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RACISM AND REASON

An Address to be delivered by Dillon S. Myer,
Director of the War Relocation Authority at an
interfaith meeting sponsored by the Pacific
Coast Committee on American Principles and Fair
Play, at Los Angeles, California, on October 2,
1944.

RACISM AND REASON

There is a special meaning in the opportunity you have given me to meet with you tonight. I see in your invitation your determination and confidence that the problem of the Japanese and Japanese Americans in this country must and shall be settled through processes of reason and in a Christian spirit.

You refute a misconception rather widely held elsewhere in the country, that the people on the West Coast all react toward persons with Japanese faces with blind, unreasoning hatred. Some people in the Pacific states unfortunately are victims of their own bigotry on this question, but there are many citizens out here, like yourselves, who have been standing up for the same just and democratic treatment of the Japanese minority that should be accorded to all minorities.

It has been easy for the racists to claim to represent a majority point of view on the evacuee question. The War Relocation Authority program has always been peculiarly subject to emotional distortion by these people. Because the WRA is dealing with people of Japanese descent, many American citizens who are rightfully indignant about the barbarism and treachery of the Imperial Japanese have found it difficult to approach the problems of WRA thoughtfully and judiciously. They have tended to identify the people in relocation centers with the real enemy across the Pacific. They have accepted without question a great many lies and half truths about the relocation centers that have been spread across the country by malicious men with malicious motives. Some have even demanded that American citizens of Japanese ancestry born and raised in this country be treated, as a group, like prisoners of war.

But in the past several months the temper of public opinion on this issue has been changing-- rapidly and unmistakably. People who were completely unaware of the Japanese American problem a year ago have begun to express themselves on this subject in rather caustic language, directed not against the Japanese Americans but at the race mongers who insult the Nation's good sense with their fantastic charges and who throw fair play overboard by their ruthless hounding of a helpless minority group. Some public officials who once demanded wholesale confinement of all persons of Japanese descent have begun to realize with the President that Americanism is not a matter of race or ancestry but a matter of the mind and heart. Some private organizations which formerly advocated total exclusion and mass deportation of Japanese Americans have softened and modified their attitudes.

Naturally this shift in public thinking is profoundly encouraging to me. But I take no personal credit for it, and I claim none for the War Relocation Authority. The change has been brought about, I am convinced, primarily-- by the magnificent combat record of Japanese American boys in the uniform of the United States Army. Since the early part of this year, these boys have written in blood and steel a record that compels all of us to think a little harder and more deeply than ever before about the real meaning of America. They have found their way up the peninsula of Italy, usually in the very forefront of the action, taking desperate chances, wiping out machine gun nests, harassing the enemy from all sides, driving him relentlessly back toward the Alps.

The outfit I am speaking of here is the far-famed 100th Infantry Battalion made up of Japanese American boys from the Hawaiian Islands. Some of them are men who were stationed at Pearl Harbor at the time of the Japanese attack on December 7. A few of them had close family relatives who were killed by the bombs made in Tokyo---bombs made perhaps from American scrap metal. When these boys first arrived in the United States for preliminary training at Camp McCoy, Wisconsin, they immediately impressed their commanding officers with their eagerness to become good soldiers, their willingness to absorb the toughest physical grind, and their alertness in performing their military tasks. Later on, they were moved to Camp Shelby, Mississippi, where they continued to maintain the same excellent record in final pre-combat training. Then, in August of last year, they had their first contact with the enemy in the area around the beachhead at Salerno. From there they stormed against the German defenses along the Volturno and Rapido Rivers, crossed these two streams, and spent 40 days in the front lines at Cassino. Later they were transferred to the tight little beachhead at Anzio, and finally took part in the break-through to Rome.

Throughout all this action, the boys of the 100th Battalion displayed the same qualities of good American soldiery they had shown in their pre-combat training. Time and again, members of the unit were singled out for especially dangerous missions and cited by their commanding officers for unusual bravery in action. Not once did a member of this Battalion go AWOL; the nearest approach was the case of two wounded boys who left the base hospital prematurely and hitch-hiked up to the front to join their comrades. As the War Department has pointed out, this is AWOL in reverse, and with a vengeance.

The normal strength of the 100th Battalion is about 1,000 men. But of course there have been replacements so that the total number of troops who have served with the unit is in the neighborhood of 1300. This is a fairly small contingent when you realize that the Japanese American boys in this group have now received a total of more than 1,000 Purple Hearts, 44 Silver Stars, 31 Bronze Stars, nine Distinguished Service Crosses, and three Legion of Merit Medals. Within the past few weeks the entire Battalion has received a Presidential citation from Lieut. Gen. Mark Clark for "outstanding performance of duty in action, on June 26 and 27, at Belvedere and Sassetta in Italy." In the closing words of his citation, General Clark said--and I quote--"The fortitude and intrepidity displayed by the officers and men of the 100th Infantry Battalion reflect the finest traditions of the Army of the United States."

In newspapers here you may have read recently of an instance of such fortitude and sacrifice, the death of Lieutenant Kei Tanahashi of Los Angeles, who fought with the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. Lieutenant Tanahashi died near Castellina, Italy, the War Department reported, because after being wounded he refused medical attention until every other wounded soldier of his platoon was given first aid and evacuated to a safe place. Army doctors said he might have lived if he had permitted himself to be treated earlier and evacuated with the first group of wounded. The Lieutenant, known for his activities in Boy Scout work, and earlier popular as a student at UCLA, was evacuated to a relocation center with his parents. They still live at our Heart Mountain center, while his widow, whom he married a week before going overseas, resides in Cleveland.

The 100th Battalion is now part of a larger fighting unit, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. The 442nd, which comprises thousands of Nisei from the mainland, including a number who once were evacuees or who have families in the relocation centers, has begun to make an enviable record in its own right. The War Department announced recently that members of a reconnaissance patrol of this Japanese American unit are believed to have been the first Allied troops to reach the historic city of Pisa. There is an aspect of this incident which symbolizes the United Nations in microcosm. Those Japanese American boys who went forward into Pisa were officered by a naturalized Canadian and an American of French extraction. Some people in these parts who think that as old settlers they have a priority on patriotism, should think that one over.

Recognition of the Japanese American soldier is not confined by any means to the War Department, the commanding generals and the official citations. The ordinary doughboys who have been in action alongside these troops---, the men of English, Irish, Italian, and all other ancestries who have seen them going into battle---are even more eloquent in their praise than the official communiques. One of them, convalescing at a military hospital in North Carolina, recently wrote to Time Magazine. "I just came from Italy," his letter reads in part, "where I was assigned to the Japanese 100th Infantry Battalion. I never in my life saw more of a true American than they are... Ask anyone who has seen them in action against the Jerry (to) tell you about them. They'll tell you that when they have them on their flanks, they are sure of security in that section..." And then he concluded, addressing his remarks to the people who have been villifying the Japanese Americans here in the United States. "They, my friends," he wrote, "are not the little 'yellow bellies', you are."

Another one wrote directly from the front lines in Italy to the Secretary of the Interior after reading about some of the worst examples of discrimination against people of Japanese ancestry that have occurred recently. "May I suggest," he asked, "that you send all those narrow-minded, bigoted un-Americans over here to relieve the 100th Infantry Battalion of the 34th Division?" The Secretary's reply was terse and to the point. He wrote: "Thank you for your letter. It is quite apparent that you know what you are fighting for."

The boys who wrote these two letters are apparently not at all unique. Within the past few weeks I had an opportunity to talk with an Army captain just back from special service in the Italian theater. Almost everywhere he went, he tells me, he found admiration for the exploits of the 100th Battalion and bitterness about the shameful and misguided actions that are being perpetrated against people of Japanese descent on some sections of the home front. The feeling he encountered seemed to be almost unanimously one of burning resentment against people who are persecuting loyal Japanese Americans in the press and through direct economic action.

One incident, in particular, that aroused the ire of our soldiers in Italy and elsewhere was the event that took place a few months ago in Great Meadows, New Jersey. It centered around the farm of a man named Ed Kowalick who tried to hire five evacuees of Japanese descent from one of our WRA

relocation centers to help him produce the food that is so vitally needed in our drive against the Axis. Before the incident was over, one of Kowalick's barns had been burned down, his family had been threatened, and he had become almost a social outcast in his own community. But, without going into any further comment, let me quote from the letter of a junior officer in Italy with an Irish American name:

"It is two years and a couple of days since I left the states with a whole hatful of company on the war's leeching business. During the ten-minute breaks in Africa and Italy we have devoted a lot of effort to trying to realize in the imagination what life is like at home....

"Today a magazine (Time, April 24) comes to the beachhead and... tells a story, and these pleasant images become hideous and confused. According to the story five Japanese, including one Frank Kitagawa, are sent to Great Meadows, N.J. from an Arizona relocation center to help Ed Kowalick run his 600-acre farm...Ed Kowalick's neighbors mount a blind patriotism against this five-man Oriental menace within their gates...A building on Kowalick's farm is burned; and Kowalick, being one man, is forced to send the offenders away. This is, as I said, a little thing. Nobody killed, nobody maimed. To show they hold no hard feelings, the farmers present Ed Kowalick with a box of cigars, and the incident is closed....

"It is the schoolhouse, I think, that sticks in my craw. Presumably the small fry of Great Meadows are taught in this school-house: study algebra; and Archimedes' principle; and nouns; and learn that Lincoln called them "the last best hope of earth..." This is the schoolhouse where hundreds met to hunt down five, who had committed the crime of discarding their ancestry for the ties of a new country.

"There are crosses with Japanese names in the American cemeteries in the bitter Italian hills. These men are worthy to bear arms; how then are they not worthy to grow tomatoes?

"Since I began, a score of shells have dolloped into the vicinity. They threaten my life, for which I have a high regard, but not the things that give my life sustenance. Now I feel that these things are threatened and I do not know where to go to find a clean picture of my country. It is not the matter of Great Meadows alone. Lord knows, that is only the latest and one of the least striking of the items on a long list. Somewhere in the confusion is the central matter of what is true and what is not true about our national life.

"This is a very personal matter, like love or good beer or dying, and I should like someone to give me an answer."

There are indeed crosses with Japanese names in the bitter Italian hills---dozens upon dozens of them. Some of them mark the graves of boys whose parents are living today in WRA relocation centers. Just recently memorial services have been held at two of these centers for the boys who have fallen on the Italian front. And in the months that lie ahead, I am sure that the relocation centers, like all American communities, will find their honor rolls and their lists of Gold Star mothers steadily increasing.

Today there are well over 10,000 American men of Japanese descent, in the uniform of the Army of the United States. Many hundreds of them are boys who were evacuated with their families from the West Coast two years ago and who have lived in WRA centers. Others come from the Hawaiian Islands and from various points on the mainland of the United States. They are serving not only on the Italian front against the Nazis, but in Burma, China, and the far Pacific Islands against the fanatical hordes from the main Japanese islands. One of the Caucasian soldiers with Merrill's Marauders in the China-Burma-India theater recently paid high tribute to the Japanese American boys fighting with that redoubtable organization. "Every Marauder," he wrote, "knows these boys by name even if they don't know ours---this is due to the courage and bravery shown by them. One of our platoons owe their lives to Sergeant Hank G. who translated Jap orders...foolishly yelled to the effect that they were attempting a flanking movement. Hank---we call him Horizontal Hank because he's been pinned down so many times by Jap Machine gun fire---guided the machine gun fire on our side which killed every Jap on that side. The boys who fought alongside of Hank agree that they have never seen a more calm, cool, and collected man under fire---he was always so eager to be where he could be of the most use and effectiveness and that was most always the hot spot...And yet while the other boys boast of the number of Japs they got he doesn't talk very much about the three he has to his account. He usually changes the subject by saying, 'Honorable ancestors much regret meeting Merrill's Marauders.' I hope I haven't given the impression that I'm trying to glorify him. Many of the boys and myself especially, never know a Japanese American or what one was like---now we know and the Marauders want you to know that they are backing the Nisei 100 percent. It makes the boys and myself raging mad to read about movements against Japanese Americans by those 4-F'ers back home. We would dare them to say things like they have in front of us." This boy and the other men of Merrill's Marauders, quite obviously, do not have the difficulty experienced by so many of our Home Front Commandos in distinguishing between the Japanese enemy and loyal Americans of Japanese descent.

Recently I was pleased to learn that a Japanese American soldier who formerly lived at the Manzanar Relocation Center has become a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. This man is Sergeant Karl G. Yoneda, who is now fighting in Burma and who in 1936 was on the picket line when longshoremen and Chinese picketed shipments of scrap and oil to Japan. Men who know and worked with him have described him in these words, and I quote, as "a long time fighter against Japanese imperialism and fascism of any kind." To my way of thinking, that makes Sergeant Yoneda more American by far than the people who shipped that scrap and oil to Japan.

If bigots had reasoning processes, one could easily prove to them that their proposals to exclude the evacuees from the West Coast permanently are not really based on suspicions of disloyalty, but solely on racial prejudices. You could start by asking whether the Japanese Americans fighting in Italy or the Pacific are disloyal, and whether the families of these boys, including families who have received "killed in action" telegrams, are disloyal. It would be a cold-blooded bigot indeed who would dare to make such a charge. And if they are not disloyal, as you and I certainly know they are not, then these servicemen and their families should have the right to return to the West Coast whenever the blanket military prohibition against return of evacuees is

lifted. Once the bigot admits that much, and he certainly hates to, he has admitted a large scale exception to his crude dogma that, "The Only Good Jap is a Dead Jap." He either must admit that loyalty of the evacuees is the real yardstick, or he must retreat to his previously prejudiced position.

Sometimes I believe that if the race-baiting extremists in California were able to override the many residents of this state who differ with them on the question of the evacuees, the logical outcome would be some kind of secession from the Union. Mentally, this minority has seceded from the rest of the nation by preaching unAmerican methods of handling the Japanese in this country, both citizens and law-abiding aliens. Newspapers throughout the country, including some on the West Coast, have differed with these advocates of second class citizenship, or harsher treatment, for Americans of Japanese descent. I would like to cite some recent examples.

The New York TIMES declared:

"Their names are: Masaki Fujikawa, Shinji Nakamino, Denis Masato Hashimoto Grover Kazutomi Nagaji, Kenji Kato, Tsugiyasu Tomas, all killed in action against their country's enemy...Other Americans of Japanese descent have fought for our flag in the Pacific and in Burma, taking risks, because of their race, over and beyond those assumed by white soldiers...Letters from other American soldiers received in this office have proclaimed the loyalty and devotion of these men.

"What this proves is a fact encouraging for Japanese-Americans, for the country of which they are citizens and for the long prospect ahead. There is nothing in the Japanese blood, or in any racial blood, that makes men ignorant and brutal. Education and environment turn the scales one way or the other. A whole generation in Japan and Germany has gone to waste and worse than waste. Under decent governments, in a decent society, in a decently organized world, the coming generations may be reclaimed. The war must be won by destruction, but the peace will be kept only by education."

The San Francisco CHRONICLE said:

"The Army has awarded Bronze Star medals for meritorious action on Saipan to four California boys, coming from Marysville, Stockton, San Jose, and Los Angel. These young men showed their American fighting spirit by volunteering for a job that took them, in that region, into particular danger. Their names are Honda, Nakanishi, Natsui and Sakamoto."

The Washington POST said:

"If the exclusion [from the West Coast] is based on nothing more than racial hostility, then it raises an ugly threat to the fundamental principles of American life. It bears, as Mr. Justice Murphy pointed out elsewhere in his opinion on the curfew case, 'a melancholy resemblance to the treatment accorded members of the Jewish race in Germany and in other parts of Europe.' If the freedom of citizens can be restricted because of the spelling of their names, then none of us can claim more than a temporary and illusory hold upon freedom."

An editorial in the Santa Ana (California) REGISTER stated:

"Real democracy, Christianity and Americanism means that people must live

a dangerous life. They must have faith in other people and be willing to take risks. We should have been willing to take the risk that possibly a few Japanese might have caused a disturbance.

"But since we have made a serious mistake, the sooner we correct it the better. There is no excuse whatever now for keeping the Japanese in detention camps. They are entitled to the same protection by the government as every other citizen, no matter what race or color."

The San Francisco NEWS said editorially, in commenting on a test case:

"The News believes the orderly procedure of a court trial is a far better way to test the question of returning loyal Japanese to the Coast than is the action of organizations like the American Legion and the Native Sons."

The Charlotte North Carolina NEWS declared:

"It was last spring that a young Marine, a Guadalcanal veteran, returned to this country and found vicious discrimination against Americans of Japanese ancestry in California -- and in a nationally-circulated letter accused the California Department of the American Legion of actually sponsoring the movement,

"We rejoice in the increasingly distinguished battle records of these troops, and consider their deeds under fire sufficient answer to irresponsible critics and idle talk of the prejudiced. Response in battle, after all, is the final evidence, and adequate testimony to the loyalty of these men to the American ideal -- regardless of their stakes in this country's future."

John W. Vandercook, nationally known NBC commentator, in a recent broadcast pointed out how the racist give Tokyo ammunition for propagandizing the Orient. He said:

"Astoundingly bad Americans have driven harmless, American-born Japanese laborers from their communities, simply because they belonged to another race. In short, we have persistently provided the Jap propagandists with deadly ammunition. We have not thought how that ammunition can be and is being turned against us, and how just as surely as the sun rises, it is costing American lives. To hate one enemy more than the other largely because one belongs to a different race of human-kind, is to lose, hopelessly, one's own moral position... Thinking like that is far more appropriate on the Axis side of the line than it is on ours. It becomes a matter of the very highest priority, as we are approaching far greater battles with the Japs than the one which took place on Saipan. It becomes, therefore, a matter of the very highest priority for us to devise some means as we have in Europe, of reaching the minds of the Jap army in such a way as to convince them that we are what the overwhelming majority of us really are - decent and honorable human beings -- even to our enemies..."

Mr. Vandercook said further in his broadcast:

"Our best propaganda weapon against the Japs would be the truthful report of how the Japanese-Americans in the Hawaiian islands in wartime still go on living loyal tranquil useful lives. It would be a still better weapon - I venture to wager it would save many, many American lives -- if we could honestly report to Japan that the loyal Japanese citizens who are still held in relocation camps

on the United States mainland, were to now be returned to their communities as normal citizens, and that their white neighbors, were receiving them with the ordinary decency which every American of any race should accord to any fellow American of every other race."

H. V. Kaltenborn, noted radio commentator, in a letter to the Rev. Allen Heist and his church, the First Methodist church of Santa Maria, wrote these words:

"It is the people of California who unhappily are primarily responsible for the unfair treatment that has been accorded to American citizens whose only crime is that they were born of Japanese parents. I am very happy to know that some of the good Christians of California are speaking out for truth and justice."

These examples, and I could give you many more if time and your patience permitted, make it plain that by and large the country is hostile toward the minority of extremists who seek to keep the home fires of hatred burning against the Japanese Americans. When confronted with such evidence that they are a minority, these race-baiters libel many thousands of decent Americans on the West Coast by employing their threadbare thesis that, "We residents of the West Coast understand the Japanese problem, and the rest of the country does not."

Those on the Pacific coast who have not wished to let their silence place them in the company of the racists, have challenged the right of the extremist group to speak for anyone but other racists. With every such challenge, the spirit of decent tolerance grows stronger. It is extremely encouraging to note that every time the extremists seek to run riot, public opinion counterpunches and rocks them back on their heels. The Great Meadows incident which I mentioned earlier, was a notable example. Editorials and soldier letters condemned the entire occurrence. LIFE magazine reported this outrageous happening and one result was that many fairminded persons from all over the country wrote to George Yamamoto, one of the five farmer evacuees, urging him not to lose heart. Some enclosed money, which he turned over to the American Red Cross. Now these evacuees are working within 50 miles of Great Meadows. They are well liked and have been able to perform useful work in farming without interference from anyone.

It is also obvious that the race baiters do not as they claim, "understand" the problem of Americans of Japanese ancestry. If they did they would never propose to bar them from the economic life of the West Coast, or to exclude them entirely from these states, or even to ship them back to Japan. Theirs is the counsel of people who fear the future, who preach defeatism, who say that we can only plan for hard times ahead and too few jobs and opportunities to be divided among the Anglo-Saxons, let alone the Japanese. It is a good thing that most people disagree with them and are determined that we shall have jobs and opportunities for all, regardless of race, creed or color.

The most tangible evidence of widespread public acceptance of the Japanese Americans in most American communities is the progress made in relocating more than 30,000 evacuees who have left the relocation centers on indefinite leave. On the average, 425 persons a week bid goodbye to the restricted life of the centers and take up new jobs and new lives on the outside. In Detroit and Philadelphia, Des Moines and Savannah, Georgia, in Madison, Wisconsin, and Kansas City, in the big cities, the small towns, and farming areas, Japanese and Japanese Americans have gone to work. In the overwhelming majority of cases they have found themselves welcomed by the men and women working with them, and by their neighbors. You will

find the evacuees worshipping in the churches, their children studying and playing with other American children in the schools. These transplanted people engage in community activities, buy war bonds, see their sons leave for the Army, carry on their war jobs. They become part of the normal American way of life once more.

Many of these evacuees, and some of those who will follow them from the centers in the months to come, will never return to the West Coast. They will settle down in communities new to the Issei and Nisei and there make their contribution to American agriculture and industry. Their contribution will be welcomed for among most Americans there is no real fear of the Japanese community in this country, and by that token there is no hatred of it. Evacuees who have relocated have been accepted and have continued the education in American living that the West Coast evacuation interrupted and life in the relocation centers retarded. For make no mistake about it, we in the WRA do not delude ourselves that we can do very much to make residents of the relocation centers part of the national American community. That is the job you can do best, when the military prohibition against their return is lifted and some of these people gradually return to live and work with you. You must recreate the proper social climate for growing Americans.

For becoming an American is a growing process. It takes patience, wisdom and tolerance to become an American in the full sense of the word. A man acts with goodwill toward his neighbors, makes sacrifices for his country, does the things that he believes help all races, creeds and groups to work together and make this a strong nation. He dies at the Biblical threescore years and ten, still busy becoming a better American. Does his son inherit all that through the accident of birth? Not at all. The son is only a potential American and he has to start all over to do what his father did, maybe better, before he can lay claim to the same proud title of American.

This conception is disturbing to the racists. It means that in the struggle to become a good citizen the child born of an old New England family, and the Nisei youngster born in a relocation center, start out even. The New England child may get later advantages, but at the outset they both have the same notion of Americanism--exactly none at all. It is a creed they learn by practice in action.

I think you and I and almost everyone want both these youngsters to have the same chance to grow into defenders of this land. If we relocate the evacuees successfully, with the help of hundreds of communities throughout the country, I feel certain that this war-born problem can be solved in a satisfactory manner and in complete accord with our democratic precepts. The people of Japanese descent can start once more to develop and mature in a truly American environment. And the Nation as a whole can take pride in the fact that, despite the physical upheavals and the emotional strains of global war, we have not lost our national conscience. Despite all the clamor of the race-baiters and their tawdry appeals to fear and hatred, the fundamental decency that characterizes the great majority of Americans is still very much alive. It will, I am confident, assert itself with increasing force and effectiveness in the days that lie ahead.

