

“NANA KOROBI YA OKI”: Japanese Resistance during the Japanese Internment

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During the Japanese internment of World War II, the United States government orchestrated a myth that the Japanese meekly and blindly submitted to the camps in order to quell the appearance of opposition. However, through interviews, documents, and camp records, we will uncover that contrary to the popular narrative of compliance, there was in fact a significant wave of resistance in protest of this immoral and unlawful detention. These disobedient acts manifested themselves in Supreme Court cases, draft dodging, protests, and strikes. Based on these findings, this paper aims to prove a counter-narrative to the Japanese American experience in the 1940s, a narrative of civil disobedience.

Introduction

For decades, the Japanese internment has remained a stain on the United States' history, a shameful reminder that America succumbed to blind fear and hatred in the throes of World War II. In 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, and forced approximately 120,000 Japanese people and Japanese Americans into internment camps.¹ In defending such an unjust act, Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt painted the Japanese as an unassimilated, alien, “Emperor-worshipping” people capable of large-scale, intelligently strategized attacks such as the surprise bombing of Pearl Harbor. To this threat, General DeWitt argued that such drastic action was a military necessity. The blanket internment of all those of Japanese descent was a far cry from American values of life, liberty, and due process of the law, and it was something that many politicians grappled with and debated in the weeks to follow. How could the United States, the supposed land of the free, possibly justify such blatant racial discrimination? Perhaps to cope with the cognitive dissonance of America locking up its own citizens without due process of law, the government (through propaganda, media, and political hearings) forced upon society a larger stereotype that Japanese people were acquiescent, even *willing*, to relocate to the internment camps for the overall benefit of a society at war. To quash opposition to the internment, the War Relocation Authority (WRA) was motivated to bury any negative coverage of the camps to make the operation seem smooth, orderly, and ethically sound. In war, the government reasoned we must all make sacrifices, and for the Japanese community in particular, this sacrifice entailed the uprooting of their entire lives. This birthed a paradoxical perception of the Japanese people: on one hand, they were viewed by society as conniving, backstabbing, power-hungry warmongers, but on the other side of the coin they were thought to be submissive and weak-willed. In essence, the government's position was that while Japanese Americans were not American enough to live without surveillance, they were conveniently still “citizens” in the sense that they could be drafted to fight in war for

¹ “Japanese-American Internment During World War II,” United States National Archives and Records Administration.

America and against Japan. In order to reconcile these inconsistent views, internment advocates and politicians orchestrated the enduring memory of the Japanese experience during World War II to be one of resignation, acceptance, and overwhelming compliance. While this is a symptom of the greater societal disease of stereotyping Asian people as passive or submissive, we will uncover newspaper articles, court proceedings, and acts of resistance that suggest the opposite.

Historiography

In the government's efforts to quell dissent to the internment, the Japanese internees during this time period are often depicted and still remembered as resolved, meek, and subservient, silently acquiescing to the U.S. government's demands without question.² These stereotypical notions have been advanced through recent scholarship; one such historian, Elliott Barkan, asserts that "the voices of protest were too few, the ethnic group too small, the hostility too deep, the desire for revenge (or a scapegoat) too strong. And so the trauma and upheaval continued for nearly four more years."³ Here, Barkan suggests that any resistance by the Japanese was futile in changing the overarching current of the internment. Furthermore, by stating that "the trauma and upheaval continued" as a result of low levels of protest, Barkan shifts the blame more towards Japanese ineptitude rather than the forces against them in their wartime oppression. Other historians explain these tendencies by citing the Japanese values of *shikata ga tai* (it cannot be helped) and *gaman* (endure; persevere): "Within camp and redress studies, seemingly passive cultural concepts such as *shikata ga nai* and *gaman* are continuously offered as reasons why more incarcerated either did not protest or rebel against the entire project of incarceration or did not talk about the experience afterwards (Muller 2001; Takezawa 1995; Nagata 1993; Ina 1998; J. Hirabayashi 1975; Kikumura and Tanaka 1981; Nakano 1990; Ishizuka 2006; Matsumoto 1984; Nagata 1994)."⁴ Eric Muller, a legal scholar who utilized these two concepts in his critically acclaimed chronicle of the internment, states that most *nikkei* (people of Japanese descent living abroad, often as immigrants) felt powerless in the face of the United States government and that any resistance would be fruitless: "It was thus a virtue, or at least a feature, of Japanese culture to accept what could not be changed." Gil Asakawa bolsters this argument, offering that both *shikata ga nai* and *gaman* "still have a powerful hold over many [Japanese]."⁵

The Japanese reaction to the internment cannot be solely attributed to these two cultural phenomena. As Fujitani has argued, such regard reduces Japanese culture to a "culture of resignation that encourages subservience or compliance to authority," despite the fact that many *Nikkei* in both Japan and the United States have, throughout history, regularly 'chosen to shape their own futures,' assuming an ethos of *ganbaru* (perseverance in struggle) just as often as any of the presumed passive concepts noted above."⁶ These impressions of Japanese culture stem from both orientalist perspectives within the United States of America as well as more recent, invented traditions promulgated during the Meiji Era of Japan. This era, spurred by political agendas including nation-building and imperialism, necessitated an obedient

² "The Untold Stories of Internment Resisters," *NBC News*, March 16, 2015.

³ Elliott Robert Barkan, "War: Against All Those of Japanese Descent" in *From All Points: America's Immigrant West, 1870s-1952* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), 377.

⁴ Mira Shimabukuro, "Recollected Tapestries: The Circumstances behind Writing-to-Redress" in *Relocating Authority: Japanese Americans Writing to Redress Mass Incarceration* (University Press of Colorado, 2015), 72.

⁵ Shimabukuro, "Recollected Tapestries," 72-73.

⁶ Shimabukuro, "Recollected Tapestries," 73.

population like all budding empires. As this shift was more politically motivated than culturally, Fujitani concludes that there is nothing fundamentally Japanese about the acceptance of or compliance with oppression.⁷ In actuality, Japanese American resistance left an indelible impact on the course of liberation and future treatment by the United States.

Starting in the 1970s, more researchers began to uncover and bring light to the acts of Japanese Americans that rejected the idea of internment. First, Japanese Americans brought their frustrations to the judicial sphere, arguing their cases all the way to the Supreme Court. While this defiance occurred outside the camps, there was significant resistance on the other side of the fences as well that was silenced by the government and popular memory thereafter. Wayne Maeda states that within the camps, there were instances of draft resistance in which 315 Japanese men refused to fight for America so long as they and their families were wrongfully imprisoned. In addition to the draft refusal, Maeda continues, “There were protests and demonstrations over food, living conditions, wage scales—all those things were left out of traditional accounts of the Japanese American internment experience. Any time you leave out aspects of what went on, it’s skewed.”⁸

Based on these findings, this paper contends that, contrary to the popular narrative that the Japanese compliantly obeyed the United States government in their internment camp relocation, coupled with military conscription, during World War II, there was in fact a significant wave of resistance in protest of this immoral and unlawful detention without due process of the law. Through studies of Supreme Court proceedings, internment camp resisters, and draft dodgers, I will be examining a counter-narrative to the Japanese American experience in the 1940s, a narrative of civil disobedience.

Narrative of Submissiveness

To encourage the perception that the Japanese were all eagerly willing to submit to internment camps for the protection of the American people, the government hired photographers to attempt to gain and circulate media depicting Japanese people as happy and willing to go to clean, livable camps. In 1942, the War Relocation Authority hired famous documentary photographer Dorothea Lange to photograph the Japanese internment with the intention of “depict[ing] the process as orderly and humane.”⁹ Lange, however, found the opposite in her documentation: she uncovered confused and chaotic scenes, stress and heartbreak, unclean and packed conditions in repurposed horse stables, and the loss of businesses, dignity, and entire livelihoods. In response to this discovery, the government seized the photos, clearly attempting to shroud the truth in the propaganda they wanted to promote. The government also forbade the use of personal cameras by the internees, suggesting that they did not want camp conditions documented. Despite not allowing Lange to publish her photos, the government allowed others such as Ansel Adams (who was not a social activist to the extent that Lange was) to publish photos that depicted the internment in a more positive light, peppered with smiling people and little evidence of disharmony. Adams’ photos depict scenes from baseball games, church services, and kids walking to school: “In Adams’ vision, Manzanar [one of the camps] comes off as a place where Japanese Americans, dignified, resilient, and optimistic in spite of their circumstances,

⁷ Shimabukuro, “Recollected Tapestries,” 74.

⁸ Annie Nakao, “Japanese Americans’ Internment Resistance Noted in Documentaries,” *SF Gate*, July 5, 1999.

⁹ Adrian Florido, “Photos: 3 Very Different Views Of Japanese Internment,” *NPR*, February 17, 2016.

built a temporary community in the desert.”¹⁰ Photographers were also forbidden from capturing pictures of the guard towers or barbed wire, which contributed to the perception that the Japanese were not being held against their will but simply relocating their lives voluntarily and temporarily around the United States during the wartime. Other photos that survived depicted the internees in positive spirits.¹¹ A photograph from April 1, 1942 taken by Clem Albers, a photographer for the War Relocation Authority, shows three smartly dressed women boarding a train on their way to an assembly center.¹² In the photo, they are grinning from ear to ear, their body language is relaxed, and their arms are extending out of a raised train window to wave goodbye, as if they are embarking on nothing more than a vacation or casual day trip. Overall, the tone of the photo belies the cramped and dehumanizing conditions that these women are about to enter, and further the government’s desired agenda that the internment was a smooth, ethical process that was not met with much friction.

The cooperation of the Japanese American Citizens League with the United States government was another aspect that contributed to the idea of Japanese subservience. The JACL, founded in 1929, is a national organization dedicated to protecting the civil rights of Asian and Pacific Islander Americans. During the war, the JACL should have stood in staunch opposition to the internment for its egregious violation of constitutional rights; however, starting in 1941, JACL President Saburo Kido and Executive Secretary Mike Masaoka initiated a campaign to increase membership and bolster public perception of the Japanese as being loyal American citizens. In “Let’s Obey Order Loyal,” an article written by the JACL and published in *The Japanese American Courier*, the JACL expressed their position on the internment:

A basic tenet of loyalty is to obey the orders of the government to which one owes his allegiance. In this case, for Japanese here, that government is the United States of America. Its will must prevail. Loyal and cheerful obedience is the best way. There will be hardships and sacrifices. But all Americans will be called on along that line. While others contribute in their way, we can assist by loyal and cheerful obedience as our contribution.¹³

Clearly, the JACL did not want to openly contradict government policy due to the potential ramifications on their community. In the context of the racial hatred of the Japanese, the JACL made a decision as an influential organization to encourage its members to take the path of least resistance and convey loyalty. In their minds, this was the “best way” to ensure the vindication of Japanese Americans suspected to be traitors. Later that year, the JACL released the “Japanese American Creed,” which was a statement written by Masaoka intended to assert American patriotism amongst Japanese citizens. Sections of the creed read:

I am proud that I am an American citizen of Japanese ancestry. I believe in her institutions, ideals, and traditions ... Although some individuals may discriminate against me, I shall never become bitter or lose faith, for I know that such persons are not representative of the majority of the American people. True, I shall do all in my power to discourage such practices, but I shall do it in the American way. Because I believe in America and I trust she believes in me ... I pledge myself to do honor to her at all times ... cheerfully and without any reservations whatsoever, in the hope

¹⁰ Florido, “Photos,” 1.

¹¹ Jasmine Alinder, “Displaced Smiles: Photography and the Incarceration of Japanese Americans During World War II,” *Prospects* 30 (October 2005).

¹² See Appendix A.

¹³ “The United States in World War II: Historical Debates About America At War,” Oberlin Staff (Omeka).

that I may become a better American in a greater America.¹⁴

This notion of utter respect and admiration was read into the Congressional Record on May 9th, 1941 by Senator Elbert Thomas of Utah, a mentor and friend of Masaoka. The JACL also adopted it as its official creed. Over the next several years, this document was often referenced in magazines, at JACL events to affirm their patriotism, and by white community leaders seeking to praise Japanese American “loyalty.” Despite its adoption by many, this position was not universally adopted. Some Japanese members expressed their disgust in op-eds and speeches: “Activist William Hohri called the creed an ‘apologetic self-declaration of imagined racial or ethnic inferiority and a promise of complete submission to and utter trust in the white majority.’”¹⁵ Another activist, Henry Miyatake, blithely paraphrased the creed as “You can treat us like crap, but we’re still going to be loyal.”¹⁶ This disapproval highlights the internal conflict that existed within the Japanese community, one far from homogeneously accepting their fate of internment. However, the JACL viewed resisters as liabilities who undermined their agenda of compromising with the government to attain freedom, and so they worked hard to stifle the voices of dissent. During the war, JACL leaders cooperated and even collaborated with the government to advance this idea of loyalty. For the duration of the war, the organization assisted the military in identifying potential disloyal men and women, encouraged President Roosevelt to let Japanese American men fight in the war to prove themselves, initially stood opposed to citizens taking their cases to court, and even published propaganda that the Japanese were “quiet Americans.” Based on these undertakings, many internees accused the JACL of not properly representing the best interests of the people, which led to fragmentation within the community.

Despite the JACL promoting this idea of the Japanese Americans eagerly entering the camps in the name of loyalty and sacrifice for the United States, second-generation Japanese American Bill Hosokawa sheds light on the true mindsets of many Japanese Americans as they entered the camps as one of resignation, fear, and anger.

Interviewer: “No question there’s a lot of hysteria, a lot of prejudice. The JACL and yourself just keep going to back to, it was either/or. We had to cooperate willingly and cheerfully, or there would be bloodshed. What about cooperation under protest?”

Hosokawa: “I think that would have been a good thing. I don’t think that there was a lot of cheerful cooperation. There might have been a lot of putting on a cheerful front. Now, there were pictures of young kids waving goodbye to their friends as they ride out on the train to the concentration camps. What are they supposed to do? Cry? You put on a face. There was not a lot of cheerfulness. There was anger and frustration and bitterness and despair, a tremendous amount of that. But there was the feeling that, ‘By God, if this is what we are called on to do, we will do it.’”¹⁷

Hosokawa’s account reveals that the decision to cooperate with internment camp coercion was not so much willingness, passivity, or blind obedience, but rather an “overwhelming sense of Hopelessness felt throughout the community.”¹⁸ As the Japanese funneled into the camps, they experienced a wave of *shikata ga nai*. This Japanese phrase translates to “it cannot be helped,” and it is used to express situations beyond one’s control. So, while evidence of resolved compliance within the Japanese community existed, it does not represent a one-dimensional sentiment of the entire

¹⁴ Brian Niiya, “Japanese American Creed,” in *Densho Encyclopedia*.

¹⁵ Niiya, “Japanese American Creed,” 1.

¹⁶ Niiya, “Japanese American Creed,” 1.

¹⁷ “The United States in World War II,” 1.

¹⁸ “The United States in World War II,” 1.

community. To the contrary, there was significant complexity and nuance among the Japanese. Surely enough, despite *shikata ga nai* inevitably permeating the camp, these feelings were met with negativity from the proportion of the Japanese community who opposed the government's grievances. To the resisters, the lack of urgency among their peers served as a hindrance to liberation, and in spite of the United States government and the overwhelming weight of *shikata ga nai*, several Japanese Americans were still able to manifest sparks of resistance in various ways across the country.

Supreme Court Cases

The resisters who challenged the internment in the most structural, legitimate way were the Japanese Americans who challenged Executive Order 9066 through cases that went all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States. The most well-known court case is that of Fred Korematsu, who deliberately defied the military orders to relocate from his home in San Leandro, California.¹⁹ Despite being compelled to report to an assembly center, Korematsu subverted the orders to carry on his life as an American citizen. He was born in the United States and therefore had birthright citizenship. To appear less visually identifiable, Korematsu solicited minor plastic surgery to alter his eye shape to look "less Japanese." In addition, he changed his name to Clyde Sarah and began to claim that he was mixed and of Spanish and Hawaiian descent. On May 30, 1942, he was eventually caught and held in county jail in San Francisco to await trial. During his detention, he was approached by Ernest Besig, the Northern California director of the American Civil Liberties Union, where the two agreed that Korematsu would represent the plight of all Japanese people forcibly interned in the United States in court. To Korematsu, "people should have a fair trial and a chance to defend their loyalty at court in a democratic way, because in this situation, people were placed in imprisonment without any fair trial."²⁰ Here, Korematsu demonstrated a fundamental understanding of the rights afforded to United States citizens. The Constitution guarantees liberty, property, and due process, three elements of which Japanese Americans were being robbed during this period. Americans are not allowed to be detained without probable cause, and Korematsu pointed out that one's ethnicity was neither just nor probable cause. Furthermore, Korematsu understood that the judicial branch of the United States cannot hear cases unless they are real "cases and controversies," i.e. live, concrete disputes between parties with adverse interests. This means Americans cannot take cases to court based solely on theory or on principle; a case needs a "person" that has suffered a direct injury from a policy or action and stands to gain an effective remedy. Therefore, Korematsu was necessary for both the ACLU and the Japanese population to serve as the lead figurehead in fighting the case all the way up to the Supreme Court. In taking the case up to the highest court in the country, Korematsu was directly challenging the President of the United States' wide latitude in making executive, military decisions. Notably, his leadership position was a far cry from the submissive role that the government insisted the Japanese internees played for the duration of the war.

Fred Korematsu's valiant effort was not met without tribulations: the Supreme Court's decision fell short of justice in their 6-3 ruling against Korematsu, but the dissents by the three justices are still widely cited today in civil rights cases, including Justice Robert Jackson's. In a condemning dissent, Jackson writes, "The Court for all time has validated the principle of racial discrimination ... The principle then lies

¹⁹ Karen Korematsu, "Fred Korematsu's Story," Fred T. Korematsu Institute.

²⁰ Steven A. Chin and David Tamura, *When Justice Failed: The Fred Korematsu Story* (New York: Metropolitan Teaching and Learning Co., 2001), 67-68.

about like a loaded weapon, ready for the hand of any authority that can bring forward a plausible claim of an urgent need.”²¹ While Korematsu did not win his case during the war, his effort to bring his argument to court brought attention to Japanese resistance to the idea of internment.

Another case that exposed the controversy of internment was *Hirabayashi v. United States*. Gordon Hirabayashi was a United States citizen who challenged the idea of internment based on his pacifist religious ideals and liberal university upbringing. After enrolling at the University of Washington and attending a leadership conference at Columbia University in 1940, Hirabayashi became involved in the pacifist movement and registered as a conscientious objector with the Selective Service. When President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, Hirabayashi dropped out of college and began volunteering with the American Friends Service Committee to coordinate the storage of Japanese families’ belongings and arrange for their transition to internment camps. Hirabayashi recognized that he too would soon be subjected to the Order, but he made the conscious decision to defy the laws that did not align with his constitutional freedoms. He began his sequence of resistance by breaking curfew and traveling where he pleased as a free citizen. When he was compelled to register for “relocation,” he subsequently turned himself in to the Federal Bureau of Investigation so that his trial would serve as the test case for determining the constitutionality of Roosevelt’s actions. Again, because courts can only hear “cases and controversy” and cannot rule solely on principle, Hirabayashi was risking his freedom to be the live case subject that would represent all other Japanese citizens who had been interned. In a New York Times interview, he stated, “I want vindication not only for myself. I also want the cloud removed from over the heads of 120,000 others. My citizenship didn’t protect me one bit. Our Constitution was reduced to a scrap of paper.”²² Hirabayashi’s case eventually made its way to the Supreme Court, which chose not to rule on the constitutionality of the internment as Hirabayashi had hoped but rather his smaller charge of disobeying curfew, to which the Court unanimously affirmed his guilty verdict. Despite a ruling against his favor, Hirabayashi later stated that he had turned himself into the FBI with the knowledge that he would probably lose his case. This is significant because it indicates that he essentially sacrificed himself to spark a legitimate judicial debate over the government’s wartime ethics. “Surprisingly, even though I lost, I did not abandon my beliefs and my values,” he said. “And I never look at my case as just my own, or just as a Japanese American case. It is an American case, with principles that affect the fundamental human rights of all Americans.”²³ Without such figureheads in these cases, the Japanese could have never hoped to receive relief from the courts. Therefore, in his bravery, Hirabayashi accepted a martyr-like role for the benefit of the 120,000 Japanese people who were interned.

A third Supreme Court case also challenged the country’s internment executive order centered around appellant Minoru Yasui, who, like Gordon Hirabayashi, offered himself as a test case to challenge the constitutionality of the government’s actions towards the Japanese. On March 28, 1942, Yasui deliberately defied the curfew imposed on Japanese people by taking a walk through downtown Portland at night: “When no one noticed his lawbreaking, he approached a policeman and demanded to be arrested. He was only told to go home. So he marched into the

²¹ “Fred Korematsu’s Story,” 1.

²² Richard Goldstein, “Gordon Hirabayashi, World War II Internment Opponent, Dies at 93,” *New York Times*.

²³ Goldstein, “Gordon Hirabayashi.”

police station and demanded to be arrested, where the officer on duty obliged.”²⁴ His case eventually rose to the Supreme Court, where only a fraction of eligible cases are heard. Although Yasui lost on appeal, his story is significant because it is here that we see a deliberate, repeated, and even strangely voluntary effort to be arrested in order to have his case tested against the courts. Regardless of the Court’s ruling, Yasui lived on as one of the many symbols of the fiery motivation and action within the Japanese community to stand up against their treatment.

Finally, perhaps the most significant and yet overlooked woman involved in the Japanese internment is Mitsuye Endo, who was the chief plaintiff in the landmark Supreme Court case that led to the dissolution of the entire internment camp operation. While Korematsu’s, Hirabayashi’s, and Yasui’s cases all failed, Endo’s trial was the only case to successfully challenge Japanese incarceration. Despite this enormous achievement, she was largely ignored by the press, which the *New York Times* later acknowledged in 2019 by featuring her in a series called *Overlooked*, a collection of obituaries about extraordinary people whose deaths failed to be reported by *The Times*. Her story being disregarded by the press at the time is evidence of the repeated dismissal of stories that contradicted the popular, demeaning narratives of Asian Americans.

Mitsuye Endo was born in California and therefore a United States citizen by birth. At the age of twenty-two, she was fired from her job as a typist and sent with her family to Tule Lake Segregation Center. Soon after her family resettled in the camp, Tule Lake was visited by a prominent San Francisco attorney James Purcell, who had been hired by the Japanese American Citizens League to create a case intended to shut down the internment camps on constitutional grounds. In order to do so, however, he needed an ideal plaintiff who would be palatable to both the court system and the American public. Mitsuye Endo immediately stood out to him as that symbolic, “loyal” American: she “had never visited Japan, had attended a Sacramento public school, and was Protestant. To top it off, her brother had served in the Army. On paper, she was perfect.”²⁵ Endo accepted Purcell’s proposition, and on July 13, 1942, Purcell filed a writ of habeas corpus, which is a legal document protesting an unlawful detainment. The Sacramento Bee’s July 15, 1942 edition highlights a stinging section of Purcell’s writ: “If you can abrogate certain sections of the Constitution and incarcerate any person without trial or charges just because you do not like his nationality, what is to prevent from abrogating any or all of the Constitution?”²⁶ In federal district court, the judge ruled against Endo, but the government, expecting her to appeal, offered her release from prison on the condition that she would not return home to Sacramento. To this, Endo refused. If she had accepted, she would have been granted conditional freedom, but the case would have never made its way further up the ladder to the Supreme Court. Therefore, by pressing on with her case that was rapidly gaining momentum, Endo reached the Court in October of 1944. That December, the bench unanimously ruled for Endo, calling her a “concededly loyal” citizen. “The majority opinion said the government had no legal right to confine people who had been screened and found to be loyal ... a concurring opinion by Justice Frank Murphy referred to the detention of Japanese Americans as ‘racial discrimination.’”²⁷ On January 1, 1945, the Roosevelt Administration began allowing the release of Japanese Americans, effectively shutting down the internment

²⁴ Gil Asakawa, “Minoru Yasui,” in *Densho Encyclopedia*.

²⁵ Stephanie Buck, “Overlooked No More: Mitsuye Endo, a Name Linked to Justice for Japanese-Americans,” *New York Times*.

²⁶ Buck, “Overlooked No More.”

²⁷ Buck, “Overlooked No More.”

camps. To this day, the Endo case remains heavily cited in many matters pertaining to the detention of American citizens. Clearly, throughout the entire war, the Japanese did not smoothly funnel into camps; there were in fact puncture points of resistance that attempted to deflate the government's authority in multiple areas: in the courts, lobbying at legislative bodies, and at the sites of the camps themselves when the drafting of Japanese American citizens was announced.

Intra-camp Protesters and Draft Dodgers

Some of the earliest incidents of resistance within the camps themselves stemmed from answers to government-issued questionnaires. To determine levels of loyalty to the United States, camp authorities circulated an arbitrary questionnaire around the sites. Question 27 asked, "Are you willing to serve in the Armed Forces of the United States on combat duty wherever ordered?" and Question 28 asked, "Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States ... and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor ... ?"²⁸ These two questions seemed to subjectively decide whether one was a loyal citizen or not, which posed a strict binary to each internee: would they answer affirmatively in a way that satisfied the United States and could possibly lead to their freedom, or would they answer negatively and protest this egregious infringement of their rights? Questions 28 and 29 also catalyzed a huge controversy amongst the Japanese. For first-generation Japanese *Issei*, forswearing their allegiance to Japan meant that they would be stateless, as they were ineligible for United States citizenship. For others, they were compelled to respond "no" because they were furious at their unfair treatment. "Though the vast majority eventually answered the key loyalty questions affirmatively, a significant minority either refused to answer, gave qualified answers, or answered negatively—about 12,000 out of the 78,000 people over the age of seventeen whom the questionnaire was distributed to."²⁹ Dubbed the "no-no boys," those who said no to those two particular questions were branded "suspicious" and sent to Tule Lake, which in 1943 was converted to an authoritarian segregation center for alleged "disloyal" Japanese Americans.

At the height of the internment operations, Tule Lake was the largest of all ten internment camps, holding 18,700 inmates. Because of the "disobedient" attitudes of most of its inmates, Tule Lake was converted into a maximum-security camp in 1943 with extremely strict rules. Penalties for disobedience included acute psychological trauma. At a 2015 UCLA community forum for internment camp survivors, Mamoru and James Tanimoto recounted how they were rounded up for failing to respond to a Selective Service questionnaire, which is not illegal, and forced into a separate jail, where they were harshly interrogated under bright lights. To exacerbate the situation, guards purposefully loaded their rifles around them, giving the men the impression that they would be executed point blank if they did not comply. Another camp survivor, Ben Takeshita, offered a similar traumatic experience: his brother Spencer "had been put before a firing squad [and] offered a blindfold as the soldiers were given the commands 'ready, aim, fire,' as blanks were fired."³⁰ Despite a camp culture of extreme emotional duress, the resisters at Tule Lake obstinately stood their ground against the war authorities. On November 4, 1943, the Tule Lake Reporter's headline reads "JAPS RIOT; ARMY MOVES IN," detailing a warehouse incident in which the internees confronted the War Relocation Authority leaders about their stealing of food meant for camp members. The article states that an angry mob swelled into a riot, but that "U.S. soldiers in steel helmets armed with

²⁸ "Japanese-American Internment."

²⁹ Brian Niiya, "No-No Boys," in *Densho Encyclopedia*.

³⁰ "The Untold Stories."

rifles and bayonets went into action” before the Japanese could be successful.³¹ In a frantic attempt to reinstate order, the WRA arrested various internees, including innocent bystander Brother Tokio. For an entire night, Brother Tokio was relentlessly interrogated and then physically beaten when the questioning proved fruitless. Afterwards, not only was he denied medical treatment for his injuries, but he was held in the “Bull Pen” of the Tule Lake stockade, the area designated for the “highest offenders.” Following this disturbance, Army troops took control of camp operations, and martial law was established at Tule Lake.

Nearing the end of 1943, national military officials began debating whether to reinstate the draft for eligible Japanese internees after yielding less volunteers than anticipated for their racially segregated combat team. In December, they decided to conscript Japanese Americans. Upon learning of mandatory service, Mits Koshiyama says his thoughts immediately turned to the irony of fighting for a country that would not fight for him and his people: “From the very beginning, I thought it was wrong that they would draft us without giving us our rights. I mean, why were we in this concentration camp when we didn’t do anything wrong? If the government does you wrong, you should protest.”³² After graduating high school in the Santa Anita internment camp, Koshiyama rejected the military draft at the age of nineteen on the basis that his incarceration violated his constitutional rights.³³ Subsequent to his induction refusal, he was arrested and forced to serve two years at McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary in Washington. Koshiyama was not alone in his endeavor but a component in the wider draft dodging movement, a movement that spread like wildfire in the camps through “leaflets and circulars that articulated legal and moral arguments against incarceration, conscription, and the racial segregation of Nisei soldiers in the army.”³⁴ In total, 315 Japanese American conscientious objectors were convicted of draft evasion, including sixty-three who were tried together and found guilty in the largest trial of draft resisters in United States history.³⁵ These numbers stand in stark juxtaposition with the popularly accepted, government-orchestrated myth of the obedient Japanese being willing and honored to fight for America. In reality, the Japanese were not a uniform group, and draft resistance extended beyond isolated incidents to a considerable movement of over 300 men.

As the Japanese people were not a monolithic group; naturally there were disagreements within the camps in terms of the manner in which they should protest. Some internalized their defeat, and others reacted in outrage: “They had lost almost everything, even modest control of their own lives. And their deepening sense of loss and frustration had virtually no outlet.”³⁶ As time went on, this discontent revealed itself in multiple shades of resistance: in strikes, riots, and the renouncing of citizenship. At Santa Anita Assembly center, internees staged a sit-down strike in June of 1942 to protest laborious working conditions of the administration to meet net quotas. The strike proved successful, and the Santa Anita administration quickly agreed to both better working conditions and food quality for the internees. Internees

³¹ “A More Perfect Union: Tule Lake Reporter,” American History (National Museum of American History); See Appendix B.

³² Nakao, “Japanese Americans’ Internment.”

³³ “Mits Koshiyama Recalls Japanese American Resistance to Incarceration,” History Matters-The U.S. Survey Course on the Web.

³⁴ Eric Muller, “Draft Resistance,” in *Densho Encyclopedia*.

³⁵ Jeffrey F. Burton et al., *Confinement and Ethnicity: An Overview of World War II Japanese American Relocation Sites*. United States: Western Archeological and Conservation Center, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, 2000.”

³⁶ “Japanese-American Internment.”

at Santa Ana also resorted to violence to resist. Two months after the strike, in reaction to internal police invading private areas and seizing hidden items of contraband, a restless crowd grew and culminated in the beating of a suspected informant. As a result of the commotion, 200 military police were sent to dispel the crowd and martial law was declared across the camps. Finally, further up north at Tule Lake, some men discovered a loophole in which they would be absolved of military duty if they renounced their US citizenship. Over the duration of the internment, 5,589 American citizens ended up taking this course of action to cut ties to the United States.³⁷ In summation, all of these defiant actions exhibit the concerted effort taken by the Japanese in camps to exploit every possible avenue of resistance.

Another source of disharmony within the camps was a deep distrust of the Japanese American Citizens League. In response to the pressure from the government and the desire to maintain peace across the camps, many JACL leaders began collaborating with the government to report suspicious internees, discourage resistance, and promote loyalty and military service to the United States.³⁸ This angered a proportion of the internees, who felt betrayed by the organization that was supposed to represent their best interests. In December 1942, this tension between the JACL and other internees culminated in a riot at Manzanar Relocation Center that resulted in two deaths and eight wounded. The incident began when Harry Ueno, an internee who worked as a cook's assistant, noticed that the camp's sugar supply was suspiciously low. Upon investigation, Nikkei police reports found that the camp's white assistant director Ned Campbell was stealing and selling the kitchen's 100-pound sugar sacks on the black market, taking food out of the mouths of the internees. In reaction to this, Ueno formed the Mess Hall Workers Union without permission of the JACL, which the League resented because of its air of defiance that could anger camp directors. A growing division between the Citizens League and the rest of the internees began to permeate the community. The camp evacuees were further offended when Fred Tayama was chosen to be one of Manzanar delegates at the JACL National Convention held in Salt Lake City, Utah. To the camp population, "no more unrepresentative person [than Tayama] could be chosen to present the views of Manzanar at the convention," as Tayama was seen as pandering to the camp administration and did not accurately reflect the people's views.³⁹ Surely enough, to the horror of the internees, Tayama went against camp consensus to advocate for the conscription of Japanese Americans into the army at the convention. Upon Tayama's return to Manzanar, six unidentified men attacked him and severely beat him to the point of hospitalization. Camp officials arrested three suspected internees, and eventually released two but kept one, Harry Ueno. Four thousand camp members erupted in protest as they cried out that Ueno was innocent and unfairly singled out because of his role in exposing the sugar scandal. They also demanded that traitors such as Fred Tayama be killed. The mob then set out with two goals: to sacrifice Tayama and rescue Ueno. As the group's hunt gained momentum, Manzanar's camp director authorized military police to enter the camp and barricade the jail from the bloodthirsty crowd. For two and a half hours, the administration attempted to negotiate with the leaders of the uprising, but the inmates refused to comply, hurling objects at the officials. In response, the military police captain ordered that his men discharge

³⁷ "Abandonment (Renunciation) of US Citizenship by Japanese Americans in WWII," Discover Nikkei.

³⁸ Arthur Hansen, "Harry Ueno," in *Densho Encyclopedia*.

³⁹ Morton Grodzins, "The Manzanar Shooting," [Japanese American] Evacuation and Resettlement Study, University of California, Berkeley, Bancroft Library Folder O10.04, p. 4. As cited in Hansen and Hacker, "The Manzanar Riot," fn. 102, p. 156.

their tear gas canisters, but for a reason unknown, several soldiers instead fired guns into the crowd, murdering two internees and wounding eight.

Evolution of Societal Perception towards Resisters

By asserting their constitutional freedoms in direct contradiction with the government's actions, the resisters' efforts served as a basis for revolutionary progress in civil rights victories that persisted for decades following World War II. After the war, Fred Korematsu went on to advocate for a re-examination of the internment to reconcile the ethical debates behind race-based imprisonment. Finally, in 1980, President Jimmy Carter commissioned an investigation into the motivations surrounding the Japanese internment, citing the dubious conviction of Fred Korematsu. Three years later, the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment published their conclusion that the process of the Japanese wartime relocation occurred due to "race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership."⁴⁰ That same year, Korematsu's district court conviction was overturned by Judge Marilyn Patel, to whom he gave this statement: "I would like to see the government admit that they were wrong and do something about it so this will never happen again to any American citizen of any race, creed, or color."⁴¹ Despite his Supreme Court case still standing today, the overturning of his district court conviction was a symbolic vindication of Korematsu's wartime conduct. After his conviction was overturned, Korematsu traveled to Washington D.C. to lobby for the passage of a policy that would serve as an official apology to the Japanese. Surely enough, his efforts proved fruitful and helped spur the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, in which the United States government issued a formal apology as well as \$1.6 billion in reparations to all the Japanese Americans who had been interned. On August 10, 1988, President Ronald Reagan officially signed both the redress and reparations legislation into law. Ten years later, in 1998, President Clinton awarded Mr. Korematsu the Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor, stating, "In the long history of our country's constant search for justice, some names of ordinary citizens stand for millions of souls. Plessy, Brown, Parks ... to that distinguished list, today we add the name of Fred Korematsu."⁴² This gesture was significant because it uplifted a Japanese name to the same degree of heroism as iconic resisters such as Rosa Parks. This helped dispel the myth that Japanese people are incapable of civil disobedience, and it transformed the stigma of being disloyal to America into one of a heroic, commendable act for the greater good.

Not only did the resisters have to withstand the torment of the United States, but they also had to grapple with the stigma of disloyalty that existed towards them in their own Japanese communities. Immediately after the war, many resisters were shunned by the Japanese population in America. In an interview, Teruo Nobori of Berkeley, who fought with the illustrious Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Team, saw avoiding war as a coward's way out: "Here my friends who gave their lives so willingly are long dead and forgotten. I don't think that's quite right. The resisters had the right to make that choice. But to me, they were not heroes."⁴³ Many other Japanese American veterans aligned with this ideology at the time; they believed that shedding their blood for America was the utmost demonstration of loyalty to vindicate them in the eyes of the public.

⁴⁰ "Fred Korematsu's Story," 1.

⁴¹ Kiran Ahuja, "Honoring the Legacy of Fred Korematsu," National Archives and Records Administration.

⁴² Kiran Ahuja, "Honoring the Legacy."

⁴³ Nakao, "Japanese Americans' Internment."

The resisters, however, did have support from one outspoken military veteran, Dr. Eji Suyama, whose public support for the resisters positively influenced how they were viewed by the public. For decades, Suyama contributed countless brash, opinionated articles to numerous Japanese American newspapers advocating for the resisters. In response to a 1992 column in the *Rafu Shimpo* newspaper that criticized the disloyalty of draft resisters, Suyama responded in “Letters to the Editor”:

I was appalled to read the deathless and graceless prose of a Mr. Yoshinaga column (“A Hush-Hush Issue,” *Rafu Shimpo*, Sept. 8, 1992) concerning the 1942 draft resisters. Some elected to resist the draft until constitutional rights were restored ... an imperative [that] took the load off the rest of us. Those who did not have the “privilege” of going to war with its grotesque and obscene landscape should realize that some of us of the 442nd Combat Team became aware of courage’s multi-faceted asymmetrics that extended beyond the battlefields to the camps.⁴⁴

Here, Suyama acknowledges that the resisters were anything but passive or idle in refusing to fight in the war; in fact, their actions led to the dissolution of Executive Order 9066 and the liberation of the Japanese people. Further, he challenges the idea that resistance was “cowardly” in his assertion that courage manifested itself in ways that extended beyond fighting at the front lines; there is value and bravery in refusing to participate in acts that contradict fundamental values. In another article for the same paper written in 1993, he analyzed the motivations behind some Japanese fighting in the war and others resisting:

The values of Americanism and loyalty were commonly cited by most of the [Japanese] men who served despite their awareness of the fallibility of the Constitution and the government. I have a different view. I suspect we [the men who served] took these values and principles from our dormant Japanese side, a collection of values such as *giri* [duty], way of the samurai, and Japanese metaphysics of loyalty, harmony between the individual, family, public, and government, and death. We in the 442nd fought by these idealistic bytes from a distant and medieval world, and at the end, acquired a tragic sense of America. The draft resisters stood fast on constitutional principles and not on old world canons or formulas, thus were more “American” but are now having hot flashes of existential despair.⁴⁵

In just a few sentences, Suyama effectively encapsulated the conflicting values that divided the Japanese community towards resistance. In the eyes of the Japanese veterans who fought in the 442nd, the best way to exemplify loyalty was to willingly and honorably fight for America. In complying with executive orders despite the racially charged circumstances, they aimed to prove to the government that they were not a threat but in fact Americans themselves and essential to the prosperity of their country. They proved successful in this endeavor; the 442nd Regiment of predominantly Japanese Americans lived on as the most decorated unit in United States history. With all due respect to the bravery and sacrifice that these veterans made, Suyama went on to point out that this mindset of unconditional allegiance to one’s country was not inherently American but more closely aligned with historic Japanese values such as duty to one’s country, honor, and community harmony. In contrast, in consideration of intrinsic American constitutional values such as due process of the law, free speech, and the right to petition the government, we find that it was the resisters whose actions more closely aligned with the spirit of the American constitution. The intent of Suyama’s argument was not to denounce Japanese values or the veterans, as he himself fought during the war, but rather to uplift the resisters and their actions as heroic in their own right. In total, Suyama’s efforts contributed to

⁴⁴ Eji Suyama to *Rafu Shimpo*, October 1, 1992, in *The Suyama Project*.

⁴⁵ Eji Suyama to *Rafu Shimpo*.

the exoneration of Japanese resisters in the court of public opinion. It was incredibly validating to have support from a person like Suyama. Largely due to his reputable character, Suyama's work heavily impacted public perception: "Because Eji Suyama was one of the few 442nd soldiers to survive the bloody battle to rescue the 'Texas Lost Battalion,' his support of the Japanese American World War II draft resisters and other protesters carried that much more weight."⁴⁶

Indeed, thanks to public support by people like Suyama, we began to see the shift of popular perspective on how Japanese citizens perceived the draft resisters by the turn of the century. Before this shift, the Japanese American Citizens League had expressed disdain and even contempt for the resisters, shunning even Korematsu, Hirabayashi, and Yasui during their challenges in federal courts. Resisters were essentially social pariahs within their own Japanese communities. However, by the turn of the century, popular opinion towards the resisters had changed. At the 2000 JACL convention, the JACL body reversed their condemnation of the resisters to a more positive light and voted to formally recognize the draft resisters as "Resisters of Conscience."⁴⁷ Despite some opposition at the conference, the majority concluded that these resisters were not primarily motivated by frivolous, selfish whims but by a deeper moral reckoning that compelled them to resist. Resister Frank Emi of San Gabriel said he would not hesitate to take the same course of action: "When you actually sit down and think coolly on the subject, what the government did was so unjust and unfair that a reasonable, fair-minded person wouldn't be able to take any other course."⁴⁸ To Emi, the issue wasn't about heroism but about correcting a flagrantly immoral governmental action.

Legacy of Resisters

As history came to show, these court plaintiffs, draft resisters, and camp rebels triumphed in advancing civil liberties: they spawned bills, policy, and a wide-reaching societal understanding that history cannot repeat itself with the blind stereotyping of groups. For example, when the aftermath of 9/11 negatively affected America's perception of Muslims, Fred Korematsu repeatedly spoke out on behalf of followers of Islam by filing amicus briefs to protect the rights of Muslim inmates being held on suspicion of terrorism at Guantanamo Bay: *Shafiq Rasul, v. George W. Bush* and *Khaled A.F. Al Odah v. United States of America*.⁴⁹ Another instance of Japanese American activism stemming from the injustices of the internment was the heavy backlash to Donald Trump's Muslim ban. In 2015, Trump introduced a plan to target and ban people from Muslim-majority nations from entering the United States under the suspicion that they could potentially terrorize America, citing "the internment of the Japanese during World War II by Franklin D. Roosevelt—a highly respected president."⁵⁰ In response to this proposal, Japanese American activists swiftly spoke out against this action, drawing direct parallels between the treatment of the Japanese during World War II and Muslims in the present day. Outside the Supreme Court, the JACL, which by that time had fully backed the resisters, and the National Council of Asian-Pacific American members protested with signs that read "SCOTUS repeats disgraced history," and "Presidential power doesn't always protect." David Inoue, the

⁴⁶ Eji Suyama to Rafu Shimpo.

⁴⁷ Japanese American Citizens League National Education Committee, "A Lesson in History: The Japanese American Experience," 132.

⁴⁸ Nakao, "Japanese Americans' Internment."

⁴⁹ "Fred Korematsu's Story," 1.

⁵⁰ The Learning Network, "Editorial Contest Winner | 'The Muslim Exclusion: A Proposal Hauntingly Reminiscent of the Japanese Internment,'" *New York Times*, May 17, 2016.

executive director for the JACL, stated that it was important for the organization to help others stand up to discrimination: “What happened to us should never happen again,” he told CNN in an interview, “And the sad thing is with this decision today, is they are affirming that it is OK to happen again.”⁵¹ In addition to the protestors’ connection, Supreme Court Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Sonya Sotomayor specifically referenced the Korematsu case in equating the injustices against Japanese Americans to the injustices being committed against Muslims in contemporary times. In 2020, the backlash won and the United States House of Representatives approved a bill reversing the ban. As demonstrated in the connection between these two political phenomena, the defiant actions taken by Korematsu and other resisters in the context of World War II did not just occur in a vacuum; they had a ripple effect that set the standard for US policy thereafter in mass applications of laws based on an inherent quality such as race or religion.

It is dangerous to remember the Japanese as simply submissive victims who resigned themselves to internment because this framing takes away their agency and diversity of approaches to the internment. Despite how the US government attempted to paint them, Japanese Americans were far from a homogenous group in their sentiments surrounding internment. Some acquiesced and entered the camps due to feelings of resignation, pressure from the government, or fear for the lives of their families. Others decided to circumvent the internment by volunteering for the draft, risking their lives to prove their loyalty to a country that had rejected them. But besides entering the camps or joining the military, the third course of action that this paper seeks to highlight is the pathway of resistance, renunciation, and/or repatriation. While it is true that many Japanese people complied with the government’s orders, it is equally important to acknowledge the counter-narrative to this enduring memory so that society can strive towards a more acute, accurate portrait of the truth. Under the counter-memory, we arrive at a situation not as frictionless as the government airbrushed it to be but one of complexity and conflict. We see people challenging policies in courtrooms, internees protesting, rioting, and demanding justice. We also see young men risking their freedom and reputations by evading the draft. While these actions may be perceived as undermining and disrespecting America, many supporters of the resistance movement point out that in their subversive actions, the resisters were not protesting America itself. In fact, several resisters frequently honored and referenced foundational American tenets that contradict racism and tyranny. Fred Korematsu offers, “Every day in school, we said the pledge to the flag, ‘with liberty and justice for all,’ and I believed that ... I was an American citizen, and I had as many rights as anyone else.”⁵² Paralleling Korematsu’s mindset, Mits Koshiyami concurs, “I really believed in the Constitution, and I believed they should protect me when I needed it the most. The belief in that Constitution kind of pulled me through all this difficulty that I had during the war years.”⁵³ Here, Korematsu and Koshiyami display their steadfast belief in the ideals of the nation, and how they were compelled to act to make sure those same ideals were actualized and properly administered in society. Thus, resistance was not a rejection of American values, but instead a rejection of the oppression that the Constitution claims to protect. Arguably, it is inherently American and anything but “alien” to risk one’s life striving for these principles. Therefore, these efforts of Asian men and women to actively resist the racist decisions of the United States government on a national level—efforts which

⁵¹ Saba Hamedy, “‘What Happened to Us Should Never Happen Again’: Japanese-American Protesters Weigh in on Travel Ban Ruling,” *CNN*, June 26, 2018,

⁵² “Fred Korematsu’s Story,” 1.

⁵³ “Mits Koshiyama.”

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have had an indelible effect on social justice attitudes and policy today—must not be swept under the rug or trivialized. We as a society must acknowledge and uplift the true Japanese experience during the World War II internment for its nuances, accounts that had long been buried, and absolute disobedience.

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Appendix A



Waving good-bye as the train pulls away from the station. Department of the Interior, War Relocation Authority. Photo by Clem Albers.

Appendix B

Sale Price 6c

Tulelake Reporter

Only Paper In The World That Is 100% For Merrill, Main and Tulelake
TULELAKE, CALIFORNIA, THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 1943. NUMBER 49.

JAPS RIOT; ARMY MOVES IN

Civ. Defense & Legion Post Study Safety
Motion Asking State And Nat'l Officials To Take Action

EARLY DONATIONS ASKED BY TULE WAR CHEST COM.

Rotary Hears Graphic Story Of Jap Riot
Speaker Was One Of White Prisoners Held Four Hours

ALL DAY SESSION AAA OFFICIALS IN TULELAKE

Tulelake Legion And Auxiliary Fete Postponed

Com'endation Expressed On Army Control
City Officials And Citizens Pleased With Outcome

JAP DISTURBANCE BOILS AGAIN, WRA EMPLOYEE BEATEN UP; TROOPS TAKE COMMAND

U. S. Army troops of the military guard of Camp Tule Lake in command of Lieutenant Colonel Austin, moved into the Tule Lake Japanese language center at about 10:30 p. m. Thursday, November 4, to quell a riot which was an aftermath of Monday's disturbances.

Ed Berkack, internal securities head, was beaten up within the project by a Japanese mob and removed to the infirmary for treatment. Following this the Jap rabble gathered near the administration building.

Angry shouting mobs were moving close to the arsenal when the army was called to take control.

Unsuccessful attempts were made by Japs riding in motor vehicles to rush soldier guards as they moved in.

U. S. soldiers in their helmets armed with rifles and bayonets went into action. It was apparent to outside observers that the army had achieved complete control within a short space of time, and the process of rounding up the disturbing element proceeded.

Unofficial reports stated there were about 20 casualties.

Farm Center Holds AAA

Headline, "JAPS RIOT; ARMY MOVES IN." Tulelake Reporter, Volume IX, Number 49. 4 November, 1943.