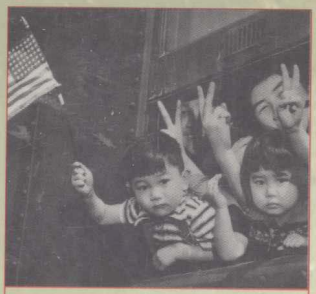

FDR

AND THE

INTERNMENT

OF JAPANESE

AMERICANS

BY ORDER OF THE PRESIDENT

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For my parents, Ed and Toni Robinson,
and in loving memory of Joyce Fath (1916–1990)

"He who gathers together not the rumors, the gossip, the legends that inevitably surround and becloud the real facts concerning a great man, but the actual things that that man wrote and said, connecting them briefly but clearly with an account of what he did so that they will be understandable, has performed a valuable service, not only for the historian of today but even more so for the historian of the future."

FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT, introduction to Harold Garnet Black, *The True Woodrow Wilson,* 1946

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INTRODUCTION

ON THE AFTERNOON of November 21, 1944, nearly three years after the United States entered World War II and just two weeks after he was elected to a record fourth term, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt held a press conference. FDR looked forward to these biweekly rituals, which were a notable innovation of the Roosevelt White House. The atmosphere was informal and lively. FDR's assistant Stephen T. Early would bring the group of White House correspondents into the Oval Office, where they would crowd around the President's desk. Roosevelt, who fancied himself an old newspaperman from his college journalism days, was on a first-name basis with many reporters, and he would greet his favorites with a joke, genial teasing, or some social chatter. Unless the President had an opening announcement to make, the reporters would then proceed to ask whatever questions they wished: unlike some of his predecessors, FDR did not demand that questions be submitted in advance. Smilingly, confidently, Roosevelt would field the queries, answering

"JAPANESE PEOPLE FROM JAPAN WHO ARE CITIZENS"

directly if he chose, otherwise responding off the record, hinting vaguely at his thoughts, or adroitly sidestepping the question. These comments to the press, with their mix of gossip, candor, guile, and wit, were pure Roosevelt—FDR at his most stimulating, complex, and seductively charming.

The November 21, 1944, conference—number 982 of Roosevelt's presidency—opened with a plea by the President for industry to continue full production for the war effort and for employers to maintain wartime wage levels once peace was restored. Reporters proceeded to quiz FDR about the budget, the situation in Poland, scheduling of wartime conferences with Churchill and Stalin, the appointment of a new ambassador to China, the future of Lend-Lease aid, and other matters.

At one point early in the conference, Warren B. Francis, correspondent of the *Los Angeles Times,* took the opportunity to ask the President about the widespread rumors regarding the West Coast Japanese-American population: "Mr. President, there is a great deal of renewed controversy on the Pacific Coast about the matter of allowing the return of these Japanese who were evacuated in 1942. Do you think that the danger of espionage or sabotage has sufficiently diminished so that there can be a relaxation of the restrictions that have been in effect for the last two years?" Francis's question sparked this response from Roosevelt:

> In most of the cases . . . I am now talking about Japanese people from Japan who are citizens . . . Japanese Americans. I am not talking about the Japanese themselves. A good deal of progress has been made in scattering them throughout the country, and that is going on almost every day. I have forgotten what the figures are. There are about roughly a hundred—a hundred thousand Japanese-origin citizens in this country. And it is felt by a great many lawyers that under the Constitution they can't be kept locked up in concentration camps.

FDR added that approximately 20–25 percent of these citizens had already "re-placed themselves" around the nation, and he argued that the rest could easily be dispersed without "discombobolating" the population. He then commented that in any given county, such as one "in the Hudson River Valley or in western Joe-gia [Georgia] probably half a dozen or a dozen families could be scattered around on the farms and worked into the community.

After all, they are American citizens, and we all know that American citizens have certain privileges . . . 75 thousand families scattered all around the United States is not going to upset anybody."[1] Roosevelt concluded by stating that in permitting such releases from the camps, the government was also "actuated" by the achievements of the "Japanese" in the combat battalion in Italy, which was "one of the outstanding battalions we have."

Francis, explaining that the concern on the Pacific Coast did not relate to the relocation of the interned Japanese Americans elsewhere in the country so much as to their return to the western states, pressed the President for comment on whether the military orders excluding Japanese Americans from the West Coast would be lifted. Roosevelt asserted blandly that he knew nothing about it, and made no further comment.

The President's comments at the November 21, 1944, press conference mark one of his few public references to the most tragic act of his administration: the internment of Japanese Americans. In December 1941 the Japanese launched a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, America's principal naval base in the Pacific, bringing the United States into World War II. Several weeks later, in January 1942, a group of U.S. Army officers, anxious over a possible Japanese invasion of the West Coast and encouraged by California politicians and nativist interest groups eager to drive out the "Japs" and seize their property, began to press for the removal from the coastal areas of all people of Japanese ancestry. Japanese Americans were singled out from other "enemy" groups such as Italian Americans and German Americans as innately untrustworthy on racial grounds. The complete absence of any documented case of espionage or sabotage by Japanese Americans only proved to the military and political leaders of the anti–Japanese-American movement that there must be a concerted plan for future subversion by Japanese Americans at an appointed time.

By the end of January 1942, the question of removal had evolved into a tug-of-war within the Roosevelt administration. The War Department, led by Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, favored mass "evacuation" of West Coast Japanese Americans as an emergency military measure, while Attorney General Francis Biddle, seconded by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, contended that mass evacuation was unnecessary. On February 11, 1942, President Roosevelt ended the debate by orally granting Stimson his consent to take whatever "reasonable" action the secretary deemed necessary. Eight

days later, FDR signed Executive Order 9066, which authorized the army to establish military areas from which any civilian could be excluded and to provide these "evacuees" with transportation and other assistance.

Although the text of Executive Order 9066 did not specifically mention Japanese Americans, it was intended to apply to them exclusively. Prior to the war, the Japanese-American or Nikkei community was made up of several distinct groups. First-generation immigrants from Japan, who were known as Issei, were resident aliens. Although the vast majority of Issei arrived before 1907, when immigration from Japan was restricted, and virtually all before 1924, when it was banned entirely, and were thus longtime U.S. residents by 1941, they were nevertheless forbidden by law from ever becoming naturalized citizens. The second generation—the Issei's American-born children, the Nisei—were, by birthright, American citizens. Among the Nisei was a third group, the Kibei, American-born U.S. citizens who were brought up and educated in Japan. All three groups were interned.[2]

Under the authority of Executive Order 9066, the army removed more than 100,000 Japanese Americans from the Pacific Coast states during spring 1942. After being rounded up by the army, Japanese Americans were first placed in temporary "assembly centers" under army custody. They were then sent under armed guard to confinement in the ten camps in the interior operated by a new civilian agency, the War Relocation Authority (WRA). The conditions in the camps were harsh. Most were set up on remote, arid lands where the climate was blisteringly hot in summer and frigid in winter and where dust storms were common. Schools and medical care were initially scarce, and food remained of poor quality. Comfort and privacy were all but impossible to secure in the uninsulated, barren, and hastily constructed barracks into which families were crowded. The camps were surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards, and in some cases guards shot "escaping" internees and beat "troublemakers." Perhaps even more damaging than these privations, especially to a proud population accustomed to hard farm labor, were the stigma and psychological impact of segregation and incarceration.

The internment of Japanese Americans in the camps continued throughout the war years. Although two thirds of the internees were American citizens, they were incarcerated without any charge, trial, or evidence against them. Since they were permitted to take to the camps only what they could carry, they were forced to abandon their homes, farms, furnishings, cars, and

other belongings or to sell them off quickly at bargain prices. Thus, as a result of Roosevelt's executive order, the vast majority of the West Coast Japanese Americans lost all their property.

In the months that followed the initial confinement of Japanese Americans, government leaders determined, as a matter of policy, that the internees should be gradually released from the camps in small groups of families or individuals and relocated throughout the country east of the Rocky Mountains. They hoped thereby to lessen anti-Japanese-American prejudice and foster the postwar assimilation of the internees into American society. However, even after the WRA and army devised a system of bureaucratically slow and largely fictive investigations of internee "loyalty" by military boards to determine eligibility for release, only a small percentage of the internees were able to leave the camps. The West Coast remained off limits to all people of Japanese ancestry, and even outside the West Coast, the internees had difficulty obtaining the guarantees of employment and housing required for resettlement due to the prejudice and stigma of disloyalty that marked them.

In addition, Japanese Americans faced restrictions on entry into the armed forces. The U.S. Navy remained closed to them throughout the war, and the army fully opened its doors to Nisei only in 1944, although in 1943 a small fraction of young men from the camps, along with Nisei troops from Hawaii, were recruited for the army's segregated 442nd Combat Infantry Battalion (the outstanding "Japanese battalion in Italy" to which Roosevelt alluded in his November 1944 press conference).

After the army finally lifted its orders excluding Japanese Americans from the West Coast in January 1945, the pace of resettlement increased. Nevertheless, many of the internees remained in the camps. Those who had been found "disloyal" remained ineligible for release until the end of the war, while others feared violence against them if they left, or stayed because they had literally no place to go. The last camps did not close until 1946.

The internment was not simply an error of official overzealousness but a tragedy of democracy. Its human costs, in the blood and suffering of its victims, were insignificant compared with the military casualties of World War II or with the millions of civilians slaughtered in the Rape of Nanking and in the Nazi death camps. Even within the history of the United States, the treatment of the internees pales in comparison with the enslavement of African Americans or the destruction of Native American nations. The special stain

of the internment is that an unpopular group of American *citizens* was singled out on a racial basis and summarily dispossessed and incarcerated without charge. By arbitrarily confining American citizens of Japanese ancestry, the government violated the essential principle of democracy: that all citizens are entitled to the same rights and legal protections.

A comparison of the treatment of Japanese Americans with that of other ethnic groups is telling. There was discussion within the administration regarding the mass removal of West Coast German and Italian aliens under the provisions of Executive Order 9066, and enemy aliens of various nationalities who were considered potentially dangerous were rounded up on an individual basis. However, unlike Japanese Americans, whether aliens or citizens, enemy aliens from other groups were granted speedy loyalty hearings at which the accused were allowed to present witnesses and evidence to demonstrate their loyalty.

It is difficult for many Americans at the turn of the twenty-first century to conceive how government officials who were fighting a war dedicated to the preservation of democracy could have become so caught up in the pressures of the wartime emergency that they implemented a profoundly undemocratic policy. It seems especially perplexing that such an action could have taken place during the administration of Franklin Roosevelt, a President justly celebrated for his attachment to human rights and his dedication to creating government programs to serve the needs of ordinary Americans. Yet, the President signed Executive Order 9066, which provided the legal basis for the internment, and his interventions into the ensuing policy were decisive in determining its character, duration, and consequences for the internees.

Perhaps because FDR's signing of Executive Order 9066 appears so uncharacteristic, his role in approving and carrying out the internment has been almost completely ignored. Instead, the policy has been seen primarily as a result of pressure from the military, combined with the anti-Japanese hysteria (manipulated by interest groups) that swept the West Coast in early 1942. In the words of a recent critic, the internment literature has focused on the actions of lesser officials, "almost to the point where history has absolved [Roosevelt] of any responsibility. In this way, time has been kind to FDR."[3]

If FDR's responsibility for the internment is to be fairly assessed, the extent of his knowledge of the policy and the nature of his active participation in formulating and executing it must be determined. Nevertheless, the principal goal of any examination of Roosevelt's actions must be an under-

standing of his motives. Why did the President sign Executive Order 9066, which violated all the democratic principles he so eloquently espoused, and what drove his conduct of the ensuing policy?

The full answer is necessarily complex, and many different elements, such as presidential leadership, administrative style, political calculation, national morale, and wartime propaganda must be explored. In addition, more personal and less immediate factors come into play. Here FDR's statements at his November 21, 1944, conference provide important testimony as to his sentiments. His words reflect the very principles that underlay the internment policy: the conviction that Japanese Americans, even native-born, were essentially Japanese; fear of their disloyalty; disregard of their citizenship rights; advocacy of their dispersion away from the West Coast; and a focus on public opinion in determining their status. Most of all, FDR's comments betray an astounding casualness about the policy and an indifference to its effect on its victims.

Official policy is, of course, the product of many people's contributions, and the influence of any one individual's ideas, even those of the leader who bears the ultimate responsibility, is not unlimited. Yet all leaders draw from their accumulated experience, emotions, and vision as well as from the conditions and forces at hand in making their decisions. In this case, Franklin Roosevelt's view of Japanese Americans as immutably foreign and dangerous was a crucial factor in his approval of the internment. To understand how Roosevelt evolved these beliefs, we must examine the nature of the American society in which Roosevelt spent his early life and investigate how his attitudes toward the presence of people of Japanese ancestry in the United States were shaped by dominant social and intellectual patterns of the period.

1

A RACIAL FEAR EMERGES

FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT grew to adulthood at the end of the nineteenth century, a period marked by the emergence of Japan as a serious power on the international stage. In the decades that followed the "opening" of Japan by a fleet of American gunboats in 1853, the Japanese undertook a drastic program of social and technological reform. Japanese leaders sought at all costs to protect the nation's independence and avoid the colonization or quasi-colonization to which most other Asian countries had been subjected. Within fifty years, Japan had developed a modern bureaucracy and navy, defeated China in two short wars, begun to compete with European nations for trade, and claimed special interests in China and Korea. In 1904–05, Japan defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War, becoming the premier military force in East Asia.

Japan's increasing economic and diplomatic self-assertion led to tension with the established powers. Although the European nations admired the Japanese for their achievement in forging a new society, they

were reluctant to grant the upstart nation an equal place, especially as Japan's status as an Asian nation challenged their notions of white racial superiority. Japanese sensitivity to discrimination compounded the problem. Having struggled valiantly to industrialize and "catch up" with the West, many Japanese considered racial prejudice and unequal treatment of Japanese nationals an unbearable affront to the honor of the nation.

Japan's success likewise gradually altered its relations with the United States. At first, most Americans sympathized with Japan. Not only had the United States "opened" Japan, but in their own drive for empire during the late 1890s, Americans had also been forced to struggle for acceptance by the Europeans. However, as Japan rose to power, U.S. leaders began to focus on Japanese expansionism as a potential threat to national security.

The hostility over security was exacerbated by the racial difference of the Japanese, which triggered a host of negative images and reactions in the American psyche. Generations of settlers from Europe had transplanted into the culture of their new country a traditional European "orientalist" view of Asia as an exotic, backward, and barbaric land. In addition, the migration of a sizable population of Chinese laborers to the western United States during the third quarter of the nineteenth century had stimulated a backlash of resentment by white laborers and nativists. In order to justify their calls for the exclusion of Chinese immigrants, these groups helped manufacture and disseminate a series of racist stereotypes of Asians as treacherous, servile, and uncivilized. In 1882, the year Franklin Roosevelt was born, Congress obliged nativists by passing the first of several Chinese Exclusion Acts. In addition, by the turn of the century "scientific racism" had become a dominant force in American thought. Adapting and distorting the work of Charles Darwin and his followers, some social scientists asserted that human life was governed by the evolutionary competition for resources between opposing "races" and that therefore the Japanese were innately hostile to people of European descent. Prominent Americans, drawing on elements from all these sources, warned that Japanese expansionism represented a "yellow peril," an Asian challenge to "Anglo-Saxon" and Christian civilization.[1]

Franklin Roosevelt, unlike many Americans, was attracted to Asia and Asian civilization from his earliest days. Roosevelt's fascination with Asia was nourished by numerous family connections. His maternal grandfather, Warren Delano, was involved in the China trade (in which he made, lost, and remade a fortune) and lived for ten years in Canton (now Guanzhou).

Roosevelt's mother, Sara Delano Roosevelt, often recounted to her son vivid stories of the girlhood trip she had made with her father to the Far East in the mid-1860s. The Roosevelt estate at Hyde Park, where FDR grew up, was full of vases and artifacts that his grandfather Delano had brought back from China, including a large temple bell which dominated the front room.[2] Because of his family background, Roosevelt in later years referred to himself as an "old China hand" (although he never visited China or studied Chinese culture in any formal way), and he spoke frequently, if sometimes paternalistically, of his attachment to China.

Roosevelt nourished a similar, though less intense, interest in Japan. Members of both sides of Roosevelt's family had traded with or visited Japan, and the Hyde Park estate contained Japanese porcelains and other cultural artifacts.[3] Warren Delano had been part-owner of the boat that brought over Manjiro Nakahama, the first reported Japanese to settle in the United States, in 1843. In 1934 Roosevelt proudly wrote Nakahama's son that he remembered his own grandfather's stories of the elder Nakahama as the Japanese boy who lived across the street from the Delano house in Fairhaven, Massachusetts, and often went to church with the Delano family.

The young Roosevelt also made friendships with numerous Japanese. In 1902, during his college years at Harvard University, Roosevelt met and grew close to Otohiko Matsukata, the son of a distinguished Japanese mercantile and political family, through Matsukata's friendship with Roosevelt's cousin Lyman Delano and his family and through Matsukata and Roosevelt's common membership in Harvard's Delphic Club (where they each gained a reputation for generously providing liquor). Roosevelt also became friendly with Ryozo Asano, a friend of Matsukata who was a Harvard classmate and friend of FDR's brother-in-law G. Hall Roosevelt. In 1911 Asano and Hall stayed with FDR and his family at their summer home at Campobello, New Brunswick.[4] In 1915, during his tenure as assistant secretary of the navy under President Woodrow Wilson, Roosevelt became friendly with Captain (later Admiral) Kichisaburo Nomura, the Japanese naval attaché in Washington. In addition to their professional relationship, he and Nomura met socially on several occasions over the following two years, and Nomura also became acquainted with Eleanor Roosevelt (possibly at a dinner which the Roosevelts attended at the Japanese Embassy in November 1915).

Roosevelt maintained these friendships into his later life. For example, in 1919 Matsukata wrote asking FDR to assist one of Matsukata's colleagues in

lobbying the Wilson administration to approve the laying of a new trans-Pacific wireless cable. The following year, he sent a telegram congratulating FDR on his nomination for the vice presidency.[5] Matsukata and Asano again renewed their contacts with Roosevelt after he entered the White House in 1933, and he conferred privately with each of them in order to keep himself informed on the state of Japanese liberal opinion.[6] Meanwhile, Roosevelt and Nomura kept up their relationship through correspondence. In 1937 Roosevelt wrote Nomura, "As I have often told you, I hope the day will come when I can visit Japan. I have much interest in the great accomplishments of the Japanese people and I should much like to see many of my Japanese friends again."[7]

As FDR's affection for these various individuals demonstrates, he did not share popular racist views of Asians as innately menacing or uncivilized. Still, despite his friendships with Japanese and his genuine interest in Japanese culture, Roosevelt adopted an increasingly wary position toward Japanese power during the first decade of the twentieth century. This shift has often been interpreted as a by-product of FDR's Chinese chauvinism. He favored China over Japan whenever the two countries were compared—in a letter he wrote in 1898, he told his parents that a Groton lecturer on China "ran down the poor Chinaman a little too much and thought too much of the Japs."[8] In 1923 he admitted that the pro-Chinese attitude of many Americans, among whom he clearly included himself, made it difficult for them to see the Japanese point of view.[9]

However, it is easy to exaggerate the strength of Roosevelt's feeling for China in his foreign policy. A more important cause of Roosevelt's shift was his evolving perception of Japan as a potential military and economic rival of the United States, a view catalyzed by his reading of the works of Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan. In his seminal books *The Influence of Sea Power on History* (1890) and *In the Interest of America in Sea Power, Past and Present* (1897), Mahan had promulgated the thesis that a nation's greatness was directly dependent on its control of the seas, and he strongly urged the United States to live up to its potential greatness by augmenting its naval strength and joining other nations to preserve a stable world order.[10] Mahan's books and articles were enormously influential. In the United States, they were largely responsible for reviving the navy, which had shrunk significantly in size and power after the Civil War. Under the leadership of Mahan's disciple President Theodore Roosevelt, the American navy attained an unprecedented level of