

ON TEACHING HISTORICAL EMBARRASMENTS

by James Reston, Jr.

Few countries willingly acknowledge past error. The common tendency of all countries is to sanitize historical embarrassments or to ignore them completely.

Consider Japan. Its modern history just won't go away, and the problem is driving Japanese leaders crazy. China and Korea keep reminding the seemingly placid land of the Rising Sun that its flag still send shudders through Asia. Japan's first reaction was to tell its former colonies to mind their own business. Its time for apology was over. But more recently, for purely diplomatic reasons, it has tried to appear contrite once again for its past sins.

This is a controversy that Americans should watch closely, for there is something universal at work. The same thing is happening in this country with respect to Vietnam.

In Japan, the issue is drawn around how high school textbooks treat foreign aggression by the Japanese in this century. What should the Japanese adolescents of the "New Japan"^{know} about such events as the Nanjing Massacre of 1937, the subjugation of Korea over 40 years, and the attack on Pearl Harbor?

That is ultimately a question for the conservative Education Ministry of the Japanese Government, which approves all textbooks or more pointedly, disapproves those textbooks which contain offending passages about embarrassing topics. Because the central government reserves the approval process to itself, it is charged with indoctrinating youth with distortions and palliatives.

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In this country, the Federal Government does not approve high school textbooks, but we should take no particular comfort from that. Local school boards do essentially the same thing. As Frances Fitzgerald points out in her book, America Revised, American social studies and history texts generally avoid complicated confrontations of American history (with the exception of the romantic Civil war.) Consequently, pallid "warless" histories are the standard in American classrooms. The Korean War, Fitzgerald points out, is usually accorded three or four paragraphs.

In 1982, the "textbook controversy" rocked Japan, but only because it was generated from abroad. China and Korea officially protested the textbook characterization of events which the Chinese and Koreans regard as 20th Century Japanese atrocities. For example, a text described the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 as an "advance." It referred to the protests of Korean freedom fighters against the Japanese occupation of Korea between 1910 and 1945 as "riots." And it called the Nanjing massacre, in which over 200,000 Chinese were slaughtered by Japanese troops, an episode of "mob confusion."

Last month, the controversy heated up again, when the latest revisions in Japanese texts became public. Where the earlier text had referred to the "so-called Nanjing incident," the new draft speaks of a "so-called Nanjing massacre."

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Some concession. Presumably, the Chinese will not be satisfied until the precedent, so-called, is removed altogether, and the gory details of murderous Japanese soldiers are laid before the tender sensibilities of young Japanese.

To the Japanese Government, the central problem after the crushing defeat in world war II was to regain a sense of national confidence. "Upbeat education" is meant to imbue this new spirit. After Vietnam, the Reagan Administration seems to be intent upon the same purpose.

Sanitized language within prettified history is just as much the vogue here as in Japan. Our version of the Manchurian "advance" is the Cambodian "incursion" or the "rescue mission" in Grenada. Our Libyan bombing, supposedly a retaliation for the West Berlin disco bombing (now known to have been perpetrated by a Jordanian) and the killings at the Rome Airport (perpetrated by Syrians), was a "response to terrorism." It is customary to hear about World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam "episode." Everywhere, the end of the "Vietnam Syndrome" is celebrated, as if the doubt over the use of America power was the real disease, rather than the unwise and ultimately degenerate use of American power itself. The final step is to declare Vietnam to be a noble cause, now a constant refrain of Reagan and Caspar Weinberger.

Is this the way our recent past will be presented to American youngsters in the classroom? Because such blameless, saccharine attitudes are the official line now, will American textbook writers be inclined to enshrine them as history?

Because of the brouhaha over the "correct" interpretation of Japanese militarism, teachers in Japan have taken the easy

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way out.. They have simply stopped their historical narrative at the year, 1930. The result is that the younger generation of Japanese has virtually no idea how the warloards assumed power in Imperial Japan, what to think of Japan's wartime leaders, like Hideki Tojo, or what to think about the Pearl Harbor episode.

If we are shocked at that, who are we to complain? The American younger generation has no notion of how the United States entered Vietnam, where the country went wrong, and who was responsible. If we have warless histories in our classrooms, so too we have villain-less histories.

If we worry that young Japanese have been left in the dark and will not be able to recognize the early signs of ~~a~~ resurgence^t of Japanese militarism, should it start to assert itself again, we protest too much .

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James Reston, Jr.'s last book was Sherman's March and Vietnam, published last year by Macmillan.