

Japanese Americans: “A Tremendous Hole” in the Constitution

Shortly after inspecting the still smoking ruins at Pearl Harbor, Navy Secretary Frank Knox issued a statement to the press: “I think the most effective fifth column work of the entire war was done in Hawaii, with the possible exception of Norway.” At a cabinet meeting on December 19, Knox recommended the internment of all Japanese aliens on an outer island.³

However, in a radio address aired two days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, General Delos Emmons as military governor of Hawaii declared: “There is no intention or desire on the part of the federal authorities to operate mass concentration camps. No person, be he citizen or alien, need worry, provided he is not connected with subversive elements... While we have been subjected to a serious attack by a ruthless and treacherous enemy, we must remember that this is America and we must do things the American Way. We must distinguish between loyalty and disloyalty among our people.” For General Emmons, the “American way” required him to respect and enforce the U.S. Constitution.⁴

On March 13, 1942, President Roosevelt, acting on the advice of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, approved a recommendation for the evacuation of 20,000 “dangerous” Japanese from Hawaii to the mainland. Two weeks later, General Emmons reduced the number to 1,550 Japanese who constituted a potential threat. Irritated by Emmons, the president wrote to Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson on November 2: “I think that General Emmons should be told that the only consideration is that of the safety of the Islands and that the labor situation is not only a secondary matter but should not be given any consideration whatsoever.”⁵

General Emmons countered that such a removal of Japanese would severely disrupt both the economy and the defense of Hawaii. The Japanese, he explained, represented over 90 percent of the carpenters, nearly all of the transportation workers, and a significant proportion of the agricultural laborers. Japanese were “absolutely essential” for rebuilding Pearl Harbor. Commenting on the charges of Japanese-American fifth-column activities, General Emmons declared: “There have been no known acts of sabotage committed in Hawaii.” In the end, he ordered the internment of only 1,444 Japanese.⁶

And so, the 158,000 Japanese Americans living in Hawaii did not become victims of mass internment, even though military action between the United States and Japan had in fact occurred in the islands and even though there were more of them living there than on the mainland.

But what happened to the 120,000 Japanese Americans living on the West Coast turned out to be a different story.

Three days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover informed Washington that “practically all” suspected individuals were in custody: 1,291 Japanese (367 in Hawaii, 924 on the mainland), 857 Germans, and 147 Italians. In a report to the attorney general submitted in early February, Hoover concluded that a mass internment of the Japanese could not be justified for security reasons.⁷

Despite these intelligence findings, Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, head of the Western Defense Command, behaved very differently from his counterpart, General Emmons in Hawaii. DeWitt wanted to exclude Japanese aliens as well as U.S.-born Americans of

Japanese ancestry from certain areas. On January 4, 1942, at a meeting of federal and state officials, DeWitt argued that military necessity justified exclusion: “We are at war and this area—eight states—has been designated as a theater of operations.” He declared that he had no confidence in the loyalty of the Japanese living on the West Coast: “A Jap is a Jap is a Jap.” On February 5, after he had received DeWitt’s assessment of the need to remove all Japanese, aliens as well as citizens, Provost Marshal General Allen Gullion drafted a War Department proposal for the exclusion of “all persons, whether aliens or citizens ... deemed dangerous as potential saboteurs” from designated “military areas.”⁸

But a decision on evacuation still had not been made in Washington. During lunch with President Roosevelt on February 7, Attorney General Francis Biddle declared that “there were no reasons for mass evacuation.” In his diary on February 10, Secretary of War Stimson wrote: “The second generation Japanese can only be evacuated either as part of a total evacuation ... or by frankly trying to put them out on the ground that their racial characteristics are such that we cannot understand or trust even the citizen Japanese. This latter is the fact but I am afraid it will make a tremendous hole in our constitutional system to apply it.”⁹

On February 14, 1942, General DeWitt sent Stimson his formal recommendation for removal, buttressing it with a racial justification: “In the war in which we are now engaged racial affinities are not severed by migration. The Japanese race is an enemy race and while many second and third generation Japanese born on United States soil, possessed of United States citizenship, have become ‘Americanized,’ the racial strains are undiluted.... It, therefore, follows that along the vital Pacific Coast over 112,000 potential enemies, of Japanese extraction, are at large today.” On February 19, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which directed the secretary of war to prescribe military areas “with respect to which, the right of any person to enter, remain in, or leave shall be subject to whatever restrictions the Secretary of War or the appropriate Military Commander may impose in his discretion.” The order did not specify the Japanese as the group to be excluded, but they were the target. A few months later, when President Roosevelt learned about discussions in the War Department to apply the order to Germans and Italians on the East Coast, he wrote to inform Stimson that he considered enemy alien control to be “primarily a civilian matter except in the case of the Japanese mass evacuation on the Pacific Coast.” Unlike the Germans and Italians, the Japanese had been singled out.¹⁰

Under General DeWitt’s command, the military posted an order: “Pursuant to the provisions of Civilian Exclusion Order No. 27, this Headquarters, dated April 30, 1942, all persons of Japanese ancestry, both alien and non-alien, will be evacuated from the above area by 12 o’ clock noon, P. W. T., Thursday May 7, 1942.” Years later, Congressman Robert Matsui, who was a baby in 1942, asked: “How could I as a 6-month-old child born in this country be declared by my own Government to be an enemy alien?” The evacuees were instructed to bring their bedding, toilet articles, extra clothing, and utensils. In silent numbness, Japanese stood before the notices. “Soldiers came around and posted notices on telephone poles,” said Takae Washizu. Reading the evacuation notice with disbelief, a Japanese American wrote:

Notice of evacuation
One spring night
The image of my wife
*Holding the hands of my mother.*¹¹

Believing the military orders were unconstitutional, Minoru Yasui of Portland refused to obey the curfew order: “It was my belief that no military authority has the right to subject any United States citizen to any requirement that does not equally apply to all other U.S. citizens. If we believe in America, if we believe in equality and democracy, if we believe in law and justice, then each of us, when we see or believe errors are being made, has an obligation to make every effort to correct them.” Meanwhile, Fred Korematsu in California and Gordon Hirabayashi in Washington refused to report to the evacuation center. “As an American citizen,” Hirabayashi explained, “I wanted to uphold the principles of the Constitution, and the curfew and evacuation orders which singled out a group on the basis of ethnicity violated them. It was not acceptable to me to be less than a full citizen in a white man’s country.” The three men were arrested and convicted; sent to prison, they took their cases to the Supreme Court, which upheld their convictions, saying the government’s policies were based on military necessity. Most Japanese, however, felt they had no choice but to comply with the evacuation orders.¹²

Instructed that they would be allowed to take only what they could carry, they were forced to sell most of their possessions—their refrigerators, cars, furniture, radios, pianos, and houses. At the control centers, the men, women, and children were registered and each family was given a number, and they found themselves surrounded by soldiers with rifles and bayonets. In poetry, one of the evacuees captured the humiliation:

Like a dog
I am
At a bayonet point.
My heart is inflamed
With burning anguish.

From there they were taken to the assembly centers. “I looked at Santa Clara’s streets from the train over the subway,” wrote Norman Mineta’s father in a letter to friends in San Jose. “I thought this might be the last look at my loved home city. My heart almost broke, and suddenly hot tears just came pouring out.” They knew that more than their homes and possessions had been taken from them. “On May 16, 1942, my mother, two sisters, niece, nephew, and I left ... by train,” said Teru Watanabe. “Father joined us later. Brother left earlier by bus. We took whatever we could carry. So much we left behind, but the most valuable thing I lost was my freedom.”¹³

After a brief stay in assembly centers, the evacuees were herded into 171 special trains, 500 in each train. One of the passengers distilled his distress in poetry:

Snow in mountain pass

*Unable to sleep
The prison train.*

They had no idea where they were going. The trains took them to ten internment camps: Topaz in Utah, Poston and Gila River in Arizona, Amache in Colorado, Jerome and Rohwer in Arkansas, Minidoka in Idaho, Manzanar and Tule Lake in California, and Heart Mountain in Wyoming.¹⁴

Most of the camps were located in remote desert areas. “We did not know where we were,” remembered an internee. “No houses were in sight, no trees or anything green—only scrubby sagebrush and an occasional low cactus, and mostly dry, baked earth.” They looked around them and saw hundreds of miles of wasteland, “beyond the end of the horizon and again over the mountain—again, more wasteland.” They were surrounded by dust and sand.¹⁵

In the camps, the internees were assigned to barracks, each about 20 by 120 feet, divided into four or six rooms. Usually a family was housed in one room, 20 by 20 feet. The room had “a pot bellied stove, a single electric light hanging from the ceiling, an Army cot for each person and a blanket for the bed.” An internee painfully conveyed the confinement’s unbearableness:

*Birds,
Living in a cage,
The human spirit.*

The barracks were lined in orderly rows; barbed-wire fences with guard towers defined space for the internees.¹⁶

They found themselves in a world of military-like routine. Every morning at seven, the internees were awakened by a siren blast. After breakfast in a cafeteria, the children went to school, where they began the day by saluting the flag of the United States and then singing “My country, ’tis of thee, sweet land of liberty.” Looking beyond the flagpole, they saw the barbed wire, the watch-towers, and the armed guards. “I was too young to understand,” stated George Takei years later, “but I remember soldiers carrying rifles, and I remember being afraid.”¹⁷

Camp life was oppressive and regimented, each day boring and tedious. Forced to abandon the values of self-reliance and activity, shopkeepers and farmers suddenly found themselves working for the government for wages. Young married couples worried about having children born in the camps. “When I was pregnant with my second child, that’s when I flipped,” said a Nisei woman. “I guess that’s when the reality really hit me. I thought to myself, gosh, what am I doing getting pregnant. I told my husband, ‘This is crazy. You realize there’s no future for us and what are we having kids for?’”¹⁸

In September 1942, the Selective Service classified all young Japanese men as IV-C, enemy aliens. A month later, however, the director of the Office of War Information urged President Roosevelt to authorize the enlistment of American-born Japanese: “Loyal American citizens of Japanese descent should be permitted, after an individual test, to enlist

in the Army and Navy. This matter is of great interest to OWL Japanese propaganda to the Philippines, Burma, and elsewhere insists that this is a racial war. We can combat this effectively with counter propaganda only if our deeds permit us to tell the truth.” President Roosevelt understood the need to neutralize “Japanese propaganda.” In December the army developed a plan for forming an all-Japanese-American combat team. On February 1, 1943, hypocritically ignoring the evacuation order he had signed a year earlier, Roosevelt wrote to Secretary of War Stimson: “No loyal citizen of the United States should be denied the democratic right to exercise the responsibilities of his citizenship, regardless of his ancestry. ... Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race or ancestry. Every loyal American citizen should be given the opportunity to serve this country ... in the ranks of our armed forces.”¹⁹

Five days later, the government required all internees to answer loyalty questionnaires. The questionnaires had two purposes: to enable camp authorities to process individual internees for work furloughs as well as for resettlement outside the restricted zones, and to register young men for the draft. Question 27 asked draft-age males: “Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?” Question 28 asked all internees: “Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power or organization?” Forced to fill out and sign the loyalty questionnaire, internees stared at the form. One of them agonized:

*Loyalty, disloyalty,
If asked,
What should I answer?*

Some 4,600, or 22 percent, of the 21,000 males eligible to register for the draft, answered with a “no,” a qualified answer, or no response. Many of them said they were not expressing disloyalty but were protesting against the internment. In January 1944, the Selective Service began reclassifying to I-A men who had answered “yes” to the two questions and serving draft registration notices. Thirty-three thousand Japanese Americans enlisted in the United States Armed Forces. They believed participation in the defense of their country was the best way to express their loyalty and to fulfill their obligation as citizens.²⁰

Several thousand of them were members of the Military Intelligence Service (MIS), functioning as interpreters and translators on the Pacific front. Armed with Japanese-language skills, the soldiers of the MIS provided an invaluable service: they translated captured Japanese documents, including battle plans, lists of Imperial Navy ships, and Japanese secret codes. One of their officers described their heroic work: “During battles they crawled up close enough to be able to hear Jap officers’ commands and to make verbal translations to our soldiers. They tapped lines, listened in on radios, translated documents and papers, made spot translations of messages and field orders.” General Charles Willoughby, chief of intelligence in the Pacific, estimated that the contributions of the Japanese Americans of the MIS shortened the Pacific war by two years.²¹

Japanese-American soldiers also helped to win the war in Europe. In 1942, General Emmons in Hawaii formed a battalion of Japanese Americans—the 100th Battalion. In response to Emmons’s call for Japanese Americans to serve in the U.S. Armed Forces, 9,507 American-born Japanese volunteered. “I wanted to show something, to contribute to America,” explained Minoru Hinahara. “My parents could not become citizens but they told me, ‘You fight for your country.’” After military training, 1,400 men of this battalion were sent to North Africa and then to Italy in September 1943. They participated in the Italian campaign until the following March: 300 of them were killed and 650 wounded. The 100th was called the “Purple Heart Battalion.” In June, the 100th Battalion merged with the newly arrived 442nd Regimental Combat Team, composed of Japanese Americans from Hawaii as well as from the internment camps on the mainland. These soldiers experienced bloody fighting at Luciana, Livorno, and the Arno River, where casualties totaled 1,272 men—more than one-fourth of the regiment. After the battle at the Arno River, they were sent to France, where they took the town of Bruyeres from the German troops in heavy house-to-house fighting.²²

Then in April 1945, the Japanese-American soldiers assaulted German troops on Mount Nebbione. “Come on, you guys, go for broke!” they shouted as they charged directly into the fire of enemy machine guns. One of them, Captain Daniel Inouye, crawled to the flank of an emplacement and pulled the pin on his grenade. “As I drew my arm back, all in a flash of light and dark I saw him, that faceless German,” he remembered. “And even as I cocked my arm to throw, he fired and his rifle grenade smashed into my right elbow and exploded and all but tore my arm off. I looked at it, stunned and unbelieving. It dangled there by a few bloody shreds of tissue, my grenade still clenched in a fist that suddenly didn’t belong to me any more.... I swung around to pry the grenade out of that dead fist with my left hand. Then I had it free and I turned to throw and the German was reloading his rifle. But this time I beat him. My grenade blew up in his face and I stumbled to my feet, closing on the bunker, firing my tommy gun left-handed, the useless right arm slapping red and wet against my side.”²³

Inouye had given one of his limbs in defense of his country. By the end of the war in Europe, the soldiers of the 442nd had suffered 9,486 casualties, including 600 killed. The 442nd, military observers agreed, was “probably the most decorated unit in United States military history.” They had earned 18,143 individual decorations—including 1 Congressional Medal of Honor, 47 Distinguished Service Crosses, 350 Silver Stars, 810 Bronze Stars, and more than 3,600 Purple Hearts. They had given their lives and limbs to prove their loyalty.²⁴

After the war, on July 15, 1946, on the lawn of the White House, President Harry Truman welcomed home the Nisei soldiers of the 442nd: “You fought for the free nations of the world ... you fought not only the enemy, you fought prejudice—and you won.” As they stood on the land of their birth, however, they could not be certain they had defeated prejudice in America. Captain Inouye discovered they had not won the war at home. He was on his way back to Hawaii in 1945 when he tried to get a haircut in San Francisco. Entering the barbershop with his empty right sleeve pinned to his army jacket covered with ribbons and medals for his military heroism, Captain Inouye was told: “We don’t serve Japs here.”²⁵

Even before the end of the war, the government had begun to close the internment camps.

“My parents did not know what to do or where to go after they had been let out of camp,” said Aiko Mifune. Her mother, Fusayo Fukuda Kaya, had come to America as a picture bride in 1919; she and her husband, Yokichi, had been tenant farmers in California before they were interned in Poston, Arizona. “But everything they had worked for was gone; they seemed listless and they stayed in Arizona and tried to grow potatoes there.” Most of the internees wanted to go home to the West Coast, and they boarded trains bound for Los Angeles, Seattle, and San Francisco. At many train stations, the returning internees were met with hostile signs: “No Japs allowed, no Japs welcome.” Many found their houses damaged and their fields ruined. Some of them were never able to return home: too old, too ill, or too broken in spirit, they died in the internment camps. Tragically, they had come all the way to America only to be buried in forlorn and windswept cemeteries of desert camps. Seeking solace in poetry, a camp survivor wrote:

*When the war is over
And after we are gone
Who will visit
This lonely grave in the wild
Where my friend lies buried?*²⁶