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The McCloy Memo: A New Look at Japanese American Internment

By Greg Robinson

The removal and confinement of some 120,000 American citizens and permanent residents of Japanese ancestry from the Pacific Coast during 1942, popularly (if inaccurately) known as the Japanese American internment, remains a powerful event in the nation's consciousness. In the decades since the war, historians have exhaustively documented the primary role of anti-Japanese prejudice and war hysteria by West Coast Army officers and civilians in bringing about the issuing of Executive Order 9066, which authorized removal.

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Yet in recent times a small group of internment revisionists led by journalist Michelle Malkin, ignoring this evidence, have loudly argued that mass removal was a justified and positive example of ethnic profiling. The keystone of their argument is that a few White House and War Department authorities, notably Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy, made the decision to confine West Coast Japanese Americans based on their reading of the MAGIC Intercepts, top-secret Japanese diplomatic messages decoded by American cryptographers. The MAGIC cables, these revisionists claim, provided clear evidence of mass espionage by aliens and American citizens during the prewar period. Although the revisionists' evidence is predominantly old and discredited, in the current mood of insecurity and wartime nationalism they have attracted significant attention.

A few years ago, I was at the Library of Congress researching my book By Order of the President, about Franklin Roosevelt's role in the wartime removal. I discovered some documents in the papers of Robert Patterson, the then-Undersecretary of War. Among them was a file copy of a memorandum, dated July 23, 1942, that John McCloy sent Patterson in response to inquiries about the feeding of Japanese American "internees." McCloy noted that since 70 percet of those in the camps were citizens, and most were women and children, the government should provide them sufficient food. This was neither novel nor relevant to my project, so I filed the document without thinking. Recently, I was surprised to discover that the memo also included a handwritten postscript. There, McCloy admitted that military security was not a primary factor in triggering the removal of West Coast Japanese Americans:

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These people are not 'internees': They are under no suspicion for the most part and were moved largely because we felt we could not control our own white citizens in California.

Since the revisionists credit McCloy as the chief decision-maker on removal, his admission fatally discredits their argument about national security. (They cannot escape this reality by claiming that McCloy was protecting the secrecy of MAGIC—Patterson probably was aware of MAGIC, and in any case the spectacle of McCloy lying to his superior officer, who supported removal, to preserve secrecy enters the realm of the ludicrous).

For more thoughtful students of history, the postscript raises questions of interpretation. For one thing, McCloy's explanation about "protective custody" does not square with the evidence —Army officers seem not to have ever discussed removing Japanese Americans to protect them, and it is certain that if protection had been the goal Japanese Americans would have faced very different conditions following removal. Conversely, how do we account for the evidence that War Department leaders genuinely feared Japanese subversion during early 1942? Or the fact that McCloy continued, then and in later years, to defend the government's actions as based on military security—even manipulating evidence before the Supreme Court to bolster the government's case against legal challenge?

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There are no simple answers to these questions. Yet the note -- especially in the intimacy of a handwritten afterword--testifies powerfully to McCloy's bitterness against the Californians who had forced Washington to take extreme action. Perhaps it is not too much to say that McCloy's memo reveals remorse--a realization that he had been misled about the Japanese threat. So why did he not publicly reveal the truth about removal? As a patriot and a military loyalist, McCloy believed in defending the White House and War Department at all costs. To confess that the Army had acted in response to popular prejudice would discredit the war effort and stain the reputations of America's leaders. Yet McCloy's postscript may help explain why that normally supercautious man twice went out on a limb during mid-1942 to support Japanese Americans. McCloy and Hawaiian Defense Commanding General Delos Emmons together thwarted President Roosevelt's orders for mass confinement of Japanese Hawaiians. Meanwhile, McCloy overrode Army opposition to Nisei soldiers, and brokered the creation of the famous 442 nd Regimental Combat Team. The possibility that these actions represented a concealed form of contrition lends them special poignancy.

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