“OUR TESTAMENT TO DEMOCRACY”
THE DECEPTION OF JAPANESE AMERICAN INTERNMENT
IN WORLD WAR II
By Laura Sorvetti

Introduction

“Let us have faith, and build here in Manzanar our testament
to democracy, a system so perfect that other Americans may
emulate it in years to come.”
— Manzanar Free Press, July 17, 1943

The incarceration of 120,000 Japanese Americans between 1942 and 1945
on the West Coast was the result of a deception on several fronts through a
variety of conduits. The United States government and press were complicit
in presenting a portrait of Japanese American incarceration that defended a
certain necessity and justification of their policy. Their deception took many
forms but was most prominently captured in language and euphemism that
reduced the experience of Japanese Americans to an acceptable necessity.
Visual deception via photographs enabled Americans to incorporate a dis­tinct visual legacy of the internment into the reports published by the gov­ernment and journalism.
The deception was also defined and maintained by Japanese Americans within the internment camps. America in the early twentieth century expected a mono-Americanism that demanded conformity. Most Japanese Americans followed the demands of the government, leaving everything familiar behind, relying on their belief in the ideals of American democracy. In order to prove their loyalty to their country and re-obtain their civil liberties, internees presented an image of their experiences that stressed American values and little criticism of the government or public.

The legacy of this deception in regards to the internment camps has been hard to dispel among Americans. Not until the 1981 Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, *Personal Justice Denied*, did the government argue that there was no certain “military necessity” demanding the incarceration of Japanese Americans. Many of the manuscript collections housed within government museums are selective in their presentation of the primary sources provided on the incarceration. Historians still debate the causes, ramifications, and meanings behind the experience.

The sources drawn upon here extend from original manuscript collections within California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo’s Special Collections in the Kennedy Library, to online collections of government and national publications, to historians’ recent analysis of the incarceration. These sources are part of a growing collection of American primary sources that present the issue of Japanese American internment from a wide array of perspectives. There are discrepancies among the various sources, but in general there is a greater consensus that unites the sources into a body that extended a deception of the truth.

Cal Poly’s Special Collections holdings entitled “Manzanar Collection, 1942–1994” contain correspondence, photographs, and newspaper copies relating to the Manzanar Relocation Center. The correspondences trace the communication between two women incarcerated at Manzanar and their friends outside the camps. In the collection are also included photographs from 1942 through 1994 that capture images of the camp and the families of the two women. The third of three areas of the collection are fourteen original copies of the *Manzanar Free Press*, a tri-weekly publication published by internees at Manzanar.

Additional copies of the *Manzanar Free Press* are now accessible to the
public via the National Park Service’s Manzanar Historical Site, the Library of Congress’ American Memory Project, and Densho, the Japanese American Legacy Project. Densho and American Memory are excellent repositories for additional sources on the internment, including photographs by War Relocation Authority employees and internees, government publications, and written and oral histories by the internees themselves. National newspapers are accessible via Kennedy Library’s Microfiche Collections (San Francisco Chronicle, Wall Street Journal, San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune, and various popular magazines) and through ProQuest’s digital collections (New York Times and Los Angeles Times).

The Linguistic Deception

The most powerful and lasting deception of Americans was the linguistic deception of the government and newspapers in the 1940s. Euphemism and language created a distorted impression and story of Japanese American incarceration that exists even into the twentieth century. These deceptions fit into a longer history of discrimination and exclusion of Asian Americans since immigration to the West Coast began in the late nineteenth century.

As early as 1790 Americans sought to define citizenship based on race and ethnicity. The Naturalization Act of 1790 provided the opportunity for citizenship to “any alien, being a free white person.” Although “persons of African nativity or decent” were incorporated in 1873, the act denied citizenship to Japanese and other Asian immigrants until 1952. Chinese who immigrated to California during the Gold Rush were essentially shut out of America by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. In 1885 the first official immigrants from Japan landed in Hawaii, and by 1905 the San Francisco Chronicle declared “The Japanese Invasion: The Problem of the Hour.” The Asiatic Exclusion League, formed in 1905, illustrated a growing public opposition to Japanese immigrants and the 1913 Alien Land Law and Takao Ozawa v. United States in 1922 legalized the discrimination against Japa-


Language became an effective means of separating European Americans from Japanese immigrants, capitalizing on the physical differences that separated them. The Japanese immigrant was known as the “brown [or yellow] peril.” Japanese were the Chinese immigrants’ “half-dwarf neighbor,” the “far more dangerous serfs from the empire of the Mikado.” Racial and cultural stereotypes abounded, generalizing Japanese into a class of aliens that were all the same in their differences from other Americans. A leader in an Anti-Japanese League in Alameda in 1905 stated that “the Japanese is worse than the Chinese in [being a danger to white labor], for while the Chinese for the most part takes up work that a white man will not do, the Japanese enters into active competition and drives the white man out.”

As war between Japan and the United States drew closer in the early 1940s journalists began to focus on a cultural legacy that excluded Japanese Americans from mainstream America and united them instead with Japan. Some newspapers recognized the Japanese terms for first and second generation Japanese Americans, *Issei* and *Nisei* respectively. Unfortunately, their main reasons for using the terms were to distinguish between what appeared to be inherently different Japanese and other Americans. For example, the *Fresno Bee* associated the *Nisei* not with their second generation counterparts born in the United States, but with their Japanese relations via their claim for dual citizenship in Japan and the United States. Japanese Americans of the *Nisei* generation who visited Japan or who had attended school in Japan, called *Kibei*, were especially investigated by the FBI for possible ties to Japan. The terms that Japanese Americans used to define their generation would be turned into means of controlling and segregating by the United States government and public media.

During World War II reporting the connection between Japanese Americans and Japan was always emphasized above any connections to the United States. Citizens of Japanese ancestry were rarely called “Japanese

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3 In 1913 the Alien Land Law prohibited “aliens ineligible to citizenship” from owning land. The Supreme Court ruling in *Ozawa v. United States* denied Japanese immigrants eligibility for naturalization and was not overturned until 1952.


Americans,” instead being divided into “pro-American Japanese” and “pro-Axis Japanese.” The derogatory term “Jap” became widely used in headlines addressing both the Japanese and Japanese Americans, linking the two groups together as a greater enemy. An older generation of non-Japanese Americans, characterized by my grandmother and grandfather, refer to both the Japanese that my grandfather fought against in the Pacific theater and Japanese American citizens as “Japs.” Their use of the term is one example of a popular sentiment that defines anyone of Japanese ancestry as a “them” against “us,” dissimilar in ancestry, customs, religion, and mentality. This appearance of difference would remain consistent throughout the 1940s.

The deception in words reached beyond the “us versus them” mentality of white American journalists, government, and public. The language of internment is still a debated issue that reflects on the lack of clarity regarding the true causes and realities of Japanese American incarceration. During World War II officials in the government and military used a number of euphemisms to describe their actions against people of Japanese ancestry that misconstrued the true meaning of the events. Historians and teachers today seek an agreement in whether or not to use the euphemistic words and phrases commonly used during the war or to replace them with language that may provide a more accurate representation of the past.

One of the most common euphemisms that limited the truth for Americans was that of “evacuation” and “evacuee.” The first Japanese Americans to reach the internment camps were called by national newspapers “voluntary evacuees.” Evacuation suggests the interpretation that these people were moved to inland areas for their own protection against angry protestors, but research suggests that the justification of protecting ethnic Japanese from vigilantes was a “lame explanation.” Historians are beginning to replace evacuation with “exclusion” or “mass removal,” which better explains the placement of thousands of people in remote and barren regions of the United States behind barbed wire and under the supervision of military personnel.

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6 To read more on this debate visit Densho: the Japanese American Legacy Project online at http://www.densho.org/densho.asp.
7 Personal Justice Denied, 89.
The temporary camps that Japanese Americans were first placed in were called by the government “Assembly Centers,” surrounded by fences and armed military personnel. As Yoshiko Uchida illustrates in Desert Exile, the “assembly centers” were little more than hastily built barracks in large public arenas, such as the Santa Anita Racetrack in Southern California.8 Although historians still recognized the place names such as “Puyallup Assembly Center,” more are turning to different terms, such as “temporary incarceration camps” or “temporary prison camps.”

The incarceration camps that Japanese Americans were confined to after exclusion were called “relocation centers” or “reception centers.”9 However, these euphemisms inadequately describe the harsh conditions of the centers. Newspapers depicted a migration similar to that of the Dust Bowl inhabitants of the 1930s, a vacation trip or summer camp. Manzanar, located at the base of the Sierra Nevadas, was in the center of an area known as a popular vacation destination. Even visitors today might consider that given the location, living at Manzanar could not have been too terrible. But the stories of Japanese Americans who lived at Manzanar, such as those of author Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, suggest otherwise.10

These euphemisms are part of a greater attempt by the government and the media to depict the internment camps as pleasant alternatives for evacuated civilians. The public exhibited growing concern at the possibility that internees were better off than the rest of the nation. Letters to editors of major and local newspapers question the lifestyle to be found at the camps, citing rumors of better pay, more foodstuffs that for other Americans had been rationed, or too much of a festive, laidback feel while the rest of the nation was hard at work. An editorial in the Los Angeles Times depicts this widespread concern: “The Japs in these centers in the United States have been afforded the very best of treatment, together with food and living quarters far better than many of them ever knew before, and a minimum amount of restraint…”11 In reality, the living conditions for most interned

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8 Yoshiko Uchida, Desert Exile.
9 For one example of the various terms used in describing the internment camps see the Los Angeles Times, April 23, 1942, 4.
11 “Kindness to Alien Japs Proves Poor Policy,” Los Angeles Times, December 8, 1942.
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at the camps was harsh and the treatment was roughshod at times and degrading. Thousands lost millions of dollars of property and possessions as a result of forced incarceration. These editors and the public spread a myth of internment that hid the realities of the program.

This deception was a necessary road for Americans to take in order to defend their support the incarceration of Japanese Americans. Government and media alike defended the action as a “military necessity” in order to protect both Japanese Americans and national security. Not until the 1980 publication of the findings of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians in Personal Justice Denied was the defense of “military necessity” denied. The belief was so prevalent among Americans at the time and after the war in part because of the work of newspaper journalists. Stories of Japanese sabotage and violence against Americans were spread throughout national newspapers, and although they were proved to be rumors they were never discounted by the press. As a result, newspapers helped spread a belief of dangerous and treasonous Japanese Americans that would be hard to dispel during and after the war.

In addition, deception was important in maintaining a distinction between the actions and policies of the United States versus Germany and Japan. Americans were aware, to an extent, of the racial segregation in Nazi Germany of Jews in the 1940s. Reports from the Pacific attested to horrific mistreatment of Allied prisoners of war by Japanese troops. As a result, American newspapers and government officials were very clear in distinguishing between American and Axis concentration camps. In the first months of interning Japanese Americans in the camps the term “concentration camp” was used interchangeably with internment camp. However, the term quickly disappeared from newspapers as the relation to the German concentration camps came too close. In fact, the internment camps fit the description of concentration camps as prison camps outside the normal criminal justice system, designed to confine civilians for military or political purposes on the basis of race and ethnicity. However, historians still refrain from using the term “concentration camp” extensively because of its connection to the horrors of the German concentration camps.

Many editors and commentators throughout the war emphasized the distinction between American and Axis concentration camps. They called on the example of the earlier internment of people of Japanese ancestry by
British and the simultaneous development of internment camps in Canada and South America. In the first days of the war, many letters to the editors concerned the treatment of Japanese Americans, cautioning against mob violence or attacks on persons. Many called upon the "democratic nature" of the American tradition. The editorial page of the San Francisco Chronicle during December 1942 is an especially thoughtful and cautious response by American journalists to the issues of race relations in the first month of the war. However, by the first month of required interment in the camps, all major newspapers supported the move, citing the military necessity and the benign—if not positive—effects on "Japanese aliens and non-aliens." The portrayal of the camps became increasingly important to justify the camps to the American public and maintain the distinction between the democratic West and the despotic East. Concerned citizens were placated by the illustration of the camp presented by the media and most newspapers quickly dropped editorials on the issue.

The camps were cited as successful "colonies" of alien and American Japanese. White administrators spoke to public hearings, white guests were invited to tour the camps on "Open House Days," and white educators were brought in to the camps to provide classes for students. At Manzanar the experimental cultivation of guayule, a potential substitute for the lack of access to Japanese controlled rubber sources in the Pacific, was lauded as a successful means of Japanese Americans proving their commitment to the war effort. Also at Manzanar workers wove hundreds of pounds of camouflage nets for the troops and their success met with similar public response.

But the reaction to the camps was not always consistently upbeat. When protest spread within internment camps, editors and journalists were quick to point out the necessity of the camps and their dangerous inmates. Americans who felt that Japanese internees were being treated too kindly attacked their opponents as treasonous abettors to the Japanese cause. As news of the Japanese treatment of Allied prisoners spread, more opponents felt justified in demanding harsher conditions for the internees.

12 "United Kingdom: All Japs Rounded Up by the British," San Francisco Chronicle, December 8, 1941.
13 For example see "This is a Tough Time for American Japanese", San Francisco Chronicle, 9 December 1941.
However, the work and words of Japanese Americans in the camps eventually convinced some authorities to begin releasing internees to attend school and move to non-restricted areas and allowed some Nisei men to enlist in combat troops. Over half of the camps were released by 1945.

The Visual Deception
The deception extended beyond that of language and into the realm of the visual. Before the move to internment camps, newspapers and magazines employed photographs and cartoons in depicting Japanese and Japanese Americans as they saw fit. As an editorial cartoonist for the liberal New York newspaper *PM* Theodor Geisel (later known as Dr. Seuss) depicted all Japanese Americans as fifth-column traitors. The visual depiction of the Japanese abroad and Japanese Americans remained markedly similar throughout the war.

![Figure 1. “Waiting for the Signal from Home” *PM*, February 13, 1942.](image)

The difficulty of distinguishing between Chinese allies and Japanese enemies confounded many Americans. Some Chinese Americans created pins that they attached to coats declaring themselves to be Chinese rather than Japanese. Journalists wrote articles on “How to Tell Your Friends from the Japs,” an example of the inability of some journalists to separate between Japanese and Japanese Americans. The article cited illustrates the racial undertones of white relations with Asian counterparts, including their Chinese allies: “Those who know them best often rely on facial expressions to tell them apart: the Chinese expression is likely to be more placid, kindly,
open; the Japanese more positive, dogmatic, arrogant.”14 Photographs depicted angry and sneering Japanese contrasted with pleasant, smiling Chinese. These photographs and cartoons helped to create a deceptive image of Japanese Americans that Americans them to support the incarceration of an entire ethnic minority.

Figure 2. “How to Tell Japs From the Chinese.” *Life*, December 22, 1941, Vol. 11, No. 25, pp.81–82.

Not all photographs attempted to attack Japanese Americans. The War Relocation Administration (WRA), a civilian agency responsible for the relocation and internment of Japanese Americans during the war, hired several photographers to capture scenes from the internment camps. Photographs that the government and news agencies published depicted happy, Americanized Japanese Americans against the backdrop of majestic landscapes. These photographs successfully accompanied the written deceptions that positively portrayed the internment camp.

Two of the most notable American photographers, Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams, consecutively photographed life in the assembly centers

Figure 3. Manzanar Relocation Center, Manzanar, California. Photograph by Dorothea Lange.

Caption reads: “An elementary school with voluntary attendance has been established with volunteer evacuee teachers, most of whom are college graduates. No school equipment is as yet obtainable and available tables and bencheses are used. However, classes are often held in the shade of the barrack building at this War Relocation Authority center.”

and at the internment camps. Both artists were opposed to the internment, but their methods to end the camps diverged. While Lange attacked the government policy by depicting the painful truth of the facts through her photographs and captions, Adams used his photographs to capture the success and American character of the internees. Although Adams’ photographs do not necessarily attempt to propagandize the internment camps, some convey a more beautiful idea of the camps than was usually the case—personal stories are posed against the majestic background of the Sierras.

However, this same mountain range contributed to the barren desert geography of the Owens Valley. Lange’s and Adams’ photographs tell two
different stories of internment, and as a result the government chose to utilize several of Adams’ while disregarding most of Lange’s photographs.

**The Story Within**
The goals of the *Nisei* in the internment camps led many to maintain and perpetuate the myths created by the government and media, staging the camps as positive and successful experiences for Japanese Americans. This second generation, citizens of the United States, grew up more as Americans than Japanese. They attended American schools—many attending university—and made friends with non-Japanese Americans. Many of those who spoke out against the internment of Japanese were these friends of *Nisei*. For most of the *Nisei* and their parents the goal of the printed word—via newspapers and correspondences—was to reinforce the connection between themselves and the American public and to “prove” themselves as American first, Japanese second. This ultimate goal, although successful,
supported a misleading interpretation of the camps for the American public that left the impression of a positive experience.

The *Manzanar Free Press*, printed by *Nisei* men at Manzanar, led by example the nine other newspapers published in each of the internment camps. Running from April 11, 1942 through September 28, 1945, the newspaper was a tri-weekly four page depiction of life in Manzanar. The cover page was generally devoted to important announcements and news from outside the camp, while the back page featured the camp’s sport teams. Editors selected news from the outside, ranging from how the war was progressing on the various fronts to other newspapers’ “letters to the editor” regarding Japanese Americans.

Within the articles in the *Free Press* there emerges an awareness of the editors that their newspaper and their camp represented the larger story of Japanese Americans internees. On July 27, 1943 one article leads: “Manzanar, the eyes of the world are upon you.” The reporters recognized that they were writing to their own audience at home—some copies were

![Manzanar Free Press, July 27, 1942, p. 1](image)

translated into Japanese for *Issei* readers—as well as a larger audience in the nation—subscribers included non-Japanese Americans outside the camp. Therefore, the articles and stories included remain consistently patriotic and positive, with little overt negative criticism toward the government or Americans. Although they never resort to calling themselves “Japs”—instead maintaining the term “Japanese Americans”—the editors utilize many of the euphemisms utilized by the government and national papers, such as “evacuees,” “military necessity,” and “relocation center.” They do not attempt to oppose federal and public policy.

Instead the editors and journalists of the *Manzanar Free Press* follow a general trend among Japanese Americans to ask the American public to let Japanese Americans prove themselves as loyal Americans. Immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor Japanese Americans began to lobby the public via the newspapers to give them a chance.

“I know that the majority of the Japanese in this country, both citizens and aliens, realize that they are truly under the merciless spotlight of the public gaze together with loyal Americans of Italian and German descent and that hardships must be undergone, silently and patiently, perhaps even increasing in severity as the war drags on and the casualties mount, but we feel in our heart that the American public will know that we are really all one people fighting against a common foe.”

“There cannot be any question. There must be no doubt. We, in our hearts, know we are Americans—loyal to America. We must prove that to all of you!”

These sentiments ran parallel to the feelings of many *Nisei* in Manzanar. The workers who contributed to the experiments of the guayule project were lauded by the *Press* as “contributing to the building of good will between the Japanese in America and their Caucasian friends...such

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good will...will benefit the entire Japanese community.”\textsuperscript{17} At the same time the newspaper reported on the developments of self-governing committees and the Consumer Cooperative within Manzanar. They purposefully denied the scope of their sacrifices, arguing that “our sacrifices, great as they may seem, will seem petty in comparison with the vast sacrifices that the rest of the world is making.”\textsuperscript{18} Through their words the \textit{Manzanar Free Press} united the camp in a population that was American first, Japanese second, and ready to be assimilated back into the general American public.

The correspondences between Japanese Americans interned and their friends outside the camps mirror the attitudes of the \textit{Manzanar Free Press}. While interned at Manzanar, between the spring of 1942 and 1943, Miriko Nagahama and Honey Mitsuye Toda wrote periodically to one of their friends, Betty Salzman. Miriko, Honey, and Betty grew up together near Los Angeles, attending school and Girl Scouts, and during the war Betty would visit the women at Manzanar. Their correspondence with Betty presented a somewhat light-hearted, patient, and positive impression of life at Manzanar.

Manzanar, known for its extreme climate, is depicted in Honey’s letters merely as “dry and dusty.” She wrote “I’m afraid Manzanar camp is a little bit different from other summer camps. But it won’t stop us from having our fun.”\textsuperscript{19} The “girls” recount stories of evening wiener roasts, college classes, and their participation in the Delta Y, an offshoot of the YWCA. Some of the heartache of the forced internment is present, but hidden among other stories:

“Manzanar isn’t too bad—but I sure would like to go “home” again.”
“We’ve had no butter for a long time, only little kids get milk.”
“Everything is on the boresome side”
“Anyone who wants to come has to apply for a permit or pass before coming. This is terrible but maybe they’ll change their

\textsuperscript{17}“Big Guayule Project Explained,” \textit{Manzanar Free Press}, August 7, 1943.
\textsuperscript{18}“America Tightens Its Belt,” \textit{Manzanar Free Press}, August 19, 1943.
\textsuperscript{19}Honey Misuye to Betty Salzman, June 17, Manzanar Collection, Kennedy Library, San Luis Obispo, CA.
minds about this ruling—as they’ve done about a lot of rules and regulations.”

The overall impression of Manzanar is of a pleasant albeit boring and limited “camp.”

Historians and veterans of internment alike are beginning to address reasons for why most internees remained in the camps without a significant amount of protest. Contemporary journalists attempted to depict Japanese Americans as possessed with an “air of Oriental fatalism,” obedient to the last, sheep-like in their willingness to be herded along. This myth was perpetuated by conservative critics who claimed the apparent lack of bitterness, the ability of many interned to close that chapter of their lives, and their silence and stoicism as proof that the internment camps were not unjust after all. However the silence has proved selective, and the attitudes of the Japanese Americans interned reflect a general consensus of the time period rather than any “model minority” stereotype proposed by some critics.

In the 1930s many Americans valued a conservative, inward looking society that avoided questioning the government and looked toward leaders in their communities to follow. Japanese Americans, like most Americans, had yet to experience the Civil Rights Movement or the anti-war protests of Vietnam: “we had been raised to respect and to trust those in authority. To us resistance or confrontation, such as we know them today, was unthinkable and of course would have had no support from the American public. We naively believed at the time that cooperating with the government edict was the best way to help our country.” Many other Japanese Americans felt likewise, relying on the belief that the wrongs inflicted against them would be righted by the participation of “good American citizens.”

The generations that followed the Issei and Nisei have since fought for

20 Honey Misuye to Betty Salzman, June 24, July 26, July 16, September 13, Manzanar Collection, Kennedy Library, San Luis Obispo, CA.
22 Emily Roxworthy, The Spectacle of Japanese American Trauma, 1.
23 Yoshiko Uchida, Desert Exile, 57.
24 Editorial, Manzanar Free Press, August 21, 1942.
redress and restitution of their parents and grandparents. Biographic accounts of the experiences in the camps and renewed examination of primary sources will continue to dispel the legacy of deception. But the legacy of the deception by the government and the media toward Japanese Americans during World War II is enduring. In a recent discussion with my mother, I found that the myth of “military necessity” remains alive in the popular understanding of internment. Her defense of the justification of the government’s policy toward Japanese Americans suggests that more work must be done. Historians, educators, and the general public must work together to understand the myth, the means of deception, and the reality of the internment of 120,000 Americans.
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