

# Power of Words Handbook

*A Guide to Language  
about Japanese Americans  
in World War II*

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Understanding Euphemisms  
and Preferred Terminology

NATIONAL JA CL  
POWER OF WORDS II COMMITTEE

APRIL 27, 2013

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Japanese American Citizens League  
1765 Sutter Street  
San Francisco, CA 94115-3217  
415.921.5225  
www.jacl.org

COVER:

Images of the incarceration of over 110,000 Japanese Americans during World War II. *Upper left counter clockwise:* 1942 newspaper headlines; Sakutaro Aso, age 70, with grandsons Jerry, 3, and Sadao Bill, 6, tagged for expulsion from West Coast; stockade prisoners from the Tule Lake concentration camp, *photos by Dorothea Lange, National Archives, AP/National Park Service*; “Three Boys Behind Barbed Wire” by Toyo Miyatake, *courtesy of the Toyo Miyatake Manzanar Collection.*

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## Introduction

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*Language shapes the way  
we think, and determines  
what we can think about.*

BENJAMIN LEE WHORF  
AMERICAN LINGUIST, 1897-1941

*Language is the  
archive of history.*

RALPH WALDO EMERSON  
AMERICAN POET, 1803-1882

“History is written by the victors” is an old saying. Is it true? What about for those who suffered ‘collateral damage’ as with Japanese Americans during World War II—because they looked like the enemy? As the Nikkei (persons of Japanese ancestry outside Japan) culturally Americanized over the 20th century, were they to be forever burdened with historical accounts of their WWII experience written in euphemistic and misleading vocabulary? It is now time to acknowledge and correct this misleading language of the past and focus on truth and accuracy for the future. The objective here is to suggest vocabulary that facilitates a more accurate understanding of events and actions experienced by the Nikkei during this tragic time.

Much of the U.S. government activity was shrouded in secrecy during the war. This was implemented in the popular press and media accounts of that time by the use of euphemistic terms by government agencies to make these actions more acceptable to the public. In the decades following the war, as scholars, analysts, and historians began to probe the realities of the WWII Nikkei experience, what emerged was that the familiar vocabulary of the war era did not adequately describe what actually happened. The widespread use of euphemistic terms, such as evacuation and assembly centers, made the government actions seem benign and acceptable in the context of wartime (Daniels, 2005; Kashima, 2003). Their concerns about euphemisms were underscored in the 1980’s with the release of previously classified documents (via the Freedom of Information Act), which revealed the scope and breadth of this misleading practice (Civil Liberties Public Education Fund, 1997).



Hiroko Mochida, 3, Miyuki Mochida, 6, and their mother, from Hayward, California wearing luggage tags and being forced from their home, May 8, 1942. *Photo by Dorothea Lange and National Archives*

In looking to the future, we are guided by the words of Whorf and Emerson. Like any other history, that of Japanese Americans during WWII needs to be told accurately and fairly, especially because the Constitutional issues that were involved then have been revisited anew in the United States since September 11, 2001. In compiling relevant documentation and references, it is the hope that this document will encourage more accurate discourse on the history of Nikkei in American concentration camps during WWII and its relevance to contemporary events. Moreover, it is the hope that what took place against Americans of Japanese ancestry during WWII never happens again.

## A Brief History of the Japanese American Experience

### LEGISLATURE DEMANDS THAT JAPANESE IMMIGRATION BE CHECKED



Headline from the San Francisco Chronicle on March 3, 1905. *Densho Digital Archive 2008*

While many of the 19th century Japanese visitors to the U.S. were sojourners seeking adventure, education, and even economic opportunities, little did they anticipate that if they decided to stay permanently in this country, any move towards naturalization would be barred by an Act of Congress passed in 1790, which allowed only ‘free white men’ to be naturalized (Chuman, 1976). The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 aided (by favoring) Japanese immigration to America, but not for long (Takaki, 1989). In early 20th Century, California passed its Alien Land Law (1913), which used the indefinite alien status of Japanese and other Asians to prevent them from acquiring real estate, and setting down permanent roots. The California law was soon mimicked by other western states (Chuman, 1976). Japanese and other Asian immigration was finally turned off by the passage of the U.S. Immigration Exclusion Act of 1924. Japanese immigration was halted until the 1952 passage of the McCarran-Walter Act. This historic act allowed Issei (Japanese immigrants) to become naturalized for the first time and allowed immigration to resume (at 185 Japanese persons per year), now without constraints to a person’s country of origin (Maki, Kitano, & Berthold, 1999).

These constraints on naturalization and immigration were a reflection of anti-Asian prejudice and exclusion by the larger Euro-centric society as expressed via local news media, public policies, and anti-social behavior (vigilantee-ism; arson; harassment). Owing to housing covenants, Japanese (Issei) and Japanese Americans (Nisei, U.S. born citizens) were forced to live in tight ethnic neighborhoods (e.g. ‘Japantowns’) and then criticized for being ‘un-assimilable’. During the 1930’s, with



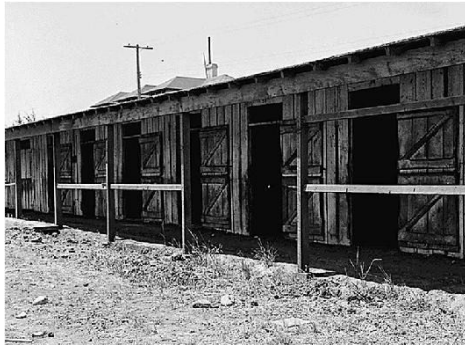
Soldiers and police posted President Roosevelt's February 19, 1942 Executive Order #9066 requiring the expulsion of Japanese Americans from the West Coast. Posters included euphemisms like "evacuation" and "Assembly Centers". *Photo by Dorothea Lange and National Archives*

the Imperial Japanese Army rampaging through Manchuria and China, U.S. leaders became concerned about another world war even though the public at-large seemed isolationist and unconcerned. As early as 1936, President F. D. Roosevelt used the term 'concentration camp' with regard to Japanese Americans, some five years before the air attack on Hawaii (Ishizuka, 2006, p. 166-167).

In this environment of increasing hostility towards American Japanese, the bombing of Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on December 7, 1941 by Imperial Japanese forces triggered a nightmare of unfathomable dimensions for Nikkei (persons of Japanese descent). Less than 24 hours after this 'Day of Infamy,' FBI and Army agents apprehended pre-designated Japanese (mostly Issei), and German and Italian nationals in communities in the western United States under the authority of the Alien Enemies Act-1798/1918. The Issei detainees were local community leaders, Japanese language teachers, martial arts instructors, faith leaders, and the like. The Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Army kept in captivity eventually more than 17,000 Nikkei in special camps (e.g. Crystal City, TX). This was an internationally acknowledged and utilized procedure defined legally as internment (Kashima, 2003).

Hidden from public view, this was followed by intense deliberations amongst the White House, the Department of Justice, the War Department, governors of California and Hawaii, and others, on whether or not to forcibly remove and incarcerate Japanese Americans irrespective of whether they were citizens or not (Daniels, 1975; Drinnon, 1987). After several wrenching weeks, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order (E.O.) 9066 on Feb. 19, 1942, which resulted in the forced removal some 110,000 people of Japanese descent (of which nearly 70% were American citizens) from communities of California, Arizona, Oregon, and Washington states—in areas defined as Military Area I (Maki, Kitano, & Berthold, 1999).

Pursuant to E.O. 9066, notices of military zones were publicly posted, which defined where Nikkei could be or not be present, along with special curfew hours prohibiting freedom of movement from dusk to dawn (see photo on opposite page). Within weeks there followed public instruction notices telling people of Japanese ancestry that they had less than one week to dispose of their property and belongings (except for a short list of portable personal items) and prepare for an indefinite leave. These ‘evacuation’ notices directing ‘non-alien’ to ‘assembly centers’ by a target date, seemed innocuous for what they really were, namely: federal orders to American citizens for their forced removal from private homes to government detention facilities and on very short notice. After being detained several weeks to months in temporary facilities (which included converted animal stalls at racetracks), the inmates were shipped under armed guard by trains to American concentration camps, which were called ‘relocation centers’ run by the War Relocation Authority (WRA--another euphemistic agency name) (Burton, Farrell, Lord, & Lord, 1999).



Horse stalls in Tanforan Race Track, a temporary detention center, housing Japanese Americans in San Bruno, California. *Photo by Dorothea Lange and National Archives*

Details of life in American concentration camps are elaborated in many other historical tracts and books, which should be consulted (e.g., Gordon & Okihiro, 2006; Harth, 2001; Kashima, 2003; Weglyn, 1996). Here we only note that the U.S. government’s reference to these facilities as ‘relocation centers’ toned down or obscured their true nature. A civilian agency, WRA, had been set up to manage these prison camps (some ten in all) which were intentionally located in desolate places largely removed from normal high population areas. Archival photographs of rows of bleak, black tar-papered barracks, barbed-wired perimeter fencing, guard towers with weapons pointed inward, and armed, uniformed soldiers patrolling inside the compound, all vividly document the prison nature of these camps (see the Online Archives of California).

During the forced removal of Nikkei and after their incarceration in camps, the U.S. government had some 'second thoughts' on the justification of these actions. This drove their hunt for disloyal Nikkei. If disloyals were found, it could justify the rationale for these actions on behalf of assuring national security.

Details on this are well documented elsewhere (Muller, 2007). By the end of the war, not one Issei was successfully convicted of espionage or sabotage against the U.S. The pivotal case in point was that of *Ex Parte Endo*, a December 1944 Supreme Court decision, which decided that Mitsuye Endo, a Nisei who had been incarcerated in the WRA camp in Topaz, Utah and not shown to be disloyal to the United States, could not be held in these camps. On January 2, 1945 all the WRA camps were ordered to be closed.

Some thirty years after WWII, in a symbolic ceremony, President Gerald Ford formally rescinded E.O. 9066 on Feb. 19, 1976. Around this time in the broader Nikkei community the 'Redress Movement' gained momentum. President Jimmy Carter signed an act in 1980 to establish the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC). The CWRIC completed its fact-finding task in 1982 and published its report: *Personal Justice Denied*, which concluded that the causes were "race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership" (Civil Liberties Public Education Fund, 1997). This became the factual underpinning for the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 signed by President Ronald Reagan. The act provided for a letter of apology from the President of the United States along with a redress check to each of the eligible surviving inmates from the WWII WRA camps (Maki, Kitano, & Berthold, 1999).

The foregoing brief history helps establish the setting in which the following discourse on vocabulary and euphemisms is directed.



## Dictionary Definitions And Euphemistic Terms

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Japanese Americans from San Pedro, California, guarded by soldiers arrive at Santa Anita Race-track, a temporary detention center, in Arcadia, California, in 1942. *Photo from National Archives*

**Definitions**—a euphemism is “a mild word or expression substituted for one considered blunt and embarrassing” (Chantrell, 2002, p.186). It comes from the Greek euphemismos, from euphemizein ‘use auspicious words’. The formative elements are eu “well” and pheme “speaking” (English usage since late 16th century) (Chantrell, 2002). In more modern times, author William Safire (1981) writes: “To some degree, euphemism is a strategic misrepresentation” (p. 82).

**Social Examples**—Typically in everyday polite discourse, people do not like to talk about death. So instead of saying “he died,” we say “he passed away” or “he departed.” A different example is in Japanese, where the word for death “shi” which is the same pronunciation for the number four, is often substituted with “yon” (a word of different origin) in conversations about prices or numbers (Hayakawa, 1964). However euphemisms can be used for other purposes and are often purposeful alternatives with hidden motives.

During WWII, the U.S. government used euphemistic language to control public perceptions about the forced removal of Japanese American citizens from their West Coast homes to desolate American concentration camps further inland. The public was told that Nisei and Issei (non-citizens) were being “evacuated” to “relocation centers” and “internment camps.” Terms like “evacuation” of people sounded like they were being rescued from some kind of disaster (like an earthquake). To obscure the unconstitutional nature of these forced removals, the government referred to the



Fumiko Hayashida of Bainbridge Island, Washington holds her sleeping daughter Natalie on March 30, 1942 while awaiting transport to the Manzanar concentration camp. *Photo from Museum of History and Industry, Seattle*

Nisei victims as ‘non-alien’ instead of ‘citizens’, which might provoke public inquiries like: “Why is the U.S. imprisoning citizens’ without due process of law?” Once in camp, Nisei could earn back their citizenship by embracing their “right” to defend their country and to serve on the “same basis” as other Americans in the military (but in the segregated U.S. Army 442nd Regimental Combat Team) (Lyon, 2012).

Over time, researchers and scholars, studying historical artifacts, documents, and accounts of the period, have increasingly pointed out the euphemistic nature of the language employed by the U.S. government during WWII in relation to the concentration camps in which Japanese American citizens were incarcerated (Daniels, 2005; Kashima, 2003; Okamura, 1982). After the national trauma of the Vietnam War era, the consciousness raising civil rights movement, and the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which provided redress to Japanese Americans incarcerated during WWII, it is compelling to have the historical record reflect reality. While history per se cannot be rewritten, scholars, the media, and analysts of the future should be guided by more accurate vocabulary and appropriate descriptors that relate to the events experienced by Japanese Americans during this period. This is the intent of this modest handbook.

## Vocabulary Related to WWII Incarceration of Japanese Americans

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Japanese Americans behind the barbed wire fence in Santa Anita Race Track, a temporary detention center, waving goodbye to friends leaving by train for other incarceration camps.

*Photo from National Archives*

We now focus in more detail on a list of words, which over time have elicited concerns of accuracy and authenticity to the events, actions, or reality on which they were applied—or not. While the published record cannot be changed, current and future analyses and assessments of historical facts will be better served for accuracy by using the recommended word or phrase, or explaining why not. In some cases citing the word placed in quotation marks may be appropriate.

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### EVACUATE/EVACUATION

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The dictionary defines this verb/noun as “the process of temporarily moving people away from an immediate and real danger, such as a fire, flood, shoot-out, or bomb threat” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2011, para. 1). Its usage to describe the forced removal by the federal government of over 110,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans from their homes on the West Coast and Arizona is not accurate. They were not “evacuated” to protect them from a disastrous environment. By using these words, the government only made it seem that these individuals were being “helped.”

**RECOMMENDATION:** The words *forced removal* should be used instead—which more accurately describes the lack of choice provided to Japanese Americans who were ordered to leave their homes.

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## RELOCATE/RELOCATION

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These terms suggest that people voluntarily moved from one location (private homes) to another (War Relocation Authority camp). Their usage obscures the fact that the U.S. military forced “all Japanese persons, both alien and non-alien” to leave their homes and many of their belongings behind, often with less than a week’s notice. See elsewhere in this document an image of a publicly posted U.S. Army notice notifying Japanese Americans to “evacuate.”

**RECOMMENDATION:** The phrase *forced removal* should be used instead—which more accurately describes the lack of choice provided to Japanese Americans who were ordered to leave their homes.

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## INTERNMENT

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As pointed out earlier, this word has a legal definition that refers to the confinement or impounding of enemy aliens in a time of war (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2011). Most of the several tens of thousands of people of Japanese ancestry that were incarcerated in WRA camps during World War II were American citizens; thus the term does not apply. A few thousand mostly Issei men were held in the Army and DOJ internment camps, but with the family reunification program and Nikkei from Latin American countries, the total exceeded 17,000 men, women, and children.

**RECOMMENDATION:** The word *incarceration* more accurately describes those held in WRA camps. Incarcerate is generally defined as to confine or imprison, typically as punishment for a crime. This term reflects the prison-like conditions faced by Japanese Americans as well as the view that they were treated as if guilty of sabotage, espionage, and/or suspect loyalty.

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## ASSEMBLY CENTER

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When many Japanese and Japanese Americans were initially forced to leave their homes, they were directed to live temporarily in “assembly centers”—officially “Wartime Civil Control Administration” camps. (The WCCA was essentially a branch of the U.S. Army.) These make-shift detention facilities were often crudely fashioned from animal stalls at racetracks and fair grounds, still emitting the stench of animal waste but surrounded by barbed wire and search lights with armed soldiers to contain the people of Japanese descent. The euphemistic nature of this term hid the degrading lack of amenities and very crude living spaces in these facilities. For example, on December 18, 1944, Supreme Court Justice Owen J. Roberts stated that “an ‘Assembly Center’ was a euphemism for a prison...so-called ‘Relocation Centers,’ a euphemism for concentration camps” (Ishizuka, 2006, p. 72).

**RECOMMENDATION:** The more accurate term is **temporary detention center**. A detention center is generally a place where prisoners are temporarily held pending some further disposition, which in the case of Nikkei civilians was to be shipped to WRA concentration camps. In discussions of certain historical contexts the phrase **assembly center** may be appropriate only as part of a proper name such as Fresno Assembly Center. It is not otherwise recommended for general usage even with quotation marks.

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## RELOCATION CENTER

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This term, like “assembly center” was used by the government to give an impression to the general public that the forcibly moved Japanese and Japanese Americans were placed in pleasant ‘summer camp-like’ facilities. This somewhat innocuous imagery was in stark contrast to the reality which was crude tar-papered wood barracks located in harsh, desolate climates, in compounds surrounded by barbed wire fences with guard towers where the sentries pointed their weapons toward those inside the barbed wire fences.

**RECOMMENDATION:** The recommended more accurate term is: **American concentration camp** (see discussion on next page). Alternatively, **incarceration camp** may be used as well as **illegal detention center**. In discussions of certain historical contexts the phrase relocation camp may be appropriate only as part of a proper name such as War Relocation Authority (WRA). It is not otherwise recommended for general usage even with quotation marks.

## CONCENTRATION CAMP

This term was not generally used in public discourse by the U.S. government in relation to Nikkei incarceration, even though it has been found in non-public documents and transcriptions by high government officials including President Roosevelt (Civil Liberties Public Education Fund, 1997). One dictionary simply defines “concentration camp” as “a facility where persons (as prisoners of war, political prisoners, or refugees) are detained or confined” (Merriam-Webster, 2011, para. 1). An encyclopedia describes concentration camps as an “internment center for political prisoners and members of national or minority groups who are confined for reasons of state security, exploitation, or punishment, usually by executive decree or military order. Persons are placed in such camps often on the basis of identification with a particular ethnic or political group rather than as individuals and without benefit either of indictment or fair trial.” These are different from prisons for convicted criminals, prisoner of war camps, or refugee camps (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1977).

Among the earliest examples is that during the 1901-02 South African War, in which the British confined non-combatants of the republics of Transvaal and Cape Colony in concentration camps. The incarceration of Japanese and Japanese Americans during WWII is cited as another example of non-combatant civilians in concentration camps (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1977).

German concentration camps were first established in 1933 to confine opponents of the Nazi party. During WWII the target shifted to minority groups, mainly Jews, and also became extermination centers. Most notorious were Auschwitz, Majdanek and Treblinka in Poland, and Buchenwald in Germany. When these horrors became known to the world, these concentration camps became synonymous with death camps—the Holocaust (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1977).

In 1994, the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) in Los Angeles curated a new exhibit entitled “America’s Concentration Camps: Remembering the Japanese American Experience,” which ran from November 11 to October 15 a year later. A traveling version was exhibited at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum in New York in 1998–1999. But in the preparation of moving the exhibit from Los Angeles to Ellis Island, a controversy over “concentration camps” emerged in New York where a large Jewish population lives. A number of Holocaust survivors and relatives expressed sensitivity towards public confusion over ‘death camps’ with “concentration camps.” A meeting of representatives from JANM and seven American Jewish organizations resulted in the following text distinguishing the Nazi death camps from the American concentration camps, which was placed at the beginning of the exhibition (Ishizuka, 2006, p.166-167):

*“A concentration camp is a place where people are imprisoned not because of any crimes they committed, but simply because of who they are. Although many groups have been singled out for such persecution throughout history, the term ‘concentration camps’ was first used at the turn of the century in the Spanish American and Boer Wars.*

*During World War II, America’s concentration camps were clearly distinguishable from Nazi Germany’s. Nazi camps were places of torture, barbarous medical experiments, and summary executions; some were extermination centers with gas chambers. Six million Jews and many others including Gypsies, Poles, homosexuals, and political dissidents were slaughtered in the Holocaust.*

*In recent years, concentration camps have existed in the former Soviet Union, Cambodia, and Bosnia.*

*Despite the difference, all had one thing in common: the people in power removed a minority group from the general population and the rest of society let it happen.”*

**RECOMMENDATION:** Instead of *relocation center*, the words **American concentration camp** is recommended. Depending on the context, words with quotation marks **“American concentration camp”** may be used. Alternatives are **incarceration camp** or **illegal detention center**. Ten types of U.S. imprisonment centers during WWII have been described (Kashima, 2003,p.11).



Prisoners from the Tule Lake concentration camp stockade overseen by soldiers in guard towers. Tule Lake became a segregation center in 1943 for those who resisted the mistreatment. *Photo from National Archives*

## SUMMARY TABLE OF ACCURATE TERMS

The table below, constructed from Ishizuka's list (Ishizuka, 2006, p.72), summarizes the various euphemistic terms and their more accurate counterparts.

| EUPHEMISM                 | ACCURATE TERM  |
|---------------------------|--|
| evacuation                | exclusion, or forced removal   |
| relocation                | incarceration in camps; also used after release from camp  |
| non-alien                 | U.S. citizens of Japanese ancestry   |
| civilian exclusion orders | detention orders   |
| any or all persons        | primarily persons of Japanese ancestry   |
| may be excluded           | evicted from one's home  |
| native American alien     | renunciants (citizens who, under pressure, renounced U.S. citizenship)   |
| assembly center           | temporary detention facility   |
| relocation center         | American concentration camp, incarceration camp, illegal detention center; inmates held here are 'incarcerees' |
| internment center         | reserve for DOJ or Army camp holding alien enemies under Alien Enemies Act 1798                                |



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The late Bob Uyeyama (*seated center*), former incarcerated from Jerome and Rohwer concentration camps, shares his experiences with Japanese American, Muslim, and other diverse students in a discussion group at the 2008 Manzanar Pilgrimage.

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## Recommended Readings & Websites

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- Densho – [www.densho.org](http://www.densho.org) Website with many digital resources, especially oral histories of Japanese Americans. See section on Terminology and Glossary. As an example of these linguistic questions found in the Densho Digital Archive, see: “Frontier Colonies or Concentration Camps? Euphemisms for the Incarceration” <http://densho.org/archive/fromthearchive/200902-fromthearchive.asp>
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CONTACT INFORMATION:

Japanese American Citizens League

1765 Sutter Street

San Francisco, CA 94115-3217

415.921.5225

[www.jacl.org](http://www.jacl.org)

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