

# A Critical Language Exchange at Tule Lake

R. Ken Fujioka

## Introduction

Darnell discusses the “asymmetrical access to power” between native Americans and white Americans within the context of interethnic communications (61). This retention of power over a subordinate group constrains interaction and creates a feeling of uneasiness which, in turn, further reinforces the unequal status between the two groups. Darnell goes on to elaborate that political, legal and educational institutions were at the forefront of validating this “power differential” (61). Though the identification of potential obstacles in communication specifically refers to the above-mentioned contact group, similar observations can certainly pertain to almost any interethnic situation in which a dominant party exerts power over a subordinate party. American history has left a number of institutional fingerprints testifying to the enactment of English language policies. Here is a partial list to name just a few:

1. In a response to the growing number of German Catholic schools, the 1889 Edwards Law of Illinois and the Bennett Law of Wisconsin required elementary schools to instruct children in English. Though this law was later repealed it was clear that state government’s position was to show no tolerance for language use other than English (Wiley 218).

2. From 1913 to 1923, the number of states which required English as the language of instruction in public and private schools increased from 17 to 34. “In 15 of those states the imposition of English—only policies was explicitly linked to restrictions on other languages” (Wiley 228–9).
3. The policies to Americanize immigrants during the period between 1914 and 1924 by the state and federal government emphasized the use of English and American civic values for all the United States (Ricento 90).
4. The United States introduced English instruction to the Philippines at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Phillipson 152).
5. In 1906, on the island of Guam, English was imposed for legal and governmental purposes while the indigenous language, Chamorro, was prohibited in school in 1922 (Phillipson 153).

Whether such policies produced the desirable linguistic results continues to be debated, however, its long term effect on the attitudes and values of not only those subjected but those who exerted their influence over them, continues to cast its shadow even today. More likely, the enforcement of “Americanization” policies on ethnic parties was more successful in stigmatizing cultural and linguistic diversity than in facilitating assimilation. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, it had succeeded in contributing to intergenerational conflict in many ethnic families by weakening respect for the language and culture of parents in the eyes of children who were less than fully assimilated (Wiley 231 quoted in Montalto).

This paper attempts to show that this attitude of power and dominance was clearly exploited at the Tule Lake Relocation Center for the Japanese Nikkei during World War II. After establishing the context for

the tense atmosphere at the internment camp and investigating a series of critical events surrounding the arrest and confinement of Nikkei internees, I will examine the cause of their arrest, which may provide clues why those incarcerated were deemed to pose such a threat. I will conclude that the institutional treatment of internees after this incident had negative ramifications which brought on further suffering.

### Pearl Harbor

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese in Hawaii, particularly the Japanese-born Issei, were suddenly thrust into the spotlight of suspicion. Rumors spread that those who were involved in the attack were among the island's Japanese residents. Reluctant to speak their native tongue for fear of misunderstanding and even backlash, they replaced their family names and first names with American names, burned prized photographs from their homeland, and essentially kept a low profile away from the glaring spotlight of public attention. A Nikkei spokesperson for the "Speak American" campaign, exhorting the Japanese who comprised nearly one-third of the population of Hawaii's Japanese to speak English, rationalized it in this way:

"In time of war, many things associated with the enemy are a source of irritation and suspicion. Japanese, being the language of our enemy, is especially irritating to many people. Used in the presence of others who cannot understand it, it also leads to suspicion" (Yoshida 330).

From then on, whenever they spoke Japanese, which was never in public, they whispered (Brown 113). Residents were subjected to strict rules concerning telephone calls. They learned that all telephone conversations would be censored and thus were restricted to English only (Brown 84).

The Japanese-speaking community including those residing in the continental United States, were conscious that, due to their salient appearance and mannerisms among a predominantly white public, they would have to force themselves to speak in English no matter how awkward it was. When they arrived at the assembly centers, where over 100,000 Nikkei evacuees were held, the mandate to discourage the use of Japanese speech in meetings, cultural events and religious services further accentuated the subordinate status of the Japanese Nikkei (Fujioka 217–219).

At the ten relocation centers scattered around the western and mid-western United States after evacuees had been detained for months in assembly centers on the West Coast, the War Relocation Authority (WRA), National Director Dillon Meyer had already assigned project directors to facilitate the governing of Nikkei evacuees. Each director was given latitude in terms of setting up policies; however, Tule Lake Relocation Center, the largest of the WRA-run centers, became synonymous with peoples' suffering from the hands of a misdirected administration.

#### Relocation Center

Tule Lake Relocation Center opened its gates to the evacuees on May 27, 1942 (U. S. Department of the Interior ix). Having to acclimate in conditions even more sparse than those at the assembly center, Tule Lake residents struggled to establish an existence while being forced to dwell among those who held to divergent political and national loyalties. Intending to release and resettle internees more expeditiously, the WRA officials conceived a plan for the registration of Japanese American men in the military and those not eligible for military duty— i. e., female Nisei and both male and female Issei—to apply for permission to leave camp called “Leave Clearance”. The registration procedure for Leave

Clearance consisted of filling out a general questionnaire which included two controversial questions which focused on the respondent's loyalty to America and/ or Japan.

At Tule Lake, the registration process never got started partly due to a combination of factors including lack of time to deliberate over key issues of the questionnaire, resignations of key leaders, distrust of the current camp administration, exasperation over further bureaucratic red tape and growing resistance as a result of their incarceration. The response generated from registration was clearly antagonistic: evacuees requested repatriation and expatriation to Japan, young males chose not to register, leading to their arrests, and pressure groups formed to influence registrants' decisions (Spicer, Hansen, Luomala, Opler 154–155). Among the ten internment camps, despite holding the largest capacity for internees, Tule Lake recruitment exhibited paltry results with only fifty-one volunteering for military duty (Weglyn 146).

### Segregation Camp

Later, the Tule Lake Relocation Center was chosen as the “depositing center” and eventual accommodation for “disloyal Japanese” and thus inherited the dubious title of “Tule Lake Segregation Center”. Tule Lake began housing evacuees relocated from other internment camps and detention centers: those who either failed to respond or responded negatively to the loyalty questions in the Leave Clearance questionnaire or were family members of those respondents.

From the outset the center's living conditions were deemed to be worse off than those in any federal penitentiary (Weglyn 156). The large influx of occupants to Tule Lake, was beyond the capacity the center could normally accommodate, leaving many newcomers to live in cramped or substandard quarters (Civil Liberties... 209). Housing com-

plaints were received by the newly-appointed project director, Raymond Best, who displayed an unsympathetic attitude towards the occupants by his lack of regard to pressing needs including improved camp maintenance, quality of food, particularly for infant care, health issues and other community concerns.

While the number of military guards was substantially reduced in other relocation centers, security in Tule Lake was increased, rendering it essentially treated as a “prison camp” (Girdner, Loftis 298). Unlike any of the existing internment centers, Tule Lake was equipped to meet the standards of a maximum security segregation facility with fortified fences, armed with a half-dozen tanks, and an increased number of battle-ready soldiers (tenBroek, Barnhart, Matson 163).

Adding to the Tule Lake residents’ frustrations were the diverse beliefs and ideologies of the new occupants. Tule Lake became the home to the Issei, Nisei, and Kibei—though labeled as “disloyal”, many were segregated from other internment centers for a number of different reasons. Many had different agendas: some wanted to return to California (Tule Lake was located in the northern tip of California); some desired to repatriate or expatriate to Japan; some felt their rights had been violated; and then there were some who refused to relocate again to another camp despite their allegiance to the U. S.; and still there were others who wanted to keep their family unity intact despite loyalty differences (Weglyn 158).

## Protests

The appalling living conditions at Tule Lake and lack of work opportunities were key issues the internees wanted the administration to address. A farm truck accident on October 15, 1943 which claimed one casualty spurred the internees to suspend farm work in order to de-

mand better working conditions; an organization named, *Daihyo Sha Kai* (a pro-Japan organization), was established to represent them (Thomas, Nishimoto 119). Further, they asked Project Director Raymond Best's permission to conduct funeral arrangements for their fallen worker, only to be refused. The internees, among them farmers who had to suspend their work, went forward with the funeral against the director's orders. A few days later, Best abruptly terminated the jobs of 800 farm workers for their part in the work stoppage.

When the National Director, Dillon Meyer visited the Tule Lake center weeks later, on November 1, the *Daihyo Sha Kai* organized a demonstration with thousands of supporters rallying for changes. Though the rally was peaceful and orderly, the crowds had an intimidating effect on the center administration. Consequently, administration staff members resigned, guard areas were fortified, regulations were strictly enforced, and fences were strategically placed to protect the staff. In an arrogant display of military force, the Army was ordered to deploy "tanks, armored trucks, gas, and machine guns" to Tule Lake and assumed control of the center after the Nov. 4 disturbance (Collins 43).

#### Camp administration staff

The behavior and attitude of the WRA camp administration staff towards the internees at Tule Lake can best be described within the context of the oppressive state of the segregation center. The mere fact that the camp inhabitants were "segregates" or "disloyals" stirred up apprehension, and the vocal ones who were portrayed as "trouble-makers" and "resistors" raised their fears, leading to an uneasy co-existence. One member of the WRA staff told a newspaper reporter for the *San Francisco Chronicle*,

“There are petty misunderstandings out in the Jap colony that in any normal community would be cleared up over night. But here they grow and fester until we have a riot on our hands” (Girdner, Loftis 317).

The Nov. 1 meeting between the internee representatives and the national and project directors brought a crowd of over 5,000 internees who surrounded the administration building, at which time the feeling among the staff inside “was one of indecision, tension and fear often bordering on hysteria” (Thomas, Nishimoto, 138–139). Convinced that military protection was the only way to calm their fears, they sought assurance from the military commander whose words apparently carried stronger weight than the project director, Best. Displeased by his subordinates for “going over his head”, Best terminated two of the staff members (Okihiro 109).

To be fair, many of the internees themselves, especially those concerned with the welfare of their children and other family members, possessed similar fears towards the extremists in their midst. On the other side of the administrative spectrum were employees whose feelings toward the Japanese were belligerent and bordering on racist. One staff member commented on the camp’s character:

“A considerable number of the administrative personnel... were Southerners who were outspoken in their contempt of the internees as members of a colored race ... A minority of the camp staff were friendly to the evacuees and sought to help them as much as possible, but their friendliness merely caused further dissatisfaction and strife because they were assailed as “Jap-lovers” by a majority of the administrative staff” (Weglyn 215).

The reinforcement of the security facilities, including the building of additional protection and a stockade, only added to the center’s prison-



like atmosphere. Whether the fortified fences with added guardsmen created a true or even ostensible sense of security among the administrative staff remained to be seen.

### Critical Incident

The following incident, which occurred three days after Dillon Meyer's visit on Nov. 1, reflects the uneasy exchange between one group of Caucasian staff and a young Nikkei worker in the wake of the mass demonstration by internees. A teenage boy recounted what happened on November 4<sup>th</sup> when troops and tanks mobilized to quell several violent disturbances:

“On the night of Nov. 4, 1943, we were, as usual, in the Motor Pool for we were working 3:00 P.M. to 11:00 P.M. on that nightshift. About 8:30 P.M., Mr. Jarrett, Mr. Zimmer, and a few other Caucasians came in with requests for farm trucks ... when they presented the requests, the signature of the Motor Pool head was missing, I told them that we could not issue trucks without the proper papers and signatures ... so I turned and asked my fellow workers in Japanese what I should do. The head dispatcher came and took care of the matter.

Nothing more happened until about 9:15 P.M. About that time, we noticed a commotion outside and we saw the army coming in. Everyone thought it was nothing until the soldiers began to charge... Without a word, we were taken into the Administration building and lined up. We were forced to keep our hands above our heads until they took us individually for questioning... Some of the fellows we saw in there were bloody.

When I was being questioned, Mr. Jarrett came up and said that I was the one who spoke in Japanese and told them not to give him a truck. After my questioning, we were taken to the hospital and kept there under guard for four days. On November 8<sup>th</sup>, we were taken into the Army Stockade. I was questioned a few times during my stay there. On November 28<sup>th</sup>, I was released” (Weglyn 164).

### Observations

At this juncture it might be useful to discuss the background of the witness who provided the statement for the Nov. 4 incident.

First, though the authorities assumed he was older and thus doubted the veracity of his age, (Weglyn 164) the young man was 16 years old. Aware of the administrative process, the young motor pool evacuee reminded Mr. Jarrett and his men that proper steps had to be followed before their request could be honored. Then, for confirmation, he presumably asked his Japanese-speaking colleagues how the situation should be handled. There are a number of reasons why he might have spoken in Japanese. He was perhaps most at ease speaking to them in a language through which their working relationship at the motor pool had been forged. So, as a matter of respect, the teenager deferred to his elders by using their native tongue while soliciting their consultation. In addition, his co-workers may have lacked sufficient ability to speak and understand English and therefore, would not know the specifics of the Caucasian workers’ request. Perhaps another reason was that the request was rather unusual—probably his first time to deal with this— as protocol called for signature approval.

On the other hand, there was clearly a sense of distrust in the minds of Jarrett and his cohorts. Impatiently awaiting an answer from the young employee, what they heard come out of his mouth was utterly

unintelligible, presumably a “secret language” directed toward his fellow internees. (From the account, there were apparently no further exchanges made between the two interlocutors.) Perturbed by his behavior, Jarrett expected some sort of explanation—at best, a clarification of what was said in Japanese—but there was none; the matter seemed to have been totally ignored. The perceived threat was that the internees were being secretive about how they should deal with their requests. Jarrett even went further and assumed that the young man was conspiring to thwart their demand for the trucks.

From the young man’s standpoint the verbal exchanges seemed rather innocuous; however, speaking in Japanese in the presence of non-speakers without translation was a serious blunder under the circumstances. While there were no restrictions against speaking Japanese in “ordinary” circumstances around the camp, language interpretation was necessary in organized camp meetings among English-speaking representatives, as a matter of policy. One could argue that the exchange at the motor pool bore little or no semblance to an organized meeting, since this was not a formal gathering and therefore language assistance was not required. The prevailing attitude, however, was that English had to be spoken in meetings, for Japanese would arouse suspicion, (Okihiro 111) which it certainly did. History seems to have repeated itself when a young Nikkei,

“heard that American Indians were beaten if they spoke their own language to each other at school. That is how much hakujiin [whites] looked down on any other language...” (Takezawa 69).

Here lies the crux of the problem: Communication is assumed when information is shared by opposite parties and the exchange of information is meant to be understood. Yet communication was never completed; rather, communication was suspended when the young man

sought consultation from his colleagues. However, there appears to have been no conclusion after the request was made, which obviously infuriated the administration staff. In addition, on Oct. 31, four days prior, the evacuee employees at the motor pool were given orders to service the trucks and they refused (Thomas, Nishimoto 130). It is thus reasonable to assume that this and the Oct. 31 event led Jarrett to accuse the young man at the motor pool of purposely withholding the trucks from them, since this had happened once before.

Why was Jarrett in need of the trucks in the first place? When Project Director Best terminated the jobs of the 800 Tule Lake farmers, he had already conceived of a plan to replace them with “loyal” internees from Poston and Topaz Relocation Center. They were to seek quarters some distance from the Tule Lake Segregation Center, and be provided with food and supplies from the Center. When word spread that trucks driven by Caucasian employees were used to supply precious Tule Lake residents’ food and supplies to the “strike breakers”, their anger was clearly evident. On Nov. 4, there rose a rebellion to prevent the trucks from loading and transporting food; when the fracas broke out, the Chief of Internal Security alerted the military immediately and soon tank and armored trucks entered the compound and took over the administration of the camp. Peace was restored but at a price: martial law was declared, curfew (Collins 47) restricted residents to their barracks, meetings and gatherings were not permitted without approval, and—worst of all—with the exception of essential employees, most internees were without work.

## Result

The Nov. 4 incident at the Motor Pool resulted in the questioning of the young man and his subsequent incarceration in a prison known as

the “stockade”. He was imprisoned there until Nov. 28 without knowledge of the charges on which he had been arrested. Would there have been a forced arrest if the young motor pool internee had followed protocol, or if the Japanese conversation had been translated and explained to Jarrett? Within the context of the segregation camp environment—the heightened tension between the camp administration and the ever-growing disenchantment of the internees caused by the termination of jobs, the project director’s unsympathetic stance toward internee requests (augmented by the friction between Japan sympathizers and the “fence sitters” who opposed the extremists and their activities), the military intervention of the camp, and the secret arrests of both agitators and pacifists (such as the young man) to the stockade—it would have been highly unlikely for anyone in those circumstances to have avoided imprisonment.

The administrative authorities’ intent was to detain the perceived troublemakers by whatever method possible. In addition to the arrest of Motor Pool employees, internees who were at the site to prevent the WRA Caucasian from “stealing food from the Internee Food Warehouse” were interrogated, physically beaten and thrown into the stockade (Civil Liberties... 210, Weglyn, 212).

“During his interrogation, Mr. Kobayashi was hit on the head with such force that blood gushed out and the baseball bat actually broke in two.” (Civil Liberties... 210)

Jarrett saw the young man’s refusal to authorize the vehicles as a sign of resistance and, further, his speaking Japanese represented the embodiment of the enemy, a “proof of disloyalty” (Wiley 220–221) and thus an added motivation to arrest him. The administrator was cognizant of the frequency of Japanese military-style exercises, the chanting of slogans in the mornings, and the rapid establishments of Japanese

schools, and could have seen these activities as a threat to his well-being, his staff and, therefore, to America. A typical reaction to the rallies follows:

“Their anger was typically American, but was expressed in Japanese symbols, which was an effective form of revenge against the government” (Girdner, Loftis 319).

Leighton contends that individuals experience fear and panic which are often symptomatic in “expressions of aggression” when exposed to hostile crowds. Leighton goes on to illustrate that “when two people are seen talking together they are instantly assumed to be plotting” (268). Jarrett was suspicious of precisely the same conditions, Japanese spoken by two members of the motor pool. His subsequent arrest of the young man illustrates his aggressive reaction.

Anything characteristically Japanese was broadly viewed as an act of defiance, whether it was involvement in cultural orientation meetings, or attendance at Japanese schools, or celebrating the Emperor’s birthday, to further extremes like shouting military slogans and renouncing their American citizenship. While Tule Lake administration did exhibit tolerance in the case of those seeking Japanese instruction and cultural training, mainly as justification for those “disloyal” internees hoping to repatriate or expatriate to Japan, face-to-face encounters between administration representatives and resident internees over policy matters were mostly fractious.

The Nov. 4 incident and subsequent underground activities resulted in over two hundred internees being arrested and held captive in the stockade (Collins 48). Best continued to make arrests thereafter. By January 1944, the number of detainees had increased to 352 men (Girdner, Loftis 322). The stockade became a symbolic reminder of each and every resident’s plight, a reflection of their sorry existence under the

heel of a repressive state with their hopes of freedom diminishing day by day.

With many of the internee leaders detained in the stockade, the administration was faced with no group to represent on the internees' behalf. Even at the project director's request, the Tulean internees refused to put themselves at risk, as their lives would be at stake if they established an elective group. Afraid of being perceived as collaborators—that is, in the service of the administration—the residents at-large remained rudderless. The strong-arm tactics grew progressively violent as a number of men were targeted and beaten for their outspoken beliefs until finally, in July of 1944, the general manager of the despised Cooperative Enterprise was murdered (Collins 65–67). This reign of terror by internee extremists brought any hint of cooperation between administrative staff and internees to a standstill. This led to the entire internee police force and other organizations suspected of collaboration being disbanded soon thereafter (Collins 68–69).

The combination of their anger towards the administration and the gross injustice against their fellow detainees fueled the pro-Japan supporters' desire to push even harder for repatriation. Their daily objective was to press the “moderates” to commit to national loyalties by endorsing Japanese events and joining radical groups such as the *Sokuji Kikoku Hoshidan* who preached for the renunciation of U. S. citizenship (Spicer, Hansen, Luomala, Opler 240). According to tenBroek, Barnhart, and Matson, from Tule Lake, 4,406 residents left for Japan (180).

Ironically, many who journeyed back to Japan would discover first hand a new predicament: that their living situation in post-war Japan would be far worse than they had ever imagined. Upon arrival, the Issei generation were shocked to see their homeland in economic and social upheaval. Family members, relatives and friends were either dispersed,

dead, or languishing. For the Nisei who had never set foot in the country of their parents, adaptation and survival served as a daily test of their endurance and fortitude. Even the Kibei would never have the opportunity to relive their childhood memories. Without financial, political, and employment backing from the American government, the renunciants—no longer American citizens—were on their own to make something out of their existence.

## Conclusion

The Project Director, Raymond Best, was emblematic of the “asymmetry” of power which he maintained throughout his tenure at Tule Lake Segregation Center. He held power over every aspect of the center’s matters and as a result, under his control, Tule Lake residents had to endure extremely stressful conditions. Without question, Best abused his authority to suppress any form of self-government representation, showed utter disregard for residents’ sufferings and grievances, terminated internees’ work, arrested and held captive randomly-chosen activists and leaders of unsanctioned committees, tortured trouble-makers, denied any personal wrong doings, and worst of all, escaped any retribution for injustice. The director, in addition, even made “enemies” among members of his own administration by abusing his authority to dismiss opposition within his ranks.

The repercussions were obvious: marginalized Tulean residents faced violent threats by pro-Japan extremists and random acts of violence by the U. S. military, who victimized not only the agitators but also the uninvolved internees. Due to the threatening atmosphere of mass rallies, administration employees resigned. Work stoppages transpired in protest of the lack of safety concerns. An internee worker was shot dead for no justifiable reason by a military guardsman.



Against this tense backdrop, at a motor pool facility on Nov. 4, an agitated group of Caucasian men, one of them the assistant director of the center, confronted a jittery teenager, and they demanded the use of the trucks for the unpopular strikebreakers. In a highly charged exchange their request was denied, at which time the young man turned to his colleague and uttered a few fateful words which would serve as justification for his incarceration in the stockade.

The display of linguistic dominance on the night of Nov. 4 was clearly audacious, because, from an institutional standpoint, no policy was in place to prohibit Japanese from being spoken. Yet the move to place the innocent man under arrest solely on the basis of language was highly abhorrent because it left no doubt that the project director and his administration abused their authority.

One might say that the perfect manifestation of power was the stockade, “a prison within a prison”. Though Tulean residents were gravely aware of the guard house and its unlawful function, the existence of the stockade was not made known to the general public. In fact, when the National Director of the WRA Dillon Meyer explained, in his book *Uprooted Americans*, about “the Tule Lake Incident”, he neglected to mention the incarceration of evacuees in the stockade (Meyer 316).

Weglyn stated it best:

“Tule Lake was an object lesson on how the easy availability of power corrupts men who wield it— of righteousness sinking to ruthlessness as ordinarily decent men harnessed themselves with near-sadistic zeal to the trappings and techniques of tyranny, relieved of any sense of personal accountability by their patriotic commitment to what was clearly national policy: an inflamed chauvinism that fed on hatred and contempt for things Japanese.” (212)

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