

Justice Denied and Forgotten: The Hidden History of Alaska’s World War II Internment Camps

Caroline Lester

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
I. PART I: HISTORY.....	4
II. LIFE IN AND AFTER CAMP.....	10
III. REDRESS.....	14
IV. UNDERSTANDING.....	16
A. <i>Racialization</i>	18
B. <i>Land Grab</i>	20
C. <i>Civil Liberties Act</i>	22
CONCLUSION	23

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. government’s removal and internment of more than a hundred thousand ethnically Japanese people during World War II is widely known. Thanks to efforts by activists and educators, the existence of Japanese concentration camps is now taught in schools and recognized as one of the most shameful acts of U.S. history.¹ But a key part of that story remains largely unknown: the evacuation and internment of nearly nine hundred Alaska Natives from the Aleutian Island chain.

The Unangaġ internment camps were different, but no less brutal, than the Japanese camps in the continental United States. Ten percent of the villagers, mainly elders and young children, died.² When they were finally allowed

1. Japanese activists have largely coalesced around the phrase “concentration camps” as a descriptor for the prisons run by the War Relocation Authority. Alaska Native scholars still use largely the phrase “internment camps” when referring to the places used to house evacuated Unangaġ.

2. Holly Miowak Guise, *Who is Doctor Bauer?: Rematriating a Censored Story on Internment, Wardship, and Sexual Violence in Wartime Alaska, 1941–1944*, 53 W. HIST. Q. 145, 151 (2022). With the death of the elders came the death of the culture, a lingering

to return to their homes, the islanders found villages wrecked by military occupation. Their churches were ransacked, their houses were ruined, and everywhere they looked, their landscape was littered with military trash.³ To this day, huge, half-sunken ships remain in the bays around the island. Musty bunkers, covered with graffiti, dot the low-lying hills near town.⁴ Hikers are still warned away from areas of tundra scattered with unexploded ordinances.⁵

Both the initial offense and the subsequent attempts at remedying the injuries from internment are widely unknown to those outside the Unangâ diaspora. The descendants of interned Japanese Americans know very little, too. Although I grew up learning about Japanese internment, I never learned about the Alaska Native community which underwent similar hardships. Most *sansei* and *yonsei* I know are also unaware of the Unangâ story,⁶ but the history of the two groups is intertwined.

In 1988, President Reagan signed into law the first and only reparations bill to ever make it through Congress. The Civil Liberties Act apologized for the U.S. government's role in the "grave injustice" and paid out \$20,000 to each Japanese American interned during World War II.⁷ Unangâ internees were included under their own section of the bill with some markedly different remedies. First, the United States established a trust fund for the benefit of the six surviving Unangan villages that were removed: Akutan, Atka, Nikolski, Saint George, Saint Paul, and Unalaska.⁸ The government deposited \$4.7 million into the fund and distributed an additional \$12,000 to each surviving internee.⁹ But unlike in the Japanese portion of the bill, the United States never apologized for interning the Alaska Natives.

The Civil Liberties Act is primarily understood to be a triumph of a long-standing effort by Japanese American communities, but it was also the product of Unangâ lobbying. The differences between what each group received from the Act reflect how the government viewed each group's experience.

This is the first legal scholarship to compare the experiences of Japanese and Unangâ internees, both during the war and after, as they sought and won redress. Most scholarly engagement has analogized between Japanese American internment and general dispossession of Native Nations, without

effect that has continued to reverberate through generations of Unangâ.

3. COMM'N ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS, PERSONAL JUSTICE DENIED 355–356 (1982) (citing Report on Unalaska Community (no date). NARS. RG 75 (CWRIC AL 6307-08)).

4. This information is based off my personal experience living in Unalaska, Alaska.

5. *Id.*

6. *Sansei*: third-generation Japanese Americans; *Yonsei*: fourth-generation Japanese Americans.

7. 50 U.S.C.A. § 4202; 50 U.S.C.A. § 4215.

8. 50 U.S.C.A. § 4235.

9. *Id.*; 50 U.S.C.A. § 4236. The fund still exists to this day; now, most of the money is primarily used for scholarships for Unangâ students. Valentine Sherry, *Aleutian And Pribilof Islands Restitution Trust*, PROPUBLICA, <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/926024502> (May 23, 2024); *The Aleut Foundation*, <https://thealeutfoundation.org/purpose> (last visited May 28, 2024).

noting that the same thing happened to both groups (or at least, a subset of them) and with almost no mention of the Unangâ people.¹⁰ Although other groups were also interned during World War II—notably Germans and Italians—only Japanese and Unangâ internees received reparations. This difference is perhaps because, although wartime internment of any U.S. resident without justification is a violation of legal and human rights, the experiences of the Unangâ and Japanese internees were both more egregious and violent.

The experience of European internees was markedly different from those of the Asian and Native populations. Although almost all internment camps included American citizens, the U.S. government interned ethnic Germans and Italians on an individual basis, examining each case file before determining whether they should be confined, rather than en masse, as they did to Japanese and Unangan populations. The scale of the internment was different, too. In 1940, more than six million people were either German-born or had two German-born parents living in the United States.¹¹ Imagine if the War Relocation Authority (WRA)—the federal agency that oversaw the detention of Japanese Americans—followed the same blood-quantum rules for Germans as they did for Japanese or Unangâ. Under these rules, anyone who was 1/16th or 1/8th of each ethnic group, respectively, was eligible for removal,¹² meaning that tens of millions of people of German descent would have been interned during World War II. Instead, only approximately 11,500 German Americans and 3,000 Italian Americans were interned.

There was another significant but essential difference. Both German and Italian immigrants were eligible for citizenship, while Alaska Natives did not receive formal citizenship until 1940, just two years before their evacuation.¹³ Moreover, *Issei* (Japanese immigrants to the US) did not even qualify for citizenship until 1952, a decade after Japanese internment formally ended.¹⁴ Although the citizenship status of Japanese Americans and Alaska

10. See, e.g., Cynthia Wu, *A Comparative Analysis of Indigenous Displacement and the World War II Japanese American Internment*, 42 *AMERASIA J.* 1, 11–12 (2016); Karen J. Leong & Myla Vicenti Carpio, *Carceral Subjugations*, 42 *AMERASIA J.* 103, 114 (2016); see generally Kristen L. Michaud, *Japanese American Internment Centers on United States Indian Reservations: A Geographic Approach to the Relocation Centers in Arizona, 1942–1945* (Sept. 2008) (Master's thesis, University of Massachusetts, Amherst) (on file with the University of Massachusetts Library System). *But cf.* JULIANA HU PEGUES, *SPACE-TIME COLONIALISM: ALASKA'S INDIGENOUS AND ASIAN ENTANGLEMENTS* (2021) (a powerful work that explicitly compares the World War II internment experiences of both groups).

11. Alan Rosenfeld, *German and Italian Detainees*, *DENSHO PROJECT ENCYCLOPEDIA* (July 29, 2015, 6:14 AM), https://encyclopedia.densho.org/German_and_Italian_detainees.

12. *A Brief History of Japanese American Relocation During World War II*, NAT'L PARK SERV., <https://www.nps.gov/articles/historyinternment.htm>; COMM'N ON WARTIME RELOCATION & INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS, *supra* note 3, at 334.

13. Although members of Native Nations were granted U.S. citizenship in 1924 under the Indian Citizenship Act, Alaska wasn't admitted to statehood until 1958. Unangâ only received formal citizenship under the Nationality Act of 1940. 8 U.S.C.A. § 1401.

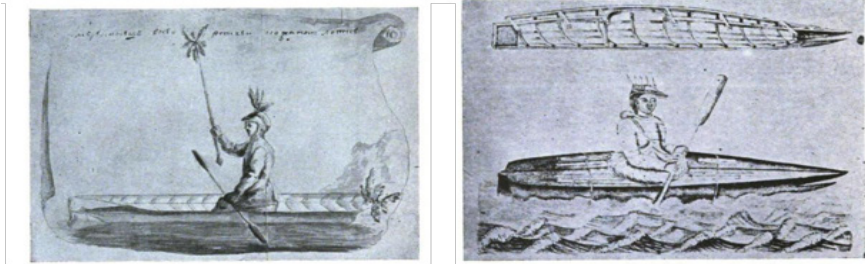
14. When the Immigration Act of 1952 passed, more than ninety percent of aliens made eligible for U.S. citizenship were *Issei*. Jane Hong, *Immigration Act of 1952*, *DENSHO PROJECT ENCYCLOPEDIA* (July 7, 2020, 7:45 PM), <https://encyclopedia.densho.org/>

Natives did little to deter their incarceration, the delay of citizenship grants may be rooted in the same causes that led to the worse treatment and living conditions in those camps.

Perhaps because of these differences, the Civil Liberties Act does not mention Germans, Italians, or Japanese Latin Americans interned during World War II.¹⁵ Instead, it focuses solely on the experience of Japanese Americans and Alaska Natives. This choice reflects both the similarities of how the internment of each group was racialized and the differences in how that racialization was reflected in internment and reparations.

This paper has four parts. Part I gives the necessary historical background on the Unanga¹⁶ up to and during evacuation during World War II. Part II details the conditions of the camps in both Alaska and the continental United States, alongside the return home for both communities. (Most of Part II will be focused on the experience of the Unanga¹⁶, given that lower-48 internment camp history is more widely known.¹⁶) Part III is a short history of the redress and reparations movement. Part IV explores why the two groups were interned during World War II and the differences in their reparations. Although Japanese American internment was justified as a kind of “security response” during the War, Unanga¹⁶ internment was supposedly for their own protection. But by looking at the orientalizing of both Unanga¹⁶ and Japanese Americans, each group’s control over valuable resources, and the difference in reparations, this paper identifies how these disparate groups were tied together by the federal government’s colonial, racist acts.

I. PART I: HISTORY



Two drawings by Russian explorers of Unangan men in their baidarkas, or kayaks. Each is estimated to be from 1744 and 1768, respectively.¹⁷

Immigration Act of 1952.

15. The United States interned approximately 1,800 Japanese Latin Americans in camps across the Southwest United States. Stephen Mak, *Japanese Latin Americans*, DENSHO PROJECT ENCYCLOPEDIA (Apr. 18, 2017, 9:06 p.m.), https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Japanese_Latin_Americans/. Japanese Latin Americans finally achieved some form of reparations and apology in the late nineties, a decade after exclusion from the Civil Liberties Act. See e.g., *Mochizuki v. United States*, 43 Fed. Cl. 97 (1999).

16. Lower-48 is a term used in Alaska to define the continental United States.

17. Left: Illustration of an Aleut in his baidarka, or one-hatch skin boat; Right:

Unanga translates to “seasiders” or “the people.”¹⁸ The group lived along the Aleutian Island chain for more than nine thousand years—one of the longest “continuous existence as an identifiable people in one place.”¹⁹

The islands, comprised of low, treeless land made of volcanic ash and tundra, are not easy to live in. The chain forms a kind of frontier that divides the cold Bering Sea and the warm Pacific Ocean, resulting in fog, rain, and cyclonic winds.²⁰ Despite *Unanga* excellence at hunting and fishing, food was scarce and highly dependent on the seasons and environment. *Unangam Tunuu*, their language, reflects this: *Qisaguni*, the word for the month of March, translates to “when they gnaw straps” or “month of hunger, gnawing thongs.”²¹ April, or *Agaluugix qisagunax*, means “the near hunger month” or “later famine.” And yet the *Unanga* not only lived but thrived. During the 1740s, their population was between 12,000 and 16,000—more than Philadelphia at the time.²² This was the height of *Unangan* culture: over the next hundred years, their population would plummet to 2,000—the consequence of conflict with the Russian Empire, disease, and forced labor.²³

The first recorded meeting between Russians and *Unanga* occurred in September 1741.²⁴ The Russians quickly discovered that Alaska was home to one of the most profitable resources in the world: sea otters. Called “soft gold,” sea otter pelt sold for twenty-five to forty times as much as Siberian sable, the next most valuable animal in the Russian fur trade.²⁵ But otters were nearly impossible to hunt, given that they spend their entire lives offshore: they hunt at sea, eat at sea, and sleep in the calmer coastal waters rather than ashore. As a result, they must be hunted at sea, too. And only the *Unanga*—who honed their craft for thousands of years—had the skills to do so.²⁶ To get to the soft gold, Russian traders needed *Unanga* labor.

The baidars, or boats, of Oonalashka, are infinitely superior to those of any other island. If perfect symmetry, smoothness, and proportion

A native of Unalaska in a baidarka, in FRANK ALFRED GOLDER, *BERING’S VOYAGES: AN ACCOUNT OF THE EFFORTS OF THE RUSSIANS TO DETERMINE THE RELATION OF ASIA AND AMERICA* 149 (1925).

18. *Glossary/Vocabulary*, ALEUTIAN PRIBILOF ISLANDS ASS’N, <https://www.apiai.org/community-services/traditional-foods-program/glossary-vocabulary> (last visited Dec. 13, 2023); *Unangam Tunuu / Aleut*, UNIV. OF ALASKA, FAIRBANKS, <https://www.uaf.edu/anlc/languages-move/aleut.php> (last visited Dec. 13, 2023).

19. WILLIAM S. LAUGHLIN, *ALEUTS, SURVIVORS OF THE BERING LAND BRIDGE* 141 (1980).

20. When I lived there in 2020, the winter storms blew so strong that my entire house shook with each gust.

21. DEAN KOHLHOFF, *WHEN THE WIND WAS A RIVER: ALEUT EVACUATION IN WORLD WAR II* 4 (1995).

22. *Id.*

23. PEGUES, *supra* note 10, at 144.

24. FRANK ALFRED GOLDER, *BERING’S VOYAGES: AN ACCOUNT OF THE EFFORTS OF THE RUSSIANS TO DETERMINE THE RELATION OF ASIA AND AMERICA* 147 (1922).

25. GWENN A. MILLER, *KODIAK KREOL: COMMUNITIES OF EMPIRE IN EARLY RUSSIAN AMERICA* 24 (2010).

26. *Id.* at 25.

constitute beauty, they are beautiful; to me they appeared so beyond anything that I ever beheld. I have seen some of them as transparent as oiled paper, through which you could trace every formation of the inside, and the manner of the native's sitting in it; whose light dress, painted and plumed bonnet, together with his perfect ease and activity, added infinitely to its elegance.²⁷

Notes from Commodore Joseph Billings Expedition, 1790.

Russian traders began practicing "an economy of confiscation."²⁸ They kidnapped the women and children of local leaders, extracting furs from Natives in exchange for the "protection" of the captives.²⁹ This continued through the eighteenth century until it was eventually outlawed by the Russian government.³⁰ At the same time, the Russian-American Company (RAC) began to dominate the Alaskan fur trade.³¹ The RAC operated under a conscription system: the Unangaġ were still forced into labor, but instead of paying tributes, they were paid in provisions.³² All Unangan men between the ages of fifteen and fifty were required to work for the RAC.³³

Sea otters typically have only one pup per year. Their low rate of reproduction could not meet the Russians' rapacious demands, and populations crashed.³⁴ Each time this happened, the Russians moved to a new island, taking Unangan men with them and forcing them to hunt.³⁵ In 1788, Russians seized Unangan hunters from Unalaska and Atka and brought them three hundred miles north to the previously uninhabited Pribilof Islands.³⁶ There, the Unangaġ established communities on Saint Paul and Saint George, two low-lying, rocky islands that are home to the largest population of northern fur seals in the world.³⁷

Unlike other Unangaġ villages in the Aleutians, the Pribilof villages existed solely to harvest fur seals for Russia. The RAC maintained total control over the population and kept "islanders in a state of abject slavery."³⁸ A change in the colonial regime did little to change life on the Pribilof Islands. In 1867, soon after the Alaska Purchase, the U.S. government ceded control

27. MARTIN SAUER & COMMODORE JOSEPH BILLINGS, AN ACCOUNT OF A GEOGRAPHICAL AND ASTRONOMICAL EXPEDITION TO THE NORTHERN PARTS OF RUSSIA 157 (1802). Sauer visited Unalaska in 1790.

28. MILLER, *supra* note 25, at 12.

29. *Id.*

30. *Id.* at 69.

31. The RAC was modeled off the East Indian Company: it was the first and only Russian joint stock company: theoretically, any Russian could purchase its shares. *Id.* at 105. In reality, only nobles and merchants did. *Id.*

32. *Id.* at 69–70.

33. *Id.*

34. *Id.* at 26.

35. *Id.* at 127 ("The hunting parties frequently got caught in storms out on the open seas where many died.")

36. PEGUES, *supra* note 10, at 148.

37. *Id.*

38. MILLER, *supra* note 25, at 26.

over the Pribilof Islands to private businesses and formed a series of consecutive twenty-year leases with American firms.³⁹ In exchange for overseeing Unangâ residents, the firms continued to demand that they harvest fur seals yearly. Within twenty years, the \$7.2 million spent on the Alaska Purchase was paid off entirely from Pribilof fur seal harvests.⁴⁰

Control of the islands shifted again when the federal government took over in 1911.⁴¹ By the 1940s, the Fish and Wildlife Service—housed within the Department of the Interior—was began overseeing the Pribilof Islands.⁴² This agency helped supervise the evacuation and internment of Unangâ during World War II.⁴³

Life on the Pribilof Islands was more controlled than the rest of the Unangan communities. The Fish and Wildlife Service considered the Unangâ “wards of the government” and refused to provide them voting rights.⁴⁴ The U.S. government continued to require all male Unangâ to hunt fur seals and provided them with housing and food in exchange.

The community was in two parts. You had the Aleut labor force living there, working for the US government. And they were managed and controlled by government agents—a very small, non-native group. Everyone had a government-provided home. It was almost like a military base. They were provided homes, they were provided with food. The Aleuts typically ate their seal meats that they froze and stored from the summer harvest. But the small force that was there, the government managers, lived a different life. The government employees—we called them the white people—typically ate different foods. When you were male, and you turned 14, you started to work for the government. No choice. This was a captive audience. Contact with the outside world was very limited. This was, in my view, a very happy community. And now, it sounds rather grim, rather weird, but this was a very controlled community.⁴⁵

General Jacob Lestenkof, Evacuee from St. George, b.1932

Unalaska—the largest village in the Aleutians—was also the site of a Russian settlement in 1772.⁴⁶ In 1825, the Russians built an Orthodox church, a beautiful building which remains to this day.⁴⁷ The village was predominantly Unangâ until 1939 when the U.S. Navy built a weather station.⁴⁸ The

39. PEGUES, *supra* note 10, at 148.

40. OFF. OF RESPONSE & RESTORATION, *Henry Wood Elliott: Defender of the Fur Seal*, NAT'L OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMIN. (Feb. 22, 2019 11:39 AM), <https://response.restoration.noaa.gov/multimedia/videos/henry-wood-elliott-defender-fur-seal.html>.

41. PEGUES, *supra* note 10, at 148.

42. *Id.*

43. *See* COMM'N ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS AND UNITED STATES, *supra* note 3, at 332, 338 (1997).

44. PEGUES, *supra* note 10, at 149.

45. Interview with General Jacob Lestenkof.

46. Jennifer Sepez et al., 30 *Unalaska, Alaska: Memory and Denial in the Globalization of the Aleutian Landscape*, POLAR GEOGRAPHY 193–94 (2007).

47. *Id.*

48. *Id.* at 195.

U.S. military identified the Aleutians as a possible area of invasion by the Japanese, so within two years, the military had occupied the town.⁴⁹ The population ballooned from 300 (mostly Unangâ) to as many as 70,000 people.⁵⁰ The landscape transformed as well: grasses, sedges, and tundra were replaced with bunkers, air hangers, warehouses, gun mounts, barracks, deep water harbors, fuel tanks, and military vessels.⁵¹ Yet, when war finally arrived, American forces were caught almost entirely unaware.

The first attack occurred on June 3, 1942.⁵² Japanese planes bombed Dutch Harbor for two days and landed on Kiska Island, an island neighboring Unalaska, where they captured ten American soldiers.⁵³ On June 6 and 7, twelve hundred Japanese soldiers invaded Attu Island, captured forty-two Unangâ, and occupied the village.⁵⁴ War had finally arrived in the Aleutian Island chain.

Down south, forced evacuations had already been in effect for two months.⁵⁵ On March 29, 1942, General DeWitt—acting under the authority of Roosevelt’s Executive Order—announced a mass detention and deportation of Japanese residents, giving them only 48-hours’ notice.⁵⁶ Japanese residents left their homes, businesses, and possessions behind. The rushed and inhumane removal tactics were repeated, thousands of miles north, in Alaska.

49. COMM’N ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS AND UNITED STATES, *supra* note 3, at 320.

50. Sepez, *supra* note 46, at 195.

51. *Id.*

52. *Id.*

53. *Id.*

54. KOHLHOFF, *supra* note 21, at 40.

55. Exec. Order No. 9066, 7 Fed. Reg. 1407 (Feb. 19, 1942).

56. Brian Niiya, *John DeWitt*, DENSHO PROJECT ENCYCLOPEDIA (Dec. 19, 2023, 6:51 PM), https://encyclopedia.densho.org/John_DeWitt/#The_Road_to_Executive_Order_9066. My grandmother was one of the very few who escaped the order. She and her family left California in early March, the day before all Japanese Americans were restricted to their homes.



Like thousands of other Japanese Americans who were interned, the Iseri family were forced to close their drugstore in Little Tokyo with almost no notice. The sign reads: “Many thanks for your patronage. Hope to serve you in near future. God be with you till we meet again.”

The Alaskan evacuation happened almost immediately, with “little preparation or planning.”⁵⁷ Atka was evacuated first.⁵⁸ The military ordered the eighty-three villagers out of their homes and told them to retreat to their summer camp sites.⁵⁹ One officer recalled the suddenness of the evacuation: “They were evacuated while eating breakfast, and the eggs were still on the table—coffee in the cups. A lot of their personal clothing and stuff was still hanging in the closets.”⁶⁰ That evening, the Navy dispatched a demolition crew to burn down the ancient village so occupying Japanese forces would not be able to use it.⁶¹ By the next morning, everything had been reduced to ashes. A few days later, the Unangā were evacuated off the island.⁶²

57. KOHLHOFF, *supra* note 21, at 68.

58. *Id.* at 70.

59. *Id.* Summer camps are places and structures—far from the village—where Unangā base themselves during the summer months. These are more rustic homes set up exclusively for the warm months when hunting, fishing, and harvesting can take place.

60. *Id.*

61. *Id.*

62. *Id.*

The Pribilof Islands were next. Islanders were given twelve hours to evacuate and were only allowed to carry one package of belongings each.⁶³ The soldiers were ruthless, refusing to allow the villagers any more. One sailor seized a beautiful set of china from an elderly woman and threw it into the water.⁶⁴ “A look of mingled horror and misery came over the woman’s face; a faint moan could be heard coming through her sunken lips.”⁶⁵

Jacob Lestenkof’s grandfather oversaw the keeping of the livestock for the white Fish and Wildlife Service agents to eat on the island.⁶⁶ “We had cows, pigs, chickens,” he recalled.⁶⁷ “This was established for the benefit of the white people, so they could have beef instead of seal meat. So they could have milk, real milk from the cows. So they could have eggs from the chickens.”⁶⁸ Lestenkof realized the seriousness of the evacuation when his grandfather was told to slaughter all the animals before they boarded the ship.⁶⁹

By the time the *USS Delarof* left the islands, 560 Unangâ men, women, and children were packed onto the ship, which only had a capacity for 376.⁷⁰ The ship left the Aleutians on June 18 for an “unknown destination.”⁷¹ On June 24, the evacuees arrived at Funter Bay in Southeast Alaska’s Tongass National Forest.⁷² In an interview with me, one evacuee described the landing: “I remember my grandfather waking me up early in the morning. We were all in the hold, sleeping on cots. He woke me up and said, ‘Come up on deck and see the trees.’ I’d never seen trees before.”⁷³

Notably, the few white civilians on the islands were given the choice to stay. Only those who were one-eighth Unangan or more were required to leave.⁷⁴

II. LIFE IN AND AFTER CAMP

In July, the villages of Akutan, Biorka, Kashega, Makushin, Nikolski, and Unalaska were removed and evacuated.⁷⁵ All Unangâ ended up in camps scattered across Southeast Alaska.⁷⁶ Those in Funter Bay moved into an abandoned cannery with no sewage system, laundry rooms, or bathing

63. *Id.* at 72.

64. *Id.* at 71–72.

65. *Id.* at 72.

66. Interview with General Jacob Lestenkof, *supra* note 45.

67. *Id.*

68. *Id.*

69. *Id.*

70. KOHLHOFF, *supra* note 21, at 72.

71. *Id.*

72. *Id.* at 77.

73. Interview with General Jacob Lestenkof, *supra* note 45.

74. National Park Service, *Forced to Leave, ALEUTIAN VOICES* (2015), <https://www.nps.gov/aleu/learn/historyculture/upload/Aleutian-Voices-v2-508.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/C42M-PS7P>].

75. KOHLHOFF, *supra* note 21, at 77.

76. See COMM’N ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS AND UNITED STATES, *supra* note 3, at 318.

facilities.⁷⁷ They were greeted by two identical, rotting barracks named the China House and the Filipino House after the nationalities of the cannery workers from years ago.⁷⁸ Families crafted privacy for themselves by stringing blankets along lines to create partitions and everyone slept on mattresses on the floor.⁷⁹ The facilities were so dilapidated that some people remember “see[ing] through the roof.”⁸⁰ Evacuees were fed powdered eggs and clams—no fresh vegetables or meat.⁸¹

If the U.S. government viewed Unangâ people as their wards, a poor analogy that does a disservice to the independence and resiliency of the Alaska Native group, then its treatment of the Unangâ people bordered on criminal. By the end of the internment, ten percent of Unangâ had died.⁸² Most of these Unangâ were elders who were keepers of history and culture.⁸³ When they died, part of the culture died with them. These deaths were felt twice over: through the loss of the individuals and the loss of traditional knowledge. The Unangâ diaspora is still recovering today.

Many of the deaths were preventable as they had been caused by “severe medical neglect.”⁸⁴ The mistreatment started with the evacuation. All the villagers were placed in the hold of the ship.⁸⁵ There was only one bathroom.⁸⁶ Alice Petrevilli, a young girl from Atka, recalled that “there was not enough food, and no matter how you tried to keep clean it was just impossible.”⁸⁷ Although the *Delarof* had a doctor on the ship, he refused to administer to the Unangâ, and—in the words of the wife of a FWS employee who was on the ship—“could not be coaxed into the disagreeable crowded hold.”⁸⁸ During the voyage, the first villagers experienced the first casualty of internment. A baby girl, three days old, died from bronchial pneumonia—likely contracted from a sick person in the hold.⁸⁹

The camps were no better. Although the *Delarof* was supplied with medical supplies for the internees, they were seized by the military hospital at Dutch Harbor.⁹⁰ The sanitary facilities at the Kilisnoo camp consisted of a

77. KOHLHOFF, *supra* note 21, at 89.

78. *Id.*

79. *Id.* at 92.

80. *Id.*

81. *Id.*

82. Guise, *supra* note 2, at 151.

83. COMM’N ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS AND UNITED STATES, *supra* note 3, at 358.

84. *Id.*

85. Ryan Madden, *The Forgotten People: The Relocation and Internment of Aleuts during World War II*, 16 AM. INDIAN CULTURE & RES. J. 55, 61 (1992).

86. *Id.* at 61.

87. *Id.*

88. *Id.*

89. *Id.* The mother of the infant girl was Haretina Kochutin of St. Paul. She was interned at Funter Bay, where another one of her infant children later died.

90. *Id.* at 62.

total of three outdoor pit toilets and a bathtub.⁹¹ One of the camps at Funter Bay was a mile from a water source, and the three outdoor toilets relied on tidal waters to clear the sewage.⁹² The camp doctor overseeing Funter Bay left for months, leaving more than 300 women and children to fend for themselves.⁹³ The nearest hospital in Juneau would not take Unangâ patients without “advance notice.”⁹⁴ The only way anyone could leave the camps was by “chance encounter” with a sympathetic fisherman, who could volunteer to bring the sick to a doctor.⁹⁵ Tuberculosis, influenza, pneumonia and measles ripped through the camps.⁹⁶ In 1943, twenty-five villagers in Funter Bay died from preventable disease.⁹⁷ In Killisnoo, only two out of seven babies born at the camp lived.⁹⁸ In Ward, 20 people died from tuberculosis.⁹⁹

History Professor Holly Miowak Guise recently uncovered evidence of sexual abuse by H.O.K. Bauer, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) doctor who oversaw medical care at Killisnoo, one of the camps in Southeast Alaska.¹⁰⁰ Bauer had been placed in Kotzebue—an Iñupiat community north of the Arctic Circle—before being transferred to the Southeast Alaskan camps.¹⁰¹ Numerous letters, affidavits, and official documents show that the BIA was aware of Bauer’s abuse when it transferred him to the even more rural, isolated camps.¹⁰² Once there, he continued abusing Alaska Native women.¹⁰³

Throughout that time, the government continued to extract resources and labor from the Unangâ. Every summer, the U.S. government forced men from St. Paul and St. George to leave their families, return to an active war zone, and continue harvesting seals.¹⁰⁴

The shock, isolation, and horror the Unangâ felt at the conditions is difficult for those outside of the community to conceive. Most Unangâ had never left the islands before they were evacuated.¹⁰⁵ After living in the vast horizons of the Aleutian Islands, some felt claustrophobic among the dense

91. *Id.*

92. *Id.*

93. *Id.* at 65.

94. *Id.*

95. *Id.*

96. *Id.* at 65, 66, 67.

97. *Id.* at 68.

98. *Id.*

99. *Id.*

100. Guise, *supra* note 2, at 156. Dr. Guise is the first historian to bring this abuse to light. It is a powerful work, exposing both the federal government’s institutional failures and Native women’s resiliency and struggle against colonial powers.

101. *Id.* at 161.

102. *Id.* at 154, 157, 160, 161.

103. *Id.* at 163. He also medically abused Native children in other communities. Two Alutiiq children from villages on Kodiak Island reported permanent speech defects, caused by Bauer’s botched tonsillectomies.

104. *Id.* at 150.

105. KOHLHOFF, *supra* note 21, at 68.

old-growth forest that surrounded them.¹⁰⁶ Still, despite their conditions, they survived.

Japanese camps in the lower-48 were markedly different. Technically, Unanga were free to leave and work in other communities, although they needed permission to do so.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, the feasibility of leaving after being marooned in areas with no boats or roads was lower. On the other hand, WRA camps were fenced in, with armed guards and snipers ensconced in watchtowers being a daily presence.¹⁰⁸ In the beginning of the internment—before they requested rice, learned how to cook with government-provided ingredients, and built gardens in the camps—incarcerees survived off moldy bread and hotdogs.¹⁰⁹

Some Native women who were married to Japanese men chose to “self-intern” along with them.¹¹⁰ The WRA, which managed the internment of 110,000 people, viewed Japanese Americans as “racial children in need of democratic tutelage.”¹¹¹ This infantilizing mirrored that of Native people, who were viewed by the U.S. government as “dependent wards not yet fit for democratic citizenship.”¹¹² Both groups were also repeatedly told that incarceration was to protect them: American officials warned of anti-Japanese sentiment flooding places like California and the dangers of more bombings in the Aleutian Island chain.¹¹³

When Japanese and Unangan internees returned home, they were both greeted with ruined homes and livelihoods. When the Unanga were allowed to return to their villages—three years after their initial removal—they found that their homes had been “vandalized and looted by occupying American military forces.”¹¹⁴ The entire village of Atka had been “burned to the ground

106. *Id.*

107. COMM’N ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS AND UNITED STATES, *supra* note 3, at 341.

108. *Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History, Behind the Wire*, LIBR. OF CONG., <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/japanese/behind-the-wire/#:~:text=Life%20in%20the%20camps%20had,their%20daily%20business%20in%20public> [<https://perma.cc/E354-5QMX>].

109. *Campu Episode Six: Food*, DENSHO PROJECT (Jun. 2021) <https://densho.org/campu/campu-food/> [<https://perma.cc/7D7K-XAVD>]; The Kitchen Sisters, *Weenie Royale: Food and the Japanese Internment*, NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO (Dec. 20, 2007, 12:01 AM) <https://www.npr.org/2007/12/20/17335538/weenie-royale-food-and-the-japanese-internment> [<https://perma.cc/7T34-JPPS>].

110. PEGUES, *supra* note 10.

111. MAE M. NGAI, *IMPOSSIBLE SUBJECTS: ILLEGAL ALIENS AND THE MAKING OF MODERN AMERICA* 179 (2014).

112. *Id.*

113. COMM’N ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS, *supra* note 3, at 83, 318 (noting that the “poverty” of General DeWitt’s arguments that Japanese Americans posed a threat committed him to a “growing emphasis on the danger of vigilantism”) (“The evacuation of the Aleuts was a reasonable precaution to ensure their safety.”).

114. *Id.* at 355.

by the Navy.”¹¹⁵ Military trash still litters the islands today.¹¹⁶ Huge numbers of animals on which the Unangan relied for subsistence living were also gone.¹¹⁷ Foxes, seals, and caribou were “slaughtered in great numbers . . . by bored servicemen.”¹¹⁸ Lagoons that once served as spawning locations for herrings were filled in and tidal-harvest foods were “destroyed” by Navy oil spills.¹¹⁹

For the Japanese communities, returning to the continental Western states was also very difficult.¹²⁰ Even after *Endo*, the Supreme Court case that led to the eventual closure of the camps, Japanese Americans remained apprehensive about returning home. Before Executive Order 9066, more than 90,000 Japanese Americans were living in California.¹²¹ By March 1945, only 1,500 had returned to the state.¹²² Those who did found that “their homes and farms had been stolen, destroyed, or ill cared for.”¹²³

III. REDRESS



President Ronald Reagan signing the Civil Liberties Act, with (from left to right): HI Sen. Spark Matsunaga, CA Rep. Norman Mineta, HI Rep. Pat Saiiki, CA Sen. Pete Wilson, AK Rep. Don Young, CA Rep. Bob Matsui, CA Rep. Bill Lowery, and JACL President Harry Hajihara.

The Civil Liberties Act is the first and only reparations bill to pass through Congress. It is the result of decades of grassroots efforts from

115. *Id.* at 356.

116. *Id.* at 356–57.

117. *Id.* at 359.

118. *Id.*

119. *Id.*

120. NGAI, *supra* note 111, at 188.

121. *Japanese Americans in World War II*, FRESNO STATE LIBR. (July 19, 2022, 1:23 PM) <https://guides.library.fresnostate.edu/c.php?g=636720> [<https://perma.cc/KE8K-9MLJ>].

122. NGAI, *supra* note 111, at 188.

123. *Id.*

both Japanese and Unangâ communities. The history of those movements deserves its own paper. This section is a highly truncated version of that history.

Both Japanese Americans and Unangâ underwent a form of “social amnesia,” described as a kind of “group phenomenon marked by attempts to suppress feelings and memories of particular moments or extended periods[,] not a psychological pathology but a conscious effort to screen memories.”¹²⁴ In this way, the groups’ two divergent experiences became deeply connected.

The children of the internees—or those internees who were too young to remember—became active in the 1970s and began demanding redress.¹²⁵ For Japanese Americans, this movement came on the coattails of the “Yellow Power” movement of the 1970s, with the backing of the newly formed “pan-Asian” identity.¹²⁶ In the Aleutians, the Unangâ also started lobbying for redress, also during a wider cultural moment. The “Red Power” movement started in the late 60s, shortly before the Unangâ started their campaign.¹²⁷ Alice Pertivelli—an Atkan, internee of Killisnoo camp, and strong advocate for the Unangâ people—reflected on the movement:

One positive effect that the evacuation had on the Aleut people as a whole was exposure to the political process. This helped the Aleut people become more self-determined about making decisions that affected their lives. It helped us achieve more independence from governmental agents who determined that we were incapable of planning our cultures and carrying out our goals concerning the way we wanted to live our lives. In spite of all that has happened to us we are still around, although gone are the secure Aleut lifestyles in which we were comfortable in our villages before World War II.¹²⁸

Pertivelli first told her daughter about what happened to her and other Atkans during World War II during the redress movement. “Because it was not in the history books,” Pertivelli recalled, “she did not believe me.”¹²⁹ John Tateishi, one of the leaders of the JACL’s redress movement, recalled that the first, and biggest, hurdle was convincing everyone that internment actually happened.¹³⁰ In an effort to spread the history, Tateishi went on a media tour that included radio talk shows. “Even in the Bay, which is such a liberal

124. Rie Makino, *Absent Presence as a Nonprotest Narrative: Internment, Interethnicity, and Christianity in Hisaye Yamamoto’s “The Eskimo Connection,”* 26 *THE JAPANESE J. OF AM. STUD.* 99, 104 (2015).

125. *Id.*

126. See ERIC K. YAMAMOTO, MARGARET CHON, CAROL L. IZUMI, JERRY KANG & FRANK H. WU, *RACE, RIGHTS, AND REPARATION: LAW AND THE JAPANESE AMERICAN INTERNMENT* 279 (2013).

127. VINE DELORIA JR., *CUSTER DIED FOR YOUR SINS* 182, 254 (1969).

128. KOHLHOFF, *supra* note 21, at x.

129. *Id.* at xi.

130. Interview with John Tateishi.

area, people would call in and accuse me of lying,” he said,¹³¹ “They’d say, ‘This never happened in this country. Otherwise, we would know about it.’”¹³²

Japanese and Unangâ activists lobbied to get a Congressional hearing. As a result, a bipartisan federal commission was established in 1980 to review the circumstances surrounding World War II internment camps.¹³³ Nine men—senators, congressmen, government officials, and even a judge—oversaw hearings all over the country and invited anyone who had been interned to testify. Over the course of six months in 1981, the Commission held twenty days of hearings and called more than seven hundred and fifty witnesses.¹³⁴ Three of those hearings occurred in Anchorage, Unalaska, and St. Paul. There, some Unangâ people spoke about their experiences for the first time.

IV. UNDERSTANDING

In 1988, the Civil Liberties Act finally passed. The election of Japanese Americans to national office after World War II was “crucial” to its passage.¹³⁵ So, too, were the political efforts by the Unangâ; the Alaskan congressional representatives at the time—Don Young and Ted Stevens—had close ties to the Alaska Native community.¹³⁶ Yet despite these ties, the remedies for each group differed.

The unity that bound the Unangâ and Japanese American activists was not reflected in the final version of the Civil Liberties Act. Congress split the bill into two parts: the first was dedicated to the Japanese Americans, and the second was dedicated to the Unangâ. The Japanese portion of the bill began with a historic apology:¹³⁷

Congress recognizes that . . . a grave injustice was done to both citizens and permanent resident aliens of Japanese ancestry by the evacuation, relocation, and internment of civilians during World War II . . . [T]hese actions were . . . motivated largely by racial prejudice, wartime hysteria, and a failure of political leadership . . . For these fundamental violations

131. *Id.*

132. *Id.*

133. Sharon Yamato, *Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians*, DENSHO PROJECT ENCYC. (July 8, 2020, 8:26 PM), https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Commission_on_Wartime_Relocation_and_Internment_of_Civilians [<https://perma.cc/R2SA-A6L6>].

134. COMM’N ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS, *supra* note 3, at xxvii.

135. YAMAMOTO ET AL., *supra* note 126, at 280.

136. Marie (Matsuno) Nash, ALASKA WOMEN’S HALL OF FAME, <https://www.alaskawomenshalloffame.org/alumnae/marie-nash/> [<https://perma.cc/CQ4M-6JWP>] (last visited Apr. 26, 2024) (Marie Matsuno Nash is half-Unangâ and half-Japanese. She was born in Camp Minidoka and later served in Senator Stevens’ office for years. She is one of the many hidden voices who contributed to the passage of the bill. Both Unangâ and Japanese descendants are indebted to her.).

137. APOLOGY RESOLUTION, Pub. L. No. 103–150, 107 Stat. 1510 (1993) (This apology is one of just two that Congress passed. The second, known as the Apology Resolution, apologized to Native Hawaiians on behalf of the U.S. government for overthrowing the kingdom of Hawai’i.).

of the basic civil liberties and constitutional rights of these individuals of Japanese ancestry, the Congress apologizes on behalf of the Nation.¹³⁸

It also earmarked \$20,000 to each Japanese American interned during World War II and an additional \$1.65 billion for a public education fund to “to inform the public about the internment of [Japanese] individuals so as to prevent the recurrence of any similar event.”¹³⁹

The Unangâ section of the bill differed significantly. The Japanese portion made sure to recognize the “individuals” who had been interned. But the Unangâ portion included no recognition of individuality, or any identity apart from the large umbrella term “Aleuts.”¹⁴⁰ Unlike the section about Japanese internment, the Unangâ internment had no apology.¹⁴¹ Although the government recognized “the injustices suffered by the Aleuts during World War II,” the statement reads almost contractually.¹⁴² The government “failed to provide reasonable care” and to “protect Aleut personal and community property while such property was in its possession.”¹⁴³ The only “remedy” for those losses was “appropriate compensation.”¹⁴⁴ To that end, the Unangâ received \$4.7 million for a trust fund along with an additional \$12,000 to each surviving internee.¹⁴⁵ (Although they lacked an apology, they did receive more money per capita than the Japanese.) The trust could be used to benefit elders or disabled villagers; help “students in need of scholarship assistance”; preserve Unangâ “cultural heritage and historical records”; improve community centers”; and generally “improve the condition” of Unangâ life.¹⁴⁶

The Japanese apology included an acknowledgement of the removal and internment of citizens—nodding to the violation of legal rights that occurred.¹⁴⁷ The Unangâ section contained nothing like that. Although it opaquely acknowledged the cultural loss caused by the removal, internment, and death of many Unangâ, there was no recognition of the Alaskan native group’s citizenship.

The differences between what each group received reflect the differences between how each group was racialized. Although racism was used as a justification for both of their confinement (explored later in the article), the differences in that racialization are evident in the text of the Act. Although the histories of Japanese Americans and Unangâ differ greatly, they were sometimes racialized in similar ways: as “Oriental,” as other, as non-citizens

138. 50 U.S.C.A. § 4202.

139. 50 U.S.C.A. § 4215.

140. 50 U.S.C.A. § 4202.

141. *Id.*

142. *Id.*

143. *Id.*

144. *Id.*

145. *Id.*; 50 U.S.C.A. § 4236.

146. 50 U.S.C.A. § 4202; 50 U.S.C.A. § 4236.

147. 50 U.S.C.A. § 4202 (“[A] grave injustice was done to both citizens and permanent resident aliens of Japanese ancestry by the evacuation, relocation, and internment of civilians during World War II.”).

(despite legal citizenship) who, importantly, had desirable resources. This combination of racial threat and economic asset led to both groups' removal. However, the additional racialization of Unangâ as government wards—thus lacking full citizenship rights, autonomy, and personhood—led to the absence of any apologies for what the Alaska Native group went through, and the contractual nature of their restitution.

Again, compare the contractual, impersonal nature of the Unangâ section to the apology to every individual Japanese internee. The Civil Liberties Act may only have affected a relatively small portion of the U.S. population, but it represents something much larger: how the law—even one written to remedy historical injustices—reflects dominant assumptions about race.

A. *Racialization*

Issei, *Nisei*, and *Sansei* were all racialized as non-citizen, and therefore not worthy of citizenship's attendant rights. The United States has a strong tradition of civic ostracization of Asians from the body politic.¹⁴⁸ Even Asian Americans with formal citizenship have, historically, experienced "racial extraterritorialization."¹⁴⁹ Japanese concentration camps were the logical end to that excommunication. While most internees were formal citizens, "they were *excluded* from the category of American identity."¹⁵⁰

The Orientalizing of the Unangâ may have also contributed to their internment, both in tangible and intangible ways. By the late nineteenth century, it was generally believed that all indigenous coastal Alaskans came from Asia across the Bering Land bridge.¹⁵¹ In 1867, Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner—during a three-hour speech in favor of ratifying the U.S.-Alaska purchase—classified "Aleutians" as "Mongolian in origin."¹⁵² An ethnographer traveling through Alaska noted that "throughout British Columbia, there is the indisputable opinion that [Tlingit and Haida native people] are descendants of Japanese sailors."¹⁵³

Political and anthropological discourses became preoccupied with the idea of distinguishing Alaska Native people from other indigenous groups in the continental United States, a distinction based "on perceived Asian origins."¹⁵⁴ By separating indigenous Alaskans from Native Nations in the south, American politicians successfully avoided the thorny question of whether indigenous groups needed separate treaties (or contracts) in order to approve of the Alaska Purchase.¹⁵⁵ This separation continued up until World

148. Claire Jean Kim, *The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans*, 27 *POL. & Soc'y* 105, 107 (1999).

149. Devon W. Carbado, *Racial Naturalization*, 57 *AM. Q.* 633, 638 (2005).

150. *Id.*

151. FRANZ BOAS, *THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF FRANZ BOAS: LETTERS AND DIARIES OF FRANZ BOAS, WRITTEN ON THE NORTHWEST COAST FROM 1886–1931* 6 (ed. Ronald P. Rohner, 1969).

152. PEGUES, *supra* note 10, at 25.

153. BOAS, *supra* note 151, at 98.

154. PEGUES, *supra* note 10, at 26.

155. *But cf. id.* (that there was no need to orientalize Lower-48 Native Nations in

War II. Alaska Natives weren't granted U.S. citizenship until 1940, nearly twenty years after indigenous people in the lower-48.¹⁵⁶ By racializing Alaska Natives—specifically Unangâ—as Asian, the U.S. government was able to withhold corresponding rights.

Unangâ were also racialized in more direct ways. The U.S. government's stated rationale for the Alaskan internment was for protection against Japanese invasion.¹⁵⁷ This likely was a significant factor in the decision to corral the Unangâ population: after the bombing of Dutch Harbor and the invasion of Attu, it was reasonable to believe that the Aleutian Islands were unsafe for civilians.¹⁵⁸ But there was another, darker possibility. To the U.S. military, an Unangan man and a Japanese soldier were physically indistinguishable.

Why were white civilians not interned? The evacuation was based on race. Anyone in the region who was one-eighth Unangâ or more was required to evacuate.¹⁵⁹ But white civilians were given the choice to evacuate or not. This may be because, in the eyes of the U.S. government, the indigenous people posed a greater risk: Unangan were “difficult to differentiate from potential Japanese spies.”¹⁶⁰ There were multiple incidents of the military detaining Unangâ for being suspected Japanese soldiers.¹⁶¹ In one incident, several Unangâ men—out on a hike from the nearby Biorka village—were seized by the U.S. military and held for nearly two weeks.¹⁶² The Unangâ themselves were not blind to this. Years after internment, John Tateishi, a JACL activist, recalled meeting redress lobbyists from the Aleutians.

I was over at the House, and all of a sudden these two men showed up, and they had come down from Alaska to testify. It was the first time I heard what that experience was like. One was Mike Zaharoff, and the other was Philemon Tutiakoff. You know, I met them, I looked at them and I said, “Shit. Except for your names, you could be Japanese.” And one of them says, “Why the hell do you think they put us into those damn prisons?”¹⁶³

*John Tateishi, Redress Director of the
Japanese American Citizens League*

order to seize their land).

156. See 8 U.S.C.A. § 1401 (the delay may be attributable to the fact that Alaska was not granted statehood until the fifties).

157. Eve Tuck & K. Wayne Yang, *Decolonization is not a Metaphor*, 1 DECOLONIZATION: INDIGENITY, EDUC., AND SOC'Y 1, 18 (2012).

158. KOHLHOFF, *supra* note 21, at 43.

159. Levi J. Long, *WWII Internments set Aleuts Adrift From Their Islands*, SEATTLE TIMES (Feb. 19, 2004), <https://archive.seattletimes.com/archive/?date=20040219&slug=aleut19m> [<https://perma.cc/5GPM-P8S9>]. Note the similarity to how race was legally defined. For example, Florida's anti-miscegenation law from 1865 identified anyone with more than one-eighth “negro blood” as fitting the definition of “a person of color.” An Act to amend the Act entitled An Act concerning Marriage Licenses, L. OF FLA., Chap. 1,468 §§ 1–3 (1865).

160. Tuck & Yang, *supra* note 157.

161. PEGUES, *supra* note 10, at 146.

162. *Id.*

163. Interview with John Tateishi, *supra* note 130.

Finally, several of the military commanders in charge of the island wanted the Unanga⁶⁴ out of the way. Any argument that evacuating Unanga⁶⁵ was for their safety was a “subtext,” and nowhere was this more evident than the treatment of Unalaskans.¹⁶⁴ The villagers were evacuated after the bombing of Dutch Harbor—after the danger had subsided—while white civilians were allowed to stay. The commanding general of Fort Mears, an Army base just south of Dutch Harbor, called Unanga⁶⁶ “degenerates” and saw their removal as a way to cleanse the area of social problems.¹⁶⁵ He feared that the Native people would “distract” military settlers through alcohol and sex.¹⁶⁶

B. *Land Grab*

We’re charged with wanting to get rid of the Japs for selfish reasons. We might as well be honest. We do. It’s a question of whether the white man lives on the Pacific Coast or the brown man. They came into this valley to work, and they stayed to take over If all the Japs were removed tomorrow, we’d never miss them in two weeks, because the white farmers can take over and produce everything the Jap grows. And we don’t want them back when the war ends, either.¹⁶⁷

*Austin Anson, Managing Secretary, Vegetable
Grower-Shipper Association of Salinas (CA)*

Before World War II, Japanese farmers produced more than a third of all commercial crops in California, despite owning less than two percent of the state’s total farmland.¹⁶⁸ In 1940, the average cost per acre of West Coast farms was \$37.94, while the average cost of Japanese farms was \$279.96.¹⁶⁹ Pearl Harbor gave white, western farmers an opportunity. Shortly after the attack, Austin Anson—a member of a farmer’s union—was “dispatched” to Washington to lobby for the removal of all *Issei* and *Nisei* from the West Coast.¹⁷⁰ A DOJ official warned the President against removal of farmers “who were helping feed the civilian population and the military,” calling Anson’s efforts “nonsense.”¹⁷¹

164. KOHLHOFF, *supra* note 21, at 69.

165. *Id.*

166. *Id.* Using promiscuity and alcoholism as a justification for excluding native people (instead of whites) is textbook racism, and part of a long-standing playbook deployed against indigenous people in both the Lower-48 and Alaska.

167. Frank J. Taylor, *The People Nobody Wants*, THE SATURDAY EVENING POST (May 9, 1942), <https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2017/05/people-nobody-wants> [<https://perma.cc/E3EB-4D5C>].

168. *History: Before the War*, HEART MOUNTAIN, <https://www.heartmountain.org/history/before-the-war> [<https://perma.cc/97F9-4UCR>].

169. COMM’N ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS AND UNITED STATES, *supra* note 3, at 122.

170. Taylor, *supra* note 167.

171. A.V. Krebs, Opinion, *Bitter Harvest: How Profiteers Forced the Nisei off Their Farms During WWII*, WASH. POST (Feb. 2, 1992), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1992/02/02/bitter-harvest/c8389b23-884d-43bd-ad34-bf7b11077135> [<https://perma.cc/Q9KJ-TVQ7>].

The removal and internment of Japanese Americans was justified by (false claims of) national security.¹⁷² And yet, the DOJ official's argument—that Japanese farms helped feed the military amassing throughout the West coast—was also a form of a national security argument. These justifications were a Potemkin village. But white farmers' attempted land grab held more water.

There were similar justifications—both Potemkin and real—for the internment of Alaska Natives. The predominant justification for the removal of the Unangâ was grounded in safety, too. Throughout June 1942, the Japanese army bombed and invaded several islands along the Aleutian Island chain.¹⁷³ The evacuation was, supposedly, done for the personal safety of the Alaska Native peoples in the region.¹⁷⁴ And yet, it was undergirded by both racial animus (explained above) and—I argue—a desire for strategic land.

The Aleutian Island chain was strategically important given their position near most direct routes from northern Asia, the U.S. West Coast, Alaska, and Hawaiian Islands, making them the “most useful” to the U.S. military.¹⁷⁵ In 1935, one general told the U.S. Congress that “whoever holds Alaska will hold the world.”¹⁷⁶ But the Unangâ were in the way. By removing the Unangan, the military was able to freely occupy the islands and the buildings left behind.

To understand why the U.S. military, which moved thousands of troops through the Aleutian Island chain, desired the comparatively small hundreds of buildings left behind by the Unangâ, one must first understand the geography of the region. The Aleutian Islands are so rural that most Americans have trouble comprehending that level of isolation. Even in the modern era, it can take days for planes to reach the islands—sometimes upwards of a week.¹⁷⁷ In

172. *See, e.g.,* *Korematsu v. United States*, 323 U.S. 214, 223 (1944) (“Korematsu was not excluded from the Military Area because of hostility to him or his race. He was excluded because we are at war with the Japanese Empire, because the properly constituted military authorities feared an invasion of our West Coast and felt constrained to take proper security measures, because they decided that the military urgency of the situation demanded that all citizens of Japanese ancestry be segregated from the West Coast temporarily, and finally, because Congress, reposing its confidence in this time of war in our military leaders—as inevitably it must—determined that they should have the power to do just this.”).

173. COMM'N ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS, *supra* note 3, at 322.

174. *Id.* at 69.

175. W. L. Goldsborough, *The Aleutians—Their Strategic Importance*, 67 PROCEEDINGS 830, 832 (1941).

176. FRANCIS PIKE, *HIROHITO'S WAR: THE PACIFIC WAR, 1941–1945* 1003 (2016).

177. *See, e.g.,* Sofia Stuart-Rasi, *Volcanic Ash Clouds Disrupt Medical Air Travel in Aleutians*, KUCB (Nov. 3, 2023, 9:02 PM), <https://www.kucb.org/health/2023-11-03/volcanic-ash-clouds-disrupt-medical-air-travel-in-aleutians> [<https://perma.cc/ML6H-77YQ>] (volcanic eruptions limiting medical evacuations from Unalaska); Andy Lusk, *Military Delegation Visit to Unalaska Postponed*, KUCB (Oct. 31, 2023, 3:07 PM) <https://www.kucb.org/regional/2023-10-31/military-delegation-visit-to-unalaska-postponed> [<https://perma.cc/Q2VX-NDJD>] (inclement weather leading to the cancellation of U.S. Coast Guard flights, Army flights, and Space Force flights to Unalaska); Jim Wilson, *On Assignment: Ceiling Briefly Unlimited*, N.Y. TIMES (Nov. 25, 2009) <https://archive.nytimes>.

such remote locations, existing infrastructure is incredibly valuable, something that the U.S. government was acutely aware of.¹⁷⁸

C. *Civil Liberties Act*

Over the years, I have spoken to Senator Norman Mineta, John Kirtland (the lawyer who represented the Unangaġ during the reparations process), John Tateishi, and various other politicians and activists. None were able to explain why the two groups ended up with different allowances. Only one clue remains, buried deep in the legislative history: “The Aleuts’ case for compensation derives not from the relocation orders executed by military commanders on the scene, but rather from the treatment suffered at the hands of the Government following the evacuation.”¹⁷⁹ These terms were proposed by the Aleutian/Pribilof Islands Association and the Aleut Corporation.¹⁸⁰

Although there are differences in how money was allocated between the two groups—larger individual awards for Japanese Americans, trusts with varying prohibitions on how the money could be used for Unangaġ—the most significant difference was the apology. Why?

The Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians released a final report that Congress adopted almost word-for-word.¹⁸¹ An explicit apology was only recommended for the Japanese.¹⁸² By way of explanation, the Commission noted that it found “no persuasive showing that evacuation of the Aleuts was motivated by racism or that it was undertaken for any reason but their safety.”¹⁸³ Other reports also insisted that the evac-

com/lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/11/25/assignment-16/ [https://perma.cc/Y9S5-N5AR] (weather forcing the grounding of a man flying from Unalaska to Nikolski for more than five days).

178. COMM’N ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS, *supra* note 3, at 69 (“If Aleuts were evacuated, their homes and lands would be open for military use.”).

179. *Civil Liberties Act of 1985 and the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands Restitution Act: Hearings on H.R. 442 and H.R. 2415 Before the Subcomm. on Admin. L. & Gov. Rels. of the House Judiciary*, 99th Cong. 1601 (1986).

180. *Id.* at 1622.

181. *See, e.g.*, COMM’N ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS, *supra* note 3, at 462 (“The Commission recommends that Congress pass a joint resolution, to be signed by the President, which recognizes that a grave injustice was done and offers the apologies of the nation for the acts of exclusion, removal and detention.”); *cf.* 50 U.S.C.A. § 4202 (“Congress recognizes that, as described by the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, a grave injustice was done to both citizens and permanent resident aliens of Japanese ancestry by the evacuation, relocation, and internment of civilians during World War II.”).

182. COMM’N ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS, *supra* note 3, at 462 (“The Commission recommends that Congress pass a joint resolution, to be signed by the President, which recognizes that a grave injustice was done and offers the apologies of the nation for the acts of exclusion, removal and detention.”).

183. *Id.* at 464.

uation was “militarily justified.”¹⁸⁴ But, as shown above, race was an explicit factor in determining who should be evacuated.¹⁸⁵

The lack of apology may be rooted in the US government’s colonial posture towards indigenous people: that Native peoples are “wards,” and in the Unanga case, wards who the U.S. government “failed to care for . . . properly.”¹⁸⁶ This understanding of the colonialist attitude goes both ways: Unanga had long complained of “Interior Department paternalism and condescension.”¹⁸⁷ Perhaps no fact can communicate that condescension more strongly than this: in the hundreds of pages of government documents, letters, and memorandums debating what to do about the Unanga, at no point is there any mention of anyone asking for their opinion.

In a brief submitted to Congress and arguing for redress, the Unanga are careful to distinguish themselves from the Japanese: “The Aleut experience in World War II is unique in the annals of modern American history. These citizens were neither accused nor suspected of any disloyalty to the United States in time of war.”¹⁸⁸ The brief then referred to educational segregation and racial discrimination against Black Americans.¹⁸⁹ Perhaps it was this reference to the Civil Rights Movement, and specifically the reference to *Bolling v. Sharpe*, that doomed the apology. If Congress apologized to the Unanga, then they might have to apologize for perpetuating the Jim Crow regime and, perhaps eventually, for slavery.

Congress was correct in making the connection between the treatment of Black and Unangan Americans, but deeply flawed in their rejection of it. One year after the Civil Liberties Act was signed into existence, Representative John Conyers introduced H.R. 40, *Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act*.¹⁹⁰ Rep. Conyers continued introducing the bill every session, for nearly 30 years, before he retired in 2017.¹⁹¹

CONCLUSION

Rie Makino—a literature professor who studied Japanese internment—wrote about the distinction between suppressing and forgetting. Suppression, as defined by Makino, is the act of concealing “emotional anger, grief, and

184. Dept. of Def. Appropriations Act of 1989, Pub. L. No. 100–463, 102 Stat. 2270 (1989).

185. See COMM’N ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS, *supra* note 3.

186. PEGUES, *supra* note 10, at 151.

187. COMM’N ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS, *supra* note 3, at 69.

188. *Civil Liberties Act of 1985 and Aleutian and Pribilof Islands Restitution Act*, *supra* note 178, at 1642.

189. *Id.* at 1644.

190. Sarah Hulett, *John Conyers, Detroit and Former Dean of House of Representatives, Dead at 90*, MICH. RADIO (Oct. 27, 2019, 4:31 PM), <https://www.michiganradio.org/news/2019-10-27/john-conyers-detroit-and-former-dean-of-house-of-representatives-dead-at-90> [https://perma.cc/9YSP-GWYG].

191. *Id.*

protest arising from [the] trauma” of incarceration.¹⁹² This was illuminated by the different generational experiences of those who went through internment: the children of internees were “aggressively involved in the redress movement,” while their parents were reluctant to talk about it.¹⁹³

As I have researched these twin stories of internment, I have tracked another similarity, one that does not fit neatly into the bounds of an academic paper. (Or at least, this academic paper.) This is a generational pattern, one I have developed largely through anecdotal evidence. Those who were interned did their best to move on from the experience; their children demanded redress; and now their grandchildren attempt to preserve the history. Perhaps that generational removal is what helps them engage with it. But our explorations rely on the generosity of our elders, who share their painful stories. In the words of Jake Lestenkof: “People tended to hesitate to talk about that experience, including me. They seem very reluctant. The people who are interested in the experience are people like you, who were not born yet.”¹⁹⁴

I am grateful for Jake Lestenkof, Leo Mercurief, John Tateishi, Norman Mineta, Marie Matsuno Nash, and John Kirtland—all elders who took the time to speak with me personally. I am also grateful to the many, many people who spoke to historians to ensure that this painful history was not lost.

192. Makino, *supra* note 124, at 104.

193. *Id.*

194. Interview with Jake Lesteknoff.