

Charles Jenkins – An American Enigma
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Mr. Charles Jenkins is an enigma, an incomprehensible riddle to most people aware of his plight. His actions since 1965 are indeed difficult to comprehend. Maybe this is why this aging, shy fellow from a tiny rural town in North Carolina, his wife and their daughters have captured the attention of the Japanese people, and a growing number of Americans. We can understand Mrs. Jenkins (Soga-san) and their daughters, but not him.

Mr. Jenkins was fortunate enough to be born into one of the world's most prosperous and free societies in the history of mankind, the United States. For two centuries, people from all over the world have struggled, risking life and wealth, to gain entry to the United States. But the young Mr. Jenkins, then a 25 year old sergeant in the US Army, allegedly chose to abandon his "inalienable rights," as stated in the American Declaration of Independence, and walk into the world's most isolated and authoritarian nations in the world. Why? Did he do this voluntarily or was he kidnapped?

For nearly forty years, he lived in North Korea. There he apparently willingly endured severe restraints on his freedom in exchange for prestigious work and privileges. He also made movies that belittled his former homeland and his former colleagues in the US Army. He lived with three other young Americans who also had deserted from the army before him. They allegedly signed North Korean leaflets designed to entice other US soldiers to join them in North Korea.

Did Mr. Jenkins stay in North Korea voluntarily because of selfishness and greed, or was he prevented from leaving? Some how, he met and married a young Japanese woman who had been abducted by North Korean agents. Why? Was their marriage arranged by North Korean authorities, was it a consequence of romance or did Mr. Jenkins hope that his marriage might help him leave North Korea? We yearn for answers to these and similar questions not because Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins are important to us, but because his past choices in life are so difficult for us to comprehend.

We can readily understand Mrs. Jenkins, regardless of whether we are Japanese, American or what ever. After all, she was a hapless victim of circumstances. Seized by North Korean agents at a young age and clandestinely rushed to North Korea, she was robbed of her freedom and denied the ability to determine her own fate. This is one of the most frightening and revolting things that could happen to anyone. Once in North Korea, her only recourse was to survive as best she could. We can also easily understand this.

Once she saw an opportunity to leave, she seized it and returned home. This too is quite comprehensible. Selfishness was not her primary motive for leaving North Korea. When

warmly welcomed back to Japan, she acted like any good mother and sincere wife. She yearned to reunite her family. She wished for her daughters to join her so they too could share the freedom and prosperity she had rediscovered in her homeland.

In essence, her motives and determination are both comprehensible and admirable to us. Similarly, we can also understand and sympathize with Mrs. Jenkins yearning to have her husband join her. The Japanese people's emotionally charged outpouring of compassion and support for her likewise is both comprehensible and admirable. After all, humanitarian concern for the fate of this hapless victim and the pathos her family motivated the Japanese people's support, nothing else..

Mrs. Jenkin's daughters also deserve our deepest sympathy and strongest support. They, like their mother, lacked the ability to decide where to live. Their birth to Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins was a genetic accident. Like their mother, they had to learn to survive in the rigidly controlled North Korean society. Even worse must have been the prejudice they endured in North Korea because their parents represented North Korea's worst and most despised enemies – "imperialist United States and Japan." Also like their mother, we should reach out and embrace these children as victims of the Cold War and the traumatic clash between communist and capitalism.

But should these young women decide to return to their homeland, we must not impede them. Doing so would be similar to what the North Korean government did to their mother. Instead, it is our responsibility to do our best to make them feel at home in their "adopted" homeland. If they chose to leave, it is our failure, and we cannot blame them.

We cannot say the same things about Mr. Jenkins. He was not a victim of abduction. The US government has reason and evidence to believe that he voluntarily gave up his rights and privileges as a US citizen to go to live in North Korea. Why he did this, we do not yet know. We can sympathize with his misfortunate, but we must also recognize that he remains responsible for his own actions. We can respect his decision to rejoin his wife and daughters in Japan. But we must also admit the possibility that he may not have been free to choose his own fate. After all, he was living in North Korea where one is expected to put the leader's wishes before one's own desires. In other words, the North Korean government may have expelled him because his continuing presence in North Korea was no longer of value to the "Supreme Commander" Kim Jong Il.

Most of all, Mr. Jenkins appears to be a pathetic victim of his own poor judgment and the ruthless politics of the Cold War. For now, his health first must be restored. Inevitably, he must face a US Army court martial. The right to a fair and speedy trial is one of the rights he gave up long ago. He should view the trial as an opportunity to cooperate with the US government and to explain his previous conduct. He certainly owes all of us, especially his families in Japan and in the United States, a full and honest explanation of his previous conduct. If he is found guilty, his punishment hopefully will not be severe. But in a democracy, no man should be placed above the law, regardless of the circumstances.