

Caricatures of Fear: Dr. Seuss, and How Japanese Internment Became Morally Acceptable

When Japanese people first immigrated to the United States in 1884, Americans originally saw them as useful laborers, until they started to thrive economically and socially. This triggered white fears of being replaced and overtaken and turned Japanese people into targets of suspicion and exclusion. Rising geopolitical tensions between the United States and Japan and propaganda further fueled support for Japanese internment during World War II, where 112,000 people were forcibly relocated into camps. One of the most influential forms of propaganda was political cartoons, including those created by Theodor Seuss Geisel. Dr. Seuss was a product and propagator of deep-rooted anti-Japanese sentiment, reflecting existing prejudices while using his comics to echo and legitimize the attitudes that made Japanese internment morally acceptable.

When Japanese immigration began, Japanese people were considered superior to Chinese people by the American government and public. Because of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 and the Panic of 1893 and subsequent depression, there was a shortage of cheap skilled labor, especially on the West Coast.¹ To solve this problem, the American Sugar Trust began importing Japanese agricultural workers to California in 1897, who transformed the beet business through their agricultural expertise.² These first-generation Japanese immigrants were known as Issei. Because the spike of Japanese immigration coincided with widespread discrimination against Chinese-Americans, Japanese people were positioned higher on America's racial hierarchy and were ethnically differentiated from Chinese people. Japan was also considered more powerful as a nation following its 1905 victory in the Russo-Japanese war.³ Japanese women were not typecast in the same way as Chinese women into a position of "diseased inferiority," which

¹ Catherine Lee, "'Where the Danger Lies': Race, Gender, and Chinese and Japanese Exclusion in the United States, 1870-1924," *Sociological Forum* 25, no. 2 (2010): 260.

² Malcolm Harris, *Palo Alto: A History of California, Capitalism, and the World* (Little, Brown and Company, 2023), 114-115.

³ Lee, "Where the Danger Lies," 260.

contributed to a more balanced gender ratio among Japanese immigrants. Japanese women instead played the role of the wife, which provided more labor for Japanese farms and protection of white women from “menacing Japanese men.”⁴

This initial ethnic differentiation that had once benefited Japanese-Americans became the groundwork for their exclusion. The balanced gender ratio helped allow for the establishment of

stable Japanese families and led to the birth of U.S.-born

children, known as Nisei.⁵ This led to Japanese women being

fetishized as incredibly fertile. Seuss draws on these racial

implications in his depiction of a Japanese woman with

exaggerated breasts, bred with Hitler to create a grotesque

monster child, implying that Japanese people were

biologically dangerous.⁶ Because Nisei held U.S. citizenship, their Issei parents were able to

acquire more land.⁷ Simultaneously, Japanese laborers became some of the

highest-paid agricultural workers and increasingly purchased and

cultivated land. This economic success provoked white anxiety about

being outbid and displaced, and Japanese people were no longer

considered “desirable Asians.”⁸ Seuss illustrated this fear by representing

agricultural Japanese laborers as “the unemployed silk worms of Japan”

with slanted eyes, glasses, and pointed mouths, belittling them and their

labor through animal imagery.⁹ These fears led to California’s alien land laws, which restricted



⁴ Lee, “Where the Danger Lies,” 261-2.

⁵ Lee, “Where the Danger Lies,” 264-5.

⁶ Geisel, *Married exactly one year today*.

⁷ Lee, “Where the Danger Lies,” 263.

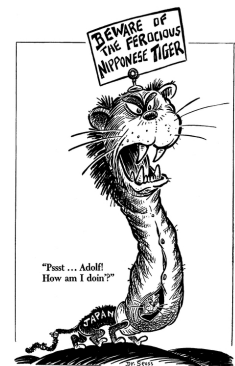
⁸ Harris, *Palo Alto: A History of California, Capitalism, and the World*, 114-5.

⁹ Geisel, *If you were smart enough to make silk, it ought to be a cinch to whip up a little gun cotton*.

land ownership and reduced Japanese immigrants to expendable labor.¹⁰ The “yellow peril” ideology reinforced this shift, portraying Japanese people as unassimilable and dangerous.¹¹

As a result of this ideological framing, anti-Japanese sentiment escalated into nationwide violence and legal dehumanization. In the 1922 case *Ozawa v. United States*, the Supreme Court declared Japanese immigrants “undesirable,” rendering them permanently “alien” and ineligible for citizenship. This exclusion was reinforced in 1924 when Japan was added to the Immigration Act’s Asiatic Barred Zone, marking a broader national shift toward hostility.¹² Anti-Japanese sentiment intensified throughout the 1920s and 1930s, with violence against Japanese Americans increasing nationwide, including incidents such as the 1934 mob attacks in Arizona. By 1930, Japan had become a serious competitor in the global market, generating fears of a Japanese invasion of America and further justifying violence against Japanese-Americans.¹³

Propagandists perpetuated the negative perception of Japanese people by repeatedly depicting them as animals, reptiles, and insects across media such as songs, films, cartoons, and writing.¹⁴ The dominant stereotypes included “the comical servant, sinister villains, the asexual detective, militaristic despots, and docile herds of followers of the emperor.”¹⁵ For example, Seuss depicted Japan as a cat puppeteering a much larger tiger and



seeking Hitler’s approval with “psst Adolf, how am I doing?”¹⁶ He presented Japan as weak and dependent on Hitler and Nazi Germany. In another cartoon, Seuss also drew two Japanese people winding a pulley mechanism with a rope labeled “Jap Threats to US,” asking whether they

¹⁰ Harris, *Palo Alto: A History of California, Capitalism, and the World*, 115.

¹¹ Mary Young, “Setting Sun: Popular Culture Images of the Japanese and Japanese Americans and Public Policy,” *Explorations in Ethnic Studies* 16, no. 1 (1993): 53-54, <https://doi.org/10.1525/ees.1993.16.1.51>.

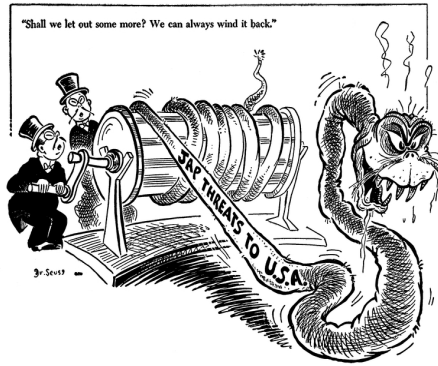
¹² Harris, *Palo Alto: A History of California, Capitalism, and the World*, 115.

¹³ Young, “Setting Sun,” 53-57.

¹⁴ Young, “Setting Sun,” 58; Minear, *Dr. Seuss Goes to War*, 118.

¹⁵ Young, “Setting Sun,” 54.

¹⁶ Geisel, *Beware of the ferocious Nipponese Tiger*



should release or retract it, portraying their threats as arbitrary and unserious. The end of the rope forms a grotesque monster with stereotypical features such as small nostrils and mustache, simultaneously marking Japanese people as alien and dangerous.¹⁷ Seuss and many other Americans were unaware of the U.S. oil embargo against

Japan and its impact on Japan's wartime decision-making.¹⁸ Propaganda flattened these complex geopolitical tensions, allowing Americans to view Japan through contradictory stereotypes. By the time Seuss created these cartoons, these stereotypes were already normalized in American culture. Seuss, in parodying Japanese stereotypes, harnessed this common anti-Asian sentiment to make his cartoons resonate with the public.¹⁹ When Seuss' cartoons were released in the PM, there was little controversy around racialized depictions of Japanese people.²⁰ Because these perceptions of Japanese people were so ingrained into public opinion, few people had problems with it.

Through this propaganda, Americans constructed a polarized moral framework against Japan and a need for national unity during World War II. From September 1939 to December 1941, the United States maintained a stance of official neutrality. After Pearl Harbor, however, the United States declared war on Japan and entered World War II. Pearl Harbor heightened the racial tension because the incident deepened Americans' emotional investment in the war and intensified perceptions of racial difference between Americans and their attackers.²¹ This

¹⁷ Geisel, *Jap threats to U.S.A.*

¹⁸ Minear, *Dr. Seuss Goes to War*, 118.

¹⁹ Amy Zawada, "The Political Roots of Dr. Seuss," American University, February 26, 2025, <https://www.american.edu/sis/news/20250226-the-political-roots-of-dr-seuss.cfm>.

²⁰ Minear, *Dr. Seuss Goes to War*, 25-26.

²¹ David M. Kennedy, "War in the Pacific" in *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford Press, 1999), 523.

emotional connection motivated civilians to see participation in the war effort as a moral obligation. Morality became a “significant military factor” and the government used propaganda as a tool to control public opinion.²² Typical wartime narratives emphasized heroism, but some accounts humanized soldiers as ordinary civilians. As war correspondent John Hersey described, “These were just American boys. They did not want that valley or any part of its jungle. They were ex-grocery clerks, ex-highway laborers, ... boys with a clean record and maybe a little extra restlessness, but not killers.”²³ By framing soldiers as everyday Americans, propaganda made their suffering more relatable to the public and intensified hostility toward Japanese soldiers, who were depicted as killing innocent civilians rather than opposing combatants.²⁴

Political artists and newspapers played a crucial role in shaping wartime public opinion and reinforcing the idea of American democratic superiority. Instead of media and art echoing public sentiment, they shaped it.²⁵ Because of this, the federal government sponsored public art and created the role for artists as storytellers, strengthening their ability to shape public perception. The War Department Art Advisory Committee (WDAAC) commissioned artists to document the war through an American perspective.²⁶ Seuss, like many other creators, used animal imagery of Japanese people already embedded in American culture to create political meaning within his work.²⁷ The PM, which published Seuss’ cartoons, was a liberal paper that emphasized democratic values and opposed fascism and other non-democratic systems. Its founder, Ingersoll, stated that “we are American and we prefer democracy,” implicitly defining who was American and who was not through democracy.²⁸ Seuss used the paper as a platform to

²² Welch, “The Culture of War: Ideas, Arts, and Propaganda.” 373.

²³ John Hersey, quoted in Kennedy, “War in the Pacific.” 561.

²⁴ Kennedy, “War in the Pacific.” 561.

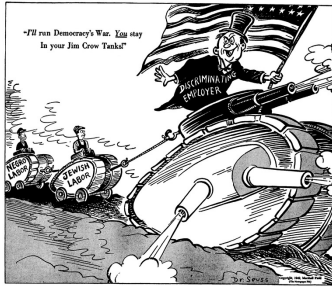
²⁵ Zawada, “The Political Roots of Dr. Seuss.”

²⁶ Welch, “The Culture of War: Ideas, Arts, and Propaganda.” 395.

²⁷ Zawada, “The Political Roots of Dr. Seuss.”

²⁸ Richard H. Minear, *Dr. Seuss goes to war: the World War II editorial cartoons of Theodor Seuss Geisel* (New York: New Press, 1999), 12-13.

criticize Jim Crow laws and antisemitism. Black Americans played a major role in the war effort



without much acknowledgment, which Seuss acknowledged in his cartoons.²⁹ For example, he illustrated a large tank driven by a discriminating employer dragging two smaller tanks labeled “Jewish labor” and “Negro labor.”³⁰ He also confronted domestic anti-semites



by connecting them to Hitler and the gift of “race hatred.”³¹ Other propaganda emphasized racial and gender diversity in the U.S. military to present “American democracy in action,” as seen in films like *Air Force* or *Wake Island*. America claimed moral superiority through these diverse depictions while ignoring its own bigotry and

systemic inequalities.

Despite Seuss’ awareness of domestic racism, he still created uniform racist caricatures of Japanese people without acknowledging the inherent contradiction. In one cartoon, he drew small figures on airplanes spitting tobacco into a Japanese man’s eye.³² He consistently used two slanted lines to represent Japanese eyes, making the character’s expressions ambiguous and



simian. In another comic, he depicted a Japanese caricature in a wanted poster format and described the figure’s expression as a “sneer,” morally framing Japanese people as inherently malicious through the word’s negative connotation.³³

²⁹ Welch, “The Culture of War: Ideas, Arts, and Propaganda,” 396.

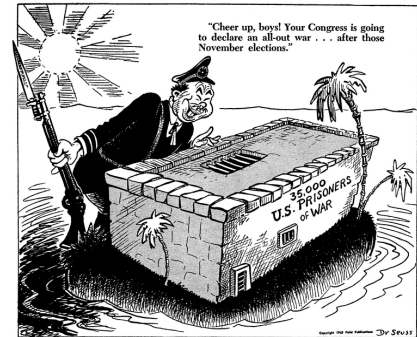
³⁰ Geisel, *I'll run Democracy's War. You stay in your Jim Crow tanks!*

³¹ Geisel, *Put your finger here, pal...*

³² Geisel, *The old tobacco juice where it counts!*

³³ Geisel, *Wipe that sneer off his face!*

Seuss intensified and sustained the polarized wartime atmosphere by collapsing racial and ideological differences into a single, unified enemy. Ingersoll stated the PM aimed to provide “the people of America the facts about the threat of fascist aggression—at home and abroad.”³⁴ He framed the war in moral terms and described Americans as victims of violence, with harsh words like “threat” and “aggression” directly linked to fascism. In one of Seuss’ cartoons, a Japanese soldier was guarding a cage containing 35,000 American prisoners of war.³⁵ While he was condemning the US government’s inaction, he also emphasized the large-scale brutality of the enemy. The United States, however, interned more than three times that number of



Japanese-Americans, revealing a contradiction between moral rhetoric and domestic policy. Seuss typically portrayed the United States as Uncle Sam or an eagle, while Axis powers were represented by their leaders.³⁶ He avoided depicting Roosevelt, even though he idolized him, because he believed that individual leaders did not represent the democratic principles of America. This reinforced his view of Axis nations as totalitarian and alien. He also linked isolationists in America with enemies abroad to build a common enemy.³⁷ He drew four kangaroos joined at the hip moving together in the same direction, with each one representing a different ideology: “America first,” or isolationists, Nazis, fascists, and communists.³⁸ Seuss called them “relatives,” implying ideological connection among enemy figures. This grouping reflects a specific political moment following the Nazi-Soviet pact, when communism was temporarily framed as aligned with fascist aggression in American discourse. By including

³⁴ Minear, *Dr. Seuss Goes to War.*, 13.

³⁵ Geisel, *Cheer up, boys! Your Congress is going to declare an all-out war... after those November elections.*

³⁶ Minear, *Dr. Seuss Goes to War.*, 22-23.

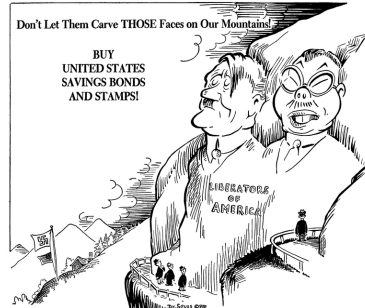
³⁷ Minear, *Dr. Seuss Goes to War.*, 21.

³⁸ Geisel, *Relatives? Naw... Just Three Fellers Going along for the Ride!*

communists alongside Nazis and fascists, Seuss reveals his own ideological bias and also demonstrates how his cartoons adapted to shifting wartime narratives, redefining the enemy as needed. In another cartoon, Seuss illustrated a bed with Uncle Sam and a bed labeled Europe with multiple people in it. The American bed was clean, while the European bed had many illnesses tacked onto it like “Nazi Fever,” “Stalin-Itch,” and “Italian Mumps.”³⁹ This contrast reinforced isolationist claims of American moral superiority, which Seuss critiques by placing the beds close together, grouping isolationists with Axis Europe.



Japanese caricatures remained rigid, while European enemies were depicted with greater variation. Seuss flagged a German person through the swastika and the accent implied in the



dialogue, rather than the figure’s facial features.⁴⁰ Hitler was depicted with recognizable features, distinguishing him from other Germans.⁴¹ Seuss was of German descent himself, which is a likely

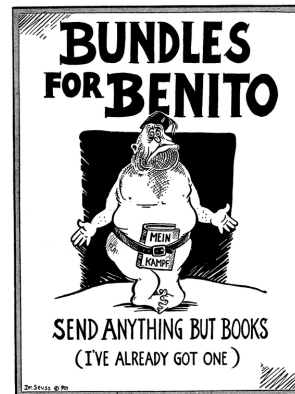
factor as to why there was variation within German people. Italian figures such as Virginio

³⁹ Geisel, *Ho Hum! No chance of contagion.*

⁴⁰ Geisel, *Haf you a match, ja?*

⁴¹ Geisel, *Don't let them carve THOSE faces on our mountains*

Gayda and Mussolini were also visually distinct.⁴² However, they are not as dignified as Hitler, stripping Mussolini naked and nicknaming him “Benito” diminutively.



In contrast, Japanese figures were largely indistinguishable. In his depiction of Hideki Tojo, the prime minister and military officer of Japan, Seuss changed only his eyes to have irises instead of slanted lines, while his facial structure and mustache remained consistent with stereotypes he had established.⁴³ Seuss also depicted Tojo's hind labeled Japan getting burned in a hot tub with the water labeled “war with U.S.” He also claimed to say an old Japanese proverb and used “velly” as a racist parody of a Japanese accent.⁴⁴ Even the Japanese emperor Hirohito, royal guard, and



messenger look nearly identical in Seuss' work because of the same eyes, mustache, and nose, showing how Japanese people were interchangeable. The animals on the throne have the same features as well, demonstrating how everything Japanese had to look a

⁴² Geisel, *Virginio Gayda Says*; Geisel, *Bundles for Benito*.

⁴³ Geisel, *Gosh, I wonder how easy this Tattoo stuff comes off...!*

⁴⁴ Geisel, *Man who draw his bath too hot, sit down in same velly slow*

certain way.⁴⁵ So even the most important figures of Japan, like Hirohito and Tojo, were reduced to being barely indistinguishable from their countrymen.

Through these caricatures, Seuss portrayed Japan as both incompetent and subordinate.

Using the portrayal of Japanese as apes,

Seuss drew a small monkey labeled Japan

with slanted eyes and glasses, tied to a

pulley machine controlled by Hitler.⁴⁶ He

portrayed Japan as being puppeteered by

Hitler, and through the noticeable size

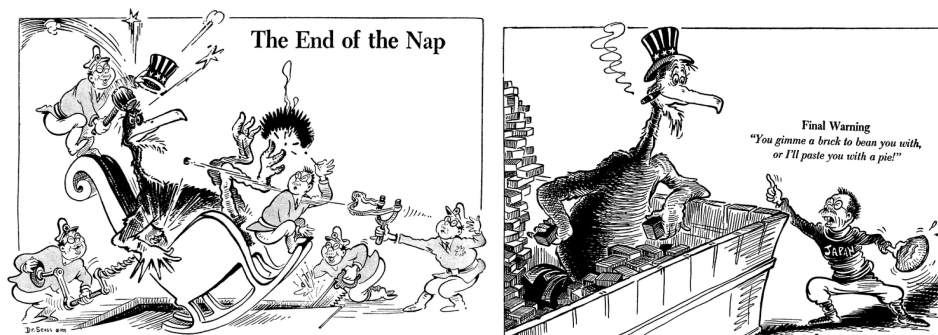
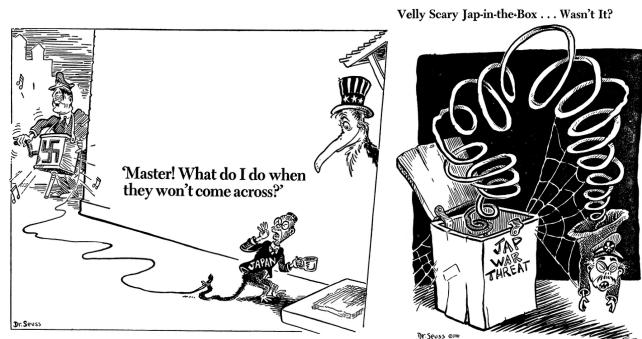
difference, weaker than America and Germany. He also created a “Jap-in-the-box,” labeled as a

“Jap War threat,” with a Japanese child hanging from it, framing Japan as immature and

inferior.⁴⁷ In other cartoons, Japanese minions use “slapstick” weapons, such as slingshots and a

trap door, or threaten trivial actions like throwing pies at Uncle Sam, reducing them to childish

aggressors rather than a serious military threat.⁴⁸



These racialized and contrasting depictions of Japanese people contributed to the justification for Japanese Internment. Seuss drew Japanese Americans on the West Coast taking

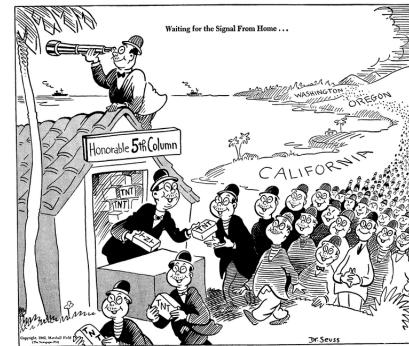
⁴⁵ Geisel, *Truly embarrassing, O Son of Heaven... 40,000 men lose face, with body unfortunately attached thereto!*

⁴⁶ Geisel, *Master! What do I do when they won't come across?*

⁴⁷ Geisel, *Velly Scary Jap-in-the-box... Wasn't it?*

⁴⁸ Minear, *Dr. Seuss Goes to War*, 119; Geisel, *The end of the nap*; Geisel, *Final Warning "You gimme a brick to bean you with, or I'll paste you with a pie!"*

TNT from the alleged Fifth column, a phrase referring to alleged internal groups collaborating with an external enemy to sabotage the country from within. A man was looking above it with binoculars as if they were “waiting for [a] signal,” building suspicion and fear.⁴⁹ He also illustrated Uncle Sam operating a machine, labeled the “psychological



We'll Have to Clean a Lot of Stuff Out Before We Put Peace Thoughts In!



disarmament of axis youth,” controlling both German and Japanese children.⁵⁰ This framed Japanese youth as incapable and in need of control, which justifies intervention and restriction. While initial arrests for internment were justified on these suspicions, mass internment was rooted in racism.⁵¹ These forces reinforced each other: racism justified suspicion,

while suspicion and Japan’s wartime aggression validated racism.⁵² This propaganda became so effective that up to 15% of Americans supported the extermination of Japanese people.⁵³ Many Japanese-Americans were also attacked at industrial sites and military installations under accusations of sabotage.⁵⁴ Internment was upheld legally in *Hirabayashi v. United States* and *Korematsu v. United States*, implementing curfews and officially authorizing internment. Both of these decisions were cited at the Nuremberg Trials in discussions of “military necessity.”⁵⁵ Racism was legalized by the US government, and 8000 Japanese Americans were repatriated or expatriated to Japan by 1946.⁵⁶ Because of visible racial differences, lack of assimilation, and

⁴⁹ Geisel, *Waiting for the signal from home...*

⁵⁰ Geisel, *We'll have to clean a lot of stuff out before we put peace thoughts in!*

⁵¹ Sundquist, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41211623>, 534.

⁵² Sundquist, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41211623>, 531.

⁵³ Sundquist, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41211623>, 537.

⁵⁴ Sundquist, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41211623>, 539.

⁵⁵ Sundquist, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41211623>, 531-2.

⁵⁶ Sundquist, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41211623>, 545.

entrenched social discrimination, Japanese Americans were an easy target for exclusion in America.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Sundquist, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41211623>, 533.

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