



Symbolic Gestures: **Lessons for East Asia** **From a Compromise** **on History in America**

By Jennifer Lind

The long shadow of history has darkened efforts to achieve a deeper reconciliation among many Asian nations, especially in East Asia. The scars of past conflicts continue to be the focus of controversy.

But Jennifer Lind, a US professor of government, argues that a recent incident in the state of Virginia about America's own efforts to grapple with history demonstrates that sensible compromises are possible.



RECENT HEADLINES WERE filled with the story of a conservative politician who, in the process of attempting to satisfy his nationalistic base, made a gaffe about his country's history that offended and alarmed many observers. In Asia, such stories usually zoom in on Tokyo, where a clueless Japanese politician stands at the center of a firestorm as Chinese and Koreans blast Japan's failure to atone for its World War II atrocities. This time, however, the story played out in the US state of Virginia, where Governor Bob McDonnell created an uproar by proclaiming "Confederate History Month."

The episode is revealing not only for America's ongoing struggle with its own past, but also for East Asia's "history problems." In this case, Americans negotiated a compromise in which Virginians were allowed to honor the Confederacy if, and only if, they linked it to the evils of slavery. De-linking is perceived as an unacceptable whitewashing of a terrible wrong.

East Asia would benefit from a similar compromise. Koreans, Chinese and others should empathize with the Japanese people's need to honor their ancestors. But as Japan remembers its wartime past, it should not deny the aggression and atrocities inextricably bound up with it. Such a compromise would leave everyone dissatisfied — Asian victims, as well as Japanese liberals and conservatives — but that is the essence of compromise. Meeting half-way would promote better relations

in the region and reassure Japan's neighbors about its future intentions and role as a global leader.

HISTORY'S SHADOW

Any conversation about East Asian international relations inevitably touches on history. Discussions of China's rise lead to the prospect of Sino-Japanese competition, which analysts expect to be animated by Chinese nationalism and lingering resentment over Japan's failure to atone for its wartime atrocities. Regional security cooperation — for example, anti-piracy or disaster relief — is frequently stymied by the specter of history. After the Sichuan earthquake Beijing refused to accept a Japanese cargo aircraft laden with relief supplies because it was a military aircraft. Japan's ability to contribute to international peacekeeping missions, and to missions in support of Washington, is similarly hamstrung by history.

The collective Japanese memory of its 20th-century history has evolved significantly, and several leaders have offered important apologies to victims. Incendiary statements by conservative politicians that deny or glorify Japan's wartime past, however, have undermined such efforts. And from time to time, a new Japanese textbook offends other countries because it glosses over known atrocities. "Japan should avoid doing something that can mislead its neighbors who still keep its wartime atrocities in mind," South Korean President Lee

Myung-bak said of a recent textbook. “There have been such hindrances in our relations in the past, but we must work toward stronger ties.”

Many countries struggle with how to remember a violent past. Political normalization between Turkey and Armenia founders in great part because of the Turkish genocide of Armenians in 1915 — the Armenians demand that Turkey recognize the tragedy; Turkey refuses. Holocaust denial in Tehran alarms Israelis, and elevates fears worldwide about Iranian nuclear weapons. Israeli-Palestinian relations are mired in disputes not only about the present, but also about how to remember the past. The US and Japan — which reconciled quite successfully after World War II — have not stepped fully out of the shadow of history. Many Japanese are calling for US and Japanese leaders to conduct joint visits to Hiroshima and Pearl Harbor as a gesture of closure and healing. Such a gesture was conducted in April this year between Russia and Poland: after years of bitterness in their international relations, the two sides met in the Katyn forest to commemorate victims of a Soviet massacre in 1940. After decades of lies, many observers praised Vladimir Putin’s visit as a sign of great progress in Russian-Polish relations.

THE VIRGINIA COMPROMISE

The controversy in Virginia was about America’s memory of its internal violence. The pain was caused not so much by the choice to commemorate Confederate History Month (which some previous state administrations had done), but by the official statement that proclaimed it. Years ago, a former governor’s proclamation had included language condemning slavery’s evils, but McDonnell’s proclamation omitted this. Then the governor fumbled the explanation, saying he focused on issues that “I thought were most significant for Virginia.”

Oops. “Is slavery not significant?” asked *Chicago Tribune* columnist Clarence Page. Lamenting the “airbrushing of Virginia history,” the *Washington Post* editorialized that “any serious statement on the Confederacy and the Civil War” would of course recognize the centrality of slavery. President Barack Obama weighed in: “I don’t

think you can understand the Confederacy or the Civil War unless you understand slavery.”

Prominent black business and political leaders, who were previously supportive of McDonnell, condemned the proclamation and the governor’s lame justification. McDonnell conferred with African-American leaders, including L. Douglas Wilder, Virginia’s first African-American governor, himself a descendant of slaves. Subsequently, the governor apologized for the proclamation, saying, “The failure to include any reference to slavery was a mistake, and for that I apologize to any fellow Virginian who has been offended or disappointed.” He inserted into the proclamation a paragraph stating that slavery “was an evil and inhumane practice” and that “all Virginians are thankful for its permanent eradication from our borders.”

YOU CAN’T PLEASE EVERYBODY

The important thing about the resolution of the Virginia case is that everyone is dissatisfied with it; this is as it should be. The Left resents the idea of celebrating Confederate history at all. *Washington Post* columnist Eugene Robinson wondered what reason there was “to honor soldiers who fought to perpetuate a system that could never have functioned without constant, deliberate, unflinching cruelty.” Princeton University politics professor Melissa Harris-Lacewell argued that, slavery aside, “This was a civil war where people who were traitorous to their nation made a choice to secede and begin a new country.” *New York Times* columnist Gail Collins grumbled, “The governor of Virginia has decided to bring slavery into his overview of the Confederacy. Good news, or is this setting the bar a wee bit too low?”

Conservatives, on the other hand, want Confederate symbols on the flags that flutter proudly above southern capitals, and many people saw nothing wrong with the proclamation. Groups such as the Sons of the Confederacy (which requested the commemoration from the governor’s office) want to honor Confederate soldiers: Brag Bowling, leader of the Virginia chapter, praises them as “the finest infantry soldier America’s ever had in any war.” Bowling argues that schools over-emphasize slavery as a cause of

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the Civil War and do not accurately portray the Confederacy. “There’s a lot to be proud of,” says Bowling, “in the sacrifice of the soldiers and what they did to save Virginia.” Many conservatives saw no problem with Governor McDonnell’s proclamation as originally written. Mississippi Governor Haley Barbour rolled his eyes and opined that the controversy “isn’t worth diddly,” saying that everyone knows “slavery was a bad thing.”

But tellingly, most mainstream Republican leaders acknowledged that McDonnell had erred, and supported the revision. Ed Gillespie, former chairman of the Republican National Committee, said in the *Washington Post* that McDonnell “made a serious mistake” and praised the governor’s apology. He called the amendment “an act of reconciliation.” A former Virginia representative, Thomas M. Davis III, also writing in the *Washington Post*, commended the governor for moving quickly “to admit and correct his mistake.” Statements like this are important: by commending McDonnell’s repair efforts, these leaders are agreeing that there was something that needed to be repaired in the first place.

The debate was far from civil. Liberals smeared conservatives as racists; conservatives lamented liberal ignorance about Civil War history. But amid all the ugliness an important compromise was achieved: mainstream conservatives and liberals agreed that, despite all of their differences, it was unacceptable in America in 2010 to detach the Confederacy from the evil of slavery. The governor’s apology — and his party’s approval of it — sent an important signal about acceptable political dialogue and conduct by American leaders.

LESSONS FOR EAST ASIA

The Virginia controversy helped draw (or underscore) a red line in the debate about America’s past. East Asians are looking to the Japanese to draw a similar red line, and to discipline political and intellectual leaders who cross it. Japanese leaders routinely tell lies about Japan’s past actions that astonish and enrage the country’s former victims: that Korea willingly joined the Japanese empire; that the Nanjing massacre didn’t happen; that the girls and women imprisoned and raped as sex

slaves for Japanese troops were volunteers who were well paid for the abuse they suffered.

To Tokyo's credit, Japanese prime ministers have sometimes fired cabinet officials or forced them to resign in the wake of some appalling statement. And many Japanese have worked valiantly to acknowledge the truth of the past. Ienaga Saburo devoted his career to ending whitewashing in Japanese history textbooks; activist Matsuoka Tamaki interviewed former victims and Japanese soldiers, creating an important documentary film about the Nanjing massacre; scholar Yoshiaki Yoshimi searched archives and produced documents that shattered Tokyo's denials about the "comfort women" program.

But there are also many high-level Japanese political and intellectual leaders who deny past atrocities, and subsequently suffer neither scandal nor censure. The world wants to see outraged op-eds in Japanese dailies if a leader describes the comfort women as volunteers. Koreans and Chinese want the words "disgraced former" in front of the name of Japanese officials who deny that Japanese troops slaughtered thousands of people in Nanjing.

What would an East Asian compromise look like? For their part, Japan's former victims should recognize its efforts so far to come to terms with its past (which in the politicization of the issue they often obscure). Chinese, Koreans and others must allow the Japanese to honor their ancestors as heroes — a bitter pill to swallow indeed, given that they and their ancestors suffered from atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers. In other words, Koreans and Chinese (and Japanese liberals) must accept Japan's right to its equivalent of Confederate History Month. But while Japanese conservatives should be allowed to honor their country, and the sacrifices of those who died for it, they cannot be allowed to distort history. The bitter pill for conservatives is that when they honor Japan's 20th-century history, they should also remember the aggression and atrocities that were part of it. As the *Washington Post's* Robinson wrote about US conservatives: "They're entitled to their own set of opinions, but they're not entitled to their own set of facts."

What would an East Asian compromise look like? Chinese, Koreans and others must allow the Japanese people to honor their ancestors as heroes — a bitter pill to swallow. For Japanese conservatives, their bitter pill is that they cannot honor Japan's 20th-century history without also remembering the aggression and atrocities that were part of it.



Conservatives in Japan frequently debate many aspects of the wartime past. Some argue that the Japanese behaved no differently than other combatants, who also bombed cities, raped women and mistreated prisoners of war. Some Japanese historians emphasize that Japan's imperialism was an act of self-defense in reaction to the threat of Western colonization. Some claim that Korea benefited from occupation because Japan's infrastructure construction laid the groundwork for South Korea's eventual economic takeoff. Historians wrangle about casualties in events such as the Nanjing massacre — just how many hundreds of thousands of Chinese did Japanese troops slaughter? Scholars can and should discuss these issues, subjecting claims to empirical evidence, but such debates must acknowledge basic truths about the war. Any debate among serious scholars about casualty figures in Nanjing cannot feature the claim that the massacre — a well-established historical fact — did not occur.

ELUSIVE MIDDLE GROUND

Japanese society may be unwilling to make a Virginia compromise. The politics of memory and justice within countries (such as the American Civil War), may be very different from such issues between countries. In cases of civil rather than international war, victims or their descendants are also fellow citizens, constituents and elected officials. Moreover, citizens with no direct stake in the dispute may feel that it is good and just for the nation to recognize the suffering of its own people. While many citizens may wish to recognize the suffering of overseas victims, their claims will inevitably carry less weight. For these reasons, the Japanese may simply be less willing to compromise than were the Virginians because the liberals won't demand it or because the conservatives will refuse to give any ground.

Even if Japan is willing to compromise, perhaps its neighbors won't be. If the Chinese Communist Party feels increasingly insecure about its hold on power, and relies on anti-Japanese propaganda to prop up domestic sup-

port, the CCP won't acknowledge progress Japan has already made toward admitting past misdeeds. Likewise, if South Korean politicians wrap themselves in the flag over the disputed Tokdo/Takeshima islands, compromise will be elusive.

Why compromise at all? In both the US and Japan, two important issues are at stake. The first is the defense of a candid historical record and the functioning of a free marketplace of ideas; the second is reconciliation. For the US, it is the long process of domestic reconciliation and racial healing; for Japan, it is reconciliation with its neighbors. This reconciliation is necessary before Tokyo can assume regional and global leadership. To date, the failure to draw the line in debates about the past has poisoned Japan's relations with its neighbors. If Japan refuses to make a Virginia-like compromise, neighbors will continue to fear increases in Japanese power, because they remember the era, whose atrocities the Japanese apparently do not repudiate, when Japan wielded power irresponsibly.

A compromise will be a smaller victory than what Japan's victims might have hoped for in the form of official apologies, reparations and so forth. But it would be a victory nonetheless and an improvement over the current situation in which Japan often tolerates denials about its wartime past. Therefore, many moderates, in both Japan and overseas, should welcome a compromise. Many Koreans say in frustration that they don't want more Japanese apologies, they want evidence that nationalist views that deny or glorify Japan's past violence can no longer gain political traction. As Poland's Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, said to Vladimir Putin as they jointly visited the tragic massacre site in the Katyn forest: "A word of truth can mobilize two peoples looking for the road to reconciliation. Are we capable of transforming a lie into reconciliation? We must believe we can."

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