

THE EVACUATION OF THE JAPANESE DURING WORLD WAR II

In the spring of 1942, the government of the United States forced approximately 112,000 persons of Japanese ancestry residing on the West Coast to leave their homes to enter concentration camps in desolate inland areas. Two-thirds of these were Nisei (NEE-say) or second generation, American citizens by birth. The rest were Issei (EE-say) or first generation, born in Japan and forbidden by American law from becoming citizens. This uprooting of an entire racial group happened during World War II when the U.S. was at war with Japan.

This almost incredible episode can only be understood in the historical context of the agitation and sentiment against Asian immigrants as they came to the U.S. beginning in the middle of the 19th century. From the start they were looked upon with great suspicion. There were many individuals and groups that were active and persistent in fostering anti-Asian feelings, particularly on the West Coast. The Oriental Exclusion Act was passed in 1924 to stop Japanese immigration into the U.S. Alien land laws were passed prohibiting Japanese immigrants from owning land. There were many other acts restricting the activities of the Japanese in the political, economic, educational and social arenas.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, provided impetus for the "final victory" for forces opposing the Japanese in America. Nevertheless, plans for a final solution were never that clear. Instead, the months after the Japanese attack and the ensuing declaration of war were troubled and confusing ones. The question of what was to be done with the Japanese in the U.S. can probably be best understood in the context of this confusion, since even today it is difficult to ascertain accurately the roles of various individuals, officials, and institutions in relation to the decision to evacuate the Japanese from the West Coast.

Immediately after Pearl Harbor, selected enemy aliens, including 2,192 Japanese, were arrested by the FBI. Curfew regulations and other precautions were also instituted. These steps might have been sufficient for protective purposes, except in the light of the continued battle between Californians and the Japanese. The Hearst papers presented the issue vigorously; for example, the Los Angeles Examiner on December 16, 1941, led off with the headline, "Fifth Column Treachery Told," using a quotation from Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, but omitting the fact that Knox was discussing only rumors against the Japanese. The San Francisco Examiner picked up the cry, then the American Legion, then the chambers of commerce, then the farm groups, and finally the politicians--"all Japanese are traitors."

Evidence to the contrary was ignored. Bill Henry, conservative columnist for the Los Angeles Times, wrote on December 26, 1941:

The FBI chief says that yarns about the dead Jap flyers with McKinley High School (Honolulu) rings on their fingers, the stories of the arrows in the cane fields pointing toward Pearl Harbor, and the yarns about the Jap vegetable trucks blocking the roadway to Pearl Harbor that day are all unadulterated bunk.

But the rumors continued to fly and were picked up on a national level. On January 29, 1942, Henry McLemore, a syndicated Hearst columnist wrote:

I am for the immediate removal of every Japanese on the West Coast to a point deep in the interior . . . let 'em be pinched, hurt, hungry . . . let us have no patience with the enemy or with anyone whose veins carry his blood. Personally, I hate the Japanese. And that goes for all of them.

Austin Anson of the Grower-Shippers Association in Salinas, California, writing in the Saturday Evening Post of May 9, 1942, said:

We're charged with wanting to get rid of the Japs for selfish reasons. We might as well be honest. We do. They came into this valley to work, and they stayed to take over . . . If all the Japs were removed tomorrow, we'd never miss them . . . because the white farmer can take over and produce everything the Jap grows, and we don't want them back when the war ends either.

The Japanese 'handicaps' of race and nationality, compounded by social and legal discrimination, isolated ghetto lives, and the outbreak of war, were even too much for the spirit of American democracy and fair play. Very few caucasians really knew the Japanese; their general ignorance about this group helped to foster and maintain negative stereotypes. The range of those attacking the Japanese was truly remarkable--the American Legion, the State Federation of Labor, the Native Sons of the Golden West, the California State Grange, the leftist parties, and individuals such as California Attorney General Earl Warren and "liberal" columnist Walter Lippman, as well as the usual racists. The major newspapers in California kept up a constant attack and were joined by local and national magazines. Also as damaging to the future of the Japanese was the silence of the traditional liberal organizations. Only some Quaker groups and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) provided visible support.

On January 29, 1942, the first of a series of orders by the U.S. Attorney General, Francis Biddle, established security areas along the Pacific Coast that required the removal of all enemy aliens from these areas. On February 13, 1942, a West Coast congressional delegation wrote to President Roosevelt urging the immediate evacuation of all Japanese, whether aliens or citizens, from the West Coast states. On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which (1) designated military areas where military commanders could exclude persons, and (2) authorized the building of "relocation" camps to house those people excluded. This set the stage for the evacuation of the Japanese.

On March 2, 1942, General John L. DeWitt, then commander in charge of the Western Defense Command, issued an order to evacuate all persons of Japanese ancestry (defined as children with as little as one-eighth Japanese blood), from the Western half of the three Pacific Coast states and the southern third of Arizona.

On March 22, 1942, the first large contingent of Japanese, both aliens and citizens, were moved from Los Angeles to the Manzanar Assembly Center in California. Prior to this, there was initial governmental encouragement of voluntary movement away from the designated strategic areas, followed by an order on March 27 to halt voluntary emigration.

From then on, all evacuation procedures were controlled by the Army, and by August 7, 1942, the more than 112,000 West Coast Japanese had been removed from their homes. The evacuation proceeded in two stages--first into temporary assembly centers at such places as the Tanforan and Santa Anita racetracks in California, and then to more permanent camps (10 in all) under the jurisdiction of the War Relocation Authority (WRA). The permanent camps were located in Utah, Arizona, Wyoming, Arkansas, Colorado, Idaho and California.

By November 3, 1942, the transfer from Army to WRA jurisdiction and from the temporary assembly centers to the permanent detention camps was complete.

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The evacuation and imprisonment of the West Coast Japanese has left in its wake a very real threat to the freedom of every American citizen. A majority of the U.S. Supreme Court by validating the evacuation orders establishing a precedent which, as dissenting Justice Robert H. Jackson pointed out, now "lies about like a loaded weapon ready for the hand of any authority that can bring forward a plausible claim of an urgent need." (Korematsu v U.S., 323 U.S. 214, 246, 1944).

This is a deep and vital concern that should weight heavily upon all Americans who are committed to the survival of this country as a free, open and democratic society. Thus, hopefully some valuable lessons can be learned by a closer look at this unfortunate experience of the Japanese in America

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