

FEATURES

Goodbye Iwojima, Hello Iwoto

—Erasing history with a name change??

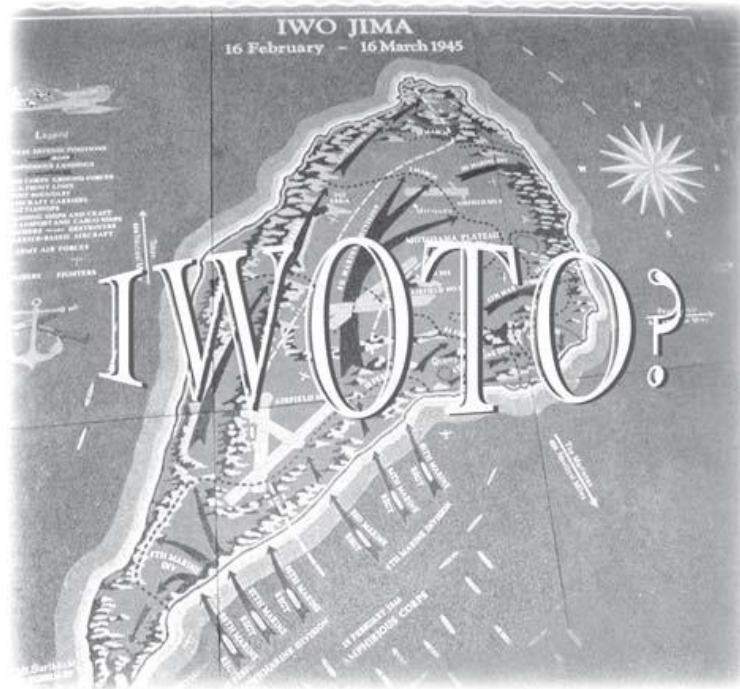
By PHILIP J. CUNNINGHAM

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A U.S. congressional panel's passage of a resolution last week calling on Japan to acknowledge and apologize for the systemic abuse of Asian women coerced to offer "comfort" to millions of Japanese soldiers during World War II is a positive development not only for U.S.-Japan relations, but for Japan itself. The conservative leadership of the ruling party that has had Japan in its grips for half a century makes Japan incapable of fully reforming itself from within.

U.S. Congressman Mike Honda's resolution, a friendly nudge from a close ally, imploring Japan to recognize past mistakes so that it may move on, is a timely corrective that may help stem the revisionist tide that is sweeping Japan, not only at the level of rightwing sound-trucks and noisemakers, but deep in the austere halls of the government itself.

In recent weeks Japanese government officials have found themselves on the wrong side of history, awkwardly defending historic abuses such as forced labor, forced prostitution, forced suicides in Okinawa, outright massacres in



Nanjing and other occupied cities; and going as far as to hint that the attack on Pearl Harbor was a strategic necessity and that the Tokyo war crimes tribunal was vindictive victor's justice.

Given the rising drum beat of revisionism, it was inevitable that fault would be found with

Hollywood's latest offering on Japan's lost war, but the meticulous research and quality production values behind Clint Eastwood's magisterial twin films about Iwojima doesn't make for an easy target.

Because the twin films were well-received in both America and Japan, filmed partly on location with Japanese cooperation that included personal consultation with nationalist firebrand Shintaro Ishihara, one might think that the U.S. and Japan had come to terms on at least one historical issue, the epic battle for Iwojima. But the immense good will accrued by this thoughtful film project was unexpectedly upended with a surprise announcement from Japanese officialdom in late June.

In what may be considered a case study of the insidious way history can be altered or erased, Iwojima is not to be called Iwojima anymore, but rather Iwoto.

The Japan Geographical Survey Institute in concert with Japan's Coast Guard — claiming to represent the sentiments of people who lived on the strategic rock before being displaced by Japan's military seven decades ago — changed the name of the small island with a big history, reportedly in reaction to the success of the film. Whatever the merits of the extremely narrow linguistic claim behind the name change, the effect of saying Iwojima is a misnomer is to subtly invalidate all extant American narratives on the topic, past and present. The impressive attempt at historic verisimilitude on the part of director Clint Eastwood is thus a victim of its own success, energizing revisionists to take action when it became apparent that Hollywood was capable of taking narrative control of a rock in their territory.

Hollywood gets things wrong more often than it gets things right, the usual complaint being they got things wrong. Eastwood did such a meticulous job, assisted by such able Japanese staffers, that his sin might have been getting things too right. *Letters from Iwojima* is much harder to dismiss in revisionist narrative terms, than transparently inaccurate tales such as *Memoirs of a Geisha*, or *Last Samurai*.

For Japan to insist on a name change for Iwojima because Hollywood more or less got it right is a shot below the belt, a blow in a battle for narrative control of war history by linguistic means.

Generally speaking, the words by which English-speakers refer to foreign locales only rarely cut close to the actual sounds used by natives in their own language. Indeed, English speakers are not pressed to call India “Bharata”; nor has it been decreed that China be called “Zhongguo”). Likewise, Japanese, when speaking their own language, can breezily call



Long known as Iwojima, this island 1,200 km south of Tokyo is now officially known as Iwoto.

— KYODO PHOTO

America “Beikoku” without encountering serious argument.

Insisting on a name change for pointedly political reasons is a different matter. When the Khmer Rouge announced that Cambodia henceforth would be called Kampuchea, and when the dictators of Burma insisted their nation be called Myanmar, it wasn't so much out of concern for linguistic accuracy — good arguments can be made either way — as a desperate attempt at total narrative control; not so much a historian's nuanced appreciation of the past as desire for a clean slate, a new year zero.

Thus to announce to the English-speaking world that henceforth Iwojima is no longer to be known as Iwojima is a decidedly political act. It places the rocky isle in a manmade fog, off-limits, or at least temporarily rendered indistinct and off the foreigner's map.

Ironically, the putative name change is next to meaningless in Japan where the name of Iwojima will continue to be written as it always has been. The only change is in how it is to be read out loud. Native speakers of Japanese have long called it Iwojima (mistakenly or not) in the first place and are apt to continue calling it that unless it becomes a trick test question in Japan's new patriotic curriculum.

Without government fiat, both readings are fully acceptable variations to a native speaker.

The mischief inherent in altering the phonetic rendering of Iwojima to Iwoto is that the change is distinct enough to require a new orthography in English, causing cartographers to spill unnecessary ink, or more ominously, causing the old name of the island to sink without a trace. With a deft linguistic sleight of hand, an islet with a contested history is permanently locked in the past, veiled in willful inscrutability.

If the announced “name change” is accepted by Western wire services and leading newspapers, the powerful symbolism inherent in the name Iwojima, enriched with usage over time, will be made more distant and inaccessible. All U.S. history-writing on the topic, the Eastwood films included, are rendered instantly anachronistic. Every discussion of the key wartime theater thereafter will get muddled by cumbersome semantics about the island formerly known as Iwojima. The word is more than a place name; it has entered English as shorthand for bravery, courage and ultimately triumph; it has a similarly profound, if not identical, raft of meanings for Japanese speakers who, too, until last week, called it Iwojima.

The word Iwojima, like the iconic image of men valiantly putting up a flag under fire, is part of the world’s historic lexicon. If, due to a calculated political move, this evocative name, and all it has come to represent, is tossed into the dustbin of history, we may one day forget the hard-won lessons of a critical chapter in the historic fight against fascism.

Whether it be definitive battles, documented massacres, the liability of war criminals, the kidnapping and raping of innocent women or inducing desperate defenders to commit mass suicide in the name of a lost cause, it is not just an academic matter to get the history right. Indeed quibbling over minor discrepancies is a useful way to avoid recognizing larger truths at stake.

What is critical is keeping history alive, not in rancor and anger but with solemn recognition of the human condition in all its

complexity, in a spirit of reconciliation and in search of common ground between parties once locked in conflict. Eastwood’s work on Iwojima comes closer to reconciliation than Ishihara’s kamikaze-glorifying “I Go to Die for You” or other revisionist films such as “Yamato” a favorite of Abe.

Maybe it’s time for a good movie about the plight of the “comfort women.”

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