Democracy behind barbed wire: Examining the political culture of Japanese American Evacuees

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Award Date
11-1998

Degree Type
Thesis

Degree Name
Master of Public Administration (MPA)

Department
Public Administration

Advisor 1
Professor William Thompson

Number of Pages
138

Abstract
This paper explores the relationship between culture and political behavior through an investigation of those Japanese Americans who were denied due process and imprisoned during World War Two simply for being of Japanese descent. Military necessity was the reason cited for the government's action, although racism, war hysteria and economic competition also played a major role.

At the time there was a general belief among Caucasian Americans that the Japanese in America had avoided Americanization and could not be trusted to participate in democratic processes. It was suggested that their political and civic culture was an obstacle to the achievement of democratic aspirations.

Using an approach similar to that pioneered by Almond and Verba in their 1963 study of five nations, this research explores the political and civic culture of the Japanese American Evacuees and argues that the skills required for meaningful participation in political and civic networks were present in the Japanese Americans, but went unrecognized.

The study concludes by finding no substantiation of the claim that the Japanese in America were then, or are now either un-Americanized or politically incompetent in a democracy.

Keywords
Americanization; Civic duty; Cultural differences; Democratic ideals; Japanese-Americans; Japanese internment camps; Japanese relocation camps; Racism; United States; War World II

Disciplines
Political History | Public Administration | Social History | United States History

Language
English

Repository Citation
https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/thesesdissertations/180
Laws and customs shut out Japanese Americans from full participation in economic and civic life for decades. Japanese immigrants – known as Issei – could not own land, eat in white restaurants, or become naturalized citizens. But the American-born descendants of Japanese immigrants – called Nisei – were citizens by birthright, and many had become successful in business and farming. “It was democracy on a small scale in action,” Asako Tokuno said. “And we made it work because everybody cooperated and we knew we were going to be living together for who knows how long.”

Japanese-American evacuees board a train at the Santa Anita Assembly Center. Despite their treatment at home, Japanese Americans served their country with honor. Behind Barbed Wire. After their detainment, Japanese Americans had to endure wretched living conditions in the WCCA assembly centers. The sixteen assembly centers were typically constructed on racetracks and fairgrounds throughout Arizona, California, Oregon, and Washington State. They were small staging areas that contained hastily built living quarters for the detainees before they were sent to WRA centers. Barbed wire fences, armed guards, and surveillance towers were common features in the camps. Strict rules and organization resulted in meticulous documentation of the detainees’ movements. The constant presence of authority, control, and oppression escalated feelings of depression and anxiety among those incarcerated.