

CHAPTER III

UNCERTAINTIES AND CONFUSIONS

A. Evacuee Reaction to Community Government Policy

The reaction of the evacuees to the announcement of policy for the establishment of a permanent plan of self-government was varied. Expressions of disappointment at the negligible delegation of responsibility followed realization that they were to be given only a minor role in managing their own affairs. Some took the position that the evacuees should force the WRA to assume full responsibility and to offer no cooperation. Others believed that the policy was better than nothing, but the vast majority indicated little interest either one way or the other.

The most controversial point and one which provoked most discussion was the exclusion of Issei from elective office. This policy was protested and requests for revision were made at several centers. A group at Gila River submitted a resolution on September 18, 1942. The resolution stressed the right of non-citizens to hold elective office. It supported this view with statements to the effect that no better evidence of the sincere desire of the non-citizens to cooperate with the War Relocation Authority could be found than their desire to be treated equally in the matter of community government. The resolution pointed out that there was a "strong unity of purpose between the citizens and non-citizens in all matters which are of vital concern to the people of this community . . . In view of this situation, to permit the citizens alone to hold elective positions would undermine seriously the harmony which so happily exists between the citizens and non-citizens."

It was contended further that there should be an equal sharing of responsibility by both groups, and that this could be achieved only by equal representation. They argued that the present arrangement placed an undue burden upon the citizens alone. The petitioners declared that many of the non-citizens were that in name only because of legal prohibitions to their assuming citizenship. They pointed out that "they have also assimilated many of the finer American ideals; they worked continuously in America ever since coming to this country; they brought up their children to be loyal American citizens, many of whom now serve in the Armed Forces of the Nation; they also bought property and invested heavily in United States War Bonds with the intention of permanently making this country their home." The last point was that the non-citizens were the economic leaders with long years of experience in the operation of extensive areas in the State of California; that these skilled and experienced agricultural leaders should be given a voice in the administration of self-government and through such participation contribute to the well-being of the people of the center and the war effort of the United States.

The Director answered this resolution October 6, 1942 with an explanation of the reasons for the policy and stated that reconsideration was impossible. The letter pointed out that:

"In the first place, we believe that the citizenship status and privilege of the evacuees who were born in the United States needs to be given special recognition. The fact that, as a matter of military necessity, all persons of Japanese ancestry were evacuated from the West Coast, both aliens and citizens alike, has caused some of the citizen evacuees to wonder what value their citizenship has. We regret that fact very much. We understand, also, that a few among the alien evacuees have been taunting the young Niseis with this fact, and have stated that the citizenship of the Niseis was valueless.

"It is our intention, therefore, to help make up for this fact, as much as possible, by giving special recognition to the citizenship status of the Niseis.

"In addition to making elective offices open only to evacuees who are citizens of the United States, it is our intention to give them preference in considering application for leave from relocation centers, in assignment of work opportunities, and in other respects.

"A second consideration had a great deal to do with our decision. In general, the Niseis are much more Americanized than are the Isseis . . . We are of the opinion that if the Niseis alone are eligible for membership in the community council, the general character of the action taken by the community council will be more in keeping with American institutions and practices."

The reply also pointed out that Issei were not barred from participation in community government but were eligible to hold appointive positions, thus the wisdom and experience of the alien evacuees would be utilized. It concluded by affirming that the original decision was a sound one and should be adhered to.

Copies of the resolution and reply were sent to all centers. No more petitions came to Washington, but project staffs remained aware of the difficulties which faced organization commissions in their efforts to give suitable status to the Issei and sufficient opportunity for Issei participation in community affairs. Policy or no policy, the evacuees were determined to include the Issei in a representative system. The first such effort was at Poston where soon after the election of a citizen temporary council, arrangements were made for the election of an Issei

advisory board. There thus arose a dual system of representation with one Issei and one Nisei from each block, organized in groups meeting separately, but in close communication with each other.

Tule Lake moved toward a solution of this problem in a different manner. There, the temporary community council authorized the establishment of an Issei planning board. Although the planning board had no legislative function, it worked in close cooperation with the community council and the two bodies presented community problems to the project director jointly.

The organization commissions at Heart Mountain and Granada attempted to establish a two-house representative system, the upper house to be composed of Issei, who should serve as advisers to the lower house, which would be composed of Nisei. This plan as developed by the evacuees in consultation with project officials was disapproved by word from Washington that such a plan would be contrary to the intent of the community government policy.

Granada then solved the problem by a mass resignation of Nisei block managers on the understanding that the administration would appoint Issei to these positions. The community council became known as the Nisei council, a distinction which stuck with it for a long period. Even after the removal of the bar to Issei membership, several elections passed before an appreciable number of Issei were willing to stand for election.

Gila River attempted to meet the same problem by formalizing a group composed of chairmen of the block councils, all of whom were Issei. Rohwer and Jerome solved the problem through an advisory Issei group and by establishing close working relations with the block managers, who were almost entirely non-citizens. Central Utah had a somewhat similar arrangement.

Although the exclusion of Issei from elective office aroused the greatest controversy, there were other and more fundamental questions which those engaged in drafting plans of government had to face. These included legal, political, and ethical considerations affecting the purpose and functioning of an evacuee self-government. From the charter commission of Heart Mountain came a statement objectifying and discussing some of these problems.

The commission considered four fundamental questions. The first was, "Is this real self-government, or is it only so-called self-government?" The opinion expressed was "If it is going to be real self-government, then it is O. K. If it is going to be a self-government in name only, then, we do not want it."

This attitude was held most strongly. The commission then asked the question, "Why is it that the members agreed to support a document which they know is not really self-government?" The answer given was: "Firstly, within a relocation center where freedom of the residents is restricted, is it possible to ask for complete self-government? Secondly, perchance that such complete self-government is granted, is it advisable for the evacuees to fully exercise such right? Thirdly, the consideration that the Heart Mountain community consists of both the American citizen of Japanese ancestry and the alien Japanese had to be taken into account."

The statement continued, "After thorough discussion, the commission came to the conclusion that it is not only impossible to ask for complete self-government, but it is better not to ask for it. In other words, we concluded that it is far better for the evacuees to leave the final responsibility of the center management to the WRA staff, while specifying in written documents evacuees' right to have limited voice in the management. If this plan is adopted, neither the citizen nor the non-citizen residents need to fear about jeopardizing their rights."

The next question asked was, "Why not stick to status quo?" The Issei members who were objecting to the discrimination favored the status quo—by which they meant a simple system of block managers. This objection was resolved, however, with the issuance of an amendment to the instruction permitting Issei equal rights.

The final question asked was, "What are the advantages of adopting a charter?" The advantages were seen as a formalization of experiences gained during the preceding several months, which upon being reduced to a formal code gave greater assurance of the continuation of the status quo. An additional advantage was that provision was made for an orderly election of representatives and enactment of regulations and the guarantee of a voice in the management of a center—even though that voice was muted. The preamble of the charter expressed these basic considerations.

B. The First Crises

In the latter part of 1942, major disturbances occurred at two centers. In late November, a general strike was called in Unit I of the Colorado River Relocation Center. Two weeks later, a series of incidents at Manzanar culminated in a riot and forced the project director to call in the military police. The great difference in the final results of these two disturbances, however, was that at Manzanar the administration emerged as the dominating and controlling factor in community life, while at Poston, there emerged a strong and responsible community organization.

1. The Poston Strike

Although the Poston strike was precipitated by the arrest and confinement of two evacuees in the project jail, it has been well established that the causes were rooted in evacuation, assembly center experience, and conditions at the center. The combination of heat, dust, primitive facilities, alleged broken promises, misunderstandings, and factional conflict were all contributing factors to a general condition of unrest. News of the arrest of the two men created wide excitement. Rumors spread rapidly and demands grew that the two men should be released. The community council held several meetings with project officials and presented the community view with the proposal for release of the individuals in question and their trial within the project. They were supported in this position by the Issei advisory board. The project director was absent; the acting director found it impossible to accede to these demands, and the council and advisory board resigned.

The situation developed rapidly with an almost complete breakdown of communication between the administration and the residents. There was quickly established in the center a committee of 72, composed of one Issei and one Nisei representative from each block. This group aided by the revived city planning board decided on a general strike to secure recognition of community demands. Most workers willingly complied with the strike decision, and pressure was applied to the recalcitrants.

The full details of the Poston strike and its many ramifications have been adequately documented and reported elsewhere.¹ Our interest arises from the unbelievably rapid strides in community organization achieved by a well-organized, adequately led evacuee organization which remained in control during the course of community government. There emerged from the strike a central executive committee selected by the executive council of the city planning board and composed of four Issei and four Nisei. There emerged also an agreement on the method of electing block managers--previously a controversial point. It was agreed to establish an honor court--though the court never materialized--and a labor relations board which was to be an adjunct of the central executive committee. The attempt to make the city planning board the responsible representative group was not acceptable to the administration, which took the position that the community council was the only official body that would be recognized by the administration. This pronouncement was accepted by the residents, and in December a new temporary community council and a new Issei advisory board were elected.

¹See A. Leighton - The Governing of Men

In the meantime, the attempt made by some of the more radical and disgruntled leaders to overthrow the central executive committee was thwarted, and the pattern of organization which persisted to the end of the project with only minor modification was firmly established.

The Poston strike produced a system of community representation and organization acceptable to residents and administration. It also served to crystallize and resolve many of the previous conflicts and to give a cohesion which permitted the application of concerted effort to community problems. It forced the administration to review not only its own policies, but its relations with the evacuees and produced a unity of purpose within the administrative staff which had previously been lacking. It is of some interest that the plans which were developed in late May and early June by the evacuee civic planning board and shelved because of the June 5 memorandum, were the basis of the strike organization and of the pattern of community government subsequently adopted.

2. The Manzanar Riot

The resolution of the diverging interests between Issei, Nisei, and Kibei was never achieved at Manzanar, where conflict focused on the policy of community government. This center, which had at first been under the administration of the WCCA, had established a system of semi-appointed, semi-elected block leaders with no distinction based on nationality. After the assumption of WRA administrative responsibility in June, no attempt was made to observe the provisions of the June 5 memorandum. The block leaders continued as a representative administrative group. The administration believed that no distinction should be made between citizens and non-citizens and wished to continue the cooperative relations which existed between the administration and the block leaders. The announcement of the new policy of community government as made by the project director in late August was to the effect that the block leaders would be disbanded and in its place there would be established a Nisei community council. This threat to the vested position of the block leaders was not readily accepted and even later, when it was explained that their activities would continue much as in the past, the harm of the original announcement was never completely dispelled either among the block leaders or among the community from which the block leaders drew support.

It was also at Manzanar that the conflict between openly loyal Japanese Americans on the one hand and Kibei and aliens with pro-Japanese leanings on the other broke into the open in dramatic fashion. This split in the community, which became organized into two opposing groups, was led by equally aggressive leaders. The issue of community government policy was one point of disagreement. Not only was there opposition to a Nisei elected community council, but there was also opposition to the establishment of any kind of representative system

which would cooperate with the War Relocation Authority in administration of the centers. The pro-American group, largely Nisei and JACL, was equally vociferous in its support of self-government. The project director, with the assistance and advice of members of his staff and evacuee leaders, appointed a commission to prepare a plan of government. The commission was so constituted that it included both Issei and Nisei, but did not include radical leadership from the two opposing factions. It was hoped that through this device acceptance could be secured for the establishment of a community council.

After several weeks of deliberation, this commission finally produced a document which was approved by the project director and ready for submission to the people of Manzanar. An educational program was started for the purpose of informing the people of its provisions and to secure pre-election approval. It soon became apparent, however, that with opposition so widespread, any charter would be rejected by the voters. This opposition was based on the belief held by a number of Issei that the provision limiting membership to Nisei was the responsibility of certain Manzanar individuals and was not a policy established by the WRA. There was fear that this Nisei group would gain control of the cooperative enterprises which at that time were Issei dominated. It was also believed that the council would supplant the block managers who were largely Issei and in whom the residents had a considerable amount of confidence.

As a result of this opposition, it was decided to postpone the election and to call for the election of a new group of block delegates, who would take the plan of government prepared by the organization commission and make such amendments and changes as were possible. An election was held. The new delegates were unanimously opposed not only to the plan of government prepared by the organization commission, but also to any form of local government which might be proposed. The administrative attempts to salvage community government for Manzanar were abruptly halted by the riot of December 6, and subsequently no serious attempts were ever made to revive it.

Thus it was that a combination of passive opposition from the block leaders, organized and violent conflict between segments of the population, and misunderstanding and misinterpretation of specific points of policy, were responsible for the failure to establish community government at Manzanar. Many of the same factors and conflicts appeared at other centers, but through more skillful handling and a better opportunity for opposing groups to resolve their differences, it was possible to achieve an acceptable plan of government.

C. Administration Attitudes toward Community Government Policy

The disturbances at Manzanar and Poston prompted administrative

concern in Washington about policies on community government and the whole field of administration-evacuee relationships. In December, a confidential memorandum was addressed to all project directors requesting their judgment and recommendations on the local government program.

The point was made that WRA was under no obligation to establish, or permit establishment of evacuee government, which policy was a liberal interpretation of the directive from the President and was intended to foster self-expression and participation in community affairs on the part of evacuees and to mobilize for administrative support the sanctions of a deliberative and representative body of citizens. The question was raised whether this policy should now be changed to WRA regulatory administration supplemented by a purely advisory committee of evacuees.

Comments were requested on Issei-Nisei participation on the community council and participation of aliens short of election to the council. Other items included an evaluation of the extent to which community government had proved or disproved itself; a statement of who among the evacuees was either opposing or favoring community government; and a request for suggested changes if a revision were thought to be desirable. It was also stated that "no action to accelerate charter commissions or other committees engaged in organizational work should be taken."

The replies from the several project directors reveal both the attitudes of project administration and the administrative interpretation of evacuee attitudes as of that time. Without exception, all project directors stated that the most crucial issue in community government policy was the provision prohibiting aliens from holding elective office. Illustrative of project opinion are such statements as:

"The Issei refuse to accept the administration's opinion that citizens alone can hold office. They feel that citizenship status is irrelevant in a relocation center and since all Japanese were relocated and treated in a similar manner, all should be entitled to hold office. Had Issei been permitted to hold office, much of the present unrest would have been obviated, the Issei stated. Issei participation would have enabled them to direct their energies into productive, loyal channels.

"Nisei felt that the present organization tends to intensify the growing cleavage between the two groups. This cleavage is so significant that at times all issues are decided within the community solely on that basis without reference to substance. While some Nisei are

of the opinion that the intensification of the cleavage is an inevitable aspect . . . the majority feel that the problems facing the community can best be worked out through joint effort."

The project director at Heart Mountain, who favored equal elective participation for the two groups, pointed out that the Nisei were fearful lest the Issei, deprived of direct participation, would be uncooperative in order to discredit the Nisei administration and convince the community that any Nisei governing body would be ineffective. Many project directors referred to the willingness of the Issei to cooperate and the general disapproval of the distinction made between them and the citizens.

Project administration by December had, in general, come to the conclusion that any policy which emphasized already existing cleavages within the evacuee population would make administration just that much more difficult. From a purely practical administrative viewpoint, there was the desire to lessen existing frictions and tensions within the centers. It had been learned that many of the older Issei were stable individuals who were cooperative and could be trusted. It had also been learned that with the exception of a small group represented largely by those who were members of the JACL, the Nisei did not wholeheartedly support the policy discrimination. Project directors wrote of difficulties which arose in assembly centers where Nisei councils, largely JACL-dominated, had ridden roughshod over the remainder of the population and had shown favoritism and created resentment and bitterness.

Response to the proposal that WRA might withdraw, or seriously modify its policy of self-government brought forth objections. The replies varied from the one project director who recommended that each center be permitted to work out its own plan, to the view expressed by the Central Utah director who wrote, "We believe that this policy of permitting a government within the center should not be changed but rather a more liberal interpretation be instigated." Most project directors, however, were of the opinion that the WRA had committed itself to the evacuees on the establishment of self-government and that its elimination would be considered as a breach of faith. These opinions were accompanied by requests that they be allowed to continue with their plans.

Two project directors did question the wisdom of the policy in terms of evacuee acceptance of a device which in actuality conferred no authority and was practically meaningless. The project director at Minidoka wrote:

"We have an impression that the presently recommended form of government is not a completely genuine delegation of authority to the colony to establish its own controls. The pseudo-government existing, subject to the pressure and cooperation of administration, has such limitations that we believe it will be difficult to secure a real participation or genuine authority in the face of the realization by the colonists of its lack of complete transmission of responsibility."

The project director at Manzanar, approaching the same question from a slightly different point of view, observed:

"Viewing the plan for creation of evacuee self-government, as an analyst and not as a critic, it now seems clear that the position of the majority of the evacuees towards self-government deserves serious open-minded consideration by the Authority. Evacuees who approach the plan of self-government without emotion and with the desire to be constructive, divide themselves roughly into two classes: those who question the sincerity of a plan of self-government which prohibits a large percentage (and particularly the more mature people) from the holding of office and the exercise of administrative authority, and those who question the sincerity of any plan of self-government prepared and limited by the authorities above, whose authority includes the maintenance of a barbed wire fence as visual evidence of the actual complete lack of the fundamentals of self-government. Their view boils down to the conclusion that it is silly for mature men to spend time playing with dolls."

The almost unanimous desire of center administrators to retain the policy of community government essentially unchanged, except in regard to Issei eligibility to elective office, allayed concern in the Washington office that community councils might be contributory to the disturbances which had occurred or might likely occur in the future. Although the project directors found themselves defending the policy, their attitudes toward council groups were frequently those of disinterest or suspicion. Many of the administrative personnel felt that community government was a meaningless gesture which could only cause trouble and that a policy of laying down rules and regulations and enforcing them by authority was most desirable. These attitudes were described in a report by Ted Haas, project attorney at Poston, in which he said:

"Some officials at Poston have said to the staff and residents that it would have been easier to have run the

center dictatorily with all rules and policies established by the administration and without consultation with the residents, and that the administration of community government, democratic practices and evacuee participation increased the difficulties of administering the center."

Caught between the pressures of divided and disorganized communities and a critical or disinterested administration, the advocates of community government faced heavy odds in their efforts to bring political organization to the centers. That they succeeded is testimony to their perseverance and to the fact that there was basic need for an instrument of this type as a coordinate of community life. It was inevitable that some kind of systematic relations would develop between the evacuees and the administration. It was not inevitable that the organization or functions should conform to the policy determined by the WRA, but the fact that this policy provided certain guideposts and carried the sanctions of the administrators gave it a decided advantage in the evolving system of relations. The alternative was anarchy and a coercive and possibly terroristic underground.

The vast majority of residents were desirous of peace and stability and were willing to make compromises to avoid trouble. Many accepted community government as a device, imperfect at best, which could allow for an orderly presentation of problems and resolution of crises. Administrators found no such need to compromise. They held the full weight and authority of the Federal Government backed by police power and the Army. They too could accept community government because it held promise of proving a useful administrative tool, and might contribute to law and order.