

The Good War and Japanese America

by Franklin Odo

For many Americans, World War II has become entrenched, solidly and nostalgically, in the national narrative as “The Good War” fought by “The Greatest Generation.” Increasingly, and disturbingly, this formulation appears to have won acceptance even by an American minority group grievously oppressed by its own government—Japanese Americans who were forcibly removed from their homes and incarcerated in American concentration camps. This essay explores the trajectory of this journey from the historical moment in World War II to current struggles of memory and history within and beyond the Japanese American community.

For some time now, the notion of World War II as “The Good War” has been disputed and complicated by the scholarly community. While few have gone so far as to posit both Allies and Axis as moral equivalents, it is commonly acknowledged that Winston Churchill tolerated massive civilian destruction to preserve the British Empire and that Franklin Roosevelt supported Stalin’s brutality in order to blunt Hitler’s blitzkrieg in Western Europe. We know, too, that the fire-bombings in Germany and atom bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were calculated to raze those cities to the ground and terrorize civilians (Kirsch). Certainly the scholarly world knows that FDR’s Executive Order 9066, signed on February 19, 1942, launched America’s radical experiment in ethnic cleansing by forcible removal and incarceration of 120,000 Japanese Americans, the Nikkei,¹ from the entire West Coast absent any semblance of due process (cf. Robinson). Still, many Americans, including those of Japanese descent, continue to believe in World War II as the “Good War” fought by “The Greatest Generation” (Brokaw).

The Nikkei community waited several decades after the end of World War II before confronting contradictions between images of the “Good War” and its own humiliating incarceration. Indeed, a similar lag existed before substantial celebration of the heroics of its World War II veterans. Beginning in the 1970s, however, there was increasing focus on the wartime racism directed towards Nikkei, two thirds of whom were American citizens. This new attention was largely due to the emergence of radical community activity and significant gains in Ethnic Studies and Asian American Studies on an increasing number of American college campuses (see Quon; Huen).

It took some time before the incarceration narrative could be joined with stories, at times ironic, of military heroism to produce a powerful formula in a Redress Movement seeking an official apology and reparations. When President Ronald Reagan signed HR 442, he triggered payments of \$20,000 to each of the surviving Nikkei who had been incarcerated during World War II—approximately one-half of the original 120,000 individuals. This became the only occasion in American history when the U.S. Congress and the White House assumed full responsibility and provided formal apologies with monetary reparations for their own unconstitutional actions.

Reagan’s signing of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 on August 10 was a major turning point in the Nikkei embrace of the “Good War” narrative. This official action apologized on behalf of the nation for the dozens of military, Department of Justice, War Relocation Authority, and other camps which operated during the war in every region of the country from Hawai’i to New York City. The earliest arrests, on or soon after December 7, involved more than one thousand individuals, overwhelmingly male and immigrant, who had been identified by the FBI as potentially “disloyal.” They had been profiled, beginning in the 1930s, years before Pearl Harbor. At least in Hawai’i, most of those arrested by the FBI were screened individually and provided the opportunity to “prove” their innocence. And, in Hawai’i, a token 2,000 individuals, half of whom who were family members of the suspects, were incarcerated, of a total Nikkei population of nearly 160,000. This community comprised over one-third of the civilian population and over one-half of some of the most critical skilled labor sectors like construction workers as well as food producers such as hog farms, poultry ranches, truck crop farms and vital sugar plantation workers (Odo 148–49). These hard facts on the ground convinced military leaders in Hawai’i and

several influential civilian leaders that mass incarceration would have made the war effort in the Pacific untenable. Removing the entire Nikkei population to concentration camps² on the North American continent would, in addition, overburden critical shipping capacity between Hawai'i and the West Coast. Later, legal scholars would realize the incongruity of the fact that nearly every Nikkei in Hawai'i, the point of actual attack and the likely site of any potential Japanese invasion, had been spared forced removal and incarceration. At the least, relative stability in Hawai'i gave the lie to the government's assertion that military necessity dictated that every West Coast resident with a drop of Japanese blood be escorted at gunpoint to concentration camps. This policy followed the rationale that the Nikkei were so inscrutable that there were no reliable means to separate the loyal from the potentially disloyal.

In the meantime, there was a complex series of events which culminated in a narrative of Nikkei wartime heroism during World War II. Soon after the draft was imposed on the country in 1940, hundreds of Nikkei were already serving in the U.S. Army. Shortly before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Army began recruiting men who could speak and read the Japanese language, anticipating the need for intelligence operations. Some 60 students, almost all Nikkei, began intensive Japanese classes at the Presidio in San Francisco. When the Nikkei were forcibly removed from the West Coast, the school moved to Minnesota. The University of Hawai'i Army ROTC had been mobilized, armed, and sent to repel Japanese paratroopers who were reported preparing to storm Honolulu. Fortunately, this proved to be one of many rumors then circulating. But many of the cadets, university undergraduates, were Nikkei. They were soon invited to join the Hawai'i Territorial Guard (HTG) and relieved Army units guarding reservoirs, hospitals, food depots, power stations, and other vital installations. But on January 21, 1942, just over a month after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the HTG was dismissed; it was reformed the next day but the Nikkei were *personae non gratae* (Odo 148–49). Soon thereafter, the Nikkei were classified 4-C, enemy aliens, and prohibited from serving in the military. But the Nikkei already in the HI National Guard had been assembled and constituted a separate unit. On June 4, 1942, as the critical Battle of Midway began, a group comprised of over 1,400 Nikkei was ordered to sail to San Francisco. En route, it became the 100th Battalion Separate (Separate, because it had no affiliation). It went into training and became the first Nikkei unit to enter combat in Europe in 1944. In the meantime, the war demanded more bodies and the War Department eventually allowed the formation of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, expecting roughly equal numbers of volunteers from mainland concentration camps and free Nikkei in Hawai'i. But the call for volunteers from within barbed wire enclosures was a difficult and controversial policy and not many incarcerated Nikkei were motivated to enlist. Far greater numbers joined from Hawai'i and the unit trained in Mississippi before shipping to Italy where it joined the 100th Battalion which became part of the 442nd; the 442nd went on to compile a bloody record of heroism and sacrifice, becoming the most decorated military unit, for its size and length of service, in American military history. This too, was a story largely untold, even within the Nikkei community, especially on the mainland.

To be sure, some attention had always been provided to the combat record of the Nikkei, especially in Hawai'i, where the distribution of lists of wounded and killed were becoming a daily routine by late 1944. Upon return to the Islands, veterans made good use of the GI Bill to attend college and proceed to advanced degrees in law, medicine, business, and the liberal arts. By the early 1950s, so many had secured elected Territory-wide office that anti-Japanese American fears would resurface. Indeed, by 1954, the Japanese American veterans, in tandem with powerful organized labor, led a newly resurgent Democratic Party to a stunning takeover of the previously solidly-Republican legislature, a phenomenon dubbed the "Bloodless Revolution" (Coffman 8). On the West Coast, Nikkei returning from camps or combat were sometimes greeted with hostility and gunfire.

With the rise of popular elected officials to the U.S. Congress, especially highly decorated combat heroes, even more attention was focused on the military exploits of the segregated 100th Infantry Battalion/442nd Regimental Combat Team which fought in Europe with great distinction. In contrast, during those first postwar decades only bits and pieces of information were released about the Military Intelligence Service which was credited with securing more information against a wartime enemy than ever before in the history of modern warfare. Eventually, some six thousand men, and dozens of women, nearly all of whom were Nikkei, provided a secret weapon through Japanese language interception, interrogation, and translation of captured documents from the Japanese military, thus securing tactical combat advantage as well as strategic superiority.³ But since the Army

had sworn the men to secrecy, few reports of their extraordinary service and heroism became public knowledge after the war ended. This silence ended when the Nikkei war record was joined to the incarceration experience in the highly politicized drama leading to Redress in 1988.

The military record compiled in general, by World War II Nikkei was indeed extraordinary. In 2000, some 55 years after the end of the war, President Bill Clinton awarded 21 Medals of Honor to Nikkei who had fought in World War II. To put this into perspective, the U.S. awarded 465 Medals of Honor for World War II service; Japanese Americans thus earned over 20 percent of the total although comprising a miniscule portion of combat troops. The Congressional Gold Medal (CGM) is the highest honor conferred by the U.S. Congress. George Washington was its first recipient. On October 5, 2010 the CGM was presented by the 111th Congress to veterans of the segregated 100th Infantry Battalion, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and the Military Intelligence Service by Public Law 111-254.

From 1945 into the early 1970s, a period of nearly three decades, critical constitutional and civil rights issues emanating from the largest forced removal of a population on the basis of race in the history of the United States, were largely silenced, even within Japanese American communities. Stories began to emerge, in Asian American studies classes in college, from students who had just learned that the World War II “camps” in which their parents had been confined, had not really been summer camps like the ones they enjoyed. Scholars soon began publishing a torrent of articles and books denouncing the euphemisms used to describe the forced removal (“evacuation”) and the concentration camps (“relocation centers”) which masked the unconstitutional, race-based, official actions (see, e.g., Yamamoto et al.). In one of the earliest public demands for redress, Edison Uno called upon his fellow Japanese American Citizens League members to pursue federal government action—but “his really lone call for redress in the early 1970s” went unheeded at the time (“Uno”).⁴

But once the nation blessed the recognition of Nikkei World War II heroism “in spite” of the forced removal and incarceration, dozens of new exhibits, memorials, and monuments began to emerge.⁵ Two major historical interpretations formed a linear master narrative for the Nikkei and World War II: first, the Nikkei were indiscriminately and unconstitutionally removed from homes and work and placed wholesale in barbed wire enclosed camps; in spite of this humiliating rejection by their own country, the only one they knew, the community served heroically by refraining from behavior which would disrupt the war effort and, moreover, by serving in combat with ferocity, skill, and determination. Second, the 1988 Civil Liberties Act, which formally apologized for the nation’s action and provided \$20,000 to each individual who had been incarcerated and who was still alive at the date of the signing, was a testament to the correctness of the historical narrative presented to the American public over the past half-century. It was also politically palatable and extremely useful to suggest that such an apology and redress were hallmarks of a truly “great nation” able and willing to bear responsibility for its own wrongdoing. The Nikkei narrative thus became further justification for proclaiming World War II as “The Good War” via “The Greatest Generation.”

These interpretations may reflect the positivist attitude of many, if not most Nikkei but it is now widely contested by scholars whose publications over the last four decades have tended to emphasize the casualties of the war and the narrative. On the domestic front: there has been much more documentation of acts of resistance to the incarceration, whether judicial cases, including the famous Supreme Court cases of Fred Korematsu, Gordon Hirabayashi, Minoru Yasui and Mitsuye Endo or the equally famous coram nobis cases which vacated the convictions of Korematsu, Hirabayashi, and Yasui in the 1980s (see Yamamoto et al, 221–327). Memoirs of internees/survivors including Yasutaro Soga and Otokichi Ozaki have been published; and documentaries like Emiko Omori’s *Rabbit in the Moon* (2001) and Frank Abe’s *Conscience and the Constitution* (2000), have provided award-winning versions of the camp experience. The latter famously included the young men who, when the U.S. determined to conscript Nikkei in 1944, directly from the concentration camps in which they were then being held, decided to protest by resisting the draft (until released) and were tried, convicted and imprisoned. This counter-narrative has not yet peaked and promises to continue into the near future.

The military heroism narrative, however, has continued largely intact even though there was an early scholarly study of a Japanese American military unit which was notorious for its negative behavior when angered by racial provocation, demonstrating that not all Nikkei were model soldiers. Tamotsu Shibutani’s *The Derelicts of*

Company K: A Sociological Study of Demoralization has been conspicuously ignored since its publication by the University of California Press in 1978. Nikkei who publicly and militantly protested the incarceration of their families did so in other military units as well. The 1800th Engineer General Service Battalion included a large company of Japanese Americans who were kept under surveillance while serving in construction projects in the South (“1800th Engineer”).⁶ This story, too, has largely been ignored. In the meantime, a deluge of books and films honoring the heroism of Nikkei combat troops continues to inundate the nation.

The master narrative of the “good Japanese American” community which endured unjust incarceration with dignity while their young men nonetheless fought in the U.S. military with splendid courage and to great effect thus continues its journey. There are signs of contestation: much of the recent scholarly literature on the World War II incarceration experience focuses on protest and continues to erode earlier accounts of heroic and fatalistic endurance (see Muller; Lyon). But on balance the mainstream narrative maintains its hold on the population, including the Nikkei communities now increasingly evident in public history venues including numerous memorials, monuments, films/videos, and exhibitions now gracing half-a-dozen states and the Nation’s Capital.⁷

Notes

- 1 The term, *Nikkei*, is increasingly employed for Japanese emigrants and their descendants in diasporas around the globe. See “Nikkei.”
- 2 Although the term has become associated with Nazi extermination camps of World War II, a similarity is not suggested here. The terminologically correct designation, which was already widely employed at the time the American camps were established, is concentration camp (cf. Daniels).
- 3 Nisei linguists served with Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines, in every major battle action in the Pacific, including with Merrill’s Marauders in Burma (cf. McNaughton; Hawaii Nikkei History Editorial Board). For two interesting documentaries, the first general and the second more specific, see: *MIS: Military Intelligence Service, Human Secret Weapon*, a film by Junichi Suzuki (2012), and *Honor & Sacrifice: The Roy Matsumoto Story* (Stourwater Pictures, 2013).
- 4 Uno is said to have explained the long silence among Japanese Americans as akin to reluctance on the part of rape victims unwilling or unable to bear further victimization since critics accused them “for having brought the violence upon themselves” (“Uno”).
- 5 See Gessner for an analysis of these exhibits and memorials.
- 6 There were German American and Italian Americans but it is not clear why they had been removed from their original units.
- 7 The National Japanese American Memorial to Patriotism During World War II occupies prime real estate in view of Union Station and the Nation’s Capitol. It was in 2000. See *National Japanese American Memorial Foundation*.

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