

Remembering the Konoe Memorial: the Battle of Okinawa and Its Aftermath 近衛上奏文を想起して 沖縄戦とその後遺症

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I first visited Okinawa in 1961 as a junior officer aboard the USS Pollux (AKS 4), a part of the service squadron of the Seventh Fleet. When it sailed into "Buckner" (Nakagusuku) Bay, on the southern part of the island, I had not begun the study of Japanese language, and had no chance to meet local residents. Several years later while in graduate school I came to realize the importance of the relationship between secret U.S. military base construction on Okinawa and the tumultuous events that had occurred on the Korean peninsula a decade earlier. The more I learned the clearer became the connection between the disastrous American policy of perpetuating Korea's division ever since 1945 and the pivotal military role the Pentagon consigned to Okinawa.

Yet it was not until the late 1990s, while teaching at Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo, that I had a chance to discuss the wartime history of Okinawa with an Okinawan student. I can dimly recall her saying that her father worked for the U.S. military and that her mother worried about her safety in Japan because in comparison to rough Tokyoites Okinawans were a gentle, patient people. To me her words indicated an important difference in consciousness, shaped by the islands geostrategic position in the East China Sea between China and Japan, and by Okinawa's relationship to both countries dating back many centuries.

Today, whenever I think of Okinawa, I cannot help recalling the Showa Emperor Hirohito, who pushed the mobilization for total war to its utmost limits. In early 1945, when most of the imperial navy's warships rested beneath the seas and the U.S. strategic bombing of Japanese cities had just begun, Hirohito queried his senior statesmen and others for advice on how to proceed. They recommended continuing the war. The sole exception was Prince Konoe Fumimaro. February 14 is the seventieth anniversary of the day Konoe presented his famous written report to Hirohito in which he told him that after endless defeats the war was irrevocably lost and His Majesty should immediately surrender, without negotiation. This was a key moment, for Hirohito's fateful response--we're going to hit them hard one more time, then we'll talk about it--was the prelude to the Battle of Okinawa.



Prince Konoe Fumimaro

Six weeks later the suicidal battle that Hirohito insisted had to take priority over ending the war started. Before the fighting came to a virtual end on June 23, 1945, incalculable damage had been wreaked on the people of Okinawa. There is in Mabuni, in the southern part of the island, a Peace Museum and a "Cornerstone of Peace" that honors all who died in the fighting. As of June 30, 2014, the names of over 14,000 Americans who were killed or wounded are on the Cornerstone together with the inscriptions of 82 British citizens. But residents of Okinawa Prefecture (149, 329) and Japanese from all other prefectures (77,380) account for the largest number of inscriptions. Most of them were killed in air, sea, and land bombardments. They included men, women, young boys and even

children whom the Japanese military recruited in stages into their reserves without regard to age. Others whose blood was sacrificed as the fighting proceeded and who are memorialized were Korean laborers, "comfort women," and Taiwanese.

Students of this final land battle in the Pacific note that Japanese army officers tended to distrust the local residents, viewing them as racial inferiors and potential enemy collaborators. As the situation on the battlefield worsened, Okinawans whom they accused of being "spies," were deliberately murdered; many who sought shelter in caves with Japanese troops were forced to commit mass suicide. Yet, so far as I know, no documents have come to light showing that the emperor took responsibility upon himself for anything that happened as a result of his fateful decision to ignore Konoe's warning.

We should indeed question whether it was really necessary for an all but defeated Japan to fight this battle since it capitulated shortly after the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on the undefended cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Soviet forces entered the war. While the fighting on Okinawa dragged on, however, military leaders who participated with Hirohito in making decisions thought they needed to buy time to prepare for the defense of the homeland. Hence Hirohito's order to Army Chief of Staff Gen. Umezu Yoshijiro, to have the Okinawa operational commanders (Lt. Gen. Ujishima Mitsuru heading the 32nd Army and his chief of staff Cho Isamu) defend the island to the bitter end; hence also Hirohito's radio message to Ujishima in May urging him to fight on (*Showa tenno dokuhakuroku*). Nor should we forget the sending of the navy's giant battleship, the "Yamato," to Okinawa without air cover, as part of a special attack force. This may also have been decided at the emperor's

urging. No sooner had the "Yamato" put to sea than U.S. aircraft sunk it off Bono-misaki, southwest of Kyushu with the loss of more than 4,000 lives.

Although Hirohito intervened often in military operations, he shirked the enormous responsibility he bore for his speech and actions and blamed his subjects when something went wrong. The very way he approached life and his office prolonged the war. The Showa emperor attributed the loss in the Battle of Okinawa to the "incongruity of land, sea and air operations." When his aides questioned him in 1946 about his wartime experience, he called it "an utterly foolish battle" (*Showa tenno dokuhakuroku*). Hirohito's actions concerning Okinawa did not end with Japan's surrender. In 1947, he suggested to U.S. government officials that the military occupation of Okinawa should continue "25 to 50 years or more."

Hirohito never visited Okinawa after 1945, though his son, Emperor Akihito, visited the island with Empress Michiko in 1993 and 1995. In his travels Akihito apologized for the suffering caused by the war but carefully avoided any mention of the Showa emperor's wartime behavior or his message of September 1947 requesting that America's military occupation of Okinawa and the Ryukyu chain continue. As Hirohito wished, U.S.-occupied Okinawa remained politically detached from Japan. Under the San Francisco Peace Treaty it continued to serve as an American military outpost. After the island's "reversion" in 1972, it functioned as a joint U.S.-Japan military outpost throughout the remainder of the Cold War and up to the present day.

The modern benchmarks of the Okinawan

people's relationship with Japan and the U.S. are easily identified: 1879, when the Meiji government took full possession of Okinawa; December 1945 when the House of Representatives Election Law was revised and the residents of U.S.-occupied Okinawa Prefecture, no longer under Japan's control, were deprived of suffrage rights. Japan retained sovereignty over Okinawa but the Constitution was never properly applied there, even after May 1972, when Okinawa formally reverted to Japanese rule. Most of the U.S. bases have remained, and today about 74 percent of all U.S. bases in Japan are still concentrated in this one prefecture.

Thus, Okinawa was integrated into the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty system and a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA)--by definition an inherently unequal neo-colonial agreement--applied to the entire prefecture. This meant that U.S. military personnel could not get away as easily as they did during the Vietnam War with raping bar hostesses and committing capital offenses because Japanese laws and constraints were, in theory, applicable to U.S. military personnel and their family members who committed crimes. Only in this sense could the reversion be called an improvement. In the meantime, mainland Japanese restored a relationship that allowed them to deal with the prefecture's residents, the poorest in all Japan, as though they were an indirectly colonized people. Survivors of the Battle of Okinawa, however, never forgot what was done to them and continued to speak out in publications that increased over the years about the war and the unfair location of the bases.

The modern problem of U.S. overseas imperialism began more than a century ago when the U.S. used Cuba as a flashpoint to launch a unilateral war of aggression against the Philippines concurrently with seizing Guam,

the largest island in Micronesia, and taking Puerto Rico and Cuba in the Caribbean. These events, codified in the Treaty of Paris, marked the start of a new age of American expansion. It was motivated ideologically by the idea of an inherent "right" or "mission" or "duty" to expand, which "God" had supposedly bestowed on racially superior White Americans. (Efren Rivera Ramos, "The Legal Construction of American Colonialism: The Insular Cases (1901-1922)", *Revista Juridica Universidad De Puerto Rico*, V. 65, N. 2, 1996, p. 287).

After incorporating the islands of Puerto Rico within their colonial empire, American elites developed the political methods and the legal and class structures for their long-term control. They won the consent of the Puerto Rican elites, and later, after the two world wars, insured their permanent subordination. The Congress, the Supreme Court, and the Paris Treaty were among the instruments applied to secure control over Puerto Rico. The Philippine islands lay at the far edge of the American empire and were never destined to receive even unequal citizenship status. In the course of bloodily subjugating most of the archipelago, the U.S. cultivated the local Filipino elites, built up a security apparatus, and relied on the army, police, courts, and pro-American propaganda to end resistance and entrench American colonial rule. Japan's political class had a much less difficult task with respect to Okinawa. The leaders of the Liberal Democratic Party needed only to use their treaty relationship with the U.S. and their control of the National Diet to keep Okinawa's bases functioning as they and the Showa emperor wished.

Today Okinawa remains a de facto Japanese colony and a joint Japan-U.S. military outpost. Similarly, Puerto Rico and Cuba's Guantanamo Bay and naval base--site of the infamous U.S.

torture prison--continue as de facto American colonies more than a century after Spain formally ceded them and the U.S. forced a new Cuban government to sign a lease agreement to Guantanamo. What makes American behavior far more dangerous to people living in Okinawa, however, is (a) the environment created by the presence of about 28,000 U.S. military personnel and their family members who number more than 19,000; and (b) the fact that they, together with the American civilians employed by the military, do not have to comply with Japan's Constitution or its laws and customs.

When the smoke of the battlefield cleared, the central and southern parts of Okinawa were destroyed. Soon the U.S. military began to confiscate Okinawan land without compensation to the farmers who owned it in order to build bases in violation of Article 53 of the Hague Convention on the Laws and Customs of War on Land (1907). The U.S. thus guaranteed that the prefecture would remain Japan's poorest. For seventy years the political essentials of the residents' situation has remained unchanged. Okinawan civilians patiently endured both America's exercise of power at their expense and Japan's unequal, undemocratic treatment of them as second-class citizens.

Looking closer, during the Korean War Americans operating under the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, flew B-29s sorties from Okinawa's Kadena air base to bomb both South and North Korea. Concurrently, they incinerated Korean civilians with napalm, which they splashed everywhere they could. During the 1960s and early 1970s when the U.S. was fighting the Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian people, the U.S. Air Force waged a napalm and cluster bomb campaign against the helpless women, children and elderly people of

Indochina. Most of them lived in the South, in what the Pentagon called "free-fire zones" and in the densely populated Mekong Delta. Okinawans remember that gigantic, high-flying, supersonic B-52 bombers from their island and Guam dropped not only bombs but also the carcinogen Agent Orange, a powerful herbicide, along the "Ho Chi Minh trail," and in South Vietnam and Cambodia, causing immense human and environmental damage (Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (Viking, 2015)).



On Okinawa, Agent Orange was stored in oil drums that eventually leaked into the soil. Okinawan civilians endured not only this environmental destruction, but also noise pollution and airplane and helicopter crashes. U.S. military or military-related persons--marines as well as soldiers--sometimes killed or injured Okinawan civilians but were seldom indicted and tried in Japan as criminals under Japanese law. A notorious example of the danger occurred in 1995 when two U.S. Marines and a Navy seaman raped a twelve-year-old Okinawan girl. This event turned many Okinawans against the bases that violate their right to live in peace.

Former Governor Nakaima Hirokazu expressed lip service to the Okinawan movement for relocating the Futenma Air Station out of Okinawa Prefecture, but running for his second term he betrayed his constituents. Governor Onaga Takeshi came into office in late November 2014 as an opponent of further base construction. He has been slow in taking actions to block base construction. Can it be the "democratic" practice of professional politicians to ignore the demand of 80 percent of the prefecture's residents for no more bases, then to go ahead and use their legal authority to authorize a *new* land reclamation and base construction project? Protest movements on Okinawa together with the Abe Shinzo government's reform agenda and its reckless conduct of international affairs are testing as never before Japan's diminished democratic potential.

The Okinawan people's movement to stop the construction of a massive new Marine base and heliport at Henoko, and prevent the destruction of pristine coral and dugong in Oura Bay, has become well known outside of Japan. Okinawan perseverance inspires persons who support grass roots democracy and oppose U.S. militarism and racism. They realize there can only be disorder when people suffer injustice and are denied a voice in deciding matters absolutely vital to their lives. Seen from this perspective, popular resistance to the construction of the costly new base poses a direct challenge to Prime Minister Abe and other ambitious members of his right-wing LDP, who wish to be untethered from the military constraints of their Constitution. Will they ignore the wishes of the prefecture's inhabitants and force the Okinawans to bend to military necessity as they define it? In brief: will geostrategic considerations alone determine how the Abe government and the Pentagon handle the base issue? Whatever factors shape thinking on this matter, the

decision-makers will have to deal with the consequences of repressing the will of the Okinawan people.

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This is an extended version of my article "Konoe josobun kara 70 nen" that appeared in *Ryukyu shimpo* on Feb. 12, 2015.

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