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Notes from editor (not for publication):

Nice interview and editing of the conversation! Per my email question — I removed the word “abrasive” entirely. I can’t imagine it significantly changes his point. If you have the actual phrase or a better idea, of course I’m open.

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

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1 Fukushima at 15

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 Japan is relaunching its nuclear program 15 years after its
3 nuclear catastrophe. ‘It’s going to end badly,’ says author Thomas
4 Bass, who will speak in Brattleboro.

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

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6 ON MARCH 11, 2011, four nuclear reactors in
7 Fukushima, Japan, were destroyed by an earthquake and tsunami,
8 triggering a disaster that still resonates worldwide. Within a swirl
9 of mismanagement and misinformation, the nuclear catastrophe
10 was one of the biggest in history.

11 This Friday at 118 Elliot, Windham World Affairs Council
12 (WWAC) presents author, journalist, and scholar Thomas Bass in
13 a talk on the disaster, the costs of “containing it, the lives of
14 people living near Fukushima’s nuclear exclusion zone, and the
15 broader implications of Fukushima for the world at large,” states
16 a WWAC press release.

17 Bass, author of *Return to Fukushima*, teaches English and
18 journalism at State University of New York in Albany and writes
19 for *The New Yorker*, *Wired*, *Smithsonian*, and *The Bulletin of the*
20 *Atomic Scientists*, among other publications.

21 “After seven years of research and travels to Fukushima
22 as recently as January 2026,” the release explains, “Bass offers a
23 sober, balanced account and reflects on lessons learned to help
24 navigate what may be an increasingly atomic future.”

25 The impetus for Bass’s talk, as event moderator Lissa
26 Weinmann states in the release, is that “as the U.S. pushes new
27 and unprecedented government investment in nuclear energy [...] while cutting regulations at every level, including radiation
28 exposure standards for workers and citizens, it is important to
29 analyze [...] what is happening with a failed nuclear plant in a
30 technologically advanced society.”

31 *The Commons* spoke recently with Bass.

32 * * *

33
34 **Annie Landenberger:** How did you come to write *Return*
35 *to Fukushima*?

36 **Thomas Bass:** A few years ago I was traveling in [Japan,
37 and] I decided to go take a look. This was the world’s worst
38 industrial accident — it devastated a large part of Japan’s eastern
39 coast. I became interested in who was living in that nuclear
40 exclusion zone.

41 [Since the disaster] people have returned to parts of it
42 and shown remarkable ingenuity, bravery, and intelligence in
43 confronting conditions there.

44 I then traveled to Chernobyl and kept my eye on other
45 nuclear exclusion zones. I suspect that an increasingly large

46 portion of the world is going to end up as a nuclear exclusion
47 zone. This just seemed to be a lens, it seemed to encapsulate
48 forces at work in the world.

49 **A.L.:** And so the book...

50 **T.B.:** Although “Fukushima” is in the title, it very much is
51 coverage of what I have learned over the last few years about
52 nuclear energy and how atoms for war never actually succeeded
53 in becoming atoms for peace.

54 **A.L.:** Given the limited supply of arable land in Japan, it
55 makes sense that they’re trying to reclaim what they can. There
56 must be a pretty intense science around how to restore
57 contaminated land like that.

58 **T.B.:** Well, they borrowed the idea from the United States
59 after the U.S. exploded thermonuclear weapons on Bikini Atoll.
60 They tried to resettle Bikini by scraping up the topsoil that was
61 contaminated with radionuclides.

62 Japan borrowed this technique and scraped up a massive
63 amount of topsoil in Fukushima in order to lessen the amount [of
64 contamination]. That succeeded somewhat, but I describe it as a
65 kind of lily pad effect: You can hop from one clean area to the
66 next, but if you stray, the radiation detector will spike.

67 And Japan suffers during the winter from monsoons and
68 heavy rains, which wash all the contaminants back down into the
69 coastal areas.

70 But the government is desperately trying to resettle the
71 nuclear exclusion zone. They’re paying subsidies if you move into
72 the area, including your gym membership and covering your bill
73 for eating out in local restaurants. Not to mention subsidizing
74 your apartment or building a house.

75 **A.L.:** Wow. Talk about incentives.

76 **T.B.:** At the same time, they’re engaged in this very
77 peculiar practice of taking radioactive soil from Fukushima and
78 spreading it across Japan.

79 **A.L.:** Why?

80 **T.B.:** Well, you may smack your forehead in disbelief. The
81 Ministry of the Environment has called it “happy soil.” It’s
82 contaminated under 8,000 [becquerels](#) per kilogram, an extremely
83 high amount of contamination.

84 A load of happy soil was dumped in the prime minister’s
85 flower bed in Tokyo a few months ago, as [part of] the first wave
86 of dumping radioactive soil from Fukushima across Japan into
87 sites, roadworks, and so on.

88 Japan has backed itself into a corner. They have
89 mandated that all radioactive soils and other radioactive material
90 have to be removed from Fukushima. No one has volunteered [to
91 take it], so the government is spreading it throughout Japan.

92 These are the things I’ve been tapped to speak about
93 when I show up in Vermont, where you people have been
94 leading this anti-nuclear struggle for a long time. You’re the real
95 heroes in this project.

96 **A.L.:** Yeah, it goes way back. And Vermont Yankee is still
97 visible.

98 So what’s your connection to WWAC?

99 **T.B.:** Well, I received an email entitled, “I love your
100 book.” I think there were several exclamation marks behind that
101 email. It just struck a nerve with these old warriors, because I
102 really do attempt to encapsulate the entire history of this effort to
103 boil water — nuclear reactors being the world’s least efficient and
104 most expensive way to boil water. It’s really a terrible idea.

105 Anyway, when Vermonters got hold of my book, they
106 said, “Please come.”

107 **A.L.:** You must have a hard time sleeping at night. These
108 exclusion zones are increasing worldwide? That doesn’t seem to
109 be getting enough press.

110 **T.B.:** I’ll give you an example: The Santa Susana Field Lab
111 in Los Angeles. It’s one of the worst nuclear disasters in U .S.
112 history. A reactor blew up just north of Los Angeles [in 1979],
113 and it was covered up for many years. The effect of the damage

114 has never been fully investigated. There have been cancer
115 clusters in the vicinity.

116 So, that's a nuclear exclusion zone right on the edge of
117 Los Angeles.

118 The Hanford reactors up along the Columbia River [in
119 Benton County, Washington], Kazakhstan, the Russian reactors
120 that have blown up, the damage to Chernobyl, Fukushima. I
121 mean, the list goes on and on. And oddly enough, human beings,
122 for whatever reason, have a way of forgetting these things. Our
123 memory sort of wears off after 10 to 15 years.

124 We're seeing the 15th anniversary of Fukushima as Japan
125 is now rushing to restart its nuclear reactors. They've been
126 mothballed for the last 15 years and were never particularly safe
127 to begin with.

128 This is a country that has over a thousand earthquakes
129 every year. It's going to end badly.

130 **A.L.:** Right. Not the best place to put a volatile reactor.

131 **T.B.:** It's the world's worst. And that's a whole intensely
132 interesting story in and of itself involving the CIA financing the
133 effort to build nuclear reactors in Japan.

134 They got Japan to buy into this enterprise of building
135 nuclear reactors. That's what Fukushima was: General Electric
136 reactors, the same design as Vermont Yankee's. And no more safe.
137 Anyway, one can smack one's forehead in disbelief over and over
138 again. These stories tend not to get publicized.

139 **A.L.:** When did you first start digging in on nuclear
140 issues?

141 **T.B.:** My father was in the military industrial complex,
142 building the triggers for the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and
143 Nagasaki. So these are subjects I've been thinking about for a
144 long time.

145 **A.L.:** What will the format for Friday be?

146 **T.B.:** I'll be giving a brief talk, maybe with some photos
147 out of Fukushima. I have a current report I could give. And then
148 I'm hoping to have a freewheeling discussion with the people

149 who show up who I suspect are going to be long-time battle-
150 scarred warriors, agitators, troublemakers. I hope there will be
151 some younger people as well.

152 We're clocking 80 years since the Trinity explosion in
153 New Mexico, so people need to remember this is getting to be an
154 increasingly lengthy history.

155 **A.L.:** Do you see any hope on the horizon?

156 **T.B.:** Well, we're still here. We have yet to blow ourselves
157 [up. A fair amount of luck is required here. And so far, a fair](#)
158 number of us have been lucky. Others have been unlucky.

159 I don't know how much we've learned. As I mentioned,
160 we seem to forget faster than we learn, which is a worrying state
161 of affairs.

162 We need to distinguish lies from truths; we need facts,
163 and we need fact checking. And we need all those old skills that
164 journalists actually have.

165 We're not enemies of the people; we're the only friends
166 the people have, so all we can do is carry on, I guess.

167 * * *

168 THE DISCUSSION with Bass takes place this Friday, March
169 13, at 118 Elliot in Brattleboro. Doors open at 6:30 p.m.

170 The program — and live broadcast on BCTV (Comcast
171 channel 1078) and livestream via YouTube — begins at 7 p.m.

172 A reception with the author will follow.

173 A \$10 donation is suggested, not required. To register for
174 the event and to connect to the livestream, visit

175 [Fukushima.eventbrite.com](#). For more about the WWAC, visit
176 [windhamworldaffairsCouncil.org](#).

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178 *Editor's note: Stories presented as interviews in this*
179 *format are edited for clarity, readability, and space. Words not*
180 *spoken by interview subjects appear in brackets, as do editorial*
181 *clarifications.*

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BIO/COATTAIL:

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