

THE NEW REPUBLIC

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California and the Japanese

BY CARY McWILLIAMS



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Despite the shock of the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, few instances of violence toward resident Japanese were reported in California immediately subsequent to December 7. Governor Culbert L. Olson made an admirable plea for tolerance, and other prominent individuals in the state echoed similar sentiments. So quietly and successfully had the resident Japanese fitted into the economy of the state, subsequent to the enactment of the Alien Land Act in 1920, that most people had forgotten about them or had come to accept them as desirable residents. But, as the war in the Far East developed and with the release of the Roberts report on the Pearl Harbor tragedy, feeling against the Japanese began to rise throughout the state. For the war in the Pacific naturally stirred nationalistic sentiments among some 30,000 resident Filipinos in California, who have never been on the friendliest terms with the resident Japanese. Filipino field-hands work for Japanese foremen, labor contractors and growers. On December 27, a riot between Filipino and Japanese occurred in Stockton; and similar disturbances were noted in Imperial Valley and other rural sections of the state. Since then feeling has gradually risen. Some forty-five cases have been reported to date in which Japanese have been attacked, several deaths have already occurred and a number of suicides have been recorded.

The feeling of the Filipinos against the Japanese served to touch off the current wave of resentment and suspicion which, unless it is checked, may produce the most unfortunate results. In the last few weeks one group after another has begun to sound off about the Japanese; special-interest groups have begun to whet their axes; and, with 1942 an election year for federal and state officers, some local politicians have suddenly remembered the Yellow Peril, a sure-fire political issue in the state. Unfortunately, this agitation has taken form in a dangerous concrete proposal that all Japanese resident in California be evacuated from the state and interned for the duration of the war. There are, of course, variations of the proposal. The American Legion wants all Japanese, citizens and aliens alike, moved from the state; the Board of Supervisors of Los Angeles County has requested the federal government to evacuate all alien Japanese; while Mayor Fletcher Brown, of Los Angeles, wants all alien Japanese interned and would like to see the American-born Japanese conscripted for civilian defense or farm labor. Just what, then, are the merits of these proposals?

The position of "enemy aliens" in time of war is necessarily precarious and difficult; but when a large group of enemy aliens are concentrated in one area and when they are as easily recognizable as the Japanese, their position becomes almost intolerable. Every Japanese face in California today is a target for curiosity, ridicule and contempt. On April 1, 1940, there were 126,947 Japanese in the continental United States, of which number 47,305 were foreign-born aliens and, therefore, permanently ineligible for citizenship. Most of these Japanese are, of



course, concentrated in California (93,717, of whom 33,569 are aliens); and they are also concentrated in areas within the state. Since most of the Japanese live near the coast, proposal that they be evacuated from "coastal areas" involve thousands of people.

The situation is also complicated by the existence of all sorts of "curious circumstances" which in these times tend to cast suspicion upon the Japanese. For example, there were some 2,100 Japanese living on Terminal Island in the Los Angeles Harbor District (a vital defense area), of whom 800 are aliens. Why, the curious immediately asked, should this large Japanese fishing colony be located on Terminal Island? The answer is quite simple: there are ten fish canneries located on the island, representing a capital investment of about \$30,000,000. It has been the location of the canneries that has anchored the Japanese on the island as fishermen and cannery workers, particularly as there are few residential areas in Los Angeles in which Japanese are permitted to live. Yet there is no question that the Japanese colony should never have been tolerated on Terminal Island. Despite the fact that most of the residents are either loyal or quite harmless, nevertheless the colony provided a convenient screen for possible subversive activities. But the situation could have been easily corrected by the simple expedient of ordering the canneries to move. That Japanese spies were working among the fishermen was, in fact, pointed out years ago by some of the Japanese themselves. Despite the resulting arrest and deportation of Lieutenant-Commander Itari Tatibana as a Japanese spy, the canneries were allowed to remain in the area. Within the last few weeks, the Department of Justice has wisely ordered all Japanese out of the district and, by a series of decrees, has limited the areas within which Japanese aliens may reside. With these regulations, I think, no one can quarrel.

The situation is also greatly complicated in California by reason of three important divisions or groupings within the Japanese population: issei, nisei and kibei, for which division we are ourselves very largely to blame. The issei, or original immigrants, were made permanently ineligible to citizenship by the Immigration Act of 1924. Never being quite certain in their own minds about their status here, they felt compelled, in many instances, to maintain some ties with Japan. They never knew but that they might some day have to return to Japan and, were they compelled to do so, they wanted their children to have some knowledge of things Japanese. Many of them, therefore, either sent their children to the local Japanese-language schools or particularly the more prosperous, sent their children back to Japan for part of their schooling. The kibei (American-born Japanese who have studied in Japan) are actually suspected and there are some 2,500 of them in Los Angeles County alone. The Immigration Act, by shutting off all further Japanese immigration, drove a deep wedge between the issei and the nisei; between the "old people" and the "young people". The issei group, largely



by reason of the language difficulty, became isolated. Notably a law-abiding, thrifty and hard-working group, they tended to center their lives in the Japanese community itself. They were outside the scope of the so-called Americanization programs, since they never could become citizens. They remained dependent upon the Japanese-vernacular newspapers, and kept close to the Japanese consulates and their own designated leaders. The nisei, on the other hand, have tended to break away from the Japanese community. As a group they are well educated and, despite the fact that many of them live under the same roof as the issei, they have few, if any, cultural ties with the issei group. Friction and tension between the two groups has, in fact, long been acknowledged. The presence of large resident kibel and issei groups, neither of which has received the proper educational attention from the authorities, serves to arouse suspicion and distrust. After the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, a statesmanlike policy would have made it possible for all resident Japanese to become citizens (and the same observation also applies to the Chinese and Filipinos). Having permitted these people to enter the country, we should have made the best of the situation by making it possible for those who were then residing here to become American citizens if they so desired.

Since December 7, a slow paralysis has crept over the once prosperous Japanese communities. There are some 550 families of Japanese aliens who have already been interned. These families, left stranded, are not eligible for public assistance. No Japanese may fish in coastal waters and, therefore, the fishermen are permanently out of employment. The whole Japanese community in Los Angeles, in a sense, revolves around the produce industry. But even the citizens among this group of growers are afraid to act. The Japanese produce firms which formerly financed their operations have either been closed or have their funds impounded or are themselves afraid to act. Some thirty-six American-born Japanese, civil-servant employees of the city of Los Angeles, have been forced to resign their positions or to request indefinite leaves of absence, solely because of the nationality of their parents. Mayor Bowron, in fact, has expressly stated that these employees were not even suspected of disloyal conduct. So far as the alien group is concerned, there are, of course, myriad restrictions, the practical effect of which is to make it almost impossible for them to function. As this paralysis has spread, other occupational groups have been affected: retail merchants, professional men, property owners, domestics. If not yet dead, Little Tokyo is in the process of dying. This very fact of economic distress, however, has been seized upon as a further reason why the Japanese as a group should be interned. Other considerations have been urged in support of the proposals for wholesale evacuation and internment. If the coast were bombed, it has been said, there is danger that the non-Japanese population might go berserk and mob the Japanese; therefore, for their own protection, all Japanese, aliens and citizens alike, must be moved. As one official said to me: "We are at war with the Japanese people. Let's be realistic



all Japanese look alike."

The enthusiasts who are proposing these schemes for wholesale evacuation have not apparently considered some of the difficulties involved. Then there is, of course, the legal issue. The only manner by which American-born Japanese could be involuntarily evacuated, I take it, would be by a declaration of martial law throughout the area. Nor to date has anyone bothered even to estimate what it would cost to evacuate 93, 717 Japanese from California, much less to point out where and in what manner they might be resettled. I asked one official where he proposed to resettle these people and his cryptic answer was "Utah." But, somehow, I have a feeling that the people of Utah might object to the resettlement of nearly a hundred thousand Japanese in the state.

People are prone to forget, in a moment of excitement, that special-interest groups have axes to grind against the Japanese. On the great wholesale produce markets in Los Angeles, the non-Japanese commission firms would, of course, like to see their Japanese competitors eliminated. "White-American" nurserymen have already organized a boycott of Japanese firms.

Quite recently the movement for the wholesale evacuation of the Japanese has taken an even more dangerous direction. It has been proposed, for example, that all Japanese be moved out of the coastal areas in California and put to work on a semi-conscription basis as farm laborers in the San Joaquin Valley "at reasonable wages." This suggestion has more than passing significance. For the first time in nearly twenty years, California agriculture in 1942 will face a close balance between the supply and the demand for farm labor. For years the interests which control California agriculture have profited by the fact of a large surplus of agricultural workers. Through the use of this surplus, they have effectively checked organizational efforts on the part of the workers themselves and have been able to delay the adoption of improved labor standards. To put an army of Japanese conscript workers at the disposal of these interests--an army unable to strike, unable even to protest over working conditions--would be to give them one of the most effective scab-labor reserves imaginable. Recently a modification of this proposal has appeared: to transfer all alien Japanese and all Japanese-Americans under eighteen years of age and certain other groups, to the Rocky Mountain States, where "they could be used during the spring and fall when the sugar-beet farms have their peak load." The effect of such a proposal would be to displace long-resident Mexican sugar-beet workers in the same area.

Already irreparable damage has been done the Japanese population by reason of the tragic situation in which they find themselves. They will carry with them for years to come the marks of this experience. Patterns of cultural adaptation which, under more favorable circumstances and with a little more understanding, have been seriously interrupted, if not permanently disarranged. The Japanese should be encouraged to make their own contribution to the defense effort. Many of them are talented writers, radio technicians, linguists, artists. As collaborators on propaganda programs, their services would be invaluable. They all have a job to do and they should be permitted to do it. Likewise, an educational program addressed to the



to the issei and the kibei in particular, should be launched at once.

There is every reason to demonstrate the democratic objective of the war by fair treatment of the Japanese who are resident in California. The most effective step in this direction would be the appointment of an unbiased congressional committee to investigate all phases of the problem in California (for it is, admittedly, a complicated situation). In the meantime, local officials and local politicians should be cautioned to proceed with great care and to follow the lead of Attorney General Francis Biddle, who has acted with conspicuous fairness and good sense under very trying circumstances. Were such a committee to be appointed immediately, I am thoroughly convinced that it would recommend, after a first-hand investigation of the facts, against wholesale evacuation of the Japanese. One of the most difficult phases of the present situation is that most officials, county, state and federal, are fearful of the consequences of inaction. Many of them will privately concede that they are opposed to some of the proposals that have been made, but they do not want to be made the "goats" should any difficulties with the Japanese arise. Unless this attitude is dispelled, as, for example, by a congressional committee of inquiry, the situation in California will increasingly become complicated by purely political considerations and local pressures.

Los Angeles

Cary McWilliams