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### Gordon Hirabayashi: Civic Courage Exemplified

Imagine being told that simply because of your ancestry, you must abandon your home, job, freedom, and everything you have worked hard throughout your life to build. This nightmare became a reality for Japanese Americans during World War II. As fear, racism, and paranoia filled the hearts of the American public in the aftermath of the Pearl Harbor attacks, all people of Japanese ancestry were ordered to move to internment camps by Executive Order 9066. While most complied out of fear or necessity, one man stood against this injustice: Gordon Hirabayashi. A University of Washington student at the time, Hirabayashi demonstrated extraordinary civic courage by refusing to follow the executive order to go to an internment camp. His subsequent legal battle, and the personal sacrifices that he made along the way, make him a prime example of civic courage in Washington state. Civic courage is the willingness to take personal, political, and professional risks to defend justice, even in the face of overwhelming opposition (in this case, the entire U.S. government). Unlike simple bravery, civic courage requires a strong moral conviction grounded in personal truth and a willingness to challenge injustice at great personal cost. Hirabayashi's refusal to comply with the breach of human rights that was internment exemplifies this definition, as he sacrificed his freedom, future and reputation to uphold the principles of civil rights and justice for a cause greater than just himself.

To understand Hirabayashi's act of defiance, it is necessary to examine the historical context in which it occurred. After German-allied Japan attacked the U.S. naval base on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, anti-Japanese racism spread rapidly throughout the United States. Political cartoons and propaganda depicted people of Japanese descent as

animalistic and subhuman (University of Missouri). Japanese Americans, who had in many cases lived in the U.S. for generations and were fully-fledged citizens, were suddenly viewed as potential enemies solely because of their distant connection to the country. Political leaders and military officials, fueled by racial prejudice rather than evidence, called for their removal from the West Coast. In response, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 in February 1942, which authorized the forced removal and incarceration of more than 120,000 Japanese Americans. Entire families were uprooted from their homes and sent to faraway internment camps under harsh conditions. Many lost their businesses, homes, and personal possessions, even though there was no evidence of disloyalty among Japanese Americans. This is considered one of the most egregious breaches of civil rights in U.S. history, and it happened relatively recently, all things considered.

Unlike most Japanese Americans who reluctantly complied with the order, Gordon Hirabayashi took a bold and dangerous stand against it. As a senior at the University of Washington studying sociology, he had previously registered with the Selective Service as a conscientious objector. Raised Christian, he joined the Quaker-run “American Friends Committee” while at UW where he formed a strong belief in pacifism and civil disobedience as a method of creating change (Densho Encyclopedia). He decided to put his beliefs into practice when the U.S. government imposed a curfew on Japanese Americans and ordered their internment. Rather than comply, Hirabayashi turned himself in to the FBI, inviting them to prosecute him. He believed that he would be able to fight this prosecution in court. This action represents what civic courage is all about: taking a risk to do what you know is right for the betterment of yourself and the greater community around you. Standing in the face of injustice is the only way meaningful change can be made.

Hirabayashi's decision to resist the internment order led to a significant legal battle. He was arrested and convicted for violating the curfew and internment orders. However, believing that the internment order and prosecution were unconstitutional, he continued to appeal his case all the way to the Supreme Court. The case was *Hirabayashi v. United States* (1943).

Unfortunately, the court ruled against him, citing the government's ability to bypass the due process of law due to the pressing wartime circumstances (Justia Law). Although he lost his case, Hirabayashi's willingness to challenge an unjust law in court was an extraordinary act of civic courage. He chose to stand for justice, knowing that the legal system was stacked against him. His conviction resulted in a sentence of 90 days in jail, which he served in Arizona. Rather than accept transportation at government expense, he hitchhiked to prison, further demonstrating his moral conviction to his cause. By refusing to comply with the internment order, Hirabayashi knowingly put himself in legal jeopardy. His resistance resulted in imprisonment and social ostracization, even within his own community, as many Japanese Americans were reluctant to resist government orders for fear of worse repercussions and believed they should just obey the orders to prove they were "good citizens" (Densho 2021). Throughout this hardship, he remained grounded in his cause and never lost sight of what was right.

Although his case was initially unsuccessful, in the 1980s, new evidence emerged showing that the U.S. government had deliberately withheld reports proving that Japanese Americans posed no threat to national security. As a result, Hirabayashi's case was reopened, and his conviction was overturned in 1987 (*Hirabayashi v. United States*). Hirabayashi's defiance became a significant moment in the history of civil rights and legal justice, and set a precedent so that something like this would not happen again in the future. This case proved that even if the odds (and the government) are stacked against you, civic courage can make a change not just in

the moment, but for generations to come. His courage helped lay the groundwork for future challenges to racial discrimination and government overreach. In addition to his legal battle, Hirabayashi's personal sacrifices extended well beyond his time in prison. His actions made it difficult for him to find stable employment after the war, as his criminal record and reputation as a dissenter followed him (Joseph). Many institutions were hesitant to hire someone who had openly defied the government, and he faced financial hardships as a result. Yet, despite these struggles, he continued to advocate for civil rights, later pursuing an academic career as a sociologist, focusing on issues of racial discrimination and social justice. His life serves as a reminder that standing up for justice often comes at a cost, but the long-term impact of such courage can change the course of history.

Hirabayashi's defiance also sheds light on the power of individual resistance in shaping public perception and influencing broader movements for justice. At the time of his protest, many in the Japanese American community viewed compliance as the safest path, fearing that resistance would only invite further hardship. However, his willingness to challenge the status quo helped inspire future generations of activists to question government policies and advocate for civil liberties. His case, along with those of other resisters, played a role in shifting the national conversation around race, citizenship, and constitutional rights, ultimately contributing to the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which issued a formal government apology and reparations to Japanese American internees. Hirabayashi's legacy reminds us that even in moments of widespread fear and oppression, a single voice of dissent can ignite a movement toward justice.

In a 2001 interview with students from the University of Arizona, he spoke on the Constitution and how, although it was important, it was nothing without the sentiment of the American people backing it up. "I would also say that if you believe in something, if you think

the Constitution is a good one, and if you think the Constitution protects you, you better make sure that the Constitution is actively operating... in other words, 'constant vigilance.' Otherwise, it's a scrap of paper. We had the Constitution to protect us in 1942. It didn't because the will of the people weren't behind it." Beyond his legal battle, Hirabayashi's legacy extends to the broader fight for human rights and constitutional protections. His story is a testament to the fact that standing against injustice, even when faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles, is crucial to preserving democracy and civil liberties. Today, we see parallels in ongoing struggles for immigrant rights, racial justice, and government accountability. Hirabayashi's message that the Constitution is only as strong as the people who defend it remains relevant.

Why does Hirabayashi's defiance matter, and how can we take a lesson from this today? It speaks to a greater idea: that it is on every citizen to stand up for what the Constitution represents and enforce it. We all have a responsibility, a civic duty to promote justice, even if it goes against the grain. This is especially applicable in the current age, where the political climate is unstable, serving as a warning for the future. We should stand up for our communities and not be afraid to go against the popular idea, because although something might be prevalent, it doesn't mean it is right. Change takes time, just like Hirabayashi's case did, but we must never stop fighting for what we know is right.

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