

INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP TASK OPTIONS

Choose one of the following activities for individual work:

1. Imagine that you are a member of the Okimoto family. Write a diary of at least seven paragraphs describing the experience of moving to and living in an incarceration camp. Include entries on the following topics:

- Learning that you will move to an incarceration camp
- Leaving your home
- Moving to the assembly center
- Traveling to the incarceration camp
- First impressions of the camp
- Life in the incarceration camp after one year
- Leaving the camp after three years of life there

2. Assume the role of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). The ACLU is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, 275,000-member public interest organization devoted exclusively to protecting the basic civil liberties of all Americans, and extending them to groups that have traditionally been denied civil liberties. In its almost seven decades in existence, the ACLU has become a national institution, and is widely recognized as the country's foremost advocate of individual rights.

Citing Professor Okimoto's narrative, file a formal protest of the Japanese American incarceration. Use your understanding of civil rights and the events described by Okimoto to support your claim that the incarceration is a violation of the civil rights of Japanese Americans.

Activity Options for Small-Group Work:

3. In a group of five or more students, adapt the *American in Disguise* passages into a script and create a drama performance. Possible parts include narrator, guard/government official, Tameichi, Kirie, Daniel, Paul, Ruth, Joseph, other Japanese Americans in the camp, and a newspaper reporter. Rehearse and prepare a five-minute play to present to your classmates.

4. In groups of three to four students, develop a front page for a U.S. newspaper in 1942, 1943, 1944, or 1945. As part of the front page, include at least one article or editorial that describes the Okimoto family's experience. Students may also want to include a drawing, political cartoon, or the voice of another person affected by the incarceration (e.g., a guard in the camps, a teacher in the camps).

5. In a group of five students, assume the role of a law firm charged with proving that the incarceration either violated or did not violate the Okimoto family's civil rights. (This may require substantial research.) After gathering the evidence, the recorder should prepare a written statement and the head lawyer (determined by vote) should present the case in front of the class. Each group's presentation will be evaluated based on how convincing, factual, and clear its arguments are.

American in Disguise by Daniel Okimoto

Chapter 2: Prisoners

The chain of events that brought the Okimotos to Santa Anita began during the panic-stricken months following the surprise assault on Pearl Harbor and against the background of all-out war. But the causes of the evacuation can be traced back to the anti-Oriental sentiment that was directed first against Chinese immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century. Resentment against "cheap coolie labor" produced a popular image of the Chinese as immoral and treacherous—not fit for human company. When Japanese began arriving in substantial numbers after 1890, it was easy enough to have this image extended to them. "Now the Jap is a wily an' a crafty individual—more so than the Chink," warned one writer in the *Sacramento Bee*. "They are lower in the scale of civilization than the whites and will never become our equals."

During the early decades of the twentieth century racial prejudice on the West Coast took on the characteristics of an anti-Japanese movement, first among labor unions anxious to eliminate cheap Japanese labor, then among various civic and pressure groups such as branches of the American Legion, the Native Sons of the Golden West, and the California Farm Bureau Federation, which were eager to protect the West Coast from the "contaminating" influence of Orientals. As Japan flexed its military muscles in Korea, China, and Russia, concern came to be focused on the so-called Yellow Peril, which to some hyperactive imaginations meant the overrunning of the West Coast by Japanese or the invasion of the U.S. mainland by the Imperial Japanese Army.

To cope with these fancied threats, certain control measures were deemed necessary. Organized anti-Japanese pressure was instrumental in the passage of a variety of discriminatory measures, aimed at curbing immigration and checking threats of social advance. The first of these was the Gentlemen's Agreement (1908) by which Japan promised voluntarily to restrict the flow of immigration. This was followed by the Alien Land Law (1913) which prohibited the predominantly rural Japanese not only from owning and bequeathing land but also from leasing land for any period over three years. As is clear from the statement of one high-ranking California official, the Alien Land Law was clearly intended to discourage the Japanese from coming and settling in the U.S., because "they will not come in large numbers and long abide with us if they may not acquire land." When this legislation failed to achieve its avowed purpose, an amendment was secured in 1920, depriving the Japanese of the right even to lease agricultural land. Four years later, in 1924, the Immigration Exclusion Act was passed, virtually barring the Japanese from any further settlement in America. Judged unfit for citizenship, treated as the scum of the West, harassed by a battery of legal restrictions, the Japanese in America were subjected to a degree of discrimination that was in many ways similar to that directed against American blacks.

Yet, owing largely to cultural characteristics carried over from rural Japan, the issei immigrants endured this debasement in silence. Efforts to hamper or suppress them merely brought out certain qualities—like perseverance and industry—which motivated them to work even more diligently. Countless numbers of farmers went through a pattern which became familiar: they started out as cheap hired hands, worked ceaselessly, endured hardships, saved money, and eventually got around legal barriers against ownership by purchasing land in the names of their American-born children. To accumulate enough money to buy a small plot of property usually required a lifetime of unrelenting work, yet these immigrants were willing to pay this price so their children could start out with the kind of advantages—land, homes, money—they never had. Japanese families in America were bound closely together, especially by the mothers, just as their communities tended to be tightly knit by common backgrounds, goals, and anti-Japanese hostility.

It was not unusual for the issei to live their lives for, and later pin their hopes on, their children. Even though their lot was incredibly hard and their status low, most never lost hope that things would be different for their children. Hence, after purchasing land, they continued to endure the harsh toil so as to be able to give their children what they considered the key to success: a college education. So highly was education esteemed within the Japanese community that few sacrifices were considered too great for it. To be sure, social mobility even for college-educated nisei remained restricted during the prewar period, but most parents felt the situation had become more promising.

The closeness of the family unit, tightness of the ethnic community, and strength of value priorities worked together splendidly in conditioning the first- and second-generation Japanese to adapt to an alien society, even one as ridden with racist hostilities as America is. Within his home environment the nisei would typically be told to set

ambitious goals, respect his teachers, study hard, earn good grades, succeed in his occupation, and in so doing repay his parents a tiny measure for the enormous sacrifices they made on his behalf. At the same time home values were reinforced by those of the community. The same nisei boy was expected to endure prejudice uncomplainingly, conform to American norms unquestioningly, rise as high as possible socially, set a good example constantly, and hence bring honor not only to his family but to his whole subculture. Social deviation—crime, personal rebellion, or nonconformity—was usually penalized strongly so as to make the nisei feel that he was overbearingly unfilial toward his parents as well as to shame him before everyone in the tiny Japanese-American society.

The successes of the Japanese in America threatened to come to naught after the Japanese air squadron swept down on Pearl Harbor. The suddenness of the attack confirmed belief in the stereotype of the Japanese as devious people and fanned flames of suspect loyalty that had been smoldering over the years. Any air attack so well planned and executed, it was blithely assumed, *must* have been aided by subversive activities of the large (over 200,000) Japanese population in Hawaii. Unconfirmed news reports of fifth-column activities—such as cutting arrow-shaped lanes in the cane fields to guide the fighter planes, and throwing up road blocks to impede military counteroperations—hit some of the presses, giving rise to widespread alarm among the Pacific coast population.

With Japanese concentrated near key harbor and airfield areas on the mainland, there was a great deal of concern that a repetition of Pearl Harbor might occur as well in California. Such fears raced out of hand as Japanese submarines were said to be off the shores of California and ham radio operators swore strange messages were being signaled from the mainland to these enemy vessels. Secret repositories of arms and communications equipment were reportedly uncovered in the homes of some Japanese residents.

No matter how vehemently sympathy for the enemy cause was disclaimed or instances of subversion disproved, the Japanese in America simply could not escape the stigma of nearly a century of racist paranoia abruptly rekindled by Pearl Harbor. Objectivity, even among some people noted for just attitudes, seemed to get lost in the rapidly growing hysteria. One "reputable" newsman charged that ninety percent of the Japanese in California were loyal to Japan, without bothering to make any investigation. "They will die joyously," he confidently predicted, "for the honor of Japan." Government officials, like Earl Warren, then attorney general of California, also suspected subversion on the part of the Japanese, going so far as to interpret the utter lack of sabotage as evidence that it would soon break out. The Japanese, many thought, while pretending to be loyal, were really waiting for the right moment to act.

The atmosphere became so emotionally charged because of daily broadcasts of successive enemy victories in the Pacific that it was dangerous for Japanese to walk the streets in certain areas along the West Coast. Some were assaulted by marauding gangs of superpatriots; others were knifed or shot coldly in public. Cries for the internment of all Japanese descendants rose to a fevered pitch during the months of January and February 1942. A minority of alarmists swung popular feeling toward an attitude of "better safe than sorry" regarding the proposal to concentrate Japanese in isolated camps.

The mass media, normally an essential mechanism for the smooth functioning of a democratic form of government, became a tool in the movement to deprive an American minority of its inherent and legal prerogatives. One reporter for the Hearst newspapers, for example, wrote: "I am for the immediate removal of every Japanese on the West Coast to a point deep in the interior. I don't mean a nice part of the interior either. Herd 'em up, pack 'em off, and give them the inside room in the badlands. Let 'em be pinched, hurt, hungry, and dead up against it Personally, I hate the Japanese. And that goes for all of them."

Pressure groups and civic organizations also threw their weight behind the internment campaign. Branches of the superpatriotic American Legion, which prided themselves on their dedication to protect the "American heritage," agitated actively for evacuation, forgetting that immigration from abroad, human liberty, and individual rights were essential features of that heritage. Agricultural groups, which had long sought to suppress Japanese farmers, were particularly active in the movement because, apart from the imagined dangers of subversion, removal of the Japanese was a convenient way of eliminating competition. Other rabid groups, like the American League, the Anti-Japanese League, and the Ban the Japs Committee, were formed to lobby for immediate relocation.

It made no difference whether a Japanese was an American citizen or not; the color of his skin and the shape of his eyes constituted prima facie evidence of disloyalty to the Stars and Stripes. Nor did the matter of constitutional rights come into question; Japanese ancestry automatically disqualified one from all the rights and privileges of

citizenship. Neither was it important that there was not a single instance of espionage or sabotage. A statement by General John L. Dewitt, then head of the Western Defense Command, reveals the confused mentality of a significant segment of the public: "A Jap's a Jap. It makes no difference whether he is an American citizen or not They are a dangerous element, whether loyal or not."

The mobilization campaign also found advocates in the higher echelons of government. Congressman Rankin of Mississippi, for one, favored "catching every Japanese in America, Alaska, and Hawaii now and putting them in concentration camps, and shipping them back to Asia as soon as possible...." Despite assurances by military experts that a sustained attack was not only unlikely but impossible, civilian heads of the War Department advised the president to take steps to insure the safety of the West Coast from internal or external aggression.

On February 9, 1942, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order No. 9066 authorizing military commanders to remove all Japanese from strategic defense areas. This order was implemented by Congress, executed by the War Department, approved by the Supreme Court, and supported by public opinion. Few people stood up for the Japanese; anyone who dared oppose the federal action not only incurred the epithet "Jap lover" but also became himself suspect.

Designating Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, California, Nevada, and Utah as key defense areas, General Dewitt gave orders to round up the Japanese in these states. Posters were put up all over the West Coast, addressed to "All Persons of JAPANESE Ancestry," stipulating that "all Japanese persons, both alien and nonalien, will be evacuated from the above designated area by 12:00 o'clock noon, Tuesday, April 7, 1942." (Note that instead of "American citizen," "nonalien" was used.) About 1,000 Japanese in Hawaii and Alaska who were suspected of disloyalty or were influential community leaders were also arrested or interned, but most of the Japanese in Hawaii, where the numbers were so great, and on the East Coast, where they were so few, escaped relocation because total internment was impractical.

In answer to those Japanese Americans who insisted they were loyal to the United States one congressman replied that any "patriotic" Japanese, "if he wants to make his contribution, will submit himself to a concentration camp." As it turned out, this is exactly what happened. Very few Japanese resisted the order for evacuation or bothered to test its constitutionality through legal procedures. For a number of reasons, connected with the norms of the Japanese community, the vast majority meekly submitted to government orders and cooperated completely with the authorities.

Japanese immigrants on the West Coast were not the only ones to bear this unmerited injustice. Reasoning born of ignorance caused Japanese as far away as South America also to be interned in America. In 1942 the United States Department of State arranged for over 2,000 Japanese in South America to be brought to the United States, where they were earmarked as trade bait for American citizens held in countries occupied by Japan. Many were native-born citizens of the South American countries from which they were taken.

When they arrived in the United States, they were placed in internment camps and shifted about from one to another as negotiations for human barter went on. Even when it became obvious that they could not be traded, the Japanese from South America were still held captive. Proceedings after the war were begun to deport them to Japan *for having entered the country without proper papers*. Many did not wish to go to Japan, desiring only to go back to South America. After a long series of legal moves, they won the right to return to Peru, from which most had come, but that country refused their request for reentry. Back in the courts, they won the right to apply for legal residence in the United States and many eventually became citizens.

As part of the opening phase of internment the Japanese on the West Coast, numbering over 117,000, were placed under strict curfew and forced to sell their property at prices that were absurdly low. Some families were lucky enough to entrust their property to reliable friends who promised to hold it for them until after the war. Less fortunate families, however, who could not arrange sales at all, had to abandon their property without compensation. Estimates place the total losses sustained at anywhere between \$200 and \$400 million, but the final total may have been even higher. After the war the federal government "generously" consented to compensate those families that filed claims of losses, but by 1964, when the last of the claims was settled, the government had authorized only \$38 million.

In March 1942, many Japanese families found themselves without the homes and lands they had labored to buy,

as penniless as when they first arrived as immigrants, and, far worse, on their way to be interned for no one knew how long. Of the 117,000 Japanese relocated, over 70,000 were American citizens. For this group the question of nationality posed a real dilemma. They were not Japanese subjects, yet the United States government, ignoring the fact of their citizenship, refused to honor their right to be Japanese Americans. No matter the degree of their Americanization, by a twist of physiological irony they were Americans in a cruel disguise.

Chapter 3: Exiles in the Promised Land

In late August of 1942, under close military surveillance, the Okimoto family filed out of the sequestered compounds of Santa Anita Assembly Center, part of a large group of persons obediently boarding a nonscheduled train ready for a one-way trip to the wilderness of Arizona. After the last passenger stepped in, guards locked the doors and windows and the "Oriental Express" belched out black smoke as it rumbled toward Poston, Arizona, the largest of ten relocation centers scattered in seven states. Behind them the makeshift evacuation center was torn down even more rapidly than it had gone up, and passed into the pages of American history forever a national disgrace.

The trip was long and monotonous; inside the crowded train it was painfully hot. The windows had been sealed tightly to prevent escape. The Okimoto baby, barely two weeks old, had trouble breathing and as the hours dragged on he appeared more dead than alive. Frantic, Kirie hurried through the train until she found a medical unit. They had an oxygen tent, and in this the child passed the remainder of the trip. Anguished thoughts ran through Kirie's mind that perhaps this "mistake" was not destined to live very long. Inside the plastic tent the child cried out incessantly. But the sound of screams growing more and more insistent was welcomed by the mother as a sign that he was still very much alive and that breathing was becoming easier. While in the oxygen tent the child contracted pneumonia, but it at least kept him alive.

Poston was a rude shock to many of the evacuees, whose sensitivities to the nuances of nature had been conditioned by the green hills, verdant valleys, and richly flowering landscape of the West Coast. Poston stood on a sere desert plain through which the Colorado River snakes its way. In the same state that boasts the majesty of the Grand Canyon, Poston could claim little to redeem its existence: it was a wilderness of cactus and sweltering heat where dust storms swirled through at blinding speeds. On moonlit, still nights coyotes howled plaintively in the distance and even sagebrush hurried on through, as if the desolation were too great to endure.

On this flatland a vast area had been enclosed by barbed-wire fence. This was to be the home of most of the large, dispossessed band of Japanese for the duration of the war. The enclosure was divided into three distinct camps, each of which was subdivided into blocks where long, narrow barracks, each roughly one hundred feet by twenty-five, stretched out in neat, orderly lines, separated occasionally by firebreaks. The barracks were partitioned into four sections, each occupied by a family or group. The living quarters, measuring twenty-five by twenty-five feet, were uniformly drab, furnished only with straw mattresses; accessories such as shelves, closets, chairs, tables, and bookcases had to be built by the occupants themselves. The gray, tar-papered buildings within the demarcated zone, watched from lookout posts by green-garbed guards armed with rifles and machine guns, reflected the style of life within them: austere, barren, caged. To call these quarters a relocation center, as the government did, was plainly a euphemism. Internment camp—or if one chooses to be more descriptive, concentration or prisoner-of-war camp—came closer to capturing the essence of what Poston and similar centers represented.

Superficially at least, life within the camps went on as if little were out of the ordinary. There were no mass murders, no Auschwitz-like atrocities, no tortures; nor were there riots, rebellions, or sit-down strikes by the captives except at Tule Lake where people desiring repatriation and loyalty suspects had been placed. Neither was there any real resistance or nihilistic slothfulness; true to ethnic form, a strong sense of community helped the Japanese make the best of a bad situation.

The 20,000 internees at Poston went about their occupations with exemplary orderliness and purpose. Farmers grew food, carpenters repaired buildings, teachers ran classes, and doctors attended the sick. The area within the perimeter of the fences represented a self-sufficient community which for three years was the only world that existed for its inhabitants. It would have been difficult, judging from the prosaic pace of life inside, to suspect that outside the most devastating war in human history was being waged, and that the world of the camp and the world of war were somehow linked.

At Poston the Okimotos threw themselves busily into church work. On weekdays, after sending the older children off to school, they studied the Bible and meditated for the rest of the morning, then called on members of the congregation; on Sundays they conducted church services. Certainly for them internment did not seriously warp the routine of their daily lives or impair the effectiveness of their calling.

Before evacuation the Okimotos had lived in a church parsonage, owning no land and having very few personal belongings; they consequently sustained almost no financial loss by the change. Indeed, they may well have been among those few whose material livelihood actually improved as a result of internment. In San Diego, their home before the war, they collectively earned a salary of around \$110 monthly; only careful spending enabled them to feed, clothe, and educate three growing children. In camp the family was fed in the communal dining halls and housed in the barracks. Unpalatable as both food and lodging seemed at times, there was nonetheless no lack of nutrition, and the rent was unbeatable.

Camp life also placed the missionary couple squarely in the midst of those people they had crossed the Pacific to serve. There could not have been a better opportunity to mingle with immigrants and their children; some of the friends made during the three years were among the closest they ever had. In camp they widened immensely their circle of acquaintances, deepened their own understanding of Japanese-American society, and in the process sharpened their effectiveness as ministers.

But even for the Okimotos—whose adjustment to Poston was probably among the least painful—internment still constituted in human and spiritual terms an ugly interlude. The three older children recall only too clearly the bafflement and fear they felt when they were jerked out of their playgrounds, marched onto trains by rifle-bearing soldiers, and interned in the middle of the desert with a colony of Japanese captives. No explanation for the federal action could be given to children in terms that were readily understandable. They could make no sense of the forced separation from their playmates. Nor could their minds grasp the reasoning that said their loyalties were to Japan rather than America. One child had never seen the country and the other two were too young to remember Japan.

Since they had done no wrong, the only way they could possibly interpret internment was to assume that they were being punished for being Japanese. Every Japanese, after all, was supposed to be bad; as they and their parents were Japanese, they too had to be locked up in concentration camps. The result of this assumption was that they grew to despise the Japanese part of themselves and to feel ashamed for being somehow related to a people who would dare strike so underhandedly at Americans. The psychological wounds went deep, leaving permanent scars that caused them to feel apologetic for their ethnicity. They were estranged from the mainstream of American life for some time. Even for the youngest child, spending the first three years of his life behind barbed-wire fences exclusively among his racial kind probably affected not only his basic feelings of trust but also in subtle, subconscious ways shaped what were to become his adult attitudes and whole sense of selfhood.

Even though on the surface activity went on as normal, the emotional substance of the lives of the interned was grotesquely distorted. Everything was rigidly regimented and monotonous: the same buildings, always the familiar surroundings, set hours for meals, regular routines, prescribed procedures, the next day the same as the one before. Daily existence was devoid of the pleasure of surprise; the greatest excitement each day—for some the only thing to look forward to—was mail delivery. A sense of ennui hung oppressively in the air. At times Rev. and Mrs. Okimoto felt envy for the coyotes calling in the distance, for at least they were not caged.

The Japanese in camps lived a life which, despite its material security and apparent normalcy, was fundamentally inhuman. Without freedom the years of confinement were largely wasted, barren, and spiritually brutal. Under these circumstances it is hardly surprising that unforeseen tensions invaded the lives of many inhabitants. The Okimotos' usual pattern of living was radically changed when the entire family was squeezed together in the same small room, separated only by a thin wall from the occupants of the neighboring unit. There everything a family said or did could be overheard and the most important question in life came to be: how much longer would one be trapped in the desert prison. Underlying tensions occasionally erupted into heated quarrels, emotional arguments, and petty bickering over trivia, straining relationships in the usually close Okimoto household.

It was hard for someone as proud as Tameichi to accept the armed patrols, the authoritarian commands, and the sense of helplessness without feeling deeply resentful. It was particularly frustrating that he, who had so firmly rejected Japanese militarism, should be held accountable for it in the United States. The sense of injustice was driven home when the government handed down a loyalty oath which he, like all Japanese over seventeen, either

had to sign or face the Tule Lake camp and ultimate deportation. The coercion was humiliating evidence that by virtue of his race he was considered a traitor and a subversive, unless he swore in writing otherwise.

Tameichi managed largely to suppress his feelings at the time. Afterwards he blotted many of the most grating episodes out of his consciousness, seldom bringing the subject of internment up in conversation. But Poston came back to him periodically during sleep. Twenty-five years later Tameichi still would toss violently in his sleep and scream, "Let me out! Let me out of this concentration camp!" or, "We can't let them do this to us. We have our rights and we've got to stand up for them!"

But of the 117,000 Japanese interned, the hardest hit may have been those nisei, numerically two-thirds of the evacuated population, who were in their late adolescence and early adulthood. For them, incarceration meant at best an interruption of their college education and at worst an abrupt termination of it. College was for them not only an opportunity to deepen their understanding of life but also an indispensable means of acquiring specific vocational skills. The internment deprived this group of the freedom to choose its own careers. Many who aspired to better jobs were forced into gardening or garage work.

Most nisei nonetheless begged for a chance to prove their loyalty by serving in the armed forces. The federal government, however, classified all nisei as enemy aliens in June 1942, barring them from military service. The Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) protested this measure and fought vigorously to have it changed. But JACL objections went unheeded until the shortage of manpower for the war became apparent. As the death tolls rose, it was decided finally to bestow upon Japanese Americans the privilege of volunteering for "their country." In a statement that now sounds almost deliberately tongue-in-cheek, President Roosevelt said, "No loyal citizen of the United States should be denied the democratic right to exercise the responsibilities of his citizenship regardless of his ancestry." Spelled out concretely, this generous statement meant that nisei were to have the "democratic right" to die for the United States even if they were deprived of the equally basic right to live normally within its constitutional laws.

The choice put before the twenty-year-old Japanese American was simple: either stay behind barbed wire for an indefinite period of time or go out into the battlefronts to fight for the country that had imprisoned him. Many of the nisei already in the services prior to Pearl Harbor had been hastily moved into innocuous, nonsecurity jobs or summarily discharged and placed in internment camps. Some had even been jailed on suspicion of treason and detained in military prisons on no more evidence than that of ancestry.

When interned nisei asked whether risking their lives would facilitate the release of their families, the government's answer was an unequivocal no. Nevertheless a large number of Japanese Americans volunteered for the army. During the war a total of 25,778 Japanese Americans served: 13,528 from the mainland and 12,240 from Hawaii. On January 20, 1944, with manpower exceedingly low, a draft call went out for all eligible nisei, many of whom were still in concentration camps. Out of those who had been locked up for over two years, only 300 refused to be inducted.

In the army the nisei were segregated in separate units, presumably to avoid problems that might arise in integrated groups. When nisei forces, like the 442nd Infantry Combat Team and the 100th Infantry Battalion, reached the European front, little question remained of their loyalties. Once in action these soldiers joined the ranks of the most decorated in the annals of U.S. military history. Their daring and heroism are legendary: in the Italian campaign alone the 100th Battalion won more than 1,000 Purple Hearts, 11 Distinguished Service Crosses, 44 Silver Stars, 31 Bronze Stars, and 3 Legion of Merit Ribbons. It took immense violence and wartime valor and a staggering toll of over 9,000 casualties to do it, but the nisei fighters eventually won grudging acknowledgment of their loyalty from even the most hard-bitten racist skeptics.

AMERICAN IN DISGUISE A THIRTY-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE: 1970–2000

Daniel I. Okimoto
Professor, Department of Political Science
Senior Fellow, Institute for International Studies
Stanford University
June 2000

Thirty years have passed since I wrote *American in Disguise*. Much has happened during that interval of time. The twentieth century has ended, a century that will be forever remembered for the carnage of two world wars. The world has entered into the twenty-first century, the beginning of the third millennium.

During the final three decades of the twentieth century, a number of changes have taken place, some of historic significance. The Cold War, a forty-year struggle for global supremacy between the United States and the Soviet Union, has come to a close. The end came swiftly, and in a manner unprecedented in world history. The global balance of power has been fundamentally realigned without triggering another world war and without leading to the launching of nuclear missiles. The Cold War has ended, in the words of T.S. Eliot, "not with a bang, but a whimper." There was no massive bloodshed. No nuclear holocaust. It was a rare event in world history, namely, a peaceful power transition.

The United States has emerged as the big winner. The ideology and institutions of market capitalism and of democracy have triumphed over those of state socialism and of totalitarianism. The once-mighty Soviet Empire has disintegrated. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has expanded to incorporate three Eastern European states once part of the communist bloc. By adopting market mechanisms, like a pricing system, China has taken off economically and is one of the world's fastest-growing and biggest economies. In Asia, China is emerging as a formidable power, a force to be reckoned with. So, too, is India, though with a much later start than China.

China and India are not the only countries enjoying robust growth. Asia as a whole is surging ahead, shifting from economies based on farming to manufacturing (e.g., Thailand and Malaysia) and from manufacturing to the services (e.g., Taiwan and South Korea). Over the past thirty years, Asia has grown faster than any region in the world—faster even than North America. Although several Asian countries suffered a serious financial crisis in 1997, stalling growth rates temporarily, most countries in Asia have recovered from the crisis. They are likely to continue their pace-setting growth rates, especially if Japan breaks out of its decade-long recession and returns to growth rates of 2–3 percent.

Sustained, robust growth in Asia is apt to bring about an end to five hundred years of Western domination, stretching all the way back to the early era of European sea excursion to Asia. The end of Western domination may occur sometime over the course of the twenty-first century. If it does, the tectonic shift in the global distribution of power would constitute the second case of a peaceful power transition. Indeed, the end of Western supremacy would represent a historic watershed of far greater significance than the end of the Cold War. It would signal a long-term reversal of power relations between West and East, a sea-change in the structure and dynamics of the international order.

The past thirty years have also witnessed domestic changes of far-reaching significance. The social protest movements of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s have transformed the structure of U.S. society. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s civil rights movement has established the legitimacy, norms, legal framework, and goals for racial equality. The problem is still one of getting there.

Of the myriad of social changes that have taken place over the last third of the twentieth century, the women's movement has been the most consequential. Certainly, it has been the longest, most revolutionary, and most enduring of the social protest movements organized during the twentieth century. The women's rights movement has thrown open the gates for talented women to pour into the mainstream of U.S. society. More women than men are now going to college and graduate school. They are better educated and trained than ever before. There are far greater opportunities at the high end of the U.S. labor market for qualified women to step into executive positions of responsibility and power.

As women have streamed into the workforce, the family unit in America has changed. The pattern of two working parents has become the norm. Couples marry later in life. Birth rates have fallen. Divorce rates have risen. Eschewing marriage and staying single is no longer frowned upon. It all adds up to nothing less than a quiet but powerful and lasting social revolution, typical of grassroots movements throughout U.S. history. Of all the advanced industrial countries in the world, the United States is arguably the most open to, and affected by, grassroots movements that bring about reform in society from below.

While protest movements have accelerated the pace of progress for women and minority groups, racial and social justice remain unfinished and still distant goals. To be sure, a miniscule segment of African Americans and Latino Americans has made it to the top. However, the vast majority remain mired at the low and lowest rungs of the American economy. Twenty-three percent of all black families live in poverty; the figure is 25 percent for Hispanics but only 12 percent for Asian Americans and 6 percent for non-Hispanic Whites.

For African Americans and Latino Americans, the problems today are no longer those of overt discrimination, such as the denial of restaurant service, being forced to ride in the back of buses, or school segregation. Such obvious acts of discrimination largely have been eliminated. The obstacles today are less visible but no less egregious or intractable. The barriers include inferior educational opportunities, police brutality, racial profiling, and discriminatory legal treatment. There are countless examples of legal injustices, particularly in our system of law enforcement and criminal prosecution. Instances of arbitrary treatment by local and state police enforcement officers and inferior legal protection for African Americans and Latino Americans are being exposed nearly every day. Probably a great many acts of legal discrimination fail to be reported.

Seventy percent of all inmates in America's prisons are African Americans and Latino Americans. Is the figure an indicator of intrinsic inequalities in America's criminal justice system? Do the two minority groups commit seventy percent of the crimes? Or are they more likely to be arrested and subjected to arbitrary prosecution? Are their civil rights being protected? Are police officers guilty of practicing racial profiling? If "equal opportunity" once served as the rallying cry for the civil rights movement in the twentieth century, perhaps the goal of "equal justice" will become the main focus of the civil rights movement during the early decades of the twenty-first century.

What about Asian Americans? How have circumstances changed for Asian Americans since I wrote *American in Disguise*? The most obvious change has been in the area of demographics. As a percentage of the U.S. population, Asian Americans have more than quadrupled in size. We used to be less than one percent. Now we are four percent, or roughly 12 million strong, and still rising. By the year 2025, Asian Americans will account for seven percent of the U.S. population.

This expansion is not the result of higher birth rates. Rather, it is the by-product of ever-changing patterns of immigration. More immigrants are entering the United States from Asia than ever before, especially from countries in Southeast Asia, like Vietnam; from South Asia, like India; and from Northeast Asia, like China.

Not only have the ranks of Asian Americans swelled, the composition of national groups has also changed. When I was growing up, Japanese Americans were the second largest category of Asian Americans. Today, Filipino Americans and Korean Americans have moved ahead of Japanese Americans. Large influxes can be expected in the future from greater China and India, the world's two most populous areas. The mix of national groups is thus constantly changing.

Have Asian Americans climbed up the socio-economic pyramid? Yes, according to a variety of socio-economic indicators. Asian Americans have made measurable progress with respect to educational achievement, income levels, and accumulated wealth. Probably the key to their advancement has been the capacity of Asian-American students to take full advantage of their educational opportunities. Over 40 percent of Asian-American 25-year-olds have graduated from college, compared to 25 percent of non-Hispanic Whites, 15 percent of African Americans, and 11 percent of Hispanics.

Compared to other nations, the United States is still a largely meritocratic society, one in which the myth of rising from rags-to-riches continues to be believed. It is still possible for children of poor immigrants to overcome the formidable handicaps of material deprivation, foreign language, and cultural unfamiliarity to rise to the top.

With diplomas in hand from America's top institutions of higher learning, Asian Americans have entered into the highly competitive labor market and have done remarkably well. Educational achievement has been the key to the socio-economic advancement of Asian Americans, just as it had been the key to the advancement of other minorities, such as the Irish Americans and Jewish Americans. You can see signs of the educational inroads made by Asian Americans in terms of student enrollments at top-tier universities across the country.

Take Princeton University, where I graduated in 1965. In my class, there were fewer than a half-dozen Asian Americans, representing less than one percent of the class. We all knew each other. How could we not? We were a tiny minority. Today, 35 years later, Asian Americans account for roughly 15 percent of the Princeton freshman class. Fifteen percent! That's an amazing expansion. The same is true at Harvard, MIT, Cal Tech, and Ivy League institutions. The reason is simple. Just look at the disproportionate share of Asian Americans who win National Merit Scholarships every year.

Or consider Stanford University, where I have taught for the past quarter-century. Asian-American students make up a full quarter of all Stanford undergraduates. Twenty-five percent!—from a minority that represents only four percent of the national population! I could not have imagined that there would be so many Asian-American students at Princeton and Stanford when I was an undergraduate.

It is not simply the numbers that matter. What is equally striking is the high quality of academic performance. Every year, Asian Americans win a disproportionate number of Phi Beta Kappa keys at colleges and universities across the country. Such indicators of outstanding performance suggest that Asian Americans will continue pouring into the mainstream of the middle and upper middle classes.

In terms of professional careers as doctors, lawyers, consultants, architects, accountants, designers, chefs, athletes, artists, musicians, and writers, the barriers to progress are relatively low. Many Asian Americans have reached the top of their professions. I have been particularly struck by the emergence of extraordinarily talented Asian Americans in artistic endeavors, such as music and literature. Look at Seiji Ozawa and Kent Nagano (orchestra conductors), Yo-Yo Ma (cellist) and David Henry Hwang (theatre writer).

When I was growing up, the idea of making a livelihood as a writer never occurred to me. It was about as remote as becoming an astronaut, a Nobel Prize winner, or President of the United States. There were no role models. No Asian American had ever made it to the top as a novelist, poet, dramatist, or literary critic.

Today, 30 years later, there is a remarkable flowering of artistic expression. I look at the number, quality, and prominence of Asian-American writers, and I say to myself, "Bravo!"

Or take professional athletes. When I was growing up, there were few, if any, Asian Americans who had made it as professional athletes in football, baseball, basketball, or hockey. No role models. Of course, that never prevented me from dreaming of pitching for the Los Angeles Dodgers. But that was all it was: a dream. I had accepted the common presumption that Asian Americans lacked the height, weight, speed, and strength to compete at the highest level of athletics.

But thirty years later, Asian Americans have made it to the top in nearly every pro sport. Let me again mention a few names: John Jackson and Johnnie Morton (football), Rex Chapman (basketball), Bruce Chen and Omani Matsuoka (baseball), Paul Kariya (hockey). Kariya is a superstar, a household name among hockey fans.

Many younger Asian Americans are playing at the college level. My son, Kevin, started at first base or third base for four years at Santa Clara University. At the Santa Clara games I attended against the likes of Stanford, Cal, Fresno State, and Florida, I saw a surprising number of Asian Americans playing—and doing well—at the Division I level. No doubt, some of those will go on to sign pro contracts. A few may even become household names, like Paul Kariya.

If the barriers to entry have broken down in the professions, they are breaking down more slowly in the areas of corporate management, civil service, and high level government posts. There are not as many Asian-American CEOs, Ambassadors, and Secretaries of State as one might expect, given their academic talent and professional credentials. There are a few Asian-American governors (Gary Locke, Washington; Ben Cayetano, Hawaii), congressmen (Robert Matsui), and senators (Daniel Inouye), but no Asian American has ever been appointed to the Cabinet or to the Supreme Court.

That will change. An Asian American will surely be appointed to the Cabinet in the near future. Perhaps as early as next year, 2001. It is bound to happen. The talent pool is too deep and the Asian-American community is becoming too big and influential for it not to happen.

Since 1970, Asian Americans have become better organized politically. It used to be that the JACL, Japanese American Citizens League, was the only significant political organization representing the interests of the Japanese-American community. It lobbied on our behalf at the local, state, and national levels. Now a variety of Asian-American organizations have sprung forth. They are having an impact on the political processes and policy outcomes. The number of Asian-American voters, concentrated especially in California, the largest and most pivotal state of the Union, gives the Asian-American community increasing clout. Political leaders from both sides of the aisle also are soliciting donations from Asian Americans, and the amounts donated are large.

For me, personally, as a Japanese American, the most memorable and gratifying political moment over the last thirty years came with the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1988. This was a landmark piece of legislation, which acknowledged the great injustice that had been committed against Japanese Americans in the wartime camps. It also provided some financial redress to internees who had been incarcerated. I received a \$20,000 check from the U.S. government, as did thousands of others. While I was grateful for the check, I, like others, felt that no amount of money could ever make up for the trauma of internment: specifically, the loss of liberty, the loss of homes and property, the loss of a normal life, the loss of family unity and privacy, the loss of precious and formative years, the loss of dignity and respect. How could any amount of money compensate for that?

What meant more to me than the financial compensation was the U.S. government's official apology. It made the trauma of internment a lighter cross to bear. It made me proud to be American. What other

country in the world, I asked myself, would issue an official apology for injustices done to its citizens in the heat of a world war? Probably none.

When the Civil Rights Act was brought to the floor of the U.S. Congress for a vote, most observers thought that it stood slim chance of passage. If the U.S. Congress apologized and offered financial restitution for the internment of Japanese Americans, argued opponents in Congress, what would prevent other aggrieved minority groups from mounting massive campaigns to win redress for historical injustices done to them? Native Americans would claim that their spacious lands were taken from them as they were herded onto reservations located in the backlands. African Americans would say that their ancestors were brought to the United States against their will and used as slaves until the Civil War finally eliminated slavery. Mexican Americans would argue that the United States seized vast areas of the Southwest—Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona, and California—following the Mexican-American War. In other words, the Civil Rights Act would open up a Pandora's box.

In the early stages of the legislative fight, a handful of U.S. senators, like Bill Bradley of New Jersey, threw their weight behind the effort. Acting on his core convictions, as he always does, Senator Bradley rose to his feet on the U.S. Senate floor and gave impassioned speeches in favor of the Civil Rights Act of 1988. He spoke to the mass media and to the American people. He went around to his colleagues in the U.S. Congress, seeking to convince them of the importance of acknowledging publicly the injustice that had been done to Japanese Americans. Thanks to his efforts, and thanks especially to the tireless leadership of the small but influential delegation of Japanese-American legislators in the U.S. Senate and Congress, the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1988.

Legislative approval was a moving, meaningful moment in U.S. history. It set the historic record straight. It righted a long-standing wrong. It demonstrated that the U.S. government is capable of learning from past mistakes. For other minority groups, it established a legal and moral precedent that will decrease the chances that another executive order for internment might be issued.

For me, a Japanese American born in the horse stables of Santa Anita Racetrack, the Civil Rights Act of 1988 brought closure to a bleak chapter in my life. I, like other internees, felt a sense of vindication. I had harbored feelings of indignation about the circumstances surrounding my birth and early childhood. I had felt some of the pain, anxiety, and angst that my mother and family must have felt. Internment has had a profound effect on our lives. Only recently have I been able to talk with my siblings about that searing experience.

I shall always be grateful to Senator Bill Bradley for stepping forward to fight for legislative approval when the political costs and risks of doing so were high and when the prospects for passage were still uncertain. The active role that he played meant a great deal to me, because he is one of my closest and most trusted friends. He and I were roommates at Princeton. We used to talk about race relations in America, including discussions about the internment of Japanese Americans. From our days as undergraduates, more than thirty years ago, Bill Bradley always staked out the high ground on matters of race and social justice. I have the utmost admiration and respect for him.

In 1999–2000, Bill Bradley campaigned for the Democratic Party's nomination for U.S. President. In my opinion, he embodied the best qualities of America's best presidents: character, vision, candor, boldness, and courage. Racial equality and social justice were made the centerpieces of his campaign.

I believed so deeply in Bill Bradley and what he stood for that I took a year's leave of absence from teaching and research at Stanford so that I could devote time to work as a volunteer in his campaign. Here, at last, was a man whom I knew, trusted, and respected, and whose candidacy offered the promise of reform, steady direction, unassailable integrity, and the restoration of trust in the White House.

It was painful to see Bill Bradley lose. I was especially disheartened that the Japanese-American community failed to rally behind him. Here was a leader who understood and had always supported the interests and needs of Japanese Americans. Here was a Senator who had spoken out against Japan-bashing and had taken a great deal of heat for it. Here was a presidential candidate who had warned against the dangers of racial profiling in the Wen Ho Lee case, when other presidential candidates had scurried for cover. Here was a man who had pledged to appoint more Asian Americans to high posts than any president in history. Clearly, Bill Bradley's candidacy offered the Asian-American community its best chance ever of electing a president who would preserve, protect, and advance the Asian-American cause.

Yet, as hard as I tried, I could not rally Japanese Americans to his side. Most were disinterested in the election or disposed to support other candidates because they appeared more likely to win. Where, I asked myself, was the political commitment, the social conscience, the loyalty to someone who had always been there when we needed him? Why was there such widespread apathy and political passivity? Such questions haunted me during the campaign.

I realized, of course, that honest people can differ. My assessment of Bill Bradley may have been colored by our long-standing friendship. I knew that my unabashed enthusiasm was not shared widely by others. But what I failed to understand was the indifference of so many Japanese-American citizens. Internment may be a distant memory; but our lives continue to be influenced significantly by the outcome of presidential elections.

On balance, the past three decades of high-speed change have been good years. The positives clearly outweigh the negatives. Looking back from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, I can say that I am happy to have lived through one of the most fascinating, dynamic, and seminal periods in the history of the modern world. Not only is the global system passing through a major transformation; the situation for Asian Americans is also changing rapidly, mostly in positive ways. We still have a long ways to go before Asian Americans enjoy the full fruits of racial equality and social justice. But we are moving steadily in the right direction.

Questions for *American in Disguise: A Thirty-Year Retrospective: 1970–2000*

- What does Professor Okimoto list as the most significant national and global changes of the past 30 years?
- What would you list as the most significant changes that have taken place nationally and globally over the past 30 years?
- What does he think are the most important changes for the Asian American community?
- How is the tone of this piece different from *American in Disguise*? What do you think may have caused the change in tone?
- Has Professor Okimoto's attitude toward the incarceration changed? If so, how?
- How would you assess progress toward social justice in the United States?