

Obama at Hiroshima

Yuriko Koike

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1 Summary

TOKYO – At a time when Donald Trump’s indecency and vulgarity are distorting the world’s view of America, Barack Obama’s decision to become the first US president to visit Hiroshima demonstrates anew his own great personal dignity. In the joint recognition by Japan and the United States of the horrors visited on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, both countries – the Pacific War’s victor and the vanquished – will show the world how bonds of alliance and solidarity are forged and maintained. In Hiroshima, Obama will be standing alongside Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, creating a powerful symbolic link to the founding of the Japan-US alliance and that extraordinary period of diplomatic vision that created Asia’s post-war order. Abe, after all, is the grandson of Nobusuke Kishi, the prime minister who pushed the treaty of alliance with the US through a then-reluctant Japanese Diet, sacrificing his political career for the sake of Japan’s future and peace in Asia. But Obama’s pilgrimage also symbolizes the shared recognition of the need – now and in the future – for peace in Asia and for unity between the peoples of Japan and the US.

2 Article

TOKYO – At a time when Donald Trump’s indecency and vulgarity are distorting the world’s view of America, Barack Obama’s decision to become the first US president to visit Hiroshima demonstrates anew his own great personal dignity. Moreover, it returns to the world’s attention the outward, forward-looking America that has delivered stability and prosperity over the many decades since the atomic bomb was first used.

In coming to Hiroshima, Obama will come to know intimately the deepest pain of a nation that was once America’s enemy, but which is now a devoted friend. In examining the ruins of the nuclear abyss and recognizing our eternal sorrow, he will confirm our countries’ now-unbreakable ties. And it is because of the alliance between the US and Japan that peace in Asia and the Pacific will continue unbroken, whatever challenges may come.

Obama's solemn trek is thus also a forward-looking moment for Japan. In the joint recognition by Japan and the United States of the horrors visited on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, both countries – the Pacific War's victor and the vanquished – will show the world how bonds of alliance and solidarity are forged and maintained.

The emergence of a six-decade-old alliance from the ashes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is one of the many near-miraculous achievements of America's far-sighted post-1945 diplomacy. The US also deserves credit for promoting European unity, which has ensured lasting peace between France and Germany (after three wars in a century); encouraging China's opening to the world, even as it was engulfed in the mayhem of the Cultural Revolution; and bringing the Cold War to a peaceful end.

Successive generations of American leadership and courageous statesmanship paid off for the world. And in all of these cases, America found leaders – even in the Soviet Union with Mikhail Gorbachev and China with Deng Xiaoping – who were able to transcend their own pasts and prejudices to build a better and safer world.

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Just 15 years before Kishi, then an official in the Imperial Japanese government, had been a sworn enemy of the US in the Pacific War; but post-war stability in Asia, he understood, demanded a truly viable structure of peace. And that structure could only have as its foundation the US and Japan united in solidarity.

Kishi's actions, like those of Konrad Adenauer, Charles de Gaulle, Alcide De Gasperi, and others in Europe at the dawn of European integration, demonstrate one of the reasons the post-war international system has endured for so long: It was built by statesmen in the truest sense of the word. These were leaders whose vision extended well beyond concern for their own political careers, and who had the wisdom and courage to act upon their understanding of what a future of peace and prosperity would require.

Much of the courage they demonstrated consisted in their willingness to overcome their personal histories in quest of their peoples' greater good. Kishi and his counterparts in the US and Europe saw that a different and better future

was available only by refusing to rage against the past and poke at its wounds, even the radioactive wounds of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

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The eternal scars of Hiroshima will be acknowledged by Obama to remind us of the unfathomable horror inflicted by America's nuclear attack. But Obama's pilgrimage also symbolizes the shared recognition of the need – now and in the future – for peace in Asia and for unity between the peoples of Japan and the US.

This is how historical memory should be used, not as a means to stoke citizens' anger against others, in order to deflect their attention from pressing domestic problems, as some leaders do, but to show that in our pain we share a common humanity that demands our allegiance. That allegiance must overcome our differences of interest, culture, and, most of all, past actions. It is only in our ability to share our sorrows, and our humanity, that any of us can stand before the sacred dead of Hiroshima.