Asia-Pacific War. Gotoda Masaharu, who served as Chief Cabinet Secretary for the Nakasone Cabinet in the 1980s and was also highly critical of both Koizumi's foreign and domestic policies, died last year. He was also as a staunch supporter of Article 9, the "no-war clause," of Japan's Constitution. Watanabe Tsuneo, the Editorial Chief of

the Yomiuri Newspaper, belongs to this same circle of conservatives whose wartime experiences prompted strong anti-war sentiments, although he is less supportive of Article 9.

From mid-2005, Watanabe suddenly began expressing highly critical views of Koizumi's visit to Yasukuni Shrine, where the spirits of Japanese soldiers are enshrined. At the same time, he initiated a series of articles on Japan's war responsibility in the Yomiuri, the world's largest-circulation newspaper. Yomiuri was, and is, regarded as a conservative paper, articulating views indistinguishable from those of the Japanese government on many important issues. Its traditional liberal rival has long been the Asahi News. It thus came as a surprise to readers to find this series of "progressive" articles, which clearly reflect Watanabe's critical attitude toward the national amnesia on the part of other conservatives and the Japanese government regarding war responsibility. He argued that the Japanese Government should build a new secular war memorial like those in other countries and cease official visits to Yasukuni, the preminent symbol of Japan's wartime claim that it had a divine right to dominance in Asia. The precise center of controversy is often the fact that the individuals

convicted of war crimes after the war were later enshrined at Yasukuni. Apparently he feels that time is running out and that he is one of the very few remaining persons in the old guard who still has power to influence Japanese politics and public opinion on this issue.



Watanabe Tsuneo

Watanabe may have been responding in part to the fact that recently both Yomiuri and Asahi have lost considerable numbers of subscribers, while the readership of the Sankei News - the most conservative paper of all - has increased dramatically. Given that many younger people, including university students, no longer read any newspaper, it is difficult to gauge the extent of Yomiuri's effort to raise public awareness about Japan's war responsibility. The fundamental issue confronting the Japanese press, as well as peace activists and educators, is how to motivate young people to become interested in reflecting on history and establishing peaceful and productive relationships with other nations, particularly the Asian nations that suffered from Japanese colonialism and war.

Currently Yasukuni shrine is a major flashpoint as result of Koizumi's visits and Foreign Minister Aso's provocative suggestion that the emperor should visit the shrine, both of which have strained diplomatic relations with China and Korea. This was the context

for a discussion between the editors of the Yomiuri and Asahi papers on Yasukuni, the war, and historical responsibility, published in the February 2006 issue of Bonza magazine, and presented in translated and abridged form here. LH and YT

As rivals, The Asahi Shimbun and The Yomiuri Shimbun often adopt different editorial viewpoints. Yet, a recent discussion between Wakamiya Yoshibumi, chairman of The Asahi Shimbun's editorial board, and Watanabe Tsuneo, chairman of The Yomiuri Shimbun group found some common ground regarding Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro's controversial visits to Yasukuni Shrine.

Wakamiya: I was surprised by an editorial that appeared in The Yomiuri (on June 4, 2005) with the headline, "A national memorial for the war dead should be built immediately." Although the Yomiuri has long argued for the construction of such a secular war memorial, I believe it was the first time a Yomiuri editorial had clearly stated "(the prime minister) should not visit Yasukuni Shrine, where 'Class-A war criminals' are memorialized."



Wakamiya Yoshiyumi center

I had come to believe the Yomiuri was in favor of the Yasukuni visits, and, based on the editorials of the past several years, I felt the Yomiuri had moved excessively to the right, and that now there is very little difference between the Yomiuri and the Sankei Shimbun. So I was very surprised by that editorial.

Around the time it appeared, you were quoted as saying that you opposed Koizumi's Yasukuni visits. You also began arguing that the very existence of Yasukuni was the source of the diplomatic rift in Japan's relations with China and South Korea. Since I have the opportunity to talk with you directly, I would first like to ask about this change.

Watanabe: Ever since I was in university, I have argued against war. In the last war, several million people died in the name of the emperor. I was drafted and made to work like a slave as a buck private.

Fortunately, I survived, but what was especially cruel was the system that gave birth to kamikaze pilots. As the war situation worsened, the pilots were made to fly in planes without sufficient fuel to return to base, forcing them into suicide missions.

It escalated further when they began using

gliders. Pilots were made to sit in gliders that were attached to planes and released to fly toward their targets. The only strategy left was suicide bombings. During the war, I truly felt that no nation should be allowed to do such things, especially in the name of the emperor. I still cannot erase the hatred I felt toward the military leaders who gave such orders and to the politicians who overlooked such actions.

In 2001, when Prime Minister Koizumi said he would visit Yasukuni Shrine on Aug. 15, the anniversary of Japan's surrender, I called him and said "I'm opposed." I told him, "You should not go on Aug. 15. If you have to go, go on Aug. 13. Politically, it would be a bad decision to go on Aug. 15."

After that, I moved to a residence near Yasukuni Shrine. While I began taking walks to the shrine, I still have not prayed there.

The Yushukan war memorial that stands next to the main hall at Yasukuni is wrong. That facility praises militarism and children who go through that memorial come out saying, "Japan actually won the last war."

This means that Yasukuni Shrine operates a war museum that incites militarism and displays exhibits in praise of militarism. It is wrong for the prime minister to visit such a place.

I subsequently looked into what the head priest at Yasukuni said about why Class-A war criminals were memorialized there and the difficulty of removing their spirits. I came to the conclusion that it was totally wrong.

Wakamiya: The Yushukan was rebuilt in 2002. It is quite a fine-looking facility. But the contents can in no way be considered as having a contemporary feel about them.

It is true that the letters left behind by kamikaze pilots exhibited there do move readers to tears. But the tone of the exhibits, which cover the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-4 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5, as well as the events from the Manchurian Incident of 1931 to the Pacific War, consistently describes the fighting as honorable, designed to liberate Asia, and for the defense and survival of Japan. There is no sense of shame at all.

For example, there is a Zero fighter plane on display on the first floor. The explanation says the Zero made its debut over Chongqing in China, and that during dogfights over Chongqing, it shot down a large number of the Soviet-made fighters used by the Chinese, thus giving the Zero world renown. However, the museum does not reveal that after the Zero fighters established Japan's air superiority over Chongqing, bombers flew over the city, killing countless civilian residents.

Those bombings became notorious internationally as the forerunner to indiscriminate bombings. While displaying such items boastfully at Yasukuni Shrine, it is very inappropriate for Japan's leaders to insist that China has no right to criticize the prime minister's visits.

Watanabe: This is why we started a campaign in our pages from Aug. 13, 2005, to clarify where the responsibility lies for the last war. We will continue the series for a year. After the year is up, we plan to run a story on or around Aug. 15, 2006, summarizing the degree of responsibility by various military and government leaders of that time.

Of course, since we are not a judicial organization, we will not hand down death sentences or life imprisonment. But we plan to set specific standards to assess the severity of moral responsibility for the results of the war and in that way say who was the most responsible, who can be forgiven, and who should never be forgiven.

Wakamiya: There has been considerable debate about the legitimacy of the Tokyo war crimes trial. By contrast, you are planning to have the Japanese themselves clarify the responsibility for the war. Although I believe there will be considerable overlap with those who went on trial as Class-A war criminals at the Tokyo war

crimes trial, do you have any idea of how much overlap there will be and are you also planning to focus on the responsibility of individuals who may not have been put on trial but had a greater responsibility than determined by the Tokyo war crimes trial?

Watanabe: Looked at from the perspective of international law, since Japan accepted the verdict of the Tokyo war crimes trial in Article 11 of the San Francisco peace treaty, the verdict can be said to be legally binding. However, when thinking about moral responsibility for the war, Shigenori Togo, who was foreign minister at the start of the conflict, took action from an early stage to end it. Perhaps people like that should not be considered in the same vein as Class-A war criminals.

Also, while it was wrong for the Japanese to have killed people in other countries, millions of Japanese also died. A large number of the people memorialized at Yasukuni were themselves victims. I think a distinction has to be made between those who did the killing and those who were killed. Once that is done, the level of responsibility of the perpetrators should be examined. Only then can we address the issue of the kind of trouble that we caused China and South Korea.

A soul-searching on our part that will satisfy them is absolutely necessary. While the Yomiuri

will do what it can, I believe this is something that the nation-state should do at its own initiative, for example, by setting up a historical examination committee in the Diet.

On the other hand, as a representative of the journalism sector, I feel that we have an obligation at our newspaper to think through the issue. We may, of course, have been a little late in starting this.

When then-Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro visited Yasukuni on Aug. 15, 1985, I told him I was opposed. I told him, "I will never forgive him or his faction," He said, "I did not go to pray for Tojo. My younger brother died during the war and his spirit lies there. I went to meet my brother."

At that time, I accepted his explanation. However, after thinking about the issues, I focused on the fact that the war victims' relief bureau of the Ministry of Health and Welfare had enshrined the Class-A war criminals at Yasukuni.

The Tokyo Shimbun recently reported that many former military officers worked in the war victims' relief bureau, and they handed over a list of Class-A war criminals for memorialization at Yasukuni Shrine in 1966.

Wakamiya: Yes. The head priest at the time was Tsukuba Fujimaro, a former member of the

Yamashina branch of the imperial family. During the twelve years Tsukuba was head priest, the Class-A war criminals were not included at Yasukuni.

It was said that Yasukuni Shrine backed off because the shrine officials wanted to pass a bill in the Diet for its maintenance by the state. They wanted to avoid measures that could stimulate negative public opinion, such as memorializing Class-A war criminals. It was also said that consideration was given to the feelings of the imperial family as well as the Imperial Household Agency.

However, after Tsukuba died suddenly, he was succeeded as head priest by Matsudaira Nagayoshi. Matsudaira was a former Imperial Japanese Navy lieutenant commander who totally rejected the verdict of the Tokyo war crimes trial. Soon after he became head priest, Matsudaira worked to have the Class-A war criminals memorialized and achieved that goal in 1978. But the Showa Emperor wouldn't visit Yasukuni after that. I have argued for the construction of a new war memorial that the emperor, who is the symbol of national unity, can visit. If it is built, foreign leaders could also visit.

Watanabe: On that issue, I am in total agreement. I believe that in thinking about war responsibility we have to look at everything from about the time of the Manchurian Incident in 1931. Initially,

the Manchurian Incident was considered a move to build a paradise on Earth as a form of idealism on the part of Ishihara Kanji, who was a high-ranking officer in the Kwantung Army. However, Ishihara was also involved in illegal acts, such as the bombing of a railway line at Liutiaohu. Therefore, Ishihara cannot be forgiven, even though he subsequently argued against expanding the war.

Wakamiya: Ishihara Kanji was not included among the Class-A war criminals, strange as that may be.

Watanabe: That's right. He was not considered a war criminal. But we have to think about his responsibility. An even worse case is an even higher-ranking officer in the Kwantung Army, Itagaki Seishiro, who engineered the invasion of northern China. After that, as the nation proceeded toward the Pacific War, I believe that Konoe Fumimaro, who was prime minister, was up to no good.

At first, young radical army and navy officers attempted a coup on May 15, 1932, and later a group of army officers staged the Feb. 26 coup in 1936. Terrorism seriously affected politics. As a result, political parties became weak.

Konoe became prime minister after those developments. He should have tried to normalize the political situation, but he ended up creating

the Imperial Rule Assistance Association. It can be said that there is no way to question his crimes because he committed suicide. Furthermore, it was Kido Koichi, lord keeper of the privy seal, who recommended that Tojo become prime minister. He must have known what would happen to the country if Tojo was made prime minister. For that reason, I believe Kido bears a very grave responsibility.

Wakamiya: You said that establishing war responsibility should occur in Japan rather than on the say-so of another nation. I agree that rather than wait until other nations speak up, we have to think for ourselves. However, I slightly disagree with your editorial in the Yomiuri that other nations have no right to criticize.

Watanabe: Unless the Japanese themselves admit that crimes were committed, East Asian nations that were victims of invasion during the war will never be convinced of Japanese sincerity.

Ronza: Moves that glorify and justify the war are becoming quite noticeable, although in limited quarters. That leads some Japanese to question why it is wrong for the prime minister to visit Yasukuni Shrine. What are your thoughts on these recent developments?

Watanabe: I am 79 years old. When we are gone, there will be nobody who remembers the realities of that war and I worry that there will only be

debate on ideas about it rather than on experiences. Chinese and South Koreans are building museums and taking other means to preserve extreme aspects of the war for the next generation and thereby fanning anti-Japan movements.

I believe I should talk about what I actually experienced in the war and keep records. I should talk and write that the Japanese military did terrible things.

Wakamiya: I don't think Prime Minister Koizumi is a rightist. And since he said in the Diet that Class-A war criminals are indeed war criminals, I don't think he visits Yasukuni Shrine to pay tribute to the Class-A war criminals enshrined there per se. I don't really doubt that he goes to the shrine to honor the spirits of the 3 million Japanese soldiers and to pray for peace in future. His thoughts in this matter are probably along the same line as his shedding tears for the youths who died as kamikaze suicide pilots.

The problem is the fact that the prime minister's visits to the shrine give joy and strength to people who think Class-A war criminals are not bad and that they were wrongly accused, a thought that is promoted in the shrine's war memorial museum Yushukan.

As a politician, Koizumi should use his imagination a little more. The more active

rightists become, the more China and South Korea will come to see Japan as a "dangerous nation" and inflame anti-Japan sentiments. Politicians with firm convictions will shift positions a little if they think the course is headed for a diplomatic disaster, not only in Japan but

also in China and South Korea.

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