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# *Buddhism as a National-Security Threat*

After Pearl Harbor, Japanese-Americans found their faith under attack.

By Duncan Ryūken Williams

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Buddhist Rev. Ronald Kobata in San Francisco, Feb. 19, 2017. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Today most Americans think of Buddhism as either benign or cool. But not long ago the federal government deemed the religion an un-American threat to national security.

As the smoke of Japanese bombs on Pearl Harbor cleared, FBI agents fanned out across the nation to detain “dangerous threats” to the U.S. The first person arrested? The head priest of the

Buddhist Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, Gikyo Kuchiba, who was detained 30 minutes before Gov. Joseph Poindexter put the territory under martial law.

Military and civilian intelligence agencies could move swiftly because they had been surveilling Buddhist temples and creating files on Buddhist leaders for years. These agents believed Buddhism was irreconcilable with American values. To them Buddhist priests, as leaders of their communities, in particular presented a threat to America’s safety and well-being.

The internment and mass incarceration of more than 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry—

most of whom were Buddhists and American citizens—was not the result of military necessity. A fifth column didn't present a threat to the Pacific coast. Rather, the policy was based on the assumption that members of the Japanese-American community, unlike their German and Italian counterparts, were racially and religiously incompatible with American society.

Karl R. Bendetsen, one of the chief architects of the mass incarceration, prosecuted the roundup with military efficiency. Asked whether mixed-race babies at an orphanage should be sent away, Bendetsen reportedly replied, "I am determined that if they have one drop of Japanese blood in them, they must go to camp."

Many Japanese-Americans lost virtually everything they had worked for: farms, businesses, homes—even the beds they slept on and the clothes they wore. As they boarded trains and buses against their will, they had no idea how long they were going to be gone or if they would return. In this moment of uncertainty, some found their faith was their only meaningful possession.

Once detained, practicing Buddhists faced particularly harsh conditions. In the early months of the confinement, the community was banned from any gatherings that involved the Japanese language, including Buddhist services. Books written in Japanese were confiscated as contraband, with the exception of the Bible. Buddhists campaigned against this denial of their freedom to worship. Though they never received the same privileges as their Christian neighbors, American authorities later recognized, through providing worship spaces to the majority religion in the camps, the contradiction of waging war in defense of Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" while favoring Christians over Buddhists.

Buddhists eventually formed "barrack temples." That let them reconstitute their communities and orient themselves at a time of loss and dislocation. The teachings and practices of the Buddha helped adherents find freedom amid incarceration. They made altars from desert wood and prayer beads from the pits of rationed peaches. In one camp, in honor of Buddha's birthday, internees carved a statue of the baby Buddha from the largest carrot they could find. One Buddhist priest recalled watching the guards' searchlights during his evening meditations and imagining the light of enlightenment traveling the sky like the moon.

Though consistently told that they were not fully American, many Japanese-American Buddhists of the time never gave up hope that they could be. Their example has not been forgotten. Japanese-Americans across the country still congregate annually on Feb. 19 in remembrance of the presidential executive order that led to the wartime incarceration. It is a

day to talk openly about race, religion and the American dream. The legacy of Japanese-American Buddhists is a reminder that the challenge to preserve religious freedom and honor spiritual pluralism is an enduring one, but not insurmountable.

*Mr. Williams is director of the University of Southern California's Shinso Ito Center for Japanese Religions and Culture, and is author of "America Sutra" (Harvard, 2019).*

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