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A "100 Per Cent Certainty": the FBI and the Myth of Fingerprints

By Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair

Few law enforcement institutions have been so thoroughly discred ited in recent years as the FBI's forensic lab. In 1997 the Bureau's inspector general of the time issued a devastating report, stigmatizing one instance after another of mishandled and contaminated evidence, inept technicians, and outright fabrication. The IG concluded that there were "serious and credible allegations of incompetence" and perjured courtroom testimony.

CounterPunch's view is that, taken as a whole, forensic evidence as used by prosecutors is inherently untrustworthy. For example, for years many people went to prison on the basis of the claims of a North Carolina anthropologist, Louise Robbins. She helped send people to prison or to Death Row with her self-proclaimed power to identify criminals through shoe prints. As an excellent recent *Chicago Tribune* series on forensic humbug recalled, on occasion she even said she could use the method to determine a person's height, sex and race. Robbins died in 1987, her memory compromised by the conclusion of many Appeals Courts that her methodology was bosh. There have been similarly hollow claims for lip prints and ear prints, all of them invoked by their supporters as "100 per cent certain" and believed by juries too easily impressed by passionate invocations to 100 per cent reliable scientific data.

Of course the apex forensic hero of prosecutors, long promoted as the bottom

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Japan's Neo-Militarists Get Green Light from Washington

By Christopher Reed

Tokyo

Japan is marching back to military power, or more precisely, "is being marched" by the United States toward a new militarism, as its neo-nationalist prime minister Junichiro Koizumi, who like many hawks has never served in the military, acts as eager drill sergeant. Meanwhile the putative army, the Japanese people, remains unenthusiastic.

The nation and its population are unique in the world, having honored 60 years of official pacifism since their disastrous imperialist wars from 1931-45. These ended in defeat with three million Japanese dead, and a U.S. occupation force writing a new constitution that renounced war "forever". That was then. Now, despite opinion polls still showing a pacifist public in the high 60s percentage, Japan's warmongers exert their influence. The new militarism is not trumpeted, even the Pentagon's drums are muffled, but almost every week an event occurs to push six decades of peace further into history.

This month, January, for instance, the Ground Self-Defense Force, the name Japan must give its well-equipped and powerful army, is for the first time ever exercising jointly with U.S. military for three weeks at the giant Pendleton Marine base just north of Oceanside,in southern California, staging amphibian operations against an "armed guerrilla occupation" of Japanese islands. Why?

It so happens that a nasty dispute exists between Japan, China, and Taiwan over five desolate little outcrops in the East China Sea the Japanese call Senkaku, from the original British-named Pinnacle Rocks, and the Chinese, Diaoyu islands. Controlled by Japan since its 1895 annexation of Taiwan (an earlier Japanese imperialist adventure), both the People's Republic and Taiwan now claim the isles for a predictable reason. Oil deposits lie around a "median line" drawn by Japan, which has already protested drilling on the Chinese side. Fishing rights are disputed too, and Taiwan dispatched a frigate last June as Japanese patrol boats harassed Chinese vessels.

Yet it's hardly guerrilla territory. Occasional Chinese protesters have landed, to be promptly ousted by Japanese coast-guards. Amphibious commando operations – as well as Tokyo's development of new shallow-water torpedoes – pose a graver threat from Japan. Yet it was from Japan's chauvinistic foreign minister Taro Aso' that the world heard the explosive Christmas week assertion that China's military defense budget (less than Japan's, the world's third highest) was a "considerable threat". Beijing denounced this remark as "highly irresponsible", ending the year's Sino-Japanese relations at the lowest point in decades.

In Tokyo, other militarist steps have been taken. In the last two years Japan has passed over 10 new laws and introduced fundamental bureaucratic "reforms" that promote the means to war or make it easier. One is the forthcoming elevation of the SDF from the status of an agency to a full-dress Ministry

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line in reliability – at least until the arrival of DNA matching – has been the fingerprint.

Fingerprints entered the arsenal of police and prosecutors in the late nineteenth century, touted as "scientific" in the manner of other fashionable methods of that time in the identification of supposed criminals, such as phrenology. A prime fingerprint salesman was Ernest Galton, Charles Darwin's cousin and a founder for the "science" of eugenics. Actually fingerprints, at least in modern times, found their original use in the efforts of a British colonial administrator to intimidate his Indian laborers (whose faces he could not distinguish) from turning up more than once to get paid. He'd make a great show of scrutinizing the fingerprints he insisted they daub on his ledger book. Then, as now, the use of the so-called "unique fingerprint" has been theatrical, not scientific. In 1995, so the *Chicago Tribune* series discovered, " one of the only independent proficiency tests of fingerprint examiners in U.S. crime labs found that nearly a quarter reported false positives, meaning they declared prints identical even though they were not – the sort of mistakes that can lead to wrongful convictions or arrests."

Decade after decade people have been sent to prison for years or dispatched to the death cell, solely on the basis of a single, even a partial print. So great is the resonance of the phrase "a perfect match" that defense lawyers throw in the towel, as judge and jury listen to the assured conclusions of the FBI's analysts who virtually monopolize the fingerprint industry in the U.S.A. Overseas, in London's Scotland Yard for example, the same mesmerizing "certainty" held sway, and still does. In the U.S.A., part of the mystique stems from the "one discrepancy rule" which has supposedly governed the FBI's fingerprint analysis. The rule says that identifications are subject to a standard of "100 per cent certainty" where a single difference in appearance is supposed to preclude identification.

The 1997 lab scandals threw a shadow over the FBI's forensic procedures as a whole and the criminal defense bar began to raise protests against prosecutorial use of latent fingerprint identification evidence, as produced by FBI procedures. In 2002 Judge Louis Pollak, in a case in Pennsylvania, initially ruled that the FBI's fingerprint matching criteria fell below new standards of forensic reliability (the Daubert standards) stipulated by the U.S. Supreme Court. Ultimately he was persuaded that the FBI's fingerprint lab had never made a mistake. In 2004, in *U.S. v. Mitchell,* the Third Circuit Court upheld these same procedures.

Now at last, in 2006, the FBI's current inspector general, Glenn Fine, has grudgingly administered what should properly be regarded as the deathblow to fingerprint evidence as used by the FBI and indeed by law enforcement generally.

The case reviewed by Inspector General Fine, at the request of U.S. Rep John Conyers and U.S. Senator Russell Feingold, concerns the false arrest by the FBI of Brandon Mayfield, a lawyer from Beaverton, Oregon.

On March 11, 2004, several bombs exploded in Madrid's subway system with 191 killed and 1,460 injured. Shortly thereafter the Spanish police discovered a blue plastic bag filled with detonators in a van parked near the Acala de Heres train station in Madrid, whence all of the trains involved in the bombing had originated on the fatal day.

The Spanish police were able to lift a number of latent prints off the bag. On March 17 they transmitted digital images of these fingerprints to the FBI's crime lab in Virginia. The lab ran the images through its prized IAFIS, otherwise known as the integrated, automated, fingerprint identification system, containing a database of some 20 million fingerprints.

The IAFIS computer spat out twenty "candidate prints", with the warning that these 20 candidates were "close non-match". Then the FBI examiners went to work with their magnifying glasses, assessing ridges and forks between the sample of 20 and the images from Spain. In a trice the doubts of the IAFIS computer were thrust aside, and senior fingerprint examiner Terry Green determined that he had found "a 100 per cent match" between one of the Spanish prints and the fourth-ranked print in the IAFIS batch of 20 close non-matches. Green said this fourth ranked print came from the left index finger of Brandon Mayfield. Mayfield's prints were in the FBI's master file, not because he had been arrested or charged with any crime, but because he was a former U.S. Army lieutenant.

Green submitted his conclusions to two other FBI examiners who duly confirmed his conclusions. But as the inspector general later noted, these examiners were not directed to inspect a set of prints without knowing that a match had already asserted by one of their colleagues. They were simply given the pair of supposedly matched prints and asked to confirm the finding. (These two examiners later refused to talk to the FBI's inspector general.)

The FBI lost no time in alerting the U.S. Prosecutor's office in Portland, which began surveillance of Mayfield with a request to the secret FISA court which issued a warrant for Mayfield's phone to be tapped on the grounds, laid out in the Patriot Act, that he was a terrorist, and therefore by definition a foreign agent.

Surreptitious tapping and surveillance of Mayfield began. On April 2, 2004, the FBI sent a letter to the Spanish police informing them that they had a big break in the case, with a positive identification of one of the prints on the bag of detonators.

Ten days later the forensic science division of the Spanish national police sent the FBI its own analysis. It held that the purported match of Mayfield's print was "conclusively negative". (The inspector general refers to this as the "negativo Report".)

The next day, April 14, the U.S. Prosecutor in Portland became aware of the fact that the Spanish authorities were vigorously disputing the match with Mayfield's left forefinger. But by now the Prosecutor and his team were scenting blood. Through covert surveillance they had learned that Mayfield was married to an Egyptian woman, had recently converted to Islam, was a regular attendee at the Bailal mosque in Portland, and had as one of his clients in a child custody dispute an American Muslim called Jeffrey Battle. Battle, a black man,

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What a Miner's Life is Worth

The only thing more predictable than the deaths of those 12 miners in the Sago coal mine was the Bush administration's rush to exploit a tragedy that they helped foster.

Over the past five years, Big Coal has benefited from the blind eye that Washington regulators have turned to their rampages across Appalachia. The cost of such official laxity is borne by decapitated mountains, buried and polluted streams, and hundreds of miners who have been injured and killed by an industry that has been unleashed from even the most basic regulations governing worker safety and environmental protection.

The Sago miners didn't even have the minimal protections afforded by membership in a union. In the economics of coal country these days, people are so desperate for a job that they will sign up for the most dangerous kind of work with few questions asked about the risks or the precautions taken by the companies. And that's exactly the way Big Coal wants it.

Since Bush came to office, more than 230 coal miners have perished in 206 mine accidents. Hundreds of others have been injured. Thousands suffer from chronic ailments and lung diseases caused by hazardous working conditions.

The Sago mine was a death trap. In 2005 alone, the Mine Safety and Health Administration slapped the mine with 208 citations for violations at the mine, ranging from the accumulation of flammable coal dust to ceiling collapses.

The accident rate at Sago was atrocious. In 2004, Sago had an accident rate of 15.90 accidents per 200,000 man-hours worked. This rate is nearly three times more than the national average of 5.66. Last year was even worse. In 2005, Sago's accident rate spiked to 17.04, with at least 14 miners injured.

But these citations and accidents came without regulatory bite. Most of them resulted only in minor fines of $60. In total, the mine was hit with only $24,000 worth of penalties. It's much cheaper to pay the fine than to fix the problems, even when the conditions are lethal. For example, in 2001 Jim Walters Resources paid only $3,000 in fines for an accident that led to the deaths of 13 miners in Alabama. That's $230.76 per dead miner. The company earned more than $100 million that year. Other companies have paid less than $200 in fines for fatalities linked to safety violations.

And these token fines, which don't even qualify as slaps on the wrist, often go unpaid by the mining companies. A review of the Mine Safety and Health Administration's records since 2000 reveals that the agency has hit the mining industry with $9.1 million in fines following fatal incidents. But the companies have paid less than 30 per cent of that puny amount.

All a company has to do is appeal its fine, and it will likely be reduced. More than $5.2 million in fines have been reduced to $2.5 million following appeals. Another $2.2 million is unpaid pending appeal. The agency lists more than $1.1 million in fines as being delinquent, but most of those mines remain in operation.

Under the Bush administration, Big Coal has essentially been handed the responsibility for regulating its own behavior. Few questions asked. Even in the aftermath of the Sago disaster there have been no serious calls for congressional hearings or criminal sanctions against the mine bosses and their corporate chieftains. The loudes howls of outrage were reserved for the false report that the 12 miners had miraculously survived their ordeal in the poisonous pit, where carbon monoxide levels had reached 1,300 parts per million (more than three times the maximum tolerable level).

In 2001 Jim Walters Resources paid only $3,000 in fines for an accident that led to the deaths of 13 miners in Alabama. That's $230.76 per dead miner.

The dismantling of the federal regulation of coal mining was largely the work of J. Steven Griles, a protégé of James Watt, who, from 2001 through 2004, served as Deputy Secretary of the Interior Department in charge of oil, gas and mining. Griles was intimately familiar with the desires of Big Coal. Prior to accepting his position as Gale Norton's top deputy, he was the coal industry's top DC lobbyist. In fact, Griles continued to pull down more than $250,000 a year from his lobbying firm while he worked at the Interior Department, extracting the teeth from the Office of Surface Mining and the Mine Health and Safety Administration. His toiling for the public finished, Griles quietly resumed his position as a lobbyist once more in the spring of 2005 at the firm of a principal at Lundquist, Nethercutt and (yes) Griles. Not to worry, Griles left coal-related matters in the compliant hands of Jeffrey D. Jarrett, head of the Office of Surface Mining, who in a former life served as a top executive at the Cravat Coal Company.

The deregulation of the mining companies accelerated under Bush, but it sure didn't start there. For the past 40 years or so, Big Coal's Lord Protector has been none other than Senator Robert Byrd, the Democrat from West Virginia. Byrd is to the coal companies, what Ted Stevens is to Big Oil. Byrd work is often done silently and is to be discovered in the hidden interstices of omnibus budget bills and emergency appropriations. But in emergency situations, Byrd limps out of the shadows and does his dirty work in public. Just such an event occurred in the waning days of the Clinton administration when a federal judge slapped an injunction on mountain top removal coal mining in West Virginia. Byrd publicly lashed out at the judge and pushed through the Senate a rider that overturned the injunction and issued a stern warning to Al Gore to retreat from any future meddling in the affairs of Big Coal.

Even beyond Byrd, the Democrats offer the miners almost no relief from this dire situation. In the 2004 presidential campaign, when the election hinged on results from the coal belt, John Kerry wrote off the mining country of southeast Ohio and West Virginia, counties burdened by the highest unemployment in country, and lost by landslide margins to Bush.

So if you're going to tie black ribbon on the gates of the White House, you might as well wrap one around a tree outside one of the Kerry-Heinz mansions as well. Neither party gave a damn about the lives of those men. CP

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had just been convicted of trying to go to Afghanistan to fight for the Taliban.

Armed, so they thought, with this arsenal of compromising detail, the U.S. Prosecutor and the FBI had no patience with the pettifogging negativism of the Spanish police. So confident were the Americans of the guilt of their prey that they never went back to take another look at the supposedly matching prints. Instead, on April 21, they flew a member of the FBI's latent print unit to Spain for on-the-spot refutation of the impertinent Madrid constabulary.

The Inspector General's report makes it clear that the FBI man returned from Spain with a false account of his reception, alleging that the Spanish fingerprint team had bowed to his superior analytic skills. The head of the Spanish team, Pedro Luis Melida-Weda, insists that his team remained entirely unconvinced. "At no time did we give our approval. We refused to validate the FBI's conclusions. We kept working on the identification."

By now either the U.S. Attorney's office or, more likely, the FBI was leaking to the press news of the pursuit of a U.S. suspect in the Madrid bombing. But they knew that the actual evidence they had on Mayfield was virtually non-existent, aside from the fingerprint. On May 6, the U.S. Prosecutor in Portland told U.S. District Court Judge Robert Jones that the Spanish police had ultimately accepted the FBI's match, that Mayfield, alerted by the stories in the press about an unnamed suspect, might start destroying evidence, and that, therefore, they wanted to seize Mayfield, using the now favored charge *du jour* of the war on terror, claiming him to be a "material witness". Judge Jones okayed an arrest warrant.

Mayfield had no idea that the FBI had been tapping his phones and secretly rummaging through his office. The first time he became aware that he was a citizen under suspicion was on the afternoon of May 6. On that day eight FBI agents showed up at his law office, seized him, cuffed his hands behind his back, ridiculed his protestations. As they approached the door, Mayfield implored them to take the handcuffs off, saying he didn't want his clients or staff to see him in this condition. The FBI agents said derisively, "Don't worry about it. The media is right behind us."

Mayfield ended up with two federal public defenders, Steven Wax and Christopher Schatz. Like many such, these two were dedicated to their interest of their client, tireless and resourceful. Their first concern was to get Mayfield out on the Multnomah federal detention center in downtown Portland. Though jailed under an alias chosen for him by the U.S. Prosecutor, the feds had immediately leaked this alias – Randy Barker – to *The Oregonian* newspaper, and a guard at the jail had promptly roughed up Mayfield.

The two public defenders went before Judge Jones and asked that as a material witness he be kept under house arrest, there being scant apparent evidence against him. Judge Jones finally compelled the U.S. Prosecutor to say what evidence he had against Mayfield. A fingerprint, said the U.S. Prosecutor, withholding from the court the fact that this fingerprint was highly controversial and had been explicitly disqualified by the Spanish police.

The federal defenders questioned the imprisonment of their client, facing penalties of the utmost gravity, on the basis of a fingerprint. Judge Jones allowed as how he had sent people to prison for life on the basis of a single fingerprint. Mayfield's attorneys asked to see a copy of the allegedly matched fingerprints and have them evaluated by their own expert witness. Knowing he was on thin ice the U.S. Prosecutor refused, claiming it was an issue of national security. Under pressure from Judge Jones, himself pressured by the assiduous federal defenders, the U.S. Prosecutor finally agreed he would give the prints to an independent evaluator selected by Judge Jones.

If Mayfield had been "like the Maytag repair man," an FBI examiner says the Bureau might have reevaluated its analysis.

The prints were given to Kenneth R. Moses of San Francisco, an SFPD veteran who runs a company called Forensic Identification Services which, among other things, proclaims its skills in "computer enhancement of fingerprints". It was "quite difficult", Moses said, because of "blurring and some blotting out", but yes, the FBI had it right, and there was "100 per cent certainty" that one of the prints on the blue bag in Madrid derived from the left index finger of Brandon Mayfield.

Moses transmitted this confident opinion by phone to Judge Jones on the morning of May 19. Immediately following Moses' assertion, the U.S. Prosecutor stepped forward to confide to Judge Jones dismaying news from Madrid from the Spanish police that very morning. The news "cast some doubt on the identification". This information, he added, "was classified or potentially classified".

The prosecutors then huddled with the judge in his chambers. After 20 minutes, Judge Jones stormed back out and announced that the prosecutors needed to tell the defense lawyers what they had just told him. The prosecutor duly informed the courtroom that the Spanish police had identified the fingerprint as belonging to the right middle finger of Ouhnane Daoud, an Algerian national living in Spain. Daoud was under arrest as a suspect in the bombing. Judge Jones ordered Mayfield to be freed. The U.S. Prosecutor said he should be placed under electronic monitoring, a request which the judge turned down.

Four days later, on May 24, the warrant for his detention was dismissed.

The FBI sent two of their senor fingerprint analysts to Spain on a mission to salvage the Bureau from humiliation. The two analysts did their best, returning with the claim that the fingerprint sent to the FBI by the Spanish police was of "no value for identification purposes", a claim which the inspector general later shot down by pointing that only a few weeks thereafter the FBI's latent fingerprint unit concurred with the Spanish national police lab's determination that the print on the bag matched the right middle finger of Ouhnane Daoud.

The FBI lab fought an increasingly desperate rearguard battle, eventually claiming that it had been the victim of an excessive reliance on technology. The inspector general points out that the only analyst in the FBI's lab to emerge with any credit is in fact the IAFIS computer that had stated clearly, "close, no match".

The inspector general writes the bottom line on the "science" of fingerprint matching He gets the FBI's top examiner to admit that if Mayfield had "been like the Maytag repair man" and not a Muslim convert married to an Egyptian, "the laboratory might have revisited the identification with more skepticism."

And Daoud's fingerprint match? We don't know, but if he was convicted on the basis of fingerprints alone, we would say there is grounds for an appeal. CP

(**Japan** *continued from page 1)*

of Defense; another is closer technical collaboration with U.S. missile defense projects, contrary to Japan's ban on such ventures. More momentous events are due shortly. The main one will modify the anti-war constitution. A draft has already been published, and enactment could begin this year.

Meanwhile, the Ground Self Defense Force is also for the first time serving in a war zone, the Iraqi town of Samawa, where its mission of "reconstruction and humanitarian assistance" was recently extended for another year. (Its 500 troops, protected by Australian soldiers, are almost as unpopular as Americans, and reportedly have failed their requirement to provide reliable electricity and water.)

But the main move that threatens a new and potentially dangerous alliance between Japan's neo-militarists and Washington's jingoists was the joint declaration in October, 2005, titled "U.S.-Japan Alliance: Transformation and Realignment for the Future". It extended Japan's previous defense-only stance to "develop options and adapt the alliance to the changing regional and global security environment".

The inclusion of the key word "global" can be taken to mean what the title implied: a militant new U.S.-Japan pact to transform and structurally alter their joint military position in the world. An interesting analogy with Britain exists here: like the latter's role in the Atlantic, Japan is to become America's new unsinkable aircraft carrier in the northeast Pacific, something the Pentagon has longed for. As if to seal this promise at last, the U.S.A. further announced that despite a previous Japanese port ban on nuclear warships, America's replacement in Japan for the ageing USS Kitty Hawk conventional carrier will be the atomic-powered USS George Washington (but not the originally drafted USS Harry Truman, because of that president's A-bomb attack on Hiroshima).

October's brothers-in-arms pact was further enhanced by the vision of Japan as a base for U.S. intervention anywhere. This would come by increasing Tokyo's logistic support; combining command centers at the huge Yokota U.S.A.F. base in Tokyo's suburbs; the naval SDF's acquisition and deployment of fast transport ships; a commitment against "terrorism" (even if not directed against Japan) with a combined Rapid Reaction Force based southwest of Tokyo; and, most important, integrating both nations' forces in fortress Okinawa. Here, Japan's southern island has long accommodated – unwillingly – three quarters of the U.S. military's 45,000 complement spread over 90 bases and installations.

Okinawa makes an odd but useful comparison to Hawai'i. Both these annexed islands in the Pacific were forced to act as militarized colonies under their mainland masters and bear the brunt of foreign attacks against them: Hawai'i at Pearl Harbor and Okinawa in the Pacific War's final battle. The latter lasted nearly three months and killed 240,000 on both sides, a quarter of them Okinawan civilians. The victorious U.S.A. remained in control there until 1972, when the former Pacific kingdom (as was Hawai'i) became just another Japanese prefecture.

Under the new brothers-in-arms arrangement, U.S. and Japanese SDF forces in Okinawa would be upgraded and consolidated. But could the grand military-imperial aspirations of Washington and Tokyo founder upon its shores? Okinawa's ordinary people have maintained a strong 10-year protest over military plans for the island, particularly against replacement of the 50-year old U.S. Marine and U.S.A.F.base at Futenma in the south, now occupying a cramped urban area. The U.S.A. and Japan decreed its expansion and removal northwards to the coast, with a huge floating runway extension. Before even the concrete could get poured, public opposition supported by local politicians defeated two plans.

Now, under the October alliance, and with no local consultation, a new base with even bigger runway would run across a seaside cape to create a single giant U.S. military complex. Foreign minister Aso immediately exercised his unfailing arrogance by declaring this proposal final and beyond review. President George Bush called it "positive".

Okinawans derided it as positively disgraceful, and even the governor, a political ally of Japan's ruling (conservative) Liberal Democratic Party, denounced it as "totally unacceptable". Now bribes of improved rail and air links are being offered, but in an island increasingly talking about autonomy, if not independence, the outcome is uncertain.

Could the U.S.A. and Japan be about to receive another unwanted lesson in the perils of imperialism? They represent massive force, but their military plans can be discredited historically, politically, and morally.

The historical perspective, usually lacking in the mainstream media's jargon-stuffed "defense" reporting, concerns a region where three wars involving dozens of nations, including the U.S.A., the then-Soviet Union, China, Australia, France, and in two instances Britain, occurred within the 20-odd years from World War II closure through the Korean conflict and Vietnam. Even today, Japan has yet to sign a Pacific War peace treaty with the former Soviet Union or today's Russia. North Korea claims nuclear weaponry; China and Taiwan confront Beijing's continued insistence that the island remains part of the People's Republic of China. Above all, the astonishingly rapid advance of China's economy renders previous regional assumptions invalid, but not irreplaceable.

Chalmers Johnson, former professor at the University of California at San Diego and Berkeley and now head of the Japan Policy Research Institute, offers

this perspective: "The major question for the 21st century is whether this fateful inability to adjust to changes in the global power-structure can be overcome. Thus far the signs are negative ... Is China's ascendancy to be marked by yet another world war, when the pretensions of European civilization in its U.S. and Japanese projections would be finally put to rest? That is what is at stake".

He sees Bush's encouragement of Japan's re-armament as "dangerous" and adds: "Such a development promotes hostility between China and Japan, sabotages possible peaceful solutions in those two problem areas, Taiwan and North Korea, that were left over from the Chinese and Korean civil wars, and lays the foundation for a possible future Sino-American conflict that the U.S. would almost surely lose. It is unclear whether these Washington ideologues understand what they are unleashing: a possible confrontation between the world's fastest growing industrial economy, China, and the world's second most productive ... Japan; a confrontation the United States would have caused".

Politically, it is China's advance that lies behind Washington's push of Japanese leaders' emerging militarism. Although deflected by Iraq, U.S. neocons always regarded "containment" of China a logical sequence to that old Cold War attitude. Last February they launched it afresh with the first declaration of closer "security" ties between the U.S.A. and Japan.

In June came Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's aggressive speech on China, when he asked why it rearms when "no nation threatens it". This statement ignored even his own actions in supporting constant U.S. warship patrols of China's coast and aiming nuclear missiles at its mainland.

Uncle Sam's motive here is appallingly simple: today's Washington ideology that the U.S.A. must remain the world's overwhelming sole superpower, by "pre-emptive force" if necessary. Victorian Britain's Lord "send-a-gunboat" Palmerston would understand the game instantly. Japan's neo-nationalist politicians, who still regularly appear in coattails , seem to agree too. Certainly they see U.S. dominance as a vehicle on which to ride again into a new "co-prosperity sphere" – the wartime fascist slogan – and toward military regional hegemony as well.

Have Japanese politicians not yet abandoned the racist supremacy of the fascist era?

Japan's neo-militarism, having already thrust that nation into an illegal war in Iraq, must trade on historically discredited national animosities with no contemporary relevance. Yet its ruling politicians will not even discuss it. Debate does not exist. Opinion polls from Okinawa and other prefectures hosting U.S. and Japanese troops consistently report majorities opposed to military activity, as do national polls. Democratic process is ignored while relations with China and South Korea degrade to the point where their foreign ministers cannot even meet.

One poll shows disturbing figures. Only 32 per cent of Japanese now feel friendly toward China, a drop from 50 per cent 10 years ago. In one respect, nationalist talk is working. Meanwhile, Koizumi and his cabinet cronies continue to provoke their two neighbors by justifying visits to the militarist Yasukuni shrine honoring Japan's worst war criminals, including generals in charge during the 1937 Rape of Nanking where Japanese slaughtered over 300,000 Chinese. Japan's leaders also decline to atone for other atrocities in the war and China since 1931.

Why do Japanese politicians behave like this? Have they not yet abandoned the racist supremacy of the fascist era? Apparently not – yet the subject is never discussed. Koizumi and his cabinet seem blind to the implications of what they are fostering. A possible result of their stupidity might be an incredible irony. Could their actions lead Japan once more to wartime obliteration by the world's biggest economy – this time not America's, but China's? CP

Christopher Reed is a freelance writer living in Japan.