

Deemed Satisfactory: Government Perceptions of Nisei Soldiers after World War II

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President Franklin D. Roosevelt endorsed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, which sanctioned the removal of 110,000 Japanese Americans from their homes throughout the west coast and subsequently interred them in concentration camps during World War II.¹ In Hawaii, where roughly one-third of the population was comprised of citizens of Japanese ancestry, Japanese Americans did not experience internment on the same scale as on the mainland. Roughly 1,200-1,800 Japanese Americans were interred in Hawaii, a mere fraction of the roughly 157,000 Japanese citizens that resided on the island chain. The war effort in Hawaii relied too heavily on laborers of Japanese ancestry to do without them.²

Due to the lack of enforcement of Executive Order 9066 in Hawaii, Hawaiian defense units were formed, including the Hawaii Territorial Guard (HTG) and the Victory Varsity Volunteers (VVV). Nearly one-half of the HTG and the entirety of the VVV were comprised of Nisei—second-generation Japanese Americans who were born on American soil.³ These defense units served as precursors for the creation of the 100th Battalion and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, combat units composed entirely of Nisei soldiers with white officers. In addition to the combat units formed from Hawaiian Nisei, the United States Military Intelligence Service (MIS) opened a language school in San Francisco with the intent of training Japanese-English translators. Many of the school's candidates were Nisei, many of whom already spoke Japanese. This process initially began in the months before Pearl Harbor, but the MIS redoubled the effort after the United States declared war on Japan.⁴ These Nisei soldiers serving in the MIS deployed to frontlines in the Pacific while the 100th and 442nd combat units served in the European Theatre. On both fronts of the war and in various capacities, Nisei soldiers served with distinction while fighting. With the United States' victory over Japan in 1945, the internment camps were closed, and citizens were released to return home. While white soldiers returned to jubilation and celebration, the Nisei soldiers encountered a skeptical, and oftentimes violent, homecoming reception from their communities.⁵ In the months and years that followed, social stigmas and prejudice existed toward Japanese Americans, perpetuated by xenophobia, racism, and fear.

However, the Nisei's service played a direct role in acquiring civil liberties for Japanese Americans. The US government respected the Nisei for their military service in World War II superficially, but their actions ultimately betray this façade of acceptance and appreciation. This article acknowledges the current literature on the subject and then examines the pros and cons of the Nisei's combat roles, the government response to their service, the formation of the Nisei

¹ Greg Robinson, "War Relocation Authority," *Densho Encyclopedia*.

² Franklin Odo, *No Sword to Bury: Japanese Americans in Hawaii* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 149.

³ Brian Niiya, "Japanese Americans in Military during World War II," *Densho Encyclopedia*.

⁴ Niiya, "Japanese Americans in Military."

⁵ Ellen D. Wu, "GI Joe Nisei: The Invention of World War II's Iconic Japanese American Soldier," in *Warring Over Valor: How Race and Gender Shaped American Military Heroism in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. Simon Wendt (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 44, <https://muse-jhu-edu.libproxy.troy.edu/book/63183/>.

soldier stereotype, and how each of these aspects drastically influenced the US government's perception of Japanese Americans. Through this examination, one comes to understand that the Nisei's military service, both on the frontlines and in intelligence capacities, proved crucial in obtaining more rights for the Japanese American community.

Scholars recognize the role the Nisei played in the acquisition of civil liberties. Franklin Odo stresses the importance of Nisei soldiers in World War II, saying, "More important, deploying nisei as combat troops had considerable significance in realigning official U.S. government practice with the constitutional values of racial equality."⁶ In another work, Odo explains that the Nisei narrative, something he coins as "military heroism narrative," is one-sided. This concept about the Nisei soldiers focuses only on the positive aspects of service, while simultaneously ignoring the nuance of events and how that factored into their perception by the government.⁷ Ellen Wu's analysis of events corroborates this view. Her research shows how the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) utilized this narrative extensively in their campaign for civil liberties, though it ultimately aided in establishing harmful stereotypes about Japanese Americans.⁸ Wu's interpretation views the Nisei's service as a defense mechanism the United States government employed to deflect the idea that they were fighting a "race war" with Japan.⁹

Brenda Moore, in her findings, concludes military service helped individuals attain citizenship and employment, both facets inextricably tied to the government.¹⁰ Much of the older literature in the field reflects the "military heroism" narrative previously mentioned. C. Douglas Sterner's text, while recently published, falls neatly into this category. His analysis focuses on the heroism and the emotional appeal of patriotism.¹¹ While much of the information he presents is valuable as a compilation of facts, his analysis and critiques are blatantly colored with hues of the "military heroism narrative" that Odo and Wu fiercely critique. Newer literature properly analyzes information in order to give a more complete, nuanced view of the Nisei soldier and his role in gaining Japanese American civil liberties. James C. McNaughton accurately depicts the immediate and some lasting effects the Nisei serving in the Pacific had on the U.S. His analysis provides context on how the government viewed these Nisei and their contributions.¹² Nisei servicemembers changed the view of the US government by fighting a war on two fronts: the battlefield and the home front. Understanding both is necessary to grasp the effects the Nisei servicemembers had on the perception of the United States government.

The first side of the Nisei soldier's contributions to changing the perceptions of the US government was their role in battlefield combat. FDR and government leaders formulated the creation of an all-Japanese American fighting unit (officers excluded) to utilize as a manner of combatting

⁶ Odo, *No Sword to Bury*, 221.

⁷ Franklin Odo, "The Good War and Japanese America," *American Studies Journal*, no.59 (2015), [https://DOI 10.18422/59-07](https://doi.org/10.18422/59-07).

⁸ Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 73, ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁹ Wu, "GI Joe Nisei," 42.

¹⁰ Brenda L. Moore, *Serving Our Country: Japanese American Women in the Military During World War II* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 159-160.

¹¹ C. Douglas Sterner, *Go for Broke: The Nisei Warriors of World War II Who Conquered Germany, Japan, and American Bigotry* (Clearfield: American Legacy Historical Press, 2008), v-4.

¹² James C. McNaughton, *Nisei Linguists: Japanese Americans in the Military Intelligence Service in World War II* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 2006), 457-461, WorldCat.

Japanese propaganda that accused the United States of racism.¹³ Japan carried out a propaganda campaign citing America's ongoing racism as a cause of much of their expansion. Japan painted itself as a "racial liberator," and the Japanese American concentration camps gave ample ammunition for their printing presses.¹⁴ The US military formed the 100th Battalion and 442nd Regimental Combat Team as their Nisei combat units. Both units were deployed to fight in the European front, starting in Africa, then Italy.¹⁵ In response to their military achievements during the war, the US government awarded Nisei soldiers with military citations and medals for valor in combat. These achievements of the 100th and 442nd in Europe were widely publicized back home, an attempt by the US government to overshadow the atrocities of the Japanese internment camps.

Immediately after the war, the United States government wasted no time in exploiting the Nisei war heroes' combat records. Government officials and newspapers widely spread the stories of brave Nisei soldiers who fought for a brighter, better democracy despite the unfortunate events of the internment camps.¹⁶ Harry S. Truman, the nation's president, perpetuated this propaganda campaign introduced by his predecessor. In his address during the citation ceremony for the 442nd, Harry S. Truman proclaimed, "You fought not only the enemy, but you fought prejudice—and you have won."¹⁷ Undoubtedly, the public image of the nation needed to be maintained, at all costs. Parading the Nisei soldiers around as champions of democracy was a political move used to sidestep the issues of institutional racism and forced internment of thousands of innocents.

It is important to note that Nisei soldiers received thousands of decorations for their frontline combat in Europe. The 442nd and 100th "received some 4,000 Purple Hearts, 8 Presidential Unit Citations, 559 Silver Stars, and 52 Distinguished Service Crosses among many other decorations. In the immediate aftermath of the war, only one member of 442nd received the Medal of Honor, America's highest military honor."¹⁸ In 2000, Bill Clinton awarded twenty-one Medals of Honor to Nisei soldiers.¹⁹ The Medals of Honor, though awarded fifty-five years later, reinforce the US government's perception of the Nisei in the late '40s and early '50s. Medals of Honor are the pinnacle of military combat achievement. While the Nisei soldiers were awarded Purple Hearts, Presidential Unit Citations, and Silver Stars, they were not honored with the highest achievement, despite having met the qualifications for exemplary valor. The government under FDR and Truman saw the Nisei as good soldiers, but not white soldiers, and therefore undeserving of the highest display of gratitude the country can bestow. In a 2005 interview, veteran George Kiyomoto spoke about the difference in the government administrations and perceptions of Japanese Americans at the time. When asked about the 1988 Civil Liberties Act and the nation's reparations efforts and apology, he simply said, "Well, I think it was a good thing they did you know. The

¹³ Niiya, "Japanese Americans in Military."

¹⁴ Odo, *No Sword to Bury*, 221-222.

¹⁵ Niiya, "Japanese Americans in Military."

¹⁶ Wu, "GI Joe Nisei," 42-43.

¹⁷ Harry S. Truman, "Remarks Upon Presenting a Citation to a Nisei Regiment," Presentation, Presidential Awards Ceremony, Washington D.C., July 15th, 1946, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, NARA. Accessed on June 20, 2021, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/170/remarks-upon-presenting-citation-nisei-regiment>.

¹⁸ Niiya, "Japanese Americans in Military."

¹⁹ Odo, "The Good War."

people that put them there weren't the one that was apologizing."²⁰ The government of the late 40s and early 50s did not apologize for the internment camps, nor the drafting of imprisoned men out of those camps. Indeed, they used the Nisei soldiers and their heroism as a tool to further their own narrative and goals. This reinforces the position of recent literature on the topic, which discusses a "counter-narrative" to the Nisei soldier image. Odo points out that these men, in many cases, were not model soldiers. The idealized version of the Nisei soldiers painted an inaccurate portrait of events that the government exploited.²¹

The Nisei's service in Europe created a standard by which the US government could tout its progressive democracy and acceptance of non-Caucasian races. The federal government superficially respected these men but became more interested in their accomplishments which fed into the greater narrative of the "Good War."²² Regardless of the celebration and praise their president and their commanding officers lauded upon them, the soldiers returned home to less-than-welcoming communities. Discrimination remained and opinions about Japanese Americans and their allegiances varied. The 442nd and 100th proved themselves as war heroes, and the government quickly pushed the narrative to represent them as such. The general public proved not as willing to swallow that narrative, despite its increasing popularity in the press.²³

However, Nisei soldiers did not only serve in all Nisei units in Europe and Africa. Many Nisei, those who volunteered to serve in the MIS, fought in mixed-race units on the frontlines of the Pacific theatre. The MIS began training Nisei linguists before the events of Pearl Harbor and continued with the training even after the declaration of Executive Order 9066. In an essay penned in 1987, Lt. Colonel Roy Takai confirmed that he and several others enlisted to serve well before the creation of the 442nd and 100th. These soldiers served in MIS Language schools.²⁴ These linguists became Japanese interpreters that served on the frontline in the Pacific Theater.²⁵ They interrogated captured enemies, translated intercepted messages, and printed propaganda leaflets aimed at the Japanese adversary.²⁶ Due to the sensitive nature of intelligence and counterintelligence, the military classified many of these assignments and missions. As a result, the American public remained largely unaware of the Nisei's service in the Pacific.

Nevertheless, the government responded favorably toward the MIS Nisei soldiers that served in the Pacific. The government refrained from disclosing many of the exploits of the MIS Nisei to the public, a direct inverse of their treatment of the Nisei who served in Europe. However, the federal government showed respect in different ways. The War Department and the War

²⁰ George Kiyomoto, interview by Ralph Kumano, June 10, 2005, transcript, JACL-CCDC Japanese American Oral History Collection, California State University, Fresno, CA.
<http://digitalcollections.archives.csudh.edu/digital/collection/p16855coll4/id/11196/rec/16>.

²¹ Odo, "The Good War."

²² Odo, "The Good War."

²³ Wu, "GI Joe Nisei," 43.

²⁴ Roy Takai, Nisei volunteers for the U.S. Army, essay, August 1987, Japanese American Archival Collection, Department of Special Collections and University Archives, California State University, Sacramento, CA,
<http://digitalcollections.archives.csudh.edu/digital/collection/p16855coll4/id/10725/rec/113>.

²⁵ Niiya, "Japanese Americans in Military."

²⁶ Wallace H. Moore, "Nisei in Intelligence and Counterintelligence" (Address, San Francisco Commonwealth Club, San Francisco, CA, Friday, November 30, 1945. Gerth Archives and Special Collections Department, California State University, Dominguez Hills, CA.),
<http://digitalcollections.archives.csudh.edu/digital/collection/p16855coll4/id/27132/rec/22>.

Relocation Authority (the bureaucratic entity responsible for the internment of Japanese American citizens) actively petitioned for increased peace and assimilation on the West Coast. Using the MIS Nisei service as an example of fine patriotism, the War Department dispatched speakers up and down the west coast to smooth racial tensions and help reintegrate Japanese Americans.

One of these speakers, Lieutenant Colonel Wallace H. Moore, was assigned to a sixty-day speaking tour along the West Coast where he addressed a variety of audiences about the Nisei service in the MIS.²⁷ In one of his addresses, Moore spoke to the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco and admonished the citizens about their treatment of Japanese Americans. He stated his message in clear, unambiguous terms— “don’t upset the applecart.”²⁸ Lt. Col. Moore’s speaking tour demonstrated the attitude the government had towards Nisei soldiers. The government would not tolerate violence or discrimination. Furthermore, Moore spoke at the Commonwealth Club of California. His audience consisted of high-ranking members of the community. The War Department, through speeches like Lt. Col. Moore’s, targeted the leadership organizations of the community. This focus on leaders in the community delineated the War Department’s desire for the local leadership to assume responsibility for the treatment of the Japanese Americans and to work towards changing it.

In addition to speaking tours like the one Lt. Col. Moore embarked on, high-ranking military officials made clear statements about the MIS Nisei effort in the Pacific. On September 2, 1945, Nisei soldiers aided in translating the official Japanese surrender aboard the *U.S.S. Missouri* to General MacArthur.²⁹ Military officials stated that Nisei’s service in the Pacific not only shortened the war and saved countless lives and dollars, but had also proved indispensable in the occupation of Japan.³⁰ The federal government handled the Nisei service in the Pacific differently than how they handled the Nisei service in Europe and Africa. Yet, the push by the War Department and the War Relocation Authority to credit the Nisei for their contribution demonstrated the government’s recognition of their service and a measure of gratitude.

Ellen D. Wu argues that this move by the federal government had a different agenda. She claims the government was using the exploits of the Nisei soldiers and the speaking tours as a means “to prime whites to welcome Japanese Americans as fellow patriots and future colleagues, neighbors, and friends.”³¹ The federal government, in a broad sense, did indeed want to broker peace and prosperity by tamping down racial tensions on the West Coast. The government directly utilized the exploits of the Nisei soldier to achieve, or attempt to achieve, this goal. This, however, does not consider the fact that many of these officers had served directly with the Nisei soldiers. Their accounts were not merely propaganda displays; these men genuinely believed the Nisei soldiers aided in helping end the war. Their conviction shows that beneath the propaganda campaign carried out by the Federal government, there were real people who were profoundly grateful for the Nisei’s contribution to the war. In his interview, George Kiyomoto confirms that Caucasian and Nisei soldiers got along and held a mutual respect, saying, “And they took care of us you know the guys took care of us just like we were their buddies you know. And we appreciated that.”³²

²⁷ Moore, “Nisei in Intelligence.”

²⁸ Moore, “Nisei in Intelligence.”

²⁹ Sterne, *Go for Broke*, 136-137.

³⁰ McNaughton, *Nisei Linguists*, 460-461.

³¹ Wu, “GI Joe Nisei,” 42.

³² Kiyomoto, interview.

This camaraderie between Nisei soldiers and Caucasian officers and soldiers aided in challenging the skepticism and fear that many civilians had about Japanese Americans.

This propaganda campaign by the government went on to create a poster-boy image of the Nisei soldier—a stereotype. The Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) worked closely with the federal government using this narrative as a means to secure civil liberties. The JACL and the US government made this joint decision to help ease the tensions of Japanese Americans in the concentration camps and to assuage the fears of the nation that their Japanese American neighbors were spies or collaborators.³³ The JACL wasted no time in utilizing the Nisei soldier image to push for rights. The JACL weaponized the Nisei soldier image, highlighting sacrifices and the battlefield victories won by the 442nd and 100th. The JACL successfully lobbied for Hawaii's statehood, Japanese naturalization, and eventually reparations by using the Nisei soldier image.³⁴ While the process to gain civil liberties was slow, the JACL did make considerable progress by utilizing the Nisei war hero narrative.

The JACL's decision to use the "military heroism" narrative paid off in some methods. While West Coast citizens differed in opinion and reaction to Japanese Americans and Nisei service, it became obvious that the Nisei service was beginning to open doors that had previously been shut. Franklin Odo uses higher education as a barometer to measure social change before and after the war. He notes how before the war, only a few Nisei had graduated from "prestigious universities." After the war, the Nisei utilized the G.I. Bill—a direct result of their military service—to gain a higher education in much larger numbers.³⁵ This movement of the Nisei into higher education produced community leaders who eventually went on to become national leaders. As a result, these veterans pushed the Civil Rights movement forward, not only for Japanese Americans but for Asian Americans as a whole. This uptick in diversity in local, state, and federal government resulted directly from the Nisei service. Veterans were able to use their veteran status to bypass barriers of entry into more prestigious fields, thus allowing them to have a larger democratic platform.

The downside of the "military heroism" narrative is that it allowed the federal government to perpetuate the idea that human rights were tied directly to militarism. The US government and the JACL created an image that placed loyalty and obedience above liberty and justice. The Nisei soldier narrative supported the idea that citizenship and rights were linked to military service. Brenda Moore remarks upon this point in her book. She claims that citizenship carries a certain responsibility—a responsibility that often presents itself as military service.³⁶ This concept solidifies the idea that the US government had superficial respect for the Nisei and was willing to extend rights accordingly. However, those rights were ultimately contingent on military service, not upon any form of humanity. As such, the US deemed Nisei and Japanese American citizens deserving of rights due to their military service, not because they were human beings and American citizens. For all of the good the JACL did and tried to do during this period, they ultimately perpetuated this idea by hoisting aloft the propagandized, jingoistic Nisei soldier narrative. This Nisei soldier narrative, as a direct result, increasingly contributed to the idea of an obedient, loyal,

³³ Wu, "GI Joe Nisei," 41.

³⁴ Wu, "GI Joe Nisei," 45-46.

³⁵ Odo, *No Sword to Bury*, 253.

³⁶ Moore, *Serving Our Country*, 159.

and productive minority which came to be known as the “model minority” concept.³⁷ This incorrect and monolithic view of this culture brought its own set of problems, many of which persist to this day.

The Nisei soldier narrative stamped out other Japanese Americans who fought for rights and equality in other ways. Draft resisters spoke up from the concentration camps. The government silenced them with imprisonment. These resisters went on to fight court battles up to the Supreme Court.³⁸ However, the resisters focused on their rights as human beings and citizens. The JACL ignored these resisters in favor of the more politically palatable Nisei soldier propaganda. The US government buried the issue, as well, and focused on reintegration and resettlement of Japanese Americans returning from internment.³⁹ Lt. Colonel Roy Takai mentions these men in his essay and, though a career military man, acknowledges their bravery in standing up for their convictions. He criticizes the government for stripping these men of their freedoms and praises the resisters for their determination and beliefs.⁴⁰ These resisters have become the historical face of the “counternarrative” and budding literature about Japanese Americans in World War II.⁴¹

Nisei soldiers drastically affected how the government perceived Japanese Americans. The US government initially created the Nisei combat units as a way to combat foreign propaganda and the idea the US was engaged in a race war. The all-Nisei combat units from Hawaii, the 100th and 442nd, served with distinction in Europe and Africa. The military recognized them for their heroism and decorated them with citations, medals, and awards. Due to their success on the battlefield, the US bolstered their image and used a stereotyped version of the Nisei soldier to create an ideal version of the Japanese American citizen—loyal and brave, even in the face of prejudice. The MIS Nisei serving in the Pacific aided in bringing the war with Japan to a close. Serving as linguists, the MIS Nisei earned the respect of their commanding officers and fellow soldiers by fighting in mixed-race units. This helped ease racial tensions upon their return to America; the officers they had served under “went to bat” for them.

Vying for more liberties for the recently released internment survivors, the JACL utilized the growing popularity of the Nisei soldiers as a method to acquire more civil rights. The JACL used the “military heroism” narrative as a major building block in their campaign for naturalization, Hawaiian statehood, and reparations for internment. This use of the Nisei soldier narrative, unfortunately, created a unilateral view of the Nisei soldiers, their service, and the Japanese American community as a whole. It overshadowed other attempts at gaining civil rights and helped grow and perpetuate the “model minority” myth about Japanese Americans.

The US government recognized the service of the Nisei soldiers and considered their service when the JACL pressed for more civil liberties. Though the process was not easy, the Nisei veterans used their service as a means to propel themselves into higher education and better careers, which aided in the fight for equality. The US government demonstrated a willingness to extend rights to Japanese Americans because of their perception of the Nisei soldiers. Ultimately, this extension of rights was predicated upon the military service of the Nisei. The government did not recognize the

³⁷ Wu, “GI Joe Nisei,” 46-48.

³⁸ Odo, “The Good War.”

³⁹ Wu, “GI Joe Nisei,” 42.

⁴⁰ Takai, Nisei volunteers for the U.S. Army.

⁴¹ Odo, “The Good War.”

right of the citizens because of their humanity, but solely because of their contribution to winning the war. In effect, the government of the United States deemed the Nisei's service as satisfactory and extended basic human rights to the Japanese Americans as a result.

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