

A Shrine to Japan's Tainted Past

By Gary J. Bass

IF Dec. 7 is the date that Americans remember for the infamy of Pearl Harbor, then Aug. 15 is the wrenching coda remembered by Japanese: the date on which, in 1945, Japan agreed to surrender in World War II. Under Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi,

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however, Aug. 15 has been marked not just by dignified commemoration but by repeated international brags over his annual visits to the tainted Yasukuni war shrine.

Yasukuni is a beautiful, private Shinto monument in Tokyo to Japan's 2.5 million war dead. It also glorifies criminals, most notoriously a dozen top leaders convicted as Class A war criminals by the Allied war crimes tribunal at Tokyo, including Hideki Tojo, the wartime prime minister.

A rallying point for revisionists, the shrine includes a newly renovated museum that showcases a fiercely nationalist version of Japanese military history — one that glosses over Impe-

rial Japan's invasion of Manchuria and skates past its brutal slaughter in Nanjing without mentioning the massacre of Chinese civilians. Small wonder that Japan's neighbors react with revulsion and fury when Mr. Koizumi visits the shrine.

This year, Mr. Koizumi, who is leaving office in September, has one last chance to serve his country. He should make a point of skipping a final visit to Yasukuni and push instead for a new national memorial to Japan's war dead, or for the removal of Class A war criminals from the shrine's rolls.

Doing so would remove a key piece of ammunition from the arsenal of Japan's rivals. Chinese hard-liners use

the Nanjing massacre to distract their public away from present-day communist corruption and misrule. In April 2005, there were startling anti-Japanese protests in China, sometimes involving vandalism — presumably with at least the quiet approval of China's authoritarian rulers. In March, China's president, Hu Jintao, announced that he would meet with Mr. Koizumi only if he decided to stop visiting Yasukuni.

It is no small trick for the leader of a democracy with a pacifist constitution to lose the moral high ground to a communist dictatorship, but that has been Mr. Koizumi's achievement.

Mr. Koizumi has also infatuated other democracies. In June 2005, when

Mr. Koizumi changed his own position on the shrine, he would give cover to the others to do the same. Better that a far-duck prime minister take the hit with conservatives than a fresh one. And whoever Japan's next prime minister is, he will be better off taking office without the dead weight of Yasukuni around his neck.

Many Japanese are troubled by Mr. Koizumi's visits to the shrine. In recently discovered palace diaries, Emperor Hirohito is quoted saying he stopped visiting Yasukuni after the Class A war criminals were added to the rolls in 1978. His successor, Emperor Akihito, has never visited since taking the throne.

Japan's main opposition party opposes the visits, as does the junior partner party in Mr. Koizumi's coalition, as well as much of the powerful business community. A recent Asahi Shimbun poll found that 60 percent of Japanese respondents thought their next prime minister should not visit Yasukuni, against 20 percent who backed more visits.

So the door is open to a new Yasukuni policy. It could well be domestically popular, and would certainly be diplomatically shrewd and morally wise. And it offers Mr. Koizumi one last chance to be remembered as a statesman.

Will Koizumi revisit a war memorial that honors criminals?

terpreted as dangerous weakness. And it is of course hard for Japanese to accept history lectures from a Chinese government that stifles free expression or from Americans who too easily forget the awful toll taken by the fire bombing of Tokyo and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

On top of that, the Yasukuni visits are propelled by domestic politics. In 2001, when Mr. Koizumi was campaigning for the leadership of the long-time, ruling Liberal Democratic Party, he promised influential right-wingers that he would visit Yasukuni annually. He has kept his word — although never yet on Aug. 15. This cemented a popular image of a statesman of integrity and won him favor with the powerful conservatives.

Now the party is in the midst of the leadership race to succeed Mr. Koizumi. Once again, many of the likely candidates — including the front-runner, Shinzo Abe, the chief cabinet secretary — have been tempted to ped-