

THE MISINTERPRETED FOUNDATION

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Last April a group of small gray ships weighed anchor for a voyage that will go down in history. A crowd of people gathered at the harbor to see this event. Many could not hide the worry that was preoccupying them; while the families of the crew members agonized and prayed for their loved ones' safe return, some displayed their disapproval by blocking the way with their small craft. These ships were minesweepers of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force, bound for its first overseas operation by Japanese warships ever since the demise of the Imperial Navy.

The protesters who attempted, in vain, to halt this voyage were only a handful of the millions of Japanese who reacted to the Japanese government's decision to send the flotilla, calling it a resurgence of Japanese militarism and, more than anything, totally unconstitutional. Many of us think, "Armies kill people, and killing, no matter who does it or why it is done is bad. So the military is an impediment to peace and is totally evil." What's more, some of us go on to say that the Self-Defense Forces themselves are unconstitutional.

The highly negative attitudes that many of us tend to have toward national defense have their roots in Japan's experience in World War II. The Japanese people remember, through grisly photographs, how the bodies of civilians were turned into human-shaped charcoal in the Great Tokyo Fire Raid of March 10, 1945. Every August we pay homage not only to those killed in the atomic bombings, but also to the men, women and children who lost their lives at the hands of the Red Army while fleeing from Manchuria. It was an experience without which the Japanese people's fervent postwar yearning for peace would not have emerged.

However, what many Japanese tend to overlook is what led the Japanese nation into that horrible war. It was not the military itself that led our motherland into conflict, but actually the iron totalitarianism that it imposed on the people. The press was reduced to a mere mouthpiece for the government, and those who dared to speak out against the government's policies were taken away by the thought control policy; some never again to see the light of day. All this was natural at the time, for Japan could not have carried out a war of aggression without silencing a small but durable band of dissidents. This totalitarianism, which brought about a war of aggression, is the root behind the horror and evil of modern war.

After years of being tightly chained by the totalitarian regime, our forebears worked on building a new, democratic nation which guarantees the rights and freedoms of its people. At the same time, the new Japan, resolving that she shall never repeat the horrors of conflict, declared her intention to stand for the cause of peace. Then, does she, a nation with a clear stance supporting peace expressed in her constitution, take effective action in order to promote the peace which she professes to love?

Many viewpoints exist among the Japanese on the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait; while some called for immediate military action, others argued that the so-called "Arab standpoint" deserved full consideration. But one thing is clear: Saddam violated international law by overrunning his neighboring country. In such a situation, the task facing a peace-loving nation is to stand up to this aggression and restore the original state, even if it requires the dirty, undesirable task of doing it by force. By not giving a firm response to Saddam's aggression, Japan missed an important chance to work for peace.

Japan must take a most unusual but most concrete step toward becoming an active promoter of peace: revise Article 9 of the Constitution. The revised article should continue to renounce wars of aggression, but should allow the establishment of an army, navy and air force. A constitutionally established military will provide Japan with a means of responding clearly to aggression, unlike today's Self-Defense Forces. In order to hold this new military in tight leash, I propose a system where the head of the government of Japan, who is also the commander-in-chief of Japan's military forces, is chosen by direct election every several years. Through this system, we can influence the formulation and implementation of defense policies instead of merely concluding that we have no effective voice in such affairs. Most importantly, it is each one of us who must uphold civilian control over the military by raising our voices in support of it, even in the event of an attempted coup d'etat.

We, the Japanese people, must realize that we have a duty as a promoter of peace. We must stop linking the word "war" with "evil," and instead insist that Japan should help maintain peace and prevent aggression throughout the world. Let us hasten the day when we can proudly call our country a contributor to the prosperity of the world, not "just an island nation."

This was the 1st prize winning speech of the Amano Trophy 1991. (sponsored by Dokkyo University ESS)