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By Gary Y. Okihiro

[This is an introduction to two Office of War Information propaganda films on Japanese Internment. To view the films, click on the URLs at the end of this article.]

Upon viewing once again the Office of War Information's "newsreels" on the forced removal and confinement of Japanese Americans during World War II, I am struck by the contradictions of the ideals of U.S. democracy and its realities. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in his message to Congress about a year before the U.S. plunged into the war, articulated some of those ideals. In his speech, Roosevelt told the nation and world that the U.S. was a beacon of democracy amidst the darkness of Europe and East Asia engulfed by despotisms. "We look forward to a world founded upon four essential freedoms," the President declared. "The freedom of speech and expression—everywhere in the world. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—everywhere in the world. The third is freedom from want—everywhere in the world. The fourth is freedom from fear—anywhere in the world." That global insistence on American democracy's imperative, "everywhere in the world," bespeaks an imperial and "noble" mission that became the ostensible purpose for U.S. involvement in World War II.

Needless to say, at home, the inequities under democracy were made manifest by the recent Great Depression in which capitalism's temporary collapse prompted a New Deal for enhanced federal powers and the welfare state that strengthened corporate capitalism and instigated social reform that provided little for those at the bottom of U.S. society. As was noted by African American Clifford Burke, "The Negro was born in depression. It didn't mean too much to him, The Great Depression, as you call it. There was no such thing. The best he could be is a janitor or a porter or shoeshine boy. It only became official when it hit the white man." And Lakota Indian Benjamin Reifel remembered: "While I was a boy growing up on the Rosebud Reservation, we had the most sickening poverty that I could imagine. TB was a killer of Indians. The people on the Pine Ridge Reservation at Oglala were eating their horses to survive. Impoverishment was everywhere."

So when President Roosevelt famously thundered, "Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by the naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan," peoples of color and the poor in the U.S. were cognizant of the opportunities but also the inequalities of democracy. "It was a December Sunday, so we were getting ready for our Christmas program," recalled Japanese American Mary Tsukamoto. "We were rehearsing and having Sunday School class, and I always played the piano for the adult Issei service.... But after the service started, my husband ran in. He had been home that day and heard on the radio. We just couldn't believe it, but he told us that Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. I remember how stunned we were. And suddenly the whole world turned dark. We started to speak in whispers…we immediately sensed something terrible was going to happen."

As the thick smoke rose from what was once America's Pacific Fleet, Hawai`i's governor surrendered civil authority to the U.S. Army, and teams of FBI agents and military and civilian police swept into neighborhoods and seized mainly Japanese but also German and Italian Americans in Hawai`i and along the U.S. West Coast. Martial law in Hawai`i and summary detentions in the islands and on the continent not only undermined civil liberties but tarnished the objectives of a war presumably being pursued for freedom. The situation of Japanese Americans differed from Germans and Italians in that there were no distinctions made between citizens and aliens among the nonwhite group, and the martial law instituted in Hawai`i applied to everyone in the Territory but was designed specifically to contain the "Japanese menace." On the continent within the Western Defense Command, all Japanese Americans were removed and interned, while in Hawai`i only a select group of over a thousand experienced internment. At the same time, in the islands, Japanese Americans as an entire racialized group faced special scrutiny and restrictions, including forced removals from farms and neighborhoods and controls on religion, Japanese language, and employment.

Roosevelt himself embodied the glaring gap between the rhetoric and practice of democracy when he promised shortly after Pearl Harbor, “we will not, under any threat, or in the face of any danger, surrender the guarantees of liberty our forefathers framed for us in the Bill of Rights,” while adding, “some degree of censorship is essential in wartime, and we are at war.” Some five years earlier, Roosevelt, upon reading a secret report of Hawai`i’s readiness in the anticipated war with Japan, had proposed: “One obvious thought occurs to me—that every Japanese citizen or non-citizen on the Island of Oahu who meets these Japanese ships or has any connection with their officers or men should be secretly but definitely identified and his or her name placed on a special list of those who would be the first to be placed in a concentration camp in the event of trouble.” That “special list,” begun during the 1920s by the military in Hawai`i, formed the basis for those named and targeted for detention in the roundup of December 1941.

And on February 19, 1942, that same U.S. President who had lectured the world on the “Four Freedoms,” signed Executive Order 9066, which authorized the eviction and confinement of some 120,000 Japanese Americans, classified by “race,” two-thirds of whom were U.S. citizens. Roosevelt and his men knew their culpability in this violation of the Constitution’s protections. As the assistant secretary of war, John J. McCloy, put it when the Justice Department ruled that only enemy aliens, Japanese American citizens, could be held in detention: “If it is a question of the safety of the country [and] the Constitution…. Why the Constitution is just a scrap of paper to me.” And the President, in a conversation a few days before EO 9066, instructed his secretary of war to “go ahead and do anything you think necessary,” even if it involves citizens, as long as it is dictated by “military necessity.” Although, he added, “be as reasonable as you can.”

That myth of “military necessity” was the essential message of the 1943 short, “Japanese Relocation,” put out by the Office of War Information. The OWI, it should be noted, controlled the news the American public received of the war, and its primary purpose was to promote patriotism and present the U.S. war effort in the most favorable light. “Japanese,” in the film’s title, blurred the distinction between the Japanese enemy and Japanese Americans, while “relocation” implied a temporary “mass migration,” which was framed in the spirit of the mythic West and frontier. Because the “Japanese,” the film’s narrator states, proved “potentially dangerous,” living and working as they did along vital harbors and near airfields, their “relocation” was prudent and necessary. The job, perhaps offensive to some, was made easier knowing that it was being conducted “as a democracy should” and involved cheerful and cooperative “Japanese.” Further, the land upon which those “pioneer communities” [concentration camps] were situated was “raw and untamed but full of opportunity.”

In fact, of course, the military forcibly evicted Japanese Americans from their homes and farms based upon their “race,” without proof of espionage,

sabotage, or even disloyalty, and confined them behind barbed wire in horse stalls and fair grounds and in some of the most inhospitable deserts and swamps of the American West and South. As the Army general in charge of the defense of the West Coast quipped, "The Japanese race is an enemy race and while many second and third generation Japanese born on United States soil, possessed of United States citizenship, have become 'Americanized,' the racial strains are undiluted." And the director of the Office of Indian Affairs offered Native American land for the "colonization of the Japanese" like his plan to "colonize 10,000 American Indians" to develop an irrigating system to make the reservation self-supporting. His office, he noted, had "long experience in handling a minority group," and was thus well equipped "to provide for the Japanese aliens the type of treatment and care which will make them more acceptable as members of the American population."

By 1944, the release year of the second short, "A Challenge to Democracy," the OWI, War Relocation Authority (which administered the ten concentration camps) and Office of Strategic Services no longer needed to explain the necessity of the camps to the American public and world but were faced with a glaring contradiction among the principles of the "Four Freedoms," the conduct of the war, and U.S. democracy. No contradiction, the film's producers contend, the camps were, in fact, schools in American democracy, transforming the "Japanese" into "Japanese Americans," indeed, into real "Americans" so they could reenter American life after the war, as was suggested by the Office of Indian Affairs' director. America's concentration camps had rendered them safe for democracy. See how "American" the dislocated people are, the film shows, how they've converted barracks into "apartments," they've made the desert bloom with produce, they play baseball and football, they exercise democracy and enjoy religious freedom, and above all, they enlist in the U.S. Army and wish Japan's defeat. This is "their" country, the film intones, where freedom prevails regardless of race, creed, or ancestry.

Besides the coercive and undemocratic nature of America's concentration camps and martial law Hawai`i, the wartime period saw in the drive for unity an intolerance of the freedom of speech, the rise of propaganda and press censorship, segregation in the military of African and Japanese Americans, and violent race riots directed against Filipino and Mexican Americans in Los Angeles and San Diego and against African Americans in Beaumont and Evansville, Texas, Chicago, Detroit, New York City, and Philadelphia. The June 1943 Detroit riot was one of the costliest of the century in which twenty-five African Americans and nine whites were killed, and property worth hundreds of thousands of dollars was destroyed. Clearly, whatever the war rhetoric and OWI "news" propaganda, U.S. democracy failed to embrace all of the nation's peoples.

Amidst the pervasive intolerance and illusion of freedom for all, many Americans maintained a belief in their country by holding it to its ideals and not their lived realities. As an African American mother, "Georgia," wrote in 1943: "I have faith in the goodness of America, because I'm an American.... I believe that America will eventually wipe out this challenge to her democracy, and that the time will come when no person need fear that he cannot become a truly great American because of race, color or creed." In that same spirit, about 25,000 Japanese American men and women from martial law Hawai`i and from America's concentration camps served in the U.S. military during the war, while in 1944, seventy Japanese Americans at Heart Mountain concentration camp refused to enlist and were convicted of draft evasion and conspiracy to violate the law. "We would gladly sacrifice our lives to protect and uphold the principles and ideals of our country as set forth in the Constitution and Bill of Rights," those patriots explained. Their resistance, thus, was directed at restoring those rights and guarantees, because the Constitution was more than "just a scrap of paper" to them, "for on its inviolability depends the freedom, liberty, justice, and protection of all people including Japanese-Americans and all other minority groups."

The Filipino American writer Carlos Bulosan was asked to comment on President Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" in a March 6, 1943 Saturday Evening Post essay: "We do not take democracy for granted," the labor organizer promised. "We feel it grow in our working together—many millions of us working toward a common purpose.... What do we want? We want complete security and peace. We want to share the promises and fruits of American life. We want to be free from fear and hunger. If you want to know what we are—We are Marching!"

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The OWI documentaries are available at

Japanese Relocation

and

A Challenge to Democracy

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