

# To WRA Staff Members from D. S. Myer

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WAR RELOCATION AUTHORITY  
Washington, D.C.

To WRA Staff Members

The successful administration of the WRA program, especially in the Relocation Centers, will be dependent to a great extent upon an understanding of the cultural background of the Japanese people and their American children and grandchildren. John F. Embree, who recently has assumed responsibility for documentation of the WRA program, in the Office of Reports, has conducted studies in both Japan and Hawaii, and is recognized by his colleagues as being well qualified to report on Japanese race and culture. The accompanying notes on Dealing With Japanese Americans are commended to the attention of all WRA staff members. Additional notes of similar nature will be prepared from time to time.

\s\ D. S. Myer  
Director

Attachment

DEALING WITH JAPANESE-AMERICANS

By John F. Embree

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1. Race and Culture.

The only thing evacuees in relocation centers have in common is their ancestry, i.e., their race. Because of this fact both the evacuees and members of the WRA staff are likely to assume many things to be racial which are in actual fact not racial but cultural.

What is race anyway? The basic element in race is heredity. A number of people of the same ancestry may be termed a race. Pure races, that is, large numbers of people descended from the same stocks, do not exist. All present-day groups of people such as Japanese, English, Germans, Americans, are of mixed racial stock. One consequence of this is that individuals of any so-called racial group differ greatly among themselves in regard to stature, hair form, skin color, head shape, etc. This means that race can only be considered on a statistical basis. Japanese, for instance, are on the average shorter, darker-skinned and more often round-headed than are Caucasians. But individual Japanese are often taller or lighter or more long-headed than individual Caucasians with whom they may be compared.

A look around any relocation center will demonstrate these points. Some Japanese you will notice to be rather short, but every now and then you will meet a tall man; some will have the characteristic straight black hair of the "Mongol" type, but others have wavy hair; some have an epicanthic fold on the inner part of the eye opening (which partly accounts for the so-called slant eye), but many do not. Observe your Japanese acquaintances closely and you will soon have to discard any mythical "Japanese type" you have built up in your mind.

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Physical features of parents are transmitted to their children, racial types persist through generations. But cultural traits are not inherited; they are acquired through learning and education.

Thus, a Japanese born in California grows up speaking English, something his cousin in Japan may never learn. And even though he attends a Japanese language school, he will never learn to speak Japanese properly unless he goes to Japan to live. President Roosevelt is of Dutch descent, but he cannot discourse in Dutch. To understand his personality you must know his cultural background as an American brought up in eastern New York. Mr. Willkie is of German descent, but he does not speak German, and his culturally determined personality is typically American.

Psychologists and anthropologists have made many studies in regard to intelligence and race, and temperament and rant. There is general agreement that as between the major "races" of man there is

no positive evidence to show that a given individual of one race may not develop as far mentally as an individual of another, given the same cultural background. Similarly, in regard to temperament, it is culture rather than race that is the prominent factor. Thus, the "lazy" Negro of rural United States is not lazy because of race but because of social status; his cousin in Nigeria is a very energetic individual and one capable of complex political development and strong individual leadership. Similarly, Japanese in California are known to be hard-working, self-sacrificing people with strong family loyalties. These useful traits are not biological and there is a real danger of their disappearing soon under relocation center conditions. (Remember, the Crow and Blackfoot Indians whose cultures stressed individual initiative and personal bravery and what has happened to these brilliant warriors under Reservation conditions where all the old cultural values have been undermined and many are today lacking in individual initiative and possessed of a typical wards-of-the-government-outlook on life.)

The importance of culture in determining behavior may be seen further in the fact that frequently you will find a young Nisei to have a similar temperament and outlook on life as yourself in contrast to his father who may appear to you to be "very Japanese." Of course, under center conditions of life, the administrator, with his security and dominant social position will have so many advantages over any Nisei, insecure as to his future, and in a subservient social position, that the two are bound to look upon problems in the center from different points of view. This social and economic difference in position should always be remembered by a "Caucasian" administrator or teacher when trying to settle some problem with an evacuee.

To Summarize:

Race is a hereditary and culture acquired. Races of man today are not "pure" and there is great variability in physical appearance and intelligence within any racial group. The all important factor in determining adult behavior is early education, i.e., the cultural background of an individual. Further, even in what is regarded as one culture (e.g. American) important differences in personality develop as a result of growth in different regional areas and in different social levels of society.

## 2. Behavior Patterns Found Among Issei and Some Others in Relocation Centers.

In order to deal successfully with any group of people it is well to know something about them. A friendly attitude goes a long way, but that is not enough, for good will without knowledge may result in more harm than good.

The older Japanese (Issei)\* have a number of fixed ways of living together and dealing with social situations about which it is useful to know.

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\* Much has been said of the differences between Issei, Kibei, and Nisei. On the whole it is safe to assume that older Issei are Japanese in culture and outlook and younger Nisei are American in culture and outlook. (If a Nisei is bitter and anti-administration in attitude, this is simply evidence that he is American and strongly resents his loss of liberty without trial.) The Kibei, Nisei who have been educated in Japan, have been much written of as a dangerous pro-Japanese element. Probably many Kibei are culturally Japanese, but by no means all. Furthermore, some Issei, born in Japan but educated in the United States, are American in point of view. So, while Issei, Kibei

### The Go-Between

First of all, no Japanese (and here is meant no persons of Japanese culture) likes to meet face to face with his social equal or superior in a situation that might cause embarrassment to the latter. Instead, a go-between is preferred, some common friend who will carry the message or conduct the negotiations. In this way, if the negotiations fall through or one party has to say "No," face-to-face embarrassment is avoided. The best known example of this is in marriage where the two families involved wish to inquire into one another's social backgrounds. This, of course, could lead to considerable embarrassment and so a go-between is very convenient. Even some Japanese-Americans who object to marriage arrangements by families do like to have a friend do the proposing, John Alden style.

Similarly, if an important business deal is being carried out, negotiations are often by means of a go-between.

On a relocation center, you may find that if some program or suggestion is not liked, no one will object at first but later through some third party you will hear that there is objection to it. This is the go-between system in operation. You may often get better results in work with older evacuees by working through a go-between than by working directly, since each of you can speak more freely and express your ideas more fully to a go-between without fear of hurting anyone's feelings than if you were dealing face to face.

### Sharing Responsibility

Another characteristic of older Japanese is a desire to avoid personal responsibility for something that may make him unpopular with his associates. As a result committees are more popular than chairmen. Further, any final decision for action by a committee is usually unanimous, thus making all members equally responsible for it. If people are dissatisfied with some aspect of project life, instead of using a single go-between, a committee may be chosen and that committee will wait upon some member of the staff with its complaints or proposals.

Where a single man must serve, as in the case of block representatives, he will probably either be unanimously nominated or men will rotate in office either by resignations or through having different men elected each election.

(For a comparison, note that in Japan while a certain body of men rule Japan through the years, those who are openly and formally responsible for government change frequently. No single man stands out as responsible for government for long at a time in the manner of Hitler or Mussolini.)

### Project Head's Position

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and Nisei are convenient terms of classification, it is worth remembering that generalizations concerning these groups are subject to many individual exceptions.

As the man responsible for the whole community, the project head in each center has great authority and prestige – an authority and prestige recognized by the older Japanese in the same way in which they recognize the authority of a village headman.

When a new policy is announced or anything affecting the whole center is inaugurated, it should be made by the project head himself. Furthermore, the project head should make it a point to from time to time meet with the people of the center (or of each camp where there is more than one in a center) in order to discuss new developments, answer questions and so make sure that people understand. Only in this way will the people believe what is said, because it comes from the highest authority. Talks of this sort by the project director should be as specific as possible – if necessary deal with seemingly minor but very real things as toilets, soap supply, food distribution, etc., if these questions are raised by the evacuees. Only the project head can effectively kill some rumors. Furthermore, this first-hand word from the highest authority should be given not once a year, but at least once a month. Such duties cannot be deputized. The project head, like the village headman, is expected to be responsible for taking an active interest in the welfare of his community by traditional Japanese custom. (Resentment of questions implying criticism of administration is not, of course, the best means of answering them, or solving the underlying problems and anxieties that give rise to them.)

After a new policy has been explained by the project head to responsible evacuees involved, later discussions of it may be made by the appropriate division head.

#### Modes of Employment

Employment problems form an important aspect of center life and need patient and personal attention by conscientious administrators. With Japanese (as indeed with many people), to simply ask for a turnout of 300 men on a work project is not likely to be successful. Instead, first the nature of the work must be considered, then a number of experienced evacuees contacted. To them the nature and purpose of the work must be explained. When they understand what it is all about, they can suggest the people to be employed on it, and make useful suggestions on carrying out the project. In this way a corps of workers with close rapport and good morale can be built up. If any change in conditions of work is made, this also should be carefully explained to and fully understood by the work leaders who can in turn explain it to their work crews.

Sitdowns, strikes and riots are not the result of cussedness, but are the results of misunderstandings and dissatisfactions; in the centers they are likely to be accentuated by anxieties, but the administrator who is careful to develop understanding by the evacuees of the programs he proposes to initiate probably will be favored with their cooperation.

#### Anxieties

All evacuees in relocation centers have an uneasy feeling of insecurity that determines many of their actions. This insecurity is due to the war, and especially to the relocation program whereby families often had to move, not once but twice or three times, from, say, Berkeley to Zone Two, from Zone Two to an assembly center, from an assembly center to a relocation center. All of this in a few weeks or

months. The newspapers carry stories of threats to deport Japanese after the war, threats to deprive Nisei of citizenship, threats to prevent the return of evacuees to California after the war.

WRA policy in the relocation center differs from WCCA policy, and this WRA policy itself has often changed since it was first established. Small wonder, then, that an evacuee wonders "What next?" He is worried and insecure in regard to what will happen after the war, what will become of his children's manners and morals as a result of life in center barracks, with the common mess halls and lavatories; he is worried about tomorrow's food, tomorrow's health, tomorrow's children.

It is this basic insecurity and multitude of anxieties that cause so many alarmist rumors to fly through the centers and cause so many people to be apathetic toward work.

For the present, the best way to deal with this situation is for everyone from project head down to make sure that he understand and has explained clearly and definitely just what any new policy or new activity means in terms of life in the center. Furthermore, within his sphere of activity, each staff member should make every effort to know personally and well as many evacuees of as many social types as he can. Only in this way can some of the fears and rumors prevalent among the evacuees be brought to light and so killed off just as darkness-loving bacteria die when exposed to sunshine.

#### Food

In regard to food, any regular eating in common mess halls is unsatisfactory and the food is inevitable going to be criticized whether it is good or not. But it is important to realize the great importance of the slightest change in diet to the evacuees and that anything that even looks like unfair practice by the chefs and the chief steward is going to cause a great deal of dissatisfaction. Unless the chief steward has the confidence of his cooks who in turn have the respect of the blocks, food riots or strikes are going to occur sooner or later on the project.

Most of these last suggestions all add up to the same thing, a need for staff members to be well acquainted with evacuees with whom they are concerned so that they can observe any growth of a critical situation and deal with it on a personal basis and in a peaceful manner before it gets out of hand.

#### Evacuee Attitudes

There are certain attitudes among evacuees which are fairly common. First there is a tendency to take sides in the war, to be pro- or anti-axis. These two attitudes are often related to pro- and anti-project administration attitudes. Thus, the more successful the staff is in arousing the confidence of evacuees in its integrity, the more converts to the anti-axis group among evacuees.

On the whole older single men who are aliens and who have few ties in American are most likely to be pro-axis in any aggressive way such as criticizing pro-American Nisei and telling them their American citizenship is useless.

Japanese born in this country but educated in Japan, especially for several years and since 1935 are, like the old bachelors, a group likely to actively favor Japan.

Parents of children who have made some success in American life are more likely to be neutral in action if not in attitude. Their loyalties are likely to be divided, since, up to December 7 at any rate, they realized that their children's future lay in America and America had given them a chance to rise in the world such as they would never have had in Japan.

Nisei, American born and American educated, are today of many attitudes. First there are the very pro-American. These people are easy to deal with but are often regarded as apple polishers and do not always have the respect of other evacuees, either Issei or Nisei. A large number are normal Americans who rather resent being transported and locked up just because their parents were born in Japan. A small minority are, like some Kibei, actively pro-axis.

On the whole most older married evacuees will cooperate with any reasonable program of center management since they want center conditions to be peaceful and to improve rather than deteriorate. However, it is too much to expect Japanese who could never become citizens to actively participate in program to celebrate the Four Freedoms or Independence Day. A democracy of works rather than of words is what will be most effective in influencing their attitudes.

Among Nisei, due to inactivity, many problems are going to arise in connection with work, with self-government and with sex which have nothing to do with pro- or anti-axis attitudes, but if handled without human understanding may lead to anti-administration attitudes which because of center social conditions might soon be transferred to anti-American attitudes. This would be a tragedy for the individuals concerned and an indication of failure in the WRA.

To Summarize:

Older Japanese have a number of patterns of behavior, a knowledge of which is useful in project administration. First, there is the desire to avoid face-to-face embarrassment through the use of a go-between. Second, there is a desire to avoid personal responsibility (and so invoke censure against oneself) and a consequent tendency toward group responsibility and, in committees, unanimous decisions, and rotating office holding. Thirdly, there is the tradition of accepting as true what the government head (in this case the project head) says in regard to government policy—but to be a successful government head one must give out the policy personally and so accept responsibility for it.

Finally, in all dealings with the evacuees it is well to be aware of the anxieties and attitudes which are prevalent in the center among all groups; and the need to become personally acquainted with these in order to lessen tensions that might lead to serious consequences.