

*Broadsheet IV:*

# DIVISION IN UNITY: *The Internal Conflicts*

On February 19, 1942 Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 allowing the establishment of "military areas," and empowering the military to exclude "any or all persons from designated areas, including the California coast." Thus began the evacuation and internment of over 120,000 Japanese-Americans, many of them U.S. citizens. The Japanese-Americans pictured here have just arrived at an assembly center at Santa Anita racetrack, where horse stalls had been converted into temporary living quarters.

Later, they would be transported to hastily constructed relocation centers in desolate areas of Idaho, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, Arkansas, Arizona or California.

*War Relocation Authority,  
National Archives*



The attack on Pearl Harbor unified the country as no presidential speech or election ever could. In a radio address — one of a series called "Fireside Chats" — Roosevelt presented the unity of the nation in this way: "We are in it [the war]. We are all in it — all the way. Every single man, woman, and child is a partner in the most tremendous undertaking in American history." Roosevelt's claim was true, up to a point. In every segment of society, people were willing to put aside grievances and differences in order to win the war. However, the conflicts that wracked American society in the 30s did not disappear. And what's more, the tensions brought on by the war itself created additional conflicts.

### **Dissenters Within: Who Was Against the War?**

When Congress formally declared war on Japan and Germany, the vote was not unanimous. The lone dissenter, Jeanette Rankin of Montana, a confirmed pacifist who had also voted against U.S. entry into World War I, wept as she voted against the declaration. But, Rankin was not the only person in the country to oppose the war.

When the draft was instituted before the war, compliance was almost universal. However, 17 seminary students, who were technically exempt anyway, refused publicly to register. They were given one-year prison sentences and universally condemned.

During the war, there were around 50,000 conscientious objectors, people who combined a clear religious affiliation with a deep moral objection to all wars. People who were granted conscientious objector status were required to serve in the army in some non-combat status. Most agreed to that. However, about one-fourth of the 50,000 refused to serve even in a non-combat status. Many of these people belonged to the Christian sect of Jehovah's Witnesses. Because of their



The attack on Pearl Harbor sparked fierce anti-Japanese sentiments and a proliferation of anti-Japanese propaganda, which often took the form of posters, movies and editorial cartoons. Racial stereotypes and slurs like the ones used on this poster, were commonly employed. *Franklin D. Roosevelt Library*

highly visible objection to the war, the Jehovah's Witnesses were the subjects of hundreds of beatings by angry citizens. Men, women and children were all beaten, once by a mob of over 1,000 people. The near unanimity of the American public in support of the war made it dangerous to oppose it. The last of the jailed conscientious objectors were released in 1948, three years after the war was over.

#### Treatment of Japanese-Americans

Few aspects of American society during World War II were as shameful as the internment of the Issei, Japanese-

born U.S. residents, and the Nisei, their American-born offspring, who were U.S. citizens.

Immediately after Pearl Harbor, some 3,000 foreign nationals — Germans, Italians and Japanese — were held for questioning, but there were few direct reprisals against Japanese-Americans. Many journalists and civic leaders preached caution. One columnist in California advised: "But if a fellow has not yet decided just what his bit (contribution to the war effort) should be, he should not, in desperation, decide to beat up the first Japanese ... he happens to meet on the street. The victim might happen to be a loyal American." Military leaders were against any internment. A judge and close friend of Roosevelt wrote: "If we put American citizens into concentration camps, we put democracy in there with them."

However, that's eventually just what happened. By the summer of 1942, 120,000 Nissei and Issei were interned in camps in the West, with no recourse to their basic rights and with no attempt at a fair trial.

A number of factors led to the internment of the Japanese. First, Secretary of the Navy Knox issued a report on the causes of Pearl Harbor. Instead of laying the blame on naval incompetence, he theorized that there was a network of sympathetic Japanese helping the enemy. No such network existed. Secondly, the war in the Pacific was going badly for the U.S., and after a string of defeats, the country needed someone to take their frustrations out on. The Japanese-Americans were easy targets. Third, there was some financial greed operating behind the campaign to intern the Japanese-Americans. By dint of their hard work, they owned about one-fourth of the best farmland in California. Internment meant they would have to abandon their property or sell it for a fraction of the true value. Finally, a small group of determined and influential men began to call for the internment. The commander of the 8th Army in San Francisco, General DeWitt, said simply, "The Japanese is an enemy race." When discussing the Nisei, he said, "A Jap's a Jap. ... It makes no difference if he is an American citizen."

In the face of fear and tension about the war, no significant group of Americans, from Roosevelt to the American Civil Liberties Union, came forward to speak up for the rights of Japanese-Americans. They were forced to

sell their possessions at a fraction of their value and move to desolate camps further inland. Not until late in 1944 were they allowed to go home. It was not until 1984 that a bill, signed by President Reagan, formally recognized the great wrong done to Japanese-Americans.

#### Fascists and Communists in the U.S.

The treatment of the Japanese-Americans was but one manifestation of a larger feeling prevalent in the country during the war. With such a direct threat to their way of life, Americans became less tolerant of differences among many groups of people. Pro-German groups like the German-American Bund, which had been tolerated while the U.S. was still neutral, were now suppressed and their publications banned. During World War I, attacks against Americans of German descent had been fairly common. However, during World War II there were few attacks.

Attitudes toward communists in the U.S. were more complex. In 1939, when Germany and the Soviet Union signed a treaty, communists were put in the same category as Nazis. In some states, it was illegal even to belong to the Communist Party. People were persecuted even if there was suspicion that they might be communist. All this changed in 1941 when the Nazis launched a surprise invasion against the Soviet Union. Suddenly, Russia was an ally and attacks against communists dropped off.

Even though the U.S. was fighting a war against a viciously anti-Semitic regime in Germany, violence against Jews in this country also rose. German propaganda played on anti-Jewish feelings, portraying Jewish bankers and war manufacturers as reaping benefits while not engaging in any fighting themselves. Riding this wave of distrust in differences, membership in the Ku Klux Klan rose to around 300,000 people during the war.

#### Organized Labor and the War

Throughout the Depression, organized labor (workers in unions) and management (owners of large businesses) engaged in a constant struggle — labor to gain recognition of their unions and to improve workers' lives, management to hold down wages and maintain profits. The economic bad times had made the struggle a desperate one. Even after the U.S. entered into the war, the two sides found it hard to forget past differences.

Soon after Pearl Harbor, most large labor unions, including the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), made an unofficial “no-strike” pledge to Roosevelt, promising not to engage in any large-scale work stoppage that would hinder the war effort. In a 1942 agreement that covered several smaller steel companies, called the Little Steel Formula, labor agreed that wages would not rise more than 15 percent above their 1941 level. Because strikes were the most important strategy that unions had, promising not to strike was an important concession for unions to make.

For its part, management was forced to treat its workers better than it had in the 30s. With millions of men and women in uniform and business booming, companies needed workers, and these workers, union and non-union alike, found that if one job did not pay enough, they could quit and get a better one. Teachers making \$30 a week could go to a factory and make \$60 a week at a non-skilled job. People changed jobs in a way that would have been inconceivable during the Depression. Additionally, big business began to recognize that large unions, like the United Auto Workers and the United Mine Workers, were here to stay. Unions won the right to require new workers to join the union or quit the job after a 15-day period.

To act as a mediator in labor-management disputes, Roosevelt began the War Labor Board (WLB) in 1942. Its duty was to evaluate grievances brought to it by unions and other groups of workers, and attempt to reach a solution with the companies involved. The WLB was able to intervene to raise wages for underpaid workers. However, the board refused to intervene if workers went on strike.

Government attempts to find a middle ground between the demands of labor and industry were generally successful. The strikes that did occur were mainly “wildcat” strikes — workers at one or two plants who struck for very specific reasons, usually without the approval of the whole union. Transit workers in Philadelphia struck because eight African-Americans had been promoted. (In general, unions had a dismal record in trying to combat segregation and implement integration.) Workers in an Indiana steel plant went out on strike for better wages. Not all the strikes were for serious reasons: workers in Pennsylvania struck because they were

not paid for the day they took off when Germany surrendered. But in the larger view, there were fewer strikes during the war than before or after it. Less than 1 percent of the total man-hours during the war were lost due to strikes.

Overall, organized labor made great strides during the war; union membership increased from 9 million to 15 million by war’s end. In the later stages of the war, when it was clear the U.S. would win, the number of strikes increased as both labor and management tried to position themselves favorably for the conflict that would renew once the war was over.

#### **Minorities Face Hurdles to Full Participation**

Blacks were the racial group hardest hit by the Depression. They were the first to feel its effects, and the last to get relief. When the pre-war armament economic boom began, companies — slowly, often grudgingly — opened up

limited opportunities to black workers. The advances were not gained without a struggle.

Many labor unions excluded African-Americans from membership, even when the wartime economic boom was in full swing and there were plenty of jobs. In 1941 A. Philip Randolph, president of the all-black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, threatened to organize a march on Washington to protest discrimination in defense plants. Roosevelt responded by establishing the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) to campaign for equal treatment in employment. The commission could ask companies to explain their practices, and could publicize instances of discrimination, but it had no real power to force companies to change their policies. Its power to hold public hearings and publicize complaints by individuals, however, brought good results. By 1944 the number of African-Americans employed in manufacturing



Multi-racial shipyard crew praying for the soldiers who are taking part in the Normandy landings, June 6, 1944. World War II changed the face of American industry. Labor shortages opened opportunities for groups — such as women and African-Americans — that had traditionally been shut out of the better-paying blue-collar positions. *Presidio Army Museum Photo Collection and the Oakland Tribune*

more than doubled. The number of African-American women working in industry rose from 50,000 to 300,000.

Discrimination in the workforce was mirrored in the armed forces. At the beginning of the war, the armed forces had few African-Americans, and they were rigidly segregated. The army even kept its blood supply segregated — a fact that infuriated blacks because the doctor who had developed the idea of blood transfusions, Dr. Charles Drew, was himself an African-American. In the first draft, only 2,000 African-Americans were chosen. However, the army could not stop African-Americans from enlisting. By the start of the war, 100,000 had volunteered to serve; by war's end, over 1 million had served. Throughout the war, segregation still remained the rule in the armed forces, and white officers led all-black units. It was only after the war that this barrier began to be broken down.

Other minorities faced discrimination in both civilian and military life. Before the war, most Mexican-Americans were unskilled agricultural workers living in poor rural areas. This situation began to change in 1939 when the government, anticipating manpower shortages, opened vocational schools in cities with large Mexican-American populations. Skills such as welding and mechanics were taught, enabling Mexican-Americans to join the wartime labor force. In 1941, no Los Angeles shipyard employed Mexican-Americans; by 1944, 17,000 were employed. But despite employment advances discrimination continued, with wage disparities, poor working conditions and lack of opportunity for advancement being common complaints. In cities where Mexican-Americans migrated for wartime jobs, racial tensions ran high. Young Mexican-Americans, who favored the distinctive zoot suit — loose trousers cut tight at the ankle, long key chain, long loose coat and felt hat — were often singled out for police searches. Discrimination, however, did not prevent the government from drafting 350,000 Mexican-Americans into the military.

Native Americans were also eligible for the draft, even though they were still denied voting rights in three states. Some 25,000 Native Americans served in the armed services; many enlisted. They served honorably in combat, though sometimes they were limited to service behind the lines. On the home front, approximately 50,000 Native Americans left



Racial segregation was still the rule in most of American society during the war. But, at the CIO canteen in San Francisco there was a concerted effort to break down these racial barriers. *Ann and Danny Yanow Private Collection*

the reservation to aid the war effort by working in wartime industries, mainly in the West. They faced job discrimination similar to that faced by African-Americans and Mexican-Americans. When the war ended, many did not return to the reservation.

#### Children in the Work Force

For decades, labor unions and other groups fought to pass a series of child labor laws, which protected people under 18 from being employed in dangerous industries or from being exploited by employers. But, by 1943 some states were facing severe labor shortages and they either suspended child labor laws for the duration of the war or did not do much to enforce them. The war caused a sudden upsurge in

the high school dropout rate. Some of those dropouts went into the army; most got jobs. It is estimated that by 1944 over 3 million people between the ages of 14 and 17 were working, a good portion of them illegally. In truth, the young people of the time had no good choices open to them. Too young to join the army, neglected by their parents and by an adult world intent on winning a war, the young were often left to themselves. As one sociologist put it, "It was a hell of a world for kids to be trying to grow up in."