

Introduction to the Reconsidering Hiroshima/Nagasaki Conference

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This conference “Reconsidering Hiroshima/Nagasaki” has no known precedent.

Together we have created a new type of faculty development activity, a product of Japanese and American equal collaboration. In discussing an issue as sensitive as the Hiroshima/ Nagasaki bombings, such cooperation is especially important for college teachers who seek ways to present material from different perspectives. The question on the cover of our program asks “How can history be analyzed, discussed and taught so the tragedies of the past are not repeated?” In a democracy, either Japan or United States, we are wedded to an ideology where citizens learn to weigh evidence for themselves and then act upon it, primarily by voting. The teachers here represent large community colleges and universities; our curricular work may affect thousands of students.

In explaining how the conference themes developed, I need to recognize the organizations and individuals who made this workshop possible. The Japan Studies Association’s President, Joseph Overton, has been determined to extend JSA activities from a conference held in Hawaii or mainland United States covering all aspects of Japan to provide seminars and workshops that can delve more deeply into some historical periods. JSA organized one seminar on “Post-War Issues in Japan” but we deferred an extensive discussion of the Atomic bombings until we could have Japanese input.

In the fall of 2001 I met our local coordinator Mr. Toru Mukaikubo, who works for the Hiroshima Peace Culture Foundation, funded by the Cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He referred me to Dr. Haruhiro Fukui, a political scientist who retired after a

distinguished career at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and returned to his native Japan to become President of the Hiroshima Peace Institute. Dr. Fukui had many ideas for this workshop and volunteered his time as Co-Chair and arranged for papers to be delivered by two of his associates. Under the leadership of Mayor Akiba, the proposal then received crucial support from Hiroshima City Council.

Before expressing gratitude to others who directly made the conference possible, I want to recognize some influences that reach back beyond the last two years. These influences include a family tie, a book, and an activist. In November of 1945 when I was born, three months after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, my father was on a boat to Japan. Drafted into the army with law and social work degrees and experience in Red Cross Disaster relief, he had been selected for a program at Northwestern University preparing the military for the occupation of Japan. For six months, he learned Japanese from Japanese-American teachers; he studied Japanese policies and contracts. In Japan he was eventually appointed chief of social work education and training at the general headquarters of the Supreme Commander, Allied Powers (SCAP) in Tokyo. After living three years in devastated Japan, including helping Japanese leaders begin a Social Work college training physical and occupational therapists, he went on to a life-time of work in the field of the Rehabilitation of the Disabled. At his memorial service one month ago today, Japanese speakers and letters kindly acknowledged his ties to Japan maintained until his death at age 93.

Reconstruction and life-long friendships do not mitigate what happened in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. My father traveled to Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the year after the war. He couldn't remember Hiroshima as distinct from Tokyo and other cities turned to ash

through fire-bombings. Nagasaki he could visualize because the bomb sliced off the tower from the Catholic cathedral, the highest in Asia, and he saw the tower as it lay and described the irony of a “Christian” nation choosing Nagasaki for such horror.

Until recently, my father did not discuss his work in Japan. When I was about 14, however, he gave me John Hersey’s book Hiroshima. What may interest you, is that despite American censorship of such journalism, he had read this book first in 1947 Japan. When the New Yorker commissioned and published it, issues were available in Japan. My father remembered discussing it at the home of a Japanese-American interpreter. Honed with the help of the New Yorker editor Ross, the text Hersey produced resembles many Japanese accounts of the bombing. Without anyone’s justification, or history, it begins with the early morning bombing. It focuses on six men and women and therefore humanizes the victims. The six survive and witness suffering of others, including children and elderly, so readers know the cities were not simply vaporized but that slow deaths matched the tens of thousands killed outright. The matter-of-fact tone keeps readers from being so appalled they cannot continue, yet includes details of thirst and burnt flesh that appall. Recently I’ve been thinking that Puritans in New England must have made decisions about burning men and women at the stake with similar justifications of saving their own lives and lifestyles. Such a comparison is unlike John Hersey’s calm narration that doesn’t cause protest.

My father and Hersey worked for world peace; they were not peace activists per se yet might have been effective on that account. The third individual to be described, however, Mr. Yoshio Sekiguchi, is a whole-hearted peace activist. In 1998 at age 65 he came to United States to demonstrate against the School of the Americas; an English teacher, Mr.

Sekiguchi translated for his friend, Hiroshi Suegawa, who entered Nagasaki the day after the bombing seeking his mother and sister; Mr. Suegawa guided Mr. Sekiguchi who is legally blind. Yoshio Sekiguchi had planned to speak to you at this workshop but a heart condition has kept him away; a letter of greeting will be read to you, partly so the city of Nagasaki will be represented here.

What made the greatest impression upon me when I met Mr. Sekiguchi in 1995 was his explicit concern for the Koreans who had been killed in Nagasaki's blast and the Chinese killed during Japan's attacks on Shanghai and Nanjing. He has traveled to China with peace groups and invited Chinese young people to Nagasaki. At this conference, one speaker is Liu Yongtao of Fudan University in Shanghai and before SARS made travel from China difficult, we had planned to have another speaker from Nanjing University. Shudong Chen also gives a Chinese perspective. These Chinese perspectives are crucial because this workshop, unlike Hersey's book, will put the bombing in the historical perspective of World War II. Having Japanese researchers, such as Dr. Tanaka, on Japanese war crimes is important. Part of what we want our American and Chinese participants to consider is how Japan, in the Hiroshima Peace Museum exhibit and elsewhere, does recognize its own military aggression.

The mention of our Chinese delegates leads me to my final recognitions. Liu Yongtao and Shudong Chen, and many other participants, were introduced to the Japan Studies Association through activities organized by the Asian Studies Development Program, a joint project of the East-West Center/University of Hawaii. ASDP is represented today by Dr. Elizabeth Buck who will speak at our final banquet. I also want to thank Community College of Philadelphia whose support of five colleagues and myself was

crucial in allowing enough planning time on the American side. My colleague Diane Freedman's help produced the program. I need to thank JSA's Treasurer Tom Carneal and Secretary Mike Steiner who donated much time even though they could not travel to Japan and join us. Finally I want to thank each and every one of the participants who secured their own funding for their expenses and who gallantly planned their papers through months that brought us a new war and new fears of a deadly disease. When we began organizing this conference in the fall of 2001 we had no idea how timely the themes were to become.