

Elbert D. Thomas; Forgotten Internationalist Missionary, Scholar, New Deal Senator, Japanophile, and Visionary

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The draft version of this report was much longer because I had written that paper for publication in an academic journal. Hence, this report will only briefly discuss what I had presented at the International Relations section of the 2007 Nagoya American Studies Summer Semnar. My draft consisted of the following contents:

Introduction

Childhood, Mormon Missionary, and University of Utah

New Deal Senator from Utah and Japan

Thomas and the Office of War Information (OWI)

Elbert D. Thomas and the Publication of his *Four Fears*

Thomas and Japanese-Americans

Thomas and the Debate over the Unconditional Surrender of Japan

Thomas and the Atomic Bomb

America's Mission in the Postwar World

Thomas's Views on Postwar Japan

Thomas's Career after His Senatorial Years

Conclusion

In this report I have decided to provide the entire text of the section concerning Thomas and the Japanese-Americans. Because of time limitations for making my presentation, I completely omitted that section, although Professor Hayashi had evaluated that section in his commentary. Thomas and the Japanese-Americans are discussed here from the fourth page to right before my concluding remarks. Because of the fifteen-page limitation imposed here I have omitted in this report the following sections: "America's Mission in the Postwar World," "Thomas's Views on Postwar Japan," and "Thomas's Career after His Senatorial Years."

I was delighted to know people in my panel and others at the session thought my paper was, generally speaking, original in content and well researched. I believe my paper adequately reflected the main theme "Religion in America" for this conference. I thank the three Professors in my panel (Professors Kan,

Hayashi, and Rotter) for their remarks and comments. I also thank Professors Fujimoto and Kawashima and other scholars and staff at Nanzan University for inviting me to make my presentation.

Elbert Duncan Thomas served as the U.S. Senator from Utah from 1933 to 1951. During World War II Thomas served as a member of the influential Senate Steering Committee, Chairman on the Committee on Education and Labor and a ranking member of the Military Affairs Committee. Thomas was instrumental in the establishment of the War Labor Board that mediated wartime disputes between industry and labor. As a scholar he was Vice President of the American Society of International Law and Chairman of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Commission. Thomas's thoughts and activities deserve a historical analysis in order to better understand American thinking and actions about U.S. presence in the Asia-Pacific region. In writing my paper I used the Elbert D. Thomas Papers at the Utah Historical Society and books and articles written by Thomas. I analyzed Thomas's relations with Japan from his missionary years to the time of his untimely death in February 1953. I argue that Thomas's experience in Japan as a Mormon missionary had a deep impact on his view of Japan and East Asia.

After briefly describing Thomas's childhood, Mormon missionary activities in Japan, and his academic career at the University of Utah I discussed Thomas's career as a U.S. Senator and his relations with Japan from the 1930s to the end of World War II. Until the late 1930s Senator Thomas favored appeasing Japanese militarism. In 1935 Senator Thomas worried that lack of understanding between the two nations would lead within ten years, to "the bloodiest war ever known in the world." He thus called for exchange of students between the U.S and Japan as means to achieve greater understanding and peace between the two nations, Senator Thomas opposed intervening in the Far East on behalf of China based on his belief that Japan could be won over by peaceful means. He worried that if the U.S. invoked the neutrality law towards the undeclared war between Japan and China, Japan could retaliate against American interests in China. When the Japanese military attacked the *Panay* in the Yangtze River, Senator Thomas appealed to the American public and Congress for calm by pointing to the fact that the Japanese government apologized for the sinking of the American naval vessel and also agreed to pay indemnities to those Americans killed and wounded during this incident.

By 1939, however, Senator Thomas was increasingly unwilling to put up with Japanese military aggression in China. When the Konoe cabinet collapsed in mid-October, Senator Thomas sensed that war would occur between the two countries; Mrs. Thomas made such an observation in her diary on October 16, an observation undoubtedly shared by her husband. Hideki Tojo, war minister and a war hawk in the Konoe cabinet, formed a new cabinet under his premiership on October 18.¹

On December 6 President Roosevelt sent a telegram addressed to the Japanese Emperor; Thomas was one of the people who suggested that the President send

such a cable. The American ambassador in Tokyo, Joseph Grew, was supposed to receive that cable but because of a deliberate delay in the handling of this cable in the Tokyo Central Postal Office, the details of which are discussed in Takeo Iguchi's article, Ambassador Grew did not receive the message in a way that would have permitted him to have an audience with Emperor Hirohito before the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor.² During the war, Senator Thomas argued that "[t]here is pretty good evidence that he was not even allowed to receive the [cable] sent to him by President Roosevelt just before Pearl Harbor, at least until war broke out, and it was too late."³

Shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Elbert Thomas began his monthly radio broadcast to Japan sponsored by the Office of War Information (OWI). He made his broadcasts to both American and Japanese listeners on the seventh day of each month, the day of the Pearl Harbor attack, urging Japanese listeners "to return to constitutional government, to reject their war lords, and to follow the ideals laid down for them 60 years ago by Emperor Meiji when he issued his famous rescript on government." Senator Thomas sent his OWI messages beamed at Japan every week during the last few weeks prior to the Japanese surrender on August 15. He continued to work with OWI until the fall of 1945. Thomas's senatorial colleagues, impressed by his activities, urged him to insert some of his messages in the *Congressional Record*. These insertions included his broadcasts right after atomic bomb explosions over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In my presentation and paper I then go on to describe the details of his August 7 and August 9 broadcasts.

Thomas published his book, *Four Fears*, in the spring of 1944, which called for Americans to embrace principles presented in the Atlantic Charter (August 1940) and President Roosevelt's Four Freedoms speech in January 1941. In this book Thomas shared Joseph Grew's opinion about the Japanese emperor in the aftermath of Grew's December 29, 1943 speech, one that received wide criticism from the American press because Grew had hinted at protecting the current emperor from dethronement in the postwar years.⁴

In spite of his call for retaining the Imperial Throne, Senator Thomas certainly did not want the U.S. and its allies to permit Japan to move simply back to the situation shortly before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and he gave suggestions for reforming the Japanese political economy based on his outlook that Japan could move back to a trajectory based on the idea of cooperation in the family of nations and constitutionalism, the key features he saw in Meiji Japan. Thomas expressed optimism that Germany and Japan could be brought back to the family of nations. "There are millions of decent Japanese and millions of decent Germans. We may not want to believe that now, we may find it easier to fight if we hate. But it is doubtful if the best fighters waste their energies hating. We must find those decent Germans and those decent Japanese, for on them, quite as much as on ourselves, rest the hopes of mankind."⁵ Thomas knew that the emperor was the only figure who could issue an Imperial rescript of Japanese

surrender, a document without which the Japanese armed forces would not lay down their arms *en masse*.⁶

On July 14, 1945 Senator Thomas, in a debate on a nationally broadcast NBC radio program, continued to maintain his view of the Japanese emperor mentioned in his *Four Fears*. I analyzed and described in my draft and presentation the details of that debate.

Thomas's analysis of the atomic bomb was a precursor to an argument made by P. M. S. Blackett in his book entitled *Fear, War and the Bomb: Military and Political Consequences of Atomic Energy*, published in 1948. In this book, the British Nobel prize winner in physics (1948), analyzing the aftermath of failure in international control of atomic energy, observed that atomic bombs could be used between the U.S. and Russia as tactical weapons after when the Soviets succeed in developing nuclear weapons; the Soviet Union succeeded in nuclear detonation in August 1949. Blackett's answer to decreasing the chances of nuclear war was pursuing general disarmament that included cutting nuclear arsenals but not abolishing them because he found that to be unrealistic.⁷

While very critical of Japanese war atrocities, such as the indiscriminate bombings near Shanghai in 1932 and the Bataan death march in 1942,⁸ Thomas argued that the West was "rapidly developing... same callousness and indifference to human values in its international society" as the East such as Japan. To make this point, Thomas referred readers to not only the Nazi holocaust but also American compromise of its "best standards," including the usage of the atomic bomb which indiscriminately took away life, including that of innocent women and children.⁹

An opponent of outlawing teaching of German in American schools during World War I because that would not contribute to winning the war, and an advocate of publicly calling for military and political actions to save the Jews from the Nazi Holocaust during World War II, something his Democratic cohorts, including the President and the Democrats in Congress, thought should be subordinated to the war effort, Senator Thomas did what he could do to assist the Japanese-Americans as they were incarcerated during World War II. Senator Thomas was instrumental in overcoming opposition and having the Nisei—Japanese-Americans who were second generation Americans like himself—enlist and participate in the draft.¹⁰

Although Thomas did not visibly oppose the passage of Public Law 503, he, in facing nationwide hostilities towards Japan, including even those who were Americans of Japanese ancestry, tried to assist Japanese-Americans through his protégé, Mike Masaoka, a second generation American of Japanese ancestry. He had greatly impressed Thomas over ten years before in a high school speech and debating contest sponsored by the University of Utah. Masaoka subsequently helped Thomas's Senatorial campaigns in 1932, 1936 and 1940, as a volunteer. Undoubtedly worried about Japanese-Americans facing social oppression and discrimination similar to that suffered by ethnic groups such as German-

Americans during the First World War, Senator Thomas on May 9, 1941 entered into the *Congressional Record* an essay entitled “The Japanese-American Creed,” written several months before by Masaoka, an essay that pledged Japanese-American’s loyalty to the U.S.:

I am proud that I am an American citizen of Japanese ancestry, for my very background makes me appreciate more fully the wonderful advantages of this nation. I believe in her institutions, ideals, and traditions, I glory in her heritage; I boast of her history; I trust in her future. She has granted me liberties and opportunities such as no individual enjoys in the world today. She has given me an education befitting kings. She has permitted me to build a home to earn a livelihood, to worship, think, speak and act as I please—as a free man equal to every other man.

Although some individuals may discriminate against me, I shall never become bitter or lose faith, for I know that such persons are not representative of the majority of the American people. True, I shall do it in the American way; aboveboard, in the open, through courts of law, by education, by providing myself to be worthy of equal treatment and consideration. I am firm in my belief that American sportsmanship and attitude of fair play will judge citizenship and patriotism on the basis of action and achievement, and not on the basis of physical characteristics.

Because I believe in America, and I trust she believes in me, and because I have received innumerable benefits from her, I pledge myself to do honor to her at all times and in all places; to support her Constitution; to obey her laws; to respect her flag; to defend her against all enemies, foreign and domestic; to actively assume my duties and obligations as a citizen, cheerfully and without reservations whatsoever, in the hope that I may become a better American in a greater America.¹¹

In the summer of 1941, Masaoka, who had been teaching part time since 1938 for the freshmen debating team at the University of Utah and taking pre-law courses there, reluctantly accepted the prodding from the leaders of the Japanese-American Citizens League (JACL) to lead that organization as its executive secretary after consulting with Senator Thomas who helped the twenty-five-year old Masaoka make his final decision. The Senator believed the JACL needed the talent of Masoka to run it as war clouds were moving in over U.S.-Japan relations, a situation that could have negative implications for Japanese-Americans. Shortly after Masaoka became JACL’s leader, Senator Thomas, who was an influential member of the Senate’s military affairs, foreign affairs, and labor committees, called Masaoka to go to Los Angeles, where a presidential commission on equal employment was holding hearings in the defense industries in the area. Masaoka successfully testified at the commission’s hearing to secure jobs for Japanese-Americans, arguing that they were being refused employment in these industries. When Masaoka was detained by police during his campaign to organize the JACL in Nebraska and the Rocky Mountain states, Senator Thomas was instrumental in securing his release and resuming his activities.¹²

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued the infamous Executive Order 9066 that led to forced relocation of thousands of Japanese-Americans from the West Coast to relocation camps in the interior of the U.S. This relocation order was reinforced by the passage of Public Law 503 in Congress, a law which was unanimously passed in the Senate, although Senator Taft criticized its lax wording. Even Senator Thomas did not oppose during the hearings the fact that the law aimed only at Japanese-Americans.¹³

Although some *Nisei* served in the Army at the time of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, they were stigmatized by the Selective Services as 4-C aliens. In addition, for a while the Nisei Hawaiian National Guard was disbanded after the Pearl Harbor attack before being trained in the mainland as the 100th Battalion, a unit whose intensity, skill and intelligence very much impressed the Pentagon. Many Japanese-Americans of Japanese ancestry were being trained as interpreters and translators after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. After January 1943, the American government's drive to utilize the talents of Japanese-Americans intensified with the creation of the now legendary segregated unit, the 442nd Battalion, consisting of *Nisei* volunteers led by white officers and with increased recruitment of Nisei as translators and interpreters.

Masaoka was instrumental in assisting such figures as Assistant Secretary of Army John J. McCloy in the creation of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, to which he was the first to volunteer, the second being his colleague George Inagaki who became Admiral Chester Nimitz's interpreter in the Pacific Theatre.

While Senator Thomas played a behind-the-scenes role in assisting the efforts of Masaoka and JACL in their efforts to organize the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and move Japanese-Americans out from the relocation camps, attempts were made by racist elements in Congress to deprive all Japanese-Americans of citizenship, an attempt Masaoka, with the help of his Caucasian friends, succeeded in negating. Furthermore, Masaoka, who by then was working as a public relations staff for the 442nd Battalion undergoing training in Camp Shelby, was called by chairman Costello, a racist native Californian, to his subcommittee of the infamous HUAC, which attempted to paint the picture that Masaoka was effectively manipulating the WRA with his subversive elements in Congress, including Senator Thomas and Congressman Jerry Voorhis. Masaoka played dumb. WRA officials such as Dillon Myer argued against Costello's claims and the media began to question the fact that the committee uncovered nothing that Costello claimed, hence discrediting himself and his subcommittee.¹⁴

In the Allied war effort in Europe, the Japanese-Americans fought with valor, incurring a staggering number of casualties, among them Masaoka's brothers: one was killed and another two were wounded in action. Both the 442nd Regiment and the 100th Battalion, which later became part of the 442nd as its 1st Battalion, left one of the most distinguished American military records of World War II.

However, as fighting in Europe came to an end with the German surrender in

May 1945, Masaoka, who was a public relations staff of the 442nd in Italy, was wondering why all the requests for the Congressional Medal of Honor had been downgraded to Distinguished Service Cross or Silver Star. It was at this time that Masaoka saw Senator Thomas, who was touring Italy as a chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee. Masaoka, after discussing *Nisei* war performance with Thomas, raised the issue of the Medal of Honor. Senator Thomas looked into this issue and one Medal of Honor was awarded to Sadao Munemori, who had been killed in action in April 1945.¹⁵

During the immediate postwar years, Masaoka was instrumental in lobbying efforts and negotiations that led to President Truman's signing of a bill that prohibited indiscriminate deportation of treaty merchants from Japan who had been allowed, along with students from Japan under provisions of the 1924 Exclusion Act, to live without having the opportunity to become permanent residents in the U.S. as long as their status did not change. Many of these people and those who overstayed, such as Mrs. William J. Sebald, the wife of an influential American diplomat, established families with American citizens but were subject to deportation even though many of them had contributed to the American war effort. In his efforts Masaoka was assisted by such figures in Congress as Senator Thomas, and deportations were halted until the aforementioned bill was signed by the President.

This change in immigration and the granting of American citizenship to Japan-born U.S. servicemen were victories for Masaoka and JACL's postwar efforts. But the President's signing of the Japanese American Evacuation Claimants Act was a controversial one. Signed on the day following the changes in the immigration law, this Claimants Act was grossly inadequate in compensating the properties and assets lost by Japanese-Americans during their forced evacuation. Although Congress believed the passage of this law ended the issue, Masaoka regretted that he could not secure more time and energy outside of resolving the fundamental issue of equality of naturalization and immigration.¹⁶

In addition to his behind-the-scenes support of the JACL, Senator Thomas, appealed to the American public during the war not to mistreat Japanese and Japanese-Americans interned or living in the U.S. at a time when emotions ran high as Americans learned of brutal treatment and atrocities by Japanese soldiers towards American civilians and soldiers in Japanese captivity. For example, on February 7, 1944, Thomas in the Senate condemned Japanese brutalities and atrocities towards American prisoners but also made the following statement:

[O]nly those whose fathers, and brothers, and sons are in the hands of the Japanese know much anguish and revulsion it brought. The people of New Mexico and Arizona know—for entire regiments of their National Guard were taken prisoner at Bataan. And some of our own people in Utah know, too, the torment of wondering about the welfare of loved ones held prisoner by the enemy. It is true, too, that sometimes the severest pains are not discernable upon the surface, and though we cried out in anger and protest as a nation, and though we may have thought such

things among ourselves as individuals, we all know that there would be no retaliation in kind against the Japanese interned in this country. There have been no so-called incidents. A mayor of a small town in New Jersey ordered police to stop a basketball game because three of the players were Japanese, though American citizens, and one the brother of a boy fighting with our troops in Italy. But when the boys came out upon the floor to play there was no demonstration by the crowd. Let it be said to our lasting credit as a nation that even with the sorest provocation we have not stopped to the degraded level of our enemy. But let him not think that because we have not done so we are inclined to forget or that his punishment is less certain. For when the full story is told it will be easier for the American people to forget the perfidy of Pearl Harbor than to forget the wanton brutality practiced by the Japanese in the treatment of American captives.¹⁷

In making this remark Thomas worried about his first daughter, Chiyo, who was born in Japan during Thomas's years there and given a Japanese name. Since 1943 Chiyo had been sent to the Philippines by the Red Cross as a recreational therapist.¹⁸

Shortly before his untimely death in February 1953, Thomas wrote an essay looking back at his life. In it was the essence of his Wilsonian worldview that combined with his experience in Japan.¹⁹

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Notes

1. *New York Times*, February 15, 1935; and Justin H. Libby, "Senators King and Thomas and the Coming War with Japan," *Utah Historical Quarterly* Vol. 42 No. 4 (Fall 1974), 377-80. On Roger Greene and his activities, see Warren I. Cohen, *The Chinese Connection: Roger S. Greene, Thomas W. Lamont, George L. Sokolsky and American-East Asian Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978). See the October 16, 1941 entry of the diary kept by Thomas's wife in Box 4 of the Elbert Thomas Papers, Utah Historical Society, Salt Lake City, Utah.
2. Takeo Iguchi, "Taibei Saishu Oboegaki to Beidaitoryo no Shinden no Kaidoku Kosaku o Meguru Shijitu no Saikensho," *Kokusai Seiji* No. 144 (February 2006): 85-98.
3. See the transcript of the July 14, 1945 broadcast by the National Broadcasting Company,, p. 5, "1945 Aug. 18 Japan after Surrender," Box 78, Thomas papers.
4. Masanori Nakamura, *The Japanese Monarchy: Ambassador Joseph Grew and the Making of the Symbol Emperor System, 1931-1991* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1992), 22-28.
5. Elbert D. Thomas, *The Four Fears* (Chicago: Ziff Davis Publishing Company, 1944), 166-67.
6. Elbert D. Thomas, "Elbert D. Thomas," Louis Finkelstein, *Thirteen Americans: Their Spiritual Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), 147.

7. P. M. S. Blackett, *Fear, War and the Bomb: Military and Political Consequences of Atomic Energy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1948), 2, 210-12.
8. Elbert D. Thomas, "Atomic Bombs in International Society," *The American Journal of International Law* Vol. 39, No. 4 (Oct., 1945): 740.
9. Thomas, "Atomic Bomb," 739.
10. Thomas, "Elbert D. Thomas," 132, 146-47. *Thomas and the Plight of the Jews*.
11. Mike Masaoka and Bill Hosokawa, *They Call Me Moses Masaoka: An American Saga* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1987), 50.
12. Masaoka, 34, 37, 48-49, 51, 67, 76, Bill Hosokawa, *JACL in Quest of Justice: The History of the Japanese American Citizens League*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1987), 102, 127-28,, 132-33.
13. Roger Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II*, (New York: Hill and Wang), 54.
14. Masaoka, 123-59, 178-79; Hosokawa, 209-34.
15. Masaoka, 23, 161, 176-78.
16. Masaoka, 202-212.
17. "American Prisoners of War in the Far East: Remarks of Hon. Elbert D. Thomas, A Senator from the State of Utah in the Senate of the United States, February 7 1944" (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1944), 2-3.
18. Thomas to Kenneth W. Colegrove, March 16, 1945, "Elbert Thomas," Kenneth W. Colegrove Papers, Herbert C. Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa.
19. Thomas, "Elbert D. Thomas," 135-36.