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Japanese-Americans: life after the war and internment

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AFTER CAMP: Portraits in Midcentury Japanese American Life and Politics, by Greg Robinson. University of California Press, 2012, 328 pp., $27.95 (paperback)

President Franklin D. Roosevelt never said "a Jap is a Jap." West Coast defense commander Gen. John DeWitt did, and Roosevelt acted on it. On Feb. 19, 1942, two months after Pearl Harbor, the president signed into law Executive Order 9066, under which some 112,000 West Coast residents of Japanese ancestry were removed from their homes and dispatched to "relocation centers" in deserts and swamplands. There, most languished until war's end. Clear evidence of their loyalty to their adopted country was disregarded. Fear was in the air, and every "Jap" was seen as a potential spy or saboteur.

The wartime internment of Japanese-Americans is a familiar story, long since recognized as an outrage and ultimately redressed by apologies and compensation. Less well-known is "a central but unexplored area of American history: the midcentury Japanese American experience." That is University of Quebec historian Greg Robinson's focus in "After Camp."

Japanese started migrating to the U.S. in the 1870s, when, for the first time in

250 years it became legal to leave Japan. There were opportunities in the young and growing nation not to be matched in the overcrowded, impoverished homeland.

Americans had decidedly mixed feelings about the newcomers. The United States is a "nation of immigrants," but some immigrants have been more welcome than others, and some historical periods are more welcoming than others.

The Japanese, as "Asiatics," were more disturbing than Western Europeans with whom there was a felt kinship. Pressures built and in 1924 Congress passed an Immigration Act that restricted immigration from Europe and barred it altogether from Japan. Pre-1924 immigrants were known as Issei (first-generation). Their American-born offspring were Nisei (second-generation) — U.S. citizens by birth.

Long before he became president in 1932, Roosevelt concerned himself with immigration. As a rising politician he could hardly help it. The issue aroused passions. What was to be done with the swelling "foreign elements"? As early as 1920, Roosevelt deplored the tendency of ethnic groups to stick together, "to segregate in colonies." This caused racial prejudice. Immigrants should "Americanize."

Roosevelt favored dispersion — not forced but encouraged. The right incentives would dissolve ethnic communities, scatter their members across the American heartland and turn immigrants into homogeneous "Americans."

Among Roosevelt's experts was one highly respected scientist who, on the basis of skull measurements, concluded that the Japanese were (in Robinson's summation) "innately warlike and hostile by reason of their less

developed skulls." Time, dispersion and interbreeding would solve the problem. Such were the prejudices Roosevelt brought to the crisis created by Pearl Harbor. We call them prejudices today, but at the time they had solid popular and scientific backing.

The war ended, the fear lifted, the Japanese internees were freed and left to rebuild their lives as best they could. Two disadvantages they faced were impoverishment — many had lost their businesses, occupations and property — and lingering prejudice. The latter was poisonous but irregular. The difficulty of generalizing is highlighted by two recollections Robinson cites concerning New York. One Nisei found the postwar air there so bracing she could say, "I became a free person for the first time."

The second recollection is from a sympathetic American army major who writes of his 59-year-old Japanese cook, "Whenever he goes along the street he is pointed at by adults and children who indicate that he is probably a spy."

So it was in all the cities of major resettlement — in Detroit, for example, where the Detroit Council of Churches eagerly did what it could to help and the Detroit Free Press wrote of "loyal friends in the war against Japan," while unionized workers at a local defense plant staged a walkout to protest the hiring of a Nisei.

The racial barriers dividing mankind are slowly falling, and some day no doubt people will think back with horror and incomprehension at the passions race once unleashed. That time is not yet, and certainly was not yet in postwar America.

Japanese-Americans are commonly cast as victims, and so they were, but they too, Robinson shows, were prone to bigotry — toward blacks, Jews, Hispanics, even though Nisei cooperated intermittently with all of those minorities in various civil rights issues. A Nisei was as likely as a white American to characterize Jews as money-hungry, or blacks as lazy.

"A rhetorical climate existed in which overt stereotyping was accepted," writes Robinson. Many blacks, for their part, returned the favor. As one wrote, "The Japanese were not whitefolks. Their eyes, language and customs belied the white skin and proved to (blacks) that since (Japanese) didn't have to be feared, neither did they have to be considered."

"After Camp" is a record of a unique time, place and situation, but its reach is universal. The internment of Japanese-Americans stands as an acknowledged injustice. Is it radically different from many unacknowledged ones? In 1944 a black community leader characterized the internment as "a grim warning that, when public hysteria is strong enough, not even the American Constitution can protect a minority in its right to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.' "

There will always be minorities, and public hysteria is never far beneath the surface. Today, no public person would dare say "A Jap is a Jap." Much

progress there has been. That's good. Not good enough obviously.

The Japan Times: Sunday, Aug. 19, 2012
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