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The Forgotten Heroes of World War II: The Japanese American resisters during their years of internment

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The Forgotten Heroes of World War II:
The Japanese American resisters during their years of internment

By: Daniel J. Stone
California State University, Dominguez Hills
December 2000
Dear Professor Hata:

I am responding to your request (due December 6) that I complete my contribution for the Nikkei Kenkyu Gurupu 2000 in the format of a formal research paper in an effort to revisit the Nikkei experience in World War II.

The topic I chose was the forgotten heroes of World War II, and how these Japanese American heroes resisted during their years of internment. In doing so, I will discuss those who resisted by showing deliberate defiance, experiences at the Manzanar, Tule Lake, and Heart Mountain camps, the loyalty questionnaire, those who resisted the draft, and the Fair Play Committee which formally banded together to resist against the government of the United States.

The strengths of this paper are its attention to detail in an effort to follow the format provided in the class syllabus. Many hours of research were conducted as well as several sources were used, as the attached bibliography will indicate. The weaknesses of the paper are that a portion of the research was cut short in an effort to meet all of the requirements provided for the assignment.

The services used to complete this assignment were the Little Tokyo, Redondo Beach, and C.S.U.D.H. libraries. Your personal archive collection was very informative and the librarian, Karen Hunt was very helpful. However, I was disappointed with the performance of the computers on the Dominguez Hills campus (poor in quality and low in quantity) which slowed the production process.

In closing, I wish to thank you for taking time out of your schedule to be interviewed on how the resistance movement took place on the children’s level with the children of the camps pouring dirt in the gas tanks of U.S. government trucks on the camps.

Sincerely,

Daniel J. Stone
Student, SBS 318.01, Fall 2000

Attach: Table of Contents, Formal research narrative, and Comprehensive Annotated Bibliography
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INTRODUCTION

The forgotten heroes of World War II were those Japanese Americans (Nikkei) who resisted against the U.S. government in an effort to have their rights restored. These heroes resisted by challenging President Roosevelt’s Executive Order #9066, by challenging the corrupt system of the War Relocation Authority, the reinstated draft of 1944, and dared to publish a story that others would not.

Long before the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941, and President Roosevelt’s Executive Order #9066 in February 1942 (calling all persons of Japanese ancestry living in the restricted zone of the West coast of the United States to be moved inland for security purposes), the Nikkei community was treated unfairly and their rights were violated. By 1925, the California Alien Land Law had spread to twelve other western states, which prohibited Asian immigrants to own land. The Asian immigrants were already ineligible to become citizens due to their ethnic background.

The events that followed the bombing of Pearl Harbor forever changed the lives of Americans. One group of Americans were forced to live like prisoners, lost most of their belongings, and more importantly, lost the dreams they once shared by coming to America. These Americans had their loyalty questioned, renounced their U.S. citizenship, and some even resisted the draft in an effort to have their rights protected and to be treated fairly.
**DELIBERATE DEFIANCE**

Four Nikkei resisted by challenging in the courts the government’s action against Japanese Americans. They were Minoru Yasui, Gordon Hirabayashi, Fred Korematsu, and Mitsuye Endo.

Minoru Yasui resisted by deliberately defying his curfew. All those of Japanese ancestry had to be in their home between the hours of 8 PM and 6 AM. A month after the Executive Order was called into effect, Yasui walked the streets of Portland, Oregon until about 11 PM. He first approached a police officer and showed him a copy of the Military Proclamation No. 3 authorizing the curfew of persons of Japanese ancestry. He continued to show the police officer his birth certificate to show that he was a person of Japanese ancestry. The police officer ignored him and told him to go home. Instead of going home, Yasui continued to walk the streets of Portland, and approached another police officer. He eventually argued himself into jail.

Yasui felt that an act of deliberate defiance was necessary to rectify the illegal act the U.S. government had committed against the Nikkei community. If the government was going to relocate “enemy aliens”, then the government should relocated those residing in the United States of Italian and German ancestry too.

The next, Gordon Hirabayashi, did the same as Yasui by deliberately violated the curfew. He also disregarded relocation orders, claiming that the government had violated the Fifth Amendment by restricting the freedom of innocent Japanese American citizens. Eventually, Hirabayashi’s case was heard by the Supreme Court, which in 1943 ruled that a person’s rights could be abridged during time of war.
Most everyone agreed with the decision, however Justice Frank Murphy reluctantly sided with the majority. He compared what was happening to Japanese Americans as what was happening in Germany to the Jews.

The next defiant Nikkei was Fred Korematsu. He showed his act of defiance in 1942 by ignoring the Executive Order #9066 so he could remain near his Caucasian girlfriend. However, he was caught and placed in jail. While in jail, he was visited by Ernest Besig, the head of the American Civil Liberties Union (A.C.L.U.) in Northern California. The A.C.L.U.’s sole purpose is to protect minorities and protect those who can not protect themselves. The A.C.L.U. took the cowardly approach to what was happening to the Nikkei. However, Besig helped Korematsu challenge the constitutionality of relocation, claiming that government had no right to remove and imprison a group of people solely because of their ancestry. He lost his case and in December 1944, the Supreme Court upheld his conviction by a 6-to-3 vote. They basing their decision on the fact that Korematsu had violated evacuation orders that had been law at that time. Again, Justice Murphy expressed the minority stating that he was not in favor of the legalization of racism. The Fifth Amendment protects those of racial discrimination.

The last of the four who resisted by showing deliberate defiance was Mitsuye Endo. She based her legal case on the argument that the government had no right to keep loyal citizens in prison camps. Endo was civil servant who had a brother serving overseas in the army. She obediently following government orders and went with her parents to Tule Lake center in 1942. Once there, she applied for a writ of 

*habea corpus*, demanding that she be brought to court to decide the legality of her
imprisonment. The concept of *habeas corpus* is a legal safeguard that protects citizens against illegal detention or imprisonment. After waiting two and a half years for her case to come before the Supreme Court. The justices not only decided overwhelmingly in her favor, they declared that the War Relocation Authority had no authority to detain citizens who are loyal. Consequently, the *Endo* case was the landmark that officially ended internment of all loyal Nikkei on December 18, 1944.

**ALMOST A YEAR TO THE DAY AT MANZANAR**

Another Nikkei who showed heroism was Harry Ueno. Ueno was a head cook at the Manzanar camp and resisted the War Relocation Authority by investigating the shortage of food supplies. His investigation showed that the Caucasian government workers at the camp were selling food supplies on the black market to the nearby town. Ueno began to protest that the government workers were the culprits and demanded that the administration of the camp do something. The shortages of food put the camp under constant tension. On December 5, 1942 (almost a year to the day of the bombing at Pearl Harbor), several militants attacked and beat a prominent Japanese American Counsel League leader who was believed to be an informant. The assailants were taken into custody outside the center. Ueno was blamed for starting the attack and was hauled off in the middle of the night to join the assailants. The next day Ueno was returned to the camp but by this time, center director Ralph Merritt, declared martial law in an effort to maintain control. The mob grew belligerent, the military fired shots into the defenseless crowd, and consequently, one Nikkei was killed. Again, Ueno was taken to jail and eventually was sent to seven different jails and separated from his family for over a year.
Ueno was treated like a prisoner although he was not charged with any crime. He truly displayed heroism by resisting against the U.S. government in an effort of having the Nikkei being treated fairly.

LOYALTY QUESTIONNAIRE (NO-NO’S AND YES-YES’S)

The most explosive issue in the camps was the loyalty questionnaire. By January 1943, the government was worried that the existence of concentration camps holding American citizens was bound to create embarrassing questions at the end of the war. In an effort to correct the situation, a plan was put into effect of attracting approximately 3,500 volunteers for an all-Japanese American combat unit. However, there was a question of the Japanese American’s loyalty to the United States so a loyalty questionnaire was created to sort those who were loyal enough to serve in the military and those who were not.

The questionnaire was distributed to all internees over the age of seventeen and did little to reduce the resentment of the Japanese Americans towards the government as well as reduce the confusion. Questions 27 and 28 of the questionnaire brought the most trouble to the internees. Question 27 was directed to draft-age males stated, “Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?” Question 28 asked, “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 abedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization?”
There was confusion on how to answer the controversial questions of 27 and 28. Some men hesitated to vote “yes” for fear they were volunteering for military service and would have to leave their families to an uncertain fate in the camps. To complicate matters, the questions in general were phrased in such a way that several interpretations were possible. The Nisei (second generation Nikkei and natural born U.S. citizens) pointed out that they were U.S. citizens and have never sworn allegiance to Japan and therefore did not have to renounce their loyalty. By doing this, they might appear to have once harbored disloyal thoughts about the U.S. The Issei (first generation Nikkei, immigrants from Japan) had not been allowed to become citizens due to the Alien Land Laws adopted by twelve western states in 1925. Although the Issei were loyal to America, they feared that if they renounced their homeland, they would essentially be people without a country. As a result of the confusion, the questions were changed to read, “Will you swear to abide by the laws of the United States and to take no action, which would interfere with the war effort?” Most Issei could agree to this statement. Many of the internees resented that they had to prove their loyalty and fight for the principles of freedom and justice that they had been denied.

The Nikkei internees argued at great lengths over the best answers to give. Those that were cautious took the questions at face value and claimed the best answer would be “yes” to both even if that meant going into the army and leaving vulnerable family members behind. They feared that those who answered “no” would lose their citizenship and be deported to Japan. On the other hand, the more daring looked at the questionnaire as an opportunity to vent their anger to the government. They
declared they would vote “yes-yes” only if they were first treated like real citizens and released from camp. Groups of “no-no” internees were ordered by a camp director to change their answers.

**DRAFT RESISTERS**

Little has been written about the courageous Japanese-American men who resisted being drafted from the camps so long as their constitutional rights were being denied. Those young men were considered embittered, angry, frightened idealists who chose to defy in an effort to force the government to live up to its promise of equality for all.

Their resistance took a variety of forms. There were strikes and riots in assembly centers and camps as well as some Nisei renouncing their American citizenship and seeking expatriation to Japan. Some Issei, who were denied citizenship in America, requested repatriation to Japan. Even small children got involved by pouring dirt into the gas tanks of the government trucks.

In early 1944, the draft was reinstated for the imprisoned Nisei who escalated the camp tensions. The young Japanese Americans were now being drafted from behind barbed wire to fight for democracy overseas while their families were to remain locked up on America’s concentration camps. This idea infuriated many internees.

The most remarkable form of protest to the draft was the combination of political innocence and intellectual sophistication. This mix motivated approximately three hundred young men to resist the draft. Unlike those who answered “no-no” on the controversial questions 27 and 28, the resisters answered “yes” that they would
serve in the military, but only when their constitutional rights had been restored and their families freed from the concentration camps. They stood behind their actions and started by not showing up for the pre-induction physical examination. Consequently, many resisters were arrested, prosecuted in court, and hounded by the outside press. The press accused them of treason among many other things. Caucasian military officers who came to the camps threatened many of the resisters. They would use the scare tactic of, “If you do not cooperate that you would be faced with twenty years in prison of a $10,000 fine.

In addition, those who resisted told the authorities that they do not want to go to the military because they do not want to defend the concentration camps. These resisters continued their stance by telling the authorities that they were willing to go anytime their rights were restored.

**CONFLICT AT HEART MOUNTAIN**

The government’s questionnaire provoked the most organized resistance at Heart Mountain in Wyoming. Frank Emi was one of the most influential resister from Heart Mountain. His response to the controversial questions was “Under the present conditions and circumstances, I am unable to answer this question.”

There were so many resisters at Heart Mountain that sixty-three resisters ended up on trial. The trial was a judge trial (no jury) and to make matters worse, the judge was not sympathetic. The sixty-three resisters based their case on constitutional rights. Their attorney tried to convince the judge that their constitutional rights were violated, but the judge would not listen.
The resisters were convicted and sentenced to three years in federal prison. Half of the resisters went to McNeil Island near Seattle, and the other half went to Leavenworth.

Later, the sixty-three resisters appealed their convictions. Their appeals were denied even though the newly Endo decision was in effect which stated that loyal citizens could not be detained in camps. Their convictions were upheld since the government considered that the sixty-three young men owed a debt of military service to the country.

Frank Emi and six other leaders of the resistance movement along with editor James Omura were arrested. Omura was one of the only editors who would give the resisters any positive publicity. Other editors simply ignored the resisters or shed negative light on them. Omura risked his job and even his career by helping the resisters and publishing articles about the events that were really going on in the camps. He is another forgotten hero because instead of doing what the other editors were doing, he chose to hold the U. S. government accountable for their actions.

**THE FAIR PLAY COMMITTEE**

With the assistance of Kiyoshi Okamoto, Frank Emi formed the Fair Play Committee in 1943. In the beginning, those members of the Fair Play Committee (F.P.C.) would talk about the best way to fight some of the unfair practices going on in the camp. Initially, the meetings were more or less informational where the steering committee of seven or eight people would present information for those who were undecided or unable to make up their minds. Eventually, the steering committee presented the issue of the draft. Some were hesitant to make a stand of resisting the
draft. In the beginning, several internees supported the resistance effort towards the
draft. However, when the notices came in for the draft, many decided not to
challenge the U.S. government. Those who did challenge decided to refuse to go
until their entire constitutional rights were restored and treated like American citizens.

**THE RENUNCIANTS OF TULE LAKE**

The largest numbers of disloyals according to the U.S. government’s loyalty
questionnaire were at the Tule Lake camp. Therefore, Tule Lake was known as the
“segregated” camp and the disloyals from the other camps were sent there. Once all
of the disloyals were in place, Tule Lake experienced several cases of defiant acts and
resistance.

In July 1944, the U.S. government passed a denaturalization bill written with
the Nikkei in mind allowed citizens living on American soil to renounce their
citizenship in times of war. Previously, this policy was not on the books since the
war hysteria could lead citizens to make hasty, poorly thought out decisions.

Many of the internees of Tule Lake felt like renouncing their U.S. citizenship
was the best answer to their problems. They were frightened by rumors that those
who did not renounce their citizenship would be thrown out of the center into the
midst of hostile Caucasians. In mid-1944 Tule Lake, internees began a mass
renunciation movement.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, between $3-10 billion (based on current standards) was lost when the were forced out of their homes. While in the camps, their homes and businesses were vandalized or simply taken over by others.

Once it became official that Japan had surrendered and word had gotten back to the camps, many Nikkei did not want to believe it. Some had family in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Most were worried about how they would be received by the Caucasians once they were released from the camps.

After the war, the Nikkei were released with $25.00 given to the head of household. Starting over, the Nikkei left the camps as “new immigrants”. Many went years trying to forget the terrible experience. Others had trouble finding work depending on what side they stood on during the war.
In later years, many of the Nikkei who did all possible to assist the U.S. government and were against the resisters began to appreciate what the resisters did during World War II. In 1988, President Regan formally apologized to the Nikkei survivors of the camps and gave each survivor $20,000 (tax-free).

Presently, the Nikkei Community is still divided over those who resisted and those who participated. To this day, the Nikkei who were at Tule Lake will pass each other on the streets and ignore each other because they were branded as disloyal. It is a shame that something as precious and innocent as the Japanese culture was destroyed because of the racism and ignorance of the U.S. government.

ENDNOTES

1 (D. Hata, personal interview, November 15, 2000)
COMPREHENSIVE ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOOKS

Solely because of their ancestry, their patriotism was questioned. Many lost their careers, most lost their property. Although none were accused of a war crime, all Japanese Americans were treated as traitors.


By 1945 a vast archipelago of federal concentration camps has been constructed to imprison 120,000 whose only “crime: was their Japanese ancestry.


Moreover, there were practical considerations. Removal of the Issei en masses would disrupted the majority of the families.


Manzanar went its own way. Rejecting the form of a representative committee council, it relied on a kind of town hall of block delegates.


But what an ugly sight, the rows and rows of tar-paper barracks, surrounded by barbed-wire fences and watched by armed guards.


Much has been written to suggest that Japanese Americans walked quietly, some have even implied cheerfully, into the prison camps.
Weglyn, Michi. *Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America’s Concentration Camps.*

The vigorous sorting out of disloyals from the loyals became the new obsession of those in swivel chairs in Washington.

**SCHOLARLY JOURNAL ARTICLES**


For Japanese American citizens growing up in California, racial bias and discrimination were facts of life that we had been conditioned to live with since childhood.

**MAGAZINES**


We find that our American citizens, those of Japanese Ancestry are being persecuted as though Adolf Hitler were in charge.

**NEWSPAPERS**


His family’s civil rights were not to be returned, however, and Yanagisako spent two years and four months at the federal penitentiary in Leavenworth for draft evasion.

**INTERNET**


That was the case while waiting at the Honolulu Star-Bulletin last month, and editor Craig Gima started researching leads for Eddie Yanagisako, one of the two authors of the "Song of Cheyenne" in our show.


You will also find an editorial written by Omura, entitled "In Spirit, We Are Americans." The contrast between Masaoka and Omura is striking. Whereas Masaoka accommodated the government, Omura stood up for civil rights.