

## STUDENT HANDOUT

***The Japanese in California*** (page 1) for *Flawed Democracies, Human Rights*

In the spring of 1942 the government of the United States began the removal and internment of 110,000 of its residents, two-thirds of them native-born Americans. The "relocation," as it was called, applied to all citizens and resident aliens of Japanese ancestry. These citizens and residents were not individually charged—rather they were collectively ordered to report for internment.

Perhaps it is necessary for one to have lived on the West Coast in those last weeks of 1941 and the first months of 1942 to understand the curious hysteria—a mixture of fear and outrage—that was abroad. It was seriously suggested that Japanese saboteurs dwelt in inconspicuous hovels near oil refineries and shipyards, that fishermen had their Imperial Navy uniforms wrapped in oilskins in their bait boxes, that houseboys were intelligence agents and farmers militiamen. . . . Week after week came news of successive Japanese victories; suddenly the Japanese seemed a kind of despicable super race that threatened our very national existence.

Thus there was perhaps nothing entirely surprising in America's, and particularly California's, fearful reaction against its own Japanese. Indeed, "The Yellow Peril" was a familiar threat to the Far West and it antedated the immigration of the Japanese themselves. A century of anti-Orientalism, punctuated by outbursts of physical and civil violence, stood back of the relocation order of 1942.

Though Japanese did not begin coming to the United States in significant numbers until after 1890, Professor Roger Daniels has noted that "the anti-Japanese movement was in many ways merely a continuation of the long-standing agitation against the Chinese which began in the early 1850's." Chinese had come to California with the Gold Rush, and reaction against them and other conspicuous foreigners followed quickly. There was gold enough for everybody fortunate to be on the ground in 1848, but by 1850 there was no elbow room left in the placers and Americans, perhaps naturally, turned to the notion that the gold in American soil (however recently Americanized) was for Americans. In particular, the success of skilled Mexican miners and industrious Chinese seemed an infringement upon the fruits of Manifest Destiny. . . .

[A] set of anti-Oriental prejudices and responses developed against the Chinese and greeted the Japanese in America. . . . The United States Industrial Commission stated in 1901 that the Japanese "are more servile than the Chinese, but less obedient and far less desirable. They have most of the vices of the Chinese, with none of the virtues. They underbid the Chinese in everything, and are as a class tricky, unreliable, and dishonest."

When the Chinese Exclusion Act came up for its second renewal in 1902, rallies and speeches urged exclusion of the Japanese as well. Supporters of every stripe shared a rude awakening, however, when the Japanese counter-demonstrated, arguing that they were the equals of Americans.



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In a half-century of abuse the Chinese had never done anything like that. This self-assertive response was not forgotten, and came to serve anti-Japanese forces as yet another example of the Japanese "threat."

. . . In 1908 a major subsidiary organization, the Anti-Jap Laundry League, was formed among the various San Francisco trade unions. By the 1920's the organizations had proliferated to the extent that a co-ordinating body was required—the Associated Anti-Japanese Leagues.

The agitation from labor, and occasional newspaper harangues like the *Chronicle's* of 1905 citing "The Japanese Invasion, the Problem of the Hour," set off legislative attempts to regulate the Japanese. From 1905 to 1924 the California lawmakers were besieged with proposed laws, memorials, and resolutions. . . . From this agitation would emerge three important actions: The "Gentlemen's Agreement" of 1908, the Alien Land Law of 1913, and the Japanese Exclusion Act of 1924.

Theodore Roosevelt's "Gentlemen's Agreement" was an outgrowth of a seemingly minor action by the San Francisco School Board. In October of 1906 the school board, in a half-hearted effort to fulfill a campaign promise of Mayor Eugene Schmitz (under fire for corruption and sorely in need of public favor), ordered all Japanese children to join the Chinese in the Oriental School. The action went largely unnoticed outside of San Francisco until garbled reports emerged in a very much insulted Japanese press. The Japanese government was enraged—as was Roosevelt when he realized that an incident of international moment had been created. . . .

Seeking a compromise, Roosevelt cajoled San Francisco into reinstating the Japanese students, closed immigration of Japanese from Hawaii, Canada, and Mexico, and entered negotiations with Japan. To avoid the affront of a Japanese Exclusion Bill, Roosevelt got the Japanese informally to agree to simply cease issuing passports to laborers. This agreement did not prevent the families of Japanese living in America from immigrating, and as a result, Californians would later claim that they had been betrayed. Nonetheless, anti-Japanese sentiment began to ebb after 1908 in San Francisco and other urban areas. Unfortunately, it began to spread in rural regions.

The Japanese, restricted from working in the cities by strong labor union agitation, gravitated to agricultural labor. . . . Their thrift and industry brought several hundred thousand acres into their proprietorship—and earned them the competitive enmity and fear of many of their American neighbors. The alarm caused by their success was most dramatically registered in the Alien Land Law of 1913.



## HISTORICAL WITNESS

★ SOCIAL MESSAGING ★

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. . . In May of 1913 the Alien Land Law was passed, preventing Japanese from purchasing land or leasing it for more than three years. It should be noted here that the restrictions against citizenship and against owning land could only apply to the Issei (Japanese aliens) and not to Nisei (Japanese born on American soil), and that this factor ultimately undermined the effectiveness of the land law.

From 1913 to 1919 anti-Japanese legislation subsided with Japan's entrance into World War I on the side of the Allies, but following 1920 it became apparent that California's anti-Orientalism was rather generally accepted in the nation as a whole. Strong fears of growing Japanese military prowess in the Pacific were fanned by consistent "yellow peril" warnings from California, and in 1924 it finally became possible to pass into law an immigration act which specifically excluded Japanese.

The Japanese Exclusion Act ended this burst of anti-Japanese agitation in the United States, but its embers were kept warm through the 1930's with such literary and cinematic stereotypes as the sly, ruthless Oriental villain. The Japanese occupation of Manchuria, her invasion of China, her withdrawal from the League of Nations, her defiance of naval arms limitations, and such incidents as the bombing of the U.S.S. *Panay* all contributed to a general consciousness of a Japanese threat to America.

Americans had spent a century learning to hate and fear the Japanese, and after the catastrophe of Pearl Harbor they lashed out—half in habit, and half in frustration—at the only available enemy. . . . General John L. DeWitt, Commander of the Western Defense Command, empowered by [President Franklin D.] Roosevelt to declare "military areas" and exclude "any and all persons" from them, on March 2 [1942] declared California, Oregon, and Washington to be strategic areas and stipulated that persons of Japanese descent would be removed therefrom. Decisions and orders moved faster than the bureaucracy could implement them, and substantial hardship ensued.

No facilities for detaining the evacuees existed when the order to relocate was given, and the first centers at Manzanar, California, and Poston, Arizona, were army reception centers hastily transferred to the War Relocation Authority. These camps began receiving Japanese Americans late in March of 1942, in most cases before they were entirely completed—and often when completed they were inadequate in size, sanitation, and protection from the elements for even minimum standards of human comfort. The Centers at Tule Lake, California; Gila River, Arizona; Topaz, Utah; Minidoka, Idaho; Granada, Colorado; Jerome, Arkansas; and Heart Mountain, Wyoming, were in some of the most God-forsaken regions in this country, and despite almost herculean efforts by the WRA's director, Dillon Myer, the evacuees suffered from freezing winters and blistering summers.



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The Japanese Americans also suffered almost incalculable economic losses as a result of relocation. Forced to settle their affairs in a matter of days or weeks between notification and actual evacuation, they fell victim to financial opportunists who bought their property and possessions at prices far below market value. The real and personal property not immediately sold was either stored or left in the hands of trustees, where it was often stolen, vandalized, or sold through legal chicanery for next to nothing. The government began escheatment proceedings against the farmland of many evacuees, who could not adequately fight back from their distant relocation centers. Ultimately, the government paid \$38,474,140 in property claims to Japanese Americans. This figure is generally conceded to be less than 10% of the actual value of their property, which was estimated in 1942 by the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco to total \$400,000,000. But figures are largely meaningless, because it is impossible to evaluate the wages, income, interest, and appreciation that the evacuees lost during their incarceration.

Even as the internees lived behind barbed wire, an ironic footnote was being written by young Japanese American men in Europe and the Pacific. Japanese American soldiers served hazardous duty with specialized units. . . . The 442nd Combat Team, an all-Japanese American unit fighting in Italy and France, emerged with more casualties and more decorations than any other unit of comparable size and length of service in the Army's history. In all, more than 25,000 Japanese Americans served—and many died—in the armed forces during the war.

But the tragedy of the relocation was more than squalid internment camps, lost property, and sons dead and maimed. Japanese Americans suffered the psychological stress of confinement, the embarrassment and humiliation of being regarded as traitors to their country, and the inescapable fear that their ancestry rather than their actions would always determine how they would be treated. The relocation confronted other Americans with the fact that they had paid only lip service to a cherished tradition of equality and constitutional protection—and left them with a shame that no amount of rationalization or studied indifference could diminish.

Excerpted from "The Japanese in California," by Donald Pike and Roger Olmsted, in *Executive Order 9066: The Internment of 110,000 Japanese Americans*, by Maisie and Richard Conrat (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1992).