

[Personal Correspondence]

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From O.D. Richardson

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Dear Friends:

In the Student Nisei, it now appears, we had in a few dramatic months a preview of what the war would bring to the American Japanese. They have acted exactly as the Nisei acted in City College. We were unable to interest the Kibei in our plans for absorbing the Japanese in American life, and in the centers the Kibei have shown themselves most to be strongly anti-American. Just as the larger number of the Nisei showed that they were not interested in the problems of their people, so, since the evacuation, they have formulated no plan to get out of their present situation. Just as most of them though first of their own plans and individual interests in dates, parties and well-paying jobs, and only second of their racial group and its future in America; just so they do now. Just as they would not read then, and did not know what was happening, either in the day-to-day or larger sense, so most of them today are reading nothing and are deciding their futures in rumor, fears, confusion, and the narrow range of their former experiences. Just as it was easier for the majority of the City College Nisei to continue the daily round in the "Little Tokyo" atmosphere than to live with the better Caucasians and find new experiences in common with them, so not it is easier for them to sit in the centers, suspicious and resentful of all Caucasians, complaining of racial inequality, but unwilling to gain the respect and affection of the persons they say they wish to be their fellow-citizens. The day of making up one's mind is here for all of us, Caucasians and Nisei alike, the day of holding to the things we want most and giving up the things which are incompatible with what we want most. Too many of us do not want to make up our minds, we want everything. What the Nisei do not seem to see is that they are making up their minds by not making them up.

The Nisei are splitting into two groups: the first is committed to America; the second is not committed to anything. This last is the same as being against America. Perhaps in different circumstances it would not be, but it is here and now. As a minority from an enemy country, their whole future is insecure. The only thing which can save them from discriminatory laws is public good-will. That good-will can be won if the Nisei were to throw themselves enthusiastically into the war on our side. Apathy or indifference will convince the Caucasians that the Nisei are Japanese. One group is thinking of itself as American. But a far larger group has chosen indifference, or open hostility. The first group has been silenced in many Centers. Tayama, Tanaka, Kido and others have been beaten. It has become dangerous for a person to say that he believed in the Caucasians and would cooperate with them. The American public has not forgotten this fact.

I believe the future of the Nisei who are now willing to work with the Caucasians, fight with them, and trust them is pretty clear. These Nisei will be protected from discriminatory laws by their entry into the army and their cooperative stand. Their rights of citizenship will not be abridged. People like myself who have the warmest personal attachment for certain individuals and their families will be able to help them get started after the war. They will enter the full current of American life, will make a very distinguished contribution to it, and we will be proud to know them as among our dearest friends. As the Sansei increase in number it will be increasingly difficult to discover any difference between their opportunities and those of any other third-generation group.

But the larger group of Nisei, the group which is now hesitating, will not be protected from harsh discriminatory laws, nor will it have the support of Caucasians friends. Many persons who opposed the evacuation of the Japanese are now coming to believe it was a good thing. They are not so much interested in helping the Nisei become Americans in every sense, since it looks as though a good many Nisei do not care about becoming Americans. Some Nisei, and perhaps most of the Kibei, are working themselves into such a state of mind that will have to send them away. Perhaps it would be a good thing, because they and their acts will always be a source of ill-will and danger for the truly American Japanese. Perhaps some of them might interpret such a letter as this as meaning that the Americans must be truly desperate to have to beg help from the Japanese. Whom the gods would destroy they first make mad.

My hat is off to you fellows of the Student Nisei, and your kind in all the Centers. You had courage and brains, and through you the Nisei are going to have a future in America. If you will allow me to teach the Sansei I shall be very well satisfied.

{Full text of A Social Plan for Minority Groups is in Object 1998.38.}