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The Ishihara Statement and the 1930s: Japan's National Psyche Adrift

by Yoshida Tsukasa

[Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro, and a man widely considered a leading candidate to succeed Koizumi as Prime Minister, is notorious for shooting from the hip, that is for making inflammatory and racist statements. Perhaps none so resonated with the logic of assassination that marked 1930s Japan, however, as a recent statement tacitly supporting the bombing of the home of a Foreign Ministry Counselor. As the non-fiction storyteller Yoshida Tsukasa makes plain in the following piece, this caps a long history of irresponsibility by the novelist turned politician. Reveling in the publicity accorded each of his outrageous statements, by the press, the Governor, in response to China's successful launching of a manned rocket into space, said: "The Chinese people are ignorant, so they get all excited about it. But that kind of thing is already behind the times. If Japan wanted to [launch a comparable rocket], we'd be ready within a year." The present article appeared in the Asahi Shinbun, September 24, 2003, evening edition.]

He's done it again. The man's incorrigible. Referring to a time bomb set at the home of Foreign Ministry Counselor Tanaka Hitoshi, Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintaro remarked that the bombing attempt "was perfectly understandable" in view of the Ministry's "spineless foreign policy" toward North Korea. On September 12, Tanigaki Shin'ichi, then Chief of the Public Safety Committee, criticized Ishihara for making "a statement that appears to endorse terrorism." That same day, even the conservative newspaper, Sankei Shinbun, sounded the warning, "This is clearly going too far. It would be wise to retract those phrases that represent a slip of the tongue." Since that time, the repercussions have spread.

Yet this was no "slip of the tongue." Governor Ishihara is widely known as a "linguistic felon" with an ideological mission. His explosive statements up to this point include trotting out the old epithet for Chinese residents of Japan as "Third Nation People," referring to a prominent woman as "an old bag," and, with respect to North Korea, Ishihara rhetorically asked, "why shouldn't Japan stand up to them and go to war?" Statements such as these are dangerous, even if the linguistic explosives that he constantly drops do sometimes feel refreshing in this stagnant era.

Nonetheless, Ishihara's recent remark about the bombing being "perfectly understandable" is especially dangerous because it catalyzes the latent "problem of the 1930s" hidden in the deep recesses of the postwar Japanese psyche.

At that time, when the ripples from the Great Depression reached as far as Japan, bringing about "the Showa Slump," political power was wielded by Hamaguchi Yuko, the "Lion Prime Minister," and the Communications Minister was Koizumi Matajirō (grandfather of Prime Minister Koizumi). Unemployment was rampant across the nation, and the Mitsui zaibatsu engaged in massive speculation by buying up dollars with yen—"traitorous acts"—which earned them huge profits and nationwide reproach. These events led to the February 26 Incident—the shooting of Prime Minister Hamaguchi and the assassination of Mitsui chief Dan Takuma—and to the establishment of 'Manchukuo.' The road to Asian aggression, soaked in Japanese blood, began when national outrage at the effects of deflation joined hands with right-wing terrorists exhorting, "Punish the traitors!" and "Divine punishment!"

To the extent that it threatens to revive the ghost of militarism from the dark history of the 1930s, Ishihara's recent pronouncement is incomparably more serious than were his rash of earlier statements.

The Collapse of Fantasy

Gov. Ishihara should take a good look at the world. The national outrage in response to widespread government corruption, to the illegal disposal of bad loans by Japan's major banks, and to the North Korean abductions of Japanese citizens has nearly reached 1930s levels. Moreover, with the 'activist right' now putting in frequent appearances (rather than vanishing after the collapse of the left, as anticipated), he should know that statements condoning "terrorism" have the 'demonic power' of pouring oil on fire.

Since his book *Season of the Sun* appeared in 1955, Ishihara Shintaro has won widespread popularity for poking fun at feudal authority and common sense. As a "trickster" who takes delight in upending social values, he likes to create a stir. Why? Because he is exceptionally brave when it comes to talk, but lacks the actual power to really shake things up in the world. His utterly feckless "buffoonery" is hardly deserving of comment: it evokes smiles and entertains. Yet in 25 years as a member of the Diet, Ishihara has no conspicuous achievements to show for himself. Now in his second term as governor, his proposals for an external tax on the banks and a floating casino have met with little success. Precisely because he is such a hopeless buffoon, most Japanese are quite fond of Ishihara and grant him considerable latitude. His greatest appeal lies in his braggadocio—his dangerous yet safe fantasy language, the "unreal."

But since the world has now come to resemble that of the "1930s," his words have rapidly begun to shed their fantastic quality.

For example, his remark "why shouldn't Japan ... go to war (with North Korea)?" seemed dangerous because it "overturned values." In fact, it remained safe precisely because the Self-Defense Forces had long abided by the Peace Constitution. But then on May 20, Prime Minister Koizumi pronounced that "In reality, the Self-Defense Forces are an armed force." Shintaro's "war" statement was thus rendered "real" by becoming linked to Koizumi's pronouncement. It deteriorates into a mere opportunistic assertion and clearly attests to the fact that the 'power of words' to upset values has been overtaken by the times, and fantasies like his are no longer tenable.

So the root of the problem lies not so much with Shintaro himself but rather with "the era." We Japanese have "re-elected" with overwhelming support these two men—Prime Minister Koizumi with his armed forces pronouncement and Gov. Ishihara with his war statement; and now, with Cabinet Secretary Abe Shinzo of the "revise the Constitution wing," the "new hawk" wing has entered the arena as well. The rest of the world can't be blamed if it suspects Japan of shifting gears and becoming an aggressive country. Is this really acceptable? Particularly, in the Liberal Democratic Party election for Prime Minister, the Diet members looked pitiful as they clambered onto the bandwagon, practically shouting "Me too! Me too!" Or, as an editorial in the Sept. 21 edition of the Asahi put it: "Members of the opposition forces who had opposed structural reform all stepped in line to support the prime minister."

The nation moves en masse

But the problem is not merely with the LDP. One year after the Japan-Pyongyang Declaration, Sato Katsumi, Chairman of the "National Council for the Rescue of Japanese Abducted to North Korea," commented on the shift in Japan's attitude toward North Korea: "The fickleness is truly alarming. When the abductions were still unconfirmed, there was absolutely no movement on this issue whatsoever; then, after it was confirmed, everyone got all excited, but in reality not a thing has changed." (Asahi, Sept. 13)

The Diet members, sensing a change in the atmosphere, all move in lockstep; and the Japanese populace moves en masse. With no individual or system to put the brakes on this type of mindless Japanese group behavior, the "1930s conditions" grow more intense. The danger lies not in the Ishihara statement. The danger lies in the national psyche adrift without check, having lost the historical consciousness of war and the military.

