

“History is harsh”: Prime Minister Abe, the Joint Session of Congress, and World War II

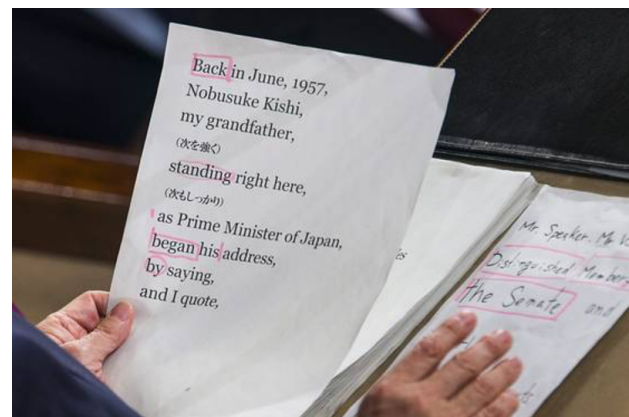
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Thanks to a referral from my university's government relations office and an ability to head to Washington on short notice, I attended Prime Minister Abe's April 29 speech before a Joint Session of Congress as a guest of Rhode Island Senator Sheldon Whitehouse. This essay began as an attempt to convey a few impressions of the event from the perspective of the House gallery, but upon reflection, and after encountering the [generally uncritical reception](#) the speech received from the media in the U.S., it seemed useful to engage more directly with what Abe had said, and with the arguments I think he meant to convey. I am very grateful to the Senator and his staff for the opportunity and for their hospitality. I should stress, however, that the views expressed in this essay are entirely my own.

The first thing that Prime Minister Abe Shinzō did after taking the podium and greeting his audience at last week's Joint Session of Congress was quote from the speech that his grandfather, Prime Minister Kishi Nobusuke, had delivered in that same chamber in June 1957. Abe reminded listeners that Kishi “began his address by saying ‘It is because of our strong belief in democratic principles and ideals that Japan associates herself with the free nations of the world.’” That expression of fealty earned Kishi applause the first time it

echoed through the House Chamber. Abe's reward for recycling it was a rousing standing ovation.



The agenda for Abe's recent trip to Washington has much in common with the goals of his grandfather's visit in late June 1957. Kishi's administration was concerned with managing the emerging frameworks for trade in East Asia, and with the limits on Japan's access to American markets for some of its key exports, especially textiles. China also loomed large, in part because Japan's agreements with the U.S. precluded doing any significant business with the PRC, closing off opportunities for trade that might otherwise have benefited the Japanese economy. Kishi's visit was also an opportunity to remind U.S. policy makers and the public alike that Japan shared their commitment to democracy, and thus to resisting communism in all its forms, themes Kishi touched on more than once in his speech to Congress.

That there are these commonalities in topics and tone in visits separated by almost fifty years is of course something that Abe's speechwriters must have hoped policy makers and the public would pick up on, and be reminded of how long and how well Japan has aligned itself with America's geopolitical goals. Having Abe quote from the lyrics of Carole King's 1971 hit "[You've Got a Friend](#)" was arguably another gesture in that same direction. The Prime Minister is of the same generation as many of those listening on the House Floor that morning, and no doubt more than a few recognized the song as having a place in their own histories, even if they had not before thought of it as part of the soundtrack of postwar U.S.-Japan relations. Such an emphasis on continuity and past friendship meshes well with the push by both the Abe and Obama administrations to ratify the TPP, to align Japan's expanding military capabilities even more closely with U.S. goals in the region, and to otherwise continue on their current trajectory towards what Abe, by the end of his speech, was describing as "an alliance of hope."

One striking and somewhat ironic difference between the expectations that shaped Abe's speech and the context of his grandfather's is that Kishi didn't have to talk about the war, much less apologize for any of Japan's actions during it. Kishi's speech referenced the conflict only to thank the U.S. for its support in rebuilding Japan's economy in its aftermath. Kishi's own personal experiences as a wartime cabinet member and potential defendant in the post-surrender war crimes trials were of little interest to the press or the public during his visit. Invited to throw out the first ball at Yankee Stadium a few days after his speech in Washington, the fans in New York greeted the Prime Minister with a standing ovation, after

which he delivered "a strong overhand pitch that went a little more than 25 feet into the glove of Yankee catcher Yogi Berra."

Fast forward to the present, where the expectations surrounding Abe's visit and speech were very different. It matters that this year brings the 70th anniversary of some of the deadliest of the wartime encounters between the Americans and the Japanese, of course, but it also matters that the Abe administration has worked hard over the years to offer the public ways of thinking about the war that are significantly out of step with how Japan's neighbors, and many of its own historians, understand it.

Abe's performance before Congress built on those efforts in at least three ways. First, having opposed earlier expressions of remorse for Japan's actions during the war, and specifically having questioned both the veracity of the evidence linking the Japanese military to the comfort women system and thus the need to apologize to its victims, Abe has turned his decision to not repudiate the statements of regret crafted by prior administrations into a rhetorical device that occupies the space where an apology ought to be. "Our actions," Abe reminded Congress, "brought suffering to the peoples in Asian countries. We must not avert our eyes from that." "I will," he continued, to applause from the Congressmen and Senators who had gathered to hear him speak, "uphold the views expressed by previous Prime Ministers in this regard." (This language is in line with previous statements by Abe prior to his Washington visit.)

Second, Abe's speechwriters highlighted the Prime Minister's efforts to honor those who sacrificed their lives for their country by having

him reflect on his visit earlier that same day to the nearby National World War II Memorial. Referring to the field of 4,048 gold stars on the wall that is among the Memorial's most striking features, Abe reported that he had "gaped with surprise to hear that each star represents the lives of 100 fallen soldiers. I believe," he went on, "those gold stars are a proud symbol of the sacrifices in defending freedom." (A standing ovation followed.) It was in the context of his visit to the Memorial, which Abe described as "a place of peace and calm that struck me as a sanctuary," that he said:

History is harsh. What is done cannot be undone. With deep repentance in my heart, I stood there in silent prayer for some time. My dear friends, on behalf of Japan and the Japanese people, I offer with profound respect my eternal condolences to the souls of all American people that were lost during World War II. " (Another standing ovation.)

Because this language limits the scope of Abe's condolences to Americans, one of the things it also does is raise the question of whether he will eventually express similar sentiments towards the souls of Chinese or Korean soldiers and civilians lost in the war. At the same time, it is hard not to hear at least some echoes of the Prime Minister's many visits to Yasukuni Shrine in the way this part of his speech emphasizes the common impulse to honor the sacrifice and "lost hopes and lost futures" of young men and women "who otherwise would have lived happy lives." In Japanese, his reference to the National World War II Memorial as a "sanctuary" reads as "神聖を思わせる、静謐な場所でした." While 神聖 is

sometimes used to name religious sites outside of Japan - the Temple Mount (神聖の丘), for example - I'd be surprised if readers coming across that term didn't give some thought to the way it is more frequently deployed in Japan, which would be to refer to one of the sacred structures in a Shinto shrine, or more specifically still to one of the three Imperial Household sanctuaries on the Palace grounds. I'm not arguing that Abe was making an explicit comparison between his presence at the World War II Memorial and his actions at Yasukuni Shrine, but it will be interesting to see whether this visit has to some extent inoculated the Prime Minister against official American critiques of future visits to Yasukuni, or at least complicated those critiques.

Abe's final point about the war was at first blush also his least subtle. Gesturing to the visitors gallery that rings the upper level of the House chamber, Abe invited the audience to acknowledge Lt. General Lawrence Snowden, who as a young Marine captain had been among the first to land on Ioto, or Iwo Jima, in February 1945. Once the applause for Snowden had died down, Abe introduced the man standing next to the General in the gallery as

Diet Member Yoshitaka Shindō, who is a former member of my Cabinet. His grandfather, General Tadamichi Kuribayashi, whose valor we remember even today, was the commander of the Japanese garrison during the Battle of Iwo Jima. What should we call this, if not a miracle of history? Enemies that had fought each other so fiercely have become friends bonded in spirit.

The handshake that Snowden and Shindō then shared prompted yet another standing ovation from Abe's audience.

It is interesting that Abe understood history to be at once "harsh", a way of thinking about the past that insisted that what was done could not be undone, but at the same time prone to miracles. In any case, the staged performance of this "miracle of history" was quite clever on several levels. Of the many battles the American and Japanese forces waged against each other over the course of the war, only a handful have been as fixed in popular memory - in both countries - as the one for Iwo Jima. That horrific struggle is also special in that something like a shared narrative has developed around it, due in no small part to Clint Eastwood's two films on the campaign, *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*, both released in 2006. The latter portrays General Kuribayashi (played by Ken Watanabe) as an honorable and humane man, who together with the soldiers under his command struggles to do his duty against impossible odds. Very few of the Japanese defenders survived the battle. General Kuribayashi was not one of them. That there were few if any civilians left on Iwo Jima by the time the fighting commenced presumably makes it much easier - for both Americans and Japanese - to view the island's defenders and those who would take it from them as worthy of respect, and perhaps admiration. It also matters that although the Americans were victorious in the end, the total number of their dead and wounded exceeded the final tally on the other side, which in the blundered logic of the day was seen by some in the Japanese leadership as a positive outcome.

Bringing Kuribayashi's grandson together with Lt. General Snowden did useful work for the Prime Minister. Who could bear witness to such

an example of reconciliation in practice and not be moved? The optics of their friendly handshake offered tangible evidence of the Abe administration's willingness to confront the nation's wartime past, even as it reminded those who saw it of how close the U.S. and Japan had become in the seventy years since the end of the war. It therefore also smoothed the way for Abe to get on with the business of promoting the TPP and a stronger military relationship with the U.S. in his speech, and for him to eventually introduce the theme of a "proactive contribution to peace based on the principle of international cooperation" as the "new banner" under which Japan would pursue these goals.

I suspect that audiences in Japan and elsewhere in East Asia might have been paying attention to some of the other messages that this piece of Abe's performance conveyed. I was struck less by the implications of the handshake for U.S.-Japan relations, for example, than by Shindō's participation in it. It isn't that Shindō's connection to Kuribayashi came as a surprise, since he has spoken on many occasions about his grandfather, or that he is somehow opposed to reconciliation, since he is a regular and enthusiastic participant in joint memorial services on Ioto. What complicates our understanding of Shindō's role in this part of Abe's visit are all the ways he has been active over the years as an advocate of a deeply revisionist agenda for how Japan's wartime history should be remembered, and taught. Shindō is well known for his frequent and problematic visits to Yasukuni Shrine, a practice he continued during his tenure as Abe's Minister of Internal Affairs and Communications. The Chinese, South Korean and Taiwanese governments have regularly denounced these visits, but Shindō's decision not to go to Yasukuni this April, as has been his practice in recent years, almost certainly has more to do with Abe's impending visit to

Washington than with concerns over how Japan's neighbors would react. As an active proponent of Japan's claims to disputed islands in the South China Sea and the Sea of Japan, Shindō is also well known to policy makers and the public in the region for reasons other than Yasukuni. In August 2011, after announcing plans to travel to the South Korean island of Ulleung-do on a fact-finding mission related to the ongoing Dokdo/Takeshima territorial dispute, Shindō and several fellow legislators were ultimately denied entry to South Korea. That incident did not go unnoticed by the Japanese or Korean media.

The final observation to make about what it means that Abe brought Shindō with him to Washington and wrote him into his speech is that it is hard not to see it as signaling an attitude toward the comfort women issue that is at odds with the Prime Minister's careful efforts in the months leading up to the trip to avoid suggesting in public that his position differs in any way from that of his predecessors on the key questions of whether coercion occurred, and what if anything the Japanese government might owe to survivors of those practices. In a March 26th interview with the [Washington Post's David Ignatius](#) and then again at Harvard a few days before he arrived in Washington, Abe had spoken of his sorrow over the suffering of those women who had been victims of human trafficking, and as he did in his speech, reiterated the point that his views were no different from those expressed by previous Prime Ministers.

Such language was presumably designed to avoid the widespread criticism that a clearly articulated change in the government's position would have provoked, to say nothing of the complications it would have posed for Abe's dealings with the Obama administration. But casting Shindō in a key role as a symbol for

postwar reconciliation - however pleasantly sentimental that might have been for an American audience - can also be read as evidence of what the Abe administration really thinks about all this. Shindō has a history going back many years as an outspoken critic of efforts to connect the Japanese military to the coercion of young women into the comfort women system. (His views on the topic are documented on his website.) In a recent Channel Sakura broadcast, for example, Shindō responds at length to the June 2012 unveiling of a memorial to the comfort women in New York's Nassau County. The text inscribed on the memorial referring to the "more than 200,000 women and girls who were abducted for the use of sexual slavery by the armed forces of the Imperial Government of Japan," Shindō challenges as entirely without a basis in fact, and as an insult to the nation and the Japanese people alike. Later that same year, and just before Abe became Prime Minister (again), Shindō signed on as an "Assentor" when the Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact placed a prominent advertisement in the New Jersey *Star Ledger* denying that the Japanese military had been involved in coercion, and arguing that the women "embedded with the Japanese army" were "working under a system of licensed prostitution" in which they were well treated and well paid. Shindō was one of eight other future members of Abe's cabinet whose names appeared on the ad.

Or nine if you include Abe, who was also on the list.

Also in the House visitors gallery that morning, as the guest of Representative Mike Honda, was Yong Soo Lee, who at the age of 16 had been forced to serve the Japanese military as a comfort woman. She had no comment on the Prime Minister's speech.

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114 Cong. Rec. H2504 (daily edition April 29, 2015). That phrase appears three paragraphs into Kishi's speech.

Prime Minister Kishi spoke before both Houses of Congress, just not at the same time. Kishi gave the same speech twice - first in the Senate Chamber and then a few hours later in the House. 85 Cong. Rec 9777 and 9865, 1957.

"Kishi is Yankee Rooter, Hurls Game's First Ball," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, June 24, 1957, p. A4.

See, for example, Morris-Suzuki, Tessa. "Addressing Japan's 'Comfort Women' Issue from an Academic Standpoint." *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 12, issue 9, no. 1. (2014).

114 Cong. Rec H2505 (daily edition April 29, 2015).

The first two sentences of that quote are

rendered as one in the Japanese version of the speech: "歴史とは実に取り返しのつかない、苛烈なものです." See the Prime Minister's website

http://www.kantei.go.jp/jp/97_abe/statement/2015/0429enzetsu.html for the full text in Japanese.

Shindo's official website (<http://www.shindo.gr.jp>) includes video clips of his visits to the island, as well as links to published reflections on his grandfather and the battle.

"Yasukuni Frequent Flyer Enrages China, South Korea," *Japan Times*, April 12, 2014.

"David Ignatius's full interview with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe," *Washington Post*, online, March 26, 2015. <http://wapo.st/1GwHbKO>, accessed May 7, 2015.

Also accessible via Shindō's website, a Youtube version of the broadcast is available here: <https://youtu.be/JiXAcDX5SeU>.

"Yes, we remember the facts," *Star-Ledger*, 4 November 2012.

Asia-Pacific Journal articles on related themes:

[Open Letter in Support of Historians in Japan](#)

[Fact Sheet on Japanese Military "Comfort Women"](#)

