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A Conversation with Eric Muller

Author of *American Inquisition: The Hunt For Japanese American Disloyalty in World War II*

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Q: How does AMERICAN INQUISITION differ from other studies on Japanese internment during World War II?

A: AMERICAN INQUISITION focuses on what you might call the "inner workings" of the Japanese American internment—the tribunals in the bowels of the wartime bureaucracy that tried to decide which Japanese Americans were loyal to the United States and which were disloyal. Even though these loyalty programs were an important engine of the internment program—the mechanism that continued to repress Japanese Americans long after the government made its initial decision to force Japanese Americans into camps—the literature on the Japanese American internment has paid scant attention to these tribunals.

Q: How did you become interested in writing about the Japanese American internment and about the government's loyalty tests for its supposed internal enemies?

A: The themes of racial incarceration and the persecution of internal enemies run strongly through my own family history. I am the son of a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany. My grandfather was incarcerated at the Buchenwald concentration camp after the Kristallnacht pogrom of November 1938; this incarceration came after years in which my grandparents and all other German Jews were increasingly depicted as dangerous internal enemies to the German nation. For these personal reasons, I grew interested in how the United States racially identified and then incarcerated a supposed internal enemy during the same time period. Obviously, the Holocaust and the Japanese American internment were different sorts of programs in crucial ways. Yet they shared a similar engine—the engine of racial scapegoating.

Q: The Japanese loyalty questionnaire is central to your book. Can you explain what the form was and the significance it had for Japanese internees?

A: The loyalty questionnaire was a twenty-eight-question form that the government forced all Japanese American internees to fill out while behind barbed wire in spring of 1943. It tried to probe each internee's work and education background, reading habits, and familiarity with Japanese and American cultural, religious, political, and linguistic traditions. It also asked each internee whether he was willing to serve in the U.S. military and to forswear allegiance to the

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Emperor of Japan. These forms became a centerpiece of the government's administrative efforts to adjudicate the loyalty or disloyalty of American citizens of Japanese ancestry.

For the internees, the loyalty questionnaires provoked intense anxiety and controversy. Already a year into captivity, many internees saw the questions as a series of vague traps that could only force them deeper into incarceration. Especially provocative was the question asking them to renounce loyalty to the Emperor—a loyalty that none of the American citizens in the camps had ever sworn or announced in the first place. The questionnaires were greeted with wariness, confusion, and even open hostility and resistance in the camps.

Q: What were the "point systems" used in the questionnaire?

A: The "point systems" reflected the attempts of bureaucrats to take the internees' answers to the loyalty questionnaire and convert them to number values, so that each internee would have an ultimate loyalty "score." The point systems were absurdly oversimplified and dependent on cultural assumptions: practicing judo earned a negative score, while little-league baseball earned a positive; Buddhism was a negative and Christianity a positive.

Q: What penalties were invoked when a man or woman was considered to be disloyal?

A: A charge of disloyalty could force an internee's transfer to a special segregation camp where conditions were harsher and the atmosphere more turbulent. It could bar an internee from securing permission to leave a camp for a job in the country's interior. It could block an internee from obtaining a job that the government deemed too sensitive for the war effort in any way. And, as the war wound down and the mass exclusion of Japanese Americans from the West Coast ended, a finding of disloyalty meant that a Japanese American could not return home to the West Coast.

Q: What and who were the major authorities involved in determining loyalty? How did the process of determining loyalty differ among them?

A: The major authorities determining loyalty were the War Relocation Authority, which was the civilian agency that ran the internment camps; the Western Defense Command, which was the military command that had responsibility for defense of the West Coast; and the Provost Marshal General's Office, which was the military unit responsible for industrial security and military policing. All of these agencies were supposed to coordinate their work under the auspices of an overarching, inter-agency loyalty board called the Japanese American Joint Board. But the differences in vision and mission of the various agencies were so stark that the Japanese American Joint Board never managed to perform its coordinating function.

Q: Did any of the Japanese Americans challenge charges of disloyalty? If so, were any successful in overturning the charge?

A: The only loyalty adjudication system that a Japanese American challenged in court was the one that the military's Western Defense Command used in 1945 to specify which Japanese

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Americans were too dangerous to return to the West Coast after the military lifted its blanket policy of excluding all Japanese Americans en masse.

Three Japanese Americans filed challenges—George Ochikubo, a dentist from Oakland, California; Ruth Shiramizu, the twenty-four-year-old widow of a Japanese American recipient of a Purple Heart; and Masaru Baba, an honorably-discharged veteran of the U.S. Army. In order to moot the cases of Shiramizu and Baba, the government relented and permitted them to return to the West Coast. Thus, only Ochikubo's challenge to the Western Defense Command's filing of disloyalty actually went to court.

In Ochikubo's trial, military witnesses lied under oath in order to secure a judicial declaration that the military had virtually unlimited power to exclude American citizens from broad swaths of American territory. A federal judge ultimately rejected Ochikubo's challenge to his exclusion from the West Coast.

Q: Have the men and women who were held in the camps or punished for disloyalty received any recompense for their incarceration?

A: All Japanese Americans who were in the camps qualified for a rather meager compensation system for real and personal property that was administered in the late 1940s. They also qualified for a \$20,000 token redress payment that Congress authorized in the late 1980s. Those internees who were wrongfully labeled "disloyal" have never received compensation of any sort for that designation or its consequences.

Q: What significance does AMERICAN INQUISITION have for the United States' current wartime policies in places such as Guantanamo Bay?

A: The adjudication systems in AMERICAN INQUISITION bear certain troubling resemblances to those that the government is now using to designate enemy combatants. These resemblances include the thinness of the evidentiary data, the opacity of the decision-making process, the insistence on performing all review entirely in the executive branch, and the willingness of military and executive officials to seek judicial declarations of unreviewable military and executive discretion to determine the rights of U.S. citizens.

Because the decision-making by the Guantanamo review panels is not open to public view, it is impossible to say for sure what sorts of reasoning methods the military is using. However, it would not be at all surprising to learn—as we no doubt someday will, when archival material permits the sort of scholarly evaluations of today's programs that are now possible for our World War II misadventures—that the military is relying heavily on guilt-by-association and on cultural and religious practices, just as the government did in World War II.

Q: In your conclusion, you discuss the concern for loyalty in several wars that the United States has been involved in. What can readers learn from AMERICAN INQUISITION about racial profiling in times of war?

A: AMERICAN INQUISITION documents with great precision how corrosive a reliance on race, ethnicity, and culture is to a process of loyalty screening. Of all of the attributes that mark a

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person's identity—gender, physical appearance, personality, intellect, manners of speech, educational pedigree, job, and on and on—few are more pernicious predictors than ancestry and cultural practices. They are the basis of some of our society's crudest caricatures and most powerful stereotypes, not to mention our most intense fears and most destructive antagonisms. Focus on a person's ancestry and cultural practices is far likelier to corrupt an inquiry into his loyalty and dangerousness than to enhance it, by misleading the investigator into assuming that feeling and conduct correlate more closely than they really do.

This interview may be reprinted in its entirety with the following credit: An interview with Eric Muller, author of *AMERICAN INQUISITION: THE HUNT FOR JAPANESE AMERICAN DISLOYALTY IN WORLD WAR II* (University of North Carolina Press, Fall 2007). The text of this interview is available at www.ibiblio.org/uncp/media/muller.

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