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## Triumph of an Idea\_Japanese Internment and the Survival of Democracy

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## Triumph of an Idea\_Japanese Internment and the Survival of Democracy

### Abstract

The principles found in the Declaration of Independence have been what has united the disparate cultures and ethnicities that make up the United States of America. Racial prejudice, war hysteria, and political opportunism have attempted at times to smother these principles. Such a time occurred during World War II when the Japanese Americans were interned. But, those in the academic community, the church communities, and the Nisei themselves ensured that the democratic principles of the Declaration would ultimately triumph.

### Cover Page Footnote

1Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776. 2Paul Howard Takemoto, *Nisei Memories: My Parents Talk about the War Years* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 225. 3Charles Kikuchi, *The Kikuchi Diary: Chronicle from an American Concentration Camp*. The Tanforan Journals of Charles Kikuchi, ed. John Modell. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 64. 4Ellen Eisenberg, "As Truly American as Your Son: Voicing Opposition to Internment in Three West Coast Cities," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 104, no. 4 (Winter, 2003): 554; Robert Shaffer, "Opposition to Internment: Defending Japanese American Rights during World War II," *The Historian* 61, no. 3 (Spring, 1999): 601-603. 5Page Smith, *Democracy on Trial: The Japanese American Evacuation and Relocation in World War II* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 225. 6Robert A. Wilson and Bill Hosokawa, *East to America: A History of the Japanese in the United States* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1980), 218. 7Eisenberg, 555. 8Shaffer, 587. 9Nancy Nakano Conner, "From Internment to Indian: Japanese American, the War Relocation Authority, the Disciples of Christ, and Citizen Committees in Indianapolis," *Indiana Magazine of History* 102, no. 2 (June, 2006): 94. 10Sandra C. Taylor, "Fellow-Feelers with the Afflicted: The Christian Churches and the Relocation of the Japanese during World War II," in *Japanese Americans: From Relocation to Redress*, ed. Roger Daniels, Sandra C. Taylor, and Harry H. L. Kitano (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 125. 11Taylor, 125; Conner, 95; 12Peter Irons, *Justice at War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 84; Wilson and Hosokawa, 250. 13Irons, 88. 14Irons, 99. 15Wilson and Hosokawa, 254; Howard Ball, "Judicial Parsimony and Military Necessity Disinterred: A Reexamination of the Japanese Exclusion Cases, 1943-44," in *Japanese Americans: From Relocation to Redress*, ed. Roger Daniels, Sandra C. Taylor, and Harry H. L. Kitano (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 182. 16Lt. Col. Christopher T. Hiroto, "The Evacuation and Relocation of the West Coast Japanese during World War II – How It Happened!" (Study Project, U. S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 1991), 80. 17Ball, 181. 18Tetsuden Kashima, *Judgment without Trial: Japanese American Internment during World War II* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 173-174; Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, *Personal Justice Denied* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1982), 246-247. 19Ibid, 18. 20Hiroto, 25. 21President Gerald R. Ford, "Proclamation 4417 Confirming the Termination of Executive Order Authorizing Japanese-American Internment during World War II," February 19, 1976. Accessed March 31, 2017, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/speeches/760111p.htm> 22Commission of Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, 18. 23Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, part 2, 7. 24James McDonald, "Democratic Failure and Emergencies: Myth or Reality?" *Virginia Law Review* 93 (October 22, 2007): 1786, 1788. Bibliography Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, *Personal Justice Denied*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1982. Conner, Nancy Nakano. "From Internment to Indians: Japanese Americans, the War Relocation Authority, the Disciples of Christ, and Citizen Committees in Indianapolis." *Indiana Magazine of History* 102, no. 2 (June, 2006): 89-116. Daniels, Roger, Sandra C. Taylor, and Harry H. L. Kitano, ed. *Japanese Americans: From Relocation to Redress*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986. Eisenberg, Ellen. "As Truly American as Your Son: Voicing Opposition to Internment in Three West Coast Cities." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 104, no. 4 (Winter, 2003): 542-565. Ford, President Gerald R. "Proclamation 4417 Confirming the

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## Triumph of an Idea: Japanese Internment and the Survival of Democracy

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...”<sup>1</sup>

These words epitomize what the United States of America is – a country founded on and untied by these ideas. America has always been and always will be a nation of immigrants, people coming from many different cultures and ethnicities. The only tie that has bound these disparate groups together throughout our history has been a commitment to the above principles, but that commitment has often meant the sacrifice of individuals speaking against the tide of racial prejudice, war hysteria, and political opportunism that have attempted to smother these principles at specific time periods. Such a period existed from 1941 to 1945 with the internment of Japanese Americans on the West Coast during World War II.

Despite the injustices experienced by the internees, their belief in the ultimate triumph of the idea of American democracy is crucial. American democracy, rooted in the ideals of the Declaration, has enabled America to acknowledge her mistakes and redress her wrongs. Ken and Alice Takemoto expressed it this way when President Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, “The Germans never apologized for what the Nazis did...The Japanese never apologized, either...So this kind of thing, this kind of apology, could only happen in the United States. Correct the wrongs. Apologize for the wrongs...I feel that this is the best country to be in. Because I feel the U. S. will always try to correct its mistakes.”<sup>2</sup> The Takemoto’s belief is clearly reflected in the actions of the academic and religious communities who formed the

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<sup>1</sup>Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776.

<sup>2</sup>Paul Howard Takemoto, *Nisei Memories: My Parents Talk about the War Years* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 225.

vanguard of opposition to internment. It is also found in the court cases filed by Nisei during the internment. Although academia, the churches, and the Nisei could not prevent internment, they spoke against the democratic injustice and worked to alleviate the trauma.

After President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, all Nisei college students on the West Coast had to leave their educational institutions to be interned. Charles Kikuchi, one such student at Berkeley, stated in his diary the importance of the Nisei's continuing fight for democracy, saying, that "their confidence in democracy has not been shaken since they realize that there are millions of other New Americans in this country who are with them in the struggle to achieve the potential ideals of this country."<sup>3</sup> Kikuchi and hundreds of other Nisei students were supported by fellow students, professors, and deans at major universities like the University of Washington and the University of California at Berkeley.

The students at the University of Washington publicly testified about the loyalty of their Nisei friends and demanded that they be allowed to stay at the university to finish their studies. University President L. P. Sieg and Dean Robert O'Brien actively protested the internment, as did Sociology Chair Jesse F. Steiner who stated that the mass evacuation of the Japanese Americans was no different than the actions of the totalitarian regimes in Europe. O'Brien "headed a broad-based committee of deans, professors, and students on the Seattle campus and later became a national organizer as well in an effort to enroll Japanese American students in colleges in the East and Midwest." Sieg allowed Nisei students forced to leave the University of Washington to receive their diplomas early<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Charles Kikuchi, *The Kikuchi Diary: Chronicle from an American Concentration Camp. The Tanforan Journals of Charles Kikuchi*, ed. John Modell. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 64.

<sup>4</sup>Ellen Eisenberg, "'As Truly American as Your Son': Voicing Opposition to Internment in Three West Coast Cities," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 104, no. 4 (Winter, 2003): 554; Robert Shaffer, "Opposition to Internment: Defending Japanese American Rights during World War II," *The Historian* 61, no. 3 (Spring, 1999):

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When Robert Gordon Sproul, president of the University of California, learned that the Nisei would be forced to evacuate, he wrote President Roosevelt about the hardship being imposed on these students and requested the President take steps to ensure that these students be able to continue their education. “Roosevelt was clearly dismayed to learn that the education of so many students was imperiled, and Milton Eisenhower [who would become the first head of the War Relocation Authority] believed that if the issue had arisen earlier it might well have resulted in Roosevelt forbidding mass evacuation.”<sup>5</sup> Sproul’s inquiry and ultimate actions, along with the support of academics at Stanford and Berkeley, resulted in the formation on the Berkeley campus of the Student Relocation Council, which eventually became the National Student Relocation Council. This council enabled 4,300 Nisei students to relocate to other institutions in the Midwest and East in order to finish their educations.<sup>6</sup>

Academics were not the only ones to protest the internment as a violation of the Nisei’s constitutional rights. The Christian clergy and former missionaries to Japan with close ties to the Japanese communities decried what was happening. Quaker Floyd Schmoe, coordinator for the American Friends Service Committee formed to help the Japanese Americans, testified before the Tolan hearings in Seattle, saying, “They are American citizens by virtue of birth and training... We agree that anyone, whether Japanese, German, or American, who is proven dangerous to the community should be removed, but justice cannot be done by branding all men, who by accident of their birth come from countries now at war with America, as enemy aliens.” E. W. Thompson, pastor of the Japanese Methodist Church in Seattle stated that mass internment

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601-603.

<sup>5</sup>Page Smith, *Democracy on Trial: The Japanese American Evacuation and Relocation in World War II* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 225.

<sup>6</sup>Robert A. Wilson and Bill Hosokawa, *East to America: A History of the Japanese in the United States* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1980), 218.

of the Japanese was “repeating the deed that Hitler perpetrated against the Jews... We cannot fight for democracy by such methods.”<sup>7</sup> Baptist minister and former missionary Rev. Emery Andrews stated, that “future historians will record this evacuation – this violation of citizenship rights – as one of the blackest blots on American history; as the time that democracy came the nearest of being wrecked.”<sup>8</sup>

In California, soon after Pearl Harbor, Dr. Frank Herron, superintendent of the Japanese Methodist churches in California, went with several Protestant leaders to see General John L. DeWitt, Western Defense Commander, to try to prevent the mass evacuation of Japanese Americans. DeWitt refused to meet with them and sent a surrogate instead. A few months later at the Tolan hearings in California, several prominent pastors lamented the policy of internment adopted by the federal government.<sup>9</sup> In June, four months after Executive Order 9066 had been issued, the Protestant magazine *Christian Century* wrote, “It is time that all churches stir themselves to make plain to the nation the tragic mistake it is making... the method is not democratic, is not in accord with American traditions, and is not right.”<sup>10</sup>

Although many churches at first did not get involved in protesting the internment, eventually prominent denominations like the Quakers, Disciples of Christ, Presbyterians, Brethren, and American Baptists united together to prevent the withdrawal of citizenship from the Nisei, provided storage places for property of internees, brought supplies to the camps, taught in camp schools, provided religious services and activities in the camps, and worked to

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<sup>7</sup>Eisenberg, 555.

<sup>8</sup>Shaffer, 587.

<sup>9</sup>Nancy Nakano Conner, “From Internment to Indian: Japanese American, the War Relocation Authority, the Disciples of Christ, and Citizen Committees in Indianapolis,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 102, no. 2 (June, 2006): 94.

<sup>10</sup>Sandra C. Taylor, “‘Fellow-Feelers with the Afflicted’: The Christian Churches and the Relocation of the Japanese during World War II,” in *Japanese Americans: From Relocation to Redress*, ed. Roger Daniels, Sandra C. Taylor, and Harry H. L. Kitano (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 125.

relocate people out of the camps by finding them jobs in the Midwest or East or scholarships to go to college.<sup>11</sup>

Besides people affiliated with academia and certain churches, the Nisei themselves attempted to confront the constitutional injustices of their internment. Minoru Yasui, a Portland, Oregon, attorney and Army Reserve officer, mounted the first legal challenge to the internment, not because of disloyalty but because he believed the military orders were illegal. As a test case, he decided to violate the curfew imposed on Japanese American citizens, stating that because Military Order 3 applied to all persons of Japanese ancestry and made a distinction between citizens on the basis of ancestry, “that order infringed on my rights as a citizen.”<sup>12</sup> Six weeks later, Gordon Hirabayashi refused to register for evacuation, stating, “Over sixty percent [of Japanese Americans] are American citizens; [yet their rights] are denied on a wholesale scale without due process of law and civil liberties which are theirs... I consider it my duty to maintain the democratic standards for which this nation lives. Therefore, I must refuse this order for evacuation.”<sup>13</sup> Both men turned themselves in voluntarily and were incarcerated. Their cases were heard by the Supreme Court on June 21, 1943. The court ruled unanimously that the military “has the legal right to discriminate against certain groups of citizens based on their ethnic background.” The Court did not rule on the constitutionality of internment.

A third case that came before the Supreme Court concerned Fred Korematsu, who also offered to be a test case on constitutional principle. Korematsu criticized the imprisonment of the Japanese Americans as people who had not been given a fair trial to defend their loyalty in a

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<sup>11</sup>Taylor, 125; Conner, 95;

<sup>12</sup> Peter Irons, *Justice at War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983),84; Wilson and Hosokawa, 250.

<sup>13</sup>Irons, 88.



democratic way.<sup>14</sup> His case was heard October 11 and 12, 1944. This time the Court was split 6 to 3. Justices Owen J. Roberts, Frank Murphy, and Robert H. Jackson determined that Korematsu's constitutional rights had been violated and that the court's majority endorsed the principle of racial discrimination in an emergency. Justice Murphy opined that racial discrimination "in any form and in any degree has no justifiable part whatsoever in our democratic way of life."<sup>15</sup> He also stated in his opinion, "The broad provisions of the Bill of Rights...are not suspended by the mere existence of a state of war...Distinctions based on color and ancestry are utterly inconsistent with our traditions and ideals...It bears a melancholy resemblance to the treatment accorded to members of the Jewish race in Germany."<sup>16</sup>

The final and most important case involved Mitsuye Endo, interned at Tule Lake, California, and Topaz, Utah. In her legal brief, Endo maintained that once her loyalty had been established, she could no longer be held a prisoner of the internment camps. The Court unanimously agreed. She was free to go anywhere in the United States, even the West Coast. Her case helped speed the closure of the internment camps.<sup>17</sup>

Another group of Nisei who resisted government internment on constitutional grounds were 315 Nisei who refused to be drafted into the military unless their citizenship rights were restored and their families allowed to leave the camps; of these resisters 267 were convicted. All resisters were later pardoned by President Truman in 1947. U. S. district court judge Louis Goodman, who heard and dismissed indictments against twenty-seven resisters, in the *Abo v. Williams* and the *Abo v. Clark* cases, stated, "It is shocking to the conscience that an American

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<sup>14</sup>Irons, 99.

<sup>15</sup>Wilson and Hosokawa, 254; Howard Ball, "Judicial Parsimony and Military Necessity Disinterred: A Reexamination of the Japanese Exclusion Cases, 1943-44," in *Japanese Americans: From Relocation to Redress*, ed. Roger Daniels, Sandra C. Taylor, and Harry H. L. Kitano (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 182.

<sup>16</sup> Lt. Col. Christopher T. Hiroto, "The Evacuation and Relocation of the West Coast Japanese during World War II – How It Happened!" (Study Project, U. S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PZ, 1991), 80.

<sup>17</sup>Ball, 181.

citizen be confined on the grounds of disloyalty and then, while under duress and restraint, be compelled to serve in the armed forces to be prosecuted for not yielding to such compulsion.”<sup>18</sup>

After the war, important individuals began to acknowledge the constitutional injustices done to the Nisei during the war. Chief Justice Earl Warren, the California Attorney General who had advocated strongly for internment, stated, “I have since deeply regretted the removal order and my own testimony advocating it, because it was not in keeping with our American concept of freedom and the rights of citizens.”<sup>19</sup> In 1953, Fletcher Bowron, mayor of Los Angeles during the war, commented before a congressional committee, “I know of the hysteria, the wild rumors, the reports, that pervaded the atmosphere and worried a great many of us in responsible positions...I realize that great injustices were done...I thought it was the right thing to do at the time; in light of after events, I think it was wrong...”<sup>20</sup>

On February 19, 1976, the anniversary of E.O. 9066, President Ford issued an official proclamation apologizing for the internment of the Japanese Americans and officially terminating E. O. 9066, acknowledging that “we have learned from the tragedy of that long-ago experience forever to treasure liberty and justice for each individual American...”<sup>21</sup> In 1982, the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians established that the E. O. 9066 was not justified by military necessity but was driven by “race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership,”<sup>22</sup> but it also reiterated what Ken and Alice Takemoto stated at the beginning of this paper, that one of America’s strengths is her ability to admit mistakes and

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<sup>18</sup>Tetsuden Kashima, *Judgment without Trial: Japanese American Internment during World War II* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003),173-174; Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, *Personal Justice Denied* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1982), 246-247.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid, 18.

<sup>20</sup>Hiroto, 25.

<sup>21</sup>President Gerald R. Ford, “Proclamation 4417 Confirming the Termination of Executive Order Authorizing Japanese-American Internment during World War II,” February 19, 1976. Accessed March 31, 2017, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/speeches/760111p.htm>

<sup>22</sup>Commission of Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, 18.

apologize for them.<sup>23</sup> This ability is rooted in the belief that individuals have rights, rights given them by God, rights that government is to protect.

What happened to the Nisei may be seen as a failure of democracy due to supposed military emergencies, racial prejudice, war hysteria, and both military and political leadership failure, but the more important story is that democracy ultimately triumphed.<sup>24</sup> The fact that there were those in the academic community, the church communities, and the Nisei themselves willing to voice constitutional concerns, which eventually led to the acknowledgment of wrongdoing and redress of grievances, demonstrates the transcendence and triumph of our democratic ideals as stated in the Declaration of Independence.

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<sup>23</sup>Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, part 2, 7.

<sup>24</sup>James McDonald, "Democratic Failure and Emergencies: Myth or Reality?" *Virginia Law Review* 93 (October 22, 2007): 1786, 1788.

