

THE FUTURE OF THE J.A.C.L.

In view of the difficulty in finding members who are willing to devote the necessary time and effort to maintaining it, proposals that the New York Chapter of the J.A.C.L. be dissolved and its members continue their membership in the J.A.C.L. directly with the national office in San Francisco have often been made. The Denver Chapter of the J.A.C.L. has been inactive for several years. It is no secret that many Nisei and Sansei have long been critical of J.A.C.L. policies and remain aloof to it. If the League is to be permanently maintained as the one organization qualified to speak for all Americans of Japanese ancestry, a careful examination and correction of its weaknesses may be more effective than repeated recitations of its past accomplishments.

The apparent thesis of the J.A.C.L.'s message to the public is that through J.A.C.L. leadership the Nisei conclusively demonstrated an inspiring loyalty to the United States. First, by cooperating with the U.S. Government when it perpetrated the Evacuation in 1942. Second, by flocking willingly to enter the U.S. Army directly from the concentration camps into which they had been incarcerated. And third, by the outstanding war record of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. The J.A.C.L. claims that as a result of the above incontestable demonstrations of Americanism, the organization through its lobbyist, Mike Masaoka, was able to persuade Congress to pass a number of laws aimed at reducing injustices to persons of Japanese ancestry in the United States. The League further claims that because of this record of wisdom and accomplishment, the organization and its policies deserve the gratitude and support of all Nisei and Sansei and can be depended upon to protect their interests in the future.

This story has never sounded quite right to many people and it has gone unchallenged too long. In effect, the J.A.C.L. has been and still is boasting of its success in following a policy of uncompromising appeasement of the white-skinned majority in this country. The J.A.C.L. is still trying to trade on its record of all-out Uncle Tomism when that type of behavior is being scornfully rejected by even the American Negroes as inconsistent with human dignity.

Some League members have expressed a feeling of neglect because no really important novel or motion picture has yet been produced about their wartime experience of evacuation, internment, and later release. It is possible that truly able writers who have examined the record as set forth by the J.A.C.L. have been so shocked by its gross misinterpretation of the basic principles of Americanism as to conclude that a story which could receive the emotional rapport and sympathy of the general public cannot be constructed from it. The villainous tyrant in the form of the U.S. Government is there, but the direct defiance of and unyielding resistance to tyranny required of the role of hero among Americans is completely missing.

Let us summarize the story bluntly. When in early 1942 the War Department proposed the evacuation of all persons of Japanese ancestry from Pacific Coast areas, the intended victims expected the J.A.C.L. to put up a strong opposition in their behalf. As soon as some white army officer made the wholly unsubstantiated claim of "military necessity," however, the League's leaders not only ended all protest, but agreed to cooperate with the carrying out of this outrage against their own people.

This demonstration of the J.A.C.L.'s willingness to become a door-mat for white-skinned Americans proved to be only the beginning. After the innocent victims had been forced out of their homes and finally transferred to semi-permanent concentration camps in the desert areas of the West, the U.S. Government began an intensive campaign to induce the Nisei living in such camps to volunteer to fight in and for the very same Army which had placed and held them there. The response of the J.A.C.L. leaders was overwhelming approval and support of the Government's campaign. They not only rushed to register themselves with the recruiting officer, but eagerly lent their efforts to persuading other Nisei to follow their example.

After the Government had exhausted this method of getting recruits, it decided to apply the draft laws to all Nisei remaining in the concentration camps. Again, the approval of the

J.A.C.L. leaders was loud and emphatic. This time, however, a number of Nisei proudly refused to submit quietly to this additional outrage by the Government and were convicted of resisting the draft and placed in Federal penitentiaries. These Nisei felt that as Americans, in view of the illegal Government violation of almost all their rights as citizens, it was more honorable under the circumstances to wear the prison uniform of a convict than to wear the uniform of a soldier of the U.S. Army ... a view which would undoubtedly have been shared by Jefferson, Patrick Henry, Thomas Paine and other Founding Fathers of this nation. This brave, if futile, act in defense of basic American principles by even a small minority of Nisei was an unwelcome hindrance to the J.A.C.L. efforts to portray all Nisei as 200% Uncle Toms. The reaction of the League's leaders was a shockingly bitter tirade of denunciation which included a publicly made appeal to the authorities to inflict the heaviest possible penalties on any Nisei who chose to defy the draft.

This almost incredible J.A.C.L. propensity for appeasement was first of all a total violation of the oldest of American political traditions which honors the defiance of any government when that government unjustly deprives a person of certain "unalienable rights." It was also a violation of the traditional Japanese pride in their cultural heritage and history and of their proud record of unbending belief in being the racial equals of any people on Earth.

It is difficult to believe that all who volunteered or were drafted from the camps entered the army to appease the white-skinned majority of Americans. Those who entered the armed forces from the "Relocation Centers" did so for many reasons which varied with each individual. Undoubtedly, one of these reasons was a desire to escape camp life. To imply, as the J.A.C.L. has, that these Nisei soldiers were all heroes of appeasement amounts to a slander.

No one can deny that the great record of the Nisei soldiers in World War II is without parallel. Since the J.A.C.L. places so much stress on it, however, it deserves a few comments. Much of the heaviest fighting was done by the 100th Infantry Battalion when it was composed mostly of Nisei from Hawaii, long before the Nisei from the concentration camps arrived at the front. To refute the white-racist lie of inborn Nisei disloyalty, the record of the Hawaiian Nisei soldiers and Nisei from other parts of the United States (who had not been stripped of their rights as citizens) would have been enough. There was no need for Nisei from concentration camps to enter the Army in order to disprove the false accusation. The only lasting effect of applying the draft laws to youths in the "Relocation Centers" was the additional deaths of a number of young Nisei on foreign battlefields in place of the white-skinned Americans who otherwise would have constituted the casualties.

The J.A.C.L. has never been reluctant to claim credit for the improvement which has taken place in the economic, political and social position of the Nisei in America since the end of World War II. Practically never mentioned by the J.A.C.L. spokesmen is the fact that the development of the Cold War with Russia and the re-emergence of Japan as the greatest industrial power in the Orient made it highly inconvenient for the U.S. Government to continue its former policies of treating persons of Japanese blood as being sub-human. The United States now needs the goodwill of the Japanese people. If these developments, completely outside of the control of the J.A.C.L., had not taken place, it is probable that the lobbying efforts of the League would have been substantially less rewarding. It is time that the J.A.C.L. abandon its insistence that the Nisei record of shameless Uncle Tomism is the chief cause of the post-World War II "acceptance" by the whites. The claim is not only of doubtful validity; it is increasingly inappropriate amid the present trends in public opinion. If continued, the claim

will serve eventually to bring upon the Nisei the contempt and ridicule of other non-white minority groups in America.

Let us keep in mind, however, that the past leaders of the J.A.C.L. cannot be blamed for their apparent belief that the Japanese were really an inferior race and that the Nisei, therefore, were under some kind of special obligation to "earn" better treatment from the white-skinned Americans. Some of the causes of this attitude go back in time for more than a hundred years. When Yankee greed and insolence finally resulted in Perry's unlawful intrusion into Japanese coastal waters in 1853, the Japanese were forced to face up to the painful realization that their coastal defense shore batteries were hopelessly inadequate to deal with the modern guns on Western warships. This humiliating demonstration of the inability of the Tokugawa shogunate to protect Japanese soil from foreign intruders resulted in the overthrow of the feudal system by two Southern clans. The young samurai who led the rebellion then dedicated themselves to placing Japan on an equal footing with the West in terms of naval and military power at the earliest possible date.

In order to speed the Westernization of Japan, her new leaders during the Meiji Period, did all in their power to eliminate hostility among the Japanese to Western ideas and methods. This propaganda campaign included flattering references to Englishmen and Americans in school textbooks which held up some American presidents as models of proper behavior. Many Issei brought up in Japan during that period grew to adulthood with a very definite belief that whatever was Western was generally good. When they came to America, they were awed by the material wealth which they saw everywhere around them. The few educated Issei from samurai families had enough knowledge of Japanese history and culture to avoid the mistake of uncritical admiration of almost everything American, but the great majority of Issei from peasant and lower-class families did not.

Even without the pro-American bias on the part of their parents, it would have taken an unusually strong family background and temperament for a Nisei to be brought up in America during the first half of the 20th century without acquiring an inferiority complex to some degree. First, there was the all-pervading atmosphere of American contempt for non-white peoples which stemmed from the white-skinned Americans' long successful oppression of Negroes and American Indians. Second, there was until the end of World War II an almost continuous barrage of the most vile and outrageous anti-Japanese propaganda from much of the American press, particularly in the Pacific Coast states. Third, there was the almost total ignoring or at best condescending treatment of Japanese history and culture in American schools and textbooks. Fourth, there was the relative poverty of the Issei compared with the conspicuous affluence of many whites. And last, but not least, there existed the racially restrictive real estate covenants which in West Coast cities forced most Issei and Nisei, regardless of economic ability, to live in the slum areas.

The J.A.C.L. can never be stronger than its own members and leaders. Any real improvement in its effectiveness will depend upon first getting rid of the crippling inferiority complex which apparently burdens most of its older members. As it is now constituted, the J.A.C.L. can rarely attract to membership those Nisei who have always regarded themselves as being the racial equals of any whites. The organization is scorned by the Nisei who defied the draft and went to Federal penitentiaries from the concentration camps. The League's mistaken line of propaganda continues to alienate the very kind of Nisei needed to give it the strength and backbone it sorely lacks.

In seeking to gain "acceptance" from white-skinned Americans, the majority of J.A.C.L. members seem to have made the tragic error of adopting the adverse judgments of Japan by whites who from both ignorance and prejudice were totally

unqualified to recognize or appreciate the subtle greatness of Japanese civilization. It is time for the Nisei to cease being misled by these false and worthless judgments and to learn to see the real value and worth of the culture to which they are inescapably related by birth.

The statement, "Once a Jap, always a Jap," is truly applicable to the physical characteristics of the Nisei. For the Nisei who has no pride in the history and cultural attainments of the country of his parents, his yellow skin and slant eyes are badges of inferiority which he has been cursed to bear throughout his life ... a sort of punishment for not having been born white. To compensate for this "handicap" he sometimes foolishly tries to become a 200% American which, of course, is not being a true American at all.

The meaning of the J.A.C.L. motto, "Better Americans in a Greater America," needs clarification for it to serve any useful purpose. The J.A.C.L. should give the fact that America is made up of peoples and races from many lands the emphasis which it deserves. The true greatness of this country comes from the contributions of all its component cultures. Its greatness is not the result of every new immigrant group making itself into the exact imitation of Americans of Anglo-Saxon descent. A "Better American" should not be taken by the Nisei to mean a yellow carbon copy of a W.A.S.P. It should mean any American of any ethnic group who is able to contribute to the enrichment of American culture and civilization and help to make America a better place for present and succeeding generations to live in.

The Nisei thus far have in most cases turned their backs on a unique opportunity to be truly "Better Americans." Many Western intellectuals now recognize that the West desperately needs to learn many of the teachings of the Orient. The headlong pursuit of sensual pleasures and the crass materialism which characterizes so much of American life needs persons who can help to discipline and reduce its

vulgarity. America needs people who are sensitive to the beauties of nature instead of people who arrogantly regard nature as something to be "conquered." The nation needs persons who can quietly but firmly live up to self-imposed duties instead of people who have forgotten their own duties and loudly bray for "rights." This republic needs to rebuild a respect for the wisdom which comes with age instead of the senseless worship of the fleeting pleasures of youth. All of these qualities and disciplines have long constituted important aspects of Japan's culture which today is being studied with ever increasing respect and earnestness by many people of other races. Most Nisei, however, continue to remain hypnotized by the cheap chromium plated glitter of the most materialistic aspects of American civilization and sometimes try to imagine themselves to be thus superior to even finest persons which Japan throughout her long history was able to produce.

Many Sansei, not having been brain-washed by anti-Japanese propaganda as the Nisei were, strongly question the attitudes of their parents and the values of the existing order in America. They are able to sense that there is something empty and meaningless in a life devoted entirely to the pursuit of money, power, and the false appearance of respectability. These Sansei should be commended for their perception and intelligence. And above all, they should be helped to seek and discover the enduring truths and values on which they can build lives of genuine self-respect and service to their fellow Americans. At present, unfortunately, many are lost in their quest for standards and values to replace those they have properly rejected.

If the J.A.C.L. can provide the guidance and leadership to direct the Sansei back to their Japanese and Oriental heritage, it might assure itself of a permanent role in American society. Many of the older officers of the J.A.C.L. have been giving up the positions of control which they held until recently. Let us hope that the Sansei will insist that

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the new generation of J.A.C.L. officials will be as informed and proud of their Japanese heritage as the English-Americans are of theirs and completely reject the crawling boot-licking posture of so many former J.A.C.L. leaders.

It is no longer necessary to read Japanese in order to learn about Japanese and Oriental history, culture, traditions and religions. There are now hundreds of excellent books written in English as well as English translations available on those subjects. But because of the almost total neglect which Japanese and Oriental history and culture has received in the public schools of the United States, many Nisei and Sansei are not even aware that such books exist and have not the slightest idea of how to get started on correcting their own ignorance.

One of the most important projects the J.A.C.L. could sponsor would be to make such books easily accessible to at least its own members. It can do this first, by establishing lending libraries at each of its chapters stocked with all available worthwhile books in English on Japan and the Orient selected by a qualified committee; second, by making such books available for purchase by J.A.C.L. members at a discount; and third, by providing suggested reading lists and book reviews to members.

There is no sudden overnight cure for overcoming such deep-seated inferiority complexes as the Nisei suffer from, but the J.A.C.L. should at least make a start and in the process help the Sansei to really find themselves, and thus perhaps assure its own future.

- Shosuke Sasaki