Japanese American Internment Camps
ed William Dudley (San Diego, 2002)

4

Draft Resistance by Some Internees Has Left Divisions Within the Japanese-American Community

Norihiko Shirouzu

During their wartime internment, young Japanese-American men were faced with a choice of how to respond when the U.S. government sought to enroll them in the U.S. armed forces. The different choices they made divided the camps then and, as journalist Norihiko Shirouzu writes in the following selection, continue to divide the Japanese-American community to this day.

Following Pearl Harbor, many Japanese Americans already in the armed forces were summarily discharged or assigned to noncombat positions. In addition, Japanese Americans not in the armed forces were classified 4-F (unfit for service) by the Selective Service System. Their classification was subsequently changed to 4-C (enemy aliens ineligible for service) even though they were American citizens. However, in 1943, the U.S. Army decided to reclassify Japanese Americans as 1-A (eligible for service) and asked Japanese Americans in Hawaii and in the internment camps to consider volunteering for a segregated unit. In early 1944, the government made the military draft applicable to Japanese Americans in the camps.

Some internees chose military service as a way both to help the war effort and to prove the loyalty of Japanese Americans to the United States; many became part of the highly decorated 442nd Regimental Combat Team. Others refused to enlist or chose to become draft resisters, citing the unfair treatment of Japanese Americans and demanding that the camps be closed. Many were convicted of violating the Selective Service Act and sent to federal prison.

Shirouzu, a staff reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, describes how these differing choices created animosities within the Japanese-American community that still exist today. Many World War II veterans remain scornful of those who chose draft resistance. Former draft resistors, who initially kept a low profile after the war, have become more critical of Japanese-American leaders (especially the Japanese American Citizens League) for failing to acknowledge the sacrifices they made and the reasons behind them. Efforts to reconcile these warring elements within the Japanese-American community have had mixed success, Shirouzu concludes.

In 1944, as America's war with Japan raged in the Pacific, Mits Koshiyama received his draft orders from Uncle Sam. Then, as now, he considered it his moral obligation not to answer the call. After all, he was languishing behind barbed wire, one of the roughly 110,000 Japanese-Americans imprisoned by the U.S. government as potential subversives.

"How could we have fought for democracy and freedom overseas when we were denied the very same rights by our own government?" Mr. Koshiyama says.

> *To . . . many . . . Japanese-American veterans, the [draft] resisters betrayed their community.*

The logic escapes Teruo Nobori, and mere mention of Mr. Koshiyama's name makes his blood boil. Mr. Nobori, like Mr. Koshiyama, is a nisei—a second-generation Japanese-American. Unlike Mr. Koshiyama, he is a war hero. "Cowardly draft dodgers" is how he describes the more than 300 Japanese-Americans who defied the draft on civil-rights grounds during World War II. To him and many other Japanese-American veterans, the resisters betrayed their community when it most needed to prove its patriotism. "If the Japanese had landed on U.S. soil, who knows?" he says. "They might've shot the other way."

Festering Animosity

Mr. Koshiyama is now 74 years old; Mr. Nobori, 84. The history that divides them may seem ancient to some, but while the war ended 54 years ago, the animosity has only festered over the decades—mostly in silence. More recently, the old passions have been stoked as younger Japanese-Americans have discovered the story of the draft resisters—and concluded that they have been wrongfully shunned for holding to convictions that, by current sensibilities, were justified.

"It was liberating to discover . . . Mr. Koshiyama in our history," says Kenji Taguma, a third-generation Japanese-American who didn't learn of the resisters until undertaking a high-school term paper a decade ago. These men are proof, he says, that "some of our own people had the courage to fight our own government's oppression and racism."

Younger Japanese-Americans have . . . concluded that [draft resisters] have been wrongfully shunned for holding to convictions that, by current sensibilities, were justified.

Few disagree that the root cause of this rift—the imprisonment of Japanese-Americans—is a disgraceful episode in U.S. history. After Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the U.S. government deemed most Japanese-Americans on the West Coast to be potential "subversive enemy elements," evicting them from their homes and businesses, stripping them of their U.S. citizenship, and confining them in prison camps.

The U.S. government acknowledged the mistake much later, in 1988, paving the way for financial reparations to Japanese-Americans for a racially motivated violation of their civil rights. (Whites of German and Italian ancestry weren't systematically incarcerated.)

But how was a young man behind a chain-link fence to act when, in January 1944, the government that had denied his family its civil rights asked him to fight for it? Many answered the call. Some, like Mr. Nobori, volunteered. He fought in the all-nisei 442nd Regimental Combat Team, which gained acclaim by giving 140 lives and suffering 674 wounded to save 211 soldiers isolated behind German lines deep in a French forest in the closing days of the war.

"We were being tested on our loyalty to America. Is that time to resist?" says Mr. Nobori, a retiree from the produce business who lives in Albany, Calif. "If you were American at heart, you wanted to do all you could to make yourself a real American."

Draft Resisters

But a vocal minority rebelled. These men refused induction orders and openly urged compatriots to do the same. They would go to war, they said, only if the government restored their citizenship and released their families.

Frank Emi was a leader of the resisters and inspired hundreds more to buck the draft. "You get uprooted, kicked around, stomped on, and they asked you to fight for the very government who orchestrated all that," says Mr. Emi, now 82 and living in the Los Angeles suburb of San Gabriel. "It was insult to injury."

Many of the resisters were convicted of violating the Selective Service Act and sent to federal prison. Mr. Koshiyama was convicted in 1944 in a mass trial of about 60 resisters in Cheyenne, Wyo., and sent to McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary in Washington state. He was released for good behavior in the summer of 1946, after serving 26 months of his three-year sentence, and returned to his home in San Jose, Calif. Like others, he feels he made his peace with the government after President [Harry] Truman extended a full pardon to the resisters in December 1947.

But he still hasn't made peace with the broader Japanese-American community, and particularly with the Japanese American Citizens League. The JACL, a community group that led the patriotic faction during the war and now has 24,500 members, remains one of the dominant Japanese-American organizations in the country. Its stated purpose: "to fight discrimination against people of Japanese ancestry."

"I'm still upset about the JACL," Mr. Koshiyama says. "They demanded and received an apology from the government, but they haven't faced up to what they did to the community's own dissenters like us."

For Mr. Koshiyama and the others, the ostracism began

in the prison camps and persisted for decades. At Heart Mountain, an internment camp in Wyoming where Mr. Emi was imprisoned, a group called the Fair Play Committee counseled nisei men to ignore the draft. The *Heart Mountain Sentinel*, the official camp newspaper, excoriated Fair Play leaders like Mr. Emi, calling them "wild-eyed," "slow-witted," "warp-minded" rabble-rousers who "lacked physical and moral courage."

George Ishikawa, an 84-year-old resister in Mountain View, Calif., says his wife, Barbara, endured much hostility in the camp and long after the war. After he was arrested at Heart Mountain, she came under continual verbal assault from camp neighbors. He says she was once told that "there's no future for your kids in this country." Mrs. Ishikawa declined to discuss the matter.

Upon release from prison, most resisters returned to the West Coast, but fearing backlash against their families, most kept low profiles in the Japanese-American community. "We were such a minority," Mr. Ishikawa says. "We tried to live quietly, not to be noticed."

The Vietnam War, with its protests and conscientious objectors, brought back the bitterness. Mr. Ishikawa recalls a party in the 1960s at the Buddhist church his family attended in Mountain View. An acquaintance he and his wife had known from childhood stood up, looked directly at the couple, and announced: "Men who resist the draft don't deserve to be in this country."

The JACL's Version of History

Much of the hostility toward the resisters, says Frank Chin, a Chinese-American who has written extensively on the resisters, can be traced to what he calls "myth making" by Japanese-American groups, particularly the JACL. The league, he says, long promoted a version of history in which Japanese-Americans willingly accepted the prison camps as their contribution to America's war effort, and in which nisei soldiers proved the community's unwavering loyalty to the U.S.

True, enthusiasm for the draft was real in Hawaii, where there was no mass internment of Japanese-Americans: About 13,500 volunteered or responded to the draft there, accounting for more than half of the 22,235 Japanese-American men who fought during the war, according to

Roger Daniels, a professor of history at the University of Cincinnati. But on the mainland, only 1,943 of the more than 20,000 eligible Japanese-American men volunteered, while 2,795 answered induction orders, Prof. Daniels says.

Herb Yamanishi, national director of the JACL in San Francisco, says it was "not the JACL's official policy" to bend history to its view, but he acknowledges that certain members may have done so on their own. One of those historians, Bill Hosokawa, says he tried to "present the bright side" of the community in his writings. But he insists that the lack of mention of the resisters in his writings was merely an oversight. "I just didn't think about them," he says.

The resisters, too, played a part in keeping themselves out of history. When Mr. Chin interviewed several resisters and some Fair Play Committee leaders in the early 1980s, most didn't want their names attached to anything he planned to publish. Many resisters also went years without telling their children about their wartime actions.

Now, it is a younger generation of Japanese-Americans who have been forcing open the file on the resisters. Discovering their tale has answered a question that many long asked: Why did 110,000 Japanese-Americans apparently become model prisoners so willingly and meekly? Obviously, not all of them did

A Son's Discovery

Mr. Taguma discovered the resisters through a high-school project. Now editor of the *Nichi Bei Times*, a Japanese-American daily in San Francisco, he says that uncovering the diversity of the community's response to the war gave him "a tremendous sense of pride" as a Japanese-American.

It also deeply changed his view of his father. When he was growing up, Mr. Taguma, now 29 years old, never got along with his father, Noboru. His father was a "mean guy," often "very irritable" and given to pacing the house, muttering, "You don't know about us guys," and, "You guys don't know anything about suffering." His father had never told him about his past as a draft resister.

Then in 1987, while he was writing a term paper about Japanese-Americans' wartime experience, Mr. Taguma says, his father began telling him about his past. Noboru Taguma says he hadn't hidden his past, but that he only wanted to

make sure that his son was "mature enough" to understand the issues involved.

Kenji Taguma says the importance of his father's action didn't dawn on him right away. It had to wait until the fall of 1991, when he took a class in Asian-American studies with lecturer Wayne Maeda, an activist on behalf of the resisters who encouraged him to organize an exhibit on the resistance movement.

Since then, "there has been a tremendous turnaround" in the relationship between father and son, Mr. Taguma says. "I take pride in what my father did," he says. "My father was a resister at a time when it was really unpopular to take a stance like that. His legacy of resistance will always be with me." Mr. Taguma now uses his Western middle name, Glenn, less and his Japanese first name, Kenji, more.

Attempts at Reconciliation

Resolution of that sort eludes the broader Japanese-American community, despite several attempts at reconciliation. In 1999, several nisei veterans groups officially acknowledged that the resisters were acting on just principles. In 1990, the JACL approved a resolution saying that it "regrets any pain and bitterness caused by its failure to recognize this group of patriotic Americans." Critics say that doesn't go far enough.

Several nisei veterans groups officially acknowledged that the resisters were acting on just principles.

In the summer of 1994, the JACL's more liberal members led an effort to investigate the league's role in ignoring the resisters' story and saw an opportunity for the group to offer a public apology. They invited resister leaders like Mr. Emi to Salt Lake City for the league's national convention. But the maneuvering by the league's old guard blocked full debate on the issue, and the resisters went home without an apology.

In 1995, the league district that represents Southern California and Southern Nevada formally apologized to the resisters. Only one district has followed suit since, and the other six districts are still weighing similar resolutions.

Some veterans have softened their stance. Tom Sakamoto, a nisei veteran who once shouted down Mr. Emi and Mr. Chin in a public forum in Oakland, says he has changed his mind on resisters. He says he understands that they were acting in good conscience, and "my heart goes out to them."

But others, like Karl Kinaga, a 75-year-old veteran and longtime Japanese-American community leader in San Jose, continue to consider the resisters traitors. Mr. Kinaga says the resisters who have come out of the closet have grossly misled the Japanese-American public by refusing to address one issue: While some of the 315 resisters "didn't want to get shot at," many others refused the draft because "their fathers were pro-Japan," he alleges.

That's an explosive charge among Japanese-Americans, and Mr. Koshiyama, among others, dismisses it as pure speculation. The war government and the JACL would have jumped at the chance to lodge similar accusations against the resisters during the war, Mr. Koshiyama says. "But they couldn't and didn't because they had no basis for claims like that," he says. Nor does anyone today, he adds. Those who make them, he says, "just hate our guts."