

Six Decades of US-Japanese Government Collusion in Bringing Nuclear Weapons to Japan.

Steve Rabson

Abstract: *The Navy ship containing nuclear bombs that a junior officer saw anchored off Iwakuni Marine Corps Air Station in 1959 was only the most notorious of many U.S. violations of Japan's official policy banning nuclear weapons. The Japanese government has a long history of secretly agreeing to their deployments, and feigning ignorance when they were revealed. The outrage that erupted in the press and in the Diet when former American Ambassador to Japan, Edwin Reischauer, spoke publicly in 1981 about nuclear-armed warships in Japan's ports came close to bringing down an LDP government. In Okinawa local residents protested the large numbers and types of nuclear weapons based there during the U.S. military occupation (1945-72). Breaking its promise that they be permanently removed, the Japanese government concluded a secret nuclear understanding as part of the 1969 Okinawa Reversion Agreement that the U.S. government could bring them back whenever it decided there was "a great emergency." In 2009 a high Japanese government official advocated their return to Okinawa in testimony before a U.S. Congressional Commission.*

Key Words: *MCAS Iwakuni, LST, Atomic Energy Basic Law, Three Non-Nuclear Principles, Bravo H-Bomb Test, Lucky Dragon No. 5, Ambassador Edwin Reischauer, Honest John rocket, U.S.S. Ticonderoga, Kadena Airbase, Okinawa Reversion Agreement, Prime*

Minister Satō Eisaku, President Richard Nixon, secret nuclear understanding, Henoko Ordnance Storage Depot, Akiba Takeo

Stewart Engel was a Navy junior officer in late 1959 when his assigned ship, *USS Carpenter*, made a port call at Iwakuni Marine Corps Air Station in Yamaguchi Prefecture, Japan.

Off our beam, moored or anchored, was an LST ["Landing Ship, Tank" or tank landing ship]. It was by far the worst rust bucket I saw in my three years of active duty. Any C.O. [commanding officer] would have been mightily embarrassed to command it. Its condition convinced me that it had not been to sea with a Navy crew for a while.

During our entire stay at Iwakuni I never saw a sailor on the ship. I did always see two Marines, one forward and one aft. Sometimes Marines are used as decorative base gate guards in their pressed uniforms with perhaps a sidearm. These were not. They were dressed for combat and heavily armed accordingly.

The peculiar arrangement caused me to inquire about the LST's purpose and I was told it was to repair electronics. That made

no sense. Anybody with equipment to repair would have carried it to a dock and scheduled a boat to go out to the LST. In addition, I saw no accommodation ladder on the side of the LST.

Clearly there was some hanky-panky going on. At the time I speculated on what it might be. My first choice was that it was actually a brig for really, really bad military personnel. A distant second choice was that it was being used to house victims of extraordinary rendition, a floating precursor to Gitmo. Both choices meant that the guards were there to keep people from escaping from the LST. Regardless of the LST's actual function, the foolishness of the cover story seemed to ensure that Iwakuni would draw more than its fair share of attention from Soviet or Chinese spies. I learned later that the hold was full of amtracs [armored tracked vehicles] packed with nuclear bombs.



Navy Ensign Stewart Engel, 1958

In 1981 former U.S. Ambassador to Japan, Edwin Reischauer, revealed publicly that the U.S. had been bringing nuclear weapons into Japanese ports for decades contrary to the government's stated policies and public understanding.¹

In fact, Reischauer had negotiated an agreement with Foreign Minister Ōhira Masayoshi in April, 1963, to accept the transit of nuclear armed warships in Japanese waters which only formalized what had been going on already. "I've long suspected," wrote Stewart Engel, "that Japanese officials approved these nukes but needed 'plausible deniability' for domestic political reasons."



Army Specialist 5 Steve Rabson, Henoko, Okinawa, 1968

Japan's "Atomic Energy Basic Law," enacted by the Diet in 1955, states that "atomic energy shall be limited to peaceful purposes, aimed at ensuring safety . . . and under democratic management." Its "Three Non-Nuclear Principles" resolution, passed by the Diet in 1971, states that "Japan shall neither possess nor manufacture [nuclear weapons](#), nor shall it permit their introduction into Japanese [territory](#)."

In his book *The Doomsday Machine: Confessions of a Nuclear War Planner* (Bloomsbury, 2017), Daniel Ellsberg writes that "in early 1960 I was told in great secrecy by a nuclear control officer in the Pacific that one small Marine airbase at Iwakuni in Japan had a

secret arrangement whereby its handful of planes with general war missions would get their nuclear weapons very quickly in the event of a general war alert." Ellsberg goes on to explain how they would be deployed.

Because of the special relation of the Marines to the Navy, there was a flat-bottomed ship for landing tanks on the beach (LST, for Landing Ship, Tank), anchored just offshore Iwakuni with nuclear weapons aboard, loaded onto amphibious tractors, just for the small group of planes on this base.



Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni with port and airfield.



U.S. Navy LST

The LST, the *USS San Joaquin County*, had a cover mission as an electronics repair ship. It was permanently stationed not just inside the three-mile limit of Japanese territorial waters but anchored a couple of hundred yards from the beach, in the tidal waters. By any standards it was stationed within the territory of Japan. So were its nuclear weapons.

In a nuclear emergency. The *San Joaquin County* would operate as it was designed to do in an amphibious landing. It would haul anchor and come straight ashore. The front of the ship would open up like a clam-shell, and amphibious tractors loaded with nuclear weapons would come down a ramp into the water or directly onto the beach, then head on land straight to the airstrip where the weapons would be loaded onto the Marine planes.

[In 1966] Edwin Reischauer, our ambassador to Japan, learned of [the *San Joaquin County's*] presence—through a leak to his office—and demanded that it be removed. He threatened to resign if it wasn't. In 1967 it finally moved back to Okinawa.²

Ellsberg later wrote, “There were major interviews in Japan after Reischauer’s revelations, in one of which I was paired with a retired general who had been in one of the highest positions in the Japanese defense establishment.”

Like other official spokespersons at the time, he maintained that the U.S. had assured the Japanese government they would inform the government of any intention or practice of introducing nuclear weapons into Japanese territory. This was in reference to nuclear weapons even aboard U.S. ships in Japanese ports, let alone permanently in Japanese territorial waters like the LST at Iwakuni. Since the U.S. had not made any such announcement to the government, the government assumed that no such introduction had ever occurred.

Every US sailor in a Japanese port knew *that* was untrue. Virtually every U.S. ship in a Japanese port had nuclear weapons aboard. But did the Japanese government know it? Yes, said former ambassador Reischauer. Moreover, he said, they knew about the LST, and accepted it, so long as the U.S. kept it secret and denied it. On the ports, the US always said “We neither confirm nor deny the location of any US nuclear weapons.” This declaration was largely to allow the Japanese government, in particular, to deny their knowledge and to lie about it.³



Edwin O. Reischauer, U.S. Ambassador to Japan, 1961-66

In an article headlined “Japan reels under Reischauer’s nuclear ‘bombshell’” (*Christian Science Monitor*, May 19, 1981), reporter Geoffrey Murray wrote,

Why did he choose now to make a statement like that? It's incredible, beyond belief." The anguish in the voice of the senior Japanese Foreign Ministry official was obvious. He was referring to claims by Edwin Reischauer, a highly respected former US ambassador to Tokyo and now a Harvard professor, that American warships carrying nuclear weapons had frequently entered Japanese ports or passed through territorial waters.

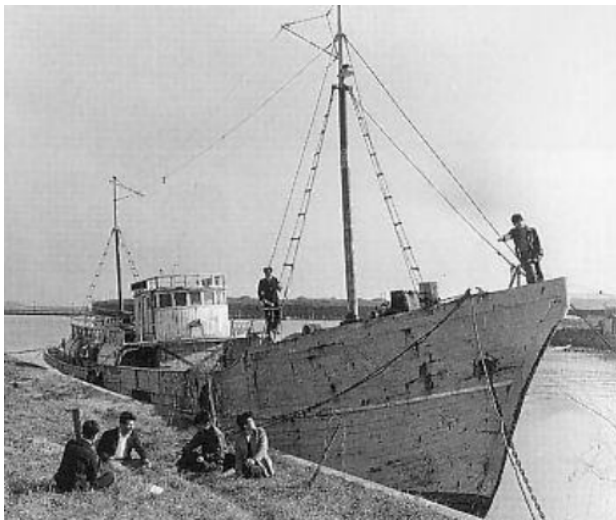
Repeatedly over the years, however, the

Japanese people have been assured by their government that visiting U.S. vessels have been "clean" in compliance with this country's three nonnuclear principles -- not to manufacture, possess, or allow introduction of nuclear weapons.

In fact, Japanese government officials have a long history of approving U.S. nuclear weapons deployments going back to 1954 when the crew of a Japanese fishing boat suffered severe radiation poisoning from the test of a hydrogen bomb in the South Pacific. The March, 1954 “Bravo Shot” H-bomb explosion dumped radioactive debris on the Marshall Islands, U.S. servicemen aboard Navy ships, and the crew of the Japanese fishing boat *Lucky Dragon No. 5*. The multi-megaton blast infected Marshall Islanders with radiation sickness and caused cancers in the years that followed. Their contaminated home on Bikini Atoll remains uninhabitable to this day. U.S. servicemen who had been purposely transported into the blast zone have suffered from multiple cancers from radiation exposure. For years their claims were denied by the Veterans Administration. It took an act of Congress in 1990 to provide compensation for them and their children with birth defects. One crew member of *Lucky Dragon No. 5*, Kuboyama Aikichi (age 40), died while in treatment with the others for radiation exposure.⁴



“Bravo Shot” H-bomb test, Bikini, March 1, 1954



Japanese scientists examine the hull of contaminated *Lucky Dragon No. 5* at Yaizu City port, Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan.

With the Diet in an uproar over the H-bomb tests and the resulting poisoned fishermen, opposition parties demanded that the Japanese government bring the case to the International

Court of Justice. On March 17, 1954, Representative Kawasaki Hideji of the Progressive Party argued that “world opinion would be deeply sympathetic to a nation that has now been victimized three times by nuclear explosions. Our foreign policy must be courageous enough to petition the International Court.” Foreign Minister Okazaki Katsuo responded that “I am confident we can resolve the issue without going to the Court.”

On April 9, 1954, Foreign Minister Okazaki explained his decision not to pursue America’s legal responsibility at a party in Tokyo given by the America-Japan Society. “We recognize that nuclear tests are indispensable to the security not only of America, but of Japan and other democratic nations. Thus, we join the other democratic nations in helping to make sure the atomic tests are successful.”⁵

For his thoroughly researched article “Japan under the US nuclear umbrella,” Hans Kristensen drew on historical records and recently declassified documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act that listed U.S. nuclear weapons deployments in Japan during the Cold War.⁶

There was in fact no such understanding. In a secret letter on July 17, 1955, the foreign minister was officially informed by the Embassy that the ambassador “made no commitments ... regarding the storage of atomic weapons in Japan” and that “the U.S. government does not consider itself committed to any particular course of action.”

In March of 1955, one year after the crew of *Lucky Dragon No. 5* had suffered radiation poisoning from the Bikini H-bomb test, Prime Minister Hatoyama Ichirō was asked at a press conference if he would permit U.S. nuclear

weapons in Japan. He responded much like Foreign Minister Okazaki Katsuo had the previous year. “If we are to sanction the present ‘peace sustained by force’ as justifiable, then I would have to allow such stockpiling.” To calm the furor that ensued, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) insisted that Japan had an “understanding” with the U.S. that it would be consulted before such deployment took place. Foreign Minister Shigemitsu Mamoru told the Diet in June, 1955, that there would be “prior consultation” with the U.S. if nuclear weapons were ever deployed in Japan. But in a classified internal report in 1957 the U.S. State Department refuted this claim.

Meanwhile, only one week after he told the Diet the U.S. would not bring nuclear weapons into Japan without asking first, Foreign Minister Shigemitsu sent a letter to the American ambassador John M. Allison assuring him that “nothing in the discussions in the Diet commits the U.S. to any particular course of action.” As noted by Hans Kristensen, “This double standard policy of secretly relieving the U.S. from any obligations before bringing nuclear weapons in, while at the same time assuring the public that specific limitations existed, would become a trademark of Japanese governments for the next four decades.”⁷

On July 29, 1955, only eleven days after the State Department’s letter, the Associated Press reported a U.S. Army announcement that it was sending nuclear missiles and Honest John artillery rockets to Japan. The report cited a “heretofore secret agreement” between the U.S. and Japanese governments permitting their deployment, but that “the Diet had not been informed.” The report made headlines in Japan. The next day Prime Minister Hatoyama, testifying in the Diet, denied any knowledge of the planned deployment and claimed there was no secret agreement. Without mentioning an agreement, U.S. Ambassador Allison released a statement that the missiles and rockets would

be sent to Japan minus their nuclear warheads. In fact, the “secret agreement” between the two governments allowed for the positioning of the weapons and their crews in Japan with the understanding that nuclear warheads would be brought in if both governments agreed that the international situation required them.⁸

However, no such subterfuge was necessary when it came to Okinawa. A prefecture of Japan until the spring of 1945, Okinawa was seized by the U.S. during the Battle of Okinawa and ruled under U.S. military occupation until 1972. This allowed American forces “freedom of operations” unfettered even by the easily circumvented laws in “sovereign” mainland Japan. The same day, July 29, 1955, that the Associated Press reported the U.S. dispatch of nuclear weapons to Japan, the Chicago Tribune reported that atomic cannons and nuclear-armed Honest John rockets were being deployed to Okinawa.

Chicago Daily Tribune
Friday, July 29, 1955
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ATOM WEAPONS REPLACE GIs IN FAR EAST

[Chicago Tribune Press Service]

Washington, July 28—Atomic cannon and rockets are being shipped to the far east to bolster reduced ground forces, the army announced today.

The army said the 633d field artillery battalion with six of the big 280 mm. cannon, and the 5th field artillery battery with Honest John rockets are being assigned to Gen. Isaac D. White, commanding the 8th army and army forces in the far east.

The army base in Okinawa announced arrival of the battalion with the atomic weapons.

Trained in South

The army said the 633d battalion recently completed training at Fort Bragg, N. C. The Honest John battery, which has six launchers, was trained at Fort Sill, Okla.

The Honest John is described as a 762 mm. rocket, about 30 inches in diameter, and has a range of 20 miles.

Although the subsequent presence of nuclear weapons in Okinawa was supposed to be highly classified information, anti-nuclear protests that greeted the arrival of Honest John rockets showed that they were hardly a secret to Okinawans. How could local residents not be suspicious of the extremely high security at the Army's ordnance storage base at Henoko where squads of armed soldiers with German Shepherd sentry dogs patrolled its perimeter 24/7, where signs along the main road passing it ordered "no stopping," and where a large area of close-cropped grass surrounded by high-wire fencing contained several oblong, sod-covered concrete bunkers with steel doors? They could easily find out that the base's "SW" designation on the sign at its entrance gate stood for "special weapons"--nuclear, chemical and biological. Among Okinawans inclined to do some research into nuclear issues, a book published in mainland Japan about the U.S. military in Okinawa noted that an unclassified Army manual describing the base's organization listed a "nuclear ordnance platoon."⁹



Nuclear-capable Honest John rocket on its truck-transported launcher.



Storage “igloos” at the Army ordnance company in Okinawa that stored nuclear weapons until 1972. (Photos by the author, 2014)

In the 1956 edition of the college student magazine *Ryūdai Bungaku*, its founder Arakawa Akira published his poem “The Colored Race,” protesting deployment of the Honest John rockets and calling for black soldiers to join Okinawans in resisting the U.S. military occupation. Occupation officials promptly shut down the magazine for one year, confiscated issues already printed, and expelled Arakawa and his co-editor Kawamitsu Shin’ich from University of the Ryukyus. One stanza reads,

The whites,
 The flabby, hairy whites
 Bring the Honest John to our island,
 Strut around arrogantly,
 And act like our masters,
 Calling us yellow.¹⁰

There could have been any number of reasons

for this crack-down on a small student publication, but nuclear weapons in Okinawa were supposed to be a military secret. According to a November, 1999 article in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, nuclear weapons had first come to Okinawa in 1954.

Deployment of complete weapons and components coincided with the U.S.-China crisis over the Taiwan straits in 1954-55. The Eisenhower administration, worried that Chinese forces might attack the offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu or even Taiwan itself, made nuclear threats and developed contingency plans for the use of nuclear weapons against China. Complete nuclear weapons were deployed to Okinawa in December 1954. That same month, the nuclear-armed aircraft carrier U.S.S. Midway deployed to Taiwanese waters. . . .

At the end of the Eisenhower administration, U.S. nuclear deployments on shore in the Pacific—at Okinawa, Guam, the Philippines, Korea, and Taiwan (but not Hawaii)—totaled approximately 1,700 weapons. There were about a dozen weapons on Taiwan, 60 in the Philippines, 225 on Guam, and 600 in Korea. The lion’s share—nearly 800 weapons—were located at Kadena airbase, Okinawa, the location of SAC’s strategic bombers. New dispersals to the Pacific region began with the Kennedy administration. By the beginning of 1963, on-shore deployments—to Guam, Okinawa, the Philippines, and Taiwan—grew to about 2,400, a 66 percent increase from 1961 levels. The on-shore stockpile in the Pacific peaked in mid-1967 at about 3,200 weapons, 2,600 of which were in Korea and Okinawa.¹¹

Stored with the Honest John rockets at the Army's ordnance base in Henoko were Nike-Hercules surface-to-air anti-aircraft missiles with nuclear warheads. They were deployed on hilltops and at airfields in Okinawa. In 1959 one of the Nike-Hercules missiles at Naha Airbase fired accidentally killing two Army crewmen and injuring one. The warhead bounced out and rolled on the ground, but did not detonate. Soldiers in Okinawa worried about the Nike Hercules. Although it was capable of destroying a squadron of Soviet MiGs, a nuclear explosion in the air would release radiation endangering everyone on the ground.



Nike-Hercules warhead, conventional version.
Nuclear version was white.

Along with the nuclear strategic bombers at Kadena airbase, nuclear-armed Mace-B surface-to-surface missiles arrived in 1961 with a range capable of attacking all of China and the Soviet Far East. An erroneous launch order issued to Mace-B crews during the Cuban Missile Crisis of October, 1962, came close to starting a nuclear war.¹²



Mace-B surface-to-surface guided missile.

Along with growing outrage in Okinawa and mainland Japan over the presence of nuclear weapons, NATO nations in Europe demanded in 1957 that they had to be deployed "in agreement" with the host country. In response, a meeting of officials from the U.S. military and the Atomic Energy Commission in January, 1958, produced the "Neither Confirm nor Deny" (NCND) policy that remains in effect today.¹³

[I]t is the policy of the United States Government . . . neither to confirm nor deny the presence of the nuclear component of nuclear-capable weapons in any another country, and that this policy would be followed in the event that U.S. officials are queried with respect to any statement made by an official of a foreign country or by any other source.

The United States refused to agree to treaty language committing it to seek Japan's approval for nuclear weapons deployments on land. In April, 1963 it secured the aforementioned agreement from Foreign Minister Ōhira Masayoshi, with an exchange of formal letters, to accept the transit of nuclear armed warships through Japanese ports and territorial waters. (Kristensen) This directly

contradicted Japan's 1955 "Atomic Energy Basic Law" that restricted nuclear energy to "peaceful purposes;" and its "Three Non-Nuclear Principles" resolution passed by the Diet in 1971 specifying that "Japan shall neither possess nor manufacture **nuclear weapons**, nor shall it permit their introduction into Japanese **territory**." Not limited to transit by ship, Navy records from 1963 and the 1972 interview of a former U.S. serviceman, published in the *Mainichi Shimbun* newspaper, indicate that nuclear weapons were delivered by air to U.S. bases in Japan. "On a number of occasions over three years beginning in 1960 we carried B-43 small nuclear bombs and others from McCord [Air] Base in Tacoma, Washington to four bases in Japan: Yokota, Misawa, Johnson (Iruma), and Kadena [in Okinawa]." ¹⁴

In March of 1961 with tensions rising in Southeast Asia over anti-government insurgencies, the U.S. Navy declared a DEFCON 2 alert, the condition immediately below the outbreak of war. Nuclear-strike aircraft carriers USS Midway, docked at Yokosuka Naval Base in Japan, and USS Lexington at Okinawa, were ordered to the South China Sea. The Japanese government was already well aware of U.S. carriers' nuclear capability. One month earlier, in February of 1961, the Chief of Staff of Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Forces (JMSDF) observed a demonstration of "special weapons delivery" by U.S. Navy aircraft from nuclear strike carriers on a three-day cruise to Okinawa. By this time Navy warships were routinely bringing both tactical and strategic nuclear weapons into Japanese ports well before the 1963 formal agreement from the Japanese government. ¹⁵



U.S.S. Midway underway in the Pacific

In December, 1965, a jet fighter carrying a hydrogen bomb accidentally rolled off the aircraft carrier *U.S.S. Ticonderoga* returning to Yokosuka Navy Base in Kanagawa Prefecture, one hour west of Tokyo. Hans Kristensen describes the accident:

While steaming 80 miles off Okinawa on December 5 enroute to Yokosuka, a nuclear weapon loading exercise was conducted onboard. An A-4 strike aircraft was loaded with a B43 hydrogen bomb and rolled onto one of the ship's elevators to be brought up to the flight deck. For reasons that remain unclear, the brakes failed and the aircraft, with the pilot still strapped in his seat, rolled overboard and sank in 16,000 feet of water with its nuclear armament. Neither the pilot, the aircraft, nor the bomb was ever recovered. The carrier's remaining nuclear weapons were still onboard when the *USS Ticonderoga* arrived at Yokosuka only two days after the accident. Japan was not informed of the accident at the time. ¹⁶

By the mid-1960's protests in Okinawa against the U.S. occupation and its nuclear-armed bases were beginning to interfere with the functioning of the American military mission. Mass demonstrations, including sit-ins at base gates and occupation headquarters, demanded a return of Okinawa to Japanese sovereignty, reduction of the U.S. military presence, and the removal of nuclear weapons. Beginning in 1967, negotiations led to the "Okinawa Reversion Agreement" between U.S. President Richard Nixon and Japan's Prime Minister Satō Eisaku, concluded in November, 1969.



Prime Minister Satō and President Nixon at the White House in November, 1969

The Japanese government had publicly pledged an Okinawa reversion with bases reduced to mainland levels (*hondo nami*) and without nuclear weapons (*kaku nuki*). Thus the actual agreement, which left the U.S. military presence intact and mentioned nothing about nuclear weapons, sparked outrage and more protests in Okinawa. Officially named in Japanese *Okinawa Henkan Kyōtei* (Okinawa Reversion Agreement), it came to be known among Okinawans as *Okinawa Henken Kyōtei* (Okinawa Discriminatory Agreement). Prime Minister Satō, who reaped enormous political benefits from the agreement in mainland Japan

and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1974, was later revealed as the ultimate betrayer.

Accompanying the Reversion Agreement, Sato and Nixon secretly signed what was officially called an "agreed minute," drafted by Henry Kissinger, later known in Japan as a "secret nuclear understanding" (*kaku mitsu-yaku*). Confirming widespread suspicions of its existence, the "secret" was uncovered in 1972, the year of the reversion, by *Mainichi Daily* reporter Nishiyama Takichi. Two decades later Wakaizumi Kei, special envoy and interpreter, published a draft of the "agreed minute" in his book *Tasaku Nakarishi o Shinzamuto Hossu* (I Want to Believe There Were No Other Options), *Bungei Shunjū*, 1994. The existence of this document has never been officially recognized by the Japanese or U.S. governments, but in 2009 Satō's son Shinji discovered it, signed by his late father and President Nixon, inside a drawer at a former family residence in Shibuya Ward, Tokyo.. The English text of the agreement reads,

Agreed Minute to Joint Communique of United States President Nixon and Japanese Prime Minister Sato (Draft)

21st November, 1969

United States President:

As stated in our Joint Communique, it is the intention of the United States Government to remove all the nuclear weapons from Okinawa by the time of actual reversion of the administrative rights to Japan; and thereafter the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security and its related arrangements will apply to Okinawa, as described in the Joint

Communique. However, in order to discharge effectively the international obligations assumed by the United States for the defense of countries in the Far East including Japan, in time of great emergency the United States Government will require the re-entry of nuclear weapons and transit rights in Okinawa with prior consultation with the Government of Japan. The United States Government would anticipate a favorable response. The United States Government also requires the standby retention and activation in time of great emergency of existing nuclear storage locations in Okinawa: Kadena, Naha, Henoko and Nike Hercules units.

Japanese Prime Minister:

The Government of Japan, appreciating the United States Government's requirements in time of great emergency stated above by the President, will meet these requirements without delay when such prior consultation takes place.

The President and the Prime Minister agreed that this Minute, in duplicate, be kept each only in the offices of the President and the Prime Minister and be treated in the strictest confidence between only the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of Japan. [emphasis added]

Washington, D.C., November 21, 1969

Despite the stated desire to keep the agreement in “strictest confidence,” its subsequent revelation showed that Prime Minister Satō had not only broken his oft-stated

promise of a post-reversion Okinawa without nuclear weapons (*kaku-nuki*), but he had violated his own proclamation for the 1971 Diet resolution of Japan’s “Three Non-Nuclear Principles” (non-production, non-possession, and non-introduction), which was cited as a major reason for awarding him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1974.

With Okinawa’s return to Japan in May, 1972, it became the nation’s only prefecture where the Japanese government explicitly approved the re-deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons on its land, in its surrounding waters or airspace during any U.S.-determined “emergency.” The “secret understanding” became headlines and sparked outrage in Japan when it was first revealed publicly by a *Mainichi Daily* reporter in 1972 and when Satō’s interpreter published the text in 1994. Subsequently, Akiba Takeo, a senior Foreign Ministry official, testified before a U.S. Congressional Commission in 2009 that re-deploying nuclear weapons to Okinawa “sounds persuasive to me.”

Akiba’s statement to the Commission, obtained by the Union of Concerned Scientists, ignited a predictable firestorm in Japan. Gregory Kulacki, UCS Senior Analyst, explained, “[A] reason for redeploying US nuclear weapons in Okinawa that might sound persuasive to Mr Akiba is that US and Japanese officials can use ambiguities in the language of the Nixon-Sato agreement, and tight controls on the dissemination of information about [related bilateral discussions](#), to obscure the process that would be followed if the United States decided to make Okinawa nuclear again.” Kulacki explains how the “secret understanding” makes redeployment easy in Okinawa.

[P]ermission [of the Japanese government] need not be explicit, or public. It may not even be necessary. The language of the Nixon-Sato agreement is intentionally

vague and suggests simple notification at a relatively low level of the bureaucracy might be enough. This kind of low level agreement would give the prime minister and other LDP officials the same kind of [plausible deniability](#) they used to avoid discussing the Sato-Nixon agreement on redeploying nuclear weapons in Okinawa for more than 50 years.

The potential presence of US nuclear weapons in Okinawa would be further obscured from public view by the US government's non-confirm, non-deny policy on military deployments. . . . In the absence of an external inquiry, US nuclear weapons could be put back in Okinawa quietly, without public knowledge or debate.

[Another] reason Okinawa might sound persuasive to Mr. Akiba is that the United States is building a new military base in the Okinawan village of [Henoko](#). The project includes significant upgrades to a

munitions storage depot, adjacent to the new base, where US nuclear weapons were stored in the past. Henoko is specifically mentioned in the 1969 Nixon-Sato agreement as a mutually acceptable location for the possible redeployment of US nuclear weapons in Japan.¹⁷

Thanks to the Tokyo government's betrayal in the 1969 Okinawa Reversion Agreement, this small island prefecture still bears 70% of the U.S. military presence in all of Japan on 0.6% of the nation's land area with 1% of its population. Construction of the new base in Henoko, with offshore runways for planes and helicopters, has been delayed more than twenty years by daily protests at the construction site and opposition by the local prefectural government which has filed lawsuits on jurisdictional and environmental grounds. Joining a protest rally at the site on March 3, 2016, Gregory Kulacki urged Okinawans to continue opposing its construction. The protests continue in 2021.

Stewart Engel served in the U.S. Navy from July, 1958 to July, 1961 as Lieutenant Junior Grade. He trained at Watch Officers School in San Diego and was aboard the U.S.S. Carpenter in the Western Pacific when it entered port at the Marine Corps Air Station, Iwakuni, Japan in late 1959. He has worked as a computer programmer, systems analyst, and engineer for companies in New York, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, California and Virginia where he currently resides in Fredericksburg.

Steve Rabson was stationed as a U.S. Army draftee at the 137th Ordnance Company (SW) in Henoko, Okinawa from July, 1967 to June, 1968. He is professor emeritus of East Asian studies at Brown University and has published books and articles about Okinawa, and translations of Okinawan literature. His articles about nuclear weapons in Okinawa and Japan are listed below.

["Okinawa's Henoko was a 'Storage Location' for Nuclear Weapons: Published Accounts,"](#) *Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol 11, Issue 1, No. 6, January 14, 2013.

Ota Masakatsu and Steve Rabson, “[U.S. veterans reveal 1962 nuclear close call dodged in Okinawa](#),” *Asia-Pacific Journal*, Volume 13, Issue 13, Number 3, March 30, 2015.

Gregory Kulacki with a comment by Steve Rabson, “[Nuclear hawks in Tokyo call for stronger nuclear posture in Japan and Okinawa](#),” *Asia-Pacific Journal*, Volume 16, Issue 11, Number 1, June 1, 2018.

Okuaki Satoru, Introduction and translation by Steve Rabson, “[How Japanese scientists confronted the U.S. and Japanese governments to reveal the effects of Bikini H-bomb tests](#),” *Asia-Pacific Journal*, Volume 17, Issue 17, Number 2, September 1, 2019.

Notes

¹ Geoffrey Murray, “[Japan reels under Reischauer's nuclear 'bombshell'](#),” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 19, 1981.

² Ellsberg, *Doomsday Machine*, 118.

³ From email communication with Daniel Ellsberg in May, 2021.

⁴ Okuaki Satoru, “[How Japanese scientists confronted the U.S. and Japanese governments to reveal the effects of Bikini H-bomb tests](#),” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, September 1, 2019, Volume 27, Issue 17, Number 2. From the introduction by Steve Rabson.

⁵ Okuaki.

⁶ Hans Kristensen, “[Japan under the US nuclear umbrella, supporting documents global problem-solving nuke policy](#),” *Nautilus Institute*, July 21, 1999.

⁷ Kristensen, “Nuclear umbrella.”

⁸ Kristensen, “Nuclear umbrella.”

⁹ *Okinawa Beigun kichi* (U.S. bases in Okinawa), Shin-Nihon Shppan-sha, 1972. Includes Henoko ammunition storage area map.

¹⁰ Translated in Steve Rabson, *Righteous Cause or Tragic Folly: Changing Views of War in Modern Japanese Poetry*, Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1998, 227. Also see Michael S. Molasky, *The American Occupation of Japan and Okinawa: Literature and Memory*, Routledge, 1999, 93-102.

¹¹ Robert S. Norris, William M. Arkin, William Burr, “[Where they were](#),” *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, November 1, 1999.

¹² Ota Masakatsu and Steve Rabson, “[U.S. veterans reveal 1962 nuclear close call dodged in Okinawa](#),” *Asia-Pacific Journal*, Volume 13, Issue 13, Number 3, March 30, 2015.

¹³ Kristensen, “Nuclear umbrella.”

¹⁴ Quoted in Kristensen.

¹⁵ Kristensen, “Nuclear Umbrella.”

¹⁶ Kristensen, “Nuclear Umbrella.”

¹⁷ Gregory Kulacki with a comment by Steve Rabson, “[Nuclear hawks in Tokyo call for stronger nuclear posture in Japan and Okinawa](#),” *Asia-Pacific Journal*, Volume 16, Issue 11, Number 1, June 1, 2018.