

Scariest earthquake may be yet to come – in California

By Simon Winchester, Newsweek

All of those broken bones in northern Japan, all of those broken lives and those broken homes prompt us to remember what in calmer times we are invariably minded to forget: the most stern and chilling of mantras, which holds, quite simply, that mankind inhabits this earth subject to geological consent—which can be withdrawn at any time.

For hundreds, maybe for thousands of people, this consent was withdrawn with shocking suddenness—all geological events are sudden, and all are unexpected if not necessarily entirely unanticipated—at 2:46 on this past clear, cool spring Friday afternoon. One moment all were going about their quotidian business—in offices, on trains, in rice fields, in stores, in schools, in warehouses, in shrines—and then the ground began to shake. At first, the shock was merely a much stronger and longer version of the temblors to which most Japanese are well accustomed. There came a stunned silence, as there always does. But then, the difference: a few minutes later a low rumble from the east, and in a horrifying replay of the Indian Ocean tragedy of just some six years before, the imagery of which is still hauntingly in all the world's mind, the coastal waters off the northern Honshu vanished, sucked mysteriously out to sea.

The rumbling continued, people then began to spy a ragged white line on the horizon, and, with unimaginable ferocity, the line became visible as a wall of waves sweeping back inshore at immense speed and at great height. Just seconds later and these Pacific Ocean waters hit the Japanese seawalls, surmounted them with careless ease, and began to claw across the land beyond in what would become a

dispassionate and detached orgy of utter destruction.

We all now know, and have for 50 years, that geography is the ultimate reason behind the disaster. Japan is at the junction of a web of tectonic-plate boundaries that make it more peculiarly vulnerable to ground-shaking episodes than almost anywhere else—and it is a measure of Japanese engineering ingenuity, of social cohesion, of the ready acceptance of authority and the imposition of necessary discipline that allows so many to survive these all-too-frequent displays of tectonic power.

But geography is not the only factor in this particular and acutely dreadful event. Topography played an especially tragic role in the story, too—for it is an axiom known to all those who dwell by high-tsunami-risk coastlines that when the sea sucks back, you run: you run inland and, if at all possible, you run uphill. But in this corner of northeast Japan, with its wide plains of rice meadows and ideal factory sites and conveniently flat airport locations, there may well be a great deal of inland—but there is almost no uphill.

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