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A Japan-US reconciliation through "wreath-laying  
diplomacy"

Fumio Matsuo, journalist

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At last, a U.S. president might be coming to Hiroshima.

As a person who has advocated this for many years, I feel half-gratified just thinking of the prospect that this will finally happen. After all, more than 70 years have passed since that war came to an end.

While I suppose hardly any Japanese are aware of it, Japan and the United States have not engaged in any visible form of reconciliation, such as a ceremony in which incense is burnt and prayers mutually offered to console the souls of those who died in the war.

I first noticed this in February 1995, while watching a newscast on the TV in my hotel during a business trip to Washington D.C. The broadcast showed a joint ceremony at the city of Dresden between WW2 belligerents America and Britain and Germany. During the war, by allied forces indiscriminately bombed the

city of Dresden, with an estimated 35,000 residents losing their lives. On the 50th anniversary of the air raid, I saw the representatives of the governments and military of the former enemies pay tribute to the war victims, and make declarations to validate reconciliation. But I realized that Japan has yet to do so.

So 11 years ago, during the summer that marked the 60th anniversary of the end of the war, I published articles in Chuo Koron magazine and the Wall Street Journal, under the title "Arrange for (then) President George W. Bush lay a wreath at the monument to atomic bomb victims at Hiroshima." I also proposed that the prime minister of Japan pay a reciprocal visit to Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. In my way of thinking, in order for the ceremonies to represent true reconciliation, they had to be conducted jointly by Japan and the U.S.

My personal involvement in this arises from three encounters with the U.S. as a wartime enemy.

The first, in April 1942, was the first air raid on Tokyo by the Doolittle force, which I personally witnessed from the proximity of the yard of my primary school. I also experienced machine-gun fire from carrier-based U.S. aircraft while at the Zentsuji temple in Shikoku. Then in July 1945, I was in Fukui City when it underwent incendiary carpet

bombing in a night raid by B29s, and I saw a bomb filled with napalm canisters strike a rice field right before my eyes. I thought I was done for, but it failed to explode, just settling into the mud. Sometimes I still marvel at the quirk of my survival. Perhaps my thinking may have been influenced by growing up in an environment with an awareness toward war, with my father being in the military, and my grandfather killed by rebel soldiers during the February 26, 1936 uprising when he was mistaken for his brother-in-law, then-prime minister Keisuke Okada.

I would certainly wish for Mr. Obama to go to Hiroshima and deliver a comprehensive address. While it would be natural for him to echo the theme of "A World without Nuclear Weapons" that he touched on in the speech delivered in Prague in 2009, I would wish for this to represent yet another step forward, in the sense that it would demonstrate a decision by the U.S. to contribute to East Asia, where reconciliation over the past remains incomplete.

And how about Japan? Things cannot be concluded merely with Mr. Obama coming here and laying a wreath. Next would be Japan's turn. This should be taken up as a major opportunity for Japanese diplomacy.

In South Korea, warnings have already been issued that such a visit by Mr. Obama would "raise the possibility of resulting in the obscuring of Japan's stance as the aggressor." When I made my proposals to Japan and the U.S., I cannot allow myself to forget that Asian-American scholars had remarked "we will not tolerate even for one second Japanese assuming the face of victims."

For PM Shinzo Abe, to respond to the "laying of a wreath at Hiroshima" with a "laying a wreath at Pearl Harbor" would represent a major opportunity to remove a thorn still deeply embedded in the U.S. Japan relationship that even now effects the situation in East Asia. Japan is a country that engages in reconciliation; and that it can join in consolation with former enemies.

It is not only Japan and the U.S. that should proceed with "wreath-laying diplomacy." I want for Japan to take the initiative, issuing an appeal not only to South Korea and China, but all other nations of Asia and the Pacific that were involved in war at that time, by mutually paying visits to symbolic places. Of course that will not mean that grudges will quickly vanish, but this will serve as a great step toward the future.

(As told to Masaaki Tonetate, member of editorial committee)