

Japanese draft resisters deserve better

Today marks "The Day of Remembrance." On this day in 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 — the order that called for the evacuation of all people of Japanese American ancestry from the West Coast.

For me, it is a day to reflect upon the sacrifice and dedication of the Nisei, the second generation of Japanese Americans, who paved a way for all Americans of Japanese descent.



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Perhaps the most disheartening, yet enlightening story I had the benefit of never learning as a part of my Japanese American history is that of the Japanese American draft resisters of World War II.

I have basked in the numerous stories of the well-deserved glory achieved by the 442nd Regimental Combat

Unit, the most decorated unit of World War II, made up entirely of Nisei men during a time when their families were imprisoned in camps.

They proved themselves to be loyal Americans by saving the lives of other soldiers and fighting for freedoms that their families were being denied.

Only recently did I learn of another group of Nisei who fought on their own battlefield. Their stand was refusing to be drafted during World War II because they wanted to see their families released from internment camps, become citizens and be treated as free and equal Americans.

In other words, they wished to be "Free to Die for Their Country," the title of Eric L. Muller's book, which is devoted to the story of the Nisei draft resisters.

But even in their patriotic intentions, they were looked upon with shame, not only by the government, but also by the Japanese American community.

Film tells the story

"Conscience and the Constitution," a film telling the story of the Nisei draft resisters shown on PBS, incorporates interviews with various resisters, including Jim Akutsu. He spoke of his mother's suicide, after her exclusion from church due to his resistance and eventual arrest, depicting the rejection and hardship faced by these men and their families.

In the process of writing a history paper on the controversial World War II topic, I contacted my family friend, Paul Tsu-



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Frank Emi was one of seven resistance leaders convicted in 1944 for conspiracy to counsel draft evasion among the Japanese Americans held in the internment camps.

neishi, past Southern California district governor for the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), asking him the debated question, "Will the JA draft resisters of World War II ever be accepted into society?" He said no.

Tsuneishi, a World War II veteran and a part of the present-day movement to reconcile the Japanese American community with the resisters, was not aware of the resisters while interned, but said, "The shocking treatment of the resisters, who stood on Constitutional grounds, is a disgrace on the public record of the Japanese American community."

They were fighting for a fundamental principle of living in America, but they only received two years in prison and more than 50 years of scorning.

It took two years in prison before these men were freed and eventually pardoned, but even then, they dealt with ostracism and fear that their actions placed a "black mark" of the loyalty of Japanese Americans to America.

When I ask my World War II-age relatives about the resisters, most say that they did not know about them, or didn't discover the story until recently.

I can tell by their shifty eyes and serious expressions that many of them still feel embarrassed by those who might have been seen as disloyal Americans. It is as if by supporting the resisters after 50 years, they still fear being labeled as disloyal Americans themselves.

Many formerly imprisoned Nisei draft

resisters honorably served in the Korean War after their families were released from camps and were given freedom to live as Americans again, but their honor was never redeemed.

Apology is offered

Even as late as 1999, the JACL proposed an apology to the draft resisters, only to be met with controversy and tension. It was not until May 11, 2002, after many years of internal bitter dispute, did the National JACL issue an apology to those who courageously fought for the civil liberties of their families in the name of what it means to be an American.

"We did not do anything so extraordinary. We simply realized something was terribly wrong with the situation we were in," said Frank Emi, Nisei draft resister who led the vital resistance group called the Fair Play Committee in Heart Mountain relocation center.

Whether they wish to believe it or not, the Japanese American draft resisters of World War II acted bravely. Although there may never be a monument dedicated to them, they were willing to face the condemnation from their ethnic community for what was a true act of patriotism, a loyalty to American values.

As a member of the next generation of Japanese Americans, a generation twice after the Nisei resisters, I aspire to tell the story of the internment — all of it.

Whether it is through my history paper or waiting for the next generation, I will include the story of the resisters. They represent a group of Americans who were imprisoned for looking like the enemy, but proved themselves more knowledgeable of America's Constitution than those who interned them.

I have faith that my generation will succeed in making these men, who have been angrily forgotten, known for their legacy.

My greatest fear is that my good friend Paul Tsuneishi will remain correct — that the resisters will never be accepted in the Japanese American community. I fear that the young Nisei men I see in the black and white photos of World War II will not be able to witness the reconciliation and recognition that they so fervently deserve.

They have waited too long to receive their heroes' welcome — the time we should begin to write them back into American history is now.

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