

DEBATES OVER THE OPENING OF JAPAN

When Commodore Matthew Perry anchored off the shores of Uraga in 1853, his action was to precipitate one of the greatest debates to occur in Tokugawa Japan. In an unprecedented move, the bakufu solicited the opinions of the daimyō, and they were divided. At issue were the questions of jōi (expelling the barbarians) or kaikoku (opening the country), and of acquiescence to the foreign demands or preservation of the two-century-old tradition of seclusion. In the background were such issues as the declining power of the bakufu, and the pending succession disputes.

¹¹The last king of the Shang dynasty, known for his cruelty and unrighteous acts.

¹²Respectively, the founder of the Shang dynasty and of the Zhou dynasty.

In the following selections, Tokugawa Nariaki (1800–1860), former Lord of Mito, represents the policy of jōi (Document 8) and Ii Naosuke (1815–1860), Lord of Hikone who was to become the tairō in 1858, represents the policy of kaikoku (Document 9). While they started from different premises and arrived at differing conclusions, there were also some common denominators, such as the desire to preserve Japan's national power, and the realization that importation of Western guns and books was inevitable and necessary.

8 Tokugawa Nariaki to Bakufu, 14 August 1853¹³

Observations on coastal defense:

It is my belief that the first and most urgent of our tasks is for the *bakufu* to make its choice between peace and war, and having determined its policy to pursue it unwaveringly thereafter. When we consider the respective advantages and disadvantages of war and peace, we find that if we put our trust in war, the whole country's morale will be increased and even if we sustain an initial defeat we will in the end expel the foreigner; while if we put our trust in peace, even though things may seem tranquil for a time, the morale of the country will be greatly lowered and we will come in the end to complete collapse. This has been amply demonstrated in the history of China and is a fact that men of intelligence, both past and present, have always known. . . . However, I propose to give here in outline the ten reasons why in my view we must never choose the policy of peace.

1. Although our country's territory is not extensive, foreigners both fear and respect us. That, after all, is because our resoluteness and military prowess have been clearly demonstrated to the world outside by such events as the conquest of Korea by the Empress Jingō in early ancient times; by the repulse of the Mongols in the Kōan period (1278–1288) during the middle ages; and in the recent past by the invasion of Korea in the Bunroku period (1592–1596) and the suppression of Christianity in the Keichō (1596–1615) and Kanei (1624–1644) periods. Despite this, the Americans who arrived recently, though fully aware of *bakufu*'s prohibition, entered Uruga displaying a white flag as a symbol of peace and insisted on presenting their written requests. Moreover they entered Edo Bay, fired heavy guns in salute and even went so far as to conduct surveys without permission. They were arrogant and discourteous, their actions an outrage. Indeed, this was the greatest disgrace we have suffered since the dawn of our history. The saying is that if the enemy dictates terms in one's own capital one's country is disgraced. The foreigners, having thus ignored our prohibition and penetrated our waters even to the vicinity of the capital, threatening us and making demands upon us, should it happen not only that the *bakufu* fails to expel

¹³From *Select Documents on Japanese Foreign Policy 1853–1868*, translated and edited by W. G. Beasley and published by Oxford University Press, pp. 102–107. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press.

them but also that it concludes an agreement in accordance with their requests, then I fear it would be impossible to maintain our national polity (*kokutai*). That is the first reason why we must never choose the policy of peace.

2. The prohibition of Christianity is the first rule of the Tokugawa house. Public notices concerning it are posted everywhere, even to the remotest corner of every province. It is said that even so, during the Bunsei period (1818–1830), men have been executed for propagating this religion secretly in Osaka. The *bakufu* can never ignore or overlook the evils of Christianity. Yet if the Americans are allowed to come again this religion will inevitably raise its head once more, however strict the prohibition; and this, I fear, is something we could never justify to the spirits of our ancestors. That is the second reason why we must never choose the policy of peace.

3. To exchange our valuable articles like gold, silver, copper, and iron for useless foreign goods like woollens and satin is to incur great loss while acquiring not the smallest benefit. The best course of all would be for the *bakufu* to put a stop to the trade with Holland. By contrast to open such valueless trade with others besides the Dutch would, I believe, inflict the greatest possible harm on our country. That is the third reason why we must never choose the policy of peace.

4. For some years Russia, England, and others have sought trade with us, but the *bakufu* has not permitted it. Should permission be granted to the Americans, on what ground would it be possible to refuse if Russia and the others [again] request it? That is the fourth reason why we must never choose the policy of peace.

5. It is widely stated that [apart from trade] the foreigners have no other evil designs and that if only the *bakufu* will permit trade there will be no further difficulty. However, it is their practice first to seek a foothold by means of trade and then to go on to propagate Christianity and make other unreasonable demands. Thus we would be repeating the blunders of others, seen remotely in the Christianity incidents of the Kanei period (1624–1644) and before [in Japan] and more recently in the Opium War in China. That is the fifth reason why we must never choose the policy of peace.

6. Though the *Rangakusha* (scholars of Dutch studies) group may argue secretly that world conditions are much changed from what they were, Japan alone clinging to ideas of seclusion in isolation amidst the seas, that this is a constant source of danger to us and that our best course would therefore be to communicate with foreign countries and open an extensive trade; yet, to my mind, if the people of Japan stand firmly united, if we complete our military preparations and return to the state of society that existed before the middle ages [when the emperor ruled the country directly], then we will even be able to go out against foreign countries and spread abroad our fame and prestige. But if we open trade at the demand of the foreigners, for no better reason than that, our habits today being those of peace and indolence, men have shown fear merely at the coming

of a handful of foreign warships, then it would truly be a vain illusion to think of evolving any long-range plan for going out against foreign countries. That is the sixth reason why we must never choose the policy of peace.

7. The *bakufu* entrusted the defense of the Uraga district to the Hikone and Wakamatsu *han*, and I hear that the Aizu retainers [from Wakamatsu] have already gone there, travelling night and day for some 170 miles or more despite the heat. I also hear that in addition to this the *daimyō* ordered to defend Edo Bay are sending troops at once. All this is admirable. But if we ignore the fact that the foreigners went so far as to enter Edo Bay and carry out surveys without permission, if we do not take action to expel them, this will be to allow the men of all provinces to exhaust themselves in activity that is but vain and wasted effort, and in the end our people will be brought to a state of complete collapse. That is the seventh reason why we must never choose the policy of peace.

8. When Kuroda (lord of Fukuoka) and Nabeshima (lord of Saga) were made responsible for the coast defense of Nagasaki it was not intended that this be directed solely against the Dutch and Chinese. It was a measure directed against all foreigners. But by agreeing to receive written requests from the foreigners at Uraga—and still more were the *bakufu* to conclude an agreement there in accordance with those requests—would we not, as it were, be allowing the foreigners to enter by the back door, thus rendering futile the guard-duties entrusted to those two families and arousing their resentment? That is the eighth reason why we must never choose the policy of peace.

9. I hear that all, even though they be commoners, who have witnessed the recent actions of the foreigners, think them abominable; and if the *bakufu* does not expel these insolent foreigners root and branch there may be some who will complain in secret, asking to what purpose have been all the preparations of gun-emplacements. It is inevitable that men should think in this way when they have seen how arrogantly the foreigners acted at Uraga. That, I believe, is because even the humblest are conscious of the debt they owe their country, and it is indeed a promising sign. Since even ignorant commoners are talking in this way, I fear that if the *bakufu* does not decide to carry out expulsion, if its handling of the matter shows nothing but excess of leniency and appeasement of the foreigners, then the lower orders may fail to understand its ideas and hence opposition might arise from evil men who have lost their respect for *bakufu* authority. It might even be that *bakufu* control of the great lords would itself be endangered. That is the ninth reason why we must never choose the policy of peace.

10. There are those who say that since the expulsion of foreigners is the ancient law of the *shōgun*'s ancestors, reissued and reaffirmed in the Bunsei period (1825), the *bakufu* has in fact always been firmly resolved to fight, but that even so one must recognize that peace has now lasted so long our armaments are inadequate, and one cannot therefore tell what harm might be done if we too recklessly arouse the anger of the foreigners. In that event, they say, the *bakufu* would be forced to conclude a peace settlement and so its prestige would

suffer still further damage. Hence [it is argued], the *bakufu* should show itself compliant at this time and should placate the foreigners, meanwhile exerting all its efforts in military preparations, so that when these preparations have been completed it can more strictly enforce the ancient laws. This argument sounds reasonable enough. However, to my mind the people here [in Edo] are temporizing and half-hearted; and even though the *shōgun* exhorts them day and night he cannot make them resolute. Now there is not the slightest chance that the feudal lords will complete military preparations, however many years may pass, unless they are set an example in military matters by the *bakufu*. There have already been clashes in Ezo (Hokkaidō) during the Kansei (1789–1801) and Bunka (1804–1818) periods [against the Russians], but despite the *bakufu*'s efforts to effect military preparations they have not yet been completed. Again, relaxation of the expulsion laws was ordered in 1842, with the apparent object of first placating the foreigners and then using the respite to complete military preparations, but here, too, I do not think the various lords have made any particular progress in rearming in the twelve years that have since elapsed. On the arrival of the foreign ships recently, all fell into a panic. Some take matters very seriously while foreign ships are actually at anchor here, but once the ships leave and orders are given for them to revert to normal, they all relax once more into idleness and immediately disperse the military equipment which they had hurriedly assembled. It is just as if, regardless of the fire burning beneath the floor of one's house, one neglected all fire-fighting precautions. Indeed, it shows a shameful spirit. I therefore believe that if there be any sign of the *bakufu* pursuing the policy of peace, morale will never rise though preparations be pressed forward daily; and the gun-batteries and other preparations made will accordingly be so much ornament, never put to effective use. But if the *bakufu*, now and henceforward, shows itself resolute for expulsion, the immediate effect will be to increase ten-fold the morale of the country and to bring about the completion of military preparations without even the necessity for issuing orders. Hesitant as I am to say so, only by so doing will the *shōgun* be able to fulfill his 'barbarian-expelling' duty and unite the men of every province in carrying out their proper military functions. That is the tenth reason why we must never choose the policy of peace, and it is by far the most urgent and important of them all.

I have tried to explain above in general terms the relative advantages and disadvantages of the war and peace policies. However, this [policy I recommend] is something that is easy to understand but difficult to carry out. In these feeble days men tend to cling to peace; they are not fond of defending their country by war. They slander those of us who are determined to fight, calling us lovers of war, men who enjoy conflict. If matters become desperate they might, in their enormous folly, try to overthrow those of us who are determined to fight, offering excuses to the enemy and concluding a peace agreement with him. They would thus in the end bring total destruction upon us. In view of our country's tradition of military courage, however, it is probable that once the *bakufu* has

taken a firm decision we shall find no such cowards among us. But good advice is as hard to accept as good medicine is unpleasing to the palate. A temporizing and time-serving policy is the one easiest for men to adopt. It is therefore my belief that in this question of coastal defense it is of the first importance that the *bakufu* pay due heed [to these matters] and that having once reached a decision it should never waver from it thereafter. . . .¹⁴

9 **Ii Naosuke to Bakufu, 1 October 1853**¹⁵ Before the year 1635 there were nine government-licensed trading vessels belonging to Nagasaki, Sakai, Kyoto, etc., but with the prohibition of Christianity in the time of the *Shōgun* Iemitsu the *bakufu* put an end to the voyages of these nine ships and laid down laws closing the country. Commerce was entirely limited to the Dutch and Chinese, no others being allowed to participate in it. Careful consideration of conditions as they are today, however, leads me to believe that despite the constant differences and debates into which men of patriotism and foresight have been led in recent years by their perception of the danger of foreign aggression, it is impossible in the crisis we now face to ensure the safety and tranquillity of our country merely by an insistence on the seclusion laws as we did in former times. Moreover, time is essential if we are to complete our coast defenses. Since 1609, when warships of over 500 *koku* were forbidden, we have had no warships capable of opposing foreign attack on our coasts with heavy guns. Thus I am much afraid that were the foreigners now to seize as bases such outlying islands as Hachijō-jima and Ōshima, it would be impossible for us to remain inactive, though without warships we should have no effective means of driving them off. There is a saying that when one is besieged in a castle, to raise the drawbridge is to imprison oneself and make it impossible to hold out indefinitely; and again, that when opposing forces face each other across a river, victory is obtained by those who cross the river and attack. It seems clear throughout history that he who takes action is in a position to advance, while he who remains inactive must retreat. Even though the *shōgun*'s ancestors set up seclusion laws, they left the Dutch and the Chinese to act as a bridge [to the outside world]. Might not this bridge now be of advantage to us in handling foreign affairs, providing us with the means whereby we may for a time avert the outbreak of hostilities and then, after some time has elapsed, gain a complete victory?

I understand that the coal for which the Americans have expressed a desire is

¹⁴In the remaining pages of this memorandum, in which he deals with the specific military steps to be taken, Nariaki recommends encouragement of training with sword and spear (for, armed with them, no soldier will fear warship or cannon); the purchase of ships and cannon with the proceeds of the Dutch trade, using the Dutch as agents; the granting of permission to *daimyō* to build modern ships and guns; and the construction of the defense works along the coast. (Beasley's footnote.)

¹⁵Beasley, *op. cit.*, pp. 117–119.

to be found in quantity in Kyushu. We should first tell them, as a matter of expediency, that we also have need of coal, but that should their need of it arise urgently and unexpectedly during a voyage, they may ask for coal at Nagasaki and if we have any to spare we will provide it. Nor will we grudge them wood and water. As for foodstuffs, the supply varies from province to province, but we can agree to provide food for the shipwrecked and unfortunate. Again, we can tell them, of recent years we have treated kindly those wrecked on our coasts and have sent them all home. There is no need for further discussion of this subject, and all requests concerning it should be made through the Dutch. Then, too, there is the question of trade. Although there is a national prohibition of it, conditions are not the same as they were. The exchange of goods is a universal practice. This we should explain to the spirits of our ancestors. And we should then tell the foreigners that we mean in the future to send trading vessels to the Dutch company's factory at Batavia to engage in trade; that we will allocate some of our trading goods to America, some to Russia, and so on, using the Dutch to trade for us as our agents; but that there will be a delay of one or two years because we must [first] construct new ships for these voyages. By replying in this way we will take the Americans by surprise in offering to treat them generally in the same way as the Dutch.

We must revive the licensed trading vessels that existed before the Kanei period (1624–1644), ordering the rich merchants of such places as Osaka, Hyōgo, and Sakai to take shares in the enterprise. We must construct new steamships, especially powerful warships, and these we will load with goods not needed in Japan. For a time we will have to employ Dutchmen as masters and mariners, but we will put on board with them Japanese of ability and integrity who must study the use of large guns, the handling of ships, and the rules of navigation. Openly these will be called merchant vessels, but they will in fact have the secret purpose of training a navy. As we increase the number of ships and our mastery of technique, Japanese will be able to sail the oceans freely and gain direct knowledge of conditions abroad without relying on the secret reports of the Dutch. Thus we will eventually complete the organization of a navy. Moreover, we must shake off the panic and apprehensions that have beset us and abandon our habits of luxury and wasteful spending. Our defenses thus strengthened, and all being arranged at home, we can act so as to make our courage and prestige resound beyond the seas. By so doing, we will not in the future be imprisoning ourselves; indeed, we will be able, I believe, so to accomplish matters at home and abroad as to achieve national security. Forestalling the foreigners in this way, I believe, is the best method of ensuring that the *bakufu* will at some future time find opportunity to reimpose its ban and forbid foreigners to come to Japan, as was done in the Kanei period. Moreover, it would make possible the strictest prohibition of Christianity. And since I understand that the Americans and Russians themselves have only recently become skilled in navigation, I do not see how the people of our country, who are clever and quick-wit-

ted, should prove inferior to Westerners if we begin training at once.

The national situation being what it is, if the *bakufu* protects our coasts peacefully without bringing upon us permanent foreign difficulties, then even if that entails complete or partial change in the laws of our ancestors I do not believe such action could really be regarded as contrary to the wishes of those ancestors. However, I think it is essential to win the support of the country for *bakufu* policy on this occasion, so the *bakufu* should first notify the [Imperial] Court and then arrange to send Imperial messengers to the Ise, Iwashimizu, and Kashima shrines and a Tokugawa messenger to the Nikkō shrine, announcing there its resolve to secure tranquillity at home and security for the country. Trust in the will of the gods, after all, is the ancient custom of our land; and I believe, moreover, that by so doing the *bakufu* may be able to unite national opinion.

It is now no easy matter, by means of orders concerning the defense of Edo and the nearby coast, to ensure that all will be fully prepared for any sudden emergency, so not a moment must be wasted. However many firm walls we construct, they will certainly not be as effective as unity of mind if the unforeseen happens. The urgent task of the moment, therefore, is for the *bakufu* to resolve on relieving the nation's anxieties and issue the appropriate orders.

I am conscious of my temerity in putting forward views that conflict with the existing [seclusion] laws, but I have so reported in accordance with your orders that I was to do so fully and without reserve.