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The American Public's Reaction to the Japanese American Internment

NICHOLAS TAYLOR*

The American public voices its concerns over fundamental issues, like the justice system, that pertain to the US Constitution. The American public in World War II, however, faced many challenges in voicing its concerns over the Japanese American internment due to the dominance of racism at the time. This paper explores the background of Executive Order 9066, the document that provoked mass evacuation, in order to understand why President Franklin D. Roosevelt enforced it and why most people, particularly on the West Coast, advocated for Japanese American evacuation. More fundamentally, the bulk of the paper centers on the argument that different individuals and groups broke their silence on the matter. They reminded other people of the importance of democracy during wartime as it applied to every Japanese American citizen as well as Japanese immigrants who were trying to achieve the American Dream.

When people attending school or visiting historic sites today first begin to learn about the Japanese American internment, it is obvious that they view the evacuation as morally wrong. However, the way that Americans during World War II viewed the Japanese American internment was divisive. A poll from the American Institute of Public Opinion in March 1942 shows that 93 percent of Americans were in favor of the removal of Japanese immigrants and 59 percent supported the removal of Japanese American citizens. Only 1 percent opposed the internment of Japanese immigrants, while 25 percent opposed the internment of Japanese American citizens.¹ While most Americans did not generally recognize Japanese American citizens and aliens as ordinary people, others from the 1 percent and the 25 percent shed some light on the truth of the situation involving the evacuees. Those people, who were well ahead of their time, believed that the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt did not enact Executive Order 9066 because of “military necessity,” as they called it. In fact, they believed it was the public’s overall lack of acceptance of Japanese Americans that caused the government to evacuate the entire Japanese population on the West Coast while they disregarded the facts.

The reality was that many Caucasian Americans grievously had mistreated people of Japanese descent before evacuation, which is at odds with the fact that this set of individuals clearly did not pose a threat or do any harm to the country domestically. This is especially true compared to German immigrants, who actually posed a threat to national security with the rise of the German American Bund, a pro-Nazi organization of around 40,000 people of German descent.² Still, even before the Japanese military bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the government was skeptical of the loyalty of Japanese Americans.³ In the fall of 1941, the Alien Divisions of the Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation created a list of alien groups,

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¹“Public Opinion Poll on Japanese Internment,” *Americans and the Holocaust*, <https://exhibitions.ushmm.org/americans-and-the-holocaust/main/japanese-american-internment>.

²Roger Daniels. *Prisoners Without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 24.

³Ibid., 24-25.

including West Coast Japanese, who, they believed, could threaten national security.⁴ They proposed that they should place them in internment camps if the US went to war with their ancestral countries.⁵ Journalist John Franklin Carter put together an intelligence unit of the Office of Strategic Services, which is now the Central Intelligence Agency, to investigate the loyalty of aliens in the United States.⁶

Carter reported businessman Curtis L. Munson's findings about the Japanese Americans to President Franklin Roosevelt.⁷ According to Munson, an "overwhelming" majority of the Nikkei were loyal to the United States and they had no intention to harm the country.⁸ Additionally, US Naval Intelligence Officer Kenneth D. Ringle, who was fluent in the Japanese language, clarified that more than 90 percent of the Nisei, the second generation of Japanese Americans, and 75 percent of the Issei, the first generation of Japanese immigrants, had no loyalty to the country of Japan.⁹ Ringle eventually went on to disagree with the Japanese American evacuation once FDR signed Executive Order 9066. He argued that "there was never a shred of evidence found of sabotage, subversive acts, spying, or fifth column activity on the part of the Nisei or long-time local residents" following his "careful investigations on both the West Coast and Hawaii."¹⁰ Munson and Ringle's findings provided real evidence regarding the Japanese Americans' overall behavior towards the United States.

Despite factual evidence that the majority of Japanese Americans did not commit any sabotage on the West Coast, there were still problems that remained in the minds of government officials that were eventually passed on to the American public. Similar to how some Americans are currently dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, one major factor led to the decision to relocate Japanese Americans to internment camps, and that was hysteria. As the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and America entered the war, Americans became extremely worried. However, it was not until the spread of "fake news" from US Army Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, commander of the Western Defense Command, that Americans incomprehensibly put the blame on Japanese Americans.¹¹ DeWitt expressed anti-Japanese sentiments by stating "a Jap is a Jap. It makes no difference whether he is an American citizen or not. I don't want any of them."¹² In a phone call with US Army Major Karl Bendetsen on January 24, 1942, DeWitt said he believed that Japanese Americans corresponded with the Japanese Navy to commence the Pearl Harbor attack.¹³ He, therefore, proposed the evacuation of Japanese Americans due to his own belief that Japanese Americans posed a security threat to the United States.¹⁴ Without any legitimate information, DeWitt's belief undoubtedly sparked public hysteria amongst West Coast residents as well as government officials.¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, historians question DeWitt's judgement and his ignorance of Japanese Americans. According to historian and scholar Tetsuden Kashima, DeWitt was "not

⁴Ibid., 24.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., 25.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., 26.

¹¹Ibid., 36-37.

¹²David M. Kennedy, *The American People in World War II: Freedom From Fear Part Two* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 327.

¹³Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial*, 36.

¹⁴Ibid., 37.

¹⁵Dillon S. Myer, *Uprooted Americans: The Japanese Americans and the War Relocation Authority during World War II* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1971), 13-14.

an analyst or careful thinker who sought balanced judgements of the risks before him,” and he “did little to calm the fears of West Coast people.”¹⁶

Informed by DeWitt’s lies to the public, many Americans believed his words rather than fact-checking him as people often do today with politicians and military leaders. Among the majority of Americans who were extremely averse to hosting Japanese citizens, Earl Warren, then Attorney General of California, defended DeWitt’s proposal. Warren argued that the fact that there were no incidents before the attack on Pearl Harbor meant that Americans were “being lulled into a false sense of security” and that “our day of reckoning is bound to come.”¹⁷ This was obviously a sign of hysteria and hatred towards Japanese Americans in the United States.

DeWitt’s proposal caught the attention of Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, who not only advocated for Japanese American evacuation, but also was responsible for carrying out the executive order following its approval. Roosevelt told Stimson to “be as reasonable as you can” when carrying out the evacuation.¹⁸ Like DeWitt, Stimson ignored the real facts. He, especially, did not listen to the concerns of his top military advisors from the Army and Navy Departments, for they believed that “there was no possibility of invasion [of the West Coast]” by the Japanese, and it was not necessary to carry out evacuation orders.¹⁹

Members of FDR’s staff were not entirely in favor of Japanese American removal. US Attorney General Francis Biddle and FBI Chief J. Edgar Hoover both expressed concerns regarding the evacuation.²⁰ Biddle, as with the entire Justice Department, did not find the evacuation to be necessary. He wrote a memorandum to FDR on February 17, 1942, regarding his concerns for the California economy as well as the behavior of West Coast residents. While he reluctantly agreed that the War Department was to carry out evacuation orders for the soon-to-be evacuees, Biddle argued that the evacuation “would materially disrupt agricultural production in which they play a large part” and that “the farm labor” was “so limited that they could not be quickly replaced.”²¹ He also added that “it is extremely dangerous for the columnists. . . to suggest that an attack on the West Coast and planned sabotage is imminent when the military authorities and the FBI have indicated that this is not fact.”²² Hoover backed Biddle’s argument, saying that “the necessity for mass evacuation is based primarily upon public and political pressure than on factual data.”²³ Despite warnings from Hoover and Biddle, Roosevelt did not heed their advice, and portions of the public soon began to question the government’s handling of the evacuation.

Indeed, FDR was under pressure when he made the decision to evacuate thousands of Japanese Americans, both citizens and aliens alike. The advice he received from his cabinet and other executive officials was “conflicting.”²⁴ While he was not reluctant to approve the unethical executive order, he was not resolute either. He understood the ramifications that the evacuation order would have on Japanese residents and the question about the constitutionality of the issue, but he never considered civil rights as the primary concern for America at the time.²⁵ Unquestionably, Roosevelt focused more on the war effort above everything else. According to

¹⁶Tetsuden Kashima, *Personal Justice Denied: Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 64.

¹⁷Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial*, 37.

¹⁸Bill Hosokawa, *Nisei: The Quiet American* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1969), 274-275.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 275.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 276-277.

²¹Memorandum from Francis Biddle to Franklin D. Roosevelt, February 17, 1942, in Hosokawa, *Nisei*, 277.

²²*Ibid.*, 278.

²³Hosokawa, *Nisei*, 276.

²⁴Megan M. Foster, “Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Role in Japanese American Internment: Exploring the Interaction of International Security and Civil Liberties” (BA thesis, Pennsylvania State University, 2012), i.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 58-59.

FDR scholar Greg Robinson, Roosevelt's approval of the evacuation order was a "failure" that proved to be "a lack of compassion, or more precisely, of empathy" and that his decision "was not of malice but indifference."²⁶

FDR's approval of the evacuation order was, indeed, a failure, and at least part of the public was profoundly disappointed in his decision. On February 19, 1942, "another day that will live in infamy" in the minds of Japanese Americans, President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066. This order gave Secretary of War Henry Stimson the authority to establish military areas on the West Coast and remove 120,000 people of Japanese descent from those districts.²⁷ About 60 percent of the affected people were those of the Nisei generation, the first Japanese Americans born in the United States whose Fourteenth Amendment rights the government violated.²⁸ While the public opinion poll from March 1942 seems to suggest that a majority of Americans supported the evacuation, there were groups and individuals who opposed the order.

Indeed, a vast majority of West Coast residents were in favor of Japanese removal given their anti-Japanese sentiments and the fact that they wanted to segregate from Japanese residents. There were also some competing white farmers who hoped to profit by buying their property at fire-sale prices. Their response to Roosevelt's executive order was filled with praise and relief when West Coast newspapers announced the relocation of Japanese Americans.²⁹ Many groups on the West Coast, such as the California Farm Bureau Federation and the Western Growers Protection Association, believed that the removal would lead to the reduction of economic competition between Japanese and white residents.³⁰ This belief, however, contradicts Biddle's above argument that the evacuation was going to cause a labor shortage, as Japanese American farmers were assets to the agricultural economy in California.

From the perspectives of many evacuation supporters, the executive order did not completely fulfill their expectations. On May 9, 1942, Lawrence Davies, a columnist for the *New York Times*, had mixed views on the evacuation. He reported an incident in the Salinas Valley where the US military temporarily settled Japanese Americans into an assembly center near white residents' houses before they shipped them to permanent camps. One Salinas Valley resident, who felt that the government was going back on its word, shouted in anguish, "Why do they have to put the Japs right here? We thought we were going to get rid of them for good; now we find they're bringing them in from other places and dumping them on us."³¹ He believed that so long as the evacuation was done humanely, democracy was "not inert" in retaining the rights of Japanese Americans.³² Despite the obvious wrongdoing of the US military by unconstitutionally relocating thousands of Japanese residents from the West Coast, Davies's argument indicates that Japan's view of the US's handling of the Nikkei was meant to be different than the US's view of Germany's handling of the Jews in Europe.

Besides the *New York Times*, other newspapers across the United States reacted to the executive order as representing a defense of democracy rather than the government's mistreatment of citizens. On February 21, 1942, two days after FDR signed the executive order, the *Washington Post* carried a story with the subtitle "Nisei Reaffirm Their Loyalty." The article briefly stated that a group of Nisei women gathered to sign a pledge of their loyalty to the United States and that

²⁶Greg Robinson, *By the Order of the President: FDR and the Internment of Japanese Americans* (Harvard University Press, 2003), 123.

²⁷Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial*, 46.

²⁸Ibid., 46.

²⁹Robinson, *By the Order of the President*, 125.

³⁰Kashima, *Personal Justice Denied*, 99.

³¹Lawrence E. Davies, "West Coast Expects Bombing," *New York Times*, May 20, 1942, E8.

³²Ibid., E8.

they devoted themselves and their “all-out energy to defeat Japan and the Axis.”³³ The article suggested to the public that the Japanese Americans were just as loyal and supportive of the war effort as other Americans, which indicated that the order to evacuate them from the West Coast was not the answer.

Other columnists continued to raise issues with the Japanese American evacuation. Ernest L. Lindley, a columnist for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* in Richmond, Virginia, also had mixed thoughts. While he agreed that the evacuation order was necessary for the sake of national security, he added that it was “a confession of ignorance.”³⁴ He argued that both the Nisei and the Sansei, also known as third-generation Japanese Americans, “have been imbued with a real sense of devotion to this country and its institutions.”³⁵ This was yet another piece that showed the public’s recognition that Japanese Americans were not terrorists, even if they believed the evacuation was mandatory because of “military necessity.”

Despite the public’s mixed response to the Japanese American evacuation, many different organizations and groups across the country took a more radical approach. However, one cannot understand their progressive arguments without understanding the Japanese Americans’ own reaction to the executive order. To many Japanese Americans during that time, the news of the executive order left them with shock and devastation. Take, for example, *Star Trek* actor George Takei, a then five-year-old boy who remembers seeing the look in his mother’s eyes as they filled with tears when the news of the executive order came to her. He stated, “I will never be able to forget that scene. . . . [I]t is burned into my memory.”³⁶ The conflicted emotions of Japanese Americans like Takei’s mother justified their feelings of betrayal by the government and why many Americans across the country were so eager to defend their civil liberties.

The poor conditions that existed in the relocation camps is critical to the response of both Japanese Americans and those outside of that ethnic group. Upon move-in to the relocation camps, many Japanese American evacuees lived in extremely poor conditions that caused further uncertainty. When Takei and his family first evacuated along with thousands of evacuees, the military forced them to sleep in horse stalls. Takei described the moment he and his family walked into the horse stall: “As a kid, I couldn’t grasp the injustice of the situation.”³⁷ To Takei’s parents, who clearly remembered the circumstances of the camps, “it was a devastating blow. They had worked so hard to buy a two-bedroom house and raise a family in Los Angeles. Now we were crammed into a single, smelly horse stall. It was a degrading, humiliating, painful experience.”³⁸

The inhospitable environments in which the camps were located also contributed to the Japanese American sense of despair. Yuri Kochiyama, a Nisei woman, stated that the camps were “in mountainous areas, deserts, and swamplands.”³⁹ They were “not the nicest kinds of places for family life” and they were “climatically. . . rougher than anything” that she experienced living in California.⁴⁰ Poor living conditions had a negative impact on interned Japanese Americans. That negative impact motivated other minority groups and portions of the public to come to their defense and remind people of the Japanese Americans’ rights under the Constitution.

³³“Nisei Reaffirm Their Loyalty,” *Washington Post*, February 21, 1942, 4.

³⁴Ernest L. Lindley, “On Capitol Hill,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, March 12, 1942, 11.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶George Takei, Justin Eisinger, Steven Scott, and Harmony Becker, *They Called Us Enemy* (Marietta: Top Shelf Productions, 2019), 8-9.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 32.

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹Yuri Kochiyama, *Fishmerchant’s Daughter: An Oral History, Vol. 1* (Community Documentation Workshop, 1981), 14.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

Despite their misgivings, most Japanese American residents followed through with the executive order without any form of resistance. The Tolson Committee hearings, which directly responded to FDR's executive order, called on members of the Japanese American Citizens League to testify, including its national secretary, Mike Masaoka.⁴¹ Although they were "willing to prove loyalty by making sacrifices," Masaoka expressed concerns of his own by arguing that Japanese Americans "had every right to protest" despite the executive order's intended purpose.⁴² The word "sacrifices" meant for Japanese Americans to voluntarily give up their homes and follow the government's orders to show their loyalty despite their First Amendment rights. Only a few Japanese Americans made their own "sacrifices" to follow something they believed as more superior than the executive order: the Constitution.

Most Japanese Americans did, indeed, respond to the executive order by acceding to it.⁴³ However, there were a handful of them who felt strongly opposed to it to the point that they courageously defied the order and voiced Japanese Americans' need for full recognition as residents of America. Gordon Hirabayashi, a then twenty-four-year-old Nisei student from the University of Washington, was among the first to do so.⁴⁴ Instead of getting away with a violation he knew he committed, he appeared before the FBI office in Seattle and turned himself in to the authorities willingly. Many newspapers across the country described him as a "conscientious objector" for sacrificing himself for the Constitution.⁴⁵ Hirabayashi used his Christian beliefs as his motivation for objecting to the order. During that time, he wholeheartedly argued in his defense:

Since childhood I have been in contact with the personality of Jesus. This personality became more vivid, more real, and more meaningful with each significant experience. If I were to register and cooperate under those circumstances, I would be giving helpless consent to the denial of practically all the things which gives me incentive to live. I must maintain my Christian principles. I consider it my duty to maintain the democratic ideals for [which] this nation stands. Therefore, I must refuse this order for evacuation.⁴⁶

Whether they objected to the order or they simply went along with it, Japanese Americans were not alone in defending their civil liberties. Many liberals, in particular, despised the internment. Among many radical liberals who opposed the executive order was journalist Galen M. Fisher. He described FDR's reason for evacuation as a "blanket phrase" when the latter referred to "military necessity."⁴⁷ In Fisher's view, given the proven loyalty of most Japanese Americans, there was no justification to remove them. The government's action was illegitimate because they chose to relieve the public from "fear of sabotage" rather than rely on actual facts.⁴⁸ It was unfortunate, yet unsurprising, that the West Coast residents under John DeWitt's influence did not care about factual information, but instead chose prejudice over acceptance of Japanese Americans.

Carey McWilliams, an author and journalist for the *New Republic*, was also an outspoken advocate who, like Fisher, criticized the government's actions. In his 1944 book, *Prejudice*, he

⁴¹"800 West Coast Japanese Go to Enemy Camps," *New York Times*, February 24, 1942, 11.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Diane Garey, *Defending Everybody: A History of the ACLU* (New York: TV Books, 1998), 120.

⁴⁴Ibid., 122.

⁴⁵"Conscientious Objector to Evacuation Held," *Great Falls Tribune*, May 20, 1942, 10.

⁴⁶ACLU Press Service, "A.C.L.U. to Test West Coast Evacuation Order," June 1942, American Civil Liberties Union Papers, 2356, Reel 203, Series 1, ACLU Subgroup 1, Roger Baldwin Years Microfilm 1912-50, Correspondence – Federal Department, Princeton University Library Special Collections, Mudd Library, Princeton, NJ.

⁴⁷Galen M. Fisher, "Japanese Evacuation from the Pacific Coast," *Far Eastern Survey* 11 (June 29, 1942): 146.

⁴⁸Ibid.

described the Pearl Harbor attack as “an earthquake that sent tremors throughout the entire Pacific Coast” and called Japanese Americans “the victims of this social earthquake.”⁴⁹ The “earthquake” that McWilliams referred to was the war hysteria among white Pacific Coast residents who used Japanese Americans as scapegoats. Given his argument on the Pearl Harbor attack and its relevance to the mistreatment of Japanese Americans, McWilliams felt that there were flaws in FDR’s executive order. In a March 2, 1942, magazine article, he proposed a fair congressional committee be established to investigate the evacuation in California, which he described as “a complicated situation.”⁵⁰ He was more afraid that the white West Coast residents “might go berserk and mob the Japanese population” than of the Nikkei population itself if an enemy attack took place there.⁵¹ Similar to Attorney General Biddle’s argument, he expressed concern about the economic consequences of the internment. More specifically, he argued that a forced evacuation of thousands of Japanese Americans, many of whom were farmers, would cause a disruption in California’s surplus economy by decreasing the supply in the agricultural industry.⁵² Although he believed that Californian farmers in 1942 would “face a close balance of supply and demand for farm labor” for their own benefit, he argued that Japanese American farmers would face an even harsher labor environment in the internment camps.⁵³

If the moral efforts of progressive liberals like Galen Fisher and Carey McWilliams were not strong enough, then Norman Thomas, a member of the Socialist Party of America, took an even more radical stance. Not only did he agitate against the executive order, but also against those who either wanted to compromise or were not radical enough in their opposition to evacuation. In early March 1942, he described FDR’s executive order as “the worst plot” and “the establishment of military despotism.”⁵⁴ In this case, Thomas compared FDR’s controversial decision to Hitler’s totalitarian power in Europe and his persecution of Jews because of their non-Aryan race. He also accused the American Civil Liberties Union of being too soft in its opposition to the evacuation, calling it a “dereliction of duty” to accept FDR’s executive order as being “within the proper limits of the President’s war powers.”⁵⁵ While reluctantly accepting the internment for what it was, he co-led the Post-War World Council with pacifist Oswald Villard to entice hundreds of liberals and socialists to join his organization in order to end the mistreatment of Japanese Americans in internment camps.⁵⁶ It was movements like Thomas’s Post-War World Council that attempted to bring likeminded liberals and evacuation oppositionists together to address the veracity of the executive order. Unfortunately, the public did not seem supportive to his cause.⁵⁷

Despite Thomas’s opinion, the ACLU did, in fact, contest FDR’s executive order. The ACLU played an essential role regarding the response to the Japanese American removal because its sole mission was to protect the rights of individuals, including Japanese Americans, in order to make the Constitution relevant.⁵⁸ On March 6, 1942, ACLU President Roger Baldwin wrote a letter to President Roosevelt out of concern that the evacuation order was “open to grave question on constitutional grounds by depriving American citizens of their liberty and use of

⁴⁹Carey McWilliams, *Prejudice: Japanese Americans: Symbols of Racial Intolerance* (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1944), 106.

⁵⁰Carey McWilliams, “California and the Japanese,” *New Republic*, March 2, 1942, 297.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 296.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 297.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 296-297.

⁵⁴Robert Shaffer “Cracks in the Consensus,” *Radical History Review* 72 (1998): 95.

⁵⁵Michi Weglyn, *Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America’s Concentration Camps* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1976), 111.

⁵⁶Shaffer, “Cracks in the Consensus,” 95-96.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 96.

⁵⁸Garey, *Defending Everybody*, 119.

their property without due process of law.”⁵⁹ Baldwin’s argument refers to the violation of the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments of the Constitution, both of which grant citizens the right to due process, including the Japanese Americans born in the United States. He also believed that the military’s authority to “remove vast populations from areas” that were “declared to be defense zones” against the Japanese military was “unchecked.”⁶⁰ If the government removed Japanese residents from the so-called “defense zones” without regard to their constitutional rights, it opened the door to other violations of civil liberties justified by the war.

In the same letter to FDR, Baldwin not only expressed the ACLU’s concerns, but he also strongly suggested the President revise the executive order, acknowledging the Constitution’s role and importance. As part of his proposal, he argued that loyal Nisei Americans should remain on the West Coast and that the military should only evacuate them if there was proof that they attempted sabotage.⁶¹ He believed that “considerations both of public policy and of law” made it necessary that “the rights of these citizens which are equal with those of other American citizens should be given every possible protection.”⁶² His letter was not enough for FDR to change his mind on the matter immediately. Baldwin knew that FDR struggled to keep faith with the Constitution and carry out the wishes of the majority of Americans.

Despite efforts to convince FDR to release Japanese Americans from the internment camps, Baldwin went so far as to challenge the legality of the evacuation in court.⁶³ Unfortunately, the ACLU was often not successful in defending their cases of Japanese Americans who violated the evacuation order. In the case of Gordon Hirabayashi, Baldwin arranged with Mary Farquharson to be Hirabayashi’s attorney as Farquharson had worked with Quakers like Hirabayashi prior to the case.⁶⁴ Funding issues within the board, in addition to Baldwin’s continuing efforts to entice FDR to revise the order, prevented them from immediately advancing forward.⁶⁵

Despite trying to maintain liberty when the question of the Constitution and Japanese Americans came to mind, Baldwin was stuck in the middle of a divided ACLU. Some ACLU members, such as Norman Thomas, John Haynes Holmes, and Arthur Garfield Hays, worked with Baldwin to challenge the constitutionality of the executive order, while other members “were blindly loyal to Roosevelt.”⁶⁶ Among those who opposed the ACLU’s involvement, one member compared the Japanese American internment to “a public health quarantine in measles.”⁶⁷ This shows that 1942 proved to be a challenging year for those like the ACLU and liberals outside their organization who fought the Japanese American evacuation from the Pacific Coast.

Although Baldwin and many ACLU members ultimately accepted the evacuation, it does not mean that they stopped believing in the constitutional rights of Japanese Americans. In the latter half of 1942, some senior members of the ACLU exchanged letters with Dillon S. Myer, the head of the War Relocation Authority at the time, in which they discussed ways to reform regulations in order to improve the treatment of evacuees. When a letter from Myer came to them communicating that the military had, in fact, begun to release certain Japanese Americans

⁵⁹Roger Baldwin to Franklin D. Roosevelt, March 18, 1942. American Civil Liberties Union Papers, 2356, Reel 203, Series 1, ACLU Subgroup 1, Roger Baldwin Years Microfilm 1912-50, Correspondence – Federal Department, Princeton University Library Special Collections, Mudd Library, Princeton, NJ.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Garey, *Defending Everybody*, 120.

⁶⁴Ibid., 122.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid., 123.

⁶⁷Ibid.

from internment camps, the ACLU responded with satisfaction.⁶⁸ The ACLU also expressed gratitude in a sense that the military did not separate Nisei children from their immigrant parents knowing that it could have caused significant outrage from internees.⁶⁹ Although it took the government almost four years to realize what the ACLU meant, the latter's role in maintaining the civil liberties of Japanese Americans ignited other organizations and minority groups to challenge the executive order and the overall internment. To that extent, the ACLU helped voice their concerns not just throughout 1942, but during the entire war as well.

Not only did political groups express their concerns about the executive order, but also many Christian communities on the West Coast in accordance with their moral and pacifist beliefs. When FDR enforced the executive order in February 1942, many Christians were worried that the incarceration would affect America's relationship with other countries, particularly the ones in Asia. They felt that the internment "would irreparably damage foreign missions" and that it would also ruin "America's chance to establish global peace by destabilizing domestic race relations and damaging diplomatic ties with Asian nations."⁷⁰ Although that may not have been the case realistically, the internment could have given the United States a bad reputation. This especially would have been true if the perception of other nations was that the treatment of Japanese Americans was as bad as Adolf Hitler's treatment of European Jews, which was obviously different in reality.

Many Christian leaders on the West Coast also played a role in assisting the already-interned Japanese Americans. Several of them moved to Southern Idaho, where one of the internment camps was located, to collaborate with Japanese Christian ministers and "maintain pastoral care."⁷¹ Both white and Japanese Christian leaders collaborated together to end the internment and integrate the Nikkei into white church communities to "strengthen the integrity of American Christianity" and "reduce national racial tensions."⁷² Unfortunately, the goal to assimilate Japanese Americans into white churches failed as many white and Nikkei congregants opposed their efforts.⁷³ They even went so far as to stop attending church services altogether.⁷⁴ The government had already betrayed the Nikkei, so it was understandable for them to refuse to congregate with white church communities. Besides the war effort, the failed efforts of kindhearted Christians showed that hatred and lack of acceptance of different racial groups dominated the American home front.

The *Christian Century*, a religious magazine, also played a more radical role in their opposition to the removal of Japanese Americans. Its editors posed fundamental questions about the Japanese American removal in an effort to capture the public's attention. Like the ACLU, the editors saw internment as an infringement on democratic principles by the government. However, they also pointed out Christian solutions. In an article the *Christian Century* published in June 1942, they argued that the evacuation policy was "headed in the wrong direction" and that all churches should take an active role "to guard against further injustice" to Japanese Americans.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the magazine added that FDR and others responsible for the evacuation order should be like men

⁶⁸Roger N. Baldwin, Arthur Garfield Hays, and John Haynes Holmes to Dillon S. Myer. October 8, 1942. American Civil Liberties Union Papers, 2356, Reel 203, Series 1, ACLU Subgroup 1, Roger Baldwin Years Microfilm 1912-50, Correspondence – Federal Department, Princeton University Library Special Collections, Mudd Library, Princeton, NJ.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Anne Blankenship, "Religion and Japanese American Incarceration," *Religion Compass* 8 (2014): 318.

⁷¹Ibid., 319.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Quintus Quiz, "Justice for the Evacuees," *Christian Century*, June 10, 1942, 751-752.

who “declare their mistake as boldly and as widely as they declared their first faith.”⁷⁶ None of those men saw it that way.

Minority groups, more specifically African Americans and Jewish Americans, identified more personally with the plight of Japanese Americans. Knowing about their negative feelings towards the executive order, ACLU President Roger Baldwin argued that those groups had “a firm sense of security that in fighting for the United States” they were “fighting for their own future security.”⁷⁷ That was certainly the case for African Americans, who believed that democracy and the war effort were equally important. The *Chicago Defender*, an African American newspaper, argued that clearly the military interned Japanese Americans in internment camps for crimes they did not commit, other than their appearance.⁷⁸ From their perspective, the same as with other groups that actually looked into the facts behind the evacuation, the interment was “the result of pure racialism.”⁷⁹

The news of what was happening to Japanese Americans in the internment camps raised concerns for African American communities as they were afraid that they, too, might suffer the same fate.⁸⁰ George Schuyler, an African American writer for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, argued that “it [would] be easy to denationalize millions of Afro-American citizens,” so in that case, he added that “we must champion their cause as ours.”⁸¹ This was a strategy to unify African Americans and other minorities to face the already undemocratic United States.⁸² Some anti-Japanese groups adhered to the executive order so well because they aimed to deprive minorities of their rights as well. Schuyler also believed that the Native Sons of the Golden West, whose extremely fascist views were similar to the Ku Klux Klan and the German American Bund, aimed to remove Japanese Americans from the West Coast. One such case was when they denied Japanese Americans and other minority citizens access to vote, a violation of the First and Fifteenth Amendments.⁸³ To African Americans, unity with Japanese Americans was the key to achieve equality in a society that routinely trampled on the rights of people of color.

African American communities, particularly those in Baltimore, also used their Christian beliefs to argue against removal. Margaret Lewis, a black female editor of the newspaper the *Afro-American*, argued in response to the internment, “The principles of our democracy is founded – tolerance, liberty, the respecting of the human personality regardless of race, creed, or color, even though not at all times observed – is the ideal. There could be nothing more Christian than the ideal.”⁸⁴ The “ideal” was a reminder that they, too, believed that nothing was more important than the Constitution, a document that established the foundations of democracy. Lewis even added that the terrible conditions in the camps that Japanese Americans endured was un-Christian. She described them as “inadequate,” “crowded,” and “unbearable” during the summer months due to the exhaustive heat.⁸⁵ African Americans related the Japanese American experiences to their own mistreatment by higher officials and violations of their political, social, and economic rights.

⁷⁶Ibid., 752.

⁷⁷“WRA Scores Japanese Segregation, Discrimination,” 1942, American Civil Liberties Union Papers, 2356, Reel 203, Series 1, ACLU Subgroup 1, Roger Baldwin Years Microfilm 1912-50, Correspondence – Federal Department, Princeton University Library Special Collections, Mudd Library, Princeton, NJ.

⁷⁸“The Bill of Rights and Japanese Americans,” *Chicago Defender*, April 22, 1944, 12.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰George S. Schuyler, “VIEWS and Reviews,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 29, 1943, 13.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Margaret Lewis, “Along the Kings Highway,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 26, 1942, 10.

⁸⁵Ibid.

Although African Americans did receive some work benefits from the Fair Employment Practice Committee in 1941, their treatment by whites was not significantly different from Japanese Americans. In fact, some African Americans on the West Coast were even at risk of following the same fate as Japanese Americans, even if the evacuation did not directly apply to them. If a non-Japanese person was married to a Japanese person, then the former, too, faced internment, especially if it was an African American or Hispanic spouse. Charles Williams, an African American photographer for a local Los Angeles newspaper, nearly faced internment because he married a Nisei woman.⁸⁶ When the evacuation commenced, Williams and his wife managed to do “the smart but perfectly legal thing” by escaping the West Coast and migrating to Chicago, where they began a new life.⁸⁷ While very few African American newspapers, such as the *New Journal and Guide* based in Norfolk, Virginia, reported this incident, it was still important news for African American communities. Charles Williams’s story justifies the reason many African Americans cared for defending Japanese American rights. They praised Williams for his bravery in helping himself and his wife leave the area without military supervision. If anything, their escape for freedom from military authorities was almost comparable to when Harriet Tubman led slaves to freedom on the Underground Railroad in the mid-nineteenth century.

African Americans were not the only minority group to voice their opinion against the Japanese American internment. Jewish Americans on the West Coast also responded with concern to the treatment of Japanese Americans. In fact, Jewish and Japanese Americans both suffered from systematic racism, although it was possible for Jews to pass as gentiles. Similar to African Americans, Jewish Americans identified with Asian Americans’ long-standing struggle for equality. In the late 1930s, attacks on Jews increased, and well-known public officials like Charles Lindbergh and Father Coughlin helped legitimize antisemitism in the United States.⁸⁸

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, some Jews on the West Coast worried about the fate of Japanese Americans. The day after the attack, two rabbis, Samuel Koch of Seattle, Washington, and Irving Reichert of San Francisco, California, warned the public to not panic as they expressed concerns with white West Coast residents’ bitter attention toward Japanese Americans.⁸⁹ Koch argued that “it is not unlikely that hotheads will endeavor to embarrass them in various ways” despite the fact that Japanese Americans had no role “in the folly of Japan.”⁹⁰ Reichert expressed similar concerns, and he argued, “we must not commit the unpardonable offense of visiting upon the heads of the innocent” and that “we Jews ought to be among the first to cry down the unjust persecution of the foreign-born in our midst whose patriotism is equal to ours.”⁹¹ Reichert and Koch’s arguments showed that Jewish leaders on the West Coast were wise enough to show Americans that hysteria should not solve the problem with Japanese Americans and that they assumed the latter group was affiliated with the enemy because of their appearance.

The Jewish press was also critical in combating racism towards Japanese Americans. As historian Ellen M. Eisenberg argued, Jewish support and advocacy for equality were “staples” in the Jewish press on the West Coast, something that the government did not seem to fully grasp.⁹² *Scribe*, a Jewish American newspaper in Portland, Oregon, reacted negatively to FDR’s executive

⁸⁶Harry Levette, “Colored Husband Takes Nippon Wife to Chicago,” *New Journal and Guide*, May 2, 1942, B15.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Ellen M. Eisenberg, *The First to Cry Down Injustice: Western Jews and Japanese Removal during WWII* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008), 30.

⁸⁹Ibid., xi.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Ibid., xi-xii.

⁹²Ibid., 41.

order. It described supporters of the mass removal of Japanese Americans as “unthinking persons” who “forget the basic concepts of freedom for which America fights.”⁹³

The Jewish press of the Pacific Coast believed that the executive order was certainly an unthinkable act and acknowledged it violated the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution. However, unlike African Americans, Jewish Americans, as a whole, did not believe that fighting for equal rights and fair treatment for Japanese Americans was just as important as supporting the war effort. While the evacuation concerned Jewish Americans less in other parts of the United States, West Coast Jews struggled balancing their contribution to the war effort and their support for Japanese Americans’ rights.⁹⁴ Therefore, they remained mostly silent because the mass genocide that Hitler aimed toward their European counterparts prompted them to focus on the war effort in Europe.⁹⁵

Franklin Roosevelt’s executive order that led to the Japanese American internment received more mixed reactions from the public than what the March 1942 poll shows. Most Americans supported evacuation and felt relieved once it took place, while at least some important parts of American society felt that it went against democracy, something that US soldiers overseas fought for. Based on the arguments of those who opposed the evacuation, the internment had a negative effect on Japanese Americans as the government ignored their civil liberties. Japanese Americans and those who supported them during World War II knew the fundamental principles of the Constitution. Because most Americans were in favor of the evacuation, those who opposed it struggled to vocally address racism through protest. In today’s nation, racism continues to shape government policy and the ideas and actions of some Americans. People in the United States see the government separating Hispanic children from their families.⁹⁶ They see other people using racist sentiments towards those of Chinese descent because of the spread of the coronavirus.⁹⁷ It is obvious not all have learned from the mistakes that hysteria caused in World War II. The question remains whether these mistakes of today will be allowed to stand again or if benevolence can address and solve problems.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Ibid., 43.

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Olivia B. Waxman, “Family Separation is Being Compared to Japanese Internment. It Took Decades for the U.S. to Admit That Policy Was Wrong,” *Time*, June 18, 2018, <https://time.com/5314955/separation-families-japanese-internment-camps/>.

⁹⁷Allyson Chiu and Craig Timberg. “As the Coronavirus Spreads, So Does Online Racism Targeting Asians, New Research Shows,” *Washington Post*, April 8, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/04/08/coronavirus-spreads-so-does-online-racism-targeting-asians-new-research-shows/>.

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