5. Evicted and Detained: *Japanese American Internment*

In the months after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, under Franklin D. Roosevelt’s leadership and by the authority of his executive orders, the United States orchestrated what an official report would call “the massive eviction of an entire ethnic group”—people of Japanese ancestry—from America’s West Coast. After expelling these families from their homes in California, Oregon, Washington, and Arizona, the government held them under armed guard in isolated, hastily constructed camps scattered across the West for more than two years. More than 110,000 people—men, women, and children whose only crime was their Japanese ethnicity—experienced this forced migration and internment. Two-thirds were American citizens and more than half were minors.

The government’s rationale for this action: “military necessity.” Shocked that Imperial Japan had come as far as Hawaii in its opening salvo against the United States, Americans, including top military brass, feared the enemy’s next move might be to launch a lethal strike on the U.S. mainland. Military leaders—particularly Lieutenant General John DeWitt, who headed the command responsible for protecting America’s Pacific coast—argued that Japanese Americans living in the region might maintain a strident loyalty to Japan’s militarist regime and collude in an attack on the vulnerable U.S. coast.

These images from the Manzanar War Relocation Center in central California were made by the renowned landscape photographer Ansel Adams, who hoped to show that despite the injustice they suffered, the camps’ inmates had “overcome the sense of defeat and despair by building for themselves a vital community in an arid (but magnificent) environment.” LOC
At the “exclusion” policy’s inception in February 1942, there was no evidence of disloyalty, much less of treason, among ethnic Japanese communities. Nor did any emerge later. In any event, the program made no attempt to base evacuation and confinement on individual culpability. “It was unfortunate,” Secretary of War Henry Stimson wrote in a 1943 report on the evacuation, “that the exigencies of the military situation were such as to require the same treatment for all persons of Japanese ancestry, regardless of their individual loyalty to the United States. But in emergencies, where the safety of the Nation is involved, consideration of the rights of individuals must be subordinated to the common security.”

Western members of Congress strongly advocated the internment program. At the time, California Attorney General Earl Warren, who as chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1950s and ’60s would go on to play a key role in dismantling racial segregation in America, supported Japanese internment. In 1944 the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the exclusion orders as constitutional.

But some forty years later, a bipartisan federal commission would hear testimony from former internees—testimony about disrupted lives, lost homes and businesses, and deep emotional injury—and conclude that they had suffered a “grave personal injustice” at the hands of the federal government. “The broad historical causes that shaped [the policy] were race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership,” the report said. “Widespread ignorance about Americans of Japanese descent contributed to a policy conceived in haste and executed in an atmosphere of fear and anger at Japan.” Issued in 1983, the report led to bipartisan passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which extended an official American apology to Japanese internees, giving each $20,000 in reparations.
Prewar Anti-Asian Sentiment

The official policy of rounding up and confining Japanese Americans at the outset of World War II reflected the fury of a nation at war, to be sure, but it also was the culmination of a long history of distrust and hostility toward Asian immigrants to U.S. shores. Americans of German and Italian descent, after all, did not as a rule meet the same fate; they were seen as elements of the American melting pot, more racially "assimilable" than Asians.

Japanese Americans to a large extent inherited the animus directed at an earlier influx of immigrants from China, many of whom came to work in California’s gold fields or building the transcontinental railroad. In 1882, spurred by labor and nativist groups that insisted cheap “coolie” labor was depressing wages in California especially, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, a ban on immigration by Chinese workers, skilled or unskilled, that was unprecedented for its exclusion of a single ethnic group. The act also made Chinese immigrants already living in the United States ineligible to become citizens.

This curtailed immigration from China. Meanwhile, Japanese immigration was growing, and the same nativist activists, augmented by western farmers objecting to Japanese American competitors, began arguing that the Exclusion Act should also apply to the Japanese. In 1907 the Japanese government agreed to ease these tensions by restricting the emigration of Japanese laborers to America. But in 1919, Japanese delegates to the fledgling League of Nations were insulted when American representatives rejected their proposal to include in the organization’s founding document a clause embracing a belief in racial equality. The Americans were concerned the clause would affect U.S. prerogatives in setting immigration policy, as well as offend powerful southern Democrats who supported racial segregation at home.

In 1922 the U.S. Supreme Court rejected a Japanese immigrant’s bid for citizenship under a 1906 law restricting naturalization to whites and people of African descent or birth. The court ruled that the man, Takao Ozawa, was nonwhite and therefore of an "unassimilable race" that made him ineligible to become an American. With the Immigration Act of 1924, the gate slammed shut against Japanese immigration to the United States. The law set quotas on immigration from various countries, but absolutely barred entry to the United States by anyone not eligible for naturalization—including, of course, the Japanese. The Japanese government protested, to no avail.

By the 1930s, though, many Japanese Americans were well established in the West and in Hawaii, forming associations, developing a fusion of Japanese and American cultures, and farming or running successful businesses. The vast majority considered America their permanent home. As America became engulfed in World War II, Franklin D. Roosevelt identified the Chinese Exclusion Act as a “mistake” and a liability even as he authorized the eviction of ethnic Japanese from the West Coast. In 1943 he prevailed on Congress to repeal the law barring Chinese immigration and naturalization as a “display of friendship” toward China, an ally in the war, and to combat “distorted Japanese propaganda” that charged America with anti-Asian racism.

An 1882 political cartoon criticizing the Chinese Exclusion Act passed that year. The law banned immigration by Chinese workers and made Chinese residents in America ineligible for citizenship. The American internment of people of Japanese heritage during World War II was a response to events of the moment but also reflected a long history of treating Asian immigrants as permanent strangers in the United States. LOC

Japan is shown as a bucktoothed rat nibbling at Alaska in this U.S. poster commenting on Japan’s occupation from 1942 to 1943 of two Alaskan islands. Although anti-German and anti-Italian sentiment certainly rose among Americans during the war, the Japanese were more often characterized as a racially distinct and repulsive people. LOC

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“Exclusion” Gets Underway

Even before America entered World War II, Franklin D. Roosevelt authorized surveillance of ethnic Japanese communities, although his agents assured him that Japanese Americans were overwhelmingly loyal. Following Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, leaders in Japanese communities were quickly arrested and detained. Over the following weeks, West Coast Army officers, backed by local politicians and lobbying groups, called for mass removal of ethnic Japanese, insisting that they were potential spies and saboteurs for Tokyo.

On February 19, 1942, under pressure from the War Department, FDR issued Executive Order 9066. It authorized army leaders to designate military areas from which “any or all persons” could be “excluded” in the interest of national security. In early March, Lieutenant General John DeWitt established Military Area No. 1, encompassing the western parts of California, Oregon, Washington, and part of Arizona, and Military Area No. 2, including the rest of those states. By October the government had ordered the expulsion of all ethnic Japanese from Area No. 1 and the California portion of Area No. 2.

The policy of detention grew out of the decision to expel well over one hundred thousand individuals from the cities and countryside of the West Coast. At first the government encouraged “voluntary evacuation” of ethnic Japanese. But many had no place to go, and, given that the government had labeled the would-be migrants as threats, inland communities did not wish to receive them. So the government soon moved to take control of the process and hold Japanese Americans in remote locations. On March 18, 1942, FDR issued an executive order creating the War Relocation Authority (WRA), which, over the spring and summer, would be responsible for moving evicted families, first to “assembly centers” at fairgrounds and
In a WRA report on the opening of the camps, authorities related inevitable logistical problems. “At some of the centers,” the report said, “evacuees were forced temporarily to live in barracks without lights, laundry facilities, or adequate toilets. Mess halls planned to accommodate about 300 people had to handle twice and three times that number for short periods as evacuees poured in from assembly centers on schedule and shipment of stoves and other kitchen facilities lagged behind. In a few cases, where cots were not delivered on time, some newly arriving evacuees spent their first night in relocation centers sleeping on barracks floors.”

During the war, some Japanese Americans would leave the camps to serve in the military, attend college, or resettle outside the West Coast. Most would remain in confinement.

By the spring of 1943, it was clear the U.S. mainland was not under the threat of attack, and top U.S. military officials no longer believed it necessary to protect national security by excluding ethnic Japanese from the West Coast. Yet people of Japanese heritage were not allowed to return to the far West until January 1945.
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Life in Camp

The ten War Relocation Authority (WRA) relocation camps where Japanese Americans lived during the war years were purposely situated in remote desert and swamp areas in the West and Arkansas. The climate was hot and dusty or humid in summer; in most locations, winters were bitterly cold. Housing consisted of tar-paper shacks, one room per family, surrounded by barbed wire and armed sentries. Health and sanitary facilities were primitive, especially at the start, though dedicated Japanese American doctors and nurses served their fellow inmates. Food was limited and of poor quality, although inmates improved their own nutrition by growing vegetables.

Indeed, Japanese Americans took up most of the work in camp. All adults were expected to work, at a maximum salary of nineteen dollars per month. Inmates staffed schools and hospitals, and ran agricultural and consumer cooperatives. Each camp had an inmate-run newspaper, and the WRA provided a measure of self-government, though camp administrators held ultimate authority.
Korematsu’s Challenge

A few Nisei—first-generation Americans born to Japanese immigrants—challenged Executive Order 9066 in court. One was Fred Toyosaburo Korematsu, a twenty-three-year-old from Oakland, California, whose parents ran a flower nursery. With help from the Northern California American Civil Liberties Union he argued that the government’s policy deprived him of liberty “without due process of the law”—that is, without charges or a trial—and thus violated the Constitution’s Fifth Amendment.

Having been rejected by the military and fired from a series of welding jobs due to his Japanese heritage, the young Korematsu resisted the 1942 order to report with his family to an assembly center at a racetrack in nearby San Bruno, California. He was arrested in the spring of 1942 and convicted of resisting military orders. Korematsu challenged the conviction, and in October 1944 his appeal was argued before the U.S. Supreme Court, one of four wartime “Japanese internment” cases heard by the court. In December 1944, the court upheld Korematsu’s conviction by a six to three vote on the grounds that national security interests trumped Korematsu’s civil liberties.

In his dissenting opinion, Justice Robert H. Jackson underlined the irrational and ultimately racist implications of the military order barring Korematsu’s presence “in the state whereof he is a citizen, near the place where he was born, and where all his life he has lived.” Jackson wrote, “Had Korematsu been one of four—the others being, say, a German alien enemy, an Italian alien enemy, and a citizen of American-born ancestors, convicted of treason but out on parole—only Korematsu’s presence would have violated the order. The difference between their innocence and his crime would result, not from anything he did, said, or thought, different than they, but only in that he was born of different racial stock.”

In 1983 a federal judge vacated the conviction because the government, in making its case, had suppressed evidence that Japanese Americans were not a threat. In 1998 Korematsu received the Presidential Medal of Freedom.
In the fall of 1942, the War Department proposed enlisting Nisei—American-born children of Japanese immigrants—in the military to obtain more recruits and allow United States citizens of Japanese heritage to prove their loyalty to America. Though the navy would remain closed to Japanese Americans for the war’s duration, Franklin D. Roosevelt approved their service in the army. In February 1943, he announced the formation of a segregated Japanese American unit with the remark, “Americanism is a matter of the mind and heart; Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race or ancestry.”

Contrary to expectations, the vast majority of ethnic Japanese who enlisted voluntarily came from Hawaii, where Japanese Americans remained free, and not from internment camps. The Japanese American unit became the “Go for Broke” 442nd Regimental Combat Team, which fought in Italy and France and became the most decorated unit of its size in U.S. history. In all more than thirty-three thousand Nisei served in the war. One volunteer in the 442nd was Daniel Inouye of Honolulu, who would be awarded the military’s highest distinction, the Medal of Honor, for his courageous stand against the Germans in Italy; he lost an arm in the battle. On returning home, Inouye went to college and law school on the G.I. Bill and was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1962, serving until his death in 2012.

In 1944, however, the army started drafting Nisei from the camps. Now, more than three hundred young men refused to accept military service in the government that was denying them the rights of citizenship and incarcerating their families. Federal courts convicted all but twenty-seven of them, and they went from relocation centers to federal prison.
People of Japanese Ancestry in Hawaii

In the spring of 1942, as Japanese Americans were being systematically removed from the West Coast and confined in camps, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox ordered the same treatment for the 140,000 Japanese Americans in the Territory of Hawaii, where military officials likewise feared an invasion by Imperial Japan. But the president’s orders were never implemented.

This was partly due to the logistic challenges involved in finding the resources to build the camps, transport whole communities there, and guard the facilities—all amid wartime shortages in materials and labor. But a more important factor was the opposition of Hawaii’s military governor, General Delos Emmons. Emmons realized that Japanese Americans made up almost 40 percent of the territory’s population and much of its workforce, so confining them would paralyze Hawaii’s economy. Rather than defy the policy openly, Emmons quietly delayed implementing the removal, and in this way he eventually succeeded in killing the plan (although he also used the presence of Japanese Americans as justification for maintaining military rule in Hawaii). In return, Japanese communities provided soldiers and indispensable support to the territory’s war effort.

Delos Emmons in 1918. An aviator and official in the U.S. Army Air Corps, Emmons was appointed Hawaii’s military governor shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. He augmented defenses in Hawaii and did not carry out an order to evacuate people of Japanese ancestry, who made up nearly 40 percent of the territory’s population and were vital to its functioning. LOC
Loyalty Questionnaires

In 1943, the original impetus for Japanese American removal having faded considerably, the military and the War Relocation Authority (WRA) introduced a “loyalty questionnaire” for Japanese internees designed to test their fitness to serve in the army or to be released for resettlement. All adults in the camps were required to fill them out.

The questionnaires were confusing and, to families that had already suffered traumatic dislocations, full of obscure and threatening implications. For example, one question asked whether an internee would “swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any and all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forebear any form of allegiance to the Japanese Emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization.” Yet Japanese immigrants had been denied naturalization as American citizens, and under the circumstances some feared an affirmative answer would make them stateless. Many native-born Americans of Japanese descent, meanwhile, were outraged at once again being treated as enemy aliens. Some feared “wrong” answers to the questions could result in family separations or expulsion from camps into hostile and dangerous U.S. communities.

Whether through confusion, defiance, or fear, thousands answered the questions in ways that, as far as the War Department was concerned, cast even greater doubt on their loyalty. The department insisted these inmates be segregated. The WRA reluctantly rounded up some fifteen thousand “disloyals” and sent them to a high-security center created at the Tule Lake camp in Northern California, where they remained imprisoned until 1946.