

JUST AMERICANS: HOW JAPANESE AMERICANS WON A WAR AT HOME AND ABROAD¹

REVIEWED BY MAJOR JASON S. WRACHFORD²

*The original volunteers for the 442d from the camps in 1943 had sometimes chosen to serve their country against the wishes of their parents and the pressure of their peers. They had stepped forward under extreme duress. At some level, they knew that being forced to prove their loyalty made a mockery of the very notion of loyalty. If it is demanded, not earned, it is a fealty, the tribute due a lord, not loyalty as properly understood in a liberal democracy. Yet somehow the volunteers for the 442d had refused to let the coercion they faced rob them of their dignity of choice. They were expressing allegiance to a higher understanding of what it meant to be an American, and a citizen, than their own government's debased notion of loyalty.*³

Over sixty-five years have passed since pilots from the Empire of Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, destroying or damaging scores of ships and planes and killing thousands. Yet, the memories and pictures of that terrible morning still reverberate in the minds of many Americans. As President Franklin D. Roosevelt described in his speech to a Joint Session of Congress and the Nation following the attacks, "December 7, 1941, [is] a date which will live in infamy . . ."⁴ This date is still one of the most infamous dates in American history, perhaps only recently surpassed by September 11, 2001.

The call to arms after the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor engendered not only a sense of patriotism, but also created a sense of fear, and in some cases, prejudice. In *Just Americans*, Robert Asahina⁵ attempts to portray the interplay among these seemingly competing interests, and how men of Japanese descent living in America overcame their ill treatment and proved their true sense of self-sacrifice and loyalty to their country during World War II.

Asahina frames *Just Americans* with a modern-day account of a Japanese American⁶ lady, Ms. Sandra Tanamachi, who noticed a road in Texas called "Jap Road."⁷ Taking offense to this racial slur, Ms. Tanamachi sought to have the name of the road changed, but with no initial success.⁸ Ms. Tanamachi found it ironic that Texans failed to fully appreciate the struggles that Japanese Americans, including those from the 442d Regimental Combat Team, had faced for years.⁹ She had four uncles who had served in the 442d during World War II.¹⁰ The 442d was primarily drawn from men of Japanese descent from Hawaii and relocation centers on the mainland.¹¹ She knew these brave men from the 442d had risked their lives in one of the bloodiest battles of World War II, to save hundreds of men, many from Texas, from certain death after the "Texas Battalion" (often later referred to as the "Lost Battalion") was surrounded for days by German military forces.¹² In addition, she was aware that the 442d was one of the most decorated units of World War II, despite the prejudice they faced in the

¹ ROBERT ASAHINA, *JUST AMERICANS: HOW JAPANESE AMERICANS WON A WAR AT HOME AND ABROAD* (2006).

² U.S. Air Force. Presently assigned as Chief of International Agreements, United States Forces Korea (USFK/JA). Written while assigned as a student, 55th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia. The reviewer brings a unique perspective to the issues involved in the book. He is married to a Japanese citizen, and together, he and his wife have two children who are dual citizens of the United States and Japan.

³ ASAHINA, *supra* note 1, at 87.

⁴ President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Speech at a Joint Session of Congress and Radio Address to the Nation (Dec. 8, 1941).

⁵ Robert Asahina, an American of Japanese descent, is a well-respected editor, publisher, and film critic. His articles have appeared in many well-known newspapers and periodicals throughout the world. See ASAHINA, *supra* note 1, at 340.

⁶ This book review will follow Mr. Asahina's lead and will not hyphenate the term "Japanese American," regardless of whether the term is used as a noun or an adjective. Whether Mr. Asahina was intending to make a point on this issue is unknown. However, there may be some symbolic purpose to this usage which highlights that these individuals are Americans of Japanese descent rather than both Japanese and American, as the hyphenated term might imply.

⁷ ASAHINA, *supra* note 1, at 1-2.

⁸ *Id.* at 2-4.

⁹ *Id.* at 5-8.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 6.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.* at 5-6.

decoration process.¹³ At the end of the book, Asahina brings this backdrop full circle and details all of the support Ms. Tanamachi received in her ultimately successful effort to have the road name changed.¹⁴

Within this framework, Asahina goes back to a troubling time following the devastating attack at Pearl Harbor and describes the difficult circumstances faced by Japanese Americans. With tremendous skill and in great detail, perhaps too much at times, Asahina provides a meticulous narrative of many individual men of Japanese descent who faced seemingly overwhelming prejudice, even from the highest levels of American government, yet still volunteered to fight for their country. In short, Asahina attempts to contrast the moral and physical courage displayed by Japanese Americans with the perceived lack of moral courage on the part of American leadership.

With this thesis in mind, Asahina chronicles the genesis of the “relocation” program. On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which in effect gave the Secretary of War or the “appropriate Military Commander” the authority to detain persons and exclude them from certain areas.¹⁵ As Asahina notes, “[p]ut simply, the president had given the Army the power to wage war on American soil—against American citizens and the U.S. Constitution.”¹⁶

Asahina did an excellent job of laying out the arguments both for and against the relocation of approximately 110,000 Japanese Americans in the continental United States.¹⁷ He profoundly demonstrated the illogical argument of “military necessity,” especially since there was no relocation of people of Japanese descent from the Hawaiian Islands, which were far more susceptible to Japanese attack and strategic sabotage.¹⁸

Asahina also craftily pointed out the flaws in the administrative procedures during the relocation process. For example, the federal government prepared a questionnaire that ostensibly would allow internees to be on “leave.”¹⁹ To be granted leave, the internees were required to foreswear any form of allegiance to the Japanese government or any Japanese organization.²⁰ At the same time, earlier legislation had forbidden many of them from becoming citizens.²¹ In essence, “they would have to choose statelessness in order to prove their loyalty to a country that would not grant them citizenship.”²² By researching administrative procedures to this level of detail, Asahina effectively supported his thesis that Japanese Americans were willing to fight and die for a country that had consistently denied many of them the right to become a citizen or, at a minimum, the privileges that are normally associated with such a status.

Asahina provided a fascinating account of the contrasting backgrounds of the Japanese American Soldiers drawn from the Hawaiian Islands with those Soldiers from the continental United States who were “relocated” or “interned,”²³ depending on which “side of the fence” the individual stood.²⁴ Asahina chronicled the initial conflicts and struggles that these distinct groups had with each other, despite their ethnic and racial ties. He shrewdly detailed the irony that what brought the mainland Japanese American Soldiers and the Hawaiian Japanese American Soldiers together, before they went to Europe to fight alongside each other, was the visitation of a relocation center by the Hawaiians.²⁵ The Hawaiians learned for the first

¹³ *Id.* For a more thorough analysis of the decoration process involving the 442d Regimental Combat Team, *see id.* at 7-9, 199-201, 259-60.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 251-56.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 17-18 (citing Exec. Order No. 9066, 7 Fed. Reg. 1,407 (Feb. 25, 1942)).

¹⁶ *Id.* at 18.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 16-46.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 28-46. Japanese Americans in Hawaii accounted for more than one third of the total population and were the largest ethnic group on the islands. This made their relocation not only politically difficult, but economically impractical. Due to the perceived continual threat of attack, martial law was instituted on the islands. *Id.* at 28-31.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 46-47.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.* at 47.

²³ *Id.* at 13-18 (noting that the government administration preferred to use the term “relocation” rather than “internment,” as internment connotes imprisonment).

²⁴ *Id.* at 13-69.

²⁵ *Id.* at 37-69.

time of the ill treatment mainland Japanese Americans were facing.²⁶ It was at this point that all Soldiers of Japanese descent, whether mainlanders or Hawaiians, knew that they were fighting for more than just their country.²⁷ They were fighting to prove they were true Americans who deserved to be treated as Americans.

While Asahina is critical of several individuals for their role in the relocation process, including Secretary of War Henry Stimson and Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, head of the Western Defense Command,²⁸ he primarily places the onus of responsibility squarely on the shoulders of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.²⁹ The author argues that in February 1942, there seemed to be a consensus among civilian and military leaders against relocating Japanese Americans.³⁰ Asahina then contends that “[n]onetheless, on February 11, Roosevelt prevailed over the doubts of his advisors. Or rather the [P]resident washed his hands of the matter in what amounted to a stunning denial of responsibility.”³¹ On another occasion, Asahina asserts that “[e]xercising power without responsibility, authority without leadership, Roosevelt had tried to keep his hands clean by passing the matter to the War Department in the first place”³²

Asahina describes the relocation and internment of Japanese Americans as Roosevelt’s “grotesque experiment in social engineering” and as being politically motivated in an effort to alleviate the fears and appease the prejudice of his nationwide supporters.³³ In support of this proposition, Asahina notes that even when the decision was finally made to release the Japanese Americans from the relocation centers (during the 1944 election season), Roosevelt seemed to be more concerned about what effect the reintegration of the “relocated” Japanese Americans would have on the “internal quiet” of various communities rather than the propriety of “releasing” the internees.³⁴ Therefore, this political concern delayed the release of the Japanese Americans for several weeks.³⁵

Throughout the entire book, this harsh criticism of President Roosevelt, perhaps warranted, began to detract from the overarching theme of the heroic efforts of the men who overcame their lack of support to accomplish incredible feats of bravery and courage. While the author certainly wanted to contrast the courage of Japanese Americans with the perceived lack of moral courage on the part of President Roosevelt, Asahina took it too far. In his overzealous attempt to paint President Roosevelt as a two-faced, insincere figure, Asahina began to lose some credibility. In an Oliver Stone-like conspiracy theory, Asahina posits that Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter leaked the results of two Supreme Court cases challenging the “detention camps” to Roosevelt well before their formal release, so “the administration could announce the closing of the camps without appearing to have had its hand forced by the Supreme Court.”³⁶ This theory is flawed for a number of reasons. The key flaw is that the two Supreme Court cases, namely *Korematsu*³⁷ and *Endo*,³⁸ essentially upheld the government’s authority to detain the Japanese Americans.³⁹ Asahina should not have posited this conspiracy theory. It was unnecessary and internally inconsistent, especially since he later condemns the results of the decisions.⁴⁰ In addition, it challenged the author’s entire credibility in raising unsubstantiated attacks against President Roosevelt.

On another occasion, Asahina stated that “prejudice can be found in all corners of America. Not just in the boondocks of East Texas but in the White House . . . , [t]he one that was occupied in World War II by a revered president whose face is

²⁶ *Id.* at 62-64.

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.* at 16-24.

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.* at 21.

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.* at 24.

³³ *Id.* at 24, 76-82.

³⁴ *Id.* at 76-82.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.* at 207-08.

³⁷ *Korematsu v. United States*, 323 U.S. 214 (1944).

³⁸ *Ex parte Endo*, 323 U.S. 283 (1944).

³⁹ ASAHINA, *supra* note 1, at 207-13.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 208-13.

atop Mount Rushmore”⁴¹ As most of us learned in elementary school, President *Teddy* Roosevelt’s face is on Mount Rushmore, not President *Franklin* Roosevelt’s. An obvious inaccuracy like this certainly undermined the credibility of the argument, in addition to calling the validity of Asahina’s “facts” into question.

This inaccuracy was very disappointing, for throughout the rest of the book, Asahina meticulously drew his research materials from a variety of sources that included archives from federal, state, and foreign governments. He also conducted an extensive series of interviews with survivors of the 442d Regimental Combat Team and military personnel from other units that had served with them.⁴² These firsthand accounts, coupled with documentary primary source material, maps, and photos, added an authenticity that brought the book to life, especially from a military perspective. In addition, despite the fact that Asahina chronicled several battles in great detail, readers were not required to have an in-depth knowledge of military history or tactics in order to fully appreciate the military challenges the Japanese Americans overcame, which made the book fascinating to read.

Just Americans attempted to demonstrate the human nature of war through the eyes of Japanese American Soldiers fighting for their country and the honor of their families at home. Unfortunately, in an attempt to make individual Soldiers come to life, Asahina tended to bounce back and forth between the horrors of war and the reality of life before, during, and following the internment periods. Asahina introduced many Soldiers from the 442d early on, and then the reader would not hear about them again until many pages or chapters later. By that time, the reader had forgotten the background of the individual soldier, especially in the middle of fascinating details of the military campaigns. The author apparently recognized this issue and in certain places attempted to provide the reader with a short sentence reminding the reader of the background of the individual fighting soldier. This “fix,” however, still made connectivity among the sections of the book very difficult.

Furthermore, many chapters did not seem to have a logical flow. For example, at the end of the book, the author created an afterword, an epilogue, and an appendix that each contained various topics with no sense of unity. In short, without an index, the reader would have extreme difficulty trying to find passages on a particular topic, as the author continuously bounced around from topic to topic.

On the whole, feedback concerning *Just Americans* has been very positive.⁴³ One notable exception occurred when Stephen Fox, a noted author on the plight of German and Italian Americans during World War II,⁴⁴ commented on Jonathan Mahler’s review of the book.⁴⁵ Fox disagreed with Mahler’s comment (and thus part of Asahina’s thesis) that other ethnic groups did not face the same fate as that of Japanese Americans.⁴⁶ While it is unknown whether Fox ever actually read *Just Americans*, or just Mahler’s review, this criticism does have some merit. On several occasions throughout *Just Americans*, Asahina mentions that other ethnic groups, mainly Germans and Italians, were subject to some scrutiny.⁴⁷ However, he fails to mention that many German and Italian Americans were rounded up and interned for significant periods of time (although perhaps not to the same extent as Japanese Americans), as Fox details in two lengthy books.⁴⁸ While Asahina’s book was certainly written to discuss the plight of Japanese Americans and their heroic efforts during World War II, he could have provided a more accurate description of the plight of the various ethnic groups without detracting from the overall purpose of his book.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 256.

⁴² *Id.* at 281-82.

⁴³ See, e.g., Don DeNevi, *From Camp to Combat: For Japanese-Americans, WWII Was a Two-Front War*, ARMY TIMES, July 3, 2006, § 7, at 37 (reviewing ASAHINA, *supra* note 1) (asserting that *Just Americans* is “history as it should be published: an exceptionally well-written narrative that has a certainty to it, if not outright passionate, unblushing partisanship for the Japanese-American GI, viewed against the backdrop of prejudice and racial injustice”); Jonathan Mahler, *G.I. Japanese*, N.Y. TIMES, June 18, 2006, at 17 (reviewing ASAHINA, *supra* note 1) (describing *Just Americans* as “timely, thoughtful and meticulously researched”).

⁴⁴ See, e.g., STEPHEN FOX, *UNCIVIL LIBERTIES: ITALIAN AMERICANS UNDER SIEGE DURING WORLD WAR II* (2000) [hereinafter FOX, *UNCIVIL LIBERTIES*]; STEPHEN FOX, *FEAR ITSELF: INSIDE THE FBI ROUNDUP OF GERMAN AMERICANS DURING WORLD WAR II* (2005) [hereinafter FOX, *FEAR ITSELF*].

⁴⁵ See Mahler, *supra* note 43.

⁴⁶ Stephen Fox, Letter to the Editor, *Never Any Doubt*, N.Y. TIMES, July 2, 2006, at 4 (commenting on Mahler, *supra* note 43).

⁴⁷ See, e.g., ASAHINA, *supra* note 1, at 17-19, 79.

⁴⁸ See FOX, *UNCIVIL LIBERTIES*, *supra* note 44; FOX, *FEAR ITSELF*, *supra* note 44.

The book's usefulness in bringing the story of these brave Japanese Americans to the public eye can not be underestimated. Not many of the original members of the 442d are still alive, and it was extremely important to read their firsthand accounts of the relocation and of their wartime experiences. In addition, Asahina attempted to draw some comparison between the aftermath of Pearl Harbor and the aftermath of 9/11.⁴⁹ While this issue could have been more fully developed, perhaps even in a separate book, it serves as a constant reminder that we must learn lessons from the past and be willing to do what is right, despite the initial emotional response to a devastating tragedy.

Asahina accomplished his purpose of bringing the story of these brave Japanese Americans to light. He clearly demonstrated that true courage, leadership, and patriotism are not necessarily found at the highest levels of government, but can be found in those individuals who have been mistreated. These Soldiers should serve as an example to all of us both in the military profession and in the civilian arena. In sum, Asahina's book serves as a tribute to Japanese Americans who deserve the right to be called just "Americans."

⁴⁹ ASAHINA, *supra* note 1, at 257-80.