A Tragedy of Democracy: Japanese Confinement in North America

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In the spring of 1942, a few months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor launched World War II in the Pacific, the United States Army, acting under authority granted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and confirmed by Congress, summarily rounded up the entire ethnic Japanese population living on the nation's Pacific Coast. These American citizens and longtime residents—some 112,000 men, women, and children—were packed into military holding centers for several weeks or months and then transported under armed guard to the interior of the country. There they were confined in a network of hastily built camps constructed and operated by a new federal agency, the War Relocation Authority (WRA). Although some of these inmates were able after a time to leave the camps and resettle outside the West Coast, most remained in captivity for the duration of the war.

This official action, commonly called the internment of Japanese Americans but more accurately termed their confinement, has often been referred to as the worst civil rights violation by the federal government during the twentieth century. While the government's actions did bring significant pain and hardship to those affected, there was no mass torture or starvation, and sympathetic officials and outside workers worked to ease the situation. In that sense, the suffering of the inmates in the WRA camps was not comparable with that of the masses caught in the agony of total war or targeted by tyrannical regimes—the prisoners in the Nazi death camps, for instance, or the Chinese people under the Japanese occupation—or with the historic degradation of African Americans, although such comparisons are inherently troublesome. Rather, what is particularly noteworthy about the confinement of the Issei and Nisei is its fundamentally ironic character:[i] it was an arbitrary and antidemocratic measure put into effect by a government devoted to humanitarian aims, which occurred as a part of a war the nation was waging for the survival of world freedom. Through its official actions, undertaken in the name of national security, the United States not only brought suffering to its own people but handicapped its war effort. The federal government diverted massive resources to

building and maintaining an extensive network of camps to confine an entire population of citizens and permanent residents, people whose loyalty was shaken by official actions premised on their group disloyalty.[ii] The WRA's total budget through 1945 was 162 million dollars. In addition, the army spent an estimated 75 million dollars to round up and remove Japanese Americans. In vivid contrast, the Japanese community in Hawaii, whose members were not singled out for wholesale confinement, made exemplary contributions in the form of volunteer soldiers and war workers. Finally, army officers and Justice Department officials, who sought to assure the orderly release of inmates from the camps and their scattering into communities outside, resorted to manipulating evidence and covering up information about the initial removal policy to defend it from judicial review.

The wartime confinement of Japanese Americans remains not only a critical event in the Asian American experience, but a resonant point of reference and touchstone of commemoration for diverse groups of Americans. Dozens of works have appeared describing the signing of Executive Order 9066, the presidential decree that undergirded the action, as well as the court challenges to the government's actions. An equally large literature has sprung up on the camp experience of the inmates—their family relations, their schooling, their resistance, and even their artistic creations. These works have rightly focused on Japanese Americans as important actors in shaping the nature of government policy and camp life, despite the numerous limitations on their freedom and the economic and psychological burdens they faced as a result of confinement. The inmates helped staff and operate schools, churches, hospitals, and cooperative stores. In conjunction with camp administrators, and sometimes in defiance of them, they organized social groups, sports competitions, musical bands, literary magazines, and crafts classes. They also struggled to preserve autonomy from invasive camp administrations. Using their limited channels of self-government, they called for redress of grievances, and on several occasions they expressed their resistance through organized strikes or even rioting. More negatively, hard-line factions of inmates organized harassment and sometimes violence against suspected informers, or those considered too friendly to camp administrators.

Finally, a growing literature has emerged on the later movement by former inmates and their children for compensation for their confinement and for reconsideration of the Supreme Court decisions upholding it. The so-called redress movement triumphed in 1988, when Congress passed the Civil Rights Restoration Act, granting all those affected by Executive Order 9066 an official apology and a twenty-thousand dollar redress payment. Meanwhile, citing official misconduct and manipulation of evidence at trial, federal courts vacated or overturned the convictions of three Nisei who had challenged their removal.

Given all the attention that these aspects of the wartime experience of Japanese Americans have received—the books, plays, poetry, Days of Remembrance, museum exhibitions, documentaries, feature films, etc.—it might be wondered what

need there is for another historical book on the subject. Indeed, some ten years ago, when I began research on President Roosevelt and the story behind the signing of Executive Order 9066, I was obliged to reject the advice of a distinguished historian who urged me to choose another field of study. How, he asked me, could there possibly be anything new to say on the confinement of Japanese Americans, a matter about which so much had already been published?

The reasons for putting out a new book nevertheless seemed compelling then and are even more so in the case of this volume. First, the camps remain oddly obscure in popular American memory: most ordinary people I have spoken to have never even heard of them. Among those who are informed about the wartime events, there remain serious conflicts over how to interpret their legacy. Were the camps an isolated result of wartime hysteria? How do they fit into the larger history of American racism? What impact did they have on Japanese communities outside the camps? Into the void of public knowledge has stepped a small but tenacious circle of assorted right-wingers and war buffs who continue to deny or rationalize the removal of Japanese Americans from the West Coast and the institution of the camps.. Their campaign gained new strength in the post-9/11 crisis, amid the deep national anxiety over immigrants and potential threats to national security. Clearly, the entire subject of Japanese American confinement taps into some deep sources of anxiety, and this makes it call out for clear-minded historical study.

What is more, the existing literature on Japanese Americans does not take account of the profusion of new information (and in a few cases misinformation) that has come to light in recent times. Vast numbers of newly declassified or digitized documents have become available, and family and oral history archivists have put together innumerable testimonies by Japanese Americans that shed light on particulars of their experience. In the course of my ongoing historical research, I have come across collections of previously unseen or unknown material that deepen our understanding in fundamental ways. Meanwhile, the work of a new generation of scholars has left our understanding of supposedly familiar events altered and enriched.

Therefore, a first purpose of this book is to set down a record of Executive Order 9066 and the wartime Japanese American experience in a clear and digestible fashion. In the process, I will join together elements of the generally accepted narrative with significant new information, so as to form a much-needed synthesis. My goal is naturally to help those readers who are new to this history, but also to deepen the understanding of those who have some experience of it.

As important as that initial goal is, this book has a greater purpose: to expand the contours of discussion on Japanese American confinement beyond the overly narrow framework of time and space in which the subject has been placed. First, my history goes beyond the limits of the wartime period in its discussion of events. The main story of confinement properly begins in the prewar years, with the buildup of suspicion against Japanese Americans and "enemy aliens" generally. One element

especially worth exploring is the U.S. government's construction, in the months before war broke out, of what it called concentration camps to hold enemy aliens. This book investigates for the first time how these actions created a climate and momentum for mass arbitrary action against perceived "enemies" after Pearl Harbor.

Conversely, much remains to be said on the long after-history of Japanese American confinement. The postwar era is all but forgotten in conventional narratives, which tend to stop with the end of the fighting and the closing of the camps. Yet it is impossible to understand these events fully without also studying the rapid turnabout of official policy and attitudes toward Japanese Americans in the first years after the war, and the attempts by officials in Congress and the White House to make gestures at restitution. In the same way, the eclipse of the wartime events in public discussion during the 1950s and their gradual reappearance in later years, a matter largely uncovered by existing works, merit discussion. Finally, while a number of writings exist on movements among Japanese Americans for reparations and the granting of redress in the 1980s, the story of the camps does not end with the official apology and payment. In a final section, I will look at the period since redress was granted, and how recent events and polemics over historical memory and representation contribute to our overall understanding of the wartime actions and reflect their continuing impact upon American national consciousness.

An even more troubling problem with the conventional narrative is that it discusses Executive Order 9066 and the treatment of Japanese Americans only within fixed spatial and national boundaries, as part of internal (and mainland) American history. Yet the confinement policy fits into a wider international—indeed continental—pattern of official treatment of people of Japanese ancestry, and it is imperative to study other areas in order to understand in-depth the experience of West Coast Japanese Americans.[iii] The first of these areas is wartime Hawaii, where "local Japanese" constituted the largest single ethnic population and provided the backbone of the labor force. In the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor, army commanders pushed through a declaration of martial law and did not restore the territory to full civilian control until late 1944. Military rule in Hawaii—a unique status in modern American history—was shaped in fundamental ways by the fears of the "local Japanese," on the basis of which army commanders justified and built public support for such steps as abolition of civilian courts and their replacement by military tribunals. Conversely, Japanese residents were the focus of an epic conflict between national leaders who urged their mass confinement and local rulers who resisted these orders. The resulting struggle not only had different results from those on the West Coast but helped shape government policy on Japanese Americans elsewhere.

A similarly gaping hole in standard portraits of Japanese American confinement exists with regard to events in Canada. Like their American counterparts, twenty-two thousand Japanese Canadians from the West Coast of British Columbia were rounded up during the spring of 1942. They were then dispersed to a variety of destinations: road labor camps, sugar beet farms, or

settlements in isolated mining villages. Their property was confiscated and sold by official decree, and they were forced to use the funds to pay for their own expenses. The Canadian government ultimately required the Japanese Canadians to choose between resettling outside the West and being deported to Japan, and it undertook the mass deportation of thousands of inmates as soon as the war was over. Astoundingly, no work has ever been published that looks at the history of Executive Order 9066 and the camps in the United States alongside that of the Canadian government's wartime removal and confinement of Japanese Canadians, a series of events that remains all but unknown south of the border.[iv] Yet not only is the Canadian experience compelling within itself, but a study of the similarities and differences across the border provides a greater and more balanced perspective on any number of overall questions relating to the Japanese Americans: What drove confinement? What choices existed in administering it? How important were Nisei soldiers in shifting public opinion about the loyalty of the Japanese?

Finally, there is the experience of the Latin American Japanese in North America to consider. Following agreements between the U.S. State Department and the governments of Peru and other Latin American nations, U.S. forces carried off some 2,300 ethnic Japanese (plus larger numbers of ethnic Germans) from their home countries, brought them to the United States, and imprisoned them in an internment camp operated by the Justice Department at Crystal City, Texas. The Mexican government (though it refused to surrender any of its residents to the United States) decreed mass removal of ethnic Japanese from its Pacific coast in 1942 and confiscated their property. As a result, a refugee trail of thousands of people formed to Mexico City and Guadalajara, where they were forced to resettle (in most cases permanently) and make new lives amid poverty and deprivation.

While less well chronicled than the camp experience, there were further dramatic shifts in the lives of Japanese North Americans in the aftermath of the allied victory in the Pacific and the end of World War II. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the early postwar years were almost as vital as the wartime events in determining the location of Japanese communities, and the nature and condition of their inhabitants. There were strong commonalities during this period in the condition of those who had been removed from their homes by official order. Ethnic Japanese throughout North America, released from confinement, worked to establish themselves outside, whether in new communities outside the West Coast or (in the United States) in their former Pacific Coast locations. Impoverished by their removal and excluded from the wartime economic boom, most had to accept low-paying menial jobs and struggle to support themselves and their families. Because of lack of money for better housing, together with widespread racial discrimination, they were forced to crowd into housing in urban slum areas (often in racially shifting "buffer zones" between black and white areas). Meanwhile, thousands of Issei and Nisei in the United States and Canada who had agreed to deportation under duress or had been brought up from Latin America for internment were forced to battle in

the courts to win the right to remain, while those who had been accepted "voluntary" expulsion to Japan had the task of beginning life anew in a devastated country most could only dimly recall or had never known. In both countries, as a matter of elementary justice, the government agreed to accept claims for compensation for property losses, but given the narrow range of the losses considered and the difficulty of proving amounts, the relief finally granted was more symbolic than real. All the same, the civil rights of people of Japanese ancestry were dramatically expanded in the postwar years. Nisei from British Columbia, who had been long deprived of voting rights throughout Canada, were at last enfranchised in 1949. Japanese Americans won signal victories in the Supreme Court over the alien land acts and other forms of racial discrimination, and in 1952 Issei were allowed to become American citizens.

Yet the variations across borders in official policies with regard to people of Japanese ancestry were no less significant, and the United States and Canada diverged dramatically. To be sure, despite various self-justifying assertions by Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King and political leaders in Ottawa that their arbitrary wartime treatment of Japanese Canadians was designed to coordinate with Washington's, the two countries' policies were in fact quite distinct from the start.[v] The WRA provided housing and education for camp inmates, sponsored camp newspapers, and supported leisure activities and cooperatives. Japanese Canadians did not receive such assistance and had to rely on religious and nonprofit groups for aid or use their own funds. Furthermore, the large-scale official confiscation and forced sale of the properties of Japanese Canadians had no parallel south of the border, while there were no battalions of Nisei soldiers in Canada to demonstrate the loyalty of the group. Postwar policy nonetheless differed in kind as well as degree between the two nations. In the United States, exclusion was lifted as of the beginning of January 1945, and Issei and Nisei returned to the West Coast in large numbers even before the war was over. In contrast, Ottawa's policy, designed to appease the demands of racist whites in British Columbia and to win their votes, was to pressure Japanese Canadians into giving up their citizenship and leaving the country entirely, or failing that, to move east of the Rockies and disperse into small groups. Japanese Canadians were not permitted to return to the West Coast until April 1949.

How do we explain this striking contrast? It is tempting to make invidious comparisons between enlightened American rulers and bigoted Canadian ones, or to draw facile conclusions about national character. However, the truth is that the leadership of the two nations was not so far apart in their general ideas. Even after his advisors agreed that there was no longer any military threat justifying the continued existence of the camps, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt delayed lifting exclusion for six months out of political self-interest and fear of violent West Coast reaction. Similarly, the President and his advisors all agreed that Japanese Americans would be better off resettling in small groups outside the West Coast, and they

devoted their efforts to promoting dispersion with such tools as they had. White House officials recognized, nonetheless, that they had no power to keep Japanese Americans from returning to their homes or to compel them to settle elsewhere. Mackenzie King and his cabinet, conversely, extended the authority they had been granted originally for national defense into the postwar period, despite the lack of any conceivable national security justification, and instituted a compulsory dispersal policy that resembled Roosevelt's ideal policy.

Instead, the basic differences between the two countries were constitutional and political. Because of the liberties guaranteed in the Bill of Rights, the powers that the U.S. government held over Japanese Americans were limited, especially once the war drew to a close. While the U.S. Supreme Court was prepared, in the *Korematsu* decision, to grant the army considerable leeway to take actions in the name of national security, the justices simultaneously ruled in *Ex Parte Endo* that loyal citizens could not be kept in confinement indefinitely, and later struck down wartime military rule in Hawaii in the case of *Duncan v. Kahanamoku*. The Court's rulings lent constitutional approval, and political cover, to the lifting of exclusion, even before the end of the war. Canada's Supreme Court, operating in a common-law system that enshrined parliamentary supremacy and did not include a bill of rights, upheld in the case of mass deportation the government's ability to declare or extend its emergency powers. The cabinet thus was enabled to contemplate radical limitations on the fundamental liberties of citizens, even in peacetime.

The other consideration was the role of West Coast leaders in playing the race card. During the war years many California politicians, appealing to popular opinion, made public statements denouncing Japanese Americans as spies and opposing their postwar return to the coast. So strong was the opposition that John Bricker, Republican candidate for vice president in 1944, proposed that West Coast residents be permitted to vote on whether or not to permit Japanese Americans to return to their region. However, once the Supreme Court ruled and the army declared exclusion lifted, figures such as Governor Earl Warren and Los Angeles Mayor Fletcher Bowron called for public obedience to the orders and helped welcome the returning inmates. (By these actions, Warren may arguably have thereby succeeded in redeeming his tarnished reputation for civil rights, thereby making possible his emergence as a national political figure and his eventual appointment to the U.S. Supreme Court.) As a result, terrorist attacks were not widespread and public tolerance began to prevail, at no apparent political cost to the public officials responsible. In contrast, British Columbia MPs and local leaders persisted in whipping up popular racism and brandishing the threat of violence to blackmail Ottawa into violating the rights of Canadian citizens of Japanese ancestry. Cabinet ministers and advisors were unwilling to call their bluff, or to look at events south of the border in order to realize their error, and the Liberal Party suffered as a result the taint of bigotry and the loss of a pair of West Coast seats in the 1948 general election.

Notes

[i] Japanese communities are conventionally divided up by generation. The Issei are the first generation immigrants, while the Nisei are their second-generation children. A subset of the Nisei is the so-called Kibei, Nisei who were sent back to be educated in Japan.

[ii] The official confinement of Japanese Americans in the WRA camps overlapped with a separate set of U.S. government policies toward "alien enemies," which included the Justice Department's control and detention, and in some cases internment, of Japanese, German, and Italian nationals based on suspicion of their individual actions. Insofar as ethnic Japanese were handled, I discuss these policies briefly. I have elected not to discuss the internment experience of Italian and German nationals and their families, both for reasons of space and to avoid confusion with the quite distinct experience of Japanese Americans moved on a mass basis, without due process. Instead, with those distinctions in mind, I direct the reader to the literature on these groups. See, for example, Lawrence de Stasi, ed., *Une Storia Segreta: The Secret History of Italian American Evacuation and Internment during World War II* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2001); Arnold Krammer, *Undue Process: The Untold Story of America's German Alien Internees* (Lanham, Md.:, Rowman and Littlefield, 1997). For the confinement of Italian Canadians, see Mario Duliani, *The City without Women: A Chronicle of Internment Life in Canada during the Second World War* (Oakville, Ont.: Mosaic Press, 1994).

[iii] The U.S. government's actions also mirror the mass removal and confinement of ethnic Japanese following Pearl Harbor by the governments of Australia and New Zealand and the French colony of New Caledonia, and their mass postwar deportation to Japan. In addition, camps to hold ethnic Japanese were established by American forces occupying Saipan in the last months of the war, While the events in Oceania and the Pacific Islands form a useful backdrop and context for those in the Americas, they do not have the same relevance to evaluating White House policy, and so will be dealt with only summarily.

[iv] Several works on Japanese Americans have chapters that briefly discuss Canada. Examples include Roger Daniels, *Concentration Camps North America: Japanese in the United States and Canada* (Malabar, Fla.: Krieger, 1989); and U.S. Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, *Personal Justice Denied* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997 [1983]). Conversely, a few books on confinement in Canada, such as Ann Gomer Sunahara, *The Politics of Racism: The Uprooting of Japanese Canadians during World War II* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1981), briefly outline the actions of Canada's southern neighbor. Louis Fiset and Gail Nomura, eds., *Nikkei in the Pacific Northwest* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), discusses the history of both national groups but gives scant treatment to the wartime era. Stephanie Bangarth, *Voices Raised in Protest: Defending North American Citizens of Japanese Ancestry, 1942–1949* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), compares wartime events at length but focuses on opposition to confinement and deportation and not confinement itself.

[v] About the only detectable instance of any coordination took place in the spring of 1942, when the U.S. Army raised questions regarding the security of the Canadian Pacific Railroad, along which the "internee" camps were located at a number of points. "To minimize the threat of sabotage, Canada closed certain camps and took additional police measures elsewhere." Dziuban, *Military Relations between the United States and Canada*, p. 284.