

# Remembering The No-No Boys

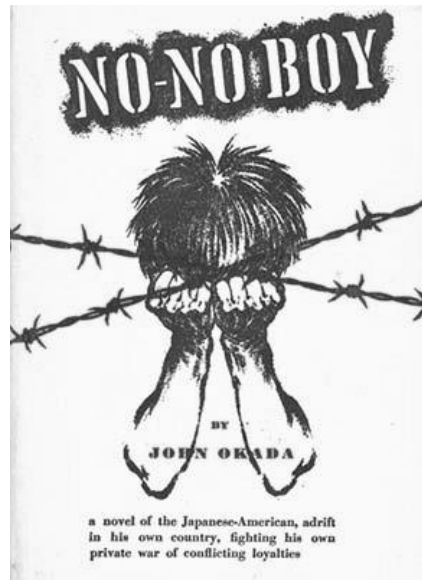
By Nadra Kareem Nittle, [About.com](http://About.com) Race Relations

(1) To understand who the No-No Boys were, it's first necessary to understand the events of World War II. The United States government's decision to place more than 110,000 individuals of Japanese origin into internment camps without cause during the war marks one of the most disgraceful chapters in American history. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on Feb. 19, 1942, nearly three months after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor the previous year. At the time, the federal government argued that separating Japanese nationals and Japanese Americans from their homes and livelihoods was a necessity because such people posed a national security threat, as they were likely to conspire with the Japanese empire to plan additional attacks on the U.S. In retrospect, however, historians agree that racism and xenophobia against people of Japanese ancestry following the Pearl Harbor attack prompted the executive order. After all, the United States was also at odds with Germany and Italy during World War II, but the federal government did not order mass internment of Americans of German and Italian origin.

(2) Unfortunately, the federal government's egregious actions did not end with the forced evacuation of Japanese Americans. After depriving these Americans of their civil rights, the government then asked them to fight for the country. While some agreed in hopes of proving their loyalty to the U.S., others refused. They were known as No-No Boys. Vilified at the time for their decision, today No-No Boys are largely viewed as heroes for standing up to a government that deprived them of their freedom.

## A Test of Loyalty?

(3) The No-No Boys received their name by answering no to two questions on a survey



given to Japanese Americans evacuated into concentration camps.

(4) Question #27 asked: "Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?"

(5) #28 asked: "Will you swear unqualified allegiances to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or other foreign government, power or organization?"

(6) Outraged that the U.S. government demanded that they vow loyalty to the country after flagrantly violating their civil liberties, some Japanese Americans refused to enlist in the armed forces. Frank Emi, an internee at the Heart Mountain camp in Wyoming, was one such young man. Angered that his rights had been trampled on, Emi and a half-dozen other Heart Mountain internees formed the Fair Play Committee (FPC) after receiving draft notices. The FPC declared in March 1944:

(7) "We, the members of the FPC, are not afraid to go to war. We are not afraid to risk our lives for our country. We would gladly sacrifice our lives to protect and uphold the principles and ideals of our

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country as set forth in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, for on its inviolability depends the freedom, liberty, justice, and protection of all people, including Japanese Americans and all other minority groups. But have we been given such freedom, such liberty, such justice, such protection? NO!!"

### **Punished for Standing Up**

(8) For refusing to serve Emi, his fellow FPC participants and more than 300 internees at 10 camps were prosecuted. Emi served 18 months in a federal penitentiary in Kansas. The bulk of No-No Boys faced three-year sentences of three years imprisonment in a federal penitentiary. In addition to felony convictions, internees who refused to serve in the military faced a backlash in Japanese-American communities. For example, leaders of the Japanese American Citizens League characterized draft resisters as disloyal cowards and blamed them for giving the American public the idea that Japanese Americans were unpatriotic.

(9) For resisters such as Gene Akutsu, the backlash took a tragic personal toll. While only answered no to Question #27—that he would no serve in the U.S. armed forces on combat duty wherever ordered—he ultimately ignored the draft notice received, resulting in him serving more than three years in a federal prison in Washington State. He left prison in 1946, but that wasn't soon enough for his mother. The Japanese-American community ostracized her—even telling her not to show up at church—because her two sons dared defy the federal government.

(10) "One day it all got to her and she took her life," Akutsu told American Public Media (APM) in 2008. "When my mother passed away, I refer to that as a wartime casualty."

(11) President Harry Truman pardoned all of

the wartime draft resisters in December 1947. As a result, the criminal records of the young Japanese-American men who refused to serve in the military were cleared. Akutsu told APM he wished his mother had been around to hear Truman's decision.

(12) "If she had only lived one more year longer, we would have had a clearance from the president saying that we are all okay and you have all your citizenship back," he explained. "That's all she was living for."

### **The Legacy of No-No Boys**

(13) The 1957 novel *No-No Boy* by John Okada captures how the Japanese American draft-resisters suffered for their defiance. Although Okada himself actually answered yes to both queries on the loyalty questionnaire, enlisting in the Air Force during World War II, he spoke with a No-No Boy named Hajime Akutsu after completing his military service and was moved enough by Akutsu's experiences to tell his story. The book has immortalized the emotional turmoil that No-No Boys endured for making a decision that is today largely viewed as heroic. The shift in how No-No Boys are perceived is in part due to the federal government's acknowledgement in 1988 that it had wronged Japanese Americans by interning them without cause. Twelve years later, the JACL apologized for widely vilifying draft resisters.



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