

The Antiwar Tour - Two American veterans journeyed to Japan to apologize for US war crimes

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Two American veterans journeyed to Japan to apologize for US war crimes. They found a growing grassroots antiwar movement.

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A vibrant antiwar movement is blooming in Japan right now. Trade unions, civic groups, and an overwhelming number of young people [\[1\]](#) are galvanizing the country around Article 9 of the Japanese constitution — the article that has kept Japan out of war for the last seventy years.

Each weekend since March, between five and ten thousand people have gathered outside of the Diet (Japan's parliament) in Tokyo to protest Shinzō Abe, Japan's prime minister and the hawkish members of his Liberal Democratic Party who are trying to repeal Article 9. Abe, the first world leader to congratulate Trump in person after the November election, is a fierce defender of US military bases inside of Japan and is making significant legislative gains towards ridding Japan of the article [\[2\]](#), which ensures Japan only takes up arms against another country when it is being directly attacked.

Antiwar mobilizations have sprung up in response. In March, thirty thousand people protested Abe on the streets outside the parliament [\[3\]](#), as thirty-five cities across Japan held similar demonstrations, demanding that the article stay.

Michael Hanes, a former Marine Force Recon (the Marines' version of the Navy Seals) staff sergeant, who was part of the initial 2003 US invasion of Iraq, and I, a former US Army Ranger — I was deployed to Afghanistan between late 2002 and 2004 before becoming a war resister [\[4\]](#) — recently toured the country on a trip sponsored by Veterans for Peace and a group within the Japanese American Bar Association (JABA) dedicated to protecting Article 9. An organizer and translator, Rachel Clark, a Japanese-born US citizen, accompanied us. We spoke twice a day to as many as ten thousand people in total.

We aimed to express solidarity with those opposing the 50,000 US troops stationed in the 122 US military sites inside of Japan, and to help this emerging antiwar movement expose the many dangers and lies that accompany militarization.

"Every one of the million or so deaths — the vast majority being innocent civilians — resulting from US military interventions around the world since 9/11 has been carried out in the name of 'self-defense.' Please don't let your government sell you that same false argument to repeal Article 9," we

stated every time we spoke during each of our two talks a day in venues across Japan for eight days, including before the A-bomb dome at the Peace Memorial Museum in Hiroshima [5] in front of a half-dozen Japanese news cameras.

Further, we issued an apology on behalf of all Americans who oppose the unjustified US firebombing of Tokyo [6], and the atomic blasts in Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II — something President Obama failed to do when he visited Hiroshima in May 2016.

American Bases

The antiwar upsurge in Japan has been sparked in part by the country's activities in South Sudan. Japan currently has 350 Self Defense Force (SDF) soldiers stationed in South Sudan, allegedly guarding the twenty Japanese embassy workers in the country.

Under Article 9, in order for Japan to justify sending the SDF into a country, a ceasefire agreement must be in place within the country; the SDF must have consent from the government in the conflict zone; the SDF mission must be conducting a nonpartisan operation; Tokyo must have the freedom to pull the plug if any conditions are not met; and finally the SDF must limit use of force.

None of these conditions are being met in South Sudan [7], making Japan's military presence in the country a clear violation of Japanese law [8].

In the last seventy years, Japan's SDF has only been involved, in very limited capacity, in UN peacekeeping missions that provide medical and humanitarian aid in conflict areas (and even then not until the late eighties and early nineties). Only 250,000 of the country's 126 million-person population are members of the SDF. Offensive war has been completely off the table for the last seventy years because of Article 9.

The situation in South Sudan, the world's youngest country, is grim, with over 2.6 million displaced and tens of thousands dead since the country fell into civil war in 2013 [9]. There are real fears that South Sudan could turn into a genocidal situation similar to Rwanda, if it's not already.

As we have seen in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, and all the other countries the United States has invaded since 9/11, however, military intervention only makes a country less stable and more violent. Besides, Shinzō Abe has made it very clear that he is less interested in South Sudan and more concerned with following in the footsteps of his grandfather, Nobusuke Kishi, who in October 1958, as prime minister of Japan, urged the country to abandon Article 9.

For the last fifteen years Abe has called Article 9 "shameful," and echoed the sentiment of his grandfather who believed the article was a grave threat to Japanese nationalism. Abe has also said that Article 9 is not "normal," and that it leaves the country vulnerable to military attacks from China and North Korea because it is unable to defend Japan's allies and launch preemptive strikes that could thwart "clear dangers" to the country [10].

In early 1946, General Douglas MacArthur and his staff wrote the Japanese constitution and sought, in part, to ensure Japan never posed a military threat to the United States and the world again [11]. Despite being written by a conquering general, seventy years on, large numbers of Japanese cherish this element of the existing constitution.

Concerned that Trump will close the US military bases in the country if Japan doesn't play its "fair share" militarily in the world [12], Abe rushed to the president-elect's Manhattan penthouse days

after the election. Trump's comments have reinforced the arguments of those who wish to repeal Article 9. Abe repeatedly warns of attacks should the United States close its bases. (Such closures are unlikely [13]).

But many Japanese, particularly those living in Okinawa, are fed up with the US military's presence in the country [14].

"We are living in a highly stressful situation in which we don't know when another military aircraft might accidentally fall from the skies, or when a US soldier might kill someone or rape someone, or when the life of one of our children might be taken in an auto accident," Yasukazu Oshiro, a resident of Okinawa, recently told Al Jazeera. "Our human rights are surely being threatened."

Large and ongoing protests on the island have sprung up in the wake of the June 2016 rape and murder of a twenty-year-old local woman by a former marine and contractor stationed at one of the US bases in Okinawa [15]. The protesters are also responding to a 2004 Bell Boeing V-22 Osprey crash into a university on the island [16] and US military expansion projects that are destroying pristine natural habitats and consuming large chunks of the country's best beaches (that would bring in much-needed tourism dollars) in order to make room for helipads.

80 percent of the 1.4 million people living in Okinawa want all US military bases removed from the country. Every Saturday as many as 500 people will drive two hours to the remote sections of the island to the gates of the US bases to protest.

The Cost of War

The conversations Mike and I had with hundreds of Japanese men and women in Hiroshima, Kobe, Kyoto, Tokyo, and others were incredible. Our apologies seemed like small and insignificant gestures, but they opened up each venue we spoke in.

Dozens of elderly people directly impacted by the bombings approached us, often with tears in their eyes, to convey how much the apology meant to them. Mike and I are not the first Americans to apologize for the bombing, but many Japanese people have never heard one.

After the apologies we talked about our own military experience, the devastating effects our actions had on the people of Afghanistan and Iraq, why the world is less safe as a result of US military intervention around the world [17], and how fighting racism is crucial to any antiwar movement. We talked about how education, health care, infrastructure, and the environment all suffer as a result of militarization; we discussed how our leaders often overstate the threats to security to justify bloated military budgets and steal other countries' resources through interventions.

The response was overwhelming. Our talks were always jam-packed. We had multiple two-hour press conferences with the national media. We apologized for Trump. People laughed — most in Japan are disgusted with him too.

We discussed how US military bases could actually serve to antagonize perceived enemies as opposed to deter them, and how US protection comes with conditions that water down sovereignty and democracy. Many of our conversations ultimately centered on questions of how to build solidarity, and support for poor and working-class people living in countries we are taught to fear: China, North Korea, and the whole of the Middle East.

Despite its problems — and they are many — Japan's achievements since the end of World War II are

a testament to what can be done when a country limits spending on the military and invests in education, health care, and infrastructure.

When it comes to education, Japan is in competition with South Korea for the best education system in the world [18]. Japanese people live longer than just about any other group of people in the world [19]. Japan has the best rail system [20] and some of the best infrastructure in the world. They have virtually eliminated gun-related deaths [21], and have the second lowest murder rate in the world. And there is greater economic equality in Japan than in Norway [22].

Japan is still a strong capitalist country and is far from perfect. Sexism is a major issue [23]. The country has a complicated problem with suicide, and of course it has a dangerous dependence on nuclear energy [24].

All that said, it is impossible for an American visiting the country not to be struck by the contrasts in standards of living between Japan and the United States, a country that spends a trillion dollars a year supporting its military [25].

In Japan, Mike and I saw a glimpse of what is possible when a country is able to resist its leaders' demands for war and channel its resources to human development and flourishing. We saw the power of civilian diplomacy. We learned that ordinary Japanese have much more in common with ordinary Americans than we do with our respective leaders who send us off to kill each other in war.

When Mike and I spoke in front of the Diet, five thousand people stood in cold and rainy weather to listen. As we walked a city block up to the stage, hundreds called out to us by our first names — despite the fact that we had only been in the country seven days.

Mike and I have no notable profile; we are simply former American soldiers who went to Japan to support peace, not war. In a country that has embraced peace for seventy years but now fears war, this was national news.

As far-right demagogues rise to power around the world, international solidarity becomes increasingly important. Ordinary working-class people around the world don't want war — their leaders and corporations do. By reaching out to those ordinary people across borders, we can make sure that the machinery of war stays silent.

Rory Fanning

P.S.

* Jacobin. 12.06.2016:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/12/japan-abe-constitution-war-peace-diet-nuclear-obama>

* Rory Fanning is the author of *Worth Fighting For: An Army Ranger's Journey Out of the Military and Across America*.

Footnotes

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