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Re-Evaluation of Self: An Examination of the Political and Personal Outlooks of White America and Japanese-Americans on the Post-World War II Era

Melissa Johnson

The United States Government awarded the 442nd Battalion with 9,486 Purple Hearts, 4,000 Bronze Stars, and 560 Silver Stars due to their heroism in the European Theater during World War II.¹ Despite the loyalty and bravery these soldiers demonstrated during the war, adversity and suspicion greeted them back home. The American population's reaction forced them into a silence that in many ways led to their invisibility over the years. Why did this happen? The simple answer is racial prejudice since the unit's members were second-generation (Nisei) Japanese American soldiers. In light of the war in the Pacific, prejudice does not seem like a stretch of the imagination. However, Anti-Japanese feelings did not begin with the war, but rather in 1851, when the first Japanese arrived along with West Coast.² To the Japanese population, Anti-Asian sentiment meant that their post-war integration was not a simple re-acceptance or re-entry into American society; instead integration created a need for all Japanese to re-evaluate their ethnic and cultural identities. Ethnic

¹ Edwin Nakasone, *The Nisei Soldier*, (White Bear Lake, MN: J-Press, 1999), 44-45.

² Raymond Buell, "The Development of the Anti-Japanese Agitation in the United States," *Political Science Quarterly*, 37 (Dec., 1922), 605.

re-evaluation signified the complete submergence of Japanese culture and a complete acceptance of an American ideology.

Unhealthy Japanese-American and white-American relations at the end of World War II coerced the Japanese to re-evaluate their ethnic identity. Japanese-Americans realized that their physical appearance reminded the United States of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the war in the Pacific. The Japanese-Americans opted, therefore, to culturally and socially blend into middle-class, white America. In effect, the Japanese asked America to accept them under the condition that they would not perpetuate a Japanese-ness. America asked the Japanese not to remind them of their ethnic Japanese and cultural identity, and offered national acceptance in return.

The story of the 442nd presented an archetype for Japanese integration. The Japanese population's lack of acceptance during the war led many Nisei to voluntarily sign up for the 442nd in order to prove Japanese loyalty to the United States. Loyalty expressed the Japanese's internal need to fit in. A second outward expression was presented when the soldiers returned home and attempted to find white-collar work that would launch them into the middle-class, instead of returning to their previous service-based jobs. The Nisei's success in their occupational endeavors made it seem like they had appropriately assimilated and America stopped talking about the Japanese presence. However, not discussing the situation led to a complete silence about the Japanese post-war era.

Discourse about this silent period has begun only recently, in large part because of the Sansei. These third generation Japanese-Americans started examin-

ing their parents' era and brought information about the post-war period to light. Scholars had previously discussed the anti-Asian sentiment in the United States, as well as the roles that the Japanese played during the War. However, anti-Asian thought as a precursor to Japanese treatment in subsequent years has never been closely examined. Investigation of early anti-Asian sentiment through the post-war period shows that the seamless integration of the Japanese into American society was not as innocent as usually presented. Understanding the lack of innocence in Japanese integration in no way disputes the reality of that integration, but provides reasoning for why it appeared faultless. The Japanese-Americans actively smoothed over or ignored transitional difficulties. Ignoring those difficulties highlights the fact that Japanese re-entry into white-America dealt with how well Japanese-Americans functioned in society, not that the American majority forgot their anti-Japanese transgressions. Seamless entry originated in the Japanese-Americans' willingness to conceal their presence in America which created the subsequent silence that the Sansei would eventually uncover.

A short history of the Japanese presence in America helps to underscore the Japanese reluctance to call attention to themselves after the War. Japanese immigrants had a relatively short existence within America. Despite that small time frame, in the eyes of Californians, the Japanese had worn out their welcome. Bias against the Japanese primarily began as an economically based problem as white Californians believed that they were forced out of service-based jobs due to the influx of Asian immigrants. America had just recently passed the Chinese Exclusion Act which

denied immigration of the Chinese into America for the same economic reasons. Naturally, then, the increase of the Japanese population escalated anti-Asian sentiments.³

Industry was not the only sector of society in which the Japanese were excluded – they also felt the push from San Francisco school districts. The people of San Francisco unsuccessfully advocated a segregated school system, mimicking the “separate but equal” ideas in other parts of the country.⁴ Anti-Asian feelings ran so high that when politicians campaigned for public office many of their platforms dealt with getting rid of the Japanese problem in the United States, with campaign slogans such as “Swat the Jap.”⁵

Racial tensions primarily took root on the West Coast, where Japanese immigration was more prevalent. However, the West’s feelings must not be mistaken as the sentiment for the rest of the country. In fact, when California petitioned for a bill to eliminate Japanese immigration, Theodore Roosevelt was quoted as saying “Didn’t you know such a thing was preposterous?” and later added “I would veto it if it were passed unanimously.”⁶ The President’s remarks show the regional nature of Anti-Asian thought. Regionalism is important to understand not only for the treatment of

³ Ibid., 605-608; Maisie Conrat, *Executive Order 9066: The Internment of 110,000 Japanese Americans*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press for the California Historical Society, 1972), 16.

⁴ Ibid., 19-20.

⁵ Roger Daniels, *The Politics of Prejudice: The Anti-Japanese Movement in California and the Struggle for Japanese Exclusion*, (New York: Atheneum, 1969), 97.

⁶ Buell, *Political Science Quarterly*, 1922, 618-619.

the Japanese during the war, but especially after – because where else would Nisei return but the West where they had grown up?

The attack on Pearl Harbor seemed to confirm the stereotype that the Japanese were “sneaky” and “unscrupulous.”⁷ As a result, Pearl Harbor was the catalyst of the infamous Executive Order 9066 that instructed the Japanese to move out of the military zones and into relocation centers. However, a grave misconception surrounds the Order. While it did lead to the evacuation of over 110,000 Japanese people, the Executive Order itself never directly mentioned Japanese people. The Order instead gave the West Coast the military power to do whatever they saw fit to protect the war zone from enemy invasion.⁸ Of course, effectively the Order let people on the *West Coast* make a decision about a group of people who had a striking resemblance to those who attacked Pearl Harbor, and whom the West had looked down upon for decades.

Mounting racial tensions fell heavily on the Nisei. White-Americans doubted the Nisei’s loyalty not only due to their physical attributes, but also because of their ties to Japan. The Issei (first generation immigrants) customarily registered their children’s birth in Japan, even if the children were born in the United States and were U.S. citizens by birth right. The

⁷ Jacobus tenBroek, et. al., *Prejudice, War, and the Constitution*, (Berkeley: University of California press, 1954), 27, 315, 329.

⁸ Louise Fiset, “Redress For Nisei Public Employees in Washington State after World War II,” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 1996-1997 88(1): 23; “Executive Order 9066,” *Japanese American Internet Curriculum*, 14 October 2006 <<http://bss.sfsu.edu/internment/executiorder9066.html>>.

resulting dual citizenship led Americans to believe that Nisei loyalty actually rested with Japan.⁹ American citizenship simply was not enough to dislodge the growing fear of the Japanese, so the Executive Order was not contested by the American majority, despite its obvious implications.

The Japanese were also unable to do anything in response to Executive Order 9066 or to assuage the fears about their loyalty to the American population. If Japanese people spoke out they would be seen as disloyal to the United States; additionally, they physically could do nothing, since they lacked political power. The Government denied the Issei citizenship until 1952 and with it the right to vote. The majority of Nisei children were usually too young.¹⁰ The only option for the Japanese was to prove their loyalty in another way.

Creating an all-Japanese battalion caused some reluctance since the Japanese were specifically not drafted at the onset of the War, due to suspicion of espionage and disloyalty.¹¹ When President Franklin Roosevelt was asked about the 442nd's formation he

⁹ Umezawa Duus, *Unlikely Liberators*, 46; Donna K. Nagata, "The Japanese-American Internment: Perceptions of Moral Community, Fairness, and Redress," in *Journal of Social Issues*, 46 (1990), 135.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ "Army Opens Ranks to Japanese Units," *New York Times*, 29 January 1943 p. 9; *The Pacific War and Peace: Americans of Japanese Ancestry in Military Intelligence Service 1941-1952*, (San Francisco: Military Intelligence Service Association of Northern California and the National Japanese American Historical Society, 1991), 13; United Japanese Society of Hawaii, *A History of Japanese in Hawaii*, (Honolulu: The Society, 1971), 268.

said, "No loyal citizen of the United States should be denied the democratic right to exercise the responsibilities of his citizenship, regardless of his ancestry."¹² Roosevelt's comments presented an overly idealized version of the situation for the Nisei soldiers. The Nisei were not selected to fight as Americans, but as more soldiers for the American cause. When the army called for volunteers from the relocation centers a great majority of the Nisei signed up to not only fight for their country, but to prove their loyalty to the American people in a time and situation when everyone believed the opposite. Opposition to the Japanese prompted the 442nd's motto "Go for Broke." They fully intended to risk everything because they believed that anything less would prove to America that they were not loyal. One Nisei soldier sums up his and other men's situation perfectly: "We're fighting two wars. One for American democracy, and one against the prejudice toward us in America."¹³ Thus it became imperative that the Nisei fight to redeem their family and friends at home. The Nisei believed that if they lost battles or jeopardized the war effort they would also lose the trust that had been put in them by their fellow Japanese to prove their united loyalty.¹⁴

The army was very aware of how the recruiting process of the 442nd looked to the Japanese population—body replacements for the fallen members of the

¹² Orville Cresap Shirey, *Americans: The Story of the 442nd Combat Team*, (Washington D.C.: Infantry Journal Press, 1946), 19.

¹³ Umezawa Duus, *Unlikely Liberators*, 44

¹⁴ Conrad R. Stein, *Nisei Regiment*, (Chicago: Childrens Press, 1985), 17.

100th Battalion (a Japanese unit from Hawaii).¹⁵ Despite this, the army did not really mask the fact that they had no idea where to place the Combat Team in relation to other platoons. As a result, the 442nd was considered the “bastard battalion” that did not really fit anywhere in the military. The army saw the battalion as a “guinea pig battalion” and “bullet shields” for the real army.¹⁶ These stigmas from within the army only helped to fuel outside disregard for the Japanese community.

The mentality of the army influenced the newspaper coverage of the 442nd as newspapers depended on what information the military released. The army’s reluctance to circulate news resulted from their fear that the Nisei soldiers would be viewed as what they were, “cannon fodder,” due to the countless numbers of Nisei soldiers killed on the battlefield. The army instead tried to promote an image of the Nisei as “willing martyrs” for the American cause in Europe. Yet the army also wanted to downplay how large of a role the 442nd had in the war effort. When large battles took place, and the U.S. military was able to gain ground, white soldiers were the ones pictured in the newspapers back home – not the 442nd members from the front lines.¹⁷

The army could not place the 442nd in a particular platoon, wanted new recruits, but could not promote

¹⁵ Umezawa Duus, *Unlikely Liberators*, 151.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23-24, 152-153; Karleen Chinen, et. al., *Japanese Eyes...American Heart*, (Honolulu: Tendai Educational Foundation, 1998), 4.

¹⁷ Patricia Curtin, “Press Coverage of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team (Separate-Nisei): A Case Study in Agenda Building,” in *American Journalism* 12 (3, 1995), 231.

the fact that the Japanese would be thrown in the front lines, and also did not want 442nd heroics pictured in the paper. The indecisiveness of the army to make a firm stance on their position about the 442nd, only reiterates how America did not know what to do with the Japanese.

Despite the military's control of what was released about the 442nd, East Coast papers lauded their military successes. Since the 442nd was doing so well it was impossible to write negatively about them, so West Coast (who still held a regional vehemence) newspapers printed nothing at all.¹⁸ The West Coast went to outstanding lengths to downplay the success stories of the 442nd. They often ran side-by-side stories of the 442nd's formation and the battles America was fighting against the Japanese in the Pacific, to detract from the 442nd's military achievements.¹⁹ All press coverage – in whatever form it took – stopped completely after the deactivation of the 442nd.²⁰ It was not until recent times that public interest pushed the facts about the relocation era and the concerned parties back into the news.

In turn, the way the newspaper coverage played out, meant that on the West Coast people still refused to acknowledge the 442nd or were unaware of its formation and what it accomplished. The lack of communication led to problems for the Nisei when they returned home as well as for their older Issei parents, recently released from the relocation centers. The discrepancies in newspaper reporting stopped the

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 230-231.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 226-234.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 239.

blending process of ethnic Japanese culture and American societal values.

The return of the Nisei soldiers cannot be viewed as one cohesive transition, but instead should be differentiated based on their living situations on both the East and West Coasts of America. An in-depth study of the East Coast is unnecessary primarily because there were only a small number of Japanese from that region, but also because negative public sentiment toward them during the War was negligible.²¹ The Japanese who trained for combat in the East and South shared an easy relationship with the town locals. Due to this relationship, the Japanese returning to the East Coast and surrounding areas had a relatively simple transition back into white-society.²² The same thing can not be said for West Coast settlers. The Japanese who returned to California and other Western states faced the same type of anti-Asian sentiment that they knew from their pre-war experience; which means that one must break down the discussion of Japanese West Coast settlers even further.

Exclusion and disdain greeted the majority of the Nisei soldiers who returned home on the West Coast. Many of the soldiers could not rent apartments or houses, were not allowed to patronize restaurants, and the states that housed internment centers did not want the Japanese to remain or return there. The West's general ideology stated that it was up to the

²¹ Umezawa Duus, *Unlikely Liberators*, 141.

²² Stein, *Nisei Regiment*, 22.

Nisei to fix their own problems, social or economic.²³ In defending their positions against the Japanese, and specifically the 442nd, some Americans stated that the 442nd soldiers fought so well in the War because they had enjoyed killing whites and that their true loyalty belonged to the Japanese Emperor.²⁴ Public consciousness, which basically called the Japanese “white-murderers,” clearly showed the difference between the Isseis and Niseis’ status between the two coastlines. The importance of the East and West dichotomy, however, does not overshadow how those anti-Japanese feelings significantly affected individual Japanese people.

Regionalism only addresses the Japanese situation on the surface. A deeper level of examining post-war re-entrance into American society must be viewed in two distinct ways: the external and the internal. The external level deals with the outside pressure of white-America silently asking the Japanese not to remind them of their inherent Japanese qualities. The internal level is then, the inward expression of how the Japanese responded to those outside pressures and molded themselves in a way that would best fit into the American majority. As the Japanese were obviously physically recognizable, visually blending into American society after the War was not an option. Instead, they began a process of adopting American culture and values. Japanese citizens sought out “clean work” to

²³ Thelma Chang, *I Can Never Forget: Men of the 100th/442nd*. (Honolulu, HI: Sigi Productions, 1991), 188; Umezawa Duus, *Unlikely Liberators*, 146; Jere Takahashi, *Nisei-Sansei: Shifting Japanese American Identities and Politics*. (Philadelphia: Templeton U. Pr., 1997), 114 and 122.

²⁴ Chang, *I Can Never Forget*, 190.

aid their transition. They looked for white-collar jobs or college educated positions to boost the Japanese social status into a middle-class setting. Japanese people were able to do this by virtue of the fact that, unlike African Americans at this time, segregation laws did not push them out of the education system. The ability to enter higher-levels of schooling meant the Japanese had a springboard to attain that middle class notoriety.²⁵

The Japanese post-war transition seemed so innocent as they easily slipped into the education system – meaning of course, that no one thought there were problems to discuss. In fact, the Japanese were not aware that their experiences during the war, whether it was through military service or the camps, were something they *could* talk about. Now, of course, there are multiple documentaries, stories, and lessons, but no one talked about the situation of the Japanese in the late 1940s. One Nisei girl recounts how her father was in a separate camp than she and her family and was unable to write to them, not because he lacked permission, but because there was no way to express the situation at hand.²⁶

The inabilities for the Japanese to express themselves only worsened once the Nisei returned home or were released from the relocation camps. They felt unsure of their place within the larger American context or even within their own communities. As a result, the Japanese were compelled to “make do.”

²⁵ Takahashi, *Nisei/Sansei*, 118, 121, 122.

²⁶ Caroline Chung Simpson, *An Absent Presence: Japanese Americans in Postwar American Culture, 1945-1960*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 28.

Such a compulsion urged the Nisei to submerge their ethnic and racial identity under that of the American culture.²⁷ The Nisei had learned through their experiences during the war that their *American* loyalty was necessary for survival. In turn, they embraced the middle-class ideology and became as *American* as they possibly could.²⁸ The fact that the Sansei did not question their parents' participation in World War II for so long exemplifies the effectiveness of Japanese integration into middle-class America.²⁹

The story of Tokyo Rose (the American G.I. term created to describe any one of the female, English-speaking, Japanese propaganda radio broadcasters during the War) provides a case in point of the external pressures that the Japanese faced. Iva Toguri D'Aquino was an American citizen who was taking care of her aunt in Japan when Pearl Harbor was attacked, and as a result was unable to return home. D'Aquino's eventual destitute status forced her into broadcasting propaganda for Japan and she was therefore considered a traitor to her American citizenship. Once she returned home, the U.S. Government denied D'Aquino's citizenship rights and placed her in prison. Everyone in America and Japan knew that there was no singular Tokyo Rose and, even more so, that D'Aquino was not guilty of treason.³⁰

D'Aquino's situation is important because the Nisei community did nothing to help her. The Nisei's refusal to step in and lend support reveals their reluctance to

²⁷ Takahashi, *Nisei/Sansei*, 113, 115, 155.

²⁸ Simpson, *An Absent Presence*, 33.

²⁹ Takahashi, *Nisei/Sansei*, 156.

³⁰ Nakasone, *The Nisei Soldier*, 130.

disturb their newly acquired Japanese American identity.³¹ The Nisei's lack of response to the D'Aquino situation was not just individual; but also that of associated groups. The JACL (Japanese American Citizens League) also refused to confront the Tokyo Rose case and isolated the community from the entire issue. The JACL was afraid to shine any light back onto Japanese Americans, good or bad.³² In the minds of the Nisei on the West Coast, it was time for them to get out of the limelight, and their attempt to find a way to blend into American life without controversy was in the forefront of their minds.

As a result, blending became the process by which the Issei and Nisei integrated into American society. The integration was seen as innocent. Yet that "innocent" re-entry came at the price of self identity. A complete submergence of Japanese culture and ethnic identity had to occur before white middle-class America accepted them.

Since the Japanese's earliest arrival, American society looked down upon their population and saw them as nothing but a labor class who competed with white Americans for positions in the service industry, and eventually as spies whose true alliance belonged to the Japanese Emperor. All of these ideologies melded into one ethnic, Oriental stereotype. The attack on Pearl Harbor confirmed the treachery and sneakiness the greater population attributed to Asians, and rumors about enemy spy rings flourished. The West Coast's lingering refusal to accept the Japanese as American citizens encapsulated fear of the Orient

³¹ Ibid. 139 and Simpson, *An Absent Presence*, 84.

³² Ibid., 101 and 103.

and caused the internment of the Japanese in ten relocation centers in states with a West Coast bias.

Finally, when the Nisei were called upon to fight for their country in a battle that was not only meant to show American democracy but also prove their loyalty, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team was formed. The 442nd soldiers fought with a vigor that belied their country's lack of faith and trust in their capabilities. The 442nd proved to the entire world what side of the War in which they fought. However, the sporadic news coverage in the East and the less than truthful coverage in the West did nothing to abate loyalty fears. When the Isseis and Niseis returned home, (primarily in the West) people were only marginally aware of what the 442nd accomplished, and most of that information was skewed, causing the internalization and re-evaluation of what the Japanese had to outwardly perpetuate in order to find acceptance with the American populace.

As it turned out, the Japanese were still the pariah of the American continent. They had to hide half, if not all, of who they were and immerse themselves in white culture so as to no longer be called traitors. These internal transformations caused them to ignore D'Aquino's plight, all in the name of not drawing unneeded attention to themselves. It was not until a generation later, when the Sansei began to question this uncharacteristic hush period within American society, that Japanese participation in the War resurfaced. Through this movement, the Sansei were able to uncover not only their lost ethnic heritage but also uncover the plight their parents and grandparents experienced during the height of the War and subsequent aftermath. The Sansei discovered one of Amer-

ica's most controversial periods, due to not only the politics involved, but also because of the silence that it was drowned in. Once the racial lines were drawn, it was difficult to erase, especially with the lack of communication between all parties. The culmination of over a century's worth of conflict led to the phenomenon in which the Japanese re-integration into middle-class America became one of re-evaluation and re-definition instead of the complete acceptance they had fought for during the War.