

Ralph Carr: A Lone Voice in the Defense of a Hated Minority

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“If you harm them, you must first harm me. I was brought up in small towns where I knew the shame and dishonor of race hatred. I grew to despise it because it threatened the happiness of you and you and you” (pointing at three different farmers in the crowd).

Speech by Ralph Carr on March 26, 1941, La Junta Town Meeting¹

Escalating Hysteria

After Pearl Harbor was attacked on December 7, 1941, Americans were enraged, and Congress declared war on Japan the next day. As the United States entered World War II, the American people increasingly began to fear that Japanese-Americans were harboring a secret loyalty to Japan. This hysteria was stoked by public figures such as Lieutenant General John DeWitt, head of the Western Defense Command, who insisted: “A Jap’s a Jap. It makes no difference whether the Jap is a citizen or not.”² DeWitt’s claim was soon backed by other policymakers, such as Secretary of War Henry Stimson, Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, Provost General Gullion (the Army’s top legal officer), and Secretary of State Cordell Hull.³ Similar sentiments were expressed by every

congressperson from California, Oregon, and Washington, by Supreme Court Justices, by mayors, and by all Western governors except one.⁴ The voices of these politicians were echoed by hundreds of newspapers across the country, as well as by radio stations and film-makers. The general public quickly followed suit. Vendors refused to hire or sell goods to anyone of Japanese descent, and Japanese Americans were spit upon, beaten, and shot; their buildings and businesses were burned. A national survey taken in 1942 found that the number of Americans who believed that the Japanese were inherently warlike was double the number of Americans who believed the same about the Germans.⁵

Eventually, even the President of the United States succumbed to the spreading public opinion. On February 19, 1942, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing the Secretary of War and military commanders to detain anyone on the West Coast deemed to be a threat and to remove the detainees to internment camps farther inland.⁶ Beginning on March 24, 1942, about 120,000 Japanese-Americans, mostly American citizens, were relocated to internment camps.⁷ Forced to bring only what they could carry, evacuees sold many of their possessions for a fraction of their true value, and left their homes, businesses, and farms behind.⁸ One Japanese family sold their house, barn, land, crops, tractors, and horses for only \$75, and another sold their pickup truck for one-fifth of the value of its tires.⁹ Relocated Japanese lost about 75% of their assets on average, and could work for only 40% of what the average American serviceman earned. Internees not only suffered economically, but also mentally and physically. Surrounded by barbed wire fences and guard towers with armed sentries, evacuees lived in barracks lacking insulation and plumbing. They had no furniture other than army cots and stoves, and they were forced to use community dining halls and bathrooms.¹⁰ Disease was common in the crowded, unsanitary camps, and many interned Japanese-Americans ended up

committing suicide or being killed by the guards.¹¹ In the midst of this widespread xenophobia, few defended the rights of Japanese-Americans as unflinchingly as Colorado Governor Ralph L. Carr.

Carr's Climb to Political Prominence

Carr's election as governor of Colorado represented a well-earned accomplishment atop the summit of a professional and political mountain. Born to a family of Scots-Irish miners on December 11, 1887 in Rosita, Colorado, Carr grew up in various mining camps around the state, working to support his family since the age of six.¹² After earning his undergraduate and law degrees from the University of Colorado, Carr moved to the largely Spanish-speaking community of Antonio in the San Luis Valley, where he worked as a journalist and lawyer.¹³ It was there that Carr became fluent in Spanish and developed a close bond with the Spanish community. One of Carr's best friends, William Grant, once said of him: "I was never in Ralph's office when he wasn't talking to a poor Spanish American, keeping someone in a three-piece suit waiting."¹⁴ On the strength of his legal work, Carr was appointed as Colorado's Assistant Attorney General, and in 1929, he was elevated to the office of Attorney General. In 1938, Carr was elected by a wide margin as governor of Colorado. Carr's popularity rose even further when he successfully got the state out from under its \$1,800,000 debt, and in 1940 he was unsurprisingly reelected by a landslide.¹⁵ By now, Carr was such a popular politician that when Wendell Wilkie was preparing to run for president in the 1940 election, he asked Governor Carr to be his vice-presidential running mate. Carr declined the invitation, citing his loyalty to the state of Colorado and his commitment to getting the state's work accomplished for the people who elected him.¹⁶

Carr's Courageous Stance

Carr was midway through his second term as governor when President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066. As soon as Carr found out about the order, he shouted: "Now, that's wrong! Some of these Japanese are citizens of the United States."¹⁷ In a statewide radio speech that he delivered only three days after the Pearl Harbor attack, Carr robustly opposed discrimination towards Japanese-Americans: "From every nation of the globe people have come to the United States who sought to live as free men under our plan of government. We cannot test the degree of a man's affection for his fellows or his devotion to his country by the birthplace of his grandfathers."¹⁸ In later radio addresses, Carr would reassert and reaffirm his strong opposition to discrimination. He also gave multiple speeches on the topic, preaching to thousands of Coloradans that American citizens of Japanese descent had the same constitutional rights as any other American. Carr also wrote to *The Pacific Citizen* newspaper, the *Christian Century* magazine, the Colorado Federation of Labor (a labor union in Antonio), and to many individual Coloradans in an attempt to extinguish the growing hostilities. Carr told reporters that it was unconstitutional to detain American citizens solely because of their Japanese heritage, and he gave examples of how Japanese-Americans had made important contributions to the United States war effort.¹⁹

Carr was a lone voice in his courageous political stance. Except for Carr, every Western governor, along with the governors of North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, and Arkansas, declared that they opposed the immigration of Japanese-Americans to their states. Several of these governors threatened to call in the National Guard if any Japanese-Americans were to enter their territory. In Colorado, leaders in both the Democratic and the Republican

parties vilified Japanese-Americans. Both of Colorado's senators and many city leaders were in favor of forcibly barring Japanese-Americans from entering Colorado, but Carr kept the state's borders open. He also refused to hold a legislative session that would have denied noncitizens the right to own property in the state. When landlords sought to extract disproportionately high rents from Japanese-American immigrants, Carr urged city and business leaders to intervene on behalf of the tenants.

While Carr was outraged by the internment of Japanese-Americans, he permitted a camp to be established within the state, reasoning that evacuees would be better off in Colorado with him as governor than they would be in any other state. Carr allowed the 7,500-plus Japanese-Americans interned in Colorado's Camp Amache to work on farms outside the camp, and issued a statewide order that required county and city officials to protect the internees from violence.²⁰ Ralph Carr himself even hired an Amache internee, Wakako Domoto, as his housekeeper, paying her nearly twice the amount she had been earning at Amache, and providing her with room, board, and college tuition. By taking a Japanese internee into his own home, Colorado's chief executive was demonstrating to the state that he trusted the Japanese just as much as he trusted any American citizen.²¹

The Political Fallout

Because of his principled stance on the treatment of Japanese-Americans, Carr's popularity plummeted. Over the course of his second term, Carr received thousands of letters and telephone calls protesting his position, some from his former supporters and admirers. Several Coloradans overtly threatened to harm Carr or the Japanese-American evacuees that he was protecting. The media also denounced the governor that it had once praised. Colorado

newspapers had once been largely supportive of Carr, but in the midst of the mass hysteria, most of the state's papers harshly criticized Carr's position. Colorado's largest newspaper, the *Denver Post*, had once written that Carr was "a strong potential candidate for the Presidency," and that "the great majority of the people, Democrats and Republicans alike, believe in his ability, trust in his judgement, and want him to succeed."²² Now, the *Post* referred to Carr as a "sappy sentimentalist" and complained: "His statement does not express the sentiment of the American people.... COLORADO DOESN'T WANT THESE YELLOW DEVILS AND DOESN'T INTEND TO ALLOW THIS STATE TO BE TURNED INTO A SANCTUARY FOR THE ENEMIES OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE."²³

When Carr's second term as governor ended and he ran for the U.S. Senate against incumbent Edwin Johnson, he found that his support for Japanese-Americans had become a weapon in Johnson's hands. One of Johnson's main arguments against Carr was that Carr was a threat to national unity, since he criticized Roosevelt's internment policy. Johnson claimed that if Carr was elected Senator, he would welcome Japanese into the state, and that "further concentration of them here might cause trouble."²⁴ Colorado Representative William Hill, who was once one of Carr's most ardent supporters, excoriated Carr for his position on Japanese-Americans, and the majority of the Spanish-speaking community in the San Luis Valley voted against their formerly beloved governor. Carr, who had easily won the 1940 gubernatorial election with 60% of the vote, now lost his Senate race to Edwin Johnson by a single percentage point, making it one of the narrowest defeats in Colorado's political history. Carr and his remaining supporters were surely right in blaming the defeat on his dogged resistance to prejudice towards Japanese-Americans.

If Carr had acceded to the prejudices of the majority, he would have been immensely more popular, and he almost certainly would have been able to marshal this popularity to enhance his own political prospects. Indeed, opposition to Japanese-Americans greatly benefited the political career of Earl Warren, then Attorney General of California, who later went on to become governor of California, and then Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court.²⁵ After losing his Senate race, Carr's political career was over forever, and he returned to his law practice in Antonio, Colorado. On September 22, 1950, 62-year old Ralph Carr died from an ankle infection that had been exacerbated by his diabetic condition.²⁶ Carr's political sacrifice had a significant impact on Colorado. Thanks to Carr's welcoming attitude towards Japanese-Americans, roughly half of all of the Japanese-Americans that evacuated the West Coast prior to forced relocation made Colorado their destination.²⁷ Without Carr to make Colorado their safe haven, these people would have moved to more hostile states, or would have faced the indignities of internment. Carr's decision also had an effect on nationwide public opinion. Carr's stance made headlines across the country, leading Americans to realize sooner rather than later that internment was unethical and unconstitutional. Dillon Meyer, the former head of the War Relocation Authority (WRA) which carried out the internment of Japanese Americans, stated that the WRA ended internment before the war's end in response to increasing public sentiment against it, thanks in large part to Ralph Carr.²⁸ Today, the name of Ralph Carr stands as a reminder that political courage has its costs, but that the cost of cowardice is morally and constitutionally even steeper.

Endnotes

¹ Adam Schrager, *The Principled Politician: The Ralph Carr Story* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2008), 193.

² Schrager, 177.

³ Richard Reeves, *Infamy: The Shocking Story of the Japanese American Internment* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2015), xvii.

⁴ Reeves, 99.

⁵ Schrager, 89.

⁶ National Archives, “Japanese-American Internment During World War II,” March 4, 2020, <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/japanese-relocation>. Accessed March 27, 2020.

⁷ History.com Editors, “Japanese Internment Camps,” Original October 29, 2009, Updated February 21, 2020, <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/japanese-american-relocation>. Accessed March 19, 2020.

⁸ National Archives, “Japanese-American Internment During World War II,” March 4, 2020, <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/japanese-relocation>. Accessed March 27, 2020.

⁹ Reeves, 70.

¹⁰ Reeves, 80.

¹¹ Reeves, 117.

¹² Denver Public Library, “Ralph Carr (1887-1950),” September 19, 2018,
<https://history.denverlibrary.org/colorado-biographies/ralph-carr-1887-1950>. Accessed February
15, 2020.

¹³ Schrager, 27-29.

¹⁴ Schrager, 75.

¹⁵ Schrager, 59.

¹⁶ Schrager, 53.

¹⁷ Schrager, 133.

¹⁸ Schrager, 145.

¹⁹ Schrager, 106.

²⁰ Colorado Encyclopedia, “Granada War Relocation Center (Amache),” December 28, 2018, <https://coloradoencyclopedia.org/article/granada-war-relocation-center-amache>. Accessed March 21, 2020.

²¹ Schrager, 308-309.

²² Schrager, 32.

²³ Schrager, 149; emphasis (i.e. capitalization) in the original.

²⁴ Schrager, 132.

²⁵ Reeves, 280.

²⁶ Schrager, 329.

²⁷ Reeves, 66.

²⁸ Reitzig, 108.

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