

JSDF Education Provides Hints for Japan's Revival

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“Japan is overmature and has started to decline.” I believe someone made that statement around 1990, when Japan's economy reached its highest peak. Although I felt some concern during the economic bubble excitement, I did not pay those words much attention. Recently, it seems they are becoming increasingly plausible.

Day after day, media outlets report on unpleasant topics like bullying, suicide, compensated dating, teachers taking surreptitious photos of students, apathy, illegal jobs known as “Yami Baito,” people killed by stalkers, child abuse, and slush funds. Lately, political party leaders no longer act honorably by accepting responsibility for crushing election defeats. Japanese citizens used to value moral principles and dignity, and felt a sense of pride in our “shame culture.” That Japan is in the process of quietly collapsing.

It is said that nations often die slow deaths, rather than downfalls caused by war defeats or bankruptcy. Venetian historian Giovanni Hotelo stated, “Great nations are not destroyed by external factors. What destroys them comes from the hearts of people, and the social trends that mirror those feelings.”

When I was teaching risk management at a university, I gave my students the assignment of creating risk management plans for their lives. They had to imagine what risks might stand in the way of their dreams, then draft plans to avoid those risks. The first step was to set forth their dreams and objectives. Astounded by the large number of students who could not carry out this task, I said they could write down temporary ideas if they had no current goals. Some students were on the verge of tears because they had nothing to write. I was truly shocked and astounded – nothing is more unfortunate than young people who cannot come up with dreams or goals at an age when they have endless potential.

I had wonderful parents, which is one reason why I dreamed from a young age of becoming a fighter jet pilot. I worked hard and made undaunted efforts to achieve that dream. Happily, I was able to do so, and I feel a sense of pride and achievement because I have helped defend our country. That is why young people who have no dreams seem so pitiable to me.

This is certainly not an individual issue. As a whole, Japanese society has lost its foundation and sense of direction. Postwar education has no concept of public engagement, and young people see no connections between the nation, society, and their own ways of living. As a result, they feel that work has no meaning and do not know what they are living for. Human life must involve more than just earning money.

It is said that graduates of top universities increasingly feel bewildered and unable to choose how they will live. Apparently, they are nicknamed “*tatazumi-kun*,” referring to someone who is standing still and unable to move forward. This is alarming, because it is also said that the young people of a country reveal what its future will be.

The historian Arnold Toynbee stated, “Internal emptiness is always the thing that destroys us.” Many young people are suffering from a sense of emptiness – they experience no discomfort in their daily lives, yet they lack dreams and reasons for living, meaning they are simply alive. This stems from the postwar social trend of less public engagement, and from the postwar educational system that gave rise to this trend. Postwar Japanese society has consistently prioritized private over public life. From elementary school through university, students are taught the value of individual- and self-fulfillment, yet this education has purposefully disregarded the value of public engagement.

Humans have three instinctive desires: 1) To be a good person, 2) To do good work, and 3) To make other people happy. These can only be accomplished by connecting private and public life. Because Japanese society has lost the universal value of public engagement, its people have no opportunities to fulfill their instinctive desires by contributing to the nation and society. That is why

they have no dreams or hopes, nor any sense of what they are living for.

Public engagement is a fundamental, universal value, something as common as the air we breathe. Although it was an accepted part of life until the generation that grew up during World War II, today this concept cannot be easily understood by the young people who received postwar education, which puts maximum priority on private concerns. The loss of this obvious concept has deprived Japanese youth of their oxygen, leaving them with two choices: to suffer greatly, or to experience a sense of helplessness that renders them unable to move forward.

Ironically, the loss of public engagement increases trust in the public sphere, causing an excessive reliance on the nation and a predisposition to irresponsibility. Even though they do not pay into the pension system, some people believe the national government should take care of them in their old age. Parents drive children to and from school in Mercedes-Benz cars while believing that they deserve to have school lunch fees paid by the national government. And with the loss of public engagement, people no longer understand the reasonable concept that freedom comes with responsibility, and rights come with obligations.

Several years ago, an international public opinion poll asked respondents if they would fight when their country was invaded. Just 13.2% of Japanese people said they would fight, by far the lowest number among the 79 countries. Even Lithuania, second from the bottom, had a percentage of over 30%. Despite this, Japanese people insist that the nation should protect its people. They dismiss their obligation and responsibility as citizens – to defend their country – while glorifying freedom and demanding maximum rights. The national government has been degraded to a target of extortion. It is rather like the *uchide no kozuchi* of legend, a magical hammer that fulfills wishes. Many citizens complain when anything happens, saying the national government does nothing for them. I cannot imagine that a country like this will last for very long.

Will Japan be able to survive this crisis, or will it meet its downfall? Toynbee said, “All nations decline, but the causes are definitely not irreversible. With awareness, a nation can be restored. The deciding factor in a nation’s decline is the inability to self-determine.” Considering Japan’s political situation in recent years, the future looks quite grim if we leave everything to politicians. First, individual citizens must wake up to the truth and take action to restore Japan to life. I spent roughly 40 years as a Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) official, and I believe that education conducted by the JSDF can provide hints for Japan’s revival.

The JSDF dispatched approximately 100,000 troops after the Great East Japan Earthquake in March 2011, who worked hard to provide disaster relief. The JSDF has about 240,000 officials, but the 100,000 troops mostly comprised its full strength considering the number who usually work in guard duty, troop training, facility management, administrative affairs, and other fields. This number was gradually reduced, but a cumulative total of about 10.9 million troops were involved in strenuous efforts over more than two years.

Rather than thinking of themselves, troops focused assiduously on their mission and prioritized citizens affected by the disasters. Some troops promptly arrived to provide on-site aid even though their own homes had been impacted. They distributed hot meals while enduring cold canned food. Troops set up temporary bathing facilities for survivors while cleaning themselves with paper towels. When they discovered the remains of people who died, they treated them just as carefully as a relative would, even shedding tears.

I imagine that citizens were surprised by these troops who prioritized public engagement, rather than their own private matters. More people got a favorable impression of the JSDF; even media outlets that were previously against the JSDF had no choice but to report on it accurately. Many citizens were deeply moved by videos of the troops, and there were numerous comments saying the JSDF could be depended on in an emergency, and that it was the foundation of the nation. This has never happened before in the history of the defense forces.

Similarly, JSDF troops were sent to Iraq at the end of 2003 to provide humanitarian and reconstruction aid. They worked silently to help supply water, offer medical care, and to carry out other humanitarian and reconstruction tasks in harsh environments with severe heat and sandstorms, as well as the threat of terrorist attacks. These troops made a positive impression on people in Japan and abroad.

The Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF) unit returned to Japan after roughly 2.5 years in Iraq, but the Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) unit remained to continue providing air transportation. After the JGSDF withdrawal, I served for two years and eight months as a commanding officer of the JASDF unit in Iraq. Since then, people in Japan have forgotten about the Iraq mission altogether, but the JASDF worked extremely hard to fulfill our duties there.

We faced many difficulties in Iraq’s challenging environment, including severe heat, sandstorms, and the threat of terrorism.

We faced the danger of gun and portable missile attacks by terrorists near the airport, and rocket attacks were a frequent occurrence above ground. We felt extremely nervous each time we took off from or landed at the Baghdad airport in particular. A cumulative total of about 4,000 JASDF troops served in Iraq for five years, and there was not a single accident or scandal during that time.

As part of a multinational air force, the JASDF carried out the same air transport mission as other countries, according to the exact same conditions. Naturally, we were compared to air forces from other nations. The JASDF surpassed all of them and received high acclaim from other air forces for all metrics over the five years, including transport results, aircraft operating rate, safety, troop abilities, and morale.

I will share an anecdote from an onsite visit I made before our withdrawal. I was asked to give a speech at a luncheon meeting hosted by generals from several other countries. I expressed gratitude for the support we received from their militaries over the past five years, and described the JASDF's distinctive characteristics, namely the fact that we have no military law or court-martial. The expressions on the generals' faces changed all at once. I could tell they were astonished, and they began questioning me rapidly. "How do you maintain order without a court-martial?" "How come soldiers don't desert?" "What's your secret for maintaining morale?" I was shocked by this unexpectedly fierce response, but I managed to answer, "It's our Samurai Spirit." JASDF troops are orderly and courteous with excellent flying skills and a powerful sense of duty. But more than anything, they were highly appraised by other militaries for the sincere way they performed their duties. This experience in Iraq convinced me that the JSDF is carrying out a correct type of education.

Many mistakenly assume that only special young people join the JSDF, but it is a microcosm of Japanese society, and some young recruits are merely average. Some are poorly behaved, unmannerly, and unable to use proper language or greet others. After several months, they are so transformed that you would not recognize them; parents often shed tears when seeing how much their children have changed at training center graduation ceremonies.

I am frequently questioned about how the JSDF educates its troops. My reply is, "It contradicts postwar education." Since World War II, the educational system has negatively portrayed Japan as an antagonistic country while negating the authority of the nation and giving maximum priority to individual, private matters. JSDF education is the exact opposite of our schools, which have repudiated the flag and national anthem until recently.

When I studied abroad in the United States, my four-year-old son attended a local preschool. The first English he learned was from the Pledge of Allegiance, recited by students every morning while facing the flag with hands on their hearts. This is an exceedingly common sight in many countries, but it is not something that happens in Japan. People who spend any time living overseas will realize the abnormal nature of Japan's educational system.

The JSDF may be the only Japanese organization that meets this international standard. The flag is hoisted every morning and brought down every evening to the accompaniment of our national anthem. Troops stop immediately to pay respects to the flag, no matter what they are doing. At enlistment, every troop recites the JSDF pledge in a loud voice, promising to "face crises with no fear of danger." This is a way of instilling values that prioritize public engagement, and leaving behind the postwar education that focuses on the self and individuals. All humans feel joy when helping others and working for their nation and society – it is part of our DNA. The postwar educational system has suppressed this and prevented its growth, but the JSDF breaks the magic spell that young people have been placed under.

Troops experience the gratification of helping people and striving for the public good through their daily activities, including training, guard duties, and disaster relief. Once they realize that the purpose of life is to work for their country, their eyes gain a new sparkle. Marcus Tullius Cicero, an ancient Roman philosopher, said, "Among all human love, love for one's country is the most important and the greatest joy." The *New Testament* reads, "There is no greater love than to lay down your life for your friends." Postwar education has disregarded this value that is shared by all humankind. Instead, it positions the individual and private manners as the supreme value to uphold, focusing solely on unimportant details. The JSDF repudiates this directly and makes troops experience the true reason for living: loving their country and laying down their lives for society and other people. Young people become outstanding JSDF officials when they learn that everyone should help each other and live for each other's sake, which is a wonderful thing. JSDF education does not do anything special; it merely helps cultivate the excellent DNA that all Japanese people naturally possess. Real examples of these results include the Great East Japan Earthquake and Iraq missions, as I mentioned before.

Japanese society is in a miserable plight today because of the blows dealt by 80 years of postwar education. If nothing is

done, Japan will reach overmaturity and decline. I previously stated that JSDF education provides hints for Japan's restoration: revitalizing public engagement in home- and school-based education. We must eradicate the postwar tendency to show contempt for our nation, history, traditions, and culture, and to turn our backs on traditional values, including love and respect for our ancestors and predecessors, along with decorum between young people.

The American elementary school taught three things: 1) When the class makes a decision, you must go along with it even if you do not want to, 2) If you see a policeman having a difficult time, you should help him, 3) If your parents and teacher tell you different things, you should obey your parents.

In this way, they instill the importance of democracy and of prioritizing public engagement from a young age, which is a highly useful reference for Japanese home and school education. Children are given a thorough understanding of concepts such as perseverance for the sake of others, not inconveniencing others, "One for all, all for one," and "Service before self." They are told to value public engagement more than the self. This shares many things in common with JSDF education, and we should emulate these teachings for the education we conduct at home and in schools.

We should think about requiring social service activities in school education for children who are old enough to understand, such as cleaning up parks and picking up beach litter. And in my opinion, we should actively consider having children in the upper grades of elementary school take part in hands-on job experiences, including the JSDF, police, fire department, and Japan Coast Guard. We should proactively incorporate volunteer activities at caregiving facilities. Above all, we must teach the history of our predecessors who made great efforts for the sake of our nation and society.

Children should learn that the nation is founded on hard work by individual citizens. We must teach them that a fulfilling life involves service to people, society, and the nation, which is a means of self-fulfillment. In her book *Tales of the Roman People* 「ローマ人の物語」, Shiono Nanami writes, "By nature, citizens should feel that the nation's fate is their own fate." In schools and at home, we must inspire a sense of involvement and teach children that they are responsible for our country and society. This is also directly connected to strengthening deterrence and enhancing our national defense abilities. Thomas Jefferson, the third American president, said, "A well informed citizenry is the best defense."

Japan is overmature and has started to decline. For the sake of Japan's recovery, we must revise the education that is conducted in our schools and homes. Japan will never be revived unless each citizen wakes up to the truth. Fukuzawa Yukichi said, "The founding of a nation is not a public matter; it is a private one. Those without independent willpower cannot think seriously about the future of the nation. If the populace is ignorant, the government will be harsh." An awareness of public engagement must be revived within the hearts of each citizen. We can look to the education conducted by the JSDF, which is already producing good results. Education may seem like an indirect way of accomplishing this, but it is actually the shortest path towards Japan's revival.