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Book defends WWII internment of Japanese Americans, racial profiling

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By JOHN IWASAKI

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

James Arima, a local officer of the Japanese American Citizens League, intended to be at Green Lake tonight for the annual peace ceremony honoring those killed by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

He changed his plans after hearing that author Michelle Malkin would be in town to discuss her new book, which defends another controversial episode of World War II: the relocation and detention of more than 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry on the West Coast.

Malkin's book -- "In Defense of Internment: The Case for 'Racial Profiling' in World War II and the War on Terror" -- has created an uproar in the local Japanese American community.

"She's looking forward to discussion and controversy," said Arima, president of the Lake Washington chapter of the citizens league. "We don't want to help her sell books."

Malkin purports to debunk the common historical view that the internment was largely driven by wartime hysteria and racism. She maintains that historians and federal panels have played down information showing that Japan had established an extensive espionage network on the West Coast.

Using the internment to criticize today's counterterrorism measures, including profiling, only jeopardizes homeland security, Malkin says.

"I start from a politically incorrect premise: In a time of war, the survival of the nation comes first," she wrote. "Civil liberties are *not* sacrosanct."

Malkin writes that the so-called MAGIC messages -- Japan's diplomatic communications that were intercepted and deciphered before and during the war -- revealed Japan's espionage intentions. Among the messages are brief reports from the Japanese Consulate in Seattle about warships anchored in Bremerton.

The existence of the top-secret messages was known to only about a dozen people before and during the war, including President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The information was declassified in 1977 and written about by David Lowman, a former national security officer and Washington state native.

"Virtually every popular account of the ethnic Japanese experience during World War II has ignored MAGIC and its vital importance in shaping FDR's national security policies abroad and at home," Malkin wrote.

She cited Tetsuden Kashima, a University of Washington professor of American ethnic studies, several times in her book, noting that he gave scant mention to MAGIC in his own book on the internment.

Kashima declined to comment until he had read Malkin's book, which is generating an online buzz.

Lowman's work has been "refuted and discredited" and Malkin's book offers "nothing new" about MAGIC, wrote Greg Robinson, a history professor at the University of Quebec at Montreal, who has written a book about FDR and the internment.

Robinson's comments appeared in a blog run by Eric Muller, a University of North Carolina law professor cited in Malkin's book. Muller said Malkin does nothing to counter criticisms that "the actions taken against Japanese Americans were absurdly disproportionate to the scope of any security risks of which the government was even arguably aware."

While Robinson and Muller have read Malkin's book, which includes more than 100 pages of photocopied documents, local Japanese Americans are reacting to a recent column Malkin wrote outlining the book's premise.

"Malkin claims to set the record straight when in reality she is distorting selected facts to fit her political position," said Tom Ikeda, executive director of Densho, a Seattle organization that preserves the histories of Japanese American internees.

Steve Sumida, chairman of the Department of American Ethnic Studies at the UW, said Malkin's argument is "based on the assumption that Japanese Americans are the Japanese enemy. ... We are not the enemy."

Malkin, 33, whose parents emigrated from the Philippines, is undaunted by her critics.

"This is exactly what we I want. We haven't had a debate," she said in a phone interview yesterday from her home in Maryland. "We can't win the war on terror until we understand our past history."

Malkin grew up in New Jersey and was an editorial writer and columnist for The Seattle Times in the late 1990s. Her syndicated column appears in nearly 200 newspapers.

Her views on the internment represent a reversal from 2000, when she wrote that "what happened to Japanese American internees was abhorrent and wrong." She heard from veterans who urged her to take a closer look at the historical record.

After the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Malkin said, the internment has "become sort of a trump card to argue against any and all of President Bush's security measures, from the most innocuous -- inviting Muslims to come in for voluntary interviews with the FBI -- to the most extreme -- (holding suspects) at Guantanamo Bay. ...

"If you have a serious debate on civil liberties versus national security, you have to get the history lessons right."

Malkin said that debunking the "myth" about the internment doesn't mean she ignores the disruption in the lives of the internees.

"Anyone who reads my book will see that I'm very sensitive to the sacrifices that were made by many ethnic Japanese, both issei (first generation) and nisei (second generation)," she said. "I am not arguing that they didn't suffer or weren't terribly inconvenienced."

Today's security measures also pose burdens.

"But any inconvenience, no matter how bothersome or offensive," Malkin wrote, "is preferable to being incinerated at your office desk by a flaming hijacked plane."

IF YOU GO

Michelle Malkin will discuss her new book, "In Defense of Internment: The Case for 'Racial Profiling' in World War II and the War on Terror," at 7 tonight at Cedar Park Church, 16300 112th Ave. N.E., Bothell. The talk, sponsored by radio station KVI, is free and open to the public.

P-I reporter John Iwasaki can be reached at 206-448-8096 or johniwasaki@seattlepi.com

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