

ECONOMIC LOSSES: IMPACT ON FAMILY AND COMMUNITY
A CASE FOR MONETARY REDRESS/REPARATIONS

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NATIONAL COALITIION FOR REDRESS/REPARATIONS, SO. CALIF. CHAPTER

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Economic losses suffered as a direct result of the World War II evacuation and internment have exacted an extraordinary toll on Japanese American lives and livelihoods, unprecedented in our country's history. Conservative estimates have figured total losses at \$350 million (in 1941-42 dollars);¹ adjusted to reflect inflation, the figure exceeds \$3 billion, according to two recent, independently conducted studies.² However, in the most authoritative study to-date, the Presidentially-empaneled Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC) has announced in a June, 1983 report that even the \$3 billion figure represents a gross underestimation of total losses: an overall sum in excess of \$6.2 billion (in 1983 inflation-adjusted money) reflects more accurately Japanese American losses in income and property.³ Yet even this figure cannot and does not account for the incalculable hardship and suffering in human terms that the evacuation and internment has left in its wake: the stigma placed on those subjected to exclusion and incarceration; the disruption of Issei and Nisei careers and education; the flagrant violation of Constitutional rights; the tragic and senseless loss of life exacted by killings, suicides, and the deaths of unborn and stillborn infants in the camps; the physical and psychological disabilities that have been revisited upon the Nikkei for the past 40 years and remain today for many Issei and Nisei as a constant and

agonizing reminder of their days of internment; and finally, the legacy of economic dislocation and loss, which has bequeathed a fragmenting of the Nikkei community, an erosion of the traditional family unit, and contrary to the myth of the Japanese American "success story," an ongoing struggle for economic gain, opportunity, and in many cases, simple survival. To provide an understanding and rationale for these claims, this testimony briefly sketches the historical development of the Japanese American community as an economic and social entity, tracing its impact on family and community for the pre-war years through the evacuation/internment period and to the present day.

I. The Pre-War Years: Struggle and Growth⁴

Significant Japanese immigration to the U.S. began only after 1885 when Japan rescinded a 250-year-old edict forbidding emigration. This circumstance, in tandem with adverse and repressive economic conditions in Japan, led by 1910 to the migration and settlement of over 72,000 Japanese with almost 60% of that figure residing in California.

This influx of Japanese to the West Coast coincided with the highwater mark of anti-Chinese harassment, massacre and discriminatory legislation aimed at stemming "racial contamination" and disposing of "cheap coolie labor" (connoting unfair labor competition with the white majority). With the arrival of this new wave of the so-called "yellow horde," long-held fears of the dreaded "Yellow Peril" were enflamed, and efforts to control and contain the Japanese were redoubled.

Spearheading the initial assault on Issei's economic rights was an organized anti-Japanese movement, which first arose on the West Coast among labor groups in 1900. Major anti-Japanese protests and lobbying efforts aimed at the restriction or elimination of all "cheap foreign (Mongolian) labor" were the order of the day, despite the fact that besides the predominant occupation of farming among the Issei, Japanese also took what the majority population considered to be undesirable, menial jobs as migrant workers or manual laborers for railroads, lumber yards, canneries and mines.⁵ Farmers' organizations, e.g., the Farm Bureau Federation and the California Grange, and civic groups, e.g., the American Legion and the Native Sons (and Daughters) of the Golden West, soon joined in the outcry for legislative controls in the Japanese American community. The stridency and persistence of this organized anti-Japanese movement soon paid off in the enactment of a series of discriminatory economic measures, with one of the most insidious being the Alien Land Laws of 1913 and 1920, which barred native Japanese from owning land and limited the leasing of agricultural land to a maximum of three years only. Still, the Japanese managed to acquire property by vesting ownership in their Nisei citizen sons and daughters, and by 1940, with the ethnic Japanese population at 127,000 (90% of whom were residing in California, Washington and Oregon), they found themselves beginning to prosper not only in agriculture, but in the fishing industry, small businesses, housework and gardening.⁶ Comparisons of

median income levels in California in 1940 reflect this remarkable though measured (and all too temporary) degree of success. For Japanese Americans the estimated median income was \$622, comparing favorably with the entire U.S. labor force average of \$627, and somewhat less so, with California at \$852.⁷ Moreover, the 6,118 farms operated by the Japanese, as owners or tenants, were valued at \$72,600,000, "with an estimated \$6 million worth of equipment in use."⁸ Agriculture accounted for almost two-thirds of Nikkei jobs, and Japanese farmers were expected "to provide 30-40% of the state's truck farm crops in 1942."⁹

What accounts for this measured success in the face of rampant anti-Japanese hostility and discriminatory laws prohibiting land ownership, citizenship, and future immigration? The answer lies essentially in the necessity for Japanese Americans to build an economically self-sustaining community--ironically, in the best spirit and tradition of the American ideal of self-sufficiency. Since the majority population avoided or resisted contact with members of the Nikkei community, Japanese Americans turned to their families and to networks of community organizations (e.g., credit associations) for economic support.¹⁰ For their part, family members (including mothers and any offspring old enough to work) frequently would toil long hours at stoop labor or would serve as unpaid employees in "ma-and-pa" shops, businesses or produce distributing centers. Thus, the traditional Japanese commitment

to family and community resulted in high yields (even though profits were inevitably slim) and low costs, while contributing substantially to a national economy that was only just recovering from the Depression.

Singular in their pursuit of the "American Dream," a better life not primarily for themselves but for their children, the Issei, through years of diligence, hard work, careful savings and investment, and much personal sacrifice, were beginning to realize economic gains by 1941. But with the tragedy of Pearl Harbor, their hopes for acceptance by their adopted homeland were dashed, as the pursuit of the American Dream was transformed overnight into survival in an American Nightmare.

II. The Evacuation and Internment: Dislocation and Loss

As noted earlier, the extent of the actual total losses may never be determined, but again, the CWRIC has established the \$6.2 billion figure as a realistic estimate. The difficulty in assessing total losses is due largely to lost or destroyed financial records. By the time that the question of compensation for losses was raised following the end of World War II, "the Internal Revenue Service had already destroyed most of the 1939 to 1942 income tax returns of evacuees--the most comprehensive set of federal financial records."¹¹ Moreover, because Nikkei evacuees "'could only take to camp what could be carried . . . it would be unreasonable to expect that emotion-charged men and women would have chosen to pack books and records instead of the food, the medicines, and the clothing which they took with them to war relocation centers'".¹²

At the root of the financial losses in property and income was the drastic policy of rapid evacuation. Henry Murakami, a fisherman on Terminal Island, the first zone to be evacuated, offers a startling case-in-point. Mr. Murakami was arrested at the outbreak of the war by the F.B.I. and was incarcerated at Fort Lincoln, North Dakota, leaving behind his pregnant wife and four children.

I spent all my savings to buy purse seine nets and by the time World War II had started, I was the owner of three sets of purse seines . . . These nets . . . (were worth a combined total of \$22,000.)

. . . the government issued evacuation notices after I was (arrested). People were given 48 hours to leave. I had four children and a wife who was pregnant at the time . . . and she couldn't carry anything except clothing . . . We had a three-bedroom house with a kitchen. My wife had to abandon everything . . . the furniture and all of our other furnishings, including a 1940 Plymouth . . . no one ever knew what happened to my property. I tried talking to all of the authorities but no one ever seemed to know.¹³

The Terminal Islanders were given 48 hours to dispose of their possessions; the rest of the Japanese American community was more fortunate--they were notified all of a generous seven-to-ten days in advance of evacuation. Within a week's time, Nikkei families had no choice but to sell their homes, businesses, property, and worldly goods at distress-sale prices to profiteers--or to abandon their possessions to carpetbagging exploiters who stole

or commandeered what had taken decades to acquire. Moreover, since many Issei male heads-of-households had been arrested immediately following the events at Pearl Harbor, the task of disposing of property and attending to financial matters frequently fell to inexperienced Nisei sons or to already overburdened mothers, whose primary responsibility was the bathing, feeding and clothing of her children. The consequence was an emotional trauma and disruption of the family unit that in many cases was irreparable.

In addition to the immediate losses attributable directly to the evacuation, economic hardships were compounded and exacerbated during the years of internment. As the CWRIC has reported:

The years of exclusion were frequently punctuated by financial troubles: trying to look after property without being on the scene when difficulties arose; lacking a source of income to meet tax, mortgage and insurance payments. Goods were lost or stolen. Income and earning capacity were reduced to almost nothing during the long detention in relocation centers. . .¹⁴

Some evacuees became aware of the destruction of their property while they were still in relocation centers; others only discovered the full extent of their losses upon their return home. The loss of time, of potential and of property were to many of the evacuees irreparable blows--financial blows from which many never wholly recovered.¹⁵

Finally, there is no proper way to assess in monetary terms the loss of life incurred by inadequate medical facilities in the camps. Mrs. Tsuye Nozawa, for example, suffered for three days and three nights in a camp hospital before treatment for her stillborn pregnancy was administered.

(T)hree days after my suffering began, a Dr. Iwasa took over and pulled the baby out with a clasp. To get the afterbirth out, two doctors had to work on me, one doctor pushing my stomach hard while a hand was put into my insides to pull the afterbirth out. . . Mrs. Nagai said I was lucky my mother gave me a strong heart, or I would be dead like my child. The next morning the young doctor (or intern) came by my bedside. He bowed his head and said that he was sorry.¹⁶

The loss of real property and income in agricultural, fishing, small business, and domestic settings; the traumatizing effect of the evacuation and internment on individuals, families and the entire Nikkei community; the wrongful deaths, injuries and ailments--all entail losses that "involved demonstrably greater hardship, anxiety and loss than other Americans suffered."¹⁷ And as such, in spite and because of the incalculability of these irreparable losses, substantive monetary reparations are imperative.

III. Post-War Period to the Present: "Recovery" and Loss

Far from being a reason for joy and celebration, release from the camps has proven to be no less than a perpetuation of the political impotency and economic hardships experienced prior to and during the evacuation and internment period for a substantial portion of the Japanese American community. Many Isseis and their families left the camps impoverished, having lost whatever possessions and capital they might have accrued before the exclusion; more often than not, they were forced to start from scratch, beginning once more their by now somewhat jaded pursuit of the American Dream--but this time, with

virtually no money or resources whatever, even less than what they brought with them when they first arrived in America. The Issei, who had taken such great pride in their hard work and diligence and in the consequent self-sufficiency that had begun to assert itself in the Japanese American community, were reduced to accepting public assistance. Finding themselves on welfare rolls and dependent upon their Nisei children for support was often a reason for shame, roughly tantamount to the humiliation of the internment itself. The absence of many Issei male heads-of-households during the wartime years forced the Nisei sons and daughters to assume financial responsibility and leadership roles in the families. And with their advanced age (many Issei were in their 50s and 60s when they left camp), the possibility for the Issei's employment and return to leadership status in the family was minimized.

Intimately tied to this breakdown in the stable family unit was a fragmenting of the economic solidarity that had begun to emerge prior to World War II. Because of the geographical dispersion of the Issei and Nisei, and because there were no family businesses, farms, or communities to which they could return, the Nisei's movement into the general U.S. work force is best understood not as a matter of choice, but of an economic necessity fueled directly by the internment.¹⁸ The traditional pre-war Japanese communities, just beginning to coalesce as viable economic and political entities in 1941, were all but destroyed by the War Relocation Authority's policy of relocation

and dispersion.¹⁹ The cost to the Nikkei, not only in terms of material security but in relation to ethnic self-identity and mutual support among Japanese Americans, is immeasurable. As we have noted elsewhere, "damage to the traditional communities was part-and-parcel of an official policy of the forced assimilation of the Japanese Americans," resulting in a severe undermining of "collective pride and identity. In short, ethnic community was also a victim of racism and wartime hysteria. Reparations are therefore necessary in order to restore and revitalize community institutions, organizations, and networks. This is vital since ethnic identity itself is sustained by the groups that collectively make up the Japanese American community."²⁰

There are those who have posed the counterargument that the dissemination of Japanese Americans throughout the country has expedited their acceptance and hastened their economic advancement. But this portrayal of the Nikkei community as a "model minority" only serves to conceal ongoing, long-term effects of the economic dislocation generated by evacuation and internment. Many Issei and Nisei, who have never fully recovered from their camp experience, currently continue to suffer not only from economic disadvantage (a full 20% of the Issei are living on incomes below the poverty level²¹), but also from a litany of physical ailments ranging from allergies to hypertension to nervous disorders, all of whose origins can be traced back to the camp years. Moreover, there exists strong evidence that in virtually all segments of the Japanese American community

(including the Sansei) instances of psychiatric pathologies can be both directly and indirectly related to the aftermath of the internment.²²

It bears repeating that no amount of money can ever fully redress the wrongs committed, the losses sustained, the indignities, deaths and shame suffered, but the clauses in S2116 calling for individual monetary compensation and for a Nikkei community fund remain nonetheless essential and non-negotiable requirements. A formal apology without monetary compensation is unacceptable. As Pacific Citizen columnist Bill Marutani has argued:

The money in and of itself is unimportant; what is important as to the money is that it gives meaning, under our cultural values, to that apology. Without money, the apology is empty . . . it is an integral part of a meaningful apology. Without it, it will be empty, a fraud.²³

That there are contemporary precedents, nationally, regionally and locally, for redress of material losses and of flagrant violations of rights cannot be denied. At the national level, CWRIC Commissioner Robert F. Drinan has argued that there are at least two separate instances, which parallel the Japanese American community's struggle for redress and reparations:

1. On September 30, 1978 the (American) Indian Commission settled more than 500 claims, leading to a total of \$800 million in awards. What is significant there is that several of these awards resulted from 76 of 371 treaties made by the U.S. with Indian tribes, calling for their removal and relocation.
2. In December, 1980, the U.S. government paid \$10,000 to each of 1,318 anti-war demonstrators who were incarcerated wrongfully for a weekend.

Directly germane to Japanese American redress and reparations are the states, counties and municipalities that have passed bills and ordinances offering apologies and authorizing monetary payments to former internees:

1. In 1982, the State of California passed into law a bill providing for \$5,000 each to 314 Japanese American state employees who were fired from their jobs in 1942. Governor Edmund G. Brown has noted, "No legislation can undo the suffering of Americans of Japanese descent who lost their jobs, their property and their rights while our country was at war. The purpose of this bill is to remember in a small way and correct the injustice."
2. In 1983 the city of San Francisco authorized a bill giving 16 former Japanese American employees of the city \$1,250 for every year they were interned during World War II.
3. In 1983 Los Angeles County undertook a compensation plan for Nisei employees, allocating \$1,250 per year for each employee. County Supervisor Kenneth Hahn has remarked, "To be sure, the \$1,250 is hardly enough to compensate those who were victimized for the financial and emotional cost of the this experience. But it is an important symbol to all Americans."

Additionally, Alameda County, California; Seattle, Washington; and the City of Los Angeles have all instituted legislatively mandated programs, compensating former Nikkei employees who were interned during World War II.

While precedents do not inherently constitute a justification or rationale for redress and reparations on a national scale, they do articulate, explicitly and implicitly, a

fundamental claim: namely, that the events of 1942 are not merely shadows of a dim past, only darkly remembered--or forgotten. The evacuation and internment period is not being raised as a specter to haunt the conscience of America. These events have been raised to public consciousness and discourse not to blacken America's proud history, but to illuminate it, to highlight what has remained hidden and silent for four decades. The redress movement is not merely a challenge, but an opportunity for the U.S. to demonstrate once again that both in principle and in practice, it is a champion of justice and fair play--and that in the face of a grievous error and tragedy, perpetrated by all three branches of the federal government, it has the moral courage and unerring strength of its convictions to redress losses that are at once documentable and incalculable. We have before us the greatest challenge and the greatest opportunity to demonstrate that we are a nation committed without qualification and without reservation to transforming the American Dream from a simple abstraction into a substantive reality--a dream that the Nikkei community, like all Americans, has been pursuing for the past century.

Gordon Nakagawa,
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ENDNOTES

¹ Leonard Broom and Ruth Riemer, Removal and Return: The Socio-Economic Effects of the War on Japanese Americans (Berkeley: University of Calif. Press, 1949), p. 203.

² See the Legislative Committee, National Coalition for Redress/Reparations, "The Moral and Monetary Basis for Redress/Reparations," unpublished document, September, 1982.

³ Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians Report, in Chicago Sun-Times, June 16, 1983.

⁴ The discussion in this section is derived from Harry H. L. Kitano, Japanese Americans: The Evolution of a Subculture (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1969); U. S. Cong. Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, Personal Justice Denied (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1982); Roger Daniels, The Politics of Prejudice (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1962); and Robert A. Wilson and Bill Hosokawa, East to America (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1980).

⁵ CWRIC, Personal Justice Denied, p. 42.

⁶ CWRIC, Personal Justice Denied, p. 43.

⁷ CWRIC, Personal Justice Denied, p. 44.

⁸ CWRIC, Personal Justice Denied, p. 44.

⁹ CWRIC, Personal Justice Denied, p. 43.

¹⁰ See for example, Edna Bonacich and John Modell, The Economic Basis of Ethnic Solidarity: Small Business in the Japanese American Community (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press,

1980).

- 11 CWRIC, Personal Justice Denied, p. 118.
- 12 CWRIC, Personal Justice Denied, p. 119.
- 13 CWRIC testimony, Los Angeles, 1981.
- 14 CWRIC, Personal Justice Denied, p. 117.
- 15 CWRIC, Personal Justice Denied, p. 122.
- 16 CWRIC testimony, Los Angeles, 1981.
- 17 CWRIC, Personal Justice Denied, p. 117-118.
- 18 Bonacich and Modell, p. 102.
- 19 Cf., Legislative Committee, NCCR, pp. 13-16.
- 20 Legislative Committee, NCCR, pp. 17-18.
- 21 Telephone conversation, Little Tokyo Service Center,
August 8, 1984.
- 22 Ben Tong, "Long-Term Consequences of the Nikkei
Internment," East Wind, 2(Fall/Winter 1983), pp. 51-53.
- 23 Bill Marutani, "Is 'Redress' Money a Sort of Haji?,"
Pacific Citizen, February 17, 1984, p. 7.