

CHAPTER VII

COMMUNITY GOVERNMENT AND THE FUTURE OF THE JAPANESE IN AMERICA

A. The "All-Center Conference"

On the morning of February 16, 1945, in Salt Lake City, Utah, 30 representatives of 7 relocation centers began a week-long discussion of problems facing the Japanese in America. Three-quarters of these delegates had been born in Japan. As enemy aliens, they had been obliged to obtain approval for their attendance at this meeting from the Department of Justice. Many of the delegates, including several of the citizens, had not set foot outside the soldier-guarded gates of the relocation centers since the evacuation in 1942. Some of them had traveled more than a thousand miles to attend the conference. This was the first all-center evacuee conference. It came in response to the crisis precipitated by the announcement on December 17, 1944, of the reopening of the West Coast and the closing of the relocation centers.

These announcements were not unexpected. For several months rumors had been current in the centers that reopening of the West Coast would closely follow the end of the campaign for the election of a new President. Those who speculated on this subject realized that further reduction of center population would inevitably lead to the closing of additional centers. It was a shock to many, however, to learn that the WRA intended to liquidate all centers by the end of 1945.

The mixed feelings of jubilation at the restitution of rights curtailed by evacuation and fears from deep anxieties about personal and economic insecurity found expression in conversations and meetings among most of the center residents. As random discussions became organized, there developed a widespread disbelief in center closure. Rumors circulated that the Arizona centers would remain open to receive those unable to relocate. Among those who had plans or hopes to return to their former communities on the West Coast, the belief was prevalent that the Government should and must do much more than was provided for in the WRA program. The individual problems were myriad, but the mass problems included personal security, economic status and housing. The center residents saw these problems primarily as rehabilitation, not relocation. There was no confidence that the WRA could or would provide what the evacuees considered minimum essentials of assistance.

These two problems of retention of the centers as war duration homes for some, and a program of rehabilitation for those who wished to return, became subjects of discussion by the community councils. Almost simultaneously, there had arisen at four projects proposals for a national meeting to discuss these two problems. It was first hoped that

this conference could be held at some project. The Director in Washington took the position, however, that if the evacuees wished to hold an all-center conference, members of the WRA staff would be willing to attend upon invitation, but that such a meeting must be planned and financed by the evacuees themselves and must be held outside a relocation center.

With these conditions as the basis for a national meeting, the Topaz Community Council under the leadership of its chairman, Masaru Narahara, sent invitations to the community councils of all centers to attend a meeting in Salt Lake City in February. To this specific proposal, there were mixed reactions. Problems of finance, selection of delegates, and the wisdom of such a meeting were debated. As it became evident that most of the centers would send delegates, those who had been hesitant, with the exception of Manzanar, fell into line and proceeded with the preconvention task of preparation.

The preconvention period was one of great activity. Community and council interest in the conference ran high. There were many extra sessions of the councils to formulate and plan. Committees were appointed to work out various details. Block meetings were called to secure resident opinion and to argue the pros and cons of the instructions to be given the delegates. Surveys were conducted. Groups favoring a flat rejection of cooperation with the WRA struggled within the council and community for a following. Center-wide elections were held at Poston and Gila to select representatives. Councils or a committee appointed from this group determined delegate selections elsewhere. Funds to cover expenses were met by assessment and collection from each block or from council money.

The councils at Rohwer and Heart Mountain conducted center-wide surveys to determine the number of people who could or would not relocate. The council at Topaz through a series of block meetings secured agreement for a set of resolutions which were to be presented. Delegates from other centers were given instructions and urged to formulate resolutions.

Concern over the possible adverse effects emanating from the decisions reached by the evacuee delegates was expressed by several project directors in their weekly reports. They were fearful that agreement for organizing opposition to center closing was inevitable. They felt that the hopes aroused in their centers for concessions from WRA were hindering relocation and acceptance of the necessity of center closing. These attitudes were expressed by one individual in his weekly report as follows:

"Most of us here on the staff including me are of the opinion that the conference idea is very ill-advised and

will produce far more harm than good to the program. Unfortunately those most interested and those who are likely to be sent as delegates are the anti-administration, disaffected, demanding and petitioning Issei type who will gain no other end but to destroy much of the good attitude which has been created here and cause people to be dissatisfied with the present program."

Although the National Director had some concern lest the conference deliberations should be framed as ultimatums or demands, he maintained that a conference by the evacuees and held outside the relocation center was a legitimate activity. He accepted the invitation extended to him to attend the conference meetings and expressed hope that measures leading to constructive cooperation and solution of the problems of the evacuees would be a result of conference discussions. An invitation was also extended to the head of the Community Government Section in Washington to attend as an adviser.

From the all-center conference held in Salt Lake City in February 1945 came the first group expression of the hopes, needs, and aspirations of the thousands of people of Japanese ancestry who had been evacuated from the West Coast in 1942. It was more than a declaration by evacuees. It was in effect a definition of the position of Japanese Americans in America and was intended for consumption by the center residents, the American public, and the United States Government. In the eyes of the delegates, it was a restrained and generous offer of cooperation to assist in solving the problems of the people they represented. It was believed to be a statement of the minimum Government assistance needed to achieve just and decent reintegration of the evacuees into American community life.

When the delegates arrived at Salt Lake City, they were in a mood to protest vigorously what they believed to be the coercive tactics of the WRA and the niggardliness of the relocation assistance. This protest was what the center residents wanted. The delegates knew that unless they fulfilled the expectations of the electorate that they would be subject to severe criticism and indignities. The shift from the desire to strike back for all the wrongs of the past, irrespective of the consequences, to one of comprehension of the realities of the situation facing them, was remarkable for its rapidity.

Although there was unanimous agreement regarding the objectives of the conference, early meetings disclosed serious disagreement on methods of expression. An analysis of the delegates on the basis of their attitudes toward relocation, the WRA, and the future, disclosed three groups, described as follows:

"(1) The Hopefuls: This group was composed largely of the Nisei and young Issei who had made up their minds that they should relocate and soon. They already had more or less definite plans as to what they should do. They were convinced that there was a future for them in this country, and that they had the ability and the courage to make a living for themselves and their families. This group was also largely the group of vocal liberals which shaped the thinking and direction of the conference in a constructive direction.

"(2) The Desperates: This group was composed largely of late middle-aged Issei. They were men who in their preevacuation communities were the middle-class respectable small business men and farmers. They had insurance and real estate agencies, or businesses that catered to a Japanese urban and rural population. Their success had depended upon a Japanese community. They were men with obligations of family, who felt themselves too old to start at the bottom of the ladder with physical labor, and whose small savings were insufficient to carry them through an uncertain period of reestablishing businesses that would have to depend upon non-Japanese customers.

"This group was basically cooperative. Its members see a home for themselves and their children in this country, but it feels that there is an obligation on the part of the Government to provide some special help, or restitution or guarantee, to help them reestablish themselves.

"This group gave assent to the proposals of the liberal and hopeful group and thus provided the weight of delegate strength toward a conciliatory and cooperative attitude.

"(3) The Resentful and Reactionary: This group includes two elements--those who are potentially cooperative and those who are completely negative. Circumstances could shift most of its members in either one direction or the other. It was composed of both Issei and Nisei. Its members expressed themselves as bitter at the treatment of the Japanese in America. They were bitter about their treatment by the WRA and particularly about the intention to close the centers. One member expressed himself as saying that the WRA treated the evacuees like children. A Kibei was resentful that he had been on the WRA stop list, and now excluded by the Army. The reactionaries

combined all these feelings plus a probable strong feeling of Japanese nationalism.

"It was this group which argued that the proposals of the conference should be worded as either demands or ultimatums. It was also the group which in terms of the entire population was most inward looking in that the effect of their action on public opinion and the amount of cooperation from public and private agencies was a matter with which they were not concerned. It was the group which would have favored the attendance of the Spanish Consul and sought recognition entirely as Japanese nationals."

The division of the delegates into "liberals," "reactionaries," and those "in between" was made by some and coincided closely with the classification made above. The "liberals" were those who sought to enlist the support of various public and private agencies for their cause. They contended that if the facts could be presented to a sufficiently wide audience that it would be possible to secure greater assistance in accomplishing relocation. This group was not in disagreement with the others on the issue of center closing. They felt that there were many who because of age or economic circumstances were unable to relocate, and the most satisfactory provisions for them could be made in a relocation center.

The "reactionaries" were more concerned with—and expected—center disapproval of a moderate position. They believed in full restitution previous to agreement to cooperate. They were insensitive to the possible adverse effect of conference declarations on the American public, Congress, or the WRA.

Leadership of the conference was won by the liberal group. Through well planned strategy this leadership was able to secure approval of the constructive approach. The early emphasis on a strongly worded protest against center closing was diverted to consideration of measures to increase relocation assistance. It was contended that the delegates should be most concerned with the majority of the evacuees who wished to relocate but could not do so without greater assistance. The smaller numbers of those who under no circumstances could leave the center obviously were a responsibility of the WRA. Their problem would be solved by continued center residence. This leadership also insisted on the importance of establishing good public relations and the need to enlist the support of various civic groups. Agreement that formal invitations should be sent to representatives of such organizations as Friends of the American Way, JACL, Citizen Committee for Constitutional Rights, American Civil Liberties Union, Buddhist and Christian churches, American Friends Service Committee, the Pacific Coast Committee on

American Principles and Fair Play, Protestant Commission, Maryknoll Mission, American Red Cross, Y. W. C. A., and to numerous individuals interested in the welfare of the evacuees was a gain for the cooperative element.

The contention that the delegates should not forget that they were Japanese nationals was met by a telling argument. It was pointed out that those who were resident in relocation centers had cast their lot with America. The separation of those who turned toward Japan had been made with segregation and their removal to Tule Lake. Thus those remaining in the centers could take no other position than that of eventually seeking reintegration in American society.

The attendance of the National Director at the sessions on February 21, provided further assurances to those who advocated a cooperative approach. The Director reiterated his confidence in the ability of the evacuees to reestablish themselves and pledged the continued efforts of the WRA to battle the forces of discrimination. He explained some of the limitations of funds and policy under which WRA operated and promised sincere and honest attention to every recommendation which they offered. He paid tribute to the many civic groups which were cooperating and helping to solve the problems created by evacuation.

The chairman of the conference, in his speech to delegates and guests at the open meeting Wednesday afternoon, reviewed the history of evacuation, the losses, the contribution to America and requested sympathetic understanding for the evacuees to reestablish themselves. His speech was an attempt to describe past relations and future hopes of the Japanese in America. Some of the significant parts are quoted below:

"It is now nearly three years ago that 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry were evacuated from the West Coast to relocation centers . . .

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"During the past three years a great many things have happened to us. We have found that there are many public and private organizations, and many people of good will who were interested in working toward a just solution to the difficult problem imposed by evacuation.

"No one is better acquainted with the fact that thousands of our sons are now serving in the armed forces on all fronts of the world, and that their record is one which has continually called forth praise and recognition from

military commanders and even from the President of the United States.

"America is a country of pioneers. We, too, wish to think of ourselves as pioneers. Most of us (aliens) came to this country 30 and 40 years ago. With the strength of our bodies we helped to build the West's railroads, to mine the ore and coal, we worked in forests and lumber mills, and we helped turn desert and waste lands into fertile gardens. In terms of the vastness of America's millions, we are only a handful, but we would like to think that we too have contributed toward the building of this country.

"We know that neither the Government nor any man can guarantee what the future holds but it is possible for the Government and its representatives to make a forthright statement as to the objectives which it is now endeavoring to reach. Such objectives should include in behalf of people of Japanese ancestry equal opportunities with all others for them to work out their destiny in proportion to their ability."

The significant accomplishments were contained in the "Statement of Facts" and the 21 recommendations. The first was a recital of the adverse social and economic future facing the evacuees as a result of evacuation. The recommendations listed requests for increased financial assistance, greater aids in housing and property, and preventive measures against possible terrorism and prejudice. These two documents are significant as expressions of the minimum conditions which the evacuees believed necessary before their relocation could be achieved, and are included in their entirety.

Statement of Facts

- (1) Mental suffering has been caused by the forced mass evacuation.
- (2) There has been an almost complete destruction of financial foundations built during over half a century.
- (3) Especially for the duration, the war has created fears of prejudices, persecution, etc., also fears of physical violence and fears of damage to property.
- (4) Many Issei (average age is between 60 and 65) were depending upon their sons for assistance and support, but these sons are serving in the United States armed forces. Now these Issei are reluctant to consider relocation.

- (5) Residents feel insecure and apprehensive towards the many changes and modifications of WRA policies.
- (6) The residents have prepared to remain for the duration because of many statements made by the WRA that relocation centers will be maintained for the duration of the war.
- (7) Many residents were forced to dispose of their personal and real properties, business and agricultural equipment, etc., at a mere trifle of their cost; also drew leases for the "duration," hence have nothing to return to.
- (8) Practically every Buddhist priest is now excluded from the West Coast. Buddhism has a substantial following, and the members obviously prefer to remain where the religion centers.
- (9) There is an acute shortage of housing, which is obviously a basic need in resettlement. The residents fear that adequate housing is not available.
- (10) Many persons of Japanese ancestry have difficulty in obtaining insurance coverage on life, against fire, on automobiles, on property, etc.

Recommendations

We recommend:

- (1) That special governmental agencies or units be established solely for providing assistance to evacuees who might require funds in reestablishing themselves.
 - a. Resettlement aid (grants)
 - b. Loans

- (2) That the present relocation grant be increased. It should be given to every relocatee. The penalty clause on the present form should be deleted.

We further recommend that Federal aid be granted according to every individual's particular needs until such time as he is reestablished.

- (3) That long term loans at a low rate of interest be made available, without security, to aid the residents in reestablishing themselves as near as possible to their former status in private enterprises, such as business, agriculture, fisheries, etc.

- (4) That the WRA use their good offices so that consideration may be given on priority by OPA. Because of evacuation, residents were forced to dispose of their equipment, trucks, cars, etc., many of which at present require the approval of an OPA board. These equipments are essential to many residents in order to reestablish themselves in former enterprises.
- (5) That the WRA make every effort to obtain a return of properties, for evacuees who, due to evacuation and consequent inability to maintain installment payments, have lost the same; further, in order to prevent loss of property, to obtain some definite arrangement for the granting of governmental aid, as may be necessary, to evacuees unable, as a result of evacuation, to maintain installment payments.
- (6) That the WRA give financial aid to residents with definite plans, for the purposes of defraying the expenses of investigating specific relocation possibilities.
- (7) That the WRA establish adequately staffed offices in important areas and employ persons of Japanese ancestry since they understand Japanese psychology; and also establish in these field offices, legal advisory and employment departments.
- (8) That the WRA continue the operation of evacuee property offices for the duration, to fulfill the needs of relocatees.
- (9) That the WRA accept for reinduction into centers those who relocate and who find themselves unable to make satisfactory adjustments.
- (10) That the WRA arrange for the establishing of hostels and other facilities in various areas; and furthermore, build new housing through the FHA, with WRA assistance.
- (11) That the WRA provide transportation of evacuee property door to door.
- (12) That the WRA negotiate for the establishing of old people's homes exclusively for persons of Japanese ancestry.
- (13) That the WRA make negotiations to arrange (1) so that evacuees formerly civil-service employees will be reinstated and (2) so that persons of Japanese ancestry will be able to secure business licenses as formerly.

- (14) That short term leave regulations be changed to permit an absence of two months with one month extension privileges. Also, that the evacuee investigating relocation possibilities be permitted to become employed, without change of status.
- (15) That when an evacuee relocates or returns to his former business or home, WRA should make every effort to release frozen assets (blocked accounts), both in cases of individuals or organizations.
- (16) That the WRA negotiate for the concluding of arrangements whereunder alien parents may be able to operate or manage properties with powers of attorney issued by their children, particularly by sons in the United States armed forces.
- (17) That the WRA arrange to secure outright releases for parolees who relocate.
- (18) That the WRA obtain the establishment of some avenue of governmental indemnities for relocatees who may become victims of anti-Japanese violence in terms of personal injuries or property damage.
- (19) That the WRA arrange for adequate Government compensation against losses to evacuee property by fire, theft, etc., while in Government or private storage or while in transit.
- (20) That the WRA arrange to provide students of Japanese ancestry with adequate protection in case of need, and opportunities equal to those enjoyed by Caucasian students.
- (21) That the WRA make every effort to secure work opportunities for returnees and relocatees on equal basis with Caucasian citizens, particularly in reference to admittance into labor unions.

B. Post-Conference Activity

In the interim period of six weeks between the return of the delegates and the receipt of a reply from the National Director, the temper of center residents changed markedly. The possibility of organized resistance to the WRA program seemed to disappear. At Heart Mountain, the center newspaper made an editorial attack on the delegates and community council. There was an exchange of letters with eventual editorial recognition of the fact that the council wisely or unwisely did work for the welfare of the residents. A group of Nisei at Rohwer, dissatisfied because they had had no representation at the conference, held a three-day meeting of their own and invited several outsiders. Council leaders at Granada, in a public meeting, reported

conference activities and informed the residents that it was to their advantage to relocate and they should begin making plans immediately. The chairman of the council at Poston was reported to have stated "the war is over," meaning that he had shifted his position to one of approving relocation. The delegates at all centers reported conference activities at public meetings. There was some disappointment that a stronger position had not been taken. There was hope that some relaxation of policy would be achieved.

The receipt of the National Director's reply was a distinct disappointment to those who had been optimistic. With the exception of the agreement to employ Japanese-speaking assistants in relocation offices, the WRA made no concessions. The reply reiterated that efforts had been made and would continue to be made to solve economic and social problems. It was pointed out that the problems of those who were parolees or who had frozen accounts or needed loans, priorities or welfare assistance would have to be met on an individual basis, and could be met only as the evacuees brought these problems to the attention of WRA officials. It was emphasized that the WRA was cooperating with various governmental and civic bodies to counteract terrorism and prejudice and to facilitate the reintegration of the evacuees into American life.

The WRA reply did not halt the efforts of councils and the headquarters organization at Topaz to achieve other objectives. Petitions were prepared and sent to Washington, asking for a reconsideration of the policy which eliminated school activities. Unsuccessful efforts were made to persuade State and local officials to assume educational responsibilities. A letter addressed to the Director from the chairman of the conference declared that center residents believed that West Coast WRA officials were inadequately discharging their responsibilities and requested assistance in arranging meetings between representatives of returning evacuees and local officials.

Another general letter was addressed to the National Director from conference headquarters in June. This letter commented that the reply to the recommendations made little or no change in "the original plan of the WRA relocation program. We see no improvements or acquiescence to any of our recommendations." It asked for special reconsideration of recommendations on loans and grants, the continuation of property services beyond April 1946, housing aid, payment for door to door delivery of evacuee property and provisions for personal and property security. The letter viewed the closing of schools as a coercive measure against families with children and anticipated deterioration of food as another repressive measure. The concluding portion summarized the prevailing tone of the letter with the statement:

"We are now at the beginning of dissemination and redistribution. As we stated before, we need better understanding and cooperation from the WRA and the U. S. Government in order to go back to normal livelihood. Thus far, we see no special attempt made to make things easier for those relocated. Numbers of incidences [sic] have been occurring in which relocation has been discouraged even by the use of gun play and fire. No special policies or provisions have been advocated to right the wrong committed three years ago. To those of us still in these centers, such incidences and poor legal justice meted out do not enhance in any way our attempts to relocate."

In his reply the National Director was firm on the point that no reconsideration of the policy of center closing was possible. He stressed the fact that great progress had been made in helping the evacuees to return to a normal and independent status. It was stated that it was impossible for the WRA to wipe out the results of evacuation, but that through relocation office assistance with housing, employment and property, evacuees were reestablishing themselves. It stated further that, contrary to the belief expressed in the letter, WRA was doing a great deal and was pledged to continue doing so in the future.

Announcement of the schedule for center liquidation--in June and July--the steady streaming of people out of the centers, the serious planning of neighbors to leave in the near future, and the inevitable disintegration of community life and service began to convince the "bitter-enders" that center closure was an inevitable reality that must be faced. Community councils were caught between the insistence of the WRA that centers were going to close and the hope of many residents that some centers would be retained. By means of relocation committees, assistance was given to those who wished to leave, but the councils worked at the same time for the welfare of the group which had no plans.

The elections held during June and July of 1945 for the new council term indicated that a fair number of residents remained "center-minded." Officers were chosen and committees were appointed with apparent disregard for the fact that within a few months the centers would be deserted villages. However, it was only at Topaz (Central Utah Relocation Center) that the election aroused center-wide interest. There the issue, aside from being personal and political, was one of the degree of cooperation with the WRA. The more moderate faction succeeded in electing its candidate as chairman by a narrow margin. The chairman in his induction speech reported the need for continuing centers for those evacuees who were unable to relocate but promised assistance to those who wanted to relocate.

By August it was obvious that the days of the councils were numbered: the minutes of each successive council meeting revealed additional vacancies caused by relocation of the councilmen. Problems of center life and relations with the administration were no longer of much concern to the evacuee community. Families remaining in the center were too busy planning their future in the outside world. With the dwindling community focusing its attention upon life outside the centers, the councils had no reason for withholding cooperation from the administration. The councils were at this stage uncompromisingly committed to furthering relocation, not only for the communities which they represented but also for themselves.

The last and greatest effort of the evacuees to gain through community government some greater measure of participation in decisions affecting their future had come too late. In the attempt, however, much had been learned by many people.