“By the Code of Humanity”: Ralph Carr Takes a Stand for Japanese-American Rights in World War II

Stephanie Reitzig
Niwot High School, Longmont, CO
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The world’s great melting pot is peopled by the descendants of every nation in the globe. It is not fair for the rest of us to segregate the people from one or two or three nations and to brand them as unpatriotic or disloyal regardless. […] Let it be understood that such conduct is not approved by the code of humanity.

- Ralph Carr, radio address, February 28, 1942

ON FEBRUARY 19, 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, stating that “the right of any person to enter, remain in, or leave [areas prescribed by the Secretary of War] shall be subject to whatever restrictions the Secretary […] may impose.”1 The order caused Japanese Americans on the West Coast to be forcibly relocated to internment camps for much of World War II, stripping thousands of their liberties and livelihoods.2 Yet as suspicion of anyone with Japanese ancestry swept the United States, one elected official steadfastly refused to be overwhelmed by the growing panic. He was Ralph Carr, the twenty-ninth governor of Colorado and the only U.S. governor to take a stand for Japanese-American rights during World War II.3 Though this stand would eventually cost Carr his career, it profoundly influenced minority rights in the United States, with a legacy that continues today. His actions not only enabled thousands of Japanese Americans to avoid the devastating impacts of internment, but also helped to bring internment to an end by bolstering the voices of those who opposed it. Finally, Carr’s affirmation of minorities’ constitutional freedoms renewed Colorado’s commitment to protecting all citizens’ rights and left a lasting impact on his state.

Hysteria after Pearl Harbor

Ralph Carr had neither expected, nor wanted, to be governor. Born December 11, 1887, in Rosita, Colorado, he had worked since the age of
six to support his family before attending the University of Colorado for his undergraduate and law degrees.\(^4\) He would later attribute his views on racial equality to his upbringing in Rosita, declaring of his stance on Japanese-American internment, “I was brought up in a small town 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.”\(^5\)

In 1929, President Herbert Hoover selected Carr to be the U.S. attorney for Colorado.\(^6\) While serving in this position, Carr reluctantly launched his 1938 gubernatorial campaign at the behest of Colorado Republicans.\(^7\) Having become a public favorite for his plan to repair the state’s tattered finances, Carr won by 49,000 votes in 1938 and was reelected by a margin of 51,000 votes in 1940.\(^8\) (See Appendix A.)

As governor, much of his work dealt with water rights, which in Colorado’s arid climate were vital to the agricultural economy.\(^9\) This work later informed his stance on Japanese internment, as fighting the Arkansas Valley Authority (AVA) in 1938 enabled Carr to fully understand the power of precedent in shaping constitutional interpretations. The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), created in 1933 to provide electricity and flood control to the Tennessee Valley, had garnered significant public support, and amid faltering judicial and public approval of the New Deal several years later, federal officials devised the similar AVA, which nationalized control over Western water rights.\(^10\) Carr worked to prevent this measure from passing after discovering that its authors had yet to even visit the region, and were merely using the TVA to rapidly pass the AVA.\(^11\) Fighting the bill gave him crucial insight into the power of precedent, which he would later voice when warning of the dangerous example set by internment.

Carr was at the midpoint of his second term as governor when the Japanese struck Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Congress quickly responded with a declaration of war on December 8.\(^12\) As the country prepared for conflict, shocked Americans panicked at the possibility of saboteurs aiding Japan from inside the United States.\(^13\) One man wrote Carr to describe how Japanese students at the Colorado School of Mines “took pictures and many notes” while visiting a local mine, adding that “the productive capacity of the Axis could be due to the fact the Axis [powers] are applying my Geological [sic] data in their mining operations.”\(^14\) Politicians’ increasing tendency to treat Japanese-American citizens as foreigners only augmented this hysteria, such as when General DeWitt declared that “a Jap’s a Jap […] whether the Jap is a citizen or not.”\(^15\) Public sentiment and the popular press overwhelmingly supported the incarceration of Japanese Americans. On February 18, 1942, for example, one Colorado newspaper editor endorsed Pulitzer Prize winner Westbrook
Pegler’s view that “the Japanese in California should be under armed guard to the last man and woman right now and to hell with habeas corpus until the danger is over.” Government leaders evidently felt the same way: one day later, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066.

The order outraged Carr, who vehemently believed that all American citizens, regardless of race or ethnicity, should be guaranteed their constitutional rights. Such a violation of these freedoms seemed increasingly inevitable, however, with reports emerging that Japanese Americans would soon be relocated to internment camps. As rumors spread of the possibility of such camps in Colorado, Coloradans grew furious at the idea of having “yellow devils” in their state. Many threatened violence towards Japanese Americans, with a report from the Immigration and Naturalization Service describing how one man planned to go “Jap hunting” if internees arrived. (See Appendix B.)

Given this escalating tension, Carr felt it more imperative than ever that he firmly express the state’s official stance on Japanese internment. On February 28, 1942, he delivered a radio address to establish Colorado’s twofold position on the subject. First, if the federal government determined that Japanese immigrants deemed dangerous to the war effort should be imprisoned in the state, “then we of Colorado are big enough and patriotic enough to do our duty” without objecting merely because of Coloradans’ racial bias. Despite this, Colorado would neither endorse these camps nor offer military support for them. Second and most importantly, Carr differentiated in his radio address between interning supposedly dangerous enemy aliens and imprisoning American citizens in violation of their constitutional rights. He further denounced discrimination against immigrants and their families, reminding listeners, “In Colorado there are thousands of men and women and children […] who by reason of blood only, are regarded by some people as unfriendly. […] [Many] are American citizens, with no connection with or feeling of loyalty toward the customs and philosophies of Italy, Japan, or Germany.” As he concluded his speech, Carr stressed the ethical cost of violence against such people. Intolerance and discrimination, he declared, are “not approved by the code of humanity.”

**Affirming Japanese-American Rights**

Reactions to Carr’s stance came swiftly, as illustrated by the flood of angry letters he received following his address. One Coloradan instructed Carr to “regard this letter as a *vigorous protest against* any of those damned Japs being sent to this state,” while another told him that “those yellow rats […] breed like termites and can be trusted less.” Many demanded
a stance like that of Wyoming’s governor, who threatened, “If you bring Japanese into my state, I promise you they will be hanging from every tree.” Carr also received hundreds of pleas from Japanese Americans seeking to move to Colorado before relocation was implemented. He responded to each with a copy of his message to U.S. military commander Herman Goebel, in which he reaffirmed Japanese Americans’ constitutional freedoms and stated that “no Governor has the right to deny to any American citizen or to any other person living in the country legally the right to enter or to reside in or to cross his state.”

Carr further reinforced this commitment to Japanese-American rights when he halted passage of a 1942 bill eliminating Japanese Americans’ citizenship in Colorado. This affirmation of Japanese-American rights had an enormous impact. Terrified of being forcibly relocated to internment camps, many Japanese Americans decided to flee the West Coast before internment was officially imposed on March 1, 1942. Because of Carr’s open-hearted stance, Colorado became one of their most common destinations. By June 8, 1942, 1,605 people of Japanese descent, 70% of them American citizens, had already fled to the state.

These refugees narrowly escaped the devastating impacts of internment. Internees suffered irrecoverable economic losses, as financial opportunists purchased evacuees’ possessions at a fraction of their worth. Property left in storage was often stolen or vandalized, and escheatment proceedings (in which the state seized unworked land) were frequently begun against interned farmers, many of whom were paid only around one-tenth of the land’s true value. The human costs of internment far exceeded this, however. Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston recalled that due to internment, her family “collapsed as an integrated unit. Whatever dignity or feeling of filial strength we may have known before December 1941 was lost.”

The distrust and lack of freedom that pervaded internment took an enormous psychological toll on internees, many of whom began to work through the emotional harms of their experiences only several decades after internment ended. Ted Nagata described the impacts of internment on his mother, stating that “the stress of incarceration […] affected her to the point where she couldn’t carry on.” By enabling Japanese Americans to avoid internment by fleeing to Colorado before relocation officially took effect, Carr saved thousands of citizens from suffering these adverse consequences and safeguarded their rights and livelihoods.
Carr’s Lasting Legacy

One letter-writer related to Carr how she and her husband “scarcely hear anything but this: ‘If Governor Carr lets the Japs in here, well, that’s the end of his political career in Colorado.’” Yet let them in he did, and as predicted, the action doomed his political career. In 1942, he ran for the Senate, facing incumbent Ed Johnson. Johnson made Carr’s opposition to internment the main issue in the race, painting Carr as an enemy of national unity. Unsurprisingly, Carr lost the race, albeit by a narrow margin.

However, Carr’s effect on minority rights continued long after his time in government. This came in part from the powerful publicity he had attracted as an elected official protesting Japanese-American internment. Carr received not only thousands of protest letters, but also many letters of support, with one man declaring that “no Governor of our great state ever spoke to the people with greater patriotism, Americanism, and valor than you.” However, the voices of those who stood with Carr were drowned out by those of the majority. Gallup polls from 1942 found that 73% of Americans believed the Japanese to be “treacherous,” while 63% believed them to be “sly.” By December 1942, only 35% of Americans believed that relocated Japanese Americans should be allowed to return to their homes after the war. Even public figures who had previously supported the Japanese, such as Earl Warren, strongly endorsed internment, and as a result, people heard few voices advocating for Japanese-American rights.

Carr’s stance on this issue, however, made headlines across the country, with his position as an elected official forcing both journalists and politicians to acknowledge internment’s constitutional violations. This heightened national consciousness is evident in the propaganda film *A Challenge to Democracy*, produced in 1944 by the War Relocation Authority (WRA), which carried out Japanese-American internment. While an earlier companion film failed to mention constitutional concerns, *A Challenge to Democracy* directly responded to them, claiming that internment was only a temporary step in relocating Japanese-Americans “so there can be no question of the constitutionality of any part of the actions taken by the government to meet the dangers of war [and] no law-abiding American need to fear for his own freedom.”

Facilitated in great part by Carr’s stance and its resulting publicity, this increased consciousness of Japanese-American internment’s constitutional violations led to the choice to terminate it in December 1944. Dillon Myer, the former head of the WRA, recounted that the organization decided to end internment before the war concluded specifically in response to increasing public consciousness of internment's unconstitutionality.
Carr’s stand for Japanese-American rights and the publicity it garnered thus hastened the decision to end internment, further demonstrating the profound influence that Carr’s position had for Japanese Americans. Yet Carr’s impact on minority rights stretched far beyond these tangible effects. Rather, his stand for Japanese-American rights established Colorado as a diverse state protective of all citizens, regardless of race or ethnicity. A thriving Japanese-American community was established in Denver after the war by many Japanese Americans who had fled the West Coast and were inspired to stay in Colorado by the kindness shown to them by Carr. Additionally, Carr’s emphasis on guaranteeing all citizens their constitutional rights gave Coloradans a firm reminder of the values of equality upon which the United States was founded, as demonstrated when Colorado voters soundly defeated a 1944 measure intended to prohibit Japanese land ownership.

Even today, reminders of Carr’s legacy abound in the state. Carr is the only Colorado governor to be memorialized in three places in the state capital, most significantly in the Ralph Carr Judicial Center. Additionally, a bill known as the “Ralph Carr Freedom Defense Act,” proposed to the Colorado General Assembly in early 2017, reaffirms Colorado’s commitment to protecting all citizens, regardless of race, ethnicity, or religion. By taking a stand for Japanese-American rights, Carr impressed upon Coloradans the importance of defending each citizen’s constitutional freedoms, and established Colorado as a state which would protect all citizens’ rights, even to the present day.

Living by “the Code of Humanity”

In 1950, Carr was persuaded by Colorado Republicans to run for a third term as governor. Sadly, he died halfway through his campaign on September 23, 1950, from complications from diabetes. In 1976, local Japanese Americans erected a bust of Carr in Denver, accompanied by a plaque affirming that “the precious democratic ideals he espoused must forever be defended against prejudice and neglect.”

This espousal of the constitutional rights of all Americans, regardless of race or ethnicity, had profound implications for minority rights in the United States. In addition to enabling thousands of Japanese Americans to avoid the adverse consequences of internment by welcoming them to Colorado before relocation took effect, Carr bolstered the voices of those opposing Japanese-American internment and thus contributed to the decision to end internment prior to the war’s conclusion. Finally, Carr established Colorado as a state committed to protecting all citizens’ rights, influencing policy even to the present day. This stand for Japanese-
American rights amidst the fear and panic of World War II proved Carr to be a man who not only espoused, but also truly lived by “the code of humanity.”

Notes

5. Quoted in Reeves, Infamy, 99.
7. Ibid., 11-16.
8. “New Governor,” Craig Empire Courier (Craig, CO), Nov. 9, 1938; Abstract of Votes Cast (Denver: Bradford-Robinson, 1940), 9.
12. Ibid., 81.
16. C. A. Stoddard, editorial, Craig Empire Courier (Craig, CO), Feb. 18, 1942.
17. Schrager, The Principled Politician, 133.
19. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. George King to Ralph Carr, March 2, 1942, Carr Collection, Colorado State Archives; anonymous to Ralph Carr, Carr Collection, Colorado State Archives.
27. Ralph Carr to Herman P. Goebel, Jr., July 2, 1942, Carr Collection, Colorado State Archives.
28. Ralph Carr to Kathryn Mowe and Mildred E. Mowe, April 1, 1942, Carr Collection, Colorado State Archives.
30. E. L. Reilly to Ralph Carr, June 12, 1942, Carr Collection, Colorado State Archives.
32. Ibid.
36. Hannah A. Steele to Ralph Carr, Feb. 18, 1942, Carr Collection, Colorado State Archives.
38. Ibid.
40. Lee Everett Minton to Ralph Carr, March 1, 1942, Carr Collection, Colorado State Archives.
43. Robinson, *By Order of the President*, 126.
47. Ibid., 118.
48. Ibid., 98.
51. Ibid.
Appendix A


Carr, at left, was inaugurated for his second term as governor on January 14, 1941, after winning reelection by a wide margin.* It was while serving this second term that he would take a stand for Japanese-American rights following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

*Abstract of Votes Cast (Denver: Bradford-Robinson, 1940), 9.*
Appendix B


This news story was released by the Immigration and Naturalization Service on February 24, 1942. Threats made towards Japanese Americans in Colorado became commonplace as rumors began to spread that internment camps might be located in the state.
Bibliography

Primary Sources

*Abstract of Votes Cast.* Denver: Bradford-Robinson, 1940.

This booklet summarized the results of the 1940 elections, in which Carr won a second term as governor by a wide margin. This helped me to understand the extent of Carr’s popularity leading into his second term, and to contrast it with the results of the 1942 Senate election in order to see how Carr’s stand for Japanese-American rights led to the end of his political career.


A wartime propaganda film about internment camp life, this movie helped me to better understand the change in public consciousness of internment’s constitutional violations between the beginning of Japanese internment and its end, as well as the way in which the War Relocation Authority reacted to this change. This allowed me to better analyze the broader impact of Carr’s stance.


By far the most useful source I employed in my research, this collection consists of all of the papers from Carr’s time as governor, including his complete correspondence. Reading through Carr’s letters allowed me to better understand not only his stance on Japanese internment, but also his broader political beliefs. Additionally, it helped me to see the enormous scope of anti-Japanese sentiment in Colorado and around the nation, and the way in which Carr responded to it.

Carr, Ralph L. Radio address, Denver, CO, Feb. 28, 1942.

This speech clearly outlined Carr’s position on Japanese internment. As one of the first sources I consulted in my research, it helped to elucidate his viewpoint on the issues of Japanese internment and Japanese-American rights, and allowed me to better understand the stand he took.


As the Executive Order that caused Japanese internment, this source was crucial to my understanding of how internment began and the process by which it came into effect.

“Gov. Carr Stakes Political Future on His Jap Stand.” *Denver Post* (Denver, CO), April 3, 1942.

This article enabled me to see how Carr’s position on internment impacted his political career, as well as the way in which he did not allow opponents to sway his belief in his policies.

This first-hand account of life in a California internment camp impressed upon me the magnitude of Carr’s stand for Japanese-American rights. The author’s descriptions of the devastating ramifications of internment for her family showed me how significant it was that families were able to avoid internment by seeking refuge in Colorado under Carr, and enabled me to articulate how Carr’s stance played a significant role in protecting minority rights in the United States.


This article described Carr’s inauguration for his second term in office. Additionally, it demonstrated the largely positive attitude towards Carr at the beginning of his second term as governor, which enabled me to follow how the public’s perceptions of him were later influenced by his stance on Japanese-American rights.


Contrasting this film with the 1944 film *A Challenge to Democracy* allowed me to better understand the influence that Carr had on public opinion and the way in which this influence impacted the War Relocation Authority’s decision to end internment.


This article in particular helped me to better understand the way in which Ed Johnson, Carr’s opponent in the 1942 Senate race, manipulated Carr’s actions to portray him as an enemy of national unity and thus used his position on Japanese-American rights against him.

Kimball, Neil West. “Short Miscellany.” *Steamboat Pilot* (Steamboat Springs, CO), March 5, 1942.

This article describes an incident in which Mexican workers repairing an old Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp were mistaken by Steamboat Springs townspeople for Japanese Americans, leading to hysteria at the possibility of an internment camp being based in the city. This article helped me to better understand the racially biased hysteria which swept the U.S. during World War II, and the way in which it manifested itself in Colorado.


This source was extremely useful to me in understanding the importance of public opinion in bringing about the decision to close the internment camps. Myer was the head of the War Relocation Authority (WRA) during Japanese
internment, and provided a first-hand account of the decisions made by the WRA with regard to relocating Japanese Americans from the West Coast to internment camps in other Western states.


This interview with a former internee shed important light on the strain that internment camp life put on families, as well as the psychological ramifications of internment. The interview enabled me to appreciate the significance of Carr’s stand for Japanese-American rights.

“New Governor.” Craig Empire Courier (Craig, CO), Nov. 9, 1938.

This article provided a brief overview of the 1938 election, allowing me to see the large margin of votes Carr won by as well as his popularity at the time for his views on balancing the state budget. This gave me further information about Carr’s career leading into his first term as governor and the way in which his courageous stand for Japanese-American rights contributed to his loss in the 1942 Senate election.


This bill gave me insight into the impact that Carr has had on modern Colorado policy, and the way his actions continue to shape Colorado’s treatment of minorities even to the present day. Since it directly shows Carr’s impact on Colorado today, it is a primary source.


This book consists of oral histories of Pearl Harbor, both from people who were present at the attack and from people elsewhere in the military and in the United States. Reading first-hand accounts of the impact that the attack had across the nation helped me to better understand how significant it was that Carr took a stand, especially given the fear and panic to which many Americans succumbed.

Stoddard, C. A. Editorial. Craig Empire Courier (Craig, CO), Feb. 18, 1942.

This editorial describes the author’s viewpoint that Japanese Americans should be interned without regard for due process. This improved my understanding of the way in which many Coloradans supported internment and expressed no regard for Japanese-American rights.

This poll was conducted in 1942, and its results were recently republished online by Gallup. The poll showed that Americans who believed Japanese Americans were entitled to their constitutional rights were in a significant minority, which allowed me to appreciate the true import and courage of Carr’s stance on the issue as an elected official.

**Secondary Sources**


This speech called on a variety of primary sources to discuss Carr’s actions in relation to the 1988 decision to provide reparations to former internees. It enabled me to see Carr’s widespread impact, and the way in which politicians even decades later continue to look to him as an example.


This article provides a detailed discussion of Arizona’s stance on Japanese internment, and thus helped me to understand the reactions of other states to Roosevelt’s executive order. This allowed me to better contrast Carr’s position with those of the other governors, and to appreciate the significance of his stance.


This book delves into the process by which Japanese internment was devised and carried out, and provides substantial information concerning the role that state governors played in the process of relocating Japanese Americans.


This book looks specifically at the Amache internment camp located in Granada, Colorado, and briefly discusses the part that Carr played in taking a stand against Japanese internment. As one of the first sources I looked at, it provided a basis from which to do further research on the topic.


This book focuses more broadly on the history of Japanese Americans in Colorado, but dedicates a significant portion of its discussions of World War II to Carr. Its author, Bill Hosokawa, lived in an internment camp for several years. Reading an account of Carr’s actions from someone who experienced the impacts of internment helped me to truly understand how significant it was to the Japanese-American community in Colorado that Carr took a stand for their rights.

This book specifically discusses the *Nisei*, first-generation Americans and children of Japanese immigrants to the United States. It gave me insight into the significance of Carr’s actions to American citizens of Japanese descent in the United States, and showed the way in which Carr’s stance helped to establish Colorado as a state that valued the rights of all citizens, regardless of race or ethnicity.


This chapter comes from a collection of articles published by journalist Bill Hosokawa, who was interned in the Heart Mountain camp during World War II. He discusses Carr and the ramifications of Carr’s actions for the Japanese-American community in Colorado, providing insight into the significance of Carr’s stand for minorities in the state.


This article describes the impact that politicians’ investigations of Japanese espionage prior to Pearl Harbor exerted on Americans’ reactions after the attack. This helped me to better acknowledge the effect that politicians’ positions had on Japanese internment, and thus to more fully analyze the way in which Carr’s stand for Japanese-American rights helped bring internment to an end.


This article provides a brief introduction to the movement of Japanese Americans to Colorado during World War II, and helped me establish the foundations of my research for this paper.


This introduction to *Executive Order 9066*, one of the first sources I consulted in my research, provided an overview of Roosevelt’s Executive Order and the way in which it caused Japanese-American internment to take place. I found it useful as a basis upon which to build as I conducted further research into this topic.


Another preface to *Executive Order 9066*, this article by the former director of the California Historical Society describes the lasting effects of Executive Order 9066 on the Japanese-American community. This source yielded
insight into the devastating impacts of internment, and allowed me to see the way in which Carr’s actions had significant ramifications for many Japanese Americans.

This chapter gave an overview of internment, including the reasons why it was imposed and the way it affected internees. It provided a strong basis from which to conduct further research as I delved more deeply into these topics, and helped me to gain an initial understanding of the way Carr’s actions impacted Japanese Americans.

This article introduced me to the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and in particular to arguments regarding its constitutionality. This proved useful to me in analyzing the way in which the TVA established a precedent for the Arkansas Valley Authority (AVA), and in turn helped me to elucidate the way in which the AVA impacted Carr’s decision to take a stand for Japanese-American rights on constitutional grounds.

This book describes Japanese internment in detail, including the process by which it began and was carried out, as well as what camp life was like. I employed this source to gain a better understanding of how internment developed throughout the war, as well as to comprehend the impact that internment had on Japanese Americans.

This source was very useful for examining the instigation and implementation of internment. It focuses primarily on Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his role in the process, as well as on many of the other army and military leaders who played significant parts in relocating Japanese Americans.

This was by far the best source that I consulted about Carr’s life. The only biography written about Carr to date, this book helped me contextualize many of the events and issues I read about while conducting research in the Colorado State Archives, and thus was invaluable to my research.

Wilmot, Frank. “A Look at Race and Ethnicity in Colorado (1860-2005): Census Definitions and Data.” *Colorado Libraries* 32, no. 4 (2006): 10-18. This source was useful for evaluating the changes in Colorado Japanese populations during World War II. Its discussions of the difficulties and inaccuracies involved in counting populations provided important considerations as I examined these population shifts.


Yamamoto, Kaoru. “Governor Ralph L. Carr of Colorado in the Turmoil of World War II-America.” *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* 39, no. 1 (2014), https://www.questiaschool.com/read/1G1-369128339/governor-ralph-l-carr-of-colorado-in-the-turmoil. This article provides a brief overview of Carr’s life and stance. I found it helpful when beginning my investigations into this topic, and used it as a basis to build upon as I conducted further research.