Community Government in War Relocation Centers

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

WAR RELOCATION AUTHORITY

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United States Department of the Interior

J. A. KRUG, *Secretary*

War Relocation Authority

D. S. MYER, *Director*

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INTRODUCTION*

The attack on Pearl Harbor by Japanese forces on December 7, 1941 drew the United States of America into a war which had previously been confined to continents of the eastern hemisphere, and in so doing converted a limited war into a global war. Following the course of that global war, it is easy to forget or overlook the effect of this world catastrophe upon specific areas of our own country or upon segments of our own population.

The treatment of the 127,000 persons of Japanese ancestry in the United States has posed particularly difficult problems for us. War did not create these problems; it merely threw them into bold relief. War did not change for most of us our beliefs, attitudes and prejudices toward these and other peoples; it merely crystallized or intensified them. We have, in the course of this war, been brought face to face with the paradox of the ideals of American democracy in conflict with their practice.

At the same time that war brings to a crisis our relations with our cultural and ethnic minorities it creates equally great stresses within the minority group itself. Individuals become intensely sensitive to the attitudes and treatment to which they are subjected. They are impelled to examine more closely their sentiments and loyalties and to resolve their indecisions and conflicts. With the condition of war between the United States and Japan, these conflicts within the Japanese American minority became doubly deep because they involved ties of homeland, culture and race.

The Japanese Americans, since Pearl Harbor, have been subject to external and internal pressures and demands for affirmations of their loyalty or disloyalty, more intense and inclusive than have ever been exerted on any other minority. The kind, magnitude, and effect of these pressures form a chapter in the history of minority peoples that is unparalleled.

The authorities decided that military necessity demanded the removal of all persons of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast. On February 19, 1942, Executive Order No. 9066 was issued by President Roosevelt which authorized the evacuation and exclusion of persons from military areas designated by the Secretary of War and the military commanders. On March 2, General DeWitt of the Western Defense Command established Military Areas Nos. 1 and 2. Between February 19 and March 27, the Japanese were free to leave the exclusion area and 10,231 left Military Area No. 1. Of this number 4,825 moved into Area No. 2 which at that time had not been scheduled for evacuation. Those who thus voluntarily evacuated met with some unpleasantness, and it soon became apparent that an uncontrolled movement would create confusion, hardship, and possibly trouble. The decision was reached that the evacuation must be regulated. It was

*Prepared by Solon T. Kimball, Head, Section of Community Government.

decided that centers should be constructed to receive the evacuees, and that the administration of the centers should be the responsibility of a civilian agency.

On March 18, the President issued Executive Order No. 9102 which created the War Relocation Authority. This was to be the civilian agency which received the responsibility for care and administration of the evacuees received from the Army. "By terms of the Order, the Authority is responsible for: (1) aiding the Army in carrying out the evacuation of military areas, (2) developing and supervising a planned, orderly program of relocation for evacuees, (3) providing evacuees with work opportunities so that they may contribute to their own maintenance and to the national production program, and (4) protecting evacuees from harm in the areas where they are relocated. The first specific task of the Authority is to resettle some 100,000 alien and American-born Japanese evacuated from military areas of the far western states."[1]

Location and construction of these centers began immediately with two each placed in the States of Arkansas, California, and Arizona, and one each in the States of Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, and Colorado. On March 27 an order was issued which prohibited all persons of Japanese ancestry from leaving the designated military areas voluntarily. This was followed by a series of 108 separate orders issued by General DeWitt which ordered the removal of all Japanese from Military Areas No. 1 and No. 2. The exclusion area included all of California, the western half of Washington and Oregon, and southern Arizona. Most of the persons of Japanese ancestry were originally transferred to assembly centers, and from there were gradually funneled to relocation centers as the latter were constructed. By June 5, the removal had been accomplished for Area No. 1, and by August 7, for Area No. 2.

Movement to the relocation centers began in May 1942, and by November 1 of that year, the last of the 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry had been placed in the centers. The evacuation included everyone except the handful who were in corrective or other institutions.

Evacuation was an orderly process. Many public and private civilian agencies cooperated with the Army and with the evacuees in an attempt to safeguard the interests of these wartime exiles. The evacuees themselves gave full cooperation which prompted the statement from Secretary of War Stimson that "great credit is due our Japanese population for the manner in which they responded to and complied with the orders for exclusion." The speed with which evacuation was decided upon and carried out, made it necessary for the evacuees to make hurried arrangements for the sale or lease of their property, and some liquidated all their possessions, selling

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[1]Eisenhower policy statement of May 29.

houses, businesses, farms, and furniture. Where such haste was required it is obvious that not all these transactions were advantageous, and the memory of property losses stings deeply.

The relocation centers to which the Japanese were sent were similar in construction and plan. The buildings were frame covered with black tar paper, arranged in blocks designed to house from 250 to 300 persons. Each block contained fourteen single story barracks, divided into four or six apartments, a mess hall, a recreation hall, men's and women's latrines, and a laundry room. The number of blocks in a camp depended on its size. Manzanar in California, with a peak population of over 10,000 had 36 blocks. Additional construction included a frame hospital and auxiliary buildings, offices, living quarters for the administrative staff, and utility buildings for warehouses, garages, construction, industry and agriculture. The school buildings which were built later usually included a combination gymnasium-auditorium and classrooms for the high school. In several projects the elementary schools were housed in blocks vacated by residents.

The administrative responsibility for each center was given to a non-Japanese civilian staff. These included a project director and his three assistants in operations, administrative management, and community management, a reports officer and an attorney. The community management division included education, health, recreation, internal security, family welfare, community analysis, and community government. The operations division was responsible for construction, maintenance, roads, utilities, agriculture, transport and industry. Administrative management provided the services of procurement, accounting and budgeting, employment, mess operations and personnel.

The early policy of the War Relocation Authority was based on the assumption that the relocation centers would be war duration homes for most of the evacuees, or until military necessity no longer excluded them from the West Coast. It was the hope that through agriculture and industry these communities would become nearly self-supporting, and that there would be a measurable degree of local government.

Based on this assumption, the early policy was directed toward the creation of self-contained economic and social units. The economic development would include the production of agricultural products not only for internal consumption, but also for distribution through regular market channels, and the establishment of factories that would engage entirely in war production. The necessary social services would be provided largely through recruitment from the evacuees. The hospitals, schools, police, fire, maintenance, and other activities would be largely evacuee staffed and directed.

Recognition of the need for community government was demonstrated as early as April 2 in a memorandum which stated: "It is proposed to develop immediately a system of internal government which will place upon the

evacuees responsibility for the civic management of the colony and to organize health, education, recreation and other community service using Japanese personnel as far as possible."[2]

These general objectives and policies were expressed in several documents. The May 29 policy statement read: "The objective of the program is to provide, for the duration of the war and as nearly as wartime exigencies permit, an equitable substitute for the life, work, and homes given up, and to facilitate participation in the productive life of America both during and after the war." Further illumination is provided by an additional statement which read: "In the last analysis, each relocation community will be approximately what the evacuees choose to make it. The standards of living and the quality of community life will depend on their initiative, resourcefulness, and skill. Initially, the Government will provide the minimum essentials of living—shelter, medical care, and mess and sanitary facilities—together with work opportunities for self-support." Administrative responsibility would extend to work projects, economical use of labor, employment outside the project on a voluntary basis, a health and education program and maintenance of law and order.

This policy also envisaged the establishment of a permanent form of community government preceded by an advisory temporary organization. The functions of self-government, in this early thinking, included the assumption by the evacuee government of responsibility for internal security and —as soon as the project should have reached a reasonably self-supporting basis of operation—the care of dependent children and adults.

In its subsequent history the War Relocation Authority diverged from the basic philosophical scheme which was tentatively developed in the earlier thinking and in the first policy statements. The objective of self-supporting, self-governing communities operating on a sound economic base was realized in only a limited sense and within a different policy and philosophy. A number of factors militated against the successful execution of the first plans for center operation—and indeed compelled the divergence. The major factor was the early decision to institute an active relocation program which would return the evacuated people to life and work in normal communities. The possibility of operating self-supporting communities was eliminated by two factors: first, vested economic groups were violently opposed to the idea of center-production of food for outside markets and to the establishment of competing industries within the centers; second, labor-hungry employers from agricultural areas saw the relocation centers as labor pools to be tapped when needed, and, in view of the manpower shortage, it was necessary to utilize evacuee labor to conserve crops outside of the relocation projects rather than to utilize it for broad-scale operations within the projects. The limited industrial program finally decided upon included agricultural production for evacuee

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[2]Fryer and Adams

use only, and a short-lived camouflage net project at three centers.

This shift in the direction of the program had an adverse effect on the extension of responsibility in other areas of community life to the evacuees. The only activity in which nearly complete community responsibility was achieved was in the purchasing and distribution of consumer goods and services through cooperatively organized and managed business enterprises. Community government became in actuality an adjunct of administration. Recreation and cultural activities were partly financed and almost entirely supervised and regulated by a non-evacuee staff. The other community services became an adjunct of a managerial hierarchy, with policy and supervision arising from outside the relocation center community. It is true that many of the workers were drawn from the community, but the control rested in what came to be known as the "appointed staff." This managerial-administrative combination was established in practice and policy early in the history of actual center management and was never relaxed during the history of the Authority.

There was almost complete dependence upon the managerial control system for food, transportation, employment, housing, clothing, education, health, law enforcement, fire protection and maintenance. Policy decisions were made by the top administrators, implemented by procedures developed by a staff, and carried into effect by paid employees working as an administrative organization at the centers. These policy decisions were made on the basis of the larger objectives of the top administrative group and modified from time to time in response to Congressional or other governmental pressures or to evacuee pressures. Although many decisions were related to perceived needs, no provision was made on the level of policy determination for the participation and advice of the evacuees in formulating decisions. The structure which was created to provide for obtaining evacuee advice and assistance in the execution of policies operated principally at the project level and there only in a limited and circumscribed manner. Managerial administration thus provided the prevailing environment within which the economic, cultural and political activity of the evacuees had to grow. The result, of course, was a rather thorough and efficient institutionalization of the population.

It has not been the purpose here to examine the whole of the War Relocation Authority's history and growth, but it has been necessary to sketch the developmental beginnings in order to place the function and policy of community government within a meaningful framework.