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# Bullying and History Don't Mix いじめと歴史は相容れない

**Alexis Dudden**

**Between 2012 and 2014 we posted a number of articles on contemporary affairs without giving them volume and issue numbers or dates. Often the date can be determined from internal evidence in the article, but sometimes not. We have decided retrospectively to list all of them as Volume 10, Issue 54 with a date of 2012 with the understanding that all were published between 2012 and 2014.**

**Alexis Dudden**

*This is an English version of the author's article that appeared in the February 15, 2013 edition of* Shukan Kinyobi*, a weekly magazine in Japan.*

As someone who cares deeply about many Japanese people and learns from them, I am most concerned by Japanese voters' decision to return Prime Minister Abe Shinzo to office because of his lengthy record of denigrating the histories of those who suffered under Japan's attempts to conquer and control much of Asia during the first half of the twentieth century. Abe has an equally vibrant record of denigrating those who give voice to these histories today. In response to the prime minister's first few weeks in office, Australia's former Foreign Minister Gareth Evans pointedly noted that it was "the responsibility of statesmen, if they are to deserve the name… to take the politically uncomfortable high ground and then bring their publics along." With Abe we have it the other way around; he drags Japan down.

Many around the world share frustration and anger with many Japanese each time Abe denies some known part of Japanese history. I find myself hoping that he will say something truly awful sooner rather than later so that his surreal view of the twentieth century will again lead to his departure from office. It worked before in 2007 when Abe and his words, together with those of his supporters, spiraled into a series of self-destructive tailspins over the question of whether or not the former sex slaves of the Japanese empire had been coerced into their horrific experience. The international opinion pages were clear: "Just what doesn't Prime Minister Abe understand?"

There is little surprising about Abe's revanchist moves thus far. He promised as much during his campaign, and he is delivering in office again in 2013. In 2004, former U.S. president George W. Bush was re-elected by the narrowest margin in American political history since 1916. With customary bombast, Bush imagined a landslide victory for himself and declared, "I've earned capital in this election, and I'm going to spend it for what I told the people I'd spend it on." By contrast, Prime Minister Abe won 80% of the 300 single member district seats last December; he has the "capital" that Bush feigned was his, and "spending" it on his retrograde promises would seem only natural.



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Abe's re-election suggests that he understands the pulse of Japan's voters. His victory brings into relief the Japan of 2013, which he and his supporters play to their advantage. Well before the 3.11 triple disasters made the politics of "reinvigorating Japan" commonplace, changes in the substance of the so-called history problems had begun to shift ground in ways that would benefit Abe's hoped-for, myopic vision of Japan — especially calls for a "stronger," "more independent" Japan able to withstand China's rise.

Various factors are at play, of course, yet since Abe last held office the region has witnessed a powerful shift in the public's broader concerns about the history problems away from victims' stories and toward demands for control over the area's disputed islands, notably the Japan-Korea dispute over the Dokdo (Takeshima) Islets, and the China-Japan clash over the Diaoyutai (Senkakus) islands.[1] The larger context is clear. Today, for example, as we learn about the region's twentieth century history we realize that we can never know the exact number of the hundreds of thousands of women, girls, and young men coerced into the history of sexual slavery that Abe would deny . Yet, we do know that in 2007 when Abe was last in office hundreds of survivors of this painful history were still alive. They and their supporters responded furiously to the prime minister's claims that they had not been coerced into servitude, or that their history had not even taken place. Since then, however, age has taken many; fewer than 60 known former victims in South Korea are alive today.

Abe's waiting game — denying known evidence while watching those who bear its truth die — meshes with his and his supporters' deeper plans. Abe has never understood history in terms of what actually took place, but rather as something to refer to in order to shape a particular future. With Northeast Asia's territorial disputes now at the center of the history wars, they bring with them the potential for violence in a way that the surviving victims of sexual slavery do not, creating for Abe the opportunity to justify his militarized vision of Japan's future. The disputed islands have relatively little human history at stake. They offer comparatively blank fields on which to battle the past in the present and as such allow for relatively pure "us" versus "them" approaches to the history problems. Collectively, the island contests allow all those who engage in the history debates enormous liberties with the categories of historical perpetrator and victim. Pushed by a leader such as Abe, Japanese far more easily view themselves as victims in the islands' history — "We were robbed!" — than when they were trying to explain away atrocities that Japanese troops committed abroad, for example. Together, the islands now stand as the pre-eminent objects and markers with which to claim the contested past for future control of the region. Abe and his supporters know this well, as his Sosei Nippon faction's well-advertised policies make clear.

With this shift — and especially with Abe's personal determination to capitalize on it — I feel my responsibility as an American more acutely than ever. As is well known, the 1952 San Francisco Treaty was even more of an American creation than Japan's 1947 constitution. In a highly self-interested move, the treaty's architects (primarily President Harry Truman's special representative John Foster Dulles) exonerated Japan from its obligation to pay reparations or to make the legally-binding apologies that victims of Japanese government-sponsored atrocities still seek. This American meddling has continued to color Tokyo's political posture in the region no



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matter how it is spun. Japanese politicians have frequently invoked the subsequent normalization treaties with South Korea (1965) and China (1972) to demonstrate that Japan has honored its victims, yet those treaties, too, simply served Japan's interests by serving Washington's Cold War vision: Washington discouraged active questioning of reparations payments and helped morph the cash involved into "gift" monies to governments — not individuals — in addition to general agreement that certain histories were legally "null and void" in order to proceed with "forward-facing relations." Victims disappeared from their own stories.

Additionally, the San Francisco Treaty avoided making final determination about certain sovereignty claims involving the islands contested today, most especially Takeshima/Dokdo. For many reasons, therefore, Americans should not tell Japanese how to view their nation's history, most fundamentally because our government is wholly implicated in the post-1945 erasures and denials of what came before, and that those who would drag Japan backwards use to their advantage today.

Among the historical hangovers from the twentieth century, the island disputes quickly spin into debates over security and resource control making the history involved vanish as fast as its victims have at different times. In light of this, one useful thing that Americans can do now to hold Prime Minister Abe accountable to the truth of Japan's past is to shift discussion of history problems back onto its victims' stories, particularly the issue of sexual slavery. Last July in response to news of former Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's insistence that her staff use the term "sex slave" when referring to this element of Japan's history problems, then Foreign Minister Genba Koichiro stated that Secretary Clinton's expression was "not right," without specifying how or why. Yet, she did not back down. For President Barack Obama too, "slavery" is not a word that he would use lightly. In addressing the global human trafficking issue last September during United Nations' week in New York, he stated:

> "When a little girl is sold by her impoverished family -- girls my daughters' age -- runs away from home, or is lured by the false promises of a better life, and then imprisoned in a brothel and tortured if she resists – that's slavery. It is barbaric, and it is evil, and it has no place in a civilized world. "

Washington's newly appointed Secretary of State John Kerry and his team have yet to meet with their counterparts in Prime Minister Abe's administration. A responsible first step for the American side will be to continue to press this terminological honesty in order to give dignity to the victims' lived history.

Most important, those of us outside of Japan who work with Japan and Japanese people and their history must work to preserve and broaden the space for the voices of those whom Abe and his cronies would silence at this critical juncture. The tireless efforts of Ikeda Eriko and Watanabe Mina and other members of Tokyo's Women's Active Museum that exhibits wartime violence against women, for example, are now more urgent than ever.

Abe is a bully, yet bullying and history do not mix. Americans must stop hiding behind the pretense that Abe's lies about the past do not involve us in exchange for colonial-style access to Japanese land for American bases. We, too, must take responsibility for Abe's denials.



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[1] A 2011 popular opinion poll conducted by Seoul's Asan Institute for Policy Studies discovered that Koreans overwhelmingly regard the island clash with Japan as the "biggest obstacle to the development of Korean-Japanese relations" averaging just above 60% across the spectrum in both the age and ideological leaning categories, with the textbooks coming in second at roughly 30% and the comfort women just under 10%." The Asan Institute for Policy Studies Annual Opinion Survey, 2011.

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