

A Historical Review of three Generations of Japanese American

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The assimilation process of social mobility of the first three generations of Japanese Americans examined by Onozawa (Onozawa 2004:93) shows that their upward mobility pattern was as smooth movement, but the reality cannot be over simplified. Their assimilation has been occurring as part of the dynamics of history, received strong influences from both American society and Japanese society, as discussed in the historical trend and background of the immigration from Japan to the U.S.A. by the same writer (Onozawa 2003). To take occupational assimilation as an example, the process was affected greatly by historical factors, such as the exclusionist movement, the wartime evacuation and incarceration, etc. (Onozawa 2004). In period 1 (1890-1908), the Issei generation started their careers in the U. S. from the bottom of the social hierarchy, being employed as poorly paid manual workers in agricultural or construction work. Slowly they progressed upward, depending upon their diligence. Their occupations gradually diversified and shifted from blue collar to white collar. But at the stage their white-collar job were limited and mainly were within the Japanese community. With the advent of Period 3 (1941-1970's), the time of evacuation and incarceration for so many Japanese Americans, they had to be relocated to concentration camps after abandoning their estates accumulated over a lifetime. Their social status dropped drastically. This caused much mental anguish and suffering for the Japanese especially for Nisei who held U. S. citizenship; their rage was revealed by the rebellious uprisings in the camps and in court suits promoted by the Japanese American Citizens League. However, paradoxically, this period of evacuation and incarceration gave the Japanese a new starting point for their assimilation. The Issei and Nisei's dual affiliation status was sharply reduced. They were compelled to give up their ties with Japan or give up their desire to return to their mother country (or, in the case of the Nisei's, their parent's mother country). Moreover, during more than three years that they were incarcerated they were constantly being indoctrinated into the American way of life and the American way of thinking. Every campsite was given to the Japanese, through which they were trained in the U. S. democratic system. By being forced to live in a non-Japanese social norm circumstance they were forced to quickly acculturate; after the war, though they suffered a great deal in material and psychic costs, they were able to rapidly attain higher social and economic status. In short, experience in the camps and their shift of value-orientation contributed greatly to their subsequent success.

By this means, the Japanese community was strongly affected by the outer world. Correspondingly, inside the Japanese community there can be seen a very complicated internal struggle or opposition to external influences. These processes are to be analyzed in this paper,

focusing on the generational differences of the Japanese group.

The Issei Stage

Most of the Japanese Issei generation in the prewar period were exposed continuously or directly to American society and they made efforts to avoid direct exposure to American culture. During the first stage of their migration, most of the Issei worked as members of contract labor gangs on farms, mines, construction sites, etc.; some of the conditions under which the Issei worked are described below:

The organization of Issei laborers, which was as much a boom to the laborer as it was to the employer, served also to secure the position of the Japanese as farm workers. The Japanese labor agents located in various farming communities conducted boarding houses and stores where their men lived on a cooperative plan. The bosses not only obtained work for their gangs and carried on all the necessary wage negotiations with the employers but also collected the wages for men and paid them their individual earnings. Under these conditions the employers could keep their bookkeeping at a minimum, having to pay only the labor agent the contracted sum, and by assured of a supply of reliable labor (Iwata: 28).

From the above description, the Issei laborers worked primarily with other Issei and only rarely mixed with other ethnic groups. Soon after their initial immigration to the U. S., they formed various ethnic organizations to protect themselves from hostile American society at every level: the Japanese Association; the Kenjinkai (prefectural association); the Buddhist organizations; the Christian churches; and ie (households), as is shown in Chart 1.

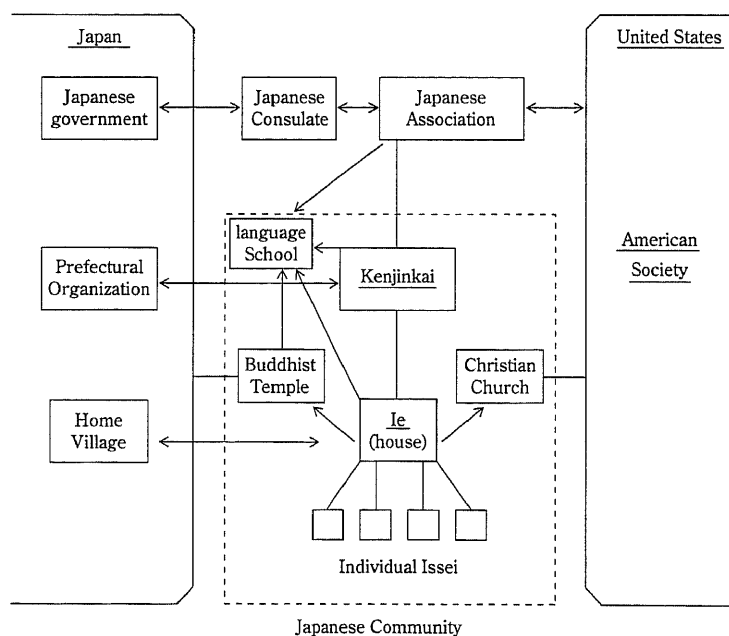


Chart 1 Various organizations in Japanese community

The Japanese Association was the most comprehensive ethnic organization in Periods 1 (1890-1908) and 2 (1908-1941); it was linked with the Japanese government through the Japanese consulate and was responsible for the security and welfare of the Issei groups who were Japanese citizens. The Japanese Association assisted the immigrants “..... in matters requiring any technical or legal knowledge, for example, in getting business licenses, working out contracts with Caucasian employers, or dealing with the authorities when a man was in trouble with the law...” (Befu: 211). The Japanese government sensitively reacted to every kind of anti-Japanese legislation through diplomatic channels. Under this umbrella, the Kenjinkai (Prefectural Associations) were organized into groups of people from the same prefectures. Because these organizations were based on the primary ties of shared birth places, shared dialects, and shared customs and experiences, they performed a very strong function in mutual aid, fund raising, information dispersal, recreation, etc. They also had direct contact with the prefectural administrative systems and influential persons in Japan. At the base of the community, there were formed *Ie* (households). In the early period, the majority of the Issei were single males who were interested in earning quick cash. But confronting the increasing difficulty of immigrating to the U. S. after the Gentlemen’s Agreement, those who decided to leave for a long time, if not for a life time, began to establish their *Ie* to receive brides from Japan (mainly through picture brides and match-making). They also kept close correspondence with their relatives.

Most of the people belonged to some Buddhist organization, which was a branch of one of the Japanese sects. More assimilated minded people belonged to the Christian churches. Even through this was the only organization affiliated closely with American society, those in the Japanese communities performed their services in the Japanese language (Befu: 212) and played a leading role in defending the Japanese and Japanese Americans from legislative and political attack (Kitano 1969 :86). It is also noted that the Issei’s adoption of the Christian faith was strongly reinforced by practical considerations, such as making contacts in order to find jobs or learning to speak and behave like Americans (Kitano 1969: 86). In addition to these organizations the Issei also formed informal groups for financial assistance known as *tanomoshiko*. This was an organization through which money was pooled and loaned in rotation to members. This rotating pool of funds was loaned entirely on mutual trust and moral obligation (McLemore: 166).

By these buffering systems, individual Issei was not only protected from direct, harsh exposure to American culture, but also remained closely linked with the mother country. Only through the understanding of this vertically structured Japanese community can we see the deep logic under the seemingly contradicting and ambivalent behavior of the Issei. As is shown by the activities of the Japanese Association, they were very defensive meanwhile very assimilative. They tried to improve the image of the Japanese people by such things as curtailing gambling, collecting money for the Community Chest, etc. In the public situation such as at work or in school, they were very obedient and assimilation minded. Moreover, as frequently mentioned, Japanese are strongly collective and conforming, observing the activities of the Japanese Association one might form the impression that the Issei were conforming to American society as a whole. In fact beneath the conformist,

assimilative public face there was concealed a strongly Japan oriented face, especially at the informal or semi-informal level. Under the shelter of the Japanese Association, the Issei as private individuals enjoyed a very conservative Japanese life style i.e. usage of the Japanese language, Japanese foods, Japanese style rooms and clothes, and participation in the ancestor worship, Emperor worship, Buddhistic, and Shintoistic belief systems and festivals, picnics, etc. (Kitano 1969: 81-82) through such organizations as the Kenjinkai, church or religious organizations, Japanese language school, or informal groups. Even after a long process of assimilation, their rate of intermarriage remained less than 5%. They, as overseas citizens of imperial Japan, preserved very strong ethnic identity inside the Japanese community; they preserved a microcosm of Japanese state and society. This two-dimensional behavior pattern of the Issei can be diagrammed as has been done in Chart 2, using the two axes: Public sphere vs. Private sphere and Japanese oriented vs. American oriented.

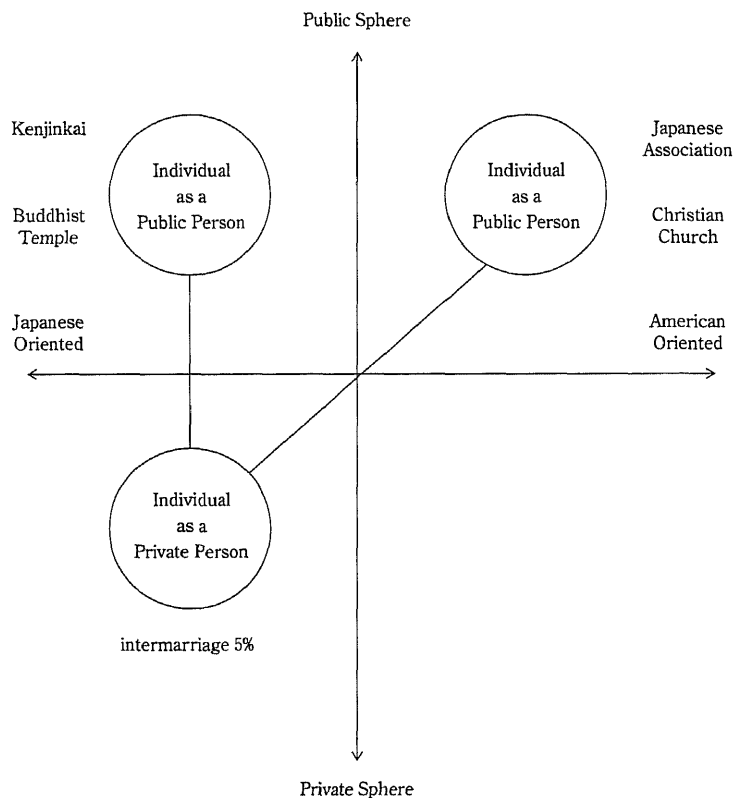


Chart 2 Life of the Issei in Public and Private Spheres

This diagram shows that at the Issei stage the private life of the first generation Japanese in America was very Japanese oriented. At the public level, there was a conflict between the Japanese oriented organization and assimilation-oriented organization, but both are rooted in the private life. Even the members of the Christian churches, considered as usually the most assimilation minded,

led very Japanese style lives.

The Nisei stage

Until the postwar period it was almost impossible for Issei to be naturalized as American citizens because of the strict naturalization regulations. In addition, until confronting the evacuation and the defeat of the Japanese Empire, most of the Issei thought their stay in the U. S. to be temporary, even after the establishment of Ie. The ambivalence of the Issei toward their future is reflected in the popular custom of sending at least one child to Japan in order to give him or her a complete Japanese education under the tutelage of relatives; these Japanese educated Nisei formed the special *Kibei* group when they returned to the U. S. Because of the loyalty of the Issei to Japan, most Nisei were registered as Japanese citizens. On the other hand, since U. S. law gave U. S. citizenship to all born on U.S. soil, most of the Nisei gained dual citizenship. The elderly generation of these dual affiliated Nisei appeared on the social and political scene of the Japanese community from the late 1920's. They were educated in American schools and in democratic ways of thinking. Therefore they attained very high levels of acculturation; but since the general atmosphere in the U. S. in the 1930's and 1940's was strongly anti-Japanese, U. S. society therefore rebuffed their attempts at assimilation. Some of the Nisei were so discouraged that they turned to Japan for their future (Kitano 1979: 163). The awakened Nisei organized themselves to fight for their right as Americans citizens. In 1930, the Japanese American Citizens' League (JACL) was organized on a national level with a creed of "For Better Americans in a Better America."

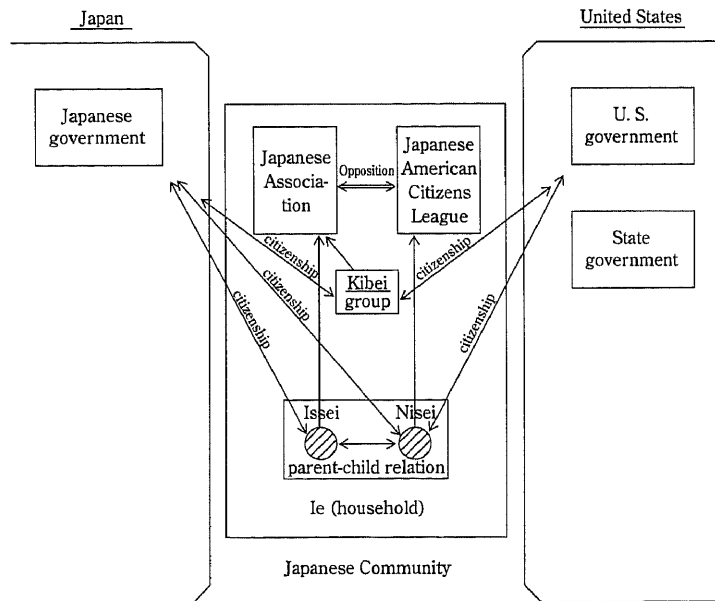


Chart 3 Citizenship of the Kibei, Issei and Nisei

It was inevitable that the JACL would clash strongly with the long established Japanese Association within the Japanese community. To take matters more complex, the Kibei group, returning from Japan having been educated in the increasingly vigorous Japanese nationalism and militarism, advocated a very aggressive pro- Japan position. They were also more fluent in Japanese than in English and were accustomed to the Japanese way of life. Their nationalistic standpoint was even more radical than that of the Issei generation, so that it was highly inappropriate and unrealistic given the situation in the U. S. in the 1930's and 1940's.

The turning point of the leadership shift from Issei to Nisei was the tragedy of the evacuation and incarceration. The War Relocation Authority completely oppressed the organizations of the Issei and Kibei; the Nisei controlled JACL was the solely recognized Japanese organization in the camps. It cooperated with the WRA in running the camps. While the Kibei centered group sought desperately to organize an anti-American movement, the JACL centered Nisei seized the leadership in the Japanese community.

After the evacuation the Nisei organized through the JACL continued to hold leadership in the Japanese community and made great efforts in pressing for restitution for losses resulting from the evacuation and incarceration and in leading a naturalization campaign:

Through an Act of Congress, Japanese were able to claim financial loss due to the wartime removal. Filling of the claims was a very complicated procedure for those Japanese who had almost no reading knowledge of English. The Sierra JACL provided assistance to anyone who needed help in filling the claim. Also, when naturalization of Japanese became possible, JACL carried out a strong campaign to help the naturalization of Issei (Befu: 215).

Focusing on the Nisei's occupation and organizational affiliations is necessary for analyzing and understanding their characteristics. The Bonacich's research which was examined in the mid 1960's and showed the general trend from blue collar to white-collar occupations in the Nisei generation, showed that 47% of the Nisei were engaged in "ethnically oriented firms", while 53% were employees in non-Japanese American businesses or worked as public servants (Bonacich: 101). As is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Male Nissei Membership in Organizations, by Type of Firm, and Occupation

Type of Firm	No Orgs.	Only J.A. Orgs.	Only Non-J.A. Orgs	Both	
Small Business	25%	28	15	33	(510)
Non-Small Business	34%	18	26	21	(619)
Occupation					
Professional, etc.	27%	12	34	27	(387)
Managers, etc.	30%	25	17	28	(206)
Clerical, etc.	40%	27	15	18	(131)
Farmers, etc.	20%	24	14	41	(152)
Craftsmen, etc.	41%	25	14	20	(146)
Service, etc.	25%	47	6	21	(108)

Bonacich, 1975, p. 109.

The Nisei in small businesses have tended to affiliate with some organizations (75%), especially with Japanese American organizations (61%), while the Nisei in medium and large businesses have had a stronger tendency not to affiliate with any organization (34%) and those of them who do affiliate with some organization (66%) preferred non-Japanese American organizations (47%) to Japanese American organizations (39%). This shows some tension between American oriented medium and large business group (53%) and ethnically oriented small business group (47%) inside the Nisei generation. This figure is for the 1960's, but one may suppose that since the 1930's there have been similar tension in the JAACL or the Nisei group, even though in the prewar period Japanese employment in the outside medium and large businesses was very restricted. Therefore we can make a diagram to show the inside struggle in the Nisei generation, as has been done in Chart 4. In this case one can observe differences in the private sphere (life style, interests in daily life) as reflecting the organizational affiliation in the public sphere.

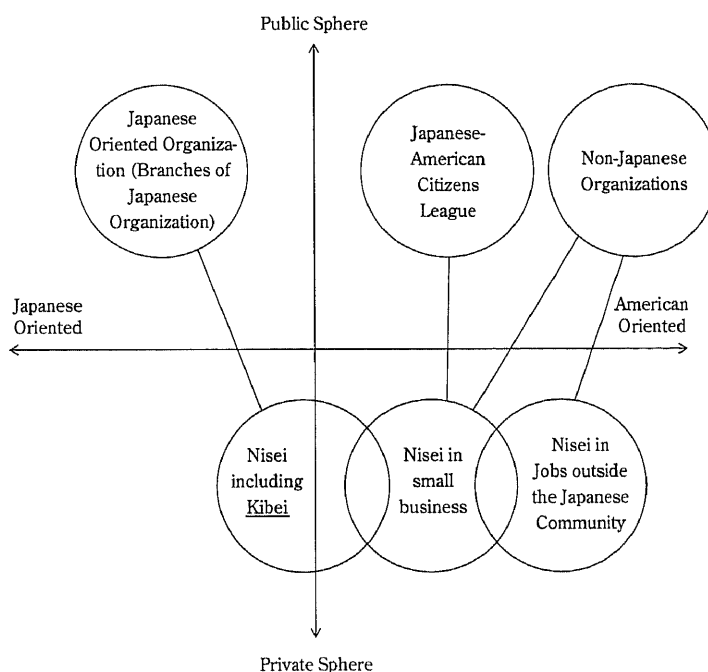


Chart 4 Nisei's Stances in Private and Public Spheres

The Sansei Stage

As previously discussed by Onozawa (Onozawa 2004), the Sansei generation is much more assimilated than are the Issei and Nisei generations; this is best illustrated by the Sansei's high percentage of intermarriage (50%). Considering the general trend of the younger generations' exodus from the Japanese community, especially those who obtained jobs outside ethnically oriented firms and considering the number of intermarried couples and non-Japanese speaking Japanese Americans,

etc., in a sense the Sansei seem to be at a critical point of losing their Japanese ethnic identity. But on the other hand, one is struck by the evidence of political activism on the part of many Sansei: the reformist movement inside the JACL; pursuit of “yellow power”; and, participation in neo-leftist movements. This is in tremendous contrast with the quiet Nisei generation. (Kitano 1979 : 164-170; Kiefer : 31-48; Maykovich : 167-183.) Many of the Sansei have tended to drop out of the activities and membership of the earlier established organizations, e.g. the JACL, and to organize their own autonomous groups. These organizations have common characteristics, usually anti-establishment and short-lived. This may reflect the fact that the main supporters of these movements are members of the young generation, especially college students.

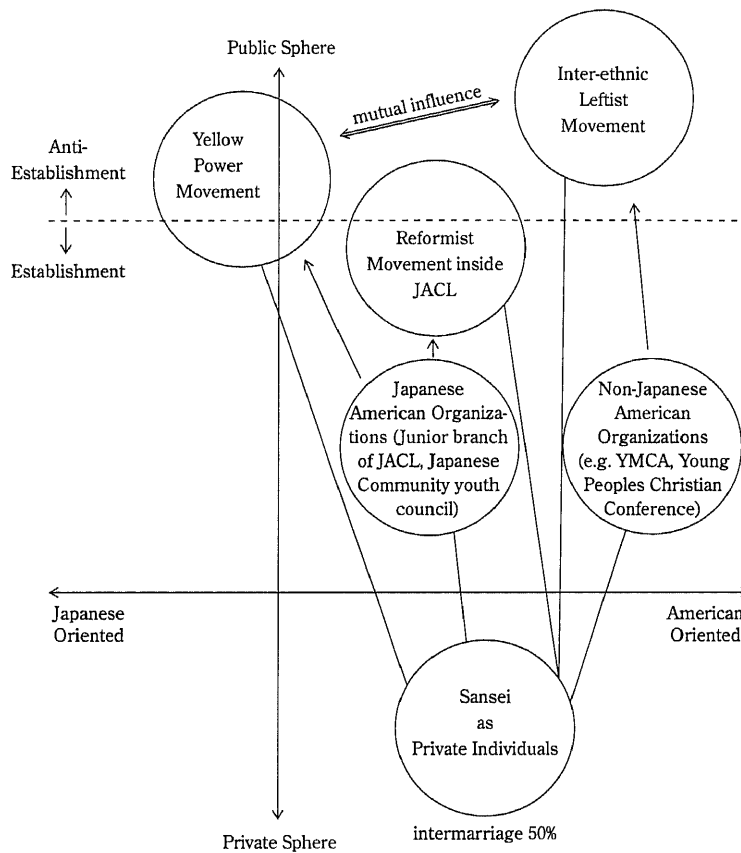


Chart 5 Sansei Generation as a Constellation of Diversified Groups.

Chart 5 depicts the Sansei generation as a constellation of diversified groups. At this point it is difficult to foresee the later coming trends of this embryonic stage of the movement, due to the shortage of academic data. However, two interesting trends of the movements should be pointed out. First, by the end of the 1960's there emerged in the Asian American community such group as the Asian American Political Alliance, the Council of Oriental Organization, the Yellow Brotherhood, the

Third World Liberation Front, the Red Guards, etc. These kinds of broad coalitions uniting all Asian American groups would have been unthinkable in past generations because of the diversity of cultural heritages and the conflict of politico-economic interests among Asians in America (Kitano 1979 : 1650). Combined with the Sansei's strong interest in their own ethnicity (their interest in Japanese culture and the history of the Japanese in the U. S., etc.), this factor would become a major element in changing of the Sansei's characteristics in later period.

The second trend discernible in the Sansei movements in the 1970's is the emergence since the 1960's from the collectivistic and conforming Japanese community a number of leftist radical groups, groups which perhaps owe their inception to the stimulation by the black movement and to the general atmosphere of student radicalism. This indicates that the Sansei have come to be moved primarily by the particular rationals inside the Japanese community. This trend is expected to increase as the Sansei's assimilation with the larger American society progresses.

CONCLUSIONS

In less than forty years since the beginning of the evacuation, which was the starting point of a new orientation for Japanese Americans, the Sansei generation seems to be in the process of merging with the white dominated society. They are rapidly mobilizing upward toward economic and social equality with whites. How far there remains to go before "equality" is reached is problematical, but certainly they are moving out of the Japanese community and are failing to learn the Japanese language and customs. Moreover, considerable numbers of them are marrying non-Japanese, especially whites. They seem through intermarriage to be at a critical point of losing their ethnic identity. Where are they heading to? There appear to be three basic alternatives:

Alternative A: To merge with whites.

Alternative B: To remain as Japanese Americans, retaining at least some of their Japanese ethnic identity.

Alternative C: To establish a third, in-between identity.

In the history of ethnic interrelationships in the U. S. (up to the late 1970's) there has been no development of in-between groups that have attained a separate and distinct political, social, and economic position in society, although there have been numerous inter-ethnic marriages. In the days when the tendency was toward "Anglo conformity" or a "melting pot society" and the black-white dichotomy was more marked, the children from marriage between whites and blacks belonged unquestionably to the black group. Even in the recent trend toward ethnic pluralism, there has scarcely been a formation of in-between groups with ethnic identities comparable to the mestizo of Latin America, the baba of Malaysia, or the luk-jin of Thailand, etc. Therefore, Alternative B seems to be the most probable, even for the descendants of Japanese-white marriages. However, most of the Sansei generation seems to be choosing the difficult way of Alternative A. And as the Yellow Power Movement suggests, some Sansei seem to be choosing Alternative C, intermingling

themselves with other groups of Asian, particularly East and Southeast Asian, extraction.

No matter which Alternatives: A, B or C predominates or to be realized, it is a new experience for American society. The future of the American Japanese will certainly form a very interesting new ethnic experience, and sheds light on the future of other ethnic groups, especially Asian groups, in the U.S. Thus the evolutionary process of Japanese Americans by itself brings something entirely new to American society.

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