

Shinzo Abe, Japan's Longest-Serving Prime Minister, Dies at 67

Mr. Abe was shot on Friday during a campaign event. Before he left office in 2020, he helped pull his country out of economic malaise but fell short of his most cherished goal: to normalize Japan's military after decades of postwar pacifism.



By Motoko Rich

Published July 8, 2022 Updated July 11, 2022, 12:20 p.m. ET

Shinzo Abe, the longest-serving Japanese prime minister, who made it his political mission to vanquish his country's wartime ghosts but fell short of his ultimate goal of restoring Japan as a normalized military power, was assassinated on Friday in the city of Nara, Japan. He was 67.

His death, from injuries sustained in a shooting during a speech at a campaign event, was confirmed by Dr. Hidetada Fukushima, professor in charge of emergency medicine at Nara Medical University Hospital.

Mr. Abe, the scion of a staunchly nationalist family of politicians that included a grandfather who was accused of war crimes before becoming prime minister, made history by leading Japan for nearly eight consecutive years, beginning in 2012.

It was a remarkable feat of longevity not only because of Japan's record of rapid turnover in prime ministers, but also because Mr. Abe himself had lasted just a year in an earlier, ill-fated stint as the country's leader.

His long run in office, however, delivered only partial victories on his two primary ambitions: to unfetter Japan's military after decades of postwar pacifism and to jump-start and overhaul its economy through a program known as Abenomics.

And in August 2020, just four days after he had set the record for the longest uninterrupted run as Japanese leader, Mr. Abe resigned as prime minister because of ill health, a year before his term was set to end.

One of his most significant moves as prime minister came in 2015, when he pushed through legislation that authorized overseas combat missions alongside allied troops in the name of "collective self-defense" after huge public protests and a contentious battle with opposition politicians.



Mr. Abe winning the leadership vote of his Liberal Democratic Party in 2018. He was Japan's longest-serving prime minister. Toru Hanai/Reuters

But he failed in his long-held dream of revising the war-renouncing clause of Japan's Constitution, which was put in place by American occupiers after World War II. Mr. Abe, in the end, proved unable to sway a Japanese public unwilling to risk a repeat of the horrors of that war.

Under his economic program, Mr. Abe imposed a form of shock therapy that involved cheap cash, government spending on stimulus projects that expanded the country's debt and attempts at corporate deregulation. The combination delivered results in the early years of his term, lifting the economy out of an unrelenting malaise and raising Mr. Abe's international profile.

A key factor in Mr. Abe's economic platform was an effort to empower women, as he argued that increasing their participation in the work force would help counterbalance a declining and aging population. But some of the early promises of his "Womenomics" agenda — such as drastically raising the proportion of women in management and in government — did not come to fruition.

On the international stage, Mr. Abe was one of the few world leaders to maintain a consistently close relationship with President Donald J. Trump. He hosted two visits by the American leader, including one in which Mr. Trump met the newly enthroned emperor, Naruhito.

Mr. Abe also hosted President Barack Obama when he became the first American president to visit Hiroshima, the site of one of the two atomic bombings by the United States at the end of World War II.



Mr. Abe with President Obama at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial in 2016. Doug Mills/The New York Times

And after years of a chilly relationship with China, Mr. Abe tried to usher in a warmer era, making the first visit to Beijing by a Japanese prime minister in seven years when he met with President Xi Jinping in 2018.

After the Trump administration pulled out of a multinational trade agreement among the United States and 11 other countries around the Pacific Rim, Mr. Abe kept the remaining countries in a coalition that enacted the pact in 2018 without the United States.

He met dozens of times with the Russian president, Vladimir V. Putin, in the hopes of negotiating a settlement over four contested islands north of Japan that were seized by the Soviet Union at the end of the war.

Mr. Abe's father had long tried, and failed, to resolve the territorial dispute, and the son was unable to resolve it, too. As a result, the countries have yet to sign a peace treaty to officially end the war between them.

‘History Is Harsh’

While Mr. Abe worked to cultivate diplomatic and trade relations around the world, he never lost sight of his nationalist agenda at home.

A year after taking office in 2012, Mr. Abe visited Yasukuni Shrine, which honors Japan's war dead — including war criminals from the World War II era. Although he largely avoided further visits, he resisted calls for Japan to more fully apologize for its wartime atrocities, a sore point with its neighbors South Korea and China.

Under his watch, Japan's relations with South Korea fell to one of their lowest points since Japan's colonial occupation of the peninsula, with the two countries arguing over how Japan should atone for its history.



Mr. Abe at the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo in 2012. The shrine honors Japan's war dead, including war criminals. Shizuo Kambayashi/Associated Press

When Mr. Abe gave the first speech by a Japanese prime minister to the U.S. Congress in 2015, he acknowledged the weight of the past but avoided a direct personal apology for Japan's role in the war.

"History is harsh. What is done cannot be undone," he said. "Our actions brought suffering to the peoples in Asian countries. We must not avert our eyes from that."

On what was the 70th anniversary of the end of the war, he reiterated his support for past official statements of remorse, but also seemed to suggest that Japan had done enough. "We must not let our children, grandchildren and even further generations to come, who have nothing to do with that war, be predestined to apologize," he said.

Shinzo Abe was born on Sept. 21, 1954, in Tokyo to Shintaro and Yoko Abe. His mother was the daughter of Nobusuke Kishi, who had been accused of war crimes by the occupying Americans, but who was ultimately released from prison without appearing before the Allied war crimes tribunal. He served as prime minister from 1957 to 1960 and ardently opposed the Constitution that his grandson, half a century later, would try to revise.

Mr. Abe's father also went into politics, serving as foreign minister and as an influential leader in the Liberal Democratic Party, which has governed Japan for all but four years since the end of the war.



Mr. Abe, center, in 1988 with his father, Shintaro Abe, right, who was a powerful figure in the Liberal Democratic Party. The younger Mr. Abe began his political career in 1982 as executive assistant to his father. The Asahi Shimbun via Getty Images

There was perhaps little question that Mr. Abe would eventually follow his father and grandfather into politics. He studied political science at Seikei University in Tokyo and spent a year at the University of Southern California, also studying political science.

After a brief stint at Kobe Steel, Mr. Abe began his political career in 1982, serving as executive assistant to his father, who was then foreign minister.

He married Akie Matsuzaki, a daughter of a former president of Morinaga, one of Japan's largest confectionary companies, in 1987. The couple never had children.

The Japanese news media — and Mrs. Abe herself — occasionally described her as Mr. Abe's "at-home opposition party," because she opposed nuclear power, which he supported, and expressed more progressive views than the prime minister on issues like gay rights.

After his father died in 1991, Mr. Abe was elected to his parliamentary seat from Yamaguchi Prefecture in southwestern Japan in 1993.



Mr. Abe breaking a sake barrel in celebration after winning his parliamentary seat from Yamaguchi Prefecture in 1993. The Asahi Shimbun via Getty Images

His first big break came in 2000, when he was appointed to serve as deputy chief secretary of the Liberal Democratic Party.

In that role, Mr. Abe accompanied Junichiro Koizumi, a popular maverick prime minister, to Pyongyang in 2002 to meet with the North Korean leader at the time, Kim Jong-il, to negotiate the release of Japanese citizens said to have been abducted by North Korean agents. The North released five abductees, and the politicians brought them back to Japan.

For Mr. Abe, championing the cause of the abducted citizens and their families remained a preoccupation for the rest of his life, and contributed to his hawkish views on North Korea. During his tenure, he encouraged a discussion about whether Japan should acquire the ability to fire weapons that could strike missile launching sites in enemy territory if an attack appeared imminent, a debate clearly tied to a rising nuclear threat from the North.

Rise and Quick Fall

Mr. Abe's first rise to Japan's top job came in 2006, when he was elected leader of the Liberal Democrats and became the first Japanese prime minister born after the end of the war.

From the start, he emphasized his desire to revise the pacifist Constitution and nudge Japan toward some level of independence from the United States, which provided Japan with security in exchange for renouncing a full-fledged military and allowing American troops to be based around the country.



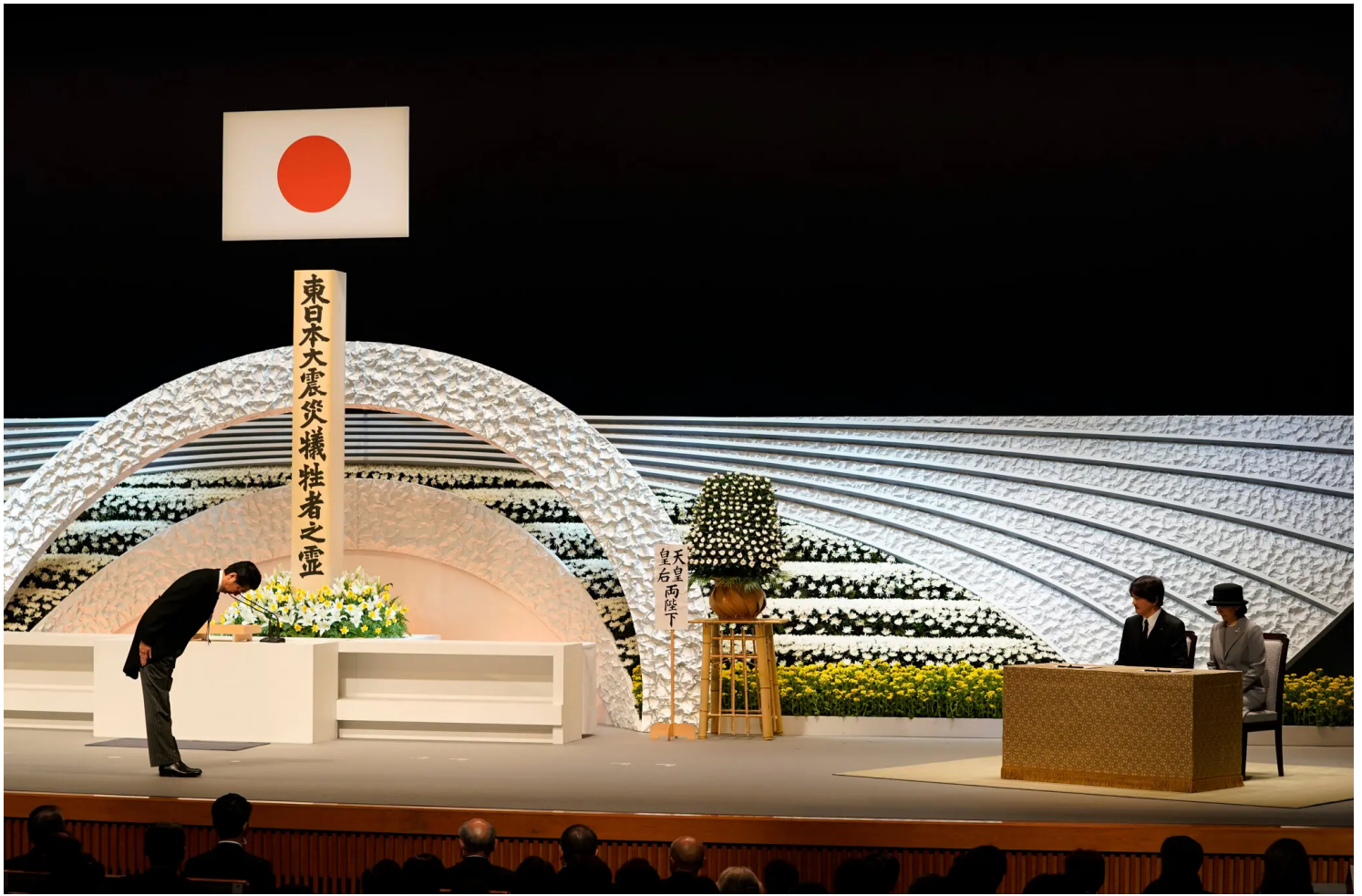
Mr. Abe in 2006 with Sadakazu Tanigaki, center, and Taro Aso, both of whom he defeated to become the Liberal Democratic Party's leader and Japan's prime minister. Koichi Kamoshida/Getty Images

“By entrusting our national security to another country and putting a priority on economic development, we were indeed able to make great material gains,” Mr. Abe wrote of the postwar era in his campaign book “Toward a Beautiful Country.” “But what we lost spiritually — that was also great.”

In seeking to revise the Constitution, Mr. Abe angered China and South Korea, two victims of Japan's 20th-century militarism. He also denied that the Japanese military had forced Asian women, primarily Koreans and Chinese, into sexual slavery during World War II, and he moved to alter school textbooks to present what critics called a whitewashed version of Japan's wartime history.

But within a year, Mr. Abe stumbled, plagued by scandals in his cabinet, and he was written off by the political establishment and news media. Citing ill health from ulcerative colitis, a bowel disease, he abruptly resigned in September 2007, throwing the party into disarray.

His resignation was the beginning of a steep slide for the Liberal Democrats, culminating in the party's loss of Parliament in 2009 to the opposition Democratic Party. It was only the second time since the Liberal Democrats were formed in 1955 that they had been out of power.



Mr. Abe at a 2018 memorial service for victims of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Pool photo by Shizuo Kambayashi

Yet the opposition's time in charge was marred by gaffes, and the administration ultimately collapsed as the public grew furious at its response to the Fukushima nuclear disaster after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. By 2012, voters had returned the conservative Liberal Democrats to power, with Mr. Abe once more at the helm.

He seemed to have learned some lessons from his first term in office. He focused at first on lifting the moribund economy and reversing years of deflation, pulling Japan out of the so-called lost decades that followed the bursting of a huge property bubble in the 1980s.

In targeting the economy in his second administration, "we saw he became much more pragmatic and flexible," said Yuichi Hosoya, a political scientist at Keio University in Tokyo and a sometime foreign policy adviser to Mr. Abe.

Nevertheless, he held on to his ambition of returning Japan to a stronger military footing. In 2015, Mr. Abe pushed through a package of security bills that would allow Japan's Self-Defense Forces to team up with allied troops to fight combat missions abroad. He also formed a national security council and helped increase Japan's defense budget.



Mr. Abe reviewing Japan's Self-Defense Forces in 2016. He never achieved his long-held dream of revising the war-renouncing clause of Japan's Constitution. Eugene Hoshiko/Associated Press

In 2016, his party won a landslide victory in national elections, aided in part by political inertia and a public that did not trust the opposition to govern.

But it also demonstrated Mr. Abe's considerable political skill in controlling his party and the bureaucracy in a country where few prime ministers have managed to keep their jobs for long. "To create stable economic growth and play an important political role on the international stage, a Japanese political leader needs to stay in power for a certain amount of time," Mr. Hosoya said.

In the 2016 election, voters gave the Liberal Democrats and their allies more than two-thirds of the seats in Parliament — a supermajority that, in theory, could have given Mr. Abe the votes he needed to revise the Constitution.



Mr. Abe with President Donald J. Trump and their wives, Melania Trump and Akie Abe, in 2017. Mr. Abe was quick to cultivate a relationship with Mr. Trump. Al Drago/The New York Times

After Mr. Trump's election victory, Mr. Abe shrewdly curried favor with him, rushing to New York to be the first world leader to meet with him after his triumph, and developing a close relationship through golf games, multiple phone calls and personal meetings.

The flattery helped forestall what many in Japan had feared would be swift demands for damaging trade deals or higher payments by Japan for hosting close to 55,000 American troops on bases across the country.

A Tarnished Tenure

Mr. Abe led his party to two more commanding victories in national elections, but he lost the supermajority in 2019 and was never able to push through a revision of the Constitution.

A string of influence-peddling scandals tarnished his standing, and disappointment over his tepid progress on women's equality, the country's perilously low birthrate, a series of natural disasters and, later, disapproval of his handling of the coronavirus pandemic and an associated economic downturn distracted from his nationalist agenda.



Mr. Abe announcing his resignation in 2020. Even after stepping down, he continued to wield considerable influence from behind the scenes. Carl Court/Getty Images

“By the yardsticks that he inherited and went into politics wanting to do, his tenure was a failure,” said Tobias Harris, an expert on Japanese politics at the Center for American Progress in Washington and the author of “The Iconoclast: Shinzo Abe and the New Japan.”

“He didn’t revise the Constitution, and there are still a number of restrictions on the use of force,” he added. “The notion that Japanese people have more national pride or have come around to his view of history — I don’t think that’s the case. These questions that have been around for decades remain as contentious as always, so I don’t think you could say he won hearts and minds over to his ideas.”

“So in that sense,” Mr. Harris said, “he did not succeed in the kind of transformation that he wanted to achieve.”

But even after he stepped down as prime minister, Mr. Abe continued to wield considerable influence from behind the scenes. His handpicked successor Yoshihide Suga, Mr. Abe’s chief cabinet secretary, succeeded him when he resigned. When Mr. Suga was forced from office, Mr. Abe supported Sanae Takaichi, 60, a hard-line conservative, to be Japan’s first female prime minister. When she did not gain enough votes in a first round of party voting, Mr. Abe supported the eventual victor, Fumio Kishida, a moderate establishment pick, in order to prevent one of his chief rivals, Taro Kono, a former foreign and defense minister, from winning.

He could still draw enormous attention by floating controversial ideas, such as a proposal that Japan host American nuclear weapons.

And as the Liberal Democrats campaigned for an upcoming Upper House election, Mr. Abe’s long-cherished hope to revise the Constitution remained a key plank in their platform.

Mr. Abe is survived by his wife, Akie Abe; his mother, Yoko Abe; and his brothers: Nobuo Kishi, Japan’s defense minister, and Hironobu Abe, who retired in March as the chief executive of Mitsubishi Corporation Packaging.

In a speech in August 2020 to mark the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II, Mr. Abe focused almost exclusively on the Japanese victims of the war, either on the battlefields of Asia, in air raids on cities across the country or in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

He made no references to learning the lessons of history.

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