

“Dear Teacher”

Letters on the Eve of the Japanese American Imprisonment

Yoon K. Pak

March 24, 1942

Dear Miss Evanson,
Because of this situation, we are asked to leave this dear city of Seattle and its surroundings. I am sure I will miss my teachers and Mr. Sears. There was never a school like Washington School and I sure will miss it. As for me, the one I will miss the most will be you. You have been very patient and kind throughout my work. If the school I will attend next would have a teacher like you I will be only too glad. When I am on my way my memories will flow back to the time I was attending this school and the assemblies that were held in the hall. Wherever I go I will be a loyal American.

Love, Emiko

Introduction

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, calling for the imprisonment of people of Japanese descent living on the west coast of the United States. A significant source of primary documents on the events that followed this order is a collection of classroom compositions written by seventh and eighth grade *Nisei* (pronounced “nee-say”), the children of Japanese immigrants in Seattle, Washington.¹

Emiko, the author of the letter above, was a seventh-grade student in Ella Evanson’s homeroom class at Washington School in Seattle. Writing to her teacher in response to Executive Order 9066, she attempted to make sense of the dissonance between the pledge of “freedom and justice for all” and the experience of being treated as an “enemy alien.” Emiko was born in the United States. She was an American citizen.

In 1940 and 1941, as hostilities grew between the nations of Europe and Asia, some Americans of European background accused Japanese Americans living on the west coast of the United States of being allied with Japan. People said and wrote (in newspaper articles, for example) that *Issei* (pronounced “ee-say”), first generation

immigrants, were a threat to U.S. national security. Such fallacious allegations (and subsequent acts of intolerance against Japanese Americans) increased after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

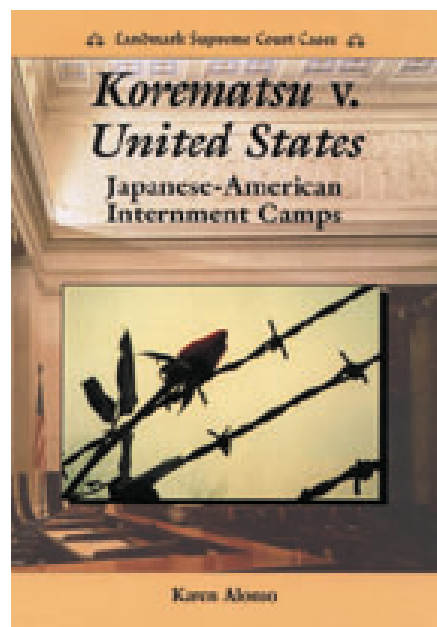
Washington School, a public school, bordered the multiracial “Central District” of Seattle, near a Jewish Settlement House, and served students of different ethnic backgrounds. Significant ethnic minorities in the school population included Eastern and Southern European Jews, Asians, African Americans, and Latinos.

While Seattle Public Schools promoted racial tolerance through its citizenship education curricula, its democratic principles were put to the test in 1941. Public schools, in the end, could not shield their students from wartime hysteria. But the principal and teachers of Washington school did give their Japanese American students an opportunity to write about their feelings and their experiences at this crucial moment – and thus to speak to their teachers, their peers, and future generations of Americans.

Teaching Tolerance

Arthur Sears, the principal of Washington School, emphasized the teaching of democratic citizenship and tolerance during his tenure. In a 1937 article for the *Seattle Educational Bulletin*, he described how he encouraged students to write letters inviting their parents to the school’s open house.² He told students to write in English and also in the language of their immigrant parents – Spanish, Hebrew, Japanese, or Chinese.

“I use this device not only to get the message over to the parents, but also to dignify the parental background. Too often I have seen tragedies among the second generations. They feel frequently that they have reason to be ashamed of their parents when they can neither read nor write the English language. I believe we produce better Americans from the foreign-born if we dignify their background, and while they should love America more, they should not



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lose their love of the land of their ancestry.”

Mr. Sears understood the importance of preserving one’s ethnic heritage. He believed that total assimilation, at the cost of forsaking one’s ethnicity, created a rift not only between parents and their children, but also within the children themselves. A careful balance between one’s past and present identities was the mark of a successful entrée into the American way of life. Sears taught this lesson in various ways until his retirement in 1942.

Assembly, December 8, 1941

The first set of documents (See Handout: Part I) consists of an assignment that was given by Miss Ella Evanson to her homeroom students. She asked them to write about a school-wide assembly held the day after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. At the assembly, the principal read a student’s poem about racial tolerance. Unfortunately, we have not found the poem.

The ideas of “race” and physical differences, and how these fit within the concept of citizenship, were central in the minds of *Nisei* students. The students’ interpretations of race is evident in their use of the words “different color face or skin” or “mixed nationalities.” In that regard, citi-

zenship meant accepting individuals from various ethnic backgrounds with different physical characteristics. Race as a social and cultural construct permeated scientific communities and popular culture, and it created an artificial hierarchy of social order (that arguably lingers to the present). For Sears to emphasize the idea of equality of the races at this moment came as a welcome message to Nisei students.

Imprisonment, March 1942

Sadly, Mr. Sears' call for racial tolerance in the school was not heeded by the larger community. In a second set of letters dated March 1942, students wrote farewell messages to Miss Evanson in response to Executive Order 9066. In these letters, Nisei students expressed how they would remain loyal to the United States despite the government's view that they were not to be trusted, despite the looming imprisonment.

The Nisei farewell letters (See Handout: Part II) reveal young Americans grappling with conflicting messages about citizenship and exclusion, tolerance and prejudice, loyalty and distrust, and democracy and totalitarianism. They are reflections of lost innocence. Nisei were suddenly thrust into a situation where their ethnic identity became the only test of their loyalty to the nation. The United States government, which was going to war "to preserve democracy" overseas, was enforcing a policy of racism at home.

The Nisei students made it clear that they were American born and distinguished themselves from the Japanese in Japan, with one student, James, even using the pejorative term "Japs." Unfortunately, any reference to one's Japanese heritage was deemed to be a sign of disloyalty by the government. In that regard, James purposely distinguished himself as a loyal American. At the same time, however, the students acknowledged that they looked like the "enemy" and that their evacuation was taking place because of their ethnicity.

One of the cultural values Japanese immigrant, or Issei, parents instilled in their children was a sense of loyalty to their country, the United States. They also taught their children to follow voices of authority to a large degree. But now government authorities were doing something wrong. For the Nisei students of Washington School, writing about their immediate anxi-

eties afforded a limited opportunity to wrestle with this dissonance. They believed that the government would take care of them (for example, by providing "some good school") because they were citizens, after all. But the government was not respecting their basic constitutional rights.

The students expressed uncertainty at what the future would hold and sadness at having to leave their home. This uprooting of young people from their birthplace created extreme anxiety. Perhaps the opportunity to express some of the chaos, fear, and disappointment in their letters helped some of the students survive the trauma. Clearly, they appreciated the guidance and empathy given by their teacher.

A Paradox or Two

Shikatta ga nai. It cannot be helped. Japanese Americans living on the west coast used this traditional phrase to express the paradox of forced imprisonment.³ Loyalty toward the United States could only be shown by acquiescing to an unjust "evacuation" order. The only loyal thing to do was to obey a law that assumed one's disloyalty. It was a "Catch-22." So Japanese Americans obeyed the order to leave their homes. What else could be done? General public protests against the imprisonment orders were scant. The few voices of dissent came from the American Civil Liberties Union and Quaker activists in Seattle.⁴ Some Nisei (old enough to be drafted into the military) who actively resisted the unconstitutionality of the imprisonment were sent to federal prisons (see side bar on page 15).

In contrast to the experience of Nisei on the west coast, there was no mass imprisonment of Japanese Americans in Hawaii, which was then a U.S. territory, and no record of disloyalty among that population during the war. This is just further evidence that Japanese Americans in Seattle posed no real security risk to the United States. President Roosevelt, who was aware of this discrepancy, could have pointed it out to Americans living on the west coast, confronting racial hysteria openly in one of his radio addresses to the nation. Instead, he acquiesced to anti-Japanese prejudices and quietly signed Executive Order 9066.

Chaos and Loss

Many Nisei suddenly faced chaotic home lives. Many fathers were arrested by the FBI

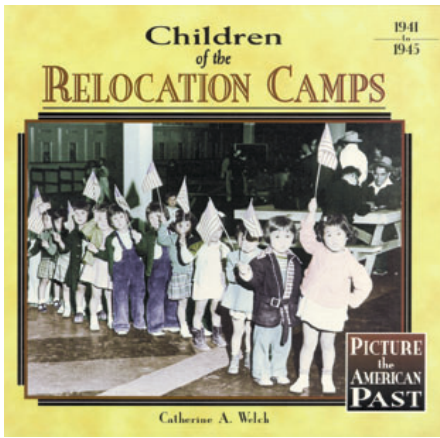
and interned in Fort Missoula, Montana. Mothers were left to resolve the final details of their removal from Seattle. Most of their belongings had to be sold. Family memorabilia were either burned by the FBI or were sold below value. Families were moved by train to prison camps in desolate areas in Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming. From 1942 to 1946 Japanese Americans lived in makeshift barracks with the ever-present dust storms and machine guns pointed at them. They lived a regimented life structured around a bugle reveille signaling when they should wake up, eat, and sleep.

Despite this treatment, Japanese Americans survived for three years behind barbed wire fences, a testament to their faith in democracy. The U.S. Army recruited Japanese American soldiers from the imprisonment camps, and these young men fought with distinction in Europe.

When teachers and parents began forming schools, they had to work from scratch. There were no chairs, desks, blackboards, or heat stoves. Classes were overcrowded; there might be fifty children to a room. But the Army gradually provided some materials for classrooms and for recreational activities like baseball, Boy Scouts, and Girl Scouts. Families and schools planted "Victory Gardens" to help supply food. Adults tried to remain hopeful and keep spirits up, but bullying and vandalism—which had seldom troubled the Japanese American community before—became a problem. Still, thousands of students graduated from high school while living in the camps.



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Personal Justice, 1988

In the 1970s, *Nisei* and *Sansei* (second and third generation Japanese Americans) spearheaded the Redress Movement, seeking personal justice for every Japanese American imprisoned during World War II. They asked for personal justice in the form of an apology from the United States and monetary compensation for individuals. They reminded the general public that, in 1942, American citizens were denied due process of law, that the forced imprisonment of innocent civilians was a serious

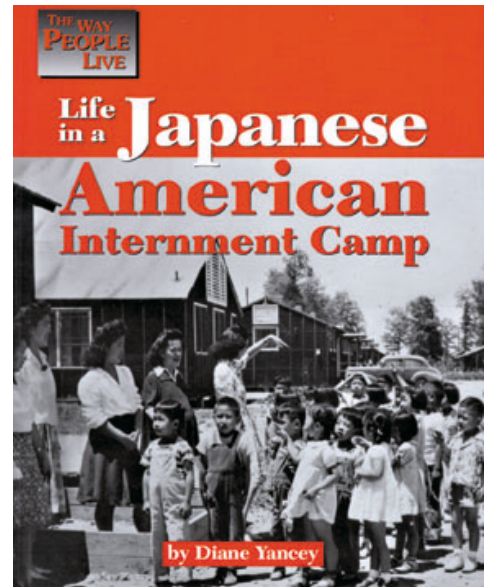
breach of the democratic principles that we all learn in school. Congress appointed a Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians to investigate the charges. As a result, in 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed a new law, the Civil Liberties Act, which acknowledged the findings of the commission that the imprisonment of Japanese Americans was motivated largely by racial prejudice and wartime hysteria, and represented a failure of political leadership.

More Than a Footnote

The imprisonment of Japanese Americans might best be understood not as an odd, wartime event, but as the result of an attitude of intolerance that had been developing over decades – as revealed by immigration restrictions and anti-Asian sentiments along the west coast of the United States beginning in the late 1800s.⁵

By studying these student compositions of 1941–42, we place the experience of *Nisei* youth at the front of a defining moment in American history. Japanese Americans did not loudly protest this unjust imprisonment, and yet they were not entire-

ly silent either. *Nisei* spoke to their fellow citizens in writing (as these student letters show), through protest against curfew orders and the military draft (resulting in challenges in court), through military service (as Japanese American soldiers fighting in Europe), and finally in a petition to the federal courts and the Congress of the United States—leading to the Civil Liberties Act of 1988. These student letters are not a footnote to American history, they are part of the main text.



SUGGESTIONS FOR A LESSON

After students have learned some background about the coming of World War II, break up the class into groups of four or five students and then distribute the Handout, which presents the writing of some Japanese American seventh and eighth grade students from 1941 and 1942. Direct the groups to read Part I of the Handout and then discuss among themselves, for about ten minutes, the following questions. Announce that you will be calling on a student from each group to stand up and summarize their group's discussion.

- ▶ What was the main theme, the main idea, of the school assembly that the students attended on the morning of Monday December 8, 1941?
- ▶ What did the students think and feel about this theme?
- ▶ What did the students think and feel about their country, the United States of America?

Ask a representative from each group to state his or her opinion on just one of the questions (for a total of five or six oral statements). There is no absolutely "correct" or "incorrect" answer to these questions. The purpose is to help the students imagine what they might have thought and felt living through such an experience

and to challenge students to draw information from primary source documents.

Direct the groups to read Part II of the Handout and then discuss among themselves, for about ten minutes, the following questions.

- ▶ Do these writing samples seem to be a class assignment, or are they personal letters?
- ▶ How do the students feel about their teacher and their school?
- ▶ Why would James, a Japanese American boy, refer to citizens of the nation of Japan as "Japs?" which is considered to be an impolite, insulting term?
- ▶ At this point, what did the students think and feel about their country, the United States of America, and their fellow citizens?

Ask a representative from each group to state his or her opinion on just one of these four questions.

Finally, provide students with historical detail concerning the imprisonment of Japanese Americans, either as a lesson or by assigned reading with the use of the resources listed above. End the lesson by describing the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, and how it came to be.

Handout: Part I



Monday December 8, 1941

Middle school students wrote these compositions upon returning to class after a school-wide assembly. It was the day after Pearl Harbor was bombed. These students were American citizens, of Japanese descent. They attended Washington School in the city of Seattle, in the state of Washington. Mr. Sears was the principal. The occasional spelling errors in these compositions have been left uncorrected, so that you can see exactly what the students wrote.

In this morning assembly Mr. Sears experimented about having the morning assembly in the second period and next week it would be the third period because we always miss the first period class.

He spoke to us about not hating each other first because we have mixed nationalities in this school. But instead cooperate with each other and think of other people as our neighbors.

He also told us a story about a German boy and a Italian boy being a good American Citizens and even if their country is in war they are very good friends.

Mr. Sears read us a poem copied from a bulletin that a boy from Miss Fitzgerald's room [wrote]. Then he mentioned about the paper drive. After he was through with his speech we sang America from the bottom of our hearts and we also saluted the flag.

Katsu

Today Mr. Sears talked to us about tolerance. As we know tolerance means to be friendly to other in any way. When war broke out in the Far East situation yesterday some citizen of this country were intolerance. The people who are intolerant do not think before they speak. Every person should be tolerant to different nationality [even] if they have enemies.

Keisoo

The morning assembly was good for it tells to be good friends or neighbors wither our skin are different. That skin does not count by shelf but our spirit for helping people and cleaned heart count more for America and honesty too counts more for defending and best of all is love one another. We are all brothers and sisters even our parents and teachers but they are sent to take care of us and to give us more education and to become a better boy and girl.

The poem was good also and that all make to become American.

I wish sometimes if there were no war or evil thing, that do now happen were stop we should be friendly with country more and more until the end of the world than people would be like neighbor, no war, no unclean heart, but all clean and cheerful voice in this world.

Fumiko

In our first assembly, Mr. Sears our principal spoke on the freindly attitude toward the pacific crisis. He said, "We are all American's and we here at Washington want no part of race hated. We are all under the same roof."

In the short time he spoke he accomplish very much. He spoke of 23 years ago, of how he work in the naturalazion dept., and of two gents, one a Italian and a German who at the same time as Germans were fighting Italians were still good neighbors and good americans. We should now be that way here at Washington school.

Maurice

In assembly this morning Mr. Sears told us about being intolerant he said that now because of the war different races might fight with each other and say that they started the war. He said that no matter what race or color you are that you are all American citizens and that even if your parent came from country that are fighting aganest us that we had nothing to do with it.

Mr. Sears also read a poem that a boy in our school made up it was very patreotic and expressed the feeling that and imagrant might have coming to America.

Mr. Sears said that people said to him that they thought he would have trouble with the children of Washington School because of the many different races and Mr. Sears said that he trust us and knew that we would not be intolerant.

Shirley

This morning we had a assembly in the hall. Mr. Sears told us that if even we have a different color face, it's alright because we're American Citizen. We all should be American Citizen.

He read us a poem of prayer because in school or out side the school the people might not be friendly with the other people which as (Japanese people) cause the war is going to be. When I heard Mr. Sears read that poem I was proud to be a American Citizen. And I'll always be American Citizen.

This year is the second world war in many years if it goes on. When we were saluting the flag I was proud to salute the flag. Some people were crying because they were proud of there country.

Betty

Handout: Part II



March, 1942

Middle school students wrote these letters to their homeroom teacher, Miss Ella Evanson, after the U.S. government announced that it would force them and their families to leave their homes and move to prison camps for Americans of Japanese descent. Miss Evanson kept and preserved the letters (and the earlier compositions), thus we can read and study them today as historical documents.

Dear Miss Evanson,

We are leaving our city, to where I am going I am wholly ignorant. However I am not unhappy, nor do I have objections for as long as this evacuation is for the benefit of the United State. But I do am regreting about leaving this school and the thought that I shall not see [you] for a long while pains me extremely. Your pleasant ways of teaching had made my heart yearn for the days when I was in your classroom. Your kind smile and your wonderful work you did for me shall be one of my pleasant memories.

Tooru

Dear Miss Evanson,

I am writing to you today because I am expecting to move away with in very short time. As you always know the japanese people has been asked by our government to evacuate. I do not know yet where we will go. I hope there will be some good school in which I can continual, my school work. I am very sorry to leave Seattle and Washington School. And most especially to lose you for my teacher. I am hoping the war trouble will be soon over and I could come back to Seattle and be in your school and have you for my teacher again.

Sincerely yours,
Chiyoko

Dear Miss Evanson,

I well start out my letter by writing about the worst thing. I do not want to go away but the government says we all have to go so we have to mind him. It said in the Japanese paper that we have to go east of the cascade mt. but we were planning to go to Idaho or Montana.

Now that the war is going on many Japanese men, women, and girls are out of jobs. And a lot of my friends fater are in consenration camp. If I go there I hope I well have a teacher just like you. And rather more I hope the war well be strighten out very soon so that I would be able to attend Washington school.

Sincerely Yours,
Sadako

Dear Miss Evanson,

Because of this situation, we are asked to leave this dear city of Seattle and its surroundings. I am sure I will miss my teachers and Mr. Sears. There was never a school like Washington School and I sure will miss it. As for me, the one I will miss the most will be you. You have been very patient and kind throughout my work. If the school I will attend next would have a teacher like you I will be only too glad. When I am on my way my memories will flow back to the time I was attending this school and the assemblies that were held in the hall. Wherever I go I will be a loyal American.

Love, Emiko

Dear Miss Evanson,

I am very sorry I will have to leave Washington School so soon. As long as I am here I will try in some way to appreciate what you've taught me.

We all hope we will win this war (not the Japs) and come back to Seattle for more education.

Sincerely Yours,
James



Notes

1. The students' compositions are from the Ella Evanson Papers at the University of Washington's Manuscripts and Archives Division in Seattle, Washington.
2. Arthur Sears, *Seattle Bulletin* (1937).
3. I use the terms "imprisonment" instead of "evacuation" or "internment." "Evacuation," according to David Takami, was a government euphemism that conveyed the excuse that the government was removing Japanese American citizens for their own safety. "Internment" of enemy aliens during a war has a basis in law — specifically the Alien and Sedition Act of 1798 — and is governed by international accord through the Geneva Conventions. The U.S. government's roundup and incarceration of U.S. citizens had no legal precedent. It singled out a people on the basis of race, not nationality. See David Takami, *Divided Destiny: A History of Japanese Americans in Seattle* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1998).
4. *The Seattle Times*, February 23, 1942; R. Daniels, S. C. Taylor, and H. H. L. Kitano, eds.,

Japanese Americans: From Relocation to Redress. (Rev. ed.) (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1994).

5. A longer version of this article appeared in the Summer 2000 issue of *Theory and Research in Social Education* (vol. 28, no. 3, p. 339). A book is in preparation, "*Wherever I Go I'll Always Be a Loyal American*": *Seattle's Japanese American Schoolchildren During World War II* (New York: Routledge/Falmer Press).
6. I thank Nancy E. Beadie and Valerie Ooka Pang for their support throughout this project and James D. Anderson and anonymous reviewers for providing helpful comments.

Background for Students

Alonso, Karen. *Korematsu vs. United States*.

Springfield, NJ: Enslow, 1998. This book looks at the experiences of Fred Korematsu and others involved in the landmark Supreme Court case.

Fremont, David K. *Japanese American Internment in American History*. Springfield, NJ: Enslow,

1998. This book highlights the personal accounts of many Japanese Americans who experienced the camps.

Tunnell, Michael O. and George W. Chilcoat. *The Children of Topaz: The Story of a Japanese-American Internment Camp*. New York: Holiday House, 1996. This account is based on a third grade classroom diary.

Welch, Catherine A. *Children of The Relocation Camps*. Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books, 2000. An overview of the issue for young readers, with many photos.

Yancy, Diane. *Life in a Japanese American Internment Camp*. San Diego, CA: Lucent Books, 1998. For the seventh or eighth grade reader, this book describes the experiences of the "Quiet Americans" in great detail.

Yoon Pak is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Conscientious Objectors

In 1944, sixty-three young American men stood trial for resisting the draft at the concentration camp at Heart Mountain, Wyoming. They were ready to fight for their country, but not before the government restored their rights as U.S. citizens and released their families from camp. Seven leaders were accused of conspiring to encourage them. The dissidents served two years in prison, and for the next 50 years the episode was written out of the popular history of Japanese America.

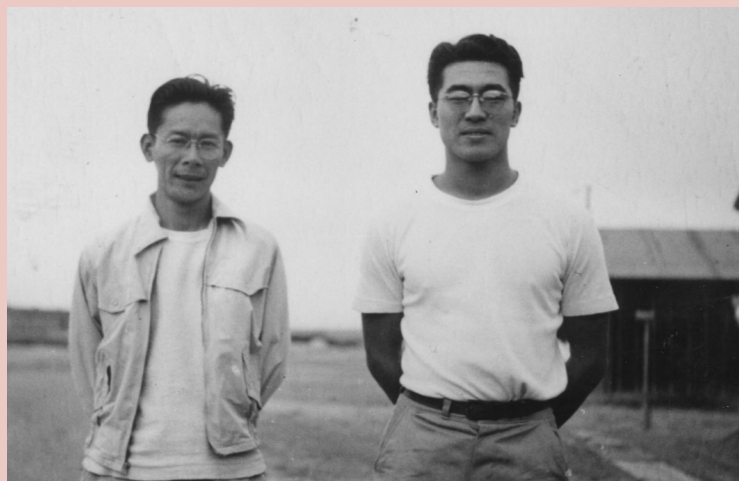
When confronted by mass injustice, should a citizen comply or to resist? And if one chooses resistance, what is the best way to "say no" to a powerful government? A PBS television documentary, *Conscience and the Constitution*, delves into the heart of the Japanese American conscience and a controversy that continues today. Learn more about the controversy by visiting www.pbs.org/conscience, a website that contains resources for teachers on this topic.

Resources

John Okada, *No-No Boy* (Charles Tuttle, 1957; Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1980).

Eric Muller, *Free to Die for Their Country: The Story of the Japanese American Draft Resisters in World War II* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, August 2001).

The documentary film *Conscience and the Constitution*, produced and directed by Frank Abe (pronounced "Ah-bay"), can be ordered by calling (800) 343-5540 or visiting www.resisters.com/orders.htm. An online, middle-level study guide is available at www.pbs.org/conscience under the Resources link.



Frank Emi (right), leader of the Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee, with supporter Kozie Sakai, at the height of the draft resistance movement in 1944.