



Historic Bakersfield & Kern County, California

www.gilbertgia.com

by Gilbert P. Gia

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Roosevelt, States Rights, and Japanese Children, 1907, v2

The debate over Japanese immigration was a political minefield at the turn of the century, but when San Francisco schools moved to segregate Japanese children, newspapers predicted war between the US and Japan.

In 1905 California limited Japanese immigration, but the public did not realize then that US Secretary of War William Howard Taft and Japanese Prime Minister Katsura Taro had agreed on a memorandum of understanding in which Japan recognized US hegemony over the Philippines and had also agreed to avoid conflict with American's trade with Asia. In return, the US promised no interference in Japan's occupation of Korea. Not until 1924 did the US public learn about what then became known as the Gentlemen's Agreement.

In May 1906 San Francisco's school board ordered Japanese students transferred to its Asian school. When news of that reached Japan, Tokyo demanded that Washington enforce the Treaty of 1884

that granted Japanese students the right to attend US schools. President Theodore Roosevelt responded by threatening San Francisco with Federal action if the city did not rescind its ruling. Californians were indignant and flayed the President ¹ for favoring Japanese interests over those of California. A face-off ensued.

Racial relations were not well in California. Incidents of violence had been noted in California newspapers, such as the incident in September 1906 when merchant seamen beat Y. Takemoto who was an employee of the steamer Santa Rosa.²

US Congressman Julius Kahn of California remarked, "I do not know whether the president means that he can compel the board of education to take Japanese children in our schools with white children. Personally I think there is grave doubt that it can be done under existing law... The people of California are law-abiding, but at the same time they intend to stoutly maintain their rights..."³ And regarding angry comments emanating from Japan, in late 1906 Congressman E.A. Hayes of San Francisco speaking before the Japanese-Korean Exclusion League said, "If we are going to have war with Japan, let's have it right away! We're ready, they ain't!"⁴

While Japanese newspapers demanded retribution for a growing list of wrongs,⁵ Ambassador Viscount Aoki Shūzō cited the 1894 treaty and pleaded, "After all the years of friendship between the two nations it seems too bad that the poor, innocent Japanese

¹ <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/japan1906.htm>. *Japan War Scare of 1906-1907*

² San Francisco Call, Sep 10, 1906

³ Los Angeles Herald, Dec 20, 1906

⁴ Los Angeles Times, Sep 19, 1906

⁵ Los Angeles Times, Oct 21, 1906

school children should be subjected to such indignities. Such action of the local authorities ... is resented very bitterly by all Japanese.”⁶

The demonstrations in Japan seemed spontaneous, but they were probably orchestrated. An Imperial Japanese Army publication from 1906 advised, “The possession of loyalty and patriotism is of absolute importance in war... The endeavor of peace training should be to cultivate this quality to a high degree.”⁷

The New York Times did not see war with Japan as imminent, but it did predict trade problems. Roosevelt faced a dilemma. The American economy was in recession.⁸ How could he avoid a trade war and still appease anti-Japanese Californians? He chose in favor of the economy and ordered Secretary of State Victor H. Metcalf to bring a Federal suit against the San Francisco school board.⁹

Meanwhile, US Ambassador Luke E. Wright and Secretary of State Elihu Root moved to soothe Japan. “The trouble about schools appears to have arisen from the fact that the schools which the Japanese had attended were destroyed by the earthquake and have not yet been replaced. The purely local nature of the San Francisco school question should be appreciated when the Japanese remember that the Japanese students are welcome in the hundreds of schools and colleges all over the country.”¹⁰ Aiding in that effort, Representative Bartholdt of Missouri, who was a leading disciple of international arbitration, minimized the possibility of war between the Japan and the US.

⁶ Los Angeles Times, Oct 26, 1906

⁷ Kuikosha Kiji [Officers Club Journal], No. 352, Dec 1906. Lieutenant Colonel Yoda, Imperial Japanese Army, “Modern Tendencies in Strategy and Tactics as Shown in Campaigns in the Far East.” Translated by Captain E.F. Calthrop, R.F.A. Journal of the Royal United Service Institute, v 51

⁸ May 1907–Jun 1908

⁹ Los Angeles Times, Oct 28, 1906

¹⁰ Ibid.

Roosevelt met with Representative Hayes, and the bellicose legislator conceded he would not push his bill to exclude Japanese from the United States.¹¹ Even though anti-Asian, anti-Japanese sentiments were tangible, the White power structure was not in accord; labor unions demanded immediate Japanese exclusion while farming lobbies preferred to wait and search for reliable replacement field labor.

In late 1906 the Japanese Embassy praised Roosevelt as a peacemaker in its war with Russia. "The heart the matter was in the hands of the President, and his willingness and ability to act was entirely relied upon."¹² The same day Washington took San Francisco to court.

Public response was immediate. The Los Angeles Times wrote, "The President has learned, with the utmost emphasis, from dozens of people of all classes in San Francisco and California, that sentiment against the Japanese is too pronounced, too deeply seated, to permit a change, and that the only thing to do is to 'let the Japanese down' as easily as possible." The Times defined "let them down" as just kind words and diplomatic "soft soap."¹³

Roosevelt did not know that Secretary Metcalf had finished his investigation of San Francisco schools and had informed city leaders that they were clearly within their rights to order Japanese pupils to attend a separate school. Wrote the Times, "It is quite certain that the State Legislature at its next session will pass a new law to keep the Japanese out of the schools in which Caucasians are taught."¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Los Angeles Times, Dec 2, 1906. On Sep 5, 1905 Roosevelt brokered the Treaty of Portsmouth that ended the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese War and established Japan as a modern nation.

¹³ Los Angeles Times, Dec 4, 1906

¹⁴ Ibid.

Cross-county communication was slow in 1907. A day after Metcalf's announcement, Roosevelt delivered a speech before Congress that characterized the decision of the San Francisco segregationist as a "wicked absurdity." The President said,

"Even as the law now is, something can be done ... In the matter now before me affecting the Japanese, everything that it is in my power to do will be done, and all of the forces, military and civil, of the United States which I may lawfully employ will be so employed. There should, however, be no particle of doubt as to the power of the national government completely to perform and enforce its own obligations to other nations. The mob of a single city may at any time perform acts of lawless violence against some class of foreigners which would plunge us into war. [But] that city by itself would be powerless to make defense against the foreign power thus assaulted..."¹⁵

In effect Roosevelt sided with Japan but softened his threat to San Franciscans by promising that if they rescinded the school segregation order, and if California refrained from passing further anti-Japanese legislation, he would negotiate with Japan to curtail Japanese immigration to the US. ¹⁶

Roosevelt's words inflamed Californians. Representative Hayes: "I want to be quoted on this. I assert that there is no authority under the Constitution which gives the Federal Government the right to make a treaty which shall dictate to us how we shall manage our schools." ¹⁷ The New York Times backed Hayes and wrote, "What

¹⁵ New York Times, Dec 4, 1906. Daily Bakersfield Californian, Dec 5, 1906

¹⁶ <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/japan1906.htm>. *Japan War Scare of 1906-1907*

¹⁷ New York Times, Dec 5, 1906

does he propose to do? Is he going to send a battalion of soldiers to escort a Japanese child to and from school, and to stand around and guard him while he plays at recess?"

The San Francisco Call reacted more coolly when it said that Japanese emigrants were treated fairly. "They are given an education free of charge in our public schools, but because they are mostly adult students, they are segregated in a special school."¹⁸ The Los Angeles Times also played down the crisis by pointing out that no more than 40 Japanese children were affected by the action of San Francisco authorities. The Times: "There are not over 100 [Japanese] in California that would have to be placed in separate schools, and it is ridiculous to think of international trouble as the outcome of such a trifling matter."¹⁹ In a face-saving move, San Francisco Board President Aaron Altman submitted that he would do everything possible to correct the impression given by Roosevelt that Japanese were absolutely excluded from the public schools.²⁰

Roosevelt's apparent bow to Japan was indigestible to at least one Bakersfield resident. Captain John Barker, in an open letter to "His Excellency Theodore Roosevelt, President of the United States," offered both an olive branch and a warning.

"My dear Sir: It is of the most sincere sentiments and regret that I sit down to write you a line -- an open letter. I am a Californian of more than 56 years residence and am in my 75th year of my age. I have been a Republican 50 years of that and have spent the best part of last night perusing your message to Congress, especially that part of it in which you refer, I regret

¹⁸ San Francisco Call, Dec 5, 1906

¹⁹ Los Angeles Times, Dec 5, 1906

²⁰ Daily [Bakersfield] Californian, Dec 6, 1906

to say, somewhat contemptuously to Californians and to California.”²¹

Barker listed how America had benefited from the sacrifices of California pioneers and set them up opposite the President’s threat of Federal force. Barker wrote,

“We ask you to reconsider your language and to ponder well the consequences that would ensue upon such a procedure on your part. We intend to care for and educate our children in our own way and all the powers of earth or hell cannot change our resolve. ... Once more I implore you to modify your view of our lives here and the habit and character of the men you address and do not force a law on a law-abiding people to a course of resistance that we both may regret.”²²

In all, 93 Japanese students, 25 of whom were born in the United States, attended San Francisco public schools. On December 11, 1906 the city ordered all of them enrolled with Chinese and Korean pupils at the Oriental School.²³ When news reached Japan, violent anti-American protests erupted. Japanese diplomats here insisted that the San Francisco was in violation of the Treaty of 1894.

The imbroglio was not improved by December 18 when Roosevelt reminded Californians that no one was asking for Japanese men to attend school with white children. Then too, because Japanese lived all over San Francisco, was it reasonable to require them to attend just one school?

²¹ Daily [Bakersfield] Californian, December 8, 1906

²² Ibid.

²³ Los Angeles Times, December 11, 1906

The President noted Secretary Metcalf's conversations with San Francisco teachers when they reported that very few Japanese pupils attended public schools, and those who did excelled in cleanliness, brightness, and good behavior, and that certainly recommended them well for admission.

Roosevelt added threatened, "If therefore the police power of San Francisco is not sufficient to meet the situation and guard and protect Japanese residents in San Francisco to whom under our treaty with Japan we guarantee the 'full and perfect protection for their persons and property' then it seems to me it is clearly the duty of the Federal Government to afford such protection."²⁴

On January 18, 1907 a writ of mandamus²⁵ was filed in California State Supreme Court on behalf of a Japanese pupil. The suit alleged that since "the Japanese are not in any sense Mongolians²⁶ but form a separate and distinct race," then the racial laws of California did not justify exclusion of Japanese from the general school population. The writ reminded the court that in 1853 the Federal Government granted more than 5,000,000 acres to California, and made large grants of other lands to the state, for the support of education. As recently as June 27, 1906, it also noted, Washington, DC passed an act giving California 5% of net proceeds from sales of public lands to support California's common schools. The argument concluded, "All schools ... should be conducted in conformity with the Constitution of the United States and with all treaties made by the authority of the United States, no matter what any State constitution or law says."²⁷

²⁴ Daily Californian, Dec 18, 1906.

²⁵ A writ of mandamus is an order to act. It is opposite of an order to "cease and desist."

²⁶ In this period the word Mongolians was commonly used in place of the word Chinese.

²⁷ New York Times, Jan 19, 1907

In early 1907 Senator Henry Cabot Lodge midwifed passage of an amendment granting the president authority to ban any foreign individual's entry to the US if the admission adversely affected labor conditions. The act generally placated Californians but was was actuarially unnecessary because a secret agreement on Japanese emigration had already been settled. In The Gentlemen's Agreement Japan promised to not issue new passports for visits to the continental US, although it would permit wives, children, and parents of Japanese already in the United States to travel to visit America. On March 13, 1907 the San Francisco School Board voted to allow Japanese pupils competent in English to attend White schools. The US Government dismissed its federal case, and the controversy seemed settled.

But other problems festered. In summer and fall of 1907, riots broke out at San Francisco after West Coast newspapers reported on Japanese beating Whites and Whites beating Japanese. The unrest provoked Japanese to call for war against the United States, but before long the boil quieted to a simmer.

On November 30, 1908 Japanese and US diplomats ignored the blow ups and affirmed their respective roles in Asia. Ambassador Takahira Kogoro agreed that Japan would recognize the US territorial possessions in the Pacific and its Open Door policy in China. Secretary of State Elihu Root recognized Japan's control over Taiwan, the Pescadores,²⁸ Manchuria, and Korea.²⁹ The Gentlemen's Agreement was reaffirmed.

Roosevelt had checkmated San Francisco's segregation ruling and in the process had an insight. In his 1909 letter to Senator

²⁸ The Pescadores are midway between mainland China and Taiwan.

²⁹ New York Times, May 17, 1908

Philander C. Knox, Roosevelt observed that Americans pulled in several directions at the same time, but he told Knox that the Federal Government, not the States, must prevail in international relations.

"...Our people are shortsighted and have short memories--I suppose all peoples are shortsighted and have short memories. The minute we arrange matters so that for the moment everything is smooth and pleasant, the more foolish peace societies, led by men like ex-Secretary of State Foster and ex-Secretary of the Navy Long, clamor for a stoppage in the building up of the Navy. On the other hand, at the very moment when we are actually keeping out the Japanese and reducing the number of Japanese here, demagogues and agitators like those who have recently appeared in the California and Nevada legislatures work for the passage of laws which are humiliating and irritating to the Japanese and yet offer no avail so far as keeping out immigrants is concerned; for this can be done effectively only by the national government."³⁰

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³⁰ Theodore Roosevelt, "The Threat of Japan." Papers of Theodore Roosevelt, 1909. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, pp. 120-126. Letter to Senator Philander C. Knox, who was soon to become the Secretary of State under William Howard Taft.