

Concentration Camps, Not Relocation Centers*

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I. Introduction

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 United States. 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.

* *An Evening Of Inquiry - Concentration Camps, Not Relocation Centers*: A panel discussion by the Manzanar Committee presented at the University Club, California State University, Fullerton on March 25, 1976.

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.

I didn't see that issue of the *Post* because on that Saturday, I boarded a train in Los Angeles to be interned at Manzanar.

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. Almost 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 lines 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.¹ Army Provost Marshal, Allen Gullion learned late in February that there were no penalties for a civilian who disobeyed a military order. Legislation was written to create this new federal crime and sent to Congress on March 5th. California Democrat John Costello, on the House Committee on Military Affairs, introduced it and it was reported out a week later, passing both houses by a unanimous vote on March 12th; signed into law on March 21st. The new act made any civilian who violated a military order in a military area subject to a year in prison and \$5,000.00 fine.

Three days later, Gen. DeWitt issued a curfew on all enemy aliens and persons of Japanese ancestry living within Military Area No. 1, restricting their movement to within five miles of their residence and prohibiting them from possessing firearms, ammunition, explosives, short-wave radios and cameras.

On March 21, 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. But for most of the Japanese and Japanese Americans, voluntary evacuation was not a viable alternative.² If an alien was head of household, his bank account and other funds were frozen by the government. Most Japanese Americans were not willing to move into an unknown,

¹ *The Evacuation and Internment of the Japanese during World War II*, printed hand-out of the Manzanar Committee, Los Angeles.

² Daniels, Roger, *The Decision to Relocate the Japanese Americans*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1975.

hostile environment. Those who had the means and the nerve to move encountered hostility and vigilante mobs; some were taken into custody by the police. Only a small fraction of the population managed to move. Official estimates range from two thousand to nine thousand. The majority who moved from Military Area No. 1 to Military Area No. 2 assumed that they were safe and that Gen. DeWitt meant what he said in his first proclamation that they could move to “any approved place beyond the was turned additional limits of Military Area No. 1.” That proclamation was turned around and many Japanese moved again, sustaining personal and property losses.

On March 27, an order was issued to halt voluntary emigration. From then on, all evacuation procedures were controlled by the Army. By August 7, 1942, more than 112,000 West Coast Japanese had been removed from their homes. The evacuation was in two stages—first into temporary assembly centers such places as Tanforan and Santa Anita race tracks and then to more permanent camps—ten in all—under the jurisdiction of the War Relocation Authority. The ten camps were Manzanar and Tule Lake, California; Poston and Gila River, Arizona; Topaz, Utah; Heart Mountain, Wyoming; Rohwer and Jerome, Arkansas; Amache, Colorado and Minidoka, Idaho.

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

II. A State Of Suspension Of Hope*

The evacuation and imprisonment of the West Coast Japanese during World War II has left in its wake a very real threat to the freedom of every American citizen. While President Gerald R. Ford by proclamation, on February 19, 1976, rescinded Executive Order 9066, signed on that anniversary date 34 years ago, a majority of the U.S. Supreme Court validated the 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.”³

While the U. S. government and the Courts claimed that “military necessity” and the unproven loyalty of those persons of Japanese ancestry living in the United States made necessary the evacuation and internment, little known is the fact that in the summer of 1941, the then and our greatest modern president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, had ordered a highly secret intelligence gathering to be done by Special Representative of the State Department, Curtis B. Munson. His mission was to get an accurate picture of the degree of loyalty of Americans of Japanese ancestry, both on the West Coast of the United States and in Hawaii.

* On March 25, 1976 the Phi Alpha Theta History Honor Society and the Japanese American Oral History Project of California State University, Fullerton sponsored an *Evening of Inquiry*, at the University Club on the Fullerton Campus.

This evening was to present members of the Manzanar Committee as they discussed *Concentration Camps, Not Relocation Centers*, as the topic title chosen by the sponsors.

The following presentation was made by Sue Kunitomi Embrey, one of the founders and original members of the Manzanar Committee, the volunteer, community-based organization most responsible for the State of California’s acknowledgement of Manzanar as State Historic Landmark #850, and whose educational campaign during the past six years has sparked new interest in the history of the camp experience of World War II.

Warren Furutani, founding member of the Manzanar Committee, and Judge Robert Takasugi of the Los Angeles Judicial District were also on the panel discussing the issues, before an audience of history students and professors.

The paper titled, *A State of Suspension Of Hope*, is a somewhat revised version of Ms. Embrey’s presentation.

³ *Korematsu v. United States*, 323 U.S., 213; 65 Supreme Court, 193 89 L Ed., 195.

According to Michi Weglyn, in her recently issued book, *Years of Infamy, the Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps*, the 25-page report corroborated data of more than a decade of spying by various U. S. intelligence services that “there is no Japanese problem” and that there existed “a remarkable degree of loyalty” among this American ethnic group. The fact is that this report was not revealed until the Pearl Harbor hearings of 1946, and even today, is strangely unpublicized. Details of this report can be found in Chapter I of the book which carries on the dust jacket, Boku Kodama's impressive photograph of the historic plaque at Manzanar. The book was released on April 27, 1976.⁴

Going back to the Munson report, let me quote:

For the most part, the local Japanese are loyal to the United States, or at worst, hope that by remaining quiet they can avoid concentration camps or irresponsible mobs. We do not believe that they would be at the least any more disloyal than any other racial group in the United States with whom we went to war.⁵

“The Nisei show a pathetic eagerness to be Americans,” Munson reported, and, “in case of war between the United States and Japan what would these people do?” The story was the same. There is no Japanese “problem.”⁶

It is not merely the usage or the dictionary definition that made these temporary sites concentration camps. It is, more importantly, a final peaking and the psychological impact that 100 years of anti-Japanese agitation and anti-Japanese legislation had on the minds and bodies of the Japanese living in the United States. As tension mounted between Japan and the U.S., the U.S. Government froze the bank accounts of a majority of the adult residents, who by law, were not able to become American citizens. The 1,500 men who were arrested early on December 7,

⁴ Weglyn, Michi Nishlura, *Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1976.

⁵ Weglyn. *Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps*.

⁶ Weglyn. *Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps*.

1942, represented five percent of the adult population, and were almost all community leaders. Their sudden departure created a far greater impact than their actual number would indicate. As early as December 11, 1941, the U.S. Government contemplated mass incarceration of the Japanese. Two days earlier, on December 9th, Westbrook Pegler, in a nationally syndicated column, wrote that the U.S. should strike back by “killing 100 victims selected out of our concentration camps,” which Pegler assumed would be set up for “subversive” Italians and Germans and “alien” Japanese. The Germans and Italians were classified as ““subversive;” the non-white Japanese classified as a race.⁷

Congressman Leland Ford, a California Republican, wrote to Secretary of War Stimson on January 16th that he “was formally proposing that all Japanese, whether citizens or not, be placed in inland concentration camps. As justification for this, I submit that if an American-born Japanese who is a citizen, is really patriotic and wished to make his contribution to the safety and welfare of this country, right here is his opportunity to do so, namely, that by permitting himself to be placed in a concentration camp, he would be making his sacrifice and he should be willing to do it If he is patriotic and working for us.”

Lynn R. Bailey has written a book called *Bosque Redondo: An American Concentration Camp*, which chronicles the story of the removal of the Navajo Indians in 1863. Bailey cites in his introduction the studies done by Alexander Leighton, a sociologist who worked at the Poston, Arizona camp, among the Nisei. Stress and the trauma of the camp conditions found to be most disturbing to the emotions and thoughts of people in confinement were listed as follows:

1. Threats to health and life;
2. Discomfort from pain, heat, cold, dampness, fatigue, and poor food;

⁷ Daniels, *The Decision to Relocate the Japanese Americans*.

3. Loss of means of subsistence and property
4. Restriction of movement;
5. Isolation;
6. Threats to family members and friends;
7. Rejection, dislike and ridicule from other people;
8. Capricious and unpredictable behavior on the part of those in authority upon whom the welfare of the group depends.⁸

All of these factors were very much a part of the concentration camps we are talking about.

Writing in 1946, Dr. Edward H. Spicer, another community analyst, stated:

The evacuation decision had now resulted in something dangerously similar to concentration camps. It is true that the WRA officials did not think of the relocation centers as concentration camps. They did not plan any cruelties or further restrictions. On the contrary, they had plans for making life in the centers as nearly like that in normal communities as possible and they had not given up wholly their plans for re-integrating the evacuees into productive American life. But that did not alter the fact that a progressive loss of rights and liberty for the American citizens and their families had flowed from the original evacuation decision. Led to believe that the evacuees were dangerous by the action taken against them, the states next to the exclusion zones, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, Idaho, refused to accept them. Crowded together in groups of 5,000 and 10,000 in places chosen by the government and remote from large cities and war activities, progressively, citizens and aliens alike have lost freedom of domicile, freedom of movement and freedom to take jobs of their choosing.⁹

“To the people concentrated in the camps, the term “relocation center” was to say the least a euphemism,” said Spicer.¹⁰

“Since June,” Dr. Spicer continues, “most of the older boys had been receiving from their draft boards the classification 4C, which is to say ‘ineligible for service because of nationality or

⁸ Bailey Lynn R., *Bosque Redondo: An American Concentration Camp*. Pasadena: Socio-Technical Books, 1970.

⁹ Spicer, Edward H. *Racism in Reverse* (final draft of undated manuscript). University of Arizona Library, Special Collections.

¹⁰ Spicer. *Racism in Reverse*.

ancestry,' born they were in the United States and raised as American citizens in American schools. In September, this selective service classification became official, and thus an ultimate right—that of demonstrating loyalty to one's country had been stripped away."¹¹

The bitterness of young and old grew as autumn wore on in the centers. Little restrictions piled up on the big ones. In four of the centers, incoming packages had to be opened in the presence of military police. Cameras were prohibited and babies and brides went unphotographed. A daily head count was instituted. Finally, barbed wire fences began to be built around the centers and at intervals, watchtowers with searchlights went up. The fence immediately became a symbol of the evacuees' progressive loss of freedom. It looms in hundreds of drawings, paintings and wood-cuts, as the symbol of exile from America.¹²

Dr. Spicer went on further:

The mounting restrictions were only half the story. No one could remain unaffected by the process of large scale turning of lives upside down...Housing of families: were single 20-foot square rooms in barracks with common latrines and mess halls designed to accommodate a non-marrying male population. All kinds of people were forced suddenly to live in great intimacy with one another, to share tables and shower rooms, toilets and meal times During the early months the strain of such confusion was intense and as some said, "unbearable," But bear it they did—the uprooting from the farms, the wiping out of businesses, the plans for the future and the terrible state of suspension of hope.¹³

Dr. Spicer concludes, "This was indeed not far different from the concentration camp method, whatever one called it, however it was softened by the sincere efforts of government employees to make things as comfortable as possible under the circumstances."¹⁴

Dr. Leonard Bloom, writing in *Proceedings: Pacific Sociological Society*, in 1943, said:

The War Relocation Authority centers and their predecessor, the Wartime Civil Control Authority Camps, are an ambiguous phenomenon as well as an anomalous event in the American scene. Throughout their history, their administrations struggled without much success to evade the stigmatizing label "prisons" and "concentration camp." The words were employed indiscriminately both by persons who were interested in protecting the evacuees

¹¹ Spicer. *Racism In Reverse*.

¹² Spicer. *Racism In Reverse*.

¹³ Spicer. *Racism In Reverse*.

¹⁴ Spicer. *Racism In Reverse*.

and by those who wished to call them bad names. This is one of the instances in which words of themselves are important.¹⁵

Would the above descriptions place these camps in the definition and classification of “relocation centers?” We believe not. Relocation is a process of moving from one location to another and did indeed apply to the initial movement from the West Coast military areas. But a relocation center is usually defined as a temporary site for persons who are adversely affected by flood, fire, earthquake, or war, with freedom of movement, freedom to go to their places of employment, to visit friends, to make telephone calls, to do whatever tasks and chores that can or need to be done in an emergency. A relocation center is not a place where people are taken into protective custody, with no entry or egress except by permit, or by clearance from a governmental agency as to that individual’s loyalty or good disposition toward his own country. Neither is it preceded by confiscation of one’s property, frozen bank accounts, or continual harassment and violence from groups who, in Dr. Spicer’s words, “wanted to make the concentration camp idea stick...”¹⁶

In a report made to the Japanese American Citizens League, Southern District Council on May 26, 1942, of conditions at Manzanar, “there was overcrowding with 7 to 13 persons occupying a room 20 x 25 feet, complete lack of privacy and no partitions between couples or families. The frequent winds whipped up blinding dust storms and the cracks in the floors and eaves caused dust to literally pour into the rooms; the roofing is of obviously poor quality, easily torn by the wind. After one month’s wear, the barracks already appear weather-beaten. By contrast, on the southeast corner of Manzanar, several cream-colored, painted barracks with

¹⁵ Bloom, Leonard. Article in *Pacific Sociological Society*, 1943. University of Arizona Library, Special Collections.

¹⁶ Spicer. *Racism In Reverse*.

regular standard flooring, insulated walls with built-in toilet, showers and wash basins are to be occupied by the Caucasian workers.¹⁷

As for the food, it is served in a single plate or aluminum pan, shortage of utensils making it necessary for the entire fare to be served together; sometimes one gets such a combination as beef stew, rice pudding and pickled beets, each mixed in with the other.

By contrast, at certain designated kitchens where Caucasian workers are given dining room service, the quality and quantity of servings is markedly superior. In Mess Hall No. 1, on a day when the lunch menu for residents was beans and rice, Caucasian workers, sitting in the same mess hall, at adjoining tables, dined on top sirloin steak and green salad. The difference here again was obvious discrimination. The fact that such things are in plain sight adds to growing resentment and bitterness.

Personal friends are discouraged by the administration personnel and by regulations from visiting the center. Visitors can come to Manzanar and meet with evacuees only at the Police Station; they are not permitted to visit homes of the internees; their time is limited to certain hours of certain days. The entire atmosphere lends itself to that of a concentration camp or Jail. As one internee, a citizen, remarked after a visit from a friend: "Whatever official terminology that may be used to describe this place, Manzanar is a concentration camp."¹⁸

The report continues, "The contradictory references of administration officials themselves, who in one breath say: "This is not a concentration camp" and in the next, slip up by referring to "this concentration camp" is indicative of the unfortunate approach to their administrative position and betrays a lack of understanding of the feelings of Americans of Japanese ancestry.

While there has been ample publicity given to the fact that the Japanese in Hawaii were not evacuated, there is documentation that the President of the United States was consulted about the feasibility of such a move.

From the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library of Hyde Park, New York, comes a copy of a special secret memorandum to the President, dated July 15, 1942:

Presidential approval was given on March 13th to a directive proposed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff which would authorize the Commanding General, Hawaiian Department, to evacuate to

¹⁷ Anonymous Report To Japanese American Citizens League, Southern District Council, May 26, 1942.

¹⁸ Anonymous Report To Japanese American Citizens League.

the mainland of the United States for internment in concentration camps Japanese residents of the Hawaiian Islands, either United States citizens or aliens, who were considered by appropriate authorities in the Islands to constitute a source of danger.^{19 20}

A handwritten "O.K., FDR." is on the second page of the memo. On June 3, 1943, President Roosevelt wrote to Governor Herbert H. Lehman of New York:

In reply to your letter of May 9th, please be assured that I am keenly aware of the anxiety that German and Italian aliens living in the United States must feel as a result of the Japanese evacuation from the West Coast. Will you assure Mr. Antonini that no collective evacuation of the German and Italian aliens is contemplated at this time?

Perhaps we can console ourselves with the fact that while racism and economic exploitation were involved in the evacuation and internment of persons of Japanese ancestry, that it was a serious wartime mistake and a hastily made decision on the part of our government. But, let us go back to Michi Weglyn's book, *Years Of Infamy* and we find in Chapter 2 documented evidence that this was not so. As early as October 20, 1941, the U.S. Government made arrangements with Panama and Peru to pay for the costs of internment and guarding of Peruvian Japanese to be deported from Peru and imprisoned in the U.S. as hostages.²¹

In August, 1941, Congressman John D. Dingell of Michigan advised FDR, after Japanese assets were frozen in the U.S.

Unless assurances are received that Japan will facilitate and permit the voluntary departure of...one hundred Americans within forty-eight hours, the Government of the United States will cause the forceful detention or imprisonment in a concentration camp of ten thousand alien Japanese in Hawaii; the ratio of Japanese hostages held by America being one hundred for every American detained by the Mikado's government.²²

¹⁹ Secret Memo dated July 15, 1942 from Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.

²⁰ Weglyn, *Years Of Infamy: The Untold Story Of America's Concentration Camps*.

²¹ Weglyn. *Years Of Infamy: The Untold Story Of America's Concentration Camps*.

²² Daniels. *The Decision To Relocate The Japanese Americans*.

Not only did the United States Supreme Court establish a precedent in American law by validating the evacuation orders in the Hirabayashi and Korematsu cases, they gave it international reputation. The Court's approval of this "legalization of racism," as charged by Justice Murphy, was to have chilling after effects. During the Nuremberg Tribunal, the Nazi defendant war criminals claimed "military necessity" in the evacuation and internment of the Jews.²³

Finally, the most touched upon in this Japanese American experience are the children. In Manzanar, they suffered considerably from lack of customary and proper food and psychological effects. In the early days of detention, a little girl saw a dog trying to climb through the barbed wire fence into an assembly center. "Don't come in here, little she cried. "You won't be able to go back to America."²⁴

The evacuation and internment created psychological attitudes that have done far more harm than physical suffering or hardship.

Let us all, Americans of whatever creed, religion, race, or national origin, in this year of the Bicentennial, President Gerald B. Ford's admonition in his February 1976 Proclamation rescinding Executive Order 9066, to commemorate the many great events in American History, but at the same time, to recognize the national mistakes we have made.

"Learning from our mistakes is not pleasant, but as a philosopher once admonished, we must do so if we want avoid repeating them."

²³ Weglyn. *Years Of Infamy: The Untold Story Of America's Concentration Camps*.

²⁴ Embrey, Sue Kunitomi. *The Lost Years, 1942-46*. Los Angeles: Moonlight Publications, 1972.