

CHAPTER 7
**American Decision Making on
 Reversion of Okinawa: A Memoir**

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This paper describes the process of decision-making in the American government on the reversion of Okinawa to Japan. It focuses on the period 1966–69 and is written as a memoir.

From 1966 to 1969 I served in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and had responsibility for the Okinawa reversion issue. In 1969 I joined the staff of the National Security Council in the Nixon Administration with responsibility for planning and NSC operations. There are disadvantages as well as advantages in writing about this subject from the perspective of a participant. The disadvantages are that only the events known to the author are discussed and the role of other participants is not given its full due. The advantages are that one is writing from personal experience, and the reader gets an understanding of the thinking and planning of one participant.

I present this paper not as the final word but as a contribution to understanding both the decision-making process within the American government on Okinawa reversion and the more general subject of American decision-making on national security issues. My objective is to explain my view of what took place within the bureaucracy between 1966 and 1969 which permitted two American Presidents to act on the reversion issue without provoking a major controversy within the government.

The Blue Sky Period

Before going into the American government I taught at Harvard University and did research at the Harvard Center for International Affairs. Between 1963 and 1966 I had visited Japan a

number of times and had been exposed to the Japanese concern that failure to move on the Okinawa issue could provoke a crisis in U.S.–Japanese relations in 1970 when the Security Treaty was open to cancellation by either nation. Thus, the reversion question was high on the list of issues on which I wanted to work when I joined the Department of Defense in 1966. One advantage of this issue was that it was not a matter which was receiving attention from senior officials. In contrast to issues such as Vietnam, this meant that I could seek to influence policy on this question without the frustration of not knowing what was being done at higher levels of the government to which I was not privy.

Shortly after I arrived at the Department of Defense, I was assigned by Adam Yarmolinsk, then the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (International Security Affairs), to serve on an inter-agency task force on Okinawa. The mandate of this group was not to consider the question of possible reversion. In fact, the explicit premise of the task force mandate was that reversion would not occur until the “sky was blue,” that is, until there were no clouds in the sky, no threats to peace and security in Asia. Obviously, that was not expected to occur any time soon.

The mission of the task force was to find ways to ameliorate the Okinawa situation under the assumption that reversion was impossible. The inter-agency group was, as I recall, focussed on such issues as permitting greater Japanese government participation in Okinawan matters such as education. I viewed this task as

essentially hopeless. From my perspective the value of the task force was in getting to know the key government players who were concerned with reversion, setting the stage for more serious efforts, and learning what was needed to change government policy.

The most important participant in the task force was its chair, Richard Sneider. "Dick," as he was universally known, was the State Department country director for Japan, and he was a very unusual foreign service officer. He believed that he was in charge of all dealings with the government of Japan and succeeded far more than most country directors in imposing that view on the other agencies of the government. Dick and I immediately established not only a close working relationship but also a friendship which was to last until his untimely death a few years ago.

To my surprise and pleasure, the task force report did make some progress in beginning to open up the issue of reversion. We were able to get agreement that 1970 was a critical date and that preserving the security relation with Japan was more important than preserving the status quo on Okinawa. The American Ambassador to Japan and the High Commissioner for Okinawa (by tradition an Army General) were instructed to work together and to report regularly to Washington on the mounting local pressures for reversion and their suggestions for how to respond. (Shortly thereafter U. Alexis Johnson was appointed to be Ambassador to Japan, and the Army civilians who were in charge of Okinawa and had worked on the task force appointed a new high commissioner who was open to reversion.)

After the task force completed its work, I met privately with Dick Sneider to discuss how to proceed. Dick noted that neither the Secretary of State nor the President was likely to be willing to move on this issue over opposition from the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Moreover, the foreign service had a strong tradition of not challenging the expertise of other career services, especially the military. Thus, as long as the Pentagon believed that reversion was incompatible with American security, little progress could be made.

Real movement toward early reversion

depended on changing the view of the Joint Chiefs. Once there was some movement, we could consider how to advance the process by getting the Japanese government and then the State Department to express the need for early reversion.

Revising the Military Position

The first step was to inform the Secretary of Defense of our plans and intentions. Robert McNamara gave substantial scope to those who worked for him in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and he backed up the positions they took. However, he expected to be fully consulted before any of his subordinates undertook to make major changes in American policy which would require his backing.

With the support of my boss, Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton, who had been in the battle of Okinawa, I prepared a memorandum for the Secretary. In this memorandum I laid out the situation as I saw it and sought the Secretary's approval for setting in train a process designed to lead to American acceptance of reversion prior to 1970.

The memorandum, which was sent to the Secretary on August 7, 1967, described the dangers which would result from failure to conclude an agreement before 1970. It argued that the ultimate risk was setting off a series of events in Japan which would jeopardize the very existence of the security treaty. The most prudent course of action was to agree to reversion, which would guarantee the continuation of the Security Treaty for the indefinite future. With one significant exception, it argued that reversion would not mean giving up the bases on Okinawa. Instead, we could continue to use the bases on the same terms that we used bases in Japan.

Nuclear weapons were a special problem. Given anti-nuclear sentiment in Japan, it would be impossible to get special permission to store nuclear weapons in Okinawa after reversion. Even if the Government of Japan were to be willing, the public outcry would threaten the Security Treaty itself. Fortunately, the memorandum argued that giving up the right to store nuclear weapons on Okinawa would not

adversely affect our security interests. Nuclear weapons could be stored further back in the Pacific and still be flown to anywhere they might be needed in a very short time.

Finally, the memorandum noted, we would need special transition rules to protect current military operations in support of the war in Vietnam.

The memorandum ended with a request for a meeting with the Secretary to discuss the issue. McNamara scribbled a handwritten note which said, in effect: No meeting is necessary, just do it. I had my mandate, but it was up to me to figure out what to do.

The task force which had prepared the first report was continued and was now charged with considering the consequences of reversion. This inter-agency requirement provided the basis for inaugurating a process within the Defense Department designed to get the Joint Chiefs of Staff to take a serious new look at the question of whether military requirements could be met by a reversion process which would permit continued operation of the Okinawa bases at the homeland level.

To do this in a serious way we needed to develop a methodology for analyzing the consequences of losing use of a specific military base. Working with researchers from the RAND Corporation (with which my office had a contract), we began to develop this needed methodology and to apply it to the Okinawa base issue. Our objective was to understand the cost of losing the base completely versus the cost of losing only those special rights which we had on Okinawa. The bases on Okinawa were not subject to the limitations which the United States had accepted on other American bases in Japan, including the need for prior consultation before undertaking military action.

We began the process of informally educating the American military on the need for early reversion and, hence, the need to take a hard look at the military consequences of reversion, at the task force meetings which included representatives of the Joint Staff. This process continued at regular lunch meetings which I held with Joint Staff officials and which permitted frank and informal conversations.

Through these channels we were able to argue that failure to agree on early reversion would jeopardize continued access to bases on Okinawa and in Japan.

These informal contacts were augmented by a formal process by which the Secretary of Defense solicited the views of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. First, the Secretary simply asked the Chiefs for their views on the military consequences of reversion. Unfortunately, this form of memorandum typically did not generate a careful evaluation. Rather, following standard practice, the Joint Staff action officer assigned to the problem simply pulled from the file what the Chiefs had previously said on the subject and repeated it. Thus, the answer was that reversion would be incompatible with the military requirements of the United States. Okinawa should be thought of not as an island with bases but as an island base.

A second memorandum was then sent from the Secretary to the Chiefs asking a series of specific questions about the consequences of reversion for the various military functions performed on the base. In response the Chiefs began to come to grips with the specific issues involved.

Finally, the Chiefs were sent a copy of the study of the military consequences of reversion which my office had prepared with support from the Office of Systems Analysis. The Chiefs were then asked to comment on this study.

As a result of this process of both informal consultation and development of formal positions, the Joint Staff agreed to include in the task force report an assessment that it would be possible to use the bases after reversion and, therefore, early reversion would be consistent with American security needs. The remainder of the task force report described the diplomatic need for reversion.

This significant progress in changing the views of the American military on the security implications of reversion led the State Department and the American Embassy in Tokyo to feel more comfortable in asserting their view that early reversion was necessary to preserve the American-Japanese security relation.

This inter-agency process was part of what was then known as the SIG-IRG system. The highest reporting level in this structure was the Under Secretary of State. There was no formal process for moving a paper prepared by this process to the President for his consideration. Thus, although the task force report was completed and available before the Johnson-Sato summit planned for November, it was not sent to Cabinet officers or to the President.

A memorandum from the Secretary of State and the President needed to be drafted which would make specific recommendations about what posture to take at the summit meeting. Issues came to Lyndon Johnson only on the basis of formal recommendations from cabinet officers. Since Dean Rusk, the Secretary of State, had not previously been involved in these deliberations, there was no way to predict how he would respond. As Sneider and I began working on the memorandum, we recognized that the key to getting the Secretary of State and the President to make a bold move was to secure the vigorous support of the U.S. Ambassador to Japan, Alexis Johnson.

Johnson, stationed in Tokyo, did not fully comprehend how much progress was being made in Washington. Like all effective ambassadors he was concerned about being accused of "localitis." Johnson did not want to argue for the need to make a firm commitment to early reversion unless that position would be viewed as reasonable in Washington and stood a chance of being adopted. To secure his support for our memorandum, Dick and I decided to fly to Tokyo for a frank discussion with Johnson.

At the same time Dick and I had been engaged in informal conversations with Gaimusho officials about the reversion issue. Japanese officials were pressing us to learn what was feasible. They did not want the Prime Minister asking for things at the summit meeting that were impossible and which would be viewed as unreasonable. In the end they understood that the Japanese government would have to be willing to state forthrightly its need for a commitment for early reversion.

As the summit drew near, senior

government officials, including the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense and the President, were drawn into the process. At the same time Prime Minister Sato began to make his needs clear. Emboldened by reports he was receiving from the Gaimusho and from his own emissaries, he decided to press for a commitment for early reversion. However, the American government was not willing to do this without a clear understanding of how the bases would be used after reversion, and there was not enough time left before the meeting to conduct these negotiations. The upshot was the famous recognition by the President of the need for reversion within a few years.

For Dick and me, and those working with us, this was a great victory; the Blue Sky position was dead. The American government had not stated that reversion would be impossible until the security problems of Asia were settled. We knew we were close to agreement within the American government on procedures for using the bases for conventional operations that would be acceptable to the Japanese government and sustainable in Japan over opposition protests. The nuclear issues remained to be finally resolved, but we were confident that we were moving towards acceptance of the need to remove nuclear weapons from the island before reversion. Further significant progress would need to await the Presidential election and the inauguration of a new President.

The Nixon Administration Review

Following the election of Richard Nixon and the appointment of Henry Kissinger as National Security Advisor, both Dick Sneider and I were asked to join the NSC staff. Dick was to be responsible for East Asian affairs. My duties would include managing the new National Security Council decision process. (At this time Alex Johnson came back to Washington as the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs.)

Kissinger and I had taught together at Harvard, and he asked me to come to New York to work with him on the transition. At his request I worked on a memorandum to the President-elect which proposed the creation of a

new system for examining national security issues. The key to the new approach, which Mr. Nixon approved, was to have the President direct the bureaucracy to conduct studies on key issues and come up with a set of options with the pros and cons of each option. These options would be presented to the President and the National Security Council in the place of recommendations from each Department. The memorandum identified nine issues "which will require early attention by the NSC." The nine issues were: Vietnam, Middle East, Europe, International Monetary Policy, Strategic Forces, U.S. Security Policy, Contingency Planning, Japan, and AID.

The paragraph of the memorandum on Japan read as follows:

8. Japan. A number of issues in U.S.-Japanese relations will arise during the next twelve months, and the Japanese Prime Minister is likely to request a meeting in the Fall. Therefore, an Ad Hoc Working Group should be set up to examine the full range of U.S.-Japanese relations (including the issue of the reversion of Okinawa, the future of the U.S.-Japanese Security Treaty, U.S. bases in Japan, and U.S.-Japanese economic relations).

The President-elect approved the memorandum on December 30, 1968, and we immediately set to work to draft the directives necessary to put the new system into place and to direct the first set of studies. On Inauguration Day Henry Kissinger signed seven National Security Study Memoranda (NSSM) on Vietnam, Middle East, Military Posture, Foreign Aid, Japan, NATO, and International Monetary Policy. Each NSSM directed an inter-agency task force to prepare a report covering the issues identified in the NSSM and providing the President with a list of options and the pros and cons for each option. The Japan study (NSSM 5) directed the Inter-agency Group to consider the issues listed in the memorandum which had been sent to the President in December including the question of reversion.

One of the assignments given to the East Asian Committee chaired by the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia was thus to consider options for the United States on Okinawa reversion. Richard Sneider represented the National Security Council on the Inter-

agency Group and was able to insure that the report was written expeditiously and that it made the case for early reversion of Okinawa.

Under the rules establishing the new NSSM/NSDM system the report was not to contain recommendations or the positions of various agencies. Rather it was to spell out the available options and the pros and cons of each. Thus, the debate and controversy that would have taken place if agencies had to take positions on reversion and on the still contentious issue of the removal of nuclear weapons were avoided. All agency representatives could agree that early reversion was one option and that within that option removal of nuclear weapons was one possible way of dealing with the clash between the American desire for maximum flexibility and the Japanese public's hostility to nuclear weapons.

The nuclear issue turned out to be less difficult than Dick and I feared. Successive exchanges with the Joint Chiefs during the previous administration and a visit to the Chiefs by Under Secretary of State Alex Johnson helped to turn the tide. The Chiefs were no longer opposed to early reversion and were now ready to conclude that removal of nuclear weapons from Okinawa would cause only "administrative inconvenience." Thus, the pros and cons of removal did not include any assertion that the ability of the United States to deter aggression in the region or to respond to military attacks would be significantly affected by the removal of the nuclear weapons then stored in Okinawa to storage sites further back in the Pacific or even in the continental United States.

When the report was ready, it was scrutinized first by the NSC staff and then by the inter-agency NSC Review Committee. Next it was scheduled for a meeting of the National Security Council. The NSC meeting, which I attended as a staff observer and note taker along with Dick Sneider and Al Haig, was surprisingly free of acrimony and disagreement. Alex Johnson made the case for early reversion and was not challenged at any point. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird and General Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, indicated that they shared the view that early

reversion was the most prudent course. General Wheeler also made it clear that the Chiefs would not "fall on their swords" if the agreement called for the withdrawal of nuclear weapons. This was a clear signal that the Chiefs were on board and would not be going to the Congress or the press to complain about what was being done.

Following the procedure then in effect, after the NSC meeting I met with the NSC staff person responsible for the issue discussed at the meeting, in this case Dick Sneider, to draft a proposed National Security Decision Memorandum (NSDM) for the President's signature. That memorandum, which both Henry Kissinger and then President Nixon approved without change, authorized negotiations with the Japanese government to include in the communiqué for the pending visit of the Prime

Minister a commitment to begin negotiations for an early return of Okinawa to Japan.

The issue of nuclear weapons was specifically reserved for talks between the President and the Prime Minister at the summit. Although there was no doubt about the need to operate the bases on Okinawa at the homeland level after reversion, it was felt that the key concession of no storage of nuclear weapons should be given directly to Prime Minister Sato by President Nixon.

My work on the Okinawa reversion issue largely came to an end with the approval of this National Security Decision Memorandum and its distribution to the government. In September 1969, I left the government to become a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.