

Chapter 2

## **To Undo a Mistake is Always Harder Than Not to Create One Originally**

*Eleanor Roosevelt*

*This essay is a draft of an article that had been written for Collier's Magazine by Eleanor Roosevelt. Mrs. Roosevelt visited the Gila River Relocation Center in Arizona in 1943 in response to charges that the Japanese American evacuees there were being "coddled" (Figures 2.1 and 2.2). The manuscript, courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library (Hyde Park, New York), was published in a revised form October 10, 1943. It is reproduced here from the original draft with only minor editorial changes.*

We are at war with Japan, and yet we have American citizens, born and brought up in this country whose parents are Japanese. This is the essential problem. A good deal has already been written about it. One phase, however, I do not think as yet has been adequately stressed. To really cover it, we must get the background straight first.

In this nation of over one hundred and thirty million, we have 127,500 Japanese or Japanese Americans. Those who have lived for a long time in the Midwest or in the east and who have had their records checked by the FBI, have been allowed to go on about their business, whatever it may be, unmolested. The recent order removing aliens from strategic areas, of course, affects those who were not citizens, just as it affects other citizens, however.

112,000 Japanese of the total 127,500 lived on the West Coast. Originally they were much needed on ranches, and on large truck and fruit farms, but as they came in greater numbers, people began to discover that they were not only convenient workers, they were competitors in the labor field, and the people of California began to be afraid of their own importation, so the Exclusion Act was passed in 1917. No people of the Oriental race could become citizens of the United States, and no quota was given to the Oriental nations in the Pacific. They were marked as different from other races and they were not treated on an equal basis. This happened because in one part of our country they were feared as competitors, and the rest of our country knew them so little and cared so little about them that they did not even think about the principle that we in this country believe in — that of equal rights for all human beings.

We granted no citizenship to Orientals, so now we have a group of people, some of whom have been here as long as fifty years who have not been able to become citizens under our laws. Long before the war, an old Japanese man told me that he had great grand-children born in this country and that he had never been back to Japan, all that he cared about was here on the soil of the United States, and yet he could not become a citizen.

The children of the Japanese born in this country, however, were citizens automatically and now we have about 42,500 native born Japanese who are known as Issei, and about 85,000 native born Japanese American citizens, known as Nisei. Some of these Japanese Americans have gone to our American schools and colleges and have never known any other country or any other life than the life here in the United States. Sometimes their parents have brought them up, as far as family life is concerned, in the old Japanese family tradition. Age has its privileges and the respect that is due the elders in a family is strongly emphasized in Oriental life. So for a young Japanese American to go against his parents is more serious than for other children. As a rule in the United States we do not lay undue emphasis upon the control of the older members of the family, or the respect and obedience that is due to mere age.



Figure 2.1. Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, accompanied by WRA National Director Dillon S. Myer, visits the Gila River Relocation Center.

*(WRA photograph, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley)*

This large group of Japanese on the West Coast preserved those family traditions, because since they were feared they were also discriminated against. Japanese were not always welcome buyers of real estate. They were not always welcome neighbors, or participators in community undertakings. As always happens with groups that are discriminated against, they gather together and live among their own racial group. The younger ones made friends in school and college and became a part of the community life, and prejudices lessened against them. Their elders were not always sympathetic to the changes thus brought about in manners and customs.

There is another group in this number of American born Japanese called the Kibei. The parents of this group had kept complete loyalty to Japan and some of them were acting as agents of that government in this country. Some of them longed for the day when they could return and live at home in Japan, so they sent their children, born in this country, back to Japan for their education. Some of these young people returned to this country in 1938 and 1939. They saw war coming in Japan and apparently were not loyal enough to Japan to want to go to war on the Japanese side, and neither did they have enough loyalty to the United States, since they did not grow up here, to serve this country. They form a group which is given scant respect either by their elders who are loyal to Japan or from the Japanese who are loyal to the United States.



Figure 2.2. Representatives of Councils greet Mrs. Roosevelt, Gila River Relocation Center.  
(WRA photograph, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley)

Enough for the background. Now we come to Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. We see the problems which faced the Pacific coast from this date on. There was no time to investigate families, or to adhere strictly to the American rule that a man is innocent until he is proven guilty. These people were not convicted of any crime, but emotions ran too high, too many people wanted to reek vengeance on Oriental-looking people. Even the Chinese, our Allies, were not always safe on the streets. A few of the Japanese had long been watched by the FBI and were apprehended on the outbreak of war and taken into custody.

In an effort to live up to the American idea of justice as far as possible, the Army laid down the rules for what they

considered the safety of our West Coast. They demanded and they supervised the evacuation. A civil authority was set up, the War Relocation Authority, to establish permanent camps and take over the custody and maintenance of these people, both for their own safety and for the safety of the country.

To many young people this must have seemed strange treatment of American citizens, and one cannot be surprised at the reaction which manifests itself not only in young Japanese American, but in others who had known them well and been educated with them, and who bitterly ask: "What price American citizenship?"

Nevertheless most of them recognized the fact that this was a safety measure. The army carried out its evacuation on the whole with remarkable skill and kindness. The early situation in the camps was difficult. They were not ready for occupation. Sufficient water was not available, food was slow in arriving. The setting up of large communities meant an amount of organization which takes time, but the Japanese proved to be patient, adaptable and courageous for the most part.

Many difficulties have had to be met, but the War Relocation Authority and the Japanese themselves have coped with these remarkably well. There were unexpected problems and one by one these were discovered and an effort made to deal with them fairly. For instance, these people had property they had to dispose of, often at a loss. Sometimes they could not dispose of it and it remained unprotected, so as the months go by it is deteriorating in value. Some business difficulties have arisen which had to be handled through agents, since the Japanese could not leave the camps.

In reading the various accounts which have been written it struck me that practically no one has recognized what a tremendous variety of things the War Relocation Authority has had to develop to meet the innumerable problems created by the removal of a great group of people from one small section of the country and their temporary location in other parts of the country. When I read the accusations against the Authority for acquiring quantities of canned goods, and laying in stocks of food, I realized there was a lack of understanding of one basic fact, namely, that government authorities such as this have to live up to the law, and if it is the law of the land that we are rationed, we are rationed everywhere — in prisons, in hospitals, in camps, wherever we may be, individuals are rationed and even the War Relocation Authority cannot buy more than is allowed for the number of people they have to feed.

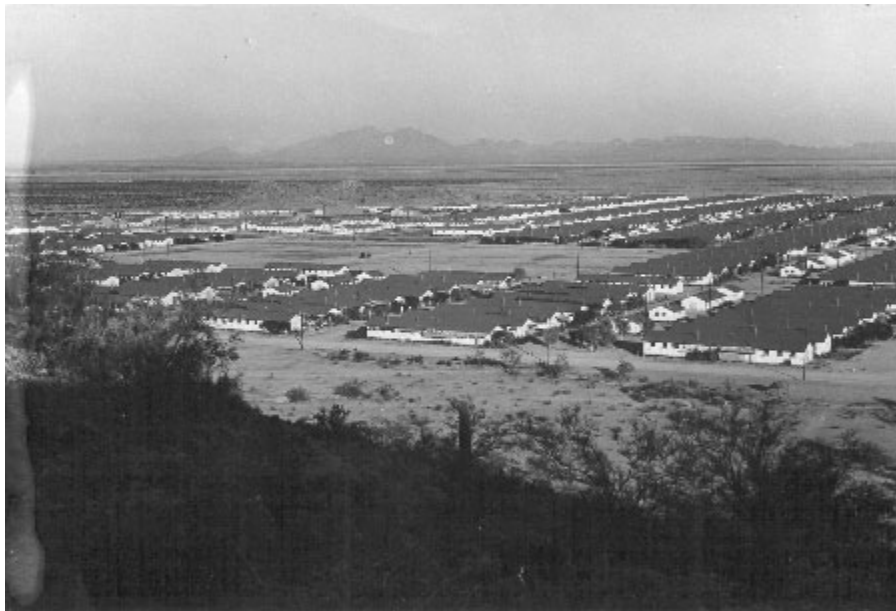


Figure 2.3. Residential area at the Gila River Relocation Center.  
(WRA photograph, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley)

The Armed Services in camp here in this country are probably exempt, but even they are now being put on short rations and I have had many complaints from boys that they were given field rations, which probably comes nearer to approximating the civilian ration. It is logical that in the Armed Forces, men who are undergoing training, physical and mental, should require more food than the civilian population. It is for that reason that civilian goods grow scarcer and we accept rationing in a desire to see that all civilian goods are more equitably distributed to all of us.

But no government authority dealing with civilians is free from the laws of the country as a whole. I think that is something that should be borne in mind when we read attacks as to the manner in which the relocation camps are run, and then see the government officials obliged to deny or explain how they happened to have a certain amount of this or that on hand. If you have a city of 14,000 people living in a camp such as the one I went to in Arizona, even in these days, you have to have more on hand than the average small community (Figures 2.3-2.5).

In these transplanted communities, schools have had to be established, hospitals have had to be equipped and manned. At Gila, the land is rented from the Indian Reservation and no special

buildings could be erected to accommodate either schools or hospitals. The buildings are just barrack buildings, adapted as well as human ingenuity can do it, to the needs for which they are used. Those of us who are familiar with the type of migratory labor camp which was gradually developed in different parts of the country during the past few years will understand what these relocation camps are like. They have certain familiar arrangements, such as a central washing unit for laundry and for personal cleanliness, and a central mess hall where the people gather for their meals. These are located in every barrack block containing about two hundred and fifty people.

The day I was at Gila there was no butter and no sugar on the tables. The food was rice and fish and greens. There was some milk for the children and some kind of pudding on the table. Neither in the stock-rooms, or on the tables did I notice any kind of extravagance.

Except for the head doctor in the hospital who was an American, the other doctors are Japanese. One had been a surgeon and had had a large Caucasian practice, he is now earning \$19.00 a month, the standard pay for all work except for those who are working under Army or Navy contracts.

Ingenuity has been used in the schools. The class in typing only had two typewriters, so they worked out a key-board of card board with holes for the keys and on this the class practiced. The typewriters were rationed, ten minutes use a day to each member of the class.

In the nursery school the toys were quite obviously homemade, and the children stretched out on the floor for their midday rest, with little makeshift covers under them which they folded up when the rest period was over.

Contractors, building army camps or any other type of camp, apparently level off the land in the quickest possible way, taking out any tree or any bush that may stand in the way of their building operations. The desert has few trees, but the scrub growth which usually holds down the land to a certain extent is completely removed around the camps I have seen. This makes a high wind a pretty disagreeable experience as you are enveloped in dust. It chokes you and brings about irritations of the nose and throat and here in this climate where people go to recover from respiratory ailments, you will find quite a number of hospitals around the camps, both military and non-military, with patients suffering from the irritations that the swirling dust cannot fail to bring.

Around the barrack buildings at Gila, a great



Figure 2.4. Buddhist Church at the Gila River Relocation Center.

(WRA photograph, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley)



effort has been made to ameliorate this condition by using scrap lumber and burlap bags for makeshift porches and awnings. They are now getting screens for protection against the insects. They have made small gardens, some with vegetables and some with flowers and shrubs from the surrounding desert, to beautify the barren streets.

At Gila there is a big farm where the Japanese who worked on the land, but perhaps grew only one type of vegetable, are now learning to cultivate as a complete farm enterprise and they care for cattle, chickens and grow a variety of foodstuffs. If some are never able to go back to the West Coast, they will be better able to learn a living on a general farm. Others work in various activities necessary to the life of the community. Since the formation of a Japanese division in the Army, it has been possible for Japanese American young men who have been checked and found loyal to the United States to volunteer for this division, and many of the Japanese American girls asked me if they would have an opportunity to serve in the same way in the Auxiliary Military Services.

Under the living conditions which exist in these camps it is natural that some of the most difficult problems faced are problems of morality. This is neither strange nor new, since overcrowding and restraint of free and normal living always bring up such problems, but crimes of violence or of theft have been remarkably low. A small force of Japanese policemen does the policing of the camps and has apparently few difficulties with which to contend.

We can be grateful that everyone has work, for work is a great panacea in all difficult human relationships.

There is perhaps a higher percentage of people with college degrees here than in the average community of the same size. They are taken from every background and yet must work in unfamiliar occupations, and one can realize that the close living quarters must create great problems.

I can well understand the bitterness of people who have lost loved ones at the hands of the Japanese military authorities, and we know that the totalitarian philosophy, whether it is in Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy or in Japan, is one of cruelty and brutality. It is not hard to understand why people living here in hourly anxiety for those they love have difficulty in viewing this problem objectively, but for the honor of our country the rest of us must do so. These understandable feelings are aggravated by the old time economic fear on the West Coast and the unreasoning racial feeling which certain people, through ignorance, have always had wherever they came in contact with people who are different from themselves. This is one reason why many people believe that we should have directed our original immigration more intelligently. We needed people to develop our country, but we should never have allowed any groups to settle as groups where they created a little German or Japanese or Scandinavian island and did not melt into our general community pattern. Some of the South American countries have learned from our mistakes and are now planning to scatter their needed immigration.

To undo a mistake is always harder than not to create one originally but we seldom have the foresight. Therefore we have no choice but to try to correct our past mistakes and I hope that the recommendations of the staff of the War Relocation Authority, who have come to know individually most of the Japanese Americans in these various camps, will be accepted. Little by little as they are checked, Japanese Americans are being allowed on request to leave the camps and start independent and productive lives again. Whether you are a taxpayer in California or in Maine, it is to your advantage, if you find one or two Japanese American families settled in your neighborhood, to try to regard them as individuals and not to condemn them before they are given a fair chance to prove themselves in the community.



Figure 2.5. Group of Japanese American children at the Gila River Relocation Center, August 1943.  
*(National Archives photograph)*

"A Japanese is always a Japanese" is an easily accepted phrase and it has taken hold quite naturally on the West Coast because of fear, but it leads nowhere and solves nothing. A Japanese American may be no more Japanese than a German-American is German, or an Italian-American is Italian, or of any other national background. All of these people, including the Japanese Americans, have men who are fighting today for the preservation of the democratic way of life and the ideas around which our nation was built.

We have no common race in this country, but we have an ideal to which all of us are loyal: we cannot progress if we look down upon any group of people amongst us because of race or religion. Every citizen in this country has a right to our basic freedoms, to justice and to equality of opportunity. We retain the right to lead our individual lives as we please, but we can only do so if we grant to others the freedoms that we wish for ourselves.