50 years later: No No Boys still ask "why"?

This is the third in a series of articles remembering the Japanese Internment, including it's victims, and how the world has changed as a result of the action.

By ETHELYN C. ABELLANOSA

Beacon Hill resident Jim Akutsu spent three years in prison during the 1940s to make a point -- Americans of Japanese desgent are either full citizens entitled to the same rights as other U.S. citizens or they are aliens, who among other things, can't be forced to sign loyalty oaths or serve in the armed services.

Now 50 years after World War II and the internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans, Akutsu, 72, feels the issue of citizenship rights of ethnic Americans has never been resolved and can be abused again. He cited some Americans' attitudes toward Arab Americans in last year's Persian Gulf war as an example, and animosity toward Japan going on right now.

"Who is going to get the end of the stick with Japan bashing?" he asked. "The Asians here will."

Akutsu, like many Japanese Americans, was interned in a relocation camp starting in 1942. He was classified as an "enemy alien" and sent to the Minidoka Relocation Center in Idaho.

But Akutsu was one of about 7,000 of those interned who objected to two questions on an infamous 1943 questionnaire aimed at determining their loyalty to the United States. The first, Question No. 27, asked the internees whether they would be willing to serve in the U.S. armed forces. The second, even more controversial Question 28, asked them whether they would "swear unqualified allegiance to the United States, faithfully defend it from attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, to any other foreign government, power or organization."

How the questions were answered split the Japanese-American community, and those who refused to answer "yes" became part of a controversial group known as the "No No Boys".

For most of the Japanese American men who were eligible to register for selective service that answered "no" to the questions, it didn't make sense to serve or swear loyalty to a country that denied them their rights as citizens.

Akutsu's story is a complicated one. He actually answered "yes" to Question 27 because he was willing to serve in the armed forces. In fact, he had actually volunteered to serve in December 1941 after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, but wasn't inducted. But he felt that by answering "yes" to Question 28 he would incriminate himself by implying that at one time he had been loyal to Japan.

"It was entrapment," he said. "I saw it right away. It was taking the blame off themselves [the government], and saying you were disloyal."

He had watched the failure of legal challenges by Minoru Yasui and Gordon Hirabayashi, who challenged the curfew imposed on people of Japanese ancestry in 1942 by claiming that their rights as Americans had been denied. They were both found guilty of curfew violation.

Knowing that Yasui's and Hirabayashi's cases had lost, he wanted to try a different approach. Akutsu wanted to press the point by accepting his status as enemy alien and applying to be repatriated to Japan. Because he never had been a Japanese citizen and his rights as a U.S. citizen had been restricted, he felt the U.S. government would be forced to address the legal citizenship status of those who refused to sign the loyalty pledge.

"I did what I did because I wanted to know was I an enemy alien or an American citizen. Can the citizen status be changed from one to another at the government's whim?" Akutsu questioned.

"Because the Spanish government was acting on behalf of all Japanese aliens in the U.S., I applied through them as an alien to repatriate to prove a point and it

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was approved," Akutsu said.

But before the issue of whether he would be repatriated could be addressed, another rather sticky issue arose: Akutsu was drafted.

He was known as a troublemaker in camp because of his outspoken nature against the conditions of camp, including shortages of food, fuel and supplies and poor housing. Although Akutsu had tried several times to leave camp to work or go to school like some Japanese-Americans, he was not permitted to leave.

"Someone in the administration had authorized a stop order so I couldn't leave. I was viewed as a dangerous enemy alien," Akutsu said.

Akutsu felt that his induction into the selective service was part of a conspiracy against him because he had threatened to blow the whistle against the camp administration.

His alien status had been accepted and he could not understand how he could be drafted as an "enemy alien". He knew that the constitution and its laws, including the selective service, did not apply to him as an enemy alien.

"How was it that all the laws of the country but one [selective

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50 years after: Many No No Boys still wonder "why"?

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service] would apply?" Akutsu said.

As further evidence of a government conspiracy to get him out of the camp, Akutsu cites a problem in his original induction notice. The notice was dated June 10, 1944 and he received it at the end of June -- but it said that he was to report a month earlier -- on May 21, 1944.

"There was no way I could have showed up," Akutsu said.

When FBI agents came in early July to arrest him for failure to appear, he explained the confusion of the dates, and was not arrested at that time.

"I wrote to General Hershey [Director of the Selective Service System] and told him I was being railroaded because I was going to blow the whistle. I never got an answer," he said.

He violated the second induction notice that came and was arrested.

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> **Jim Akutsu**
> **Former No No Boy**

"The only way I could address the court concerning the government's actions with citizenship was to not appear for induction," Akutsu said.

His trial lasted 20 minutes, during which he read a written statement to the jury explaining his reasons against participating in the Selective Service. "I asked the jury, 'does Selective Service apply to me as an alien?'" Akutsu reflected. "Citizenship is an unwritten contract between the individual and the government. You protect me during certain times in peace and during war I will fight for you. Somebody breached that, and it wasn't us, it was the government," Akutsu said.

His question of citizenship rights was never addressed by the courts, and he spent three years at a federal penitentiary on McNeil Island for failure to appear for induction. He returned to Seattle in 1947 and later that year he was granted a full presidential pardon from President Truman.

For Akutsu, his question remains unanswered by the government."If you're born here, and you didn't do anything out of the ordinary, can they be allowed to take away your citizenship without cause and due process?

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