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Okinawa, Then and Now

by Mike Millard

In 1967, I was shipped from Miramar Naval Air Station, in San Diego, California, to a small utility squadron based at Naha, Okinawa, then an American-run island with a Japanese culture that had been captured in bloody fighting during World War II. Okinawa had “good liberty,” I was told by the old chief who processed my orders, by which he meant that it was a fine place for drinking and whoring, and better than months at sea launching bombing raids against Hanoi. Okinawa sounded all right to a teenage Navy aviation electronics technician enduring the final throes of an adolescence increasingly distorted by the distant thunder in Vietnam.

Not distant enough, at times. Following an auto accident, I had just spent three months in a Navy hospital ward with a broken jaw, lying next to a skinny, red-headed Marine whose lower jaw had been blown clean off by a Viet Cong bullet. Where his mouth should have been a clear plastic tube disappeared into bandages. A Navy cook whose gunboat was blown up beneath him was suffering through skin grafts to replace what had been burned away from his face. Guys sat on the porches of their wards with white-taped stubs for limbs, forever mutilated, nearly all of them under 20. My broken jaw didn't seem so bad in comparison. But a few months hidden away in the Oakland hills with warehouses of blown-to-hell kids changed my ideas about the projecting of U.S. military force, 25 years before the truth of the matter would occur to then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara.

The next 18 months on Okinawa were a dark period of drinking to forget, of not caring whether I learned anything much about Japan, ending with a taste of bitterness as Americans were shipped back from Asia, confused like I was about the meaning of the war and not exactly welcomed home. My memories, therefore, are like puzzling shards of ancient pottery.

I recall, for example, a night of drinking in the “Ville,” a bar district outside the air base at Naha, stumbling down an alley around midnight with a girl whose name I have long since forgotten, when she told me in broken English that it was New Year's and we ought to go to the shrine. I followed along and we joined in with thin streams of pilgrims that gradually thickened into thousands flowing up a hill above the South China Sea to the Naminoue Shrine atop a great jutting slab of rock. We slowly made our way upward with the oozing river of nighttime humanity to the front of the shrine, where amidst scented clouds of incense we threw money into a rectangular box overseen by several robed Shinto

priests. She clasped her hands in a brief prayer. I had no idea what any of it signified, but she seemed to feel better for it. I did not even know, and perhaps neither did she, that Shinto had been imported into Okinawa by the Japanese and played no role in the indigenous Okinawan religion.

I remember piling into small taxis with my buddies Hickory and Oakes, going on liberty, racing down dusty oiled roads in the descending twilight to the glittering neighborhood that was our goal. The taxi would stop, the doors would swing open, and we would enter the warm night air where girls in sexy dresses stood in the neon glow at the entrances of clubs, enticing us, "Hey, GI, buy me a drink!" It was a rare evening that we managed to walk past more than two or three doorways.

Back home we weren't old enough to drink, but on Okinawa we could do whatever we wanted when we had money. Of course, we quickly learned that when we ran out of money, we lost our charm, so we played the game of trying to give up slowly what the bargirls wanted quickly. We would try to make drinks last through the evening, but it was difficult, and generally a paycheck didn't last more than two or three nights. Then it was the barracks for the remainder of the two weeks.

We would usually begin an evening at our squadron's hangout, the King Bar, where the girls knew us well and had little interest in us: we were E4 and below, and therefore not exactly rich. We would have a couple of serious drinks there, maybe whiskey, and set off on an adventure, bar-hopping our way around the Ville. Some nights we would stop at Jack's, an approved "A-sign" restaurant, for a steak and a beer. Then it was off to more exotic attractions. There was a bar, I recall, that featured a beautiful girl who danced naked with a huge python wrapped around her.

I remember one night when some army guy belted me in the mouth after I said something, and I was so drunk I chased him out onto the street and flailed away at him as he punched me several more times. The next morning I found that my lip was split down the center and it took quite a few stitches to close it up.

Another night some black dudes came into the Ville instead of going to the Bush, "their" bar district in Koza, and beat up a white guy. There were rumors of race wars, and a guy from a P 3 squadron showed me a flare pistol concealed under his Hawaiian shirt.

Fortunately, nothing ever came of it.

I met a girl from Waseda University, in Tokyo, who was walking around "observing" the GIs. We danced a bit and talked. We wrote to each other after I was transferred, and we even met in San Francisco after I got out of the Navy in the late 1960s. She liked to read Jean Paul Sartre and Herman Hesse and Yukio Mishima. One afternoon she and I came upon a march, Okinawans demanding that their island be given back to Japan, so we joined in. I was all for getting U.S. troops, including myself, back home and it was a time to demonstrate your feelings openly.

But mostly we Americans just did our jobs, kept airplanes flying with radios that worked, and when we were off work we drank and bought sex from girls in short-time hotels

behind the Ville near the beach. I didn't know anything then about yakuza gangsters who recruited the girls from families that were in their debt. It was just a wild place too far from home. What seemed at first like a paradise for young men quickly became a bore and then a jail for too many of us working to support a war that few of us thought was a good idea anymore.

One afternoon Hickory, Oakes and I went to the place we called the Seawall, below Naminoue Shrine. It was a natural cove with several rickety wooden bridges reaching out over clear water to small shacks on pilings where you could buy beer and snacks. We sat at tables in the sun and kept the jukebox blaring. We were rockers who preferred Jimi Hendrix or the Beatles, as opposed to rednecks who favored Merle Haggard or Buck Owens. We were friends with a lot of rednecks. It was just a distinction that was observed during those war-polarized years.

Painted rowboats plied the water, children swam and laughed as their parents watched them from the platforms above. We drank tall, icy bottles of beer and talked about getting out of the Navy. From up the coast from Kadena, two sets of huge, dark aircraft, swept-wing B-52s, climbed at a sharp angle into the sky, on their way to lay waste to Southeast Asia. People glanced at us strangely. We were resented as intruders. We could feel it.

“War birds,” Hickory called the planes. He was a tough, smart kid with a fondness for difficult novels. Later that night, we sat in the tropical evening outside our barracks on a soft grassy knoll, below a rusting Japanese gun emplacement left from the Battle of Okinawa. Hickory, leaning against a palm tree, broke down and began sobbing that “It wasn't supposed to be like this.” Being betrayed is something you never forget. Our officers had told us that we were “protecting America,” but it was on Okinawa that I realized we, all of the young, naive guys in the service then, had been sold out for greed, careers, ego, stupidity, whatever. Every few months I would get a letter from home telling me that another friend had been killed. It was then, on Okinawa, that I figured out that while governments might be composed of brilliant people, they didn't always perform intelligently.

Revisiting the Past

On September 4, 1995, three American GIs, not so dissimilar from myself thirty years ago, rented a car and prowled the backroads of Okinawa. Drinking heavily, they stopped at Kadena Air Base for more beer, condoms, and duct tape. They taunted each other about “the worst thing you ever did.” They were Marine privates first class Kendrick Ledet and Rodrico Harp, both of Georgia, and Navy seaman Marcus Gill of Texas. After they abducted and raped a 12-year-old schoolgirl and were apprehended by military authorities, their pictures were splashed across the pages of Japanese mass-circulation newspapers with a glaring headline that translated roughly as “Devil Soldiers!” Their deeds would trigger a crisis in U.S.-Japan relations that continues today.

Although the commander of U.S. forces in Japan and the U.S. ambassador both apologized for the rape, by September 26 about 3,000 Okinawans took to the streets calling for the

removal of U.S. bases from the island. On September 29, Gill, Harp, and Ledet were charged and turned over to Japanese authorities, but on October 21, about 85,000 Okinawans poured into the streets around the bases in the largest anti-military protest in the island's history. Then, incredibly, on November 17, the commander of U.S. military operations in the Pacific, Admiral Richard C. Macke, publicly commented that the three GIs were just stupid because for the price of their rental car, they "could have had a girl," outraging even mainland Japanese officials. Macke was forced into early retirement for his undiplomatic, even if true, remark, which illustrated how the U.S. military continues to view Okinawa and the Pacific region through neocolonial glasses.

Two years later I landed at the same airport on the outskirts of Naha where I had been stationed 30 years before, where C-130 cargo aircraft had taken off every day for Vietnam and returned the next day, empty and ready for the next load, and from which P-3 antisubmarine prop jets had patrolled the waters off China and the Soviet Union. But there was no Soviet Union now. As we shuddered down toward the runway in the Japan Airlines jetliner, I could see the blue-green Okinawan sea where I used to snorkel along the shallow coral reefs just offshore. We touched down and taxied past the military hangars, where I used to fix electronics gear in aircraft. There were still P-3s there, new models, marked with the red circle of the Japan Air Self-Defense Force.

Naha Air Base was returned to the Japanese in 1972, when the Ryukyu Islands reverted to Japanese rule. By that time, I was studying journalism on the GI Bill in Eugene, Oregon, and Okinawa had become a modest world news story. The United States kept the enormous Kadena Air Base and numerous other installations up north of them, including facilities for nuclear submarines and a live artillery firing range. They cover about 20 percent of the island, much of the best land. And the odd thing is that of all the American military facilities in Japan, about 75 percent of them are on tiny Okinawa, less than one percent of the Japanese land mass. There are more than 50,000 U.S. personnel on the island today, and the 1995 rape of the schoolgirl was not the first serious crime committed by Americans. There has been a string of incidents. In 1955, an American military officer raped and killed a six-year-old girl; in 1959, a jet fighter crashed into an elementary school killing 17 children and injuring 121 others; in 1963, a high-school girl was killed by a U.S. military truck; in 1965, a fifth-grade schoolgirl playing in her garden was killed by a U.S. military trailer dropped from a helicopter; in 1968, a B-52 heading for Vietnam crashed just after takeoff, creating an anti-U.S.-military movement on the island; in 1970, a car driven by an American civilian struck an Okinawan pedestrian and military police fired shots to intimidate the crowd that gathered, setting off riots in which 73 vehicles were set afire. In the past twenty-five years since Okinawa's reversion to Japan, there have been 127 aircraft accidents, 137 brush fires caused by military exercises, and 12 cases of Okinawans killed by American personnel.

I arrived back in Naha in October 1997, to interview Okinawa's controversial Governor Masahide Ota. Two well-groomed young men in dark suits from the governor's office met me. I asked to go first to Naha Airbase, where I had been stationed all those years before. Lieutenant Colonel Tateki Shinjo of the Japanese air force met me at the gate and we drove up a hill from where we could see the whole base, airstrip, hangars, buildings. We

stood atop the old World War II-era gun emplacement, its barrel bent and rusty. Many of the sturdy cinder-block facilities from the U.S. days were still in use. I thought I recognized my old squadron area, but I wasn't quite sure. Only the hangars and flight line looked exactly as I remembered them. It seemed to me that we were standing directly behind where the old barracks once were: the pattern of the hills seemed the same, and the distance to the flight line and the placement of the golf links, which were now an obstacle course for Japanese servicemen. It seemed strange to me somehow that this should be a Japanese facility again, as it had been before the war.

My two guides were not allowed onto the base, perhaps because the troublesome prefectural government was not popular with the national government, one of them suggested to me with a grin. He asked where else I would like to go, and I told him to Naminoue Shrine, on the hill at the edge of the sea.

As we drove down from the base toward Naha, it was quickly apparent that the changes in 30 years had been immense. I recognized only the contours of the land, the hills, the port before entering the city. The roads were now wide boulevards bordered by modern buildings. Naha no longer resembled Mexico, as I recalled it, but was indistinguishable from modern Tokyo. The squat, cinderblock typhoon-proof houses had been replaced by multi-story business structures, neon signs worthy of the Ginza, restaurants, retail stores, crosswalks, traffic signals, and well-dressed pedestrians. Naha seemed like simply another part of contemporary Japan. We skirted the seashore and pulled up alongside a hilly park-like area. "Here's the shrine," Iida, one of my guides, said, gesturing out the window.

I was lost.

We walked up a wide concrete roadway toward a small vermilion shrine that seemed smaller than I remembered it, not to mention that it was now imbedded in a dense urban area instead of perched on a great rock. But there it was, smoke rising from burning incense and the coin box in front, a few tourists milling around the grounds taking snapshots of their families in front of the Meiji-era structure. I wandered back down, to the side where I could look out over the sea. The Seawall, with its little piers that used to snake out over the cove, was gone, replaced by a bypass highway that carried traffic swiftly around the city. There was a white sand beach, however. Iida said the beach was artificial, and had been built about 20 years ago when the bypass was constructed. It was enormously popular in the summer, he said.

That night I called Toshio Hayashi, whose name I had gotten from an Okinawan journalist. Hayashi owns a small bar in Naha and also teaches college-level French and Latin on the U.S. airbase at Kadena. When I arrived at the Paradis du Lucia, located in a bustling modern entertainment district, I was greeted by a man with a wide, smiling face and a ponytail that hung nearly to his waist. He was dressed in a pastel tunic with an ornate rhinestone brooch pinned to it. Toshi, as he asked me to call him, is an unusual man with a classically trained tenor voice. His singing with karaoke accompaniment attracts a great many fans to his bar, including at least one black woman from a U.S. base who says that

“Toshi’s got soul.” As I listened to him croon a popular Mariah Carey song, I saw her point.

Toshi took me for a stroll several blocks toward the beach, where the Ville used to be located. It had almost disappeared except for Jack’s steakhouse, which still displayed its “A-sign,” the official mark of U.S. government approval. I found only one old bar, dilapidated and obviously not used for many years. We walked toward the beach where the short-time hotels had been, and found instead their modern versions “soapland” houses of prostitution, each one with a yakuza lounging in a chair or walking about in front. Business didn’t seem to be very good. “It’s still early,” Toshi explained. I was gratified that the bar district was gone, but felt strangely nostalgic for my misspent youth. As we walked back to Toshi’s bar, he told me that he had had a friend, a woman of about 50, who had recently died, but who had been a bargirl in the Ville back then. She was quite a character, he said, adding that I had probably met her.

Toshi had hired a young GI from Kadena, also named Mike, as a bartender. He was a kid in his early 20s from Chicago, a Bulls fan, and into the stock market. I asked Mike about the American bases and how the Okinawans felt about them. “We’re here to protect them,” he said genially, looking trim in an open-collar shirt, slacks, and a neat mustache. “And to protect America.”

I had heard this before. “From whom?”

Mike hesitated for a moment to think. “Well, from China,” he said.

“Are 20,000 Marines really going to stop the People’s Liberation Army?” I asked.

He thought some more.

“Or North Korea,” I offered. “What if there’s trouble up there?”

Mike broke into a grin. “Hey, I just do what they tell me, man. I don’t know why we’re here. I’m just repeating what the officers say, that’s all.” It was the same line “the officers” had given us 30 years before, but they were referring to Vietnam at that time. And of course we had believed them too, at first.

Toshi was getting interested in the conversation now, from an Okinawan perspective. “Those bases aren’t protecting anyone any more,” he said as he moved behind the bar. “The Cold War is over. We all know that. We want the bases off Okinawa. They’re just taking up all our best land.” He paused. His thick brows knitted. “On the other hand, I make several thousand dollars a month teaching on the base. I need the money.”

This is the dilemma that the whole island faces.

There really is no further rationale for maintaining the bases, not for Okinawa, not for the U.S., not even for the peace of the region, which could be secured just as well by Marines stationed in California. The bases are here because they have been for 50 years and

continue to provide comfortable overseas facilities and command opportunities for senior officers. Okinawa is still “good liberty.” Military bureaucrats are loathe to give up what is theirs, even if the training facilities are now too small on a too-crowded island, where occasional artillery shells are lobbed into backyards and sometimes airplanes fall from the sky.

The bottom line for Okinawans is that no matter how much they wish the bases would just go away and leave them in their gorgeous semi-tropical island, their average income is the lowest of any Japanese prefecture and unemployment is nearly double the national norm.

Okinawa still needs the American and Japanese money that the bases bring in, which in 1994 amounted to around 162.8 billion yen (\$1.6 billion at the then prevailing exchange rate) according to Okinawan government reckoning. More than 8,000 Okinawans work on the U.S. bases, and many thousands more are employed in the entertainment and service industries around those installations.

Money and Politics

The economic issue stood out in sharp relief last December 21 in Nago, where a non-binding referendum was held to determine whether the local residents supported the building of an offshore heliport so that the Marine Corps helicopter base at Futenma, in Ginowan, could be moved from its urban setting to the less-populated, safer location. One problem with this, of course, is that the base would not be removed from Okinawa, as promised by the Japanese and U.S. governments, but merely placed in a more remote location on the island. But the pattern for the past 50 years has been for the civilian population to build up around the bases, so that with the passage of time military installations are always located in dangerous places, surrounded by schools, hospitals, and residential areas, and ripe for disaster.

Leading up to the Nago referendum, therefore, a battle raged between the citizens who were in favor of the base and those who were not. It was opposed not only because of the usual problems of drinking, brothels and violence associated with bar districts and military bases, but also because the location proposed a beautiful coastal area just off a run-down section of Nago called Henoko, is home to rare marine life. Henoko is adjacent to a Marine Corps ammunition depot that was scaled back after the Vietnam War, and so it leaves the impression of a ghost-town with its dismal blocks of abandoned bars, shuttered and broken windows, and the occasional mangy dog darting up an empty street. Henoko needs an economic infusion as badly as any place in Japan.

Still, a newspaper poll two weeks before the voting showed the heliport was losing. Japan’s leading political party, the LDP, pulled out all the stops, canvassing the area and promising residents that their economic interests would be served by the base, that its dangers and problems would be few, and claiming that it was needed for the defense of Japan by American forces. Chikako Yoshida, an Okinawan activist who has a masters degree from Arizona State University, and who drove me around the area, said that the central government should invest in Okinawa, but in a different way. “Instead of offering

nice buildings and a community center, they should build a railway in Okinawa so that people could live in Nago and commute to Naha. That would help our unemployment problems. The bases are not the answer.”

Yoshida’s view is shared by Robert Hamilton, a former Marine Corps captain who was an artillery battery commander on Okinawa from 1986-88. One reason Hamilton has come to oppose the U.S. basing policy is that “Currently on Okinawa, serious and committed young Americans who have volunteered to serve in their nation’s armed forces are increasingly being viewed as mercenaries to be isolated and caged away from the local populace in peacetime, and only to be let loose in times of military emergency.” The proposal to move Marine Corps helicopter operations to an offshore location certainly highlighted this and called into question the Japanese commitment to the “alliance.” Hamilton argues that there is much more to being “a good and trusted ally” than simply writing a check and keeping the troops out of sight. However, Japan believes its partial financing of the U.S. garrison constitutes an alliance and, according to Hamilton, American “defense policy-makers are among the worst offenders in reinforcing this mistaken belief.”

Hamilton’s arguments are powerful because he himself has trained troops in Okinawa. His unit had about 180 artillery pieces and consisted of about 4,000 Marines. “Firing live weapons is difficult. Twenty or 30 years ago you could fire a shell into a man’s backyard, give him some money and tell him to keep quiet, and that was it. But today that’s just not possible.” Hamilton argues that the wide-open expanses of the western United States are much better training areas and that the Marines can live with their families and not feel like outcasts. “The argument that justified the American presence in Okinawa throughout the Cold War was that it was good to have a lot of Marines fairly close to Korea, so that in case of war there would be the potential of staging another Inchon landing.” That mindset still seems to exist today, although there have been revolutionary advances in logistics in the intervening years.

Hamilton believes the real reason American troops remain in Okinawa is that the Japanese government wants them there. “It’s a great deal for them. They don’t have to recruit their own young kids and send them to boot camp and incur all the social disruption that goes with that. Especially in Japan, where they initially went off the deep end into imperialism, they’ve now gone clear in the other direction and try to stay away from establishing a military. They just send several billion dollars down to Okinawa, and it’s a great deal for Japan, however you look at it.”

Hamilton says that as much as he dislikes conspiracy theories, he does believe that there is a very effective lobby on the Japanese side to maintain the American troops in Okinawa, both because they are convenient and because they are useful in bargaining to keep the U.S. markets open to Japanese export companies.

Nonetheless, the Nago referendum went against the heliport, creating a crisis for Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto’s government, which found itself in a bind between the wishes of its citizens and those of the U.S. government, its own powerful ministries, and business interests. Pressure was brought to bear, and within a week the mayor of Nago,

Tetsuya Higa, announced that he would approve the heliport despite the wishes of the voters. He then resigned, as if to atone for what he had done.

Geopolitical Winds of Change

Okinawa has not only had the geopolitical bad luck to become a military outpost for America and Japan off the shore of the emerging Chinese superpower. It is also simultaneously a cork in the bottle of a remilitarized Japan, as one U.S. general in a moment of rare candor publicly admitted, as well as a pawn in Japanese-American economic relations.

The American government would do well to reexamine the blurred policy concepts that led to its painful defeat in Vietnam. America's approach to Asia still seems based on the naive assumption that nations with heritages vastly different from the Western democracies will nonetheless evolve into "little Americas" if only they can participate in the joys of capitalism. But it doesn't take long on the ground in East Asia to realize that even with Kentucky Fried Chicken next door, Asians will remain culturally distinct, and that a one-size-fits-all foreign policy, oblivious of specific cultural and political realities, is critically deficient. In that sense, the error that was made regarding Vietnamese is being perpetuated with Okinawans and Japanese. We have failed to realize who they are, their motivations, and what is at stake for them.

Despite this, the U.S. Defense Department continues to insist that the Okinawan bases are crucial. The Japanese government is happy because foreign troops are kept far away from mainland Japan and, importantly, the U.S. garrison provides leverage to be utilized in trade negotiations. Whenever Japan's trade surplus with America soars and trade friction heats up, the inevitable chorus of Japanese officials can be heard to wonder publicly whether U.S. bases are really in Japan's interest. Editorials suddenly appear in leading Japanese newspapers that question the security relationship, and U.S. officials hurry to calm the roiled waters. A trade agreement is produced that papers over yet another American sacrifice for "the greater relationship." Both sides declare victory to the press. It is a familiar scenario.

When I came to Japan in 1988 as a journalist, it was immediately apparent that the massive trade imbalance in Japan's favor was not a sign of a healthy mutual relationship. Yet Japan was doing everything it could, making every possible argument, and greasing every political wheel in Washington to maintain the enormous trade asymmetry. Japan today enjoys an institutionalized trade surplus with the United States, and the security relationship is the glue that helps to keep it in place.

The Nye Initiative, named after former Assistant Secretary of Defense Joseph S. Nye, Jr., more officially known as the United States Security Strategy for the East Asia Pacific Region, published in 1995, declared that for the foreseeable future, U.S. troop levels in East Asia would remain at around 100,000, that the security alliance with Japan was the "linchpin of United States security policy in Asia," and that America must never allow trade friction to undermine that alliance. It even touted the U.S. defense capability as a

wedge “to open foreign markets.” Nonetheless, it doesn’t require a great deal of common sense to understand that relying on an economic adversary to finance our nation’s ability to maintain our military strength is not “a firm foundation.” There is a measure of American self-reliance being lost, of self-determination disappearing, even of self-delusion.

The Nye Initiative, however, may not mean what it says, according to Ed Lincoln, former economic attaché to the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo. When I interviewed him only days before his return in 1996 to the Brookings Institution in Washington, Lincoln asked me when his interview would be published. I assured him that it would be a couple of years, rather than a quick newspaper story, and on that basis he offered his opinion that Nye’s document was not meant to last 20 years, but only until such time as the possibility of a North Korean nuclear threat could be discounted. If North Korea’s leadership collapsed or if it ceased to threaten the stability of East Asia, that could provide an opportunity to reevaluate America’s expensive forward-deployed defense posture.

Ota’s Grassroots Federalism

Okinawa’s Governor Masahide Ota foresaw that possibility as well, when I spoke with him at his offices in Naha on October 31, 1997. Ota utilized a young woman translator for the first question, as if sizing up her abilities; then the former Fulbright scholar, Syracuse University graduate, professor and author, took over in fluent English.

In the Governor’s calculation, the bases problem will solve itself over time. American forces will be pulled out as East Asia stabilizes. Over the next two decades, American taxpayers will lose interest in spending more than \$30 billion a year to maintain an unnecessary and unwanted East Asian garrison. When that happens, Okinawa, like the Philippines, will lose an important source of income. Meanwhile, any political leverage that Okinawa enjoys today with Japan’s central government because the bases are not wanted on the “Yamato” mainland will dissipate along with their gradual removal. Ota must therefore obtain economic concessions from Tokyo now or Okinawa will remain as it is, small, beautiful and poor.

Rather than watch Okinawa’s fortunes dwindle, Ota has decided to move now and build up the economy while he has some clout in the form of public opposition to the bases. This, obviously, is a tricky maneuver. “There is a good chance that by 2015 the Korean problem will be solved and the relationship between China and America will be much better,” Ota said. “In that case, there is no need for the U.S. military forces here. Even Joseph Nye has said as much.”

Ota’s government hopes to wring economic concessions from Tokyo in exchange for a gradual reduction or relocation of the bases through the year 2015, by which time they would all be returned to Okinawan jurisdiction. By receiving preferential treatment from the central government in terms of a large free-trade zone and tariff and tax concessions that would lure investment, Ota hopes to achieve economic parity with the rest of Japan.

“The Okinawan people would like to be more independent in a way. They would like to enjoy more autonomy,” Ota said. “Okinawa used to be a kingdom that managed its own

destiny. But since Okinawa became a part of Meiji Japan in 1879, the Japanese centralization system is so strong that you have to depend on them for everything. You cannot say anything, but simply follow whatever the central government asks.”

Ota, struggling to secure from the central government the political power that Okinawans need to enhance their lives, sees not only historical precedent but also geographical reason to believe that Okinawa is a special case. “Although Kyoto, Hokkaido, and Nagano prefectures all have their own histories, Okinawa is different. Historically, they have evolved together since the Tokugawa consolidation in about 1600. But we were separate then, and after World War II as well.”

The geographically remote Okinawans have long felt “outside” the inner circle of elites who govern from Tokyo. So perhaps the Ryukyu Islands have never fully embraced the emperor based, centralized system of Japanese political and social rule that Ota says wields a tyranny of the majority over Okinawa today. “They ask us to serve the greater good, but could they say that they would do the same if the bases were in their hometowns?” Ota laughed, but without bitterness.

It is a measure of local control, a sort of federalism, that Ota and the Okinawans seek with their non-binding referendums and bargaining positions, much like that enjoyed today by the lander of Federal Germany. It is ironic that a system of Bismarckian authoritarianism continues today not in the land of its origin, but in Japan, where it was admired and emulated by Meiji samurai reformers such as Hirobumi Ito and Aritomo Yamagata.

The grassroots federalism espoused by Ota, signs of which have also emerged elsewhere in Japan in recent years in the form of civic referendums rejecting not only military bases but also nuclear power plants and garbage-incinerating facilities near population centers, seems to offer the prospect of a partial dispersion of political power from an authoritarian elite to the citizenry. Activist Chikako Yoshida said that since the 1995 rape incident in Okinawa, “More people have begun talking about Okinawan independence, about taking more autonomy from the central government. They are saying it’s possible. We didn’t think that way before.”

Okinawans are beginning to believe that they can be heard. Weary of their island’s history of being used first as a battlefield and then as a military garrison while remaining the poorest of Japan’s prefectures, this is perhaps their last, best hope—one for which they may be prepared to put up a political fight. And if this comes to pass, the American government may wake up surprised to find itself once again in a shameful position in Asia, from which it will be forced to make another embarrassing retreat.

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