

# The Politics of Loss in the Lost Decades: The *Ehime Maru* Incident as a Halfway Point<sup>1</sup>

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The public record contains little information on whether Mori Yoshirō won or lost his most famous game of golf. He certainly seemed intent on finishing it, though perhaps at some cost to his checkered political career. By the time he made headlines on Feb 10, 2001 for finishing his round on the links even after hearing news that an American nuclear submarine had collided with a Japanese fisheries training boat filled with high school students, Mori had already become a singularly unpopular prime minister, even by Japanese standards. Famously turning phrases uniting nation and emperor that invoked wartime rhetoric, and occasionally evoking a stack of bowling balls covered by a rugby shirt, Mori hit a new low by seeming both spectacularly callous and mystifyingly unready to lead in the midst of an emerging, if by now largely forgotten, crisis in the US-Japan relationship. While he remained in office for two months following the sinking of the *Ehime Maru* and the loss of nine Japanese onboard, Mori was quickly seen as the lamest of ducks, occasionally quacking for his final two months in office about his determination not to resign but shorn of virtually all support even within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).<sup>2</sup>

When he was replaced in April 2001 by his rapidly storied successor, Koizumi Jun'ichirō, Mori's place as the last gasp of the LDP's traditional ruling style seemed fully cemented, with the maverick populist Koizumi appearing to represent a collective step beyond what was by then known as Japan's "lost decade."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the cloistered old-boys' club of pork-barrel politics and backroom deals (like the one among several party leaders that had put Mori in charge following Prime Minister Obuchi

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1 The author thanks Nanyan Guo and Alexander Zahlten for their helpful comments on an earlier draft at the Nichibunken Symposium, July 2015.

2 For one representative contemporary account, see "Mori shushō, gorufu taijin seikyoku — Jimintō nai kara mo barizōgon" [Mori Catches Hell from Even Within the LDP, with Calls to Step Down after the Golf Incident], *AERA*, February 26, 2001, p. 16.

3 The Institute of Social Science at the University of Tokyo focused Vol. 2 of its 失われた10年 project on political transformations, focusing to no small degree on Koizumi's leadership. See *'Ushinawareta 10-nen' o koete II: Koizumi kaikaku e no jidai* [Overcoming the Lost Decade, Vol. II: The Era Leading to the Koizumi Reforms] (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 2006).

Keizō's debilitating stroke, which would later prove to be fatal) was seen to be a core feature of party stability during Japan's long era of postwar growth, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. It was, however, ostensibly incapable of creating bold or painful-but-necessary initiatives in the wake of the puncturing of Japan's late 1980s Bubble Economy. And so Koizumi — the neoliberal, the nationalist, the leader, the charismatic and singular voice — could embody various potential hopes and fears about where the lost ten years had left Japan.

It is nearly equally tempting, more than ten years later, to assign similar weight to the 2013 return to power of Koizumi's initially short-lived successor, Abe Shinzō. After all, whether we consider Abe's frothy blends of nostalgia and dynamic hawkishness, or of his expansive monetary policies and historical revisionism, or of his diplomatic activism and opposition to progressive mobilization at home, one might—depending on one's preoccupations—see the hallmarks of where Japan had to end up after twenty years of limited economic growth, reshuffling of labor markets, continued reliance on the United States, and widening uncertainty regarding opportunities outside of a narrowing set of economic, educational, and employment relations. If we are not concerned primarily about presentism in current discussions of, say, 2001, we ought at least be worried about the tendency toward teleology—that 2001 can be made comprehensible only because of its place in a process that led inexorably and necessarily to the Japan that Abe Shinzō leads and seemingly wants to reshape.

For this reason, I focus in this paper on a moment that seemed for a time to be a turning point, the moment that ushered in the post-“Lost Decade,” before it became an extended lost two decades. Nearly forgotten today—save for a few small monuments in Uwajima, the coastal town whose fisheries high school lost four of its students in the ocean south of Honolulu that afternoon in 2001—the *Ehime Maru* incident was described at the time as a genuine crisis for the US-Japan relationship, one resolved through the heady work of the two governments and by the care and consideration given to Japanese sensibilities by the US Navy and civil society organizations, especially those led by Japanese-Americans. If it mattered politically, it was mostly as a *coup de grâce* to Mori's career as prime minister, therefore triggering the unlikely election of Koizumi as his successor. But in retrospect it captures and intertwines, at a rough mid-point of the lost two decades, two features that help to define the era: the ease with which the nation could be reified through the representation of a unified national emotion, as well as the persistent reminders of the limits on national action. Indeed, representations at home and abroad of national grief following the *Ehime Maru*'s sinking provide a glimpse of the questions of national will, political efficacy, and personal tragedy that have reappeared periodically, most dramatically after the 2011 tsu-

nami and nuclear disaster. That the collision was so quickly forgotten, particularly after Koizumi's mobilization of Japanese security forces after the 9/11 attacks, only adds to its potential relevance as a milestone of loss in Japan's lost decades. After all, it is relatively natural to ascribe emotional weight to the lost decades: anxiety, despair, unease, and so forth. But it is worth considering what is disclosed by these representations, and what it means to suggest that losses not only exist, but are felt by the national body.

### **The Politics of the Lost Decades**

Koizumi's rise so completely eclipsed his immediate predecessors that it is easy now to forget how unlikely it was. Concerned about his rapidly declining popularity, the LDP pushed for Mori to resign and eagerly called for a party leadership, using new rules meant to underscore the responsiveness to public demand in the wake of the Mori disaster. Rather than allowing only Diet members to choose the prime minister, as LDP rules had before 1998, and rather than giving Diet members more voting power than prefectural LDP members, as had been the case between 1998 and 2001, the post-Mori rules afforded prefectural members more clout than the Diet members themselves. Koizumi took his message directly to local voters, who flocked to him over the clear favorite among party leaders, former Prime minister Hashimoto Ryūtarō.<sup>4</sup> Selected in a backroom deal made all the more shoddy and graceless by Obuchi's coma, Mori inadvertently provoked a singularly democratic moment in the LDP's long history. Koizumi's personal charisma worried his opponents, particularly on the left, because of the rightist populism he seemed to share with George W. Bush and other demagogues. But his style provoked for many, especially in the Western media,<sup>5</sup> the idea of a fundamental change: perhaps not one reducible to Koizumi himself, but emblematic of institutional and economic shifts that made enforced austerity possible, remilitarization imaginable, and the end of the lost decade seemingly within reach. Indeed,

Mori's name, in contrast, more often comes up alongside those of other short-lived prime ministers known as much for the disastrous and speedy ends of their tenure as for anything they had ostensibly achieved in office. With his single-digit approval rat-

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4 Ikuo Kabashima and Gill Steel cover this episode and its implications extensively in *Changing Politics in Japan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

5 See, for example, "The Man Who Remade Japan," *The Economist*, September 14, 2006 (<http://www.economist.com/node/7916942>. Accessed November 30, 2015).

ings at the time of his departure, Mori may lie at the edge of a bell curve, but he is nearly matched by Asō Tarō, Hatoyama Yukio, and, of course, the almost forgotten Uno Sōsuke, who managed to remain in power for two months in 1989 before capitulating to popular demand and resigning after weekly magazines revealed he had been inappropriately stingy with his mistress. And they are together emblematic of a political system depicted variously as stagnant, rudderless, and yet somehow always in crisis. For at least a few years, Prime Minister Koizumi's appearance on the scene was depicted as an epochal event, with Koizumi himself cannily running against enemies in the supposedly unified LDP even more fervently than against the comically disorganized opposition, which was treated as barely an afterthought. His subsequent 2004 campaign slogan — “Change the LDP, Change Japan” — emphasized his iconoclastic nature, as did his promise of short-term pain through neoliberal financial and budgetary reforms in order to accomplish long-term solvency. The return of a revolving-door premiership after Koizumi's resignation in 2006 hinted that perhaps observers had been wrong to invest so much hope in Koizumi and his consequences. The story of national stagnation returned unblemished, waiting for similarly revolutionary moments to pull the country from its doldrums: the 2009 victory of the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), or Prime Minister Abe's nationalism and expansionary Abenomics. It would require someone to take action.

In her superb overview of political and social debates in the first of Japan's two lost decades, Tomiko Yoda writes, “It is the terrifying prospect of disappearance, not so much of the master narrative but of the desire (and agency) that used to generate it, that calls for the apparition of the modern today.”<sup>6</sup> This reading sits uneasily alongside political accounts of the lost decades, which revolve largely around the machinations, institutional decisions, and strategies of self-interested political actors rewriting the Japanese electoral practices, bureaucratic rules, and financial policies, all of them leaving powerful legacies that affect options and choices today. The postwar multi-member-districts with single-nontransferable-votes (MMD/SNTV) electoral system became a mixed single-member-district/proportional-representation system, affecting party strategies and composition.<sup>7</sup> Public spending targeted at particular

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6 Tomiko Yoda, “A Roadmap to Millennial Japan,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 99:4 (Fall 2000), pp. 629–668, at 664.

7 For two good overviews, see Ellis S. Krauss and Robert Pekkanen, “Explaining Party Adaptation to Electoral Reform: The Discreet Charm of the LDP?” *Journal of Japanese Studies* 30:1 (2004), pp. 1–34; Ethan Scheiner, “Does Electoral System Reform Work? Electoral System Lessons from Reforms of the 1990s,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008), pp. 161–81.

constituencies declined through the period, replaced by more programmatic spending, shifting incentives for politicians and voters alike.<sup>8</sup> The need to reach voters on issues of national rather than regional interest may have driven important changes in foreign policy initiatives of key leaders.<sup>9</sup> In this more formal reading of institutions, what has been “lost” has been the kind of political flexibility and pork-barrel payouts enabled by long-term economic growth, as well as the voting system that militated against the formation of a stable opposition party capable of commanding an electoral majority. Yoda’s argument, however, puts priority on the representation of a public sense of national powerlessness, echoing important work by a number of Japanese scholars who aim both to problematize and to engage seriously what — not just economic, but rather cultural, spiritual, emotional — was seemingly lost in the lost decades.<sup>10</sup>

### Recovering the *Ehime Maru*

The *Ehime Maru* story has since been described as one of recovery and mutual understanding, but for many months the media focused primarily on loss: personal, communal, and national. Several of the basic facts of the accident are in little dispute: in the afternoon (local time) of February 9, 2010, the *Ehime Maru*, owned by Uwajima Fisheries High School in coastal Ehime prefecture and operated for long-range fishing training, was an hour off the coast of Honolulu, where it had briefly stopped for maintenance, when it was suddenly struck from below by the *USS Greenville*, a US Navy nuclear submarine executing a rapid ascent. The *Greenville*’s commander, Scott Waddle, had commanded the ballast blow to simulate evasive maneuvers in order to entertain civilian VIPs—many of them connected through political donations to the new President, George W. Bush—on board as part of the Navy’s Distinguished Visitors

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8 Gregory W. Noble, “The Decline of Particularism in Japanese Politics,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 10 (2010), pp. 239–273.

9 Frances M. Rosenbluth, Jun Saito, and Annalisa Zinn, “Japan’s New Nationalism: The International and Domestic Politics of an Assertive Foreign Policy.” In Masaru Kohno and Frances M. Rosenbluth (eds.) *Japan and the World: Japan’s Contemporary Geopolitical Challenges* (New Haven: Yale Council on East Asian Studies, 2008), pp. 229–250.

10 There are exceptions, such as Uno Shigeki’s “1990 nendai nihon no shakai kagaku: Jiko hansei to sono keishō” [Japan’s Social Sciences in the 1990s: Self-Reflection and its Progression], *Shakai kagaku kenkyū* 58: 1 (September 2006), pp. 99–123. Much of the more provocative and critical work on the politics of the lost decades in Japanese comes from history, sociology, and cultural studies. See, for example, *Sengo Nihon Sutadi-zu* [Postwar Japanese Studies], eds. Iwasaki Minoru, Ueno Chizuko, Kitada Akihiro, Komori Yōichi, and Narita Ryūichi. Tokyo: Kinokuniya Shoten, 2008.

Program, a public relations effort meant to build and maintain the Navy's connections with powerful political, economic, and journalistic voices. The *Ehime Maru* was broken nearly in half, with its nine victims apparently unable to escape the vessel because the ruptured oil lines had made it impossible to grip the railings that might have allowed them to pull themselves to safety. The *Greenville* immediately called for help from the Coast Guard and did not approach the survivors, many of them in life rafts and clinging to floating debris, reportedly because moving closer would have produced waves that could have further imperiled them.<sup>11</sup> In the months that followed, Waddle and two others were punished, Waddle with an honorable discharge and the other officers with demotion, but there were no criminal charges filed, most likely because doing so would have encouraged Waddle and his subordinates to implicate the Distinguished Visitors' Program as a mitigating factor. The US Navy paid compensation to the victims' families as well as to Ehime Prefecture, allowing for the building of a new *Ehime Maru*. Most dramatically, it engaged in an expensive and technically difficult but successful raising and search of the *Ehime Maru*, allowing for the reclamation of eight of the nine victims in October-November 2001.

This decision—which came after substantial debate within the United States, including angry outcry that repeated apologies from the US Navy, the Department of Defense, Department of State, and even President Bush had been insufficient to quell public outcry in Japan—was trumpeted by both governments as reflecting American recognition of Japan's national affective needs. While Japanese political figures debated how far to push the United States, and to do what, one key area of agreement was about the distinctiveness of Japanese views of family and death. Where Americans were depicted as rational and clinical in their approach to death, Japanese were emotionally invested in their loved ones, particularly in the need to have bodies returned so that they might be cremated and buried according to Buddhist traditions.<sup>12</sup> American representatives were quick to highlight these differences, and therefore the care that the United States was putting into Japanese perspectives of death showed just how compassionate and decent an ally it was. Ambassador Thomas Foley, who had been scheduled to leave Japan because of the end of the Clinton administration, stayed on for additional weeks to manage the crisis. Responding to a question from a Japa-

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11 National Transportation Safety Board, "Marine Accident Brief" (No. DCA-01-MM-022), September 29, 2005, pp. 1–2, 25–27

12 See particularly Nawa Kiyotaka, "Itai to reikon: *Ehime Maru* jiken yori miru" [Dead Bodies and Souls: Examining the *Ehime Maru* Case], *Taishō Daigaku Sōgō Bukkyō Kenkyūjo nenpō* [Annual of the Institute for Comprehensive Studies of Buddhism] 27 (March 2005), pp. 112–115.

nese journalist that invoked the American decision to leave the bodies of the dead in the Japanese attack in December 1941 at the bottom of Pearl Harbor, Foley answered:

Well, I think it is sometimes very difficult for people in each culture to fully appreciate and understand the attitudes in other cultures. When John F. Kennedy, Jr., and his wife were lost in an aircraft accident, they had a ceremony at sea, commending their bodies to the deep in effect. As in the case that you mention, the USS Arizona, we often regard the bodies of those lost at sea as a special matter for respect and that there is more attention and demand often; and it is an understandable but different part of the culture in Japan to recover the bodies at virtually every opportunity where it's possible.

This differentiation was repeated extensively in Japan, and became a signal point uniting left and right in the discussion of the incident. In one heated exchange in the Diet, Japan Socialist Party stalwart Den Hideo argued that the government needed to put more pressure on the United States to respect Japanese feelings:

At the same time, it's been said that there are cultural differences in the ways in which the American side and the Japanese side are approaching this, and I feel the same way. Actually, for Japanese people, family-centeredness (*kazoku-shugi*) is, so to speak, extremely important. You could probably say the same about all of Asia. America is all about individualism, so even when family members die, it's sad and regrettable, but it's still seen from the perspective of individualism. And that's different from Japan.

... And I actually think that in a sense, it's the perfect opportunity to give a piece of our mind to the Americans, to explain without restraining ourselves how Japanese feel and think. Americans are under the impression that they themselves are the world's "Number One" (*nambā wan*) in all matters. And isn't it about time for us to say, no, that American democracy, the culture of America, and of Americans, simply isn't the best in the world?<sup>13</sup>

Foreign Minister Kōno Yohei, clearly trying to limit the damage to the US-Japan relationship, responded generally about US behavior, emphasizing the care that the Amer-

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13 Kokkai gijiroku, Sangi-in Gaikō Bōei Iinkai [Minutes from the House of Councillors Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defense] February 27, 2001.

icans had put into the disaster response and what it said about the recognition of Japanese needs:

I think it's definitely correct to make sure that the United States is thinking about how to deal with this problem while obviously taking care to consider the feelings of the Japanese people, or perhaps Japan's spiritual culture. In particular, Ambassador Foley has demonstrated a great deal of heart-felt consideration (*kokoro zukai*). He's been ambassador here for an awfully long time and was supposed to return home, having finished his term at the end of this month, but he said that he would stay on a little longer because of this problem that occurred right before his departure. Of course, in America, there are people like this who really understand Japan, though I know that there's a part of America that can't understand. But I believe it's necessary to take efforts to make them understand.<sup>14</sup>

And so when the United States raised the boat in an operation sufficiently demanding and expensive that the Discovery Channel made a documentary<sup>15</sup> about it, emphasizing the skill and courage of Navy divers, the recovery would be understood as a successful case of crisis management: sending a "costly signal" to an ally to demonstrate concern and understanding.<sup>16</sup> Professor George Tanabe, a specialist on Japanese religion at the University of Hawaii, helped to advise the Navy on the need to raise the bodies as well as their proper treatment under Buddhist doctrine;<sup>17</sup> But

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14 Kokkai gijiroku, Sangi-in Gaikō Bōei Iinkai [Minutes from the House of Councillors Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defense], February 27, 2001.

15 *Deep Salvage: Raising the Ehime Maru* (dir. Herrie ten Cate, 2003). See video at: <http://www.discovery.com/tv-shows/discovery-presents/videos/deep-salvage-recovery-divers/>

16 Curtis H. Martin, "The Sinking of the Ehime Maru: The Interaction of Culture, Security Interests and Domestic Politics in an Alliance Crisis," *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 5:2 (2004), pp.287-310.

17 George J. Tanabe, Jr. "Japanese Need Body Remains of *Ehime Maru* Victims," *The Honolulu Advertiser*, February 25, 2001. Available online at: <http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/2001/Feb/25/225opinion17.html>. Accessed March 19, 2011. A Ministry of Foreign Affairs diplomat would later write a follow-up article for a publication that enthusiastically reported on the role of civil society organizations, including those of Japanese-Americans, in explaining Japanese customs to Americans in the wake of the accident. See Nakamura Kuniko, "Kenkyū nōto: Bei-taiheiyō gun no dōmei maneijimento taisaku to shimin shakai to no renkei—*Ehime Maru* jiko to sono ato no yūkō kankei" [Research Note: The Connections between Civil Society and Management of the US Naval Pacific Alliance—The *Ehime Maru* Accident and Friendly Relations Afterward], *Gaimushō chōsa geppō* [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Research Monthly], FY 2008, No. 3 (February 2009), pp. 33-55.



the discursive frame on which this understanding was built was shaky at best. Japanese are lost at sea every year—often in accidents involving fishing boats—and the Japanese Coast Guard’s search and recovery guidelines are similar to those of the United States: guided by current, temperature, expense, likelihood of discovery, and so forth. Similarly, the United States is hardly the dry-eyed, unsentimental manager of dead bodies both governments suggested; leaving aside continuing (!) efforts to locate the remains of soldiers missing in action since the Vietnam War, even Foley’s example of John Kennedy Jr.’s death is misleading. The bodies were commended to the deep, but only after the plane had been raised and there had been a funeral for the three victims of the air crash on board a Navy vessel.

There is also the legitimate question of cost. The one price that the US Navy seemed unwilling to pay was anything that might have jeopardized the Distinguished Visitors Program, in which VIPs are invited on board Navy vessels to meet the crew, dine with officers, and see what more than a billion dollars each year can produce. Additionally, the \$60 million price tag of the recovery operation included as its largest outlay a contract for the use of the oil exploration vehicle *Rockwater II* to handle the raising and movement of the *Ehime Maru* to a shallow water site to search for bodies. While Halliburton was not yet the household name it would later become because of its deep ties to Vice-President Richard Cheney and its role in the Iraq War, it was a politically well-connected oil firm that happened to own, through its subsidiary, the *Rockwater II*.<sup>18</sup>

Despite these more sordid aspects of the US operation, it was an opportunity for some in Japan to celebrate the alliance. Commander Hayashi Hideki, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force’s liaison to the US Navy in the operation, wrote an extraordinarily personal account of the effort, reporting that the American sailors cried and waved to the Japanese families when watching them through flowers into the ocean near the spot of the recovery: “I will never forget what I learned from them about the wonderful tradition of ‘honor’ (*meiyo*) of the US Navy.”<sup>19</sup>

While the family members of the victims — or at least the eight who were found — were by all accounts glad to have their bodies returned for funerals, they still ex-

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18 Greg Baumann, “*Ehime Maru* Recovery Successful,” *Faceplate: The Official Newsletter for the Divers and Salvors of the United States Navy* 6:1 (March 2002), pp. 3–5, at 4. See also Captain Charles A. Bartholomew and Commander William I. Milwee, Jr., *Mud, Muscle, and Miracles: Marine Salvage in the United States Navy*, 2nd Edition (Washington, DC: Department of the Navy Naval Sea Systems Command, Naval History & Heritage Command, 2009), p. 457.

19 Hayashi Hideki, “‘Meiyo’ to wa nani ka: *Ehime Maru* jiko o tsuyaku to shite mitodoketa kaijō-jeikan no omoi,” *Seiron*, February 2003, pp. 318–327, at 326.

pressed outrage over the Navy's unwillingness to prosecute Waddle. And of course their grief was too complex and open-ended to allow for the "closure" that Waddle's subsequent book *The Right Thing* argued he had brought to the families by visiting Japan more than a year after the accident and laying a wreath at a memorial to the lost students and sailors.<sup>20</sup> Agreeing to meet with Waddle, but at a hotel in Tokyo rather than anywhere in Uwajima, the informal leader of the families, Terada Masumi, later reported that she experienced *jiseki*, or self-reproach, because she found herself unable to forgive Waddle despite his breaking down in tears and expressing remorse when she showed him photos of her son Yūsuke. Her grief, however, ran against the simplifying claims of both governments, as well as of the rumored efforts of leaders even in Uwajima to encourage the families, who had received financial contribution and in most cases the bodies of their sons, to stop pushing for more—the criminal conviction of Captain Waddle, the elimination of the Distinguished Visitors Program—than the honorable way in which the United States Navy had ostensibly comported itself.<sup>21</sup>

In March 2001 testimony to the Diet, one of Japan's leading international relations scholars, Soeya Yoshihide, discussed his own visit, at the invitation of the United States Navy weeks after the accident, to Honolulu, where he was allowed to tour a nuclear submarine of the same class as the *Greenville*, with explanations of the submarine's actions, purposes, and capabilities. He mentioned that the Japanese visitors had been "handled sensitively" (*senshitibu ni atsukatteiru*), just as they had in the aftermath of the notorious 1995 rape of a schoolgirl in Okinawa by three American service members. He would in the end focus on concerns surrounding *shutaisei*, which one might define as subjectivity, or autonomy, or, as I think may be appropriate here, as agency. Soeya argues that this is a common concern across Japan's political landscape, from both the right and the left, though with a pervasive sense that the US-Japan alliance itself has robbed Japan of its autonomy. Soeya disagrees, arguing that battles between left and right, frequently targeting the United States, have prevented Japan from building a middle-ground consensus that will actually generate agency in the event of an emergency.<sup>22</sup>

Soeya's explicitly moderate position in some ways avoids easy criticism of the

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20 Scott Waddle (with Ken Abraham), *The Right Thing* (Nashville: Integrity Publishers, 2002).

21 Ikeda Naoki, "Ehime de nani ga okotta ka?" [What Happened in Ehime], *Ōsaka no machi* 53 (2003).

22 Kokkai gijiroku, Sangi-in Kokusai mondai ni kansuru Chōsakai [Minutes of the House of Councillors Survey Group on International Issues], March 7, 2001.

United States and its handling of the crisis. It does, however, invoke questions of national agency that lay at the core of the accident and its aftermath. Two key demands from the victims' families were left unmet: the criminal prosecution of Captain Waddle and the abolition of the Distinguished Visitors' program. Instead, what Japan got was something akin to the demand from MP Den: a recognition of and respect, even sensitivity, toward the common emotional needs of the Japanese people. The construction and representation of national emotion, as well as its acknowledgment by the United States government, together became nearly a substitute for the agency that critics across the political spectrum had long demanded.

### **From Mori to Koizumi and Beyond**

Former Prime Minister Mori has said that the whole *Ehime Maru* golf incident was misconstrued, that the information he was given while on the golf course was minimal and that he was told not to rush back to the Prime Minister's office until more details had come through.<sup>23</sup> It is not clear that his decision forced him to lose his job; after all, his dwindling popularity might have made it difficult for him to stay in power even had he dropped his club on the green, reached for his phone, and demanded that Ambassador Foley meet him immediately at the Prime Minister's Office. But it would have *felt* right, and would certainly have seemed to represent a moment of leadership in action, the kind of agency that Japanese leaders have so frequently been accused of abdicating.

National emotion—a collective feeling, one expressed by officials and embodied by a state—is of course a kind of fiction, even if most Japanese were understandably saddened by the deaths of the nine men and boys, and angered by the revelation that they had been killed by a US nuclear submarine performing an exciting emergency maneuver to entertain wealthy guests. So too is the notion of national agency, as if policies flow from the collective and deliberate actions of a country as a whole. But the articulation of a common mood and the presumption of a unified subjectivity together give the nation its force. Mori's decision to continue playing golf may even capture exactly how constrained Japan's choices were at that moment. And, if so, it may suggest why hope has been produced among many observers, both within Japan and

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23 Mori "Mori Yoshirō motoshushō — Ehime Maru jiken no sai ni gorufu tsuzuketa riyū o akasu" [Former PM Mori Clarifies the Reason He Stayed on the Golf Course during the *Ehime Maru* Incident], *Shūkan Post*, December 7, 2012. Available at: [http://www.news-postseven.com/archives/20121202\\_157304.html](http://www.news-postseven.com/archives/20121202_157304.html).

without, at the moments within the lost decades when it seemed that political figures were going to do something—whatever that something might be, and however difficult it might be to expect that something to manage the challenges of the contemporary global economy, or to offset the inequities of contemporary geopolitics.

Some version of the excitement about Koizumi, about the DPJ's success in 2009, and now Prime Minister Abe's return might well have occurred without the *Ehime Maru* accident and the damage it did to the last of the pre-Koizumi LDP prime ministers. But if the collision and its aftermath should be seen as less than a turning point in Japanese politics, they certainly reflect other than good-hearted alliance management. They might instead be seen together as a temporary moment of reckoning at the midpoint of the lost two decades: one that emphasized the durable constraints on national agency even as it reaffirmed the affective ties that were supposed to have produced it. That it did so ten years before the March 11 disaster suggests that the lost decades are perhaps less about loss—certainly not the personal losses of victims and their families—than about repetition, in the continual reminders of the limits of politics despite cruelly recurring signs of change.