

The Japanese Americans

Immediately after the massacre at the Tel Aviv airport by those terrorists from Japan, an act of vandalism was committed at the Japanese Gardens in San Mateo.



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That act of vandalism was another disturbing example of how easy it is for some people to displace their anger on irrelevant objects. As Israel had been quick to emphasize, their Japanese nationality had absolutely nothing to do with the murdering behavior of those terrorists.

However, a San Franciscan of Japanese descent pointed out the other night that such irrelevant group identification is even more complicated than that. After the terrorism at Lod Airport, someone unfriendly to Israel had called this Japanese American to tell him that he shouldn't feel bad, because the terrorism had been justified. That caller not only failed to distinguish between Japan and a few murderers who happened to be Japanese, but he also failed to distinguish between Japanese, and Americans of Japanese descent.

That's a problem about which Japanese Americans are beginning to feel increasingly concerned. It is becoming a prime item on the agenda of the Japanese American Citizens League, the very effective organization which serves the Japanese Americans as Anti-Defamation League, American Jewish Committee and American Jewish Congress all rolled up into one.

Japanese Americans have good historical reason for that concern, of course. They were torn from home and property in California and imprisoned in camps during World War II, for mistaken and often avaricious reasons, without anyone ever attempting to distinguish between Japanese and Japanese Americans. The American government has since issued a late apology, and hopefully will back it up with some form of reparations, for which the Japanese American Citizens League is now pressing.

But there are new signs that the failure to make the critical distinction is cropping up again. There is concern about the growing competition between the Japanese and American economy, which tends to put the relatively well-paid American workingman at a disadvantage. In some garment manufacturing shops a union has begun to post signs depicting the American flag, with the bitter words, "Made in Japan." Of course, in a world of huge business combines, it's not easy to know how much American—or Dutch—interest there is in a manufacturing plant located in Japan. But that won't halt anti-Japanese resentment, if American workingmen lose jobs because of the competition. And Japanese Americans are worried about that resentment irrelevantly spilling over onto them.

The Jews are perhaps the all-time world's champions when it comes to being the object of irrelevant group identification. Whether it was the black plague in medieval Europe or the depression in Modern Europe, the Jews were there to hate if the real causes of catastrophe couldn't be found. So the Jews will understand when this San Franciscan of Japanese ancestry worries: "We're too handy." Despite what happened at the Japanese Gardens in San Mateo, it's not very likely that many Jews will fall into the trap of, say, frowning at Japanese Americans because Japan Air Lines won't do business with Israel. Or, for that matter, having any automatic animosity towards the growing number of San Franciscans, adult and children, of Arab descent.

In this period of intense national self-criticism, it is easy to forget the nature of the American Experiment. When the Chinese ping-pong team played the American ping-pong team, one of the Americans on the American team was of Chinese ancestry, with a Chinese name. That just didn't happen to the Chinese team in its tour to Italy, France, Germany or Poland. That's the nature of the American Experiment—an experiment which has not yet succeeded, but which has not yet failed, either. It is an experiment of biblical proportions, of particular importance to the Jews perhaps, but of crucial importance to the future of the world. One of the indices of success will be our ability to make that distinction between Japanese and Japanese Americans.