

A Fanatical Fifth Column: The Media's Argument for Japanese Internment

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In the time leading up to and following Pearl Harbor, American media perpetuated a myth about Japanese American citizens: they were a part of a fifth column. Scholars aiming to understand the conditions that led to Japanese internment cite the media's unfounded portrayal of Japanese persons as traitors. However, this scholarship focuses on the historical context of internment, and as a result, significant examination of the media's role is neglected. A close analysis of the media's language reveals why such an unfounded myth was persuasive and how societal acceptance of it led to the internment of American citizens.

In a hearing before the Seventy-seventh Congress, the House Committee on Un-American Activities presented its "Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities in the United States," known as the Dies Report after committee chairman Representative Martin Dies. This investigation, which took place from 1938 to 1942, included appendices that scrutinized the activities of groups considered suspicious, such as Communist parties, Nazi organizations, and totalitarian propagandists. These sections of the report did not result in the mass evacuation and internment of Russian, German, or Italian Americans;¹ appendix XI, the "Report on Japanese Activity," did.

The Dies Report never mentions or advocates internment of Japanese persons. Rather, based on the committee's investigation into fifth-column activities and espionage, the report concludes, "The Japanese residents of California, Hawaii, the Philippine Islands, and the Panama Canal region [are] a menacing fifth column in the Territories of the United States" (United States 1723). In March 1942, three months after Pearl Harbor, the committee presented appendix XI of the Dies Report to Congress. The introduction outlined the evidence against persons of Japanese descent as well as the committee's previous attempt to alert the public of the findings:

Throughout the summer of 1941, when the committee's findings were taking shape, the chairman of the Special Committee on Un-American Activities made available to the press in the U.S. certain portions of the committee's evidence in the hope that this evidence would serve as a warning to the country at large even before the committee would be able to hold extensive hearings on Japanese espionage. (1726)

The report goes on to provide the full text of six articles published in July or August 1941, all in Los Angeles-based newspapers: the *Los Angeles Evening Herald and Express*, the *Los Angeles Examiner*, the *Los Angeles Daily News*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. The articles focus on both citizen and immigrant "Japs" as *alien* fishermen, government employees, and fanatical followers of the Japanese emperor involved in espionage.

I argue that a rhetorical perspective, rather than a historical one, renders a better analysis of the media's argument. I favor one of Kenneth Burke's definitions of rhetoric—"Rhetoric is rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic and continually born anew: the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (43). I posit, then, that an analysis of the language used in the news coverage

of the “fifth column” can illuminate the audience’s reaction and seeming consensus in support of Japanese exclusion and internment. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, modern scholars in Burke’s likeness, specifically focus on the language of the mass media in their book, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, in which they argue that “the mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace” (1). I treat Herman and Chomsky’s work as an informal rhetorical treatise. Through their framework, specifically their “source filter” (2), I limit my analysis to the *Los Angeles Times*’ news coverage of the fifth column and examine how the newspaper’s reporting presented information in a way that shaped its readers’ reality, leading them to conclusions that may otherwise seem illogical.

The source filter, according to Herman and Chomsky, proves that “economic necessity and reciprocity of interests” motivate the media. Based on the need for “a steady, reliable flow” of news information, Herman and Chomsky assert, the “media are drawn into a symbiotic relationship with sources that provide consistent, significant news” (18). Newspapers like the *Los Angeles Times* “concentrate their resources” by returning to the sources that make obtaining the news convenient and cheap. These sources benefit because they are able to control the information published (19)—and its language.

Historians have focused mainly on the conditions and effects of Japanese internment; few scholars have asked *how* it came to fruition. For example, Greg Robinson, in *By Order of the President: FDR and the Internment of Japanese Americans*, asserts that President Roosevelt, motivated by racial bias and lack of empathy, signed Executive Order 9066, the crux of the decision to intern Japanese Americans, and he, therefore, “bears the ultimate responsibility” for the internment (7). In his book, *Judgment without Trial: Japanese American Imprisonment during World War II*, Tetsuden Kashima claims that Roosevelt’s executive order was insufficient. He argues that the sustained cooperation of several government officials and departments prove internment was “a product of rational deliberation” and a move anticipated even before Pearl Harbor (5).

A major premise of my argument is that Japanese internment was the consequence not just of a few leaders’ decisions but of combined societal and congressional pseudo-rational deliberation. As Roger Daniels and Eric Foner argue in *Prisoners without Trial*, the circumstances that allowed for Japanese internment were ignited and fueled by government and military personnel but also by politicians, the public, and the press; the latter, they charge, “spread false and foolish rumors” (38). Alice Yang Murray, in her essay “From Pearl Harbor to Mass Incarceration” offers a detailed account of Japanese internment, identifying the false and incessant portrayal of “Jap spies and saboteurs” (5). In addition, she illustrates the legal ramifications of this portrayal and its societal context: wartime hysteria.

In response to individual Japanese Americans’ challenges, the Supreme Court ruled the exclusionary measures against Japanese Americans constitutional (*Yasui v. United States*, 1943; *Hirabayashi v. United States*, 1943; *Korematsu v. United States*, 1944), establishing the legality of wartime ethnic discrimination and incarceration (Murray 9).² These rulings legitimized the identification of Japanese Americans foremost by their ethnicity, not their citizenship. Panic and pressure from violent, radical internees resulted in 6,000 interned Japanese Americans applying for the renunciation of their citizenship; 5,409 of whose attempts were ignored by the Department of Justice (17).

Wartime hysteria inherently relied on the narrative of widespread Japanese saboteurs, or the fifth-column myth.³ This myth, Murray notes, developed as “fears [were] spawned by . . . headlines [blaring,] ‘Secretary of Navy Blames Fifth Column for Raid’ and ‘Fifth Column Treachery Told’” (6). Murray touches on the newspapers’ perpetuation of the fifth-column myth, but her research, being largely historical, does not offer a detailed analysis of the coverage’s implications.

The *Los Angeles Times* first covered Representative Dies and the Committee on Un-American

Activities on 10 October 1940, in regard to their report on Nazi, not Japanese, espionage. Instead of reporting directly on the committee's argument for the existence of Nazi espionage, the coverage heavily cites Representative Dies, quoting him five times in the brief article. As a consequence, the article introduces the committee and its work by introducing Martin Dies, his position as committee chairman, his personal summary of the report, and even anecdotal details about his life:

At his home in Orange Tex. Dies said today that the documentary evidence, which the committee has sent to President Roosevelt and Secretary of State Hull, will "expose the whole fifth column in the United States." ("Dies' Discoveries Loaded," Oct. 1940⁴)

Subsequent coverage by the *Times* continues to introduce Dies at the start of each article, establishing him as an expert within the first paragraph ("Dies Investigates Hiring," Jan. 1942; "Dies 'Yellow Paper,'" Feb. 1942; "Dies Denies," Mar. 1942).

The articles also prioritize information on Representative Dies and his committee's investigation of German, Italian, Russian, and Japanese espionage in the United States, consistently quoting Dies directly and emphasizing his position as committee chairman ("How Far Has Nazi," Oct. 1940; "Axis Sabotage," Nov. 1940; "Propaganda Curb," Jan. 1941). The first *Times* article that focuses on Japanese espionage was not published until 1 August 1941. In this, Dies is presented in a manner consistent with previous coverage. The article includes his complete credentials and either quotes Dies directly or paraphrases his opinions: "Chairman Martin Dies (D.) Tex., of the House committee on un-American activities, said today his investigators have uncovered sensational evidence of an elaborate sabotage plot by Japanese agent on the West Coast" ("Dies Reports Sabotage," Aug. 1941). After Pearl Harbor, the coverage, repeating almost word for word the same description of Dies, shifts to include Dies' retrospective reliability: "Chairman Dies (D.) Tex., today said the House committee investigating un-American activities had information months ago 'indicating the planned attack on Pearl Harbor and Manila,' but had refrained from holding hearings on the matter at the administration's request" ("Dies Tell Tip," Dec. 1941). By relying more on Dies' credibility than the evidence for espionage, the *Times* establishes the committee chair as a Japanese fifth-column expert. In positioning Dies' credential and expertise, the *Times* foregrounds his perspective, thus framing the reader's perspective through Dies'. Not only does that lead the reader to conclude he is the fundamental expert on espionage but, under a critical lens, it suggests that the *Times* has a relationship with Dies to receive and report only his perspective on the fifth column.

Herman and Chomsky suggest that audiences consider "government and corporate sources" reputable simply because they "have the great merit of being recognizable and credible by their status and prestige" (19). Therefore, Dies' position as a government representative, regardless of the subject matter, guarantees his authority. By establishing this authority early in each article, the paper constructs the rest of the article through Dies' viewpoint. Furthermore, the heavy reliance on Dies' authority renders the *Times*' own credibility—on the subject of Japanese espionage—dependent on the paper's association with Dies. Stressing Dies' sufficiency, the *Times* implies that readers need solely rely on this one perspective for their assessment of Japanese persons living in America and Japanese American citizens.

The New York Times, in comparison, does not use Dies' credentials to frame the reader's perspective. The article "The Dies Documents" summarizes the Dies committee's report on Nazi espionage as did the first of the *LA Times* articles. However, the *NY Times* omits Dies' status as House Representative or committee chair, referring to him as "Mr. Dies" or "Dies" (Nov. 1940). However, in later coverage of Dies' arguments regarding Japanese espionage, the *NY Times* articulates his credentials—"the committee chairman, Martin Dies, of Texas" ("Dies Will Report," Feb. 1942)—but not until halfway into the article after citing "a committee spokesman" and "committee mem-

bers.” The reader, then, does not immediately grant government credibility to the committee’s findings and report. The *NY Times* foregrounds the committee’s argument, not Dies’ credentials, unlike the *Los Angeles Times*.

Herman and Chomsky quote Fishman, who claims, “A newsworker will recognize an official’s claim to knowledge not merely as a claim, but as a credible, competent piece of knowledge” (19). The *Los Angeles Times* recognizes government officials associated with Dies as credible and competent. In the article “Dies ‘Yellow Paper’ Reveals Jap Spying,” the *Times* introduces H. A. Van Norman, “chief engineer and general manager of the Bureau of Water Works and Supply of Los Angeles.” According to the coverage, Van Norman’s job within the municipal government gave him expertise concerning Japanese espionage within the Water and Power Department. The article reports that Van Norman intercepted the Japanese Consulate’s request for blueprints of California’s waterways and plumbing system. He reported this request to the FBI and the army as evidence of espionage, but both authorities dismissed his concern. Still, Van Norman refused to give the consulate any information regarding the aqueducts. Subsequent articles repeated Van Norman’s narrative as evidence of Japanese espionage in the Water Department, quoting Van Norman directly (“Japan Sought Gasoline,” Feb. 1942; “Dies on Jap Spy,” Feb. 1942; “Water Plot Confirmed,” Feb. 1942; Dies ‘Yellow Paper,’” Feb. 1942). Van Norman’s credentials are not based on his position within the government, nor his field of expertise. Instead, he is presented as an espionage expert because he indicts the Japanese fifth-column parallel to, and in the context of, Dies’ argument. As a result, readers interpret Van Norman’s competency and claims as credible because of their association with Dies.

Several articles recycle Van Norman’s quotes as well as the details of his narrative. Herman and Chomsky claim that “material from sources that are not *prima facie* credible, or that will elicit criticism and threats, requires careful checking and costly research,” and that therefore the media prefer to use familiar material (19). Reusing news material—facts, quotes, and figures—is convenient for journalists. As Herman and Chomsky note, it allows them to preserve their economic and intellectual resources. A consequence of this convenience, intentional or not, was that the *Los Angeles Times* framed Japanese espionage from one perspective—in this case, Van Norman and Dies’. Herman and Chomsky imply that once audiences are familiarized with a source, they will not be critical of the information it provides. However, audiences must, with a critical eye, establish the competency and credibility of unfamiliar sources, presumably by comparing them to familiar information, which requires another critical look at familiar sources, information, and arguments. Thus, in limiting the presented perspectives to Dies’, the *Times*, in essence, prevents its audience from thinking critically about Dies’ argument.

The articles that report Van Norman and the “water plot” narrative include the same specific facts: Van Norman reached out to the FBI and the army, but both institutions referred him to the other; Van Norman fired Okura, a Japanese employee in the Water Department, for suspicious communication with other Japanese workers; after the Japanese Consulate asked for the blueprints, a young secretary called and spoke with Van Norman directly about the aqueduct information (“Japan Sought Gasoline,” Feb. 1942; “Dies on Jap Spy,” Feb. 1942; “Water Plot Confirmed,” Feb. 1942; “Dies ‘Yellow Paper,’” Feb. 1942).

The *Times*’ coverage of other aspects of the Dies Report mirrors its treatment of the “water plot” narrative. One such line of coverage focuses on a narrative that Japanese fishermen, specifically the “espionage ring” of fishermen living on Terminal Island, use the fishing boats as Japanese naval ships. In its earliest Japanese espionage article, the *Times* reported that 5,000 Japanese inhabitants of the island were holding “secret meetings” to plan “an elaborate sabotage plan” on the West Coast. The article even provided a detailed description of the fishing boats’ naval practices provided by a “co-operating Japanese fisherman”: “Many of these crafts, he added, frequently sail out

beyond the three-mile limit, hoist the Japanese flag ‘and hold naval drill practice’” (“Dies Reports Sabotage,” Aug. 1941). These same details were repeated in similar articles (“Roundup of Axis,” Dec. 1941; “Dies ‘Yellow Paper,’” Feb. 1942; “Japanese Here Sent,” Feb. 1942; “Removing All Coast,” Feb. 1942) over the following months. While the general details remained the same, specific figures varied slightly. For example, most of the Terminal Island coverage reports that 5,000 people lived there, while one of the articles reports 2,500 inhabitants (“Removing All Coast,” Feb. 1942). The inconsistencies seem, to the audience, unnoticeable enough not to call into question the legitimacy of the narratives.

The repetition of details and narratives gives the media “material that can be portrayed as presumptively accurate” (Herman and Chomsky 19), which Herman and Chomsky argue is a criterion of the source filter. While repeating the same material and drawing from the same sources give the audience a false sense of understanding, the language used by the media sources influences *how* the audience can portray this repeated material as accurate.

In substance, the documents tend to indicate that propaganda seeking to obstruct the United States’ national defense efforts has been emanating from Germany and spread through consulates in various key American cities, and the detailed instructions on the distributing of this propaganda have been received by the consuls over short-wave radio broadcasts in code. (“Dies’ Discoveries Loaded,” Oct. 1940)

The verbs of attribution given here when the article directly quotes Dies are ambiguous or vaguely modified. The verb structure, in which “indicate” is modified by “tend to,” communicates an active idea: these documents indicate propaganda, and further, that propaganda is “spread through consulates.” The language used to portray the report assumes the report’s legitimacy, leaving no space for doubt, and thus no need for further evidence. Similarly, the use of gerunds not only legitimizes the report, it creates a sense of urgency communicating that these actions are ongoing: “emanating from Germany” right now; the ideas pose an immediate and continual threat, which prompts immediate and continual action. This micro use of language, woven throughout the entire coverage, allows the *Times* to construct context that necessitates Dies’ argument that the threat is Japanese espionage.

The article “Axis Sabotage Combine Seen: Four Totalitarian Powers Acting against Defense, Chairman Dies Warns” discusses the Dies committee’s overall goal: a “program of ‘exposure’” to address Russian, German, Japanese, and Italian sabotage. To establish the necessity for this goal, the article quotes a telegram sent by the governor of California, Culbert Olson, to Dies in which Olson asks Dies for specifics of yet another espionage narrative: “information concerning the asserted threat of sabotage in the airplane industry in California.” The chosen excerpt of the telegram allows the coverage to manipulate the governor’s language:

The press reports you [the Dies committee] as saying the biggest acts of sabotage in our history is due in California with in [*sic*] 90 days. It seems to me that if you have evidence . . . you should furnish me with the same in order that I may in turn bring it to the attention of our State and local law enforcement agencies.

The article spins Dies as the expert and Olson as reliant on his expertise. However, viewed in context, Olson’s telegram communicates the opposite. Olson argues that in response to the alleged evidence of sabotage, the governor, having access to official intelligence, is responsible for any resulting decisions and should serve as the agent of information about acts of espionage to the public, not a Texas representative. However, the *Times* is able to obscure the governor’s meaning by excerpting vague language and altering the excerpt’s context. In doing so, the coverage eliminates an argument that challenges Dies’ credibility by presenting it as boosting his credibility, reinforcing the audience’s sole reliance on Dies’ perceived expertise.

Revealingly, Olson's reference to "the press" confirms that Dies is using the press as his main, perhaps only, medium of communication. This fact is reinforced in Dies' official report, known as the "Yellow Paper," in which he admits he planted articles in the *Los Angeles Evening Herald and Express*, the *Los Angeles Examiner*, the *Los Angeles Daily News*, and the *Los Angeles Times* during the summer of 1941.

Both the content and language of the *Times*' coverage of the Dies Report show how Herman and Chomsky's source filter is identifiable. The *Times*, it seems, reuses familiar material in its coverage of Van Norman's water plot and similar evidential fifth-column narratives, to avoid extraneous and costly research, continue its relationship with Dies, and add credibility to Dies' own claims. In addition, the vague language used throughout the coverage, in regard to verbs of attribution and reinterpreting the context of information, shows how the *Times* manipulates opposing perspectives. The *Times*' audience, then, receives information funneled through skewed sources, or Herman and Chomsky's source filter. An audience hearing the accounts of Japanese espionage through seemingly expert and multiple sources would conclude that Japanese persons in the United States comprise a fanatical fifth column. Based on this information, when internment is presented as an option, audiences like the *Times*' readership will view it as a necessary *solution*.

Interestingly, when polled mere weeks after Pearl Harbor on 23 December 1941, the *Times*' readers voted Nazis as the country's "foremost foe" ("Voters See Nazis"). Polled again on 24 February 1943, the *Times*' readers identified the "Japs" as "no. 1 foe" ("Americans Now Term"). This implies that Pearl Harbor did not in itself shape the audience's perception of Japanese and Japanese Americans living in the United States. Instead, it empirically suggests that the opinions of the *Times*' readership shifted over the period that the newspaper covered Dies' argument for the existence of a Japanese fifth column. Inevitably, public opinion influenced the justification of internment as a necessary solution, in addition to congressional deliberation on the potency of the Japanese fifth column, including the House Committee on Un-American Activities' presentation of its "Yellow Paper."

Despite factual inaccuracies, unfounded claims, constructed evidence, and false expertise, arguments like Dies' persuaded a nation to incarcerate innocent residents and even citizens. The *Times*' manipulation of language, on both a macro and micro level, symbolically expressed Dies' arguments as intrinsically credible and opposing arguments as intrinsically false. Thus, its readership came to believe in a fanatical fifth column and, ultimately, to conclude that internment was the only available and logical answer to such a threat.

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Notes

- ¹ "No white citizens of German or Italian birth or ancestry were deprived of their liberty by the government except by individual warrant and according to due process of law" (Daniels and Foner 51).
- ² A precedent which, Murray notes, "has never been officially overturned" (9).
- ³ The term *fifth column* refers to a subversive group that supports the enemy and engages in espionage and sabotage. The term was first used by Navy Secretary Frank Knox to describe the Japanese in Hawaii, even though his own report proved his charge an unsupported averment (Murray 6).
- ⁴ When newspaper articles are cited, the citation is modified to include the title and date of each article. These citations communicate where the reoccurring language falls over the time span of the coverage. Similarly, the committee presented its investigation in early March 1942, and interestingly, there was an upsurge in the *Times*'

coverage in February 1942 as the event neared. In regard to the news articles' titles, it is important to note the habitual mention of Dies.

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