

# Okinawa Occupied

*by Allen Mendenhall*

**OKINAWA IS A BEAUTIFUL ISLAND** in the Pacific. Although part of Japan, it is culturally and historically distinct, having a long list of diverse occupants and occupiers. The Allies won a decisive victory at the Battle of Okinawa in 1945. Following a massive amphibious invasion by U.S. forces, the battle was one of the bloodiest of World War II. More people died on Okinawa than during the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.

After U.S. forces defeated the Japanese, soldiers from both countries wreaked havoc on the island, allegedly raping up to 10,000 Okinawan women. The raping of Okinawan women by servicemen has continued. The most notorious incident occurred in 1995, when three U.S. soldiers beat, bound, and raped a 12-year-old girl, sparking massive demonstrations against U.S. occupation.

Okinawa is the ward of a government (Japan proper) that is, in matters military, the ward of another government (the United States). To influence political affairs that take place on the island, Okinawans appeal to bureaucrats off the island. Chalmers Johnson speaks of a “permanent collusion of the United States and Japan against Okinawa.” Indeed, for 65 years the U.S. military has had a “free ride” off Okinawan taxpayers, who foot the bill for a large portion of U.S. facilities, including utilities, maintenance, and upgrades. Next to the base are golf courses, fast-food chains, football fields, and shopping malls—luxuries that are significant on an island where land is hard to come by.

Whether the U.S. presence in Okinawa is necessary is a contentious issue. Many argue that the base boosts the local economy, generates thousands of jobs, floats small businesses, and provides rent payments and public-works money. If they mean that Okinawa produces more revenue with the U.S. military presence than it would without, they could be right. No one can say for sure. Perhaps tourism would have been a stronger industry in Okinawa without U.S. soldiers running around. Or perhaps Japan would have found a better use for the island. What we can say with certainty is that the United States has other viable alternatives to Okinawa. For instance, the senate of the Northern

Mariana Islands, a U.S. territory, recently voted to welcome the U.S. Marines currently stationed in Japan.

Lt. Gen. Terry Robling, who commands the U.S. Marine bases in Japan, argues that “We provide the Japanese government with a credible deterrence force—a highly effective, highly trained and very mobile force that is very strategically located.” Robling adds that “the stability of the region has been caused by our presence here. Over 50 years now there’s been relative peace in the Asia region.” That is like claiming that a lack of new terrorist attacks on U.S. soil is evidence that George W. Bush’s antiterror policies worked. There is no evidence—or, rather, the only evidence is the absence of evidence. There is no way of knowing what might have been if Japan instead of the United States had maintained control over Okinawa.

Robling might be correct in saying the United States deterred some conflict. But the U.S. military has also caused harm over time. Even if it made Japan safer from outside forces, it endangered many on the island. According to Defense Ministry data, U.S. military personnel were responsible for 7,277 accidents and criminal cases dating back five years from March 2009. Of these, 6,180 occurred while U.S. personnel were off-duty. The U.S. presence in Japan may also have triggered a resurgence in nationalism among countries that have unstable relations with Japan—North Korea and China, for instance, which have good reason to be skeptical of the nearby U.S. military.

When the left-leaning Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) surprised the world with its August 2009 victory over the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), many in Washington were concerned about the shift in power. Certain in his capacity to direct and coerce foreign nations, even a foreign nation that boasts the second-largest economy in the world, Barack Obama instructed his officials to meet with Japanese leaders in December. During this meeting, Japanese and American officials quarreled over a \$26 billion plan to relocate U.S. troops stationed in Okinawa. The plan, established in 2006, called for the relocation of U.S. facilities to another area on the island and the withdrawal of 8,000 U.S. Marines to Guam. The Futenma dispute, as the base controversy came to be known, triggered several protests by Okinawans who wished to see the base moved out of their island entirely.

Before the December meeting, U.S. Amb. John Roos submitted that the Obama administration expected Japan to resolve the dispute “expeditiously.” As far back as October, during a visit to Japan, Robert Gates tactlessly lectured his Japanese hosts, warning that if Japan vacated the deal, she would suffer palpable consequences: The U.S. would

refuse to transfer troops from Okinawa to Guam and would refuse to surrender parcels of land belonging to Okinawans. Gates became notorious for his rudeness in dealing with the Japanese, earning himself the nickname “Grumpy Gates.”

For his part, Hatoyama, the new face of the DPJ, retorted, “We are not discussing this on the premise that it has to be decided by the end of the year.” Hatoyama was engaged in domestic political battles, his party having broken a five-decade-long chain of uninterrupted LDP rule. Overseeing the transition from what seemed like a one-party system, Hatoyama faced the possibility that the DPJ would lose a majority in the upper house. Small wonder that during the Washington-Hatoyama standoff, Minoru Morita, an analyst in Tokyo, declared, “Hatoyama thinks the United States should be kind enough to wait on the base issue until this political problem is solved.” Joseph Nye, a former U.S. assistant secretary of defense, echoed Morita: “[W]e need a more patient and strategic approach to Japan. We are allowing a second-order issue to threaten our long-term strategy for East Asia.”

**IN JANUARY**, shortly after Japan announced that her navy would no longer support the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, Hillary Clinton met with Japanese Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada in Hawaii. She addressed the base with references to the “U.S.-Japanese alliance” and “stability for the region.” By obscuring the message of control and recasting the issue in terms of Asian security and U.S. goodwill, Clinton secured for the Obama administration a legitimate narrative of power.

Two U.S. senators, Daniel Inouye (D-HI) and Thad Cochran (R-MS), met with Hatoyama as though to bolster Clinton’s mission. Following these meetings, the United States and Japan pledged to expand ties despite the base feud. But Secretary Clinton’s claims that the United States would continue to “exercise influence” in Asia for another century ruffled the feathers of more than a few commentators in the region. (A professor at Australian National University, dubbing the Obama administration “paternalistic,” “colonial,” “anti-democratic,” and “intolerant,” summed up the dispute in one mocking phrase: “Yes we can—but you can’t.”) Clinton eventually accepted Japan’s delay, but not without mentioning that the United States “can provide resources and facilitate cooperation in ways that other regional actors cannot replicate.”

Hatoyama postponed the “final” Futenma decision until May. His government then announced, in March, that the United States had signed a secret deal with the Japanese during the nascent Cold War era. The deal allowed nucle-

ar-armed U.S. vessels to dock on Japanese soil despite the provisions of Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, which has been interpreted as forbidding the presence and possession of nuclear weapons within Japanese borders. The United States spearheaded Article 9 after World War II, and then violated the very clause it put into place.

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In late March, U.S. military commander Robert Willard proclaimed that the United States was “optimistic” about a resolution of the Futenma dispute. Bowing to U.S. pressure, Japan’s government hinted that it supported keeping the base on Okinawa. Meanwhile, Ambassador Roos, who met with Okada on March 27, affirmed that Washington would entertain Japan’s proposals about relocation. Actions speak louder than words, however, and U.S. officials had yet to make any concessions. In fact, on the same day that Roos expressed willingness to listen to Japan’s position, Hatoyama insisted that he would do everything he could to relocate the base outside Okinawa. He even suggested that he would stake his life on the base-relocation issue. Here was the prime minister of Japan admitting his limited ability to influence decisions over military bases located in his own country. How open to compromise could the Obama administration be?

In April, Japan informed the United States that the base could no longer remain on Okinawa and began to offer alternatives—such as relocating Futenma to an offshore area of White Beach in Uruma—that wouldn’t offend Obama’s minions. Japan conveyed mixed messages, however, offering first to transfer the base to Tokunoshima in Kagoshima Prefecture and then to construct a heliport in Nago that

would, in time, allow the base to be reconstructed off the Katsuren Peninsula, also part of Okinawa. Japan's sketchy plans had yet to please Okinawans, the Japanese public, or the Obama administration. Japanese support for Hatoyama sank below 30 percent, with the Futenma base a key factor. (Others included Hatoyama's economic policies and political-donation scandals.)

Taking advantage of Hatoyama's unpopularity, Obama questioned whether he could "trust" the Japanese prime minister to "follow through" on Futenma, a comment that sounded like a challenge and which one journalist called "extraordinarily harsh." Japanese officials were so offended by Obama's tone that they refused to record the exchange between the two leaders, even though it is customary for Japanese officials to document all discussions between Japanese prime ministers and foreign dignitaries.

In response to Obama's remarks, Hatoyama stepped up efforts to relocate the base to Tokunoshima. On April 20, Hatoyama's administration tried but failed to set up meetings with the three mayors on Tokunoshima. Defense Minister Toshimi Kitazawa noted on the same day that the Japanese government "must take it extremely seriously that half of [Tokunoshima's] residents demonstrated their opposition to the plan," and that under current conditions, "it would be pretty difficult for us to ask Tokunoshima to host the base." Despite the resistance of Tokunoshimans, Hatoyama reiterated his pledge to resolve the base dispute by the end of May. The United States, however, rejected all proposals to relocate to Tokunoshima. In the words of Kurt Campbell, assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, the Tokunoshima plan and others were "more concepts and ideas" than formal policies.

A Tokunoshima-based group that is opposed to the transfer of U.S. facilities to their island collected 24,000 signatures on a petition. The three mayors complained to the media that U.S. facilities would cause noise, pollution, and crime. The mayors drafted a protest letter to Obama and scheduled a rally. One mayor, Akira Okubo, said that he would send photos of the rally to Obama. Another mayor, Susumu Inamine, staged a sit-in at the Diet in Tokyo.

Meanwhile, demonstrations in Okinawa in late April drew nearly 100,000 people. Many in the crowd wore yellow as a symbol of protest. Forced to comment on these activities, Hatoyama downplayed them as just "one expression of public opinion." When he visited Okinawa days later, he informed local residents that "realistically speaking, [relocation of the base] is impossible." He was heckled. Residents of nearby Tokunoshima likewise roared over Hatoyama's potential visit to their island. One Tokunoshima

resident said that if Hatoyama tried to visit, "our old people and mothers with children will sit in the street to block his way. We'll even use our fighting bulls to stop him."

These comments came as Hatoyama declared that his pledge to move Futenma outside Okinawa was a hurdle over which his administration hoped to leap. In other words, the relocation plan was a goal, not a promise.

**ON MAY 17, PROTESTORS** on Okinawa formed a 17,000-man chain around the U.S. base. The chain was eight miles long. Unbeknownst to the protestors, this would be their last symbolic statement before Hatoyama's final decision, which came on May 23. Standing before an angry Okinawan crowd, Hatoyama announced that the base would be moved to a different location but would remain on the island.

Thus ended Hatoyama's stand against Obama and the United States. Days later, Hatoyama resigned, eight months after taking office. Neither Hatoyama nor Japan is the true victim of this story. The victims are the Japanese taxpayers and, most significantly, the impoverished, disenfranchised people of Okinawa, who will continue to live among, and pay for, an unwelcome foreign military.

It is odd that the most recent winner of the Nobel Peace Prize led the charge to continue occupying the small island of Okinawa. Why did Obama not agree to transfer the troops and base to the Northern Mariana Islands, a U.S. territory that lobbied to host them? How can President Obama effectively oust the peaceful leader of a foreign nation without the media thought police objecting to such blatant imperialism? George W. Bush ousted the violent leader of a foreign nation and will never live down his actions. Why should Obama be any different? True, Iraq and Okinawa are different places with different histories and different political circumstances. But at least Bush didn't pretend to be a saint. At least he faced public scrutiny. And at least he is out of office, living in relative obscurity, where he cannot harm our country any more than he already has.

The U.S. military does not belong in Japan. It is not welcome there, although some naively claim otherwise. The residents of Okinawa and Tokunoshima have made that clear, just as Obama has made it clear that he is as military-happy as his predecessor.

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