

A DEMOCRACY AT WAR

*America's Fight at Home and Abroad
in World War II*

William L. O'Neill

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It was not until January 26, 1944 that President Roosevelt created by executive order the War Refugee Board, ordering the State, War, and Treasury Departments to give it all possible aid "consistent with the successful prosecution of the war." Even then it was not too late to save those Jews who had not yet reached the death camps. Mass deportations from Hungary began only in May 1944, by which time the WRB was already working to stop them. President Roosevelt warned that those responsible would be punished, as did Secretary of State Hull and other prominent figures—warnings which were publicized by the Office of War Information and the BBC and in pamphlets dropped from aircraft. Pope Pius XII appealed directly to the Hungarian head of state, Regent Miklos Horthy, and to the International Red Cross, on behalf of this remnant.

In July, after 440,000 Hungarian Jews had already gone to the gas chambers, Horthy offered to allow Jewish children under 10 years of age to emigrate and invited the Red Cross to provide relief services to some 200,000 surviving Jews, most of whom were in Budapest. Germany prevented emigration from taking place, but the Red Cross got in and so did Raoul Wallenberg, the young scion of a distinguished Swedish family, who performed incredible feats of valor. Nominally attached to the Swedish legation in Budapest, he was actually sponsored by the WRB, which contributed much of his funding. Wallenberg provided large numbers of Jews with visas and other life-saving documents, many of them forged, and installed them in "safe houses" protected by the flags of Sweden, Switzerland, Spain, or Portugal. He even snatched victims from trains already bound for the death camps and bluffed and faced down Nazi officers, risking his life again and again in dangerous encounters.

Wallenberg was aided by neutral legations, the Church, the Red Cross, Zionist youth groups, and others, all of whom in turn were inspired by his example to make even greater efforts. When the Red Army arrived in February 1945, some 120,000 Jews were still alive as a result of this extraordinary operation. Wallenberg himself saved 20,000 Jews with Swedish documents and Swedish safe houses, and anywhere up to 30,000 more were kept alive in other legations and safe houses by people Wallenberg had recruited, or who followed his lead. Another 70,000 survived in the Jewish ghetto because Wallenberg blocked its destruction by threatening the SS commander of Budapest with punishment after the war.

Wallenberg, for reasons they never explained, was arrested by the Soviets and apparently executed in 1947, losing his own life as a direct

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result of having saved so many others. The greatest hero of the war, Raoul Wallenberg showed how much more could have been done if rescue efforts had received greater backing. With limited resources, and despite the lack of cooperation from most other government agencies, the War Refugee Board helped save perhaps 200,000 Jews—including those in Budapest. If it had been founded sooner and backed more strongly, the total would have been much higher, for numerous schemes to ransom Jews fell through for lack of support.

As much as anyone else, Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy was to blame for the government's callousness. McCloy was born in 1895, the only child to survive of a woman left widowed and penniless when John was six. Somehow she managed to send him to the Peddie School in New Jersey, a rigorous Quaker preparatory institute, where he did so well that he was awarded a scholarship by Amherst College, from which he graduated in 1916. After a year at Harvard Law, McCloy became a second lieutenant in the Army, returning to law school after the war. After graduating, he was hired by the Wall Street firm of Cravath Henderson & de Gersdorff, becoming a partner in 1929. He handled a great deal of international work for Cravath, spending much of his time in Europe. His diplomatic skills, tenacity, and talent made him a legend on the Street and brought him into contact with Henry Stimson, who recruited him for the War Department in 1940. There, he worked closely with Robert Lovett, another lawyer—Stimson and all four assistant secretaries were successful attorneys in private life. Lovett called McCloy the greatest negotiator he had ever met.⁴

As Stimson's liaison to the WRB, McCloy was in a position to put the War Department's mighty hand behind any rescue scheme. His indifference was particularly felt on the question of bombing the death camps, which the Air Force could have shut down. Jewish leaders first asked that the rail lines along which the victims moved be cut by air attacks. This was not practical, as by 1944 there was abundant evidence showing that rail lines were too easily repaired to make them suitable bombing targets. Not so the gas chambers and crematoria, which in Auschwitz had taken eight months to build under much easier conditions than obtained in the war's last summer. If destroyed, they could not have been rebuilt, making further mass exterminations virtually impossible.

The means for closing the camps were ready at hand. Allied medium and fighter-bombers had the range to attack Auschwitz from bases in Italy. The magnificent British Mosquito would have been

perfect. American B-25s and P-38s also had a demonstrated ability to destroy targets the size of those in Auschwitz, which was poorly defended by comparison with German cities. As a matter of record, on September 13, 1944, 96 Liberators bombed the factory areas of Auschwitz, at a cost of only three aircraft. This was just one of many raids in the neighborhood, the skies of which were swarming with Allied planes. By actual count, between July 7 and November 20, 1944, a total of 2,500 bombers struck targets within a 35-mile radius of Auschwitz.

The War Department refused all requests from Jewish leaders and the WRB to knock out Auschwitz, claiming falsely that it was beyond the range of medium and fighter-bombers. To which McCloy added that targeting Auschwitz would require the "diversion of considerable air support essential to the success of our forces now engaged in decisive operations," another lie.⁵ The official Allied position remained that the best way to save Europe's Jews was to conclude the war as early as possible, even though a mere handful of planes could have crippled the death camps, and was beside the point, since by the time the war actually ended, most of Europe's Jews were dead—including those hundreds of thousands who could have been saved at negligible cost by a few bombing attacks.

After the war, as American high commissioner in Germany, McCloy worked on behalf of displaced Jews and helped persuade Konrad Adenauer to increase the reparations being paid to Israel. On the other hand, he also helped cover up the escape of Klaus Barbie, a notorious Gestapo officer, and hired one of Hitler's former intelligence officers, General Reinhard Gehlen, to advise Adenauer on foreign intelligence. McCloy's problem appeared to be that he was too much the lawyer interested in resolving cases, too little the human being. Yet, in later years, McCloy became one of the most influential men in the country.

Even more than the failure to admit refugees before the war, which can be partially attributed to ignorance, the limited efforts to save Europe's remaining Jews is a stain on the nation's honor that cannot be explained away—though there is a possible explanation for it. The Northeastern WASP elite that ran the war effort did an excellent job on the whole. At the same time its racism and anti-Semitism were responsible for America's worst violations of human rights and common decency. McCloy's moral blindness, which led an exasperated Henry Morgenthau to call him an "oppressor of the Jews" at a meeting of Roosevelt's Cabinet, was not unique to McCloy, but pervaded the

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In contrast, one need only look at Morgenthau—who, despite his inherited wealth, as the only Jew at the highest level of government brought a different perspective to it. Morgenthau moved mountains in the vain effort to save Rumania's Jews, and it was thanks to him more than anyone else that the War Refugee Board came into being. If there had been even a handful of Morgenthaus at the top, many additional lives might have been saved. As it was, in no other area did the narrow social base of America's leadership class produce a more tragic outcome. This is not to suggest that had there been more Jews in government all would have been different. Walter Lippmann, the powerful columnist, did nothing to help. Neither did *The New York Times*, although its owners were Jewish. What government needed was more compassion for Holocaust victims, the likelihood—though not the certainty—of which would have been greater had Morgenthau not been alone.

McCloy also played a major part in the greatest domestic violation of human rights during the war—the mass internment of Japanese-Americans. When war was declared there were 117,000 Americans of Japanese origin or descent on the West Coast, mostly in California. They had been under surveillance by the Office of Naval Intelligence since 1935 and since 1939 by the Federal Bureau of Investigation as well. In 1940 a committee made up of the directors of the FBI, the ONI, and the Army's G-2 division was established to coordinate surveillance efforts, and it compiled a list of suspected alien subversives. Many names on the list resulted from ONI having burglarized the Japanese consulate in Los Angeles. Detaining a Japanese naval officer who had organized an espionage ring yielded additional information.

When America went to war the three agencies were confident that they had identified all potential subversives, the majority of whom they arrested within three weeks of Pearl Harbor. In all, 2,192 Japanese aliens were taken on the mainland and 879 in Hawaii. Most of them were members of the first generation of Japanese-Americans (known as Issei) who had been denied citizenship by Congress and the courts on racial grounds despite, as a rule, long residence. With the completion of these arrests, the FBI and the Justice Department were satisfied that Japanese-Americans no longer posed any threat to national security.

All the same, on February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed

Executive Order 9066, directing Secretary of War Stimson to designate military zones from which anyone could be excluded. Ostensibly this was a security measure. Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, chief of the Western Military Command, had been urging the removal of all enemy aliens. He also wanted to raid their homes and confiscate cameras, radios, and weapons that might be used for disloyal purposes. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover resisted the idea, saying that such raids "would not only be most difficult but would also have a very bad effect on the law-abiding people who were raided."⁶ Mass raids took place anyway, turning up nothing.

Meanwhile, tremendous political pressure was being put on Roosevelt by Californians and their congressmen to intern all Japanese-Americans. Journalists took up the cry—the venomous Westbrook Pegler, of course, but also, on February 12, Walter Lippmann, the most influential political columnist America has ever had. Lippmann repeated an argument that was being used privately, writing that the absence of sabotage proved Japanese-Americans were only waiting until they could strike with greatest effect—a criterion that would have justified locking up the entire population of America. Greed and hysteria were at work, but, in addition, Japanese atrocities in China had deepened the prejudice against innocent Japanese-Americans, even in far-off Arkansas. It was intensely anti-Japanese, the state's wartime history claims, because for years the national and state press had been depicting "the Chinese as a noble, peace-loving people and the Japanese as militant aggressors and sex fiends."⁷

Senior officials tried to avoid becoming responsible for mass internment. Attorney General Francis Biddle would not issue such an order, passing the buck to Stimson, who attempted to pass it on by asking Roosevelt if he wanted an evacuation, and, if so, on how large a scale. Roosevelt passed back, saying Stimson must act according to his own best judgment. On February 17 Stimson, who disliked the idea but was being urged by John McCloy to implement it, caved in, overriding Major General Mark Clark, who argued that internment would tie up too many soldiers. Biddle crumbled under pressure as well, the result being Executive Order 9066, essentially a blank check authorizing DeWitt to act as he pleased. A bill to enforce it sped through Congress, with Senator Robert Taft of Ohio, who called it the sloppiest criminal law he had ever seen or heard of, raising the only objection.

On March 18 FDR signed Executive Order 9102, establishing the War Relocation Authority, which was to share responsibility with the

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War Department for internees. Milton Eisenhower, Ike's brother and a long-time civil servant, became its director. His hope that Japanese-Americans could be employed on sugar beet farms died when western-state governors, who favored concentration camps, insisted upon internment. Most Japanese-Americans were behind barbed wire by June 7, 1942—first in temporary centers and then in more permanent camps, where some 112,000 men, women, and children would be held for an average of 900 days under harsh conditions in rural areas and wastelands. There were 10 major camps: two each in California, Arizona, and Arkansas and one each in Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, and Colorado. All had much more severe climates than the internees were used to, both in winter and summer.

The camp complex at Poston, Arizona was desert country, lacking in shade, whipped by dust and sand. When the internees began arriving in July many were felled by the intense heat. One said later: "People kept falling down. We thought it was Devil's Island."⁸ Seven victims of heat stroke died in the first days. Many internees believed this was intentional, Poston in their eyes being a death camp. The Army-style barracks in which they lived offered no shelter from the heat, were overrun with insects, and were impossible to keep clean. Camp Minidoka in Idaho, while hot in summer, experienced temperatures that fell to 25 below zero in winter. Tule Lake in California, despite its pretty name, was a dry lake bed located at an elevation of 4,000 feet. Temperatures in winter there fell to 29 below zero. In all the camps sanitation was poor by civilian standards and the lack of privacy onerous. Overcrowding, boredom, and hard work were the rule.

Camps were established not only in the arid and unpopulated West, but also in Arkansas, which was, like other Southern states, far from unprejudiced. Thousands of internees found themselves in either of two camps where they had been sent to work the rich bottom land of the Mississippi Delta. Hot in summer, the camps were swampy and damp all year round. In addition to numerous insults and some physical maltreatment, the internees were not allowed outside their camps, despite the intense labor shortage gripping Arkansas. The state medical society refused to provide care for the internees. A bill passed the state legislature denying Japanese-Americans the right to buy land in Arkansas. Despite sympathy for the heroic Chinese, another bill passed the state's lower house barring members of the "Mongolian race" from attending white schools. Both state houses unanimously passed a resolution denouncing the War Relocation Authority's policy of allowing internees to attend college in other states.

The general policy of imprisoning and persecuting Japanese-Americans was upheld by the Supreme Court—not only because it never had much respect for civil liberties in wartime but specifically because the government falsely claimed that there was no time to screen Japanese-Americans individually, though in fact such a screening had taken place before Pearl Harbor. At McCloy's orders the government also suppressed all the evidence it had, which was considerable, that undermined the case for internment.

The real reasons for putting Americans in concentration camps were fear, greed, and racism. Immediately after Pearl Harbor many citizens on the West Coast panicked, seeing every Japanese gardener as a potential danger. Japanese-Americans had founded thriving small businesses and grew nearly 40 percent of California's produce, thus building up properties which white Americans coveted. Most were sold at a loss by their owners before their internment. Racism justified all, even California Attorney General Earl Warren claiming that, while methods existed to determine the loyalty of Caucasians, that is, German and Italian-Americans, small numbers of whom were also detained, no such tests existed for the inscrutable Oriental.

Early on men of conscience began working behind the scenes to undo this miscarriage of justice. The first step was to remove General DeWitt, a racist who stood in the way of any return—which was done on September 17, 1943. He was replaced by General Delos C. Emmons, who as Army commander in Hawaii after Pearl Harbor had resisted the pressure for a mass internment of its Japanese-Americans. On December 3, 1943 Attorney General Biddle requested that President Roosevelt institute a liberal release and return program. In February 1944, Harold Ickes, whose Interior Department controlled the WRA, made similar requests. When FDR continued to ignore these Ickes assigned Under Secretary Abe Fortas to work on the problem. Fortas visited the camps and, horrified by their starkness, brought back compelling arguments in favor of early release.

Additional entreaties by Ickes and others met with failure. In June McCloy told General Emmons that Roosevelt did not want to lose any votes in California by releasing Japanese-Americans. Emmons was soon reassigned, presumably for advocating early release. His successor, General Charles H. Bonesteel, also opposed the internment program and lobbied ceaselessly against it—which was probably why he too was reassigned after less than six months in the Presidio.

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The tide had turned all the same. At the first Cabinet meeting after Roosevelt's reelection in 1944, Biddle asked Roosevelt to release all internees certified by the Justice Department as loyal. This time, having nothing to lose, FDR agreed. On December 10 the new commanding general issued Public Proclamation No. 21, which was drafted by Bonesteel, rescinding DeWitt's evacuation and exclusion orders and allowing most internees to return to the Coast.

In 1948 Congress passed an Act that doled out \$37 million in compensation to Japanese-Americans who, the Federal Reserve Bank estimated, had been deprived of \$400 million in property alone, not counting lost income and wages. Recently, Congress passed another Act that may award survivors of the relocation camps \$20,000 apiece, the equivalent of about 2,000 wartime dollars, or some \$400 less than the average American family's income in a single war year. The symbolism meant more than the money—which, on the one hand, was too little from the standpoint of actual damages and, on the other, not really needed, for after their release, Japanese-Americans as a group went on to become extremely well-educated and successful. If not the best revenge, this must have been at least some consolation.

Biddle regretted having given way on internment, and others too would later wish they had not gone along, or, if their records were clean, that they had fought harder to prevent it. McCloy was unrepentant to the end, telling a presidential commission in 1981 that internment was "retribution for the attack that was made on Pearl Harbor."⁹ In his autobiography, Stimson blandly maintained that Japanese-Americans were imprisoned for their own good as protection against vigilantism. He also patted himself and McCloy on the back for the splendid record of Japanese-American combat units, whose formation they had encouraged.

Premier among these units was the elite 442nd Regimental Combat Team, which, with an average strength of about 3,000, sustained 9,486 casualties and became the most decorated unit in the Army. In all some 33,000 Nisei, second-generation Japanese-Americans, served in the armed forces with great distinction, fighting and dying for the sake of a country which had put their families in prison. The irony seemingly escaped Stimson and McCloy—though not the internees, who had ample time to reflect on it.

Negroes, by far the largest racial minority, were as segregated and discriminated against during the war as before it. But manpower shortages and the President's need for black votes combined to make

the picture somewhat brighter than it might have been. The mobilization plan of 1940 called for proportionately half as many blacks as whites to be drafted, and those were to be confined largely to service rather than combat units, excluded entirely from the Army Air Corps and Marines, and from the Navy except as messmen.

Military discrimination became a political issue in that election year, and to hold the Negro vote Roosevelt forced the Army to say that it would become 10 percent black, giving roughly the same ratio of Negroes to whites that obtained among civilians. This did not go far enough, and in response to further pressure the Army announced that it would form a number of black combat units, promote a Negro Colonel to the rank of Brigadier General, and appoint Negro advisors to Secretary Stimson and Selective Service chief Brigadier General Lewis B. Hershey. These actions kept black voters in line, even though Negroes continued to serve in segregated units.

In 1942 they were still underrepresented in the military, a situation not only politically unwise but a waste of manpower. Consequently, Roosevelt ordered the Navy, much against its will, to enlist Negroes for general service. The Army General Staff suggested that racially integrated units be formed. This proved to be too radical a step, despite the added difficulty involved in building segregated training camps. However, except by the Air Force, officer candidate schools were integrated as an economy measure. At the end of 1944 there were more Negro officers than could be placed because of the Army's insistence that only whites command Negro units. Another rule was that no black could be ranked higher than the lowest rated white in any unit, which meant in most cases that Negroes could not rise above first lieutenant. This was justified on the ground that black troops preferred white officers, which was untrue, particularly as so many white officers were Southerners with racist attitudes offensive to Negro troops.

By the same token, white officers seldom wished to be assigned to Negro units. If they were hard on the troops, charges of discrimination resulted; but if they stood up for their men they were often scorned by peers and accused of being "nigger lovers." Commanding Negro soldiers was onerous, too, as 70 percent to 90 percent scored in the lowest Army classification test categories, compared to only 20 percent to 40 percent of whites, so training them took longer and required more patience. To prevent outbreaks of violence by or against them, commissioned whites often had to patrol black housing areas and undertake other duties in addition to their own that commanders

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would not trust to Negro officers. In the South, white officers of black units were discriminated against socially. Everywhere it was believed that they were made to command black troops as some kind of punishment. Understandably, white officers hated being assigned to Negro units and schemed constantly for transfers.

In addition to suffering from reluctant commanders, segregation, and discrimination, Negro soldiers often were victims of violence, especially in the South, scores being killed or wounded during the war. Often these casualties resulted from fights between black soldiers and white soldiers and civilians, but even minor violations of local racial codes were punishable by death. In March 1942 Sergeant Thomas B. Foster of the black 92nd Engineers Battalion was shot five times and killed by Little Rock, Arkansas police for questioning the methods being employed by MPs in arresting a drunken Negro soldier. There were race riots and fights between black and white servicemen all over the world. The resulting low morale among black troops was attributed by John McCloy to Negro oversensitivity and the fault-finding Negro press. As the pressure did not go away, in 1944 he ordered the desegregation of all facilities on military posts—an edict that was seldom observed or enforced.

As late as the spring of 1943 only 79,000 out of a total of 504,000 ✓ Negro soldiers were overseas because commanders did not want black combat units. The Army solution was to begin converting them to service troops, who were accepted—the more menial the work the better. When Representative Hamilton Fish (R-NY), who had commanded black soldiers in World War I, asked Stimson to explain this policy, he was told that Negroes "have been unable to master efficiently the techniques of modern weapons."¹⁰ Stimson also denied that the War Department was trying to keep blacks out of combat, though in fact it was. Thus, only one black division was ever committed to battle, the 92nd Infantry. It did poorly on the Italian front owing to acute morale problems, which the Army's own investigator told the press had been caused by segregation. The Navy, for its part, assigned blacks to labor units after being ordered to expand their role beyond that of messmen. Only after riots broke out did it begin to integrate a handful of auxiliary ships.

There were minor exceptions to the rule that Negroes were seldom allowed to fight, and even more rarely given the means to do so effectively. The black 99th Pursuit Squadron was a great success, as were a small number of black combat units in the Ground Forces. During the Battle of the Bulge Negroes in the Army Service Forces