

# The Model Minority Myth

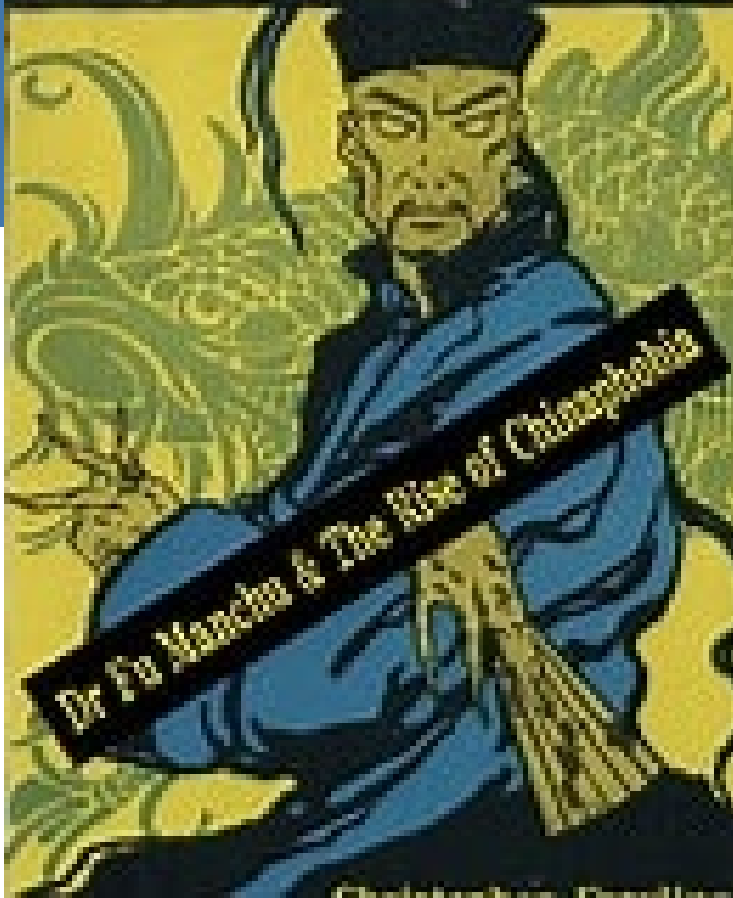
And the history of Japanese in America  
The Story of Nisei Soldiers



## Introduction

- Definition: The model minority myth stereotypes certain minority groups, particularly Asian Americans, as *inherently successful, intelligent, and hardworking*.
- Purpose: To explore the origins, implications, and steps to dispel the myth.

# The Yellow Peril



## The Yellow Peril



# Timeline

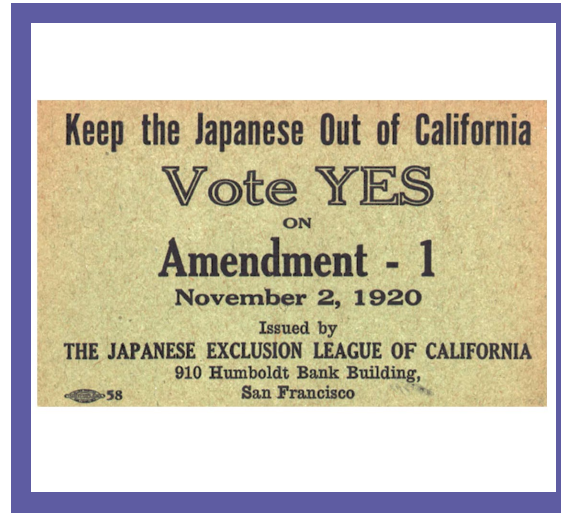


## Chinese Exclusion Act

1882

Banned Chinese immigration until 1943.

Blamed Chinese for taking jobs



## Alien Land Laws

States limited land ownership to exclude Chinese, Japanese, other Asians



## World War II

Executive Order 9066

Removal of all "persons of Japanese ancestry" and incarceration

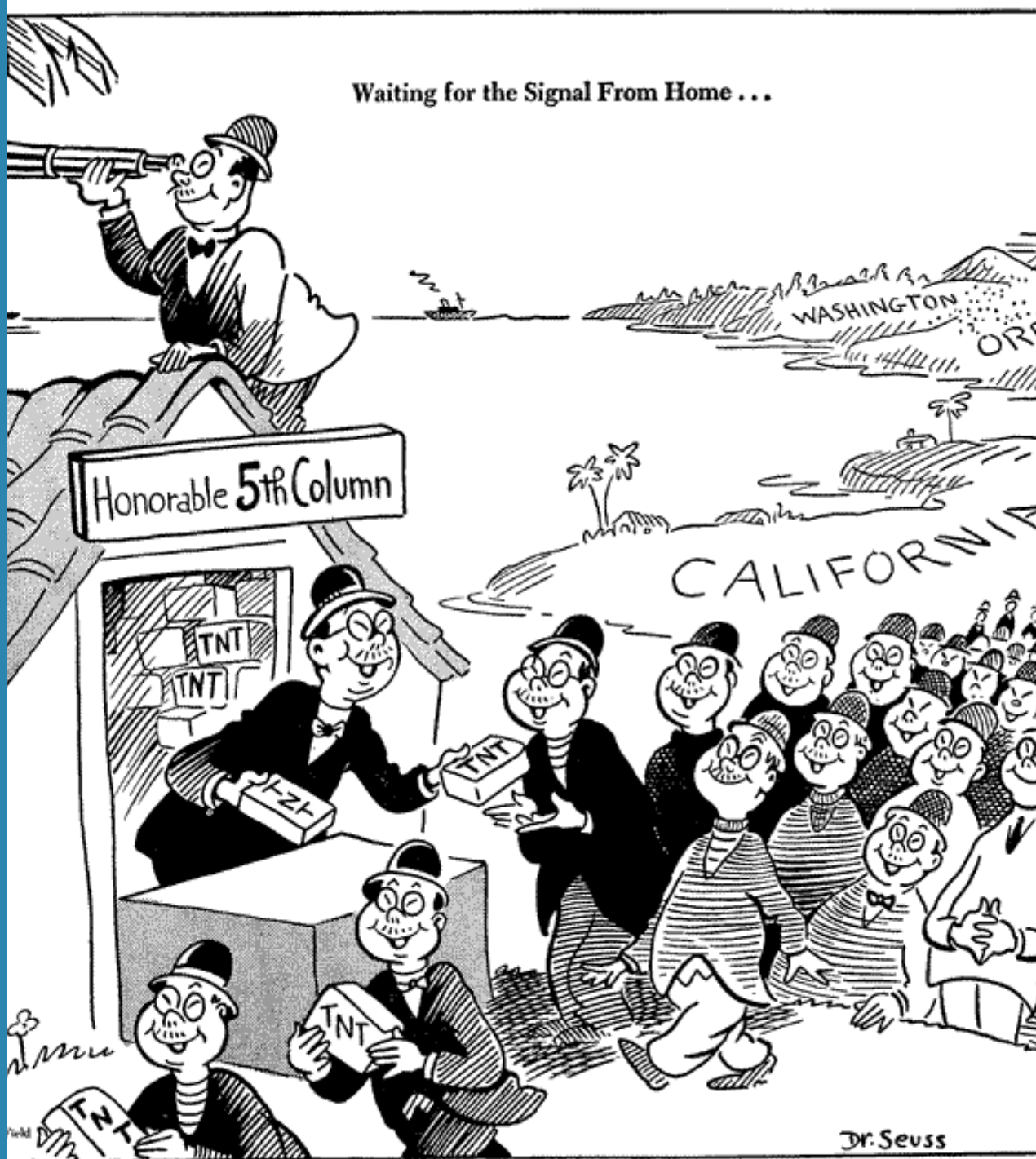


## 1952 Repeal of Chinese Exclusion Act

1965 Immigration Act

Abolished quota system favoring immigration from Europe





How did the Chinese and Japanese go from being so vilified to the model minority?

# Model Minority origin

## 1960's during the civil rights movement

- White sociologist in NY Times article:
- “Success Story, Japanese American Style” by sociologist William Petersen
- Hard work, strong family ties, focus on education

## Japanese - American Style

By WILLIAM PETERSEN

**A**SKED which of the country's ethnic minorities has been subjected to the most discrimination and the worst injustices, very few persons would even think of answering: "The Japanese Americans." Yet, if the question refers to persons alive today, that may well be the correct reply. Like the Negroes, the Japanese have been the

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object of color prejudice. Like the Jews, they have been feared and hated as hyperefficient competitors. And, more than any other group, they have been seen as the agents of an overseas enemy. Conservatives, liberals and radicals, local sheriffs, the Federal Government and the Supreme Court have cooperated in denying them their elementary rights—most notoriously in their World War II evacuation to internment camps.

Generally this kind of treatment, as we all know these days, creates what might be termed "problem mi-



## Criticisms

- Oversimplification:
  - Ignores the diversity within Asian American communities.
- Systemic Barriers:
  - Overlooks discrimination and systemic barriers faced by minorities.
- Pits minority groups against each other – to benefit racist tropes.
- Used to justify social inequality,
  - ignore the impacts of racism and systemic oppression.

# Characteristics of the Myth and Implications

## Characteristics

- Stereotypes:
  - Intelligent,
  - hardworking,
  - academically and economically successful.
- Appears positive, but harmful and misleading



## Implications

- Social Impact:
  - Pits minority groups against each other.
- Economic Impact:
  - Justifies neglect of marginalized communities.
- Mental Health:
  - Negatively affects the mental health of those stereotyped.



# Asian American Countries of Origin > 20



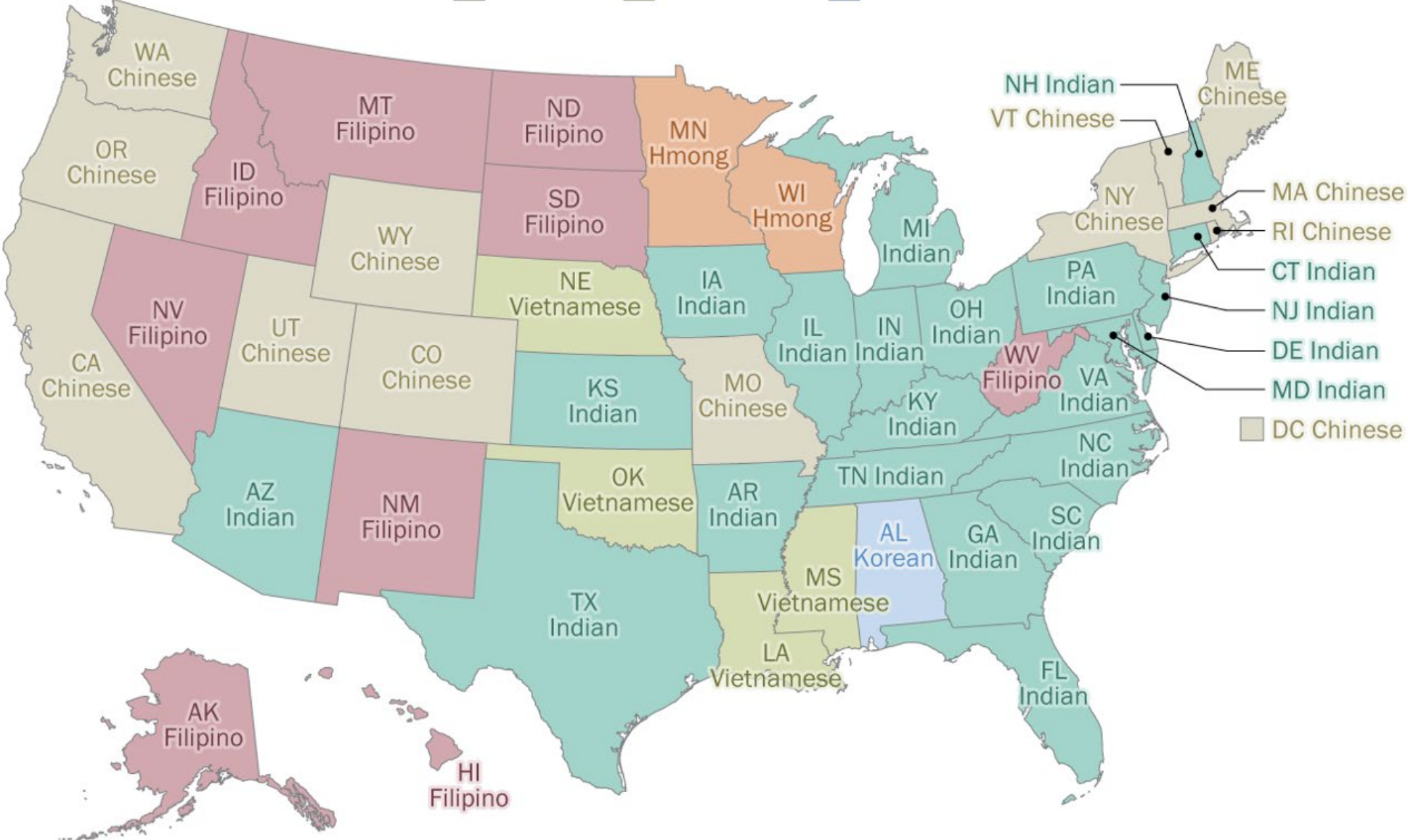
## East Asia, Southeast Asia, Indian subcontinent

- As of 2019, 85% of Asian Americans:
  - Chinese,
  - Taiwanese,
  - Indian,
  - Filipino,
  - Vietnamese,
  - Korean,
  - Japanese.
- Pakistani, Thai, Hmong, Laotian, Bangladeshi, Nepalese, Burmese, Indonesian, Sri Lankan, Malaysian, Mongolian, Bhutanese, Okinawan

## Fastest-growing major racial or ethnic group

- Differ significantly by income, education, and other characteristics.
- Wide diversity
- Origins vary by state

# Largest Asian origin groups by state, 2019



# What can we (you) do?



## Stop turning Asian Americans into a societal wedge.

### Learn about individual group histories in America.

Be vigilant about the casual racism that accompanies the myth.

- Pressure on Asian students to perform and “live up to” the stereotype leads to poor mental health outcomes and not asking for help.
- Underrepresented in leadership positions.

## Acknowledge that “Asian American” constitutes an erasure of a diverse diaspora of people from Asia.

- Hides the reality that many carry harmful experiences of European colonialism and its legacy.
- “Asian American” masks wildly different life experiences.
- Let go of the model minority myth to step forward to true inclusion.
- Step forward in fight to end anti-Black racism.



# History of Japanese in America



12 DPA Series: RELOCATION OF JAPANESE-AMERICANS — Seventeen prison-type Relocation Centers were built to incarcerate the 110,000 Japanese-Americans. These camps were laid out and constructed on remote Indian reservations, notoriously the most dismal of federally owned property. Operating under the direction of the War Relocation Authority (WRA), each family was assigned a 20 by 25 foot "apartment" in a tarred paper barrack with little furniture and privacy, and no stove or running water. Each 12 barracks, freezing in winter and sweltering in summer, was served by a mess hall, latrines, showers and laundry rooms. The internees maintained all services including the police, fire, and post office departments, and were paid \$12 to \$19 a month according to their skills (doctors received \$19 a month). The 30,000 school children continued their education in poorly equipped classes which, nevertheless, met state standards. The picture shows the Manzanar Relocation Center on a hot and dusty day in July, 1942.

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**Incarceration of over 120,000**

## Nisei soldier service

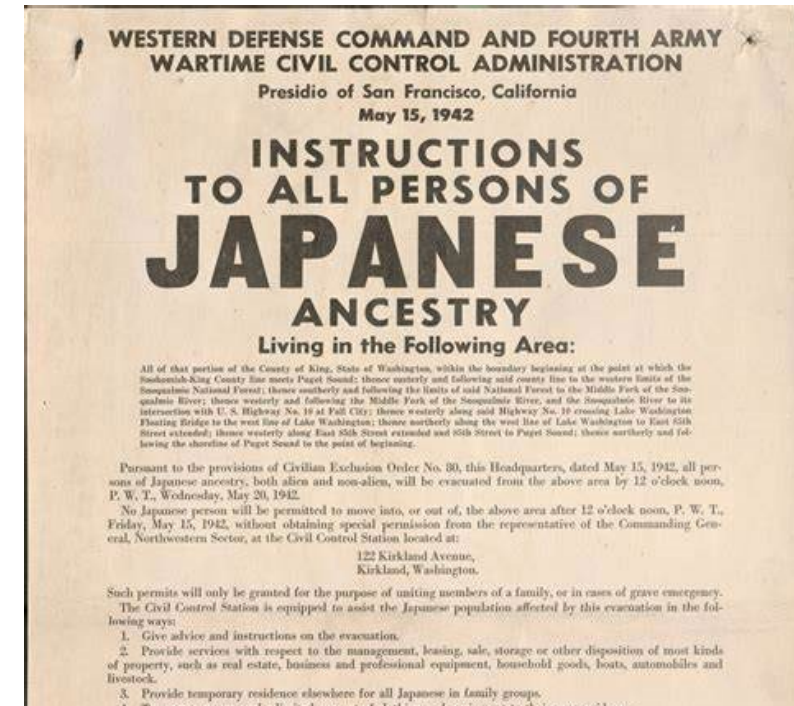


# History of Japanese in America



## 10 “Relocation Centers”

- Assembly Centers at race tracks, fair grounds
- Justice Dept prisons for early detention





# History of Japanese in America

## Evacuation:

- Take only what you can carry
- 6 Days to prepare
- First group from Bainbridge Island (left)
- Ferry from Bainbridge to Seattle
- Train to Manzanar





# History of Japanese in America





# History of Japanese in America



442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team

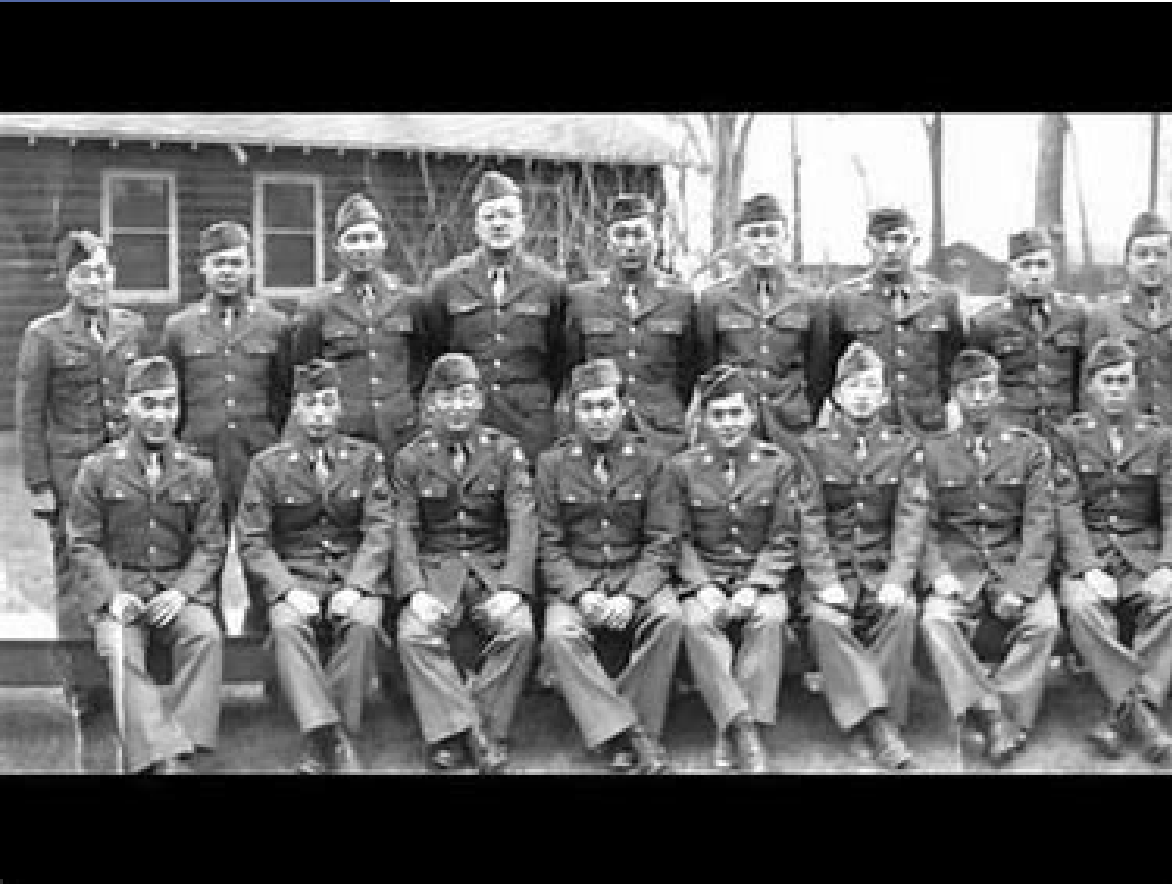


13 DPA Series. RELOCATION OF JAPANESE-AMERICANS — Although many Nisei serving in the Hawaiian National Coast Guard distinguished themselves as heroes when Pearl Harbor was attacked, the United States thereafter barred all Japanese-Americans from the military. After many appeals to serve, Secretary of War Stimson announced on January 28, 1943, that volunteers would be accepted. The several thousand who had been drafted prior to the Pearl Harbor attack, together with those who enlisted from the relocation camps (more than 23,000 in all), served with distinction as translators in the Pacific Intelligence and as soldiers in both the Pacific and European battlefields. The latter compiled extraordinary combat records; the Nisei 442nd Regiment alone winning more than 5300 decorations, while the translators' efforts "enabled American commanders to anticipate enemy action, evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, avoid surprise and strike where they were least expected." The above pictures show: A Nisei soldier (furloughed to help his family move to a prison camp) with his mother in a strawberry field at Florin, California, 1942; and a Nisei serviceman visiting his parents incarcerated in the Minidoka Relocation Center. He was one of three sons who served in the U. S. Army. Note the Purple Heart decoration awarded to one son.

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Nisei Soldiers served in WWII  
Europe – 442<sup>nd</sup> RCT in Northern Italy, France, Germany  
Pacific – Military Intelligence Service (MIS)

# History of Japanese in America



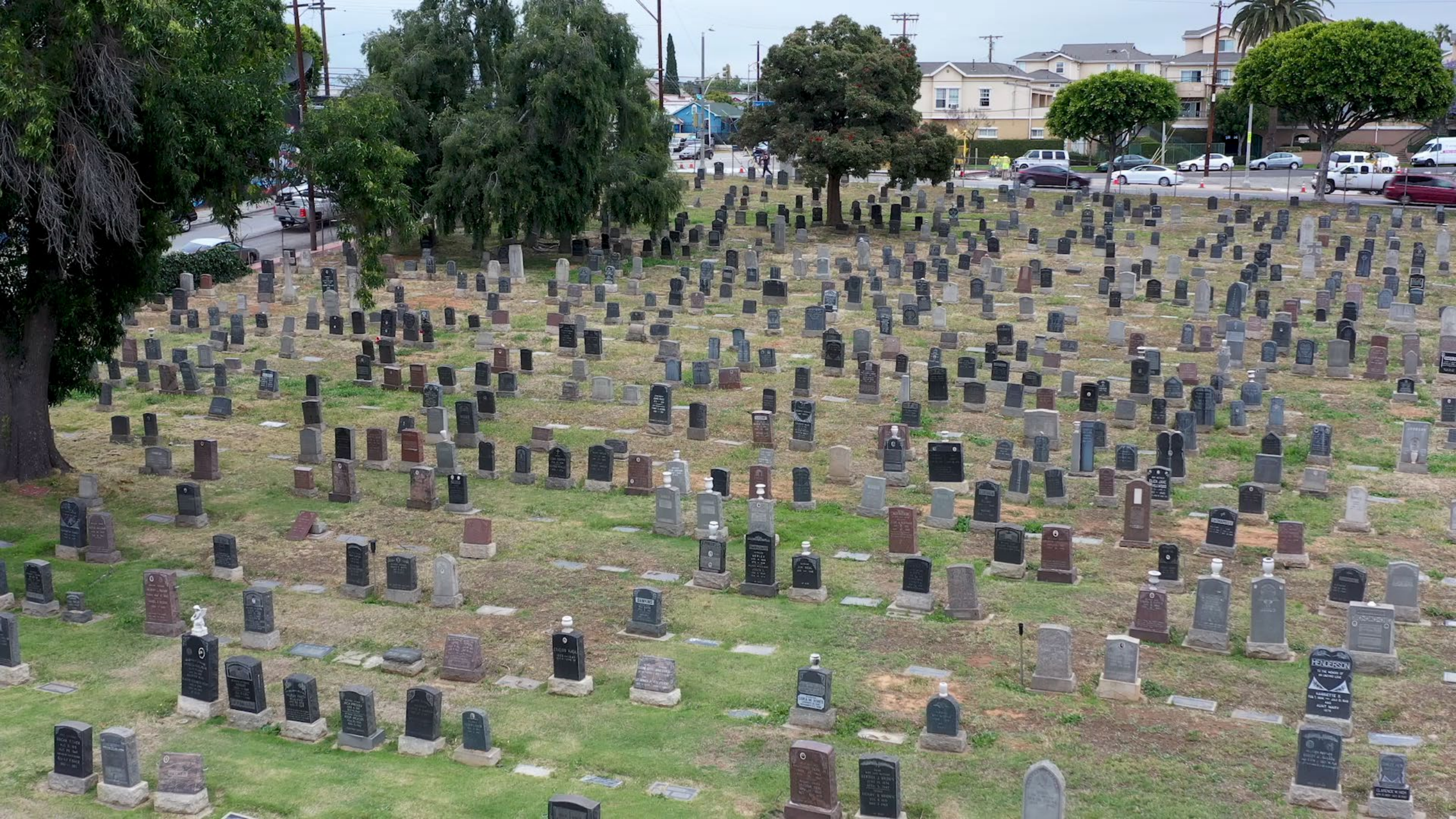
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Military Intelligence Service



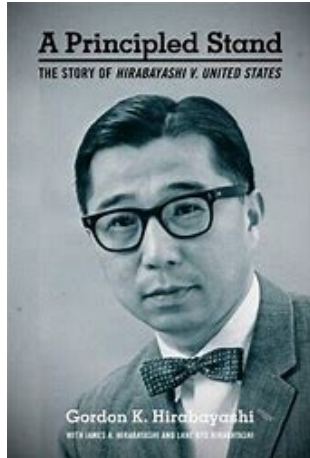




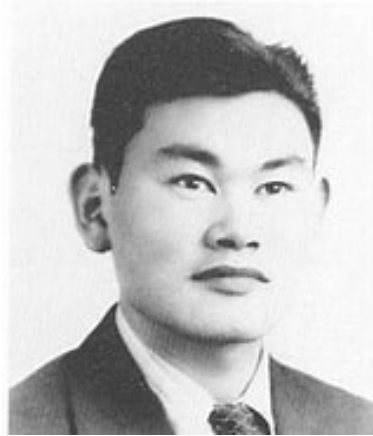


# History of Japanese in America

## Supreme Court Cases



Gordon  
Hirabayashi



Fred  
Korematsu



Min  
Yasui

Constitutionality was not judged during WWII but the cases were vacated many decades later after much effort.







# History of Japanese in America

## Norman Mineta

- Born in San Jose, CA in 1931
- Family evacuated to Heart Mountain, Wyoming
- Mayor of San Jose, CA
- Congressman from CA
- First Asian American Cabinet Member
- Secretary of Commerce under President Bill Clinton
- Secretary of Transportation under President George W. Bush





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# Empathy for people on the street should extend to Little Saigon residents

...dire state of public safety issues in the neighborhood but for the low income, immigrant and refugee residents of the neighborhood, very little has changed for the better.

...survey of 1,000 Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander adults in King, Pierce and Snohomish counties.

Focused on “anti-Asian” incidents, about a quarter of respondents said they had been harassed or threatened, and 20% physically attacked. About half of respondents who lived in the CID reported being victimized, far higher than in other neighborhoods.

Naomi Ishisaka, Columnist  
Seattle Times, October 7, 2024



# Resource List #1

Creating “Model” and “Problem” Minorities

“How to Tell Japs from the Chinese,” *LIFE Magazine*, December 1941.

[“Home Again. Japanese-American Farm Families Pick Up Peaceful, Industrious Lives,”](#) *The Seattle Times*, April 1947.

Denaree Best, “California’s Amazing Japanese,” *Saturday Evening Post*, April 30, 1955.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” (more commonly known as [The Moynihan Report](#)), 1965.

William Petersen, “Success Story: Japanese-American Style,” *The New York Times Magazine*, January 9, 1966.

“Success Story of One Minority Group in the U.S.,” *U.S. News & World Report*, December 26, 1966.

“Success Story: Outwhiting the Whites,” *Newsweek*, June 21, 1971. (Reprinted in the [1972 Pacific Citizen holiday edition](#).)

“Japanese in U.S. Outdo Horatio Alger,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 17, 1977.

# Resource List #2

Asian Americans Push Back against the Model Minority Myth

Amy Uyematsu, “The Emergence of Yellow Power,” [Gidra Vol. 1, No. 7](#) (October 1969).

Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan, “[Racist Love](#),” in *Seeing Through Shuck*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, 1972.

“Japanese Americans: Model Minority?” *Pacific Citizen* [Vol. 103, No. 25](#) (December 1986)

Mari Matsuda, “[We Will Not Be Used: Are Asian-Americans the Racial Bourgeoisie?](#)” address to the Asian Law Caucus in 1990. (Reprinted in *Where Is Your Body? And Other Essays on Race, Gender and the Law*, 1997.)

Janice D. Tanaka, “[When You’re Smiling: The Deadly Legacy of Internment](#)” (film), 1999.

[Satsuki Ina on the cost of the model minority myth](#), Densho interview with Tom Ikeda, March 14, 2019.

Nina Wallace, “[Rooted in Japanese American Concentration Camps, ‘Model Minority’ became Code for Anti-Black](#),” *Densho Catalyst*, May 5, 2016.

OiYan Poon, “[Racial Choices: Justice or ‘Just Us’?](#)” TED Talk, 2019.

Viet Thanh Nguyen, “[How the Model Minority Myth of Asian Americans Hurts Us All](#),” *Time*, June 25, 2020.

Cathy Park Hong, [Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning](#) (One World, 2021).

Tamara K. Nopper, “[Safe Asian Americans: On the carceral logic of the model minority myth](#),” *The Margins*, May 7, 2021.



# Resource List #3

## Scholarly Works on the Model Minority Myth

Bob H. Suzuki, "Education and Socialization of Asian Americans: A Revisionist Analysis of the 'Model Minority' Thesis." *Amerasia Journal* 4.2 (1977): 23-52.

Chris Iijima. "[Reparations and the Model Minority Ideology of Acquiescence: The Necessity to Refuse the Return to Original Humiliation.](#)" *Boston College Third World Law Journal* Vol. 19, No. 1 (1998).

Alice Yang Murray. [Historical Memories of the Japanese American Internment and the Struggle for Redress](#) (Stanford University Press, 2008).

Scott Kurashige, [The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles](#) (Princeton University Press, 2010).

Kurashige, "[Model minority](#)," *Densho Encyclopedia*.

Ellen Wu, [The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority](#) (Princeton University Press, 2015).