

How did Japanese Netizens Respond to the World Trade Center Attack?

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I first heard about the 9/11 terrorist attacks when I read a post an American had written on an online forum. I watched TV all through the night. The scenes I saw shocked me. Then I heard President Bush say, “Make no mistake: The United States will hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts.” I was shocked a second time by Bush’s words, “hunt down and punish.” My first thought was that if the United States hunted down and punished the terrorists involved in other countries, then this would be nothing but a kind of personal retribution carried out by a single country, not an act of justice administered by the international community. The American news media started talking about retaliation and war in the name of “justice.”

I did not agree with what the terrorists had done, but at the same time I did not agree with the assertion that the US should strike back at the terrorists and countries that harbored them. On Sep.14, a Japanese translation of a statement, written by some of the US staff members of the War Resisters League, was emailed to me by someone I did not know. The statement said “Let us seek an end of the militarism that has characterized this nation for decades. Let us seek a world in which security is gained through disarmament, international cooperation, and social justice not through escalation and retaliation. We shall live in a state of fear and terror or we shall move toward a future in which we seek peaceful alternatives to violence, and a more just distribution of the world's resources.” This statement by US citizens moved me deeply.

On Sep.17, I received another email. It was a Japanese translation of a letter from Greg Nees, former U.S. Marine Sergeant, to the President of the US. He said in his letter, “I beg you, do let not one more innocent life — American, Israeli, Palestinian, Afghan or any other — be lost. What right can we claim that allows us to take more innocent lives? Is that not also a form of terrorism? Will we rise above the level of those who attacked us?” This letter again moved

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me. At the time I was running the Life Studies Homepage, which was one of the most visited academic websites in Japan. I thought of making a special page for information about the 9/11 attack and the ensuing retaliation by the United States. One of the reasons I considered doing this was that I couldn't find any information in Japanese newspapers about the anti-war movement in the US, and therefore concluded that Japanese people probably did not know anything about it. Another reason was that I wanted to know what netizens both here and abroad thought about these issues.

I looked around on the Internet and found that there were already some Japanese websites that had been created especially to address the 9/11 attack. All of them were anti-war websites. They were collecting articles saying “No” to terrorism and retaliation. They expressed frustration with the fact that the Japanese mass media only “cut and pasted” articles that appeared in US newspapers and on CNN, and did not present their own analyses of this tragic event. Actually, it took a long time for the mass media to finally discover the extensive store of information and links that had been posted on Japanese anti-war websites.

A number of Japanese netizens' websites on the WTC attack were created to present their objections to both terrorism and retaliation. They pasted words such as “love and peace” and the lyrics to John Lennon's “Imagine” on their websites to show their opposition to retaliation and war. The WTC attack probably reminded Japanese netizens of the two most tragic events in recent Japanese history: the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 and the Hanshin Awaji earthquake that occurred in 1995. The former killed more than 100,000 ordinary citizens. The latter killed 5000 people, which was roughly equal to the number of WTC victims. The main characteristic of these two events in Japan was that the lives of many people were taken “instantaneously,” very similar to the incident on Sep.11 in NYC. One was caused by US forces, and the other was mainly caused by a natural phenomenon. We know two “instantaneous tragedies” in our history, and on Sep.11 we watched another instantaneous killing of 5000 people. When I heard Bush's words “hunt down and punish,” I automatically began to picture the people who would be killed by the high-tech attacks of US forces in Afghanistan. I assume similar sentiments also lay behind many of the anti-war websites created in Japan.

Global Peace Campaign was one of the earliest Japanese websites protesting

against retaliation. They received the letter from Greg Nees mentioned above and planned to publish his anti-war letter as a full-page ad in the New York Times. They started a fund-raising campaign through their website immediately after the WTC attack. Within only two or three weeks more than 100,000 dollars were donated. Finally, together with Veterans for Peace, USA, they gathered enough money to pay for the ad and the letter from Greg Nees was published in the *New York Times*, Section A, page 23, Oct.9. 47% of the total amount raised was contributed from within Japan, and 44% from within the USA. Another ad was published later in the *Los Angeles Times*.

Their website has both Japanese and English pages. They have some volunteer staff members who translate Japanese articles into English. The Japanese pages contain messages from the staff, a lot of comments from readers, and links to various pages. There was a forum but it was closed because of excess “flaming” among commentators on this topic. I will give one example of these comments later.

Another early group was Give-Peace-a-Chance.jp, which started its peace walk campaign just after the WTC incident. They gathered participants through their website and staged a walk through the Shibuya area in downtown Tokyo calling for peace. A series of peace walks and other campaigns were successfully carried out throughout Japan. Many volunteers got together to create websites to facilitate networking among Japanese anti-war activists. Their main website has a list of ongoing peace walks and other campaigns in Japanese and English. They also created a digital yellow ribbon image as an emblem of peace on their website. Their site has a list of projects, links to major anti-war sites, a mailing list, and messages from readers.

Alternative Mailing List, an independent website for grassroots activities run by JCA-NET, played a key role in sharing information on this incident both inside and outside Japan. Members started to post a lot of information immediately after the attack. For example, anti-war statements from the International Action Center and the Green Party of the United States were posted on Sep.12 (the latter was a Japanese translation of the original text). The Japanese translation of a statement by the War Resisters League, cited above, was posted on Sep.13. A lot of information, including information on anti-war rallies and meetings, was posted to this mailing list and then spread through the Internet.

Among the earliest of these sorts of websites were several webpages set up

to collect relevant links. One of the characteristics of Japanese anti-war websites is that they had a lot of links not only to websites inside Japan but also websites in other countries around the world. They scoured the web to find important articles and statements in English and/or other languages, then translated them into Japanese within a very short period of time. Site administrators and readers exchanged information on forums and/or mailing lists. There were some automatic translation programs/services available on the Internet, but they did not work very well and these texts therefore had to be translated by the people running these sites.

Prema21net is a good example of this kind of site. “Prema” means “love” in Sanskrit. It contains a lot of information and links, including a Japanese translation of a statement delivered by Rep. Barbara Lee on the floor of the House of Representatives on Sept.14, 2001, a letter calling for peace written by the parents of a man killed on Sep.11, an anti-war statement by Korean 533 groups calling for peace, a message from the Dalai Lama, a donation list for WTC victims and refugees in Afghanistan, and many other important resources. Other examples are the Japan Catholic Council for Justice and Peace, Tetsuro Kato's Imagine, and a special page on the WTC attack on my Japanese website for Life Studies. Gen Nakayama's Chronique Philosophique is an interesting site that periodically uploads Japanese translations of articles written by scholars such as Susan Sontag, Samuel Huntington, Jacques Derrida, Edward Said, and Giorgio Agamben.

Many activist groups and academic associations published statements objecting to both terrorism and retaliation. More than 60 such statements appeared in September of 2001. For example, a group of thirty one people, including well-known writers, journalists, professors, activists, and religious leaders, released a statement in which they said “we oppose the U.S. war of retaliation and request the Japanese government to retract its support for this war” on Sep.18 (English translation: Sep.22). They said in this statement that they were shocked by the terrorist attacks and they objected to this crime. But they were also shocked by the American attitude towards this event, namely the intention to meet an act of terrorism with a full-scale war. They stated that “the perpetrators and accomplices of this crime should be brought to justice under the international laws and tried and punished by an international criminal court set up by the United Nations” and that as a result they “strongly oppose this call for war and ask the Bush administration to immediately retract it.” What they really

feared were actions that could “bring the whole world into an infinite chain reaction of violence and hatred.” They represented the sentiments most Japanese netizens shared toward the terrorist attacks and succeeding events.

Some grassroots activists had been working as volunteers in Afghanistan before the 9/11 attacks. Among them was Dr. Tetsu Nakamura, the director of Peshawar-kai. He went to Afghanistan in 1984 as a physician, and began providing extensive medical support to Afghan people in 1986. In addition to providing treatment, he and his staff have dug over a hundred wells for fresh water. As a result of their efforts, many Afghan people now have a special feeling of respect for the Japanese. Dr. Nakamura and his staff are now in Afghanistan, transporting a large amount of food into the area. His messages are posted on Japanese websites from time to time. Sent directly from Afghanistan to Japan, his words convey valuable information the international mass media does not report. Peshawar-kai is raising funds through their website for the transportation of food to Afghanistan.

Almost all of the Japanese websites dealing with the WTC attack expressed compassion toward the victims and their families, and objected both to terrorism and retaliation. They expressed doubts about Bush’s statements concerning the war against the Taliban and air raids on Afghanistan. However, there were also comments posted on their forums that supported the policies of the US government. For example, a series of comments posted on the Global Peace Campaign website insisted that their campaign was a kind of hypocrisy and would have no effect on terrorism. One of the comments stated that people in the campaign kept using the words “love and peace” but chanting this mantra alone would not produce anything. “All you are doing is continuing the same old anti-American movement aroused by jealousy of this prosperous country. It is the USA that protects the world order and the high standard of living in our country. Are you willing to abandon our present affluence? You are in a state of ‘peace senility (heiwa boke).’ Teaching Arabs the supremacy of liberalism, democracy, and capitalism would be more effective than publishing your peace ad in a newspaper.”

Another commentator wrote, “Please do not disseminate the illusory idea that repeating phrases like ‘peace’ and ‘stop the war’ can actually stop a war. This time the victim was the USA, so please do not criticize American policy or the American mass media. Please do not hastily conclude from a one-sided perspective that this war is one of retaliation.” A heated debate occurred over

these kinds of opinions, and it sometimes escalated to a “flame war” on these forums, particularly during fund-raising campaigns.

The opinions of these critics contain a small kernel of truth, especially concerning the narcissism in the peace movement, but in general I disagree with them about the effectiveness of a peace ad in newspapers. Even if the anti-war voices outside the US grew stronger, the Bush administration would think of them as a “threat” from people in foreign countries. We need to support peace activities inside the US and help break down the macho mentality of the administration from within. This is one of the most effective ways of disarming a country that is dominating the world through its military force and economic power.

In any case, anti-war websites, forums and mailing lists played an important role in connecting people who were seeking information that did not appear in newspapers or on TV. It seems to me that a completely different kind of wind was blowing on the Internet. Through the discussions being carried out online we learned that we should distinguish US policy from ordinary American people when criticizing retaliation; while it is natural for an ordinary person to have an emotional desire for revenge after such a tragedy, a country's foreign policy should not be based solely on the cumulative total of such emotions among its people.

It is worth noting that there was a person who expressed anger on a forum about American TV hosts frequently referring to “Pearl Harbor,” “kamikaze attack,” and “Hiroshima” as if the terrorist attacks had some connection to Japanese history and culture. Another person was also angry about the fact that an American TV reporter said that ground zero looked just like Hiroshima. While in Hiroshima more than 100 thousand ordinary citizens were killed and many others continue to suffer from diseases caused by the nuclear explosion even today, in New York victims numbered in the several thousands. People in Hiroshima must have had some complicated feelings when hearing this reporter’s words. Did the reporter have an image of citizens in Hiroshima when he/she stood at a new ground zero in New York? Another thing that struck me was that bin Laden talked of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on Al Jazeera. I had never imagined that the names of Japanese cities might come out of his mouth. I couldn't help seeing in this a ghost of the miserable 20th century filled with war, retaliation, and corpses.

Life studies in the 21st century should tackle the issues of war, retaliation,

and the chains of violence that occur around the world, along with issues of life and death in our affluent society.

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