Tule Lake, Part 2: Repression and Resistance

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For the first year of its existence, the camp at Tule Lake functioned as a War Relocation Center much like the other nine Relocation Centers scattered across isolated areas in the western US and Arkansas.

Original caption: Tule Lake Relocation Center, Newell, California. Evacuees distribute scrap lumber to each block. This scrap will be used by the residents to construct furniture for their apartments and also for firewood. Photo: National Archives and Records Administration, 1 July 1942.

The 15,000 Japanese American citizens and Japanese immigrants forcibly removed to Tule Lake from their homes in western Washington and Oregon, and northern California withstood summer heat and winter cold in uninsulated and drafty barracks, latrines with no privacy, and inadequate food in mess halls (for specifics, please see Tule Lake, Part 1).

Outside the barbed wire fence and beyond the purview of guard towers, WWII continued, and the national political situation evolved.

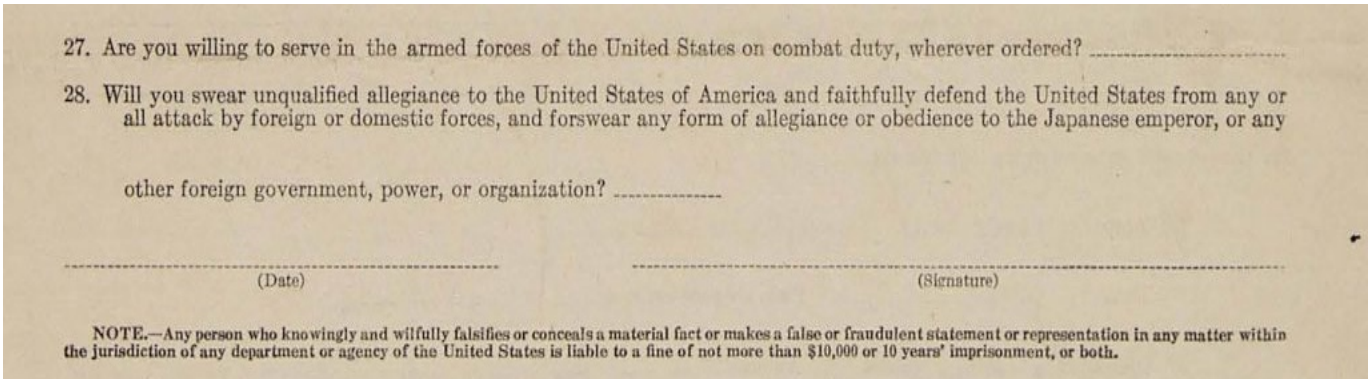
After the decisive June 1942 U.S. Naval victory at Midway, the justifications for imprisoning Japanese Americans became more implausible and difficult to defend. To create a rationale and process for releasing inmates, the federal government developed a loyalty questionnaire administered to all confined persons over age 17.

It soon became apparent that the loyalty questionnaire was deeply flawed. No one, including the War Relocation Administration (WRA), knew how the questionnaire would be used. Further, administration of the questionnaire was capricious, at best.

At Tule Lake, administration of the questionnaire by WRA staff and the US Army was announced on January 30,1943. However, Army personnel arrived a week late. Rather than revising their schedule, the WRA and Army eliminated all but one meeting

between officials and inmates. Information prepared in advance was read in English without opportunities to have other questions addressed.

Two questions – Questions 27 and 28 – turned out to be particularly problematic. The federal government expected these to be answered affirmatively. Answers that included "no" to either question or that placed conditions on the response, such as, "if my family is freed," would be interpreted as evidence of disloyalty.



27. Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered? .....

28. Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization? .....

..... (Date) ..... (Signature)

NOTE.—Any person who knowingly and wilfully falsifies or conceals a material fact or makes a false or fraudulent statement or representation in any matter within the jurisdiction of any department or agency of the United States is liable to a fine of not more than $10,000 or 10 years' imprisonment, or both.

An excerpt from the Loyalty Questionnaire. Note also the caution about a $10,000 fine and imprisonment in bold at the bottom. Courtesy of the Ikeda Family Collection at www.densho.org.

This presented several quandaries for the Japanese and Japanese Americans. Would answering "yes-yes" and gaining release mean forced departure from camp with few assets and immediate removal to a potentially hostile city or town? Who would care for children if their parents answered "yes" to Question 27 and served in the armed forces? Others refused to cooperate, believing they would be forced to join the military in a segregated combat unit – the only option open to Japanese Americans. Some interpreted Question 28 as a trick: they reasoned that "forswearing" allegiance to Japan implied that they had once held such sentiments. Further, for immigrants, answering "yes" to Question 28 could render them stateless because US law prevented them from becoming American citizens. On the other hand, "no" answers might cause the government to consider the entire family as "disloyal," a security risk.

Finally, the questionnaire asked allegiance of Japanese Americans to a nation that had unconstitutionally imprisoned them in concentration camps.

> "I answered both questions number 27 and 28 in the negative, not because of disloyalty but due to the disgusting and shabby treatment given us… Our legal

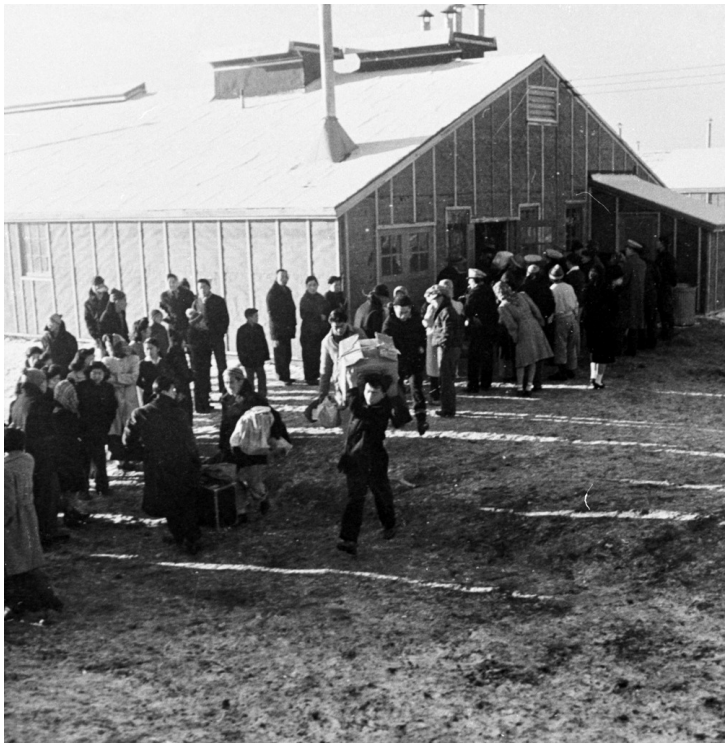
rights were violated…I was really angry." – interviewee quoted in Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, 1983. *"Personal Justice Denied",* Ch. 7.

At Tule Lake, several dozen young men refused to answer the questionnaire. The Army and the WRA followed through on the threat about imprisonment and $10,000 fines, and jailed them in Klamath Falls and Alturas under armed guard. However, local authorities had no legal authority to keep them in county jails since refusing to answer a questionnaire wasn't a crime. The protesters were moved to the WRA Tule Lake citizen isolation camp 10 miles from the main camp at Tule Lake, where they were imprisoned for months with other registration protesters.

They were never charged with an offense.

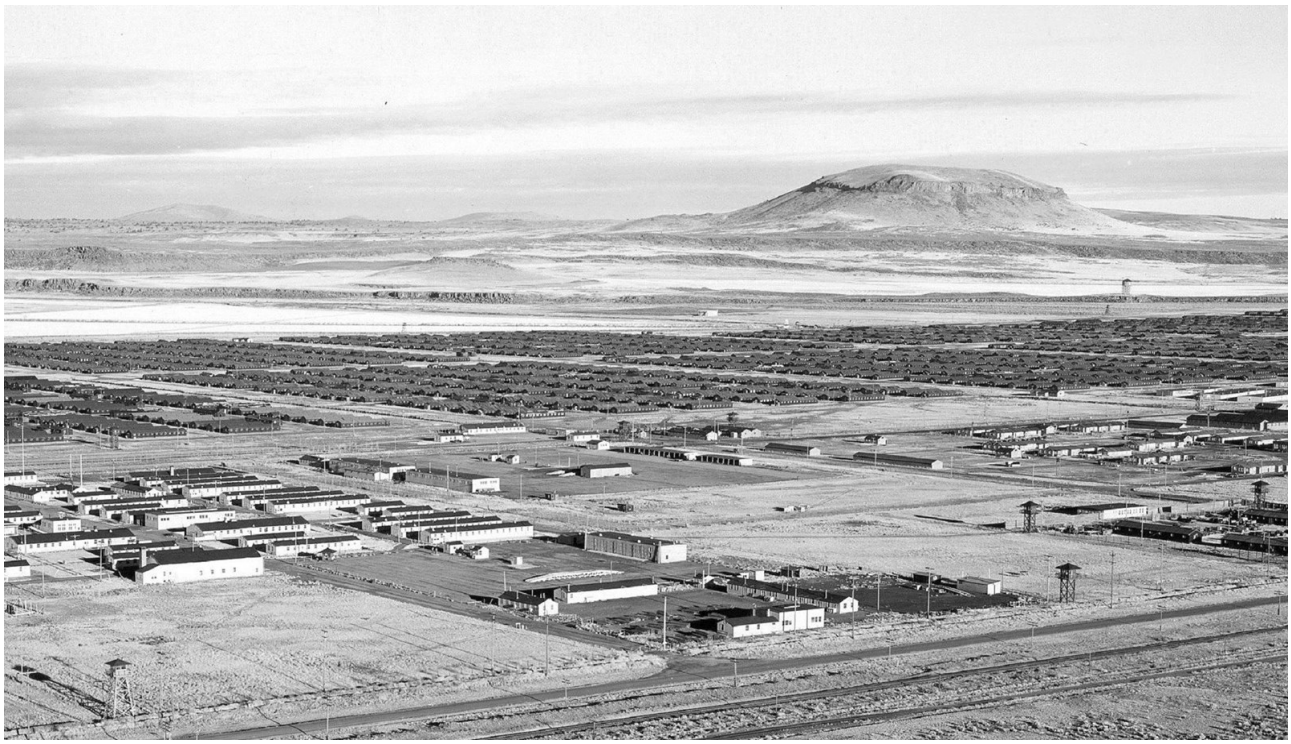
Due to mismanagement of the registration process, 42% of the Tule Lake residents answered "no" to one of the questions or refused to answer at all.

Because of the high number of prisoners who refused to cooperate, the WRA converted Tule Lake to a maximum security "segregation center" in July 1943. They built an additional "man-proof" barbed wire fence and added more guard towers, for a total of 28 guard towers around the perimeter of the camp.



Arrivals from Manzanar moving into vacated barracks at Tule Lake in 1943. Additional barracks subsequently were constructed to imprison still more segregees. Photo courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration and www.densho.org.

Approximately 6,500 of the original prisoners deemed "loyal" were transferred to other camps and replaced by dissidents from the other nine camps: roughly 12,000 "no-nos" and their family members.



Aerial view of the Tule Lake Segregation Center, showing approximately half of the barracks. Administration buildings and housing for WRA staff (white, with dark roofs) dominate the foreground. When the last segregees arrived in spring 1944, the population of the Tule Lake camp rose to 18,789 prisoners, plus 500 WRA staff and 1,000 military personnel. This was equivalent to a population density of 13,326 per square mile (for purposes of comparison, the 2024 population density of Elk Grove, CA, a fairly compact city with multi-story apartment complexes, was 4,203 per square mile). Photo: US National Park Service.

Tensions increased. The new arrivals included many leaders from other camps, who organized to protest the poor living and working conditions at Tule Lake. Labor unrest continued, particularly after a farm truck accident killed one prisoner and injured 28 others. In addition to demanding safer working conditions, the strikers sought to have produce grown at Tule Lake used to alleviate the chronic food shortages within the camp, rather than being shipped elsewhere. The camp director responded by bringing in “loyal” Japanese from other camps as strikebreakers and paying them over ten times what Tule Lake inmates earned.

On 1 November 1943, the national director of the WRA visited Tule Lake. A committee of democratically elected representatives of the inmates asked to meet with him to express their concerns about conditions. Over 5,000 others gathered peacefully to express support for their representatives. Camp administrators refused to respond to the inmates’ requests. Following an altercation at the hospital, WRA employees became fearful of an inmate uprising, and WRA security

overreacted and brutally beat a handful of inmates and imprisoned them in a hastily constructed stockade. Accompanied by tanks and armored vehicles, an Army battalion of 1,000 soldiers was sent to occupy the camp.

A week later, the Army declared martial law, set up dragnets and entered apartments in search of leaders of the committee of representatives. Most activities, including non-essential employment, came to an end. Shortages of food and coal for heating worsened, and many people grew embittered by the brutal repression.

An iconic photo of the stockade at the Tule Lake Segregation Center, 1 July 1945. The man in the foreground is Itaru Ina, an American citizen originally incarcerated at Topaz, Utah, and later segregated to Tule Lake. Photo by Robert Ross, WRA photographer, and obtained by Wayne Collins, an attorney who proved instrumental in closing the stockade. In an ironic coincidence, Ina's wife, Shizuko, appears as the central figure in another iconic photo taken on 26 April 1942 by Dorothea Lange. For more information, see Satsuki Ina, 2024, The Poet and the Silk Girl.

Military control of Tule Lake ended two months later, in January 1944. By then, many of the inmates had lost the remnants of what faith they had in America, feeling turmoil, fear and uncertainty over their future.

Legislative and legal decisions challenged Japanese Americans, especially those at Tule Lake, and posed difficult personal choices with lasting consequences.

In July 1944, the US Congress passed legislation that enabled American citizens to renounce US citizenship during wartime, thus clearing the way for the unprecedented mass denationalization and deportation of American-born inmates to Japan.

Further, over two years earlier, attorneys for Mitsuye Endo, a Japanese American woman from Sacramento, had filed a *habeas corpus* petition to rule on the legality of incarcerating "loyal" Japanese Americans. On 18 December 1944, the US Supreme Court finally ruled unanimously in favor of Endo.

> "We are of the view that Mitsuye Endo should be given her liberty. In reaching that conclusion, we do not come to the underlying constitutional issues which have been argued. For we conclude that, whatever power the War Relocation Authority may have to detail other classes of citizens, it has no authority to subject citizens who are concededly loyal to its leave procedure." – Justice William O. Douglas, writing the opinion in *Ex Parte Mitsuye Endo*, 323 U.S. 283.

Endo, and other Japanese Americans deemed "loyal," would be free to leave incarceration.

Mitsuye Endo, at the Topaz, Utah WRA camp where she was sent after Tule Lake became a Segregation Center. Photo: National Archives and Records Administration.

The announcement of the imminent closures of camps caused concern among Tule Lake inmates: would they and their families be released during wartime into an America whose populace treated a Japanese face with suspicion? Rumor spread that renouncing one's U.S. citizenship would allow a person or their family to remain safely in camp until the end of the war. American-born prisoners were driven to consider life in a country they had never visited. While under duress, almost 5,500 Japanese Americans at Tule Lake, equivalent to about 30% of the camp population, considered their options for survival and renounced their U.S. citizenship.

Within a few months, most of the renunciants realized that they had erred in this decision. Thanks to the legal efforts of attorney Wayne Collins, most avoided deportation. Collins spent the next 20 years fighting to help renunciants to recover their birthright citizenship.

In January 2025, Mitsuye Endo was posthumously awarded a Presidential Citizens Medal by President Joseph R. Biden.

> "In a shameful chapter in our nation's history, Mitsuye Endo was incarcerated alongside more than 120,000 Japanese Americans. Undaunted, she challenged the injustice and reached the Supreme Court. Her resolve allowed

thousands of Japanese Americans to return home and rebuild their lives, reminding us that we are a nation that stands for freedom for all." – the White House, 2 January 2025

The next article in this series will contain information about the postwar period. For a brief introduction to the incarceration of Japanese Americans, please see the first three articles in this series.

We plan a deeper look at the Japanese American incarceration and its implications for today in a half-day webinar planned for June 2025. Please watch for information.

Diocesan Tule Lake Committee
The Very Rev. Cliff Haggenjos, St. John's Episcopal Church, Roseville
Carole Hom, The Episcopal Church of St. Martin, Davis
The Rev. Ernie Lewis, The Episcopal Church of St. Martin, Davis
Jo Ann Williams, St. John's Episcopal Church, Roseville

See these resources for a deeper dive

- The Tule Lake Committee's history of the Tule Lake camp -- https://www.tulelake.org/history
- 10 Things You Probably Didn't Know about the Loyalty Questionnaire -- https://densho.org/catalyst/10-things-you-didnt-know-loyalty-questionnaire/#:~:text=At%20Tule%20Lake%2C%2042%25%20did,715%20giving%20a%20qualified%20answer.
- More on the Tule Lake stockade -- https://boomcalifornia.org/2015/06/29/the-tule-lake-jail-a-story-of-restoration-and-redemption/
- Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, 1983. *"Personal Justice Denied"*, Ch. 7 -- https://www.archives.gov/research/aapi/ww2/justice
- *Resistance At Tule Lake*, a documentary that examines the toxic legacy of the government's loyal/disloyal paradigm imposed on Japanese Americans – https://www.resistanceattulelake.com/
- The Tule Lake Committee, 1980. *Kinenhi: Reflections on Tule Lake*.
- Takei, Barbara and J. Tachibana. 2012. *Tule Lake Revisited: A Brief History and Guide to the Tule Lake Concentration Camp Site*. 2nd Edition. Tule Lake Committee, Inc. ISBN 98-0-9711676-1-2.

- Ina, Satsuki. 2024. *The Poet and the Silk Girl: A Memoir of Love, Imprisonment, and Protest*. Heyday Books, ISBN 9781597146265