

*Remarks delivered by Grant Ujifusa at Columbia Law School in a forum sponsored by NHK. Ujifusa was Strategy Chair for JACL's redress effort. He lives with his wife Amy in Chappaqua, NY.*

## Why The Camps Happened

I want to thank my friend Mimi Zou for inviting me to speak to you today. As you know, Mimi is an accomplished scholar and just a terrific person. It saddens me to know that she'll soon be leaving Columbia to become a Professor of Chinese Law at Oxford.

Today, I'd like to talk about why I think Franklin Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, ousting Japanese Americans from their lives on the West Coast, and second to talk about how Ronald Reagan, who for two years had publicly opposed the Japanese American redress bill, changed his mind and signed HR 442 on August 10, 1988.

That Reagan signed our bill might make you think that the experience of internment had a happy ending of the conventional sort. Not entirely. No, maybe even not really. Most Japanese Americans in camp had lost everything, which meant that some Nisei who aspired to become mechanical engineers spent their lives as garage mechanics. Flawed like other human beings, Americans must be careful when they say they live and always have in a City Shining on a Hill. Tragedy is also part of life in that place.

The question for us today is why were 110,000 perfectly ordinary Asian Americans stripped of their rights and dignity, then given 36 hours to abandon their homes, work, and schools, and then escorted by the

United States Army to 10 prison camps in the country's desolate interior?

My view is perhaps to the left and harsher than the judgment reached by the Commission looking into the internment reached in its 1982 report *Personal Justice Denied: race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership*. For me, the political failure was not, as the last term might imply, one of passive omission, but one of active commission. Franklin Roosevelt wasn't asleep at the White House switch only to find one morning that tar paper barracks were going up at Heart Mountain. Only the president of the United States could decide to sign Executive Order 9066.

And that he affirmatively did. Why? First, FDR knew that competition in the truck farming business had for many years fed racial bigotry of a political potent variety on the West Coast. As one white farmer put it, "The japs came here to work and stayed to take over." By 1940, Japanese American farmers controlled 30% of the local fruit and vegetable market in California. This was something substantial that we had what others wanted. So first, it was about money. You know, follow the money. And you know, when they say it's not about the money, it's about the money.

Second, the camps were the final installment of bigotry and political calculation of the usual sort. To put a brutal point on it: From the time just after the Gold Rush, the chinks and the japs to come later were the n-word plural of the West Coast. So it was simply good politics to run against the japs, just as in the American South it was (and usually still is) good politics to run against the n-word plural.

And FDR was a gifted, manipulative politician, enjoying near unanimous support from the immigration restrictionist labor unions and

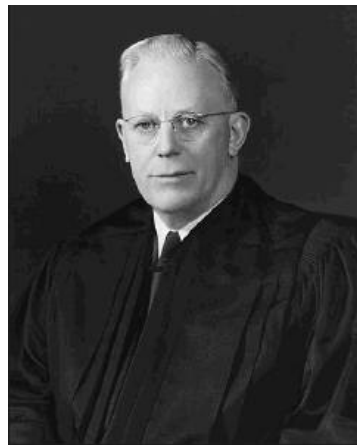
the small, landgrabbing and left-leaning farmers of the Grange. In 1942, Roosevelt was looking for an unprecedented fourth term in 1944, and he knew that for many white voters on the West Coast, internment was almost as good as sending a bunch of racially undesirable foreigners back to their own country.

Third, after Pearl Harbor, mass and elite opinion, both hysterical about the Japanese Army poised to invade Long Beach, came together on what needed to be done. If there was no time or way to separate the loyal from the disloyal, the only answer was mass incarceration.

Among the most bigoted figures in the drama was Army General John DeWitt, deputized by Franklin Roosevelt to make the decision to remove the spies and then to remove them physically. In his report to the President DeWitt wrote: “In the war in which we are now engaged racial affinities are not severed by immigration. The Japanese race is an enemy race... and the racial strain is undiluted. Along the vital Pacific Coast over 110,000.... potential enemies of Japanese extraction are at large today. There are indications that they are organized and ready for



Gen. John L. DeWitt



Earl Warren



FDR



John J. McCloy



Walter Lippmann

concerted action at a favorable opportunity (Now this is the good part.) The very fact that no sabotage has taken place to date is a disturbing and confirming indication that such action will be taken

Among the elite policy makers who agreed with DeWitt's assessment were FDR himself, perhaps the most liberal president in our history; with some misgivings. Secretary of War Henry Stimson, a true WASP Brahmin. Then there was Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy, who grew up poor in Philadelphia, who then later okayed Mike Masaoka's idea for the creation of the 442, and who then after the war rose to become called the chairman of the American Establishment – the old one based inside the big New York banks and law firms. And then there was finally and famously California Attorney General Earl Warren, who wanted to be elected Governor in 1944 and was. Would he have been had he opposed the camps? I don't think so.

Then there were the shapers (and reflectors) of mass opinion: Walter Winchell, an often rabbleroxing radio commentator; the infamous William Randolph Hearst of the nation's tabloids; worse yet, V.S. McClatchy of McClatchy papers of the Central Valley; and the

somewhat less virulent Los Angeles Times of the Chandler family and the San Francisco Chronicle owned by the de Youngs.

The shapers of mass opinion, which included Time Magazine, were later joined by Walter Lippmann of the New York Herald Tribune – the esteemed Lippmann delivered the cruelest and perhaps the decisive blow—and Edward R. Murrow of CBS radio, two men from whom the country’s elites took their cue. Finally, in a small corner of elite opinion, there was Harold Ross, editor of the now fashionably progressive New Yorker Magazine, and, oddly, an ardent young Stalinist who was later to become Dr. Seuss.

Not many disagreed with General DeWitt, but among them were J. Edgar Hoover (only a few needed to be watched); the always valiant American Friends Service Committee and the great Eleanor Roosevelt, who, I might add here, suggested to her husband that they adopt a Nisei couple to keep them from going to a camp. Sadly Roger Baldwin of the ACLU chose to sit on his hands. He had a couple of fellow travelers on his board and Stalin got the word out that he liked the idea of the camps because Japan was the Soviet enemy in East Asia.

When mass and elite opinion makers converge on something very bad, something very bad will happen. They did in 1942. Today, it seems to me unlikely that the two will converge about the place of Muslims and Latinos in American life advocated by Donald Trump, a spokesman for a notable segment of mass opinion. As we know, elite opinion furiously opposes him on just about everything. And so it may be that the camps of 1942 have had a lasting, immunizing effect on the politics and conscience of our country, one especially powerful on our nation’s elites.

In my reading of our history, elite vs.mass opinion sometimes creates another kind of check and balance in our political system.

Thank you again, Mimi, for inviting me to speak