Japanese Internment Camps: Exploration of a Civil Liberties Issue

By Kyla D.
Ms. Hernandez
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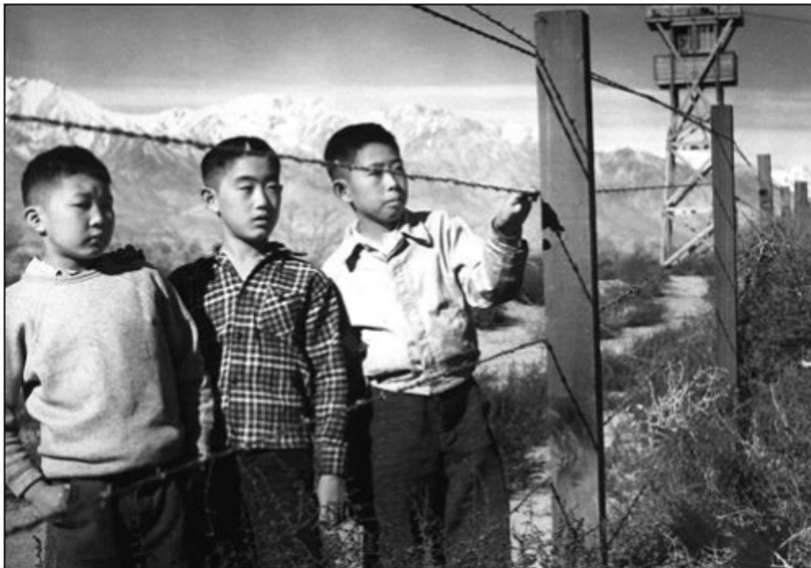
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Problem

How has morality been sacrificed in the name of security? During World War Two, the United States interned thousands of Japanese Americans to keep the country safe. In response to the bombing of Pearl Harbor on February 19, 1941, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066. The order called for all people of Japanese ancestry to be removed and sent into confinement. We call this event the Japanese internment. Within six days, the Japanese were to pack their bags and leave for a new home. Prior wariness of the Japanese further catapulted Western prejudice. The U.S. and other Western countries had become concerned about Asian immigrants' work prowess, viewing it as a potential threat to their citizens in the workforce. While this act was in place, Japanese Americans were viewed as the enemy of America due to their racial affiliation. People believed they were a threat to national security, and therefore were removed to desolate areas. The majority of U.S. citizens supported this idea, but they did not understand how it would affect the lives of their Japanese neighbors. As people began to see the wrong in the government's actions, they took legal action, and ultimately reparations were due.



Japanese children looking out of Manzanar internment camp. Courtesy of SIRS Issue Researcher

In 1941, Japan declared war on the U.S. when they launched a surprise attack and bombed a naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The Japanese military believed they could stop the United States intervention in their attack of other nations. This event prompted the U.S. to enter World War Two. Fear quickly ensued. Espionage was of great concern during this time. Japanese Americans were locked up and relocated due to the public's suspicion. The U.S. wasn't the only government to treat the Japanese with contempt. According to the History Channel, "Mexico enacted its own version, and eventually 2,264 more people of Japanese descent were forcibly removed from Peru, Brazil, Chile, and Argentina to the United States" (History Channel editors, 2). They were also put into camps.

Chapter 2: Definition of Internment Camps

Throughout history, internment or concentration camps have been meant to imprison big groups of people, without criminal charges, and largely due to political circumstances in times of war. The most notable examples of internment include Jews who were put in camps in Nazi Germany during the Holocaust, and the Japanese during World War Two.

Chapter 3: Executive Order 9066

Following the events of Pearl Harbor, the U.S. government announced that all peoples of Japanese descent were to be sent to internment camps under an act infamously known as Executive Order 9066. People of Japanese ancestry, even if they were U.S. citizens, were also affected and interned. Regardless of their status and age, over 117,000 Japanese people were forcibly removed from their homes and put into camps. Soon after the order was released in February 1942, a military restricted zone was formed that ran through Washington, Oregon, and California. Relocation centers were stationed in remote areas like Tule Lake and Manzanar,California, as well as Heart Mountain, Wyoming. People were crammed into army-style barracks with the few items they could carry, and those who were uncooperative were sent to a special camp in Tule Lake, California (Newsela).

Chapter 4: Reasons for and Against Japanese American Exclusion and Internment

During this time, most Americans believed that it was beneficial to the U.S.to intern the Japanese. The public was afraid of what more the Japanese government was capable of, after about 2,400 people died in the attack on Pearl Harbor, with scores more injured. While some civilians were killed in the Pearl Harbor attack, members of the U.S. military made up a large number of the deaths. For the event to have created such a calamity, people believed that there must have been some sort of communication between the target and Japan. Thus far, there had been no case of espionage from the Japanese, which raised the American government's suspicions. Articles, newspapers, and posters were put up with signs of anti-Japanese sentiments. People were afraid. In response, the government decided that it was best to separate Japanese Americans from the rest of society.

The stated purpose was to cut off Japanese communications and to also protect innocent Japanese. Because people felt unease around their Japanese neighbors and peers, the government was wary of anti-Japanese riots and possible casualties that could be incited. Notable figures such as U.S Army General John L. Dewitt, who subsequently oversaw the camps, and President Roosevelt were in favor of the idea of Japanese isolation.

However, not everyone was on board with this plan. The then Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director John Edgar Hoover claimed that it would be foolish to assume the Japanese government relied solely on Japanese-American intelligence. He highlighted the possibility of occidentals who could have been in coalition with the enemy forces (Hoover 1.) Others claimed that this was outright racism– to seclude a racial group from areas and withdraw them from living their normal lives.

Chapter 5: Examples that Illustrate how Internment Disrupted Japanese Americans Lives

Japanese Americans were given only a few days to pack their belongings and leave for camp when Executive Order 9066 was hurriedly signed and announced to the public. Merchants had to quickly sell

their stock before they left, losing thousands of dollars of profit. Japanese were only allowed to bring what they could carry in their hands. In most cases, this was only enough for a suitcase and a bag. They weren't given information about where they would go, how long they would stay, or even what they needed to bring.

Japanese Americans first gathered at temporary camps called assembly centers before being moved to permanent shelters called wartime residences. Camps were in desolate and removed places, surrounded by barbed wire fences. Tall watch towers loomed over the perimeters, and the camps were devoid of any semblance of privacy. Space was limited so they quickly got familiar with their fellow internees.

Despite this segregation, many Japanese Americans found ways to keep their spirits up and persevere. They set up schools, and held social events and religious gatherings. Some children were even able to participate in boy scouts. However, many internees were bored of their lives in camps. Meals were repetitive and simple, and in some camps, the internees themselves would have to fill their bedding with straw and hay.

One diary entry written by Toku Machida Shimomura, a Japanese immigrant, detailed instances where those who fell ill were isolated in a separate building that looked like a jail to prevent the spread of the disease. During the summers, temperatures would skyrocket to an insufferable 110 degrees Fahrenheit or higher. Those in isolation experienced even worse summer heat.

Despite these injustices, most Japanese decided not to rebel against authorities because they were afraid of being reprimanded. Later throughout this period of internment, the military started accepting Japanese applicants, and so many interned Japanese took this offer to display their loyalty.

Chapter 6: Court Cases that show the Division in the United States about the Exclusion Policy

At this time, the U.S.was torn between two positions: those who believed it was an absolute necessity to keep Japanese Americans interned, and those who viewed it as something far below America's moral standards. During this troubled time, challenges to the executive order eventually reached the United States Supreme Court on multiple occasions.

One landmark case called Korematsu v. United States involved a Japanese-American citizen named Fred Korematsu, who challenged the constitutionality of the executive order after he was arrested for failing to report to a relocation center. He had gotten plastic surgery on his eyes to alter his appearance and changed his name in an attempt to avoid the concentration camps. He was convicted of violating military orders. The Supreme Court ultimately continued to stand by their actions by claiming the government should have the power to prevent harm to their citizens (1).

According to the divided 6-3 decision on Dec. 18, 1944, the Court ruled that because of the war, the detention of the Japanese was a "military necessity" not based on race. The situation called for immediate response and could not wait. Therefore, they deemed it justified that Japanese Americans were put into internment camps. Although some argued that you simply cannot put "innocent" Japanese into internment, the majority of the court agreed that people of Japanese ancestry were loyal to Japan. Because of their ties to Japan, their sworn allegiance to the United States was deemed invalid.

In a dissenting opinion by Justice Frank Murphy, he said that when there is no authority on an issue, there must be a "definite limit" to military power. He said that because no Martial Law was placed, the exclusion of Japanese American immigrants and citizens from military zones on a request from the military, should not be granted.

Another dissenting Justice, Robert Jackson, claimed that the order was a violation of constitutional rights, and a clear display of racism. In his dissenting opinion, he wrote "On the contrary, it is the case of convicting a citizen as a punishment for not submitting to imprisonment in a concentration camp, based on his ancestry, and solely because of his ancestry, without evidence or inquiry concerning his loyalty and good disposition towards the United States" (Roberts 2).

Another Justice came at this issue with a different view about why this was wrong. He argued that Korematsu was a citizen of the United States because he was born in America, regardless of his blood ties. Furthermore, up until that point, Korematsu had shown no record of being unlawful or committing any crime, or that he was unloyal to the states.

That landmark case impacted future, similar cases that also made it to the country's highest court. In Hirabayashi v. United States, it was argued that the curfew portion of Executive Order 9066 overstepped its governmental authorities and constitutional limitations. The plaintiff, Gordon Hirabayashi, of Japanese descent, was accused of violating a curfew in place for those of Japanese descent during that time. In the case, he argued that isolation due to racial affiliation was discrimination and unconstitutional. The Supreme Court held that the use of curfews against those from a specific minority was constitutional when the nation was at war with a country linked to places which the group's ancestors originated.

Chapter 7: Findings: Should Freedom be Sacrificed in the Name of National Security?

After heavy consideration about the importance of both freedom and national security, I cannot possibly come to a conclusion. To say that in all cases, that freedom is more important than possibly people's lives, or that the lives of people are more important than their freedom– especially because we live in America, is something that I cannot do. The U.S is known for its freedom and equality, and to take away that aspect of America means that it is no longer what it stands for. But with realizable mass murder, without its people, what is America?

The foundation of the United States of America was built upon the freedom of its people. The belief that all humans are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness," are what makes America, America (Jefferson, "Declaration of Independence"). The Americans who preceded us broke their ties with the British because they felt suffocated under their government. Without freedom, people cannot express themselves or pursue a life of happiness. A government that controls your life and everything you do is not a government for the people, but a government for itself. Therefore, our founding fathers created a new government in which the freedom of its citizens was their top most priority.

On November 19, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln presented the Gettysburg Address, in which he stated, "and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from earth." The Preamble of the Constitution outlines the priorities of the government, and how it intends to serve the people: "in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for

the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity" (US Constitution "Preamble"). These are the basic principles of why they made a new government. Freedom was an important, founding pillar that promised hope to Americans when the country was created. Without its freedom, America would not be what it is today. During the internment of the Japanese Americans, people of Japanese descent felt betrayed because they believed that their pillar had taken away the rights that God had given them.

Some argue that the rights of the Japanese had not been infringed upon. In fact, they claimed that they were treated like any other normal citizen if they had been in a similar situation. Walter Lippman, a well-known writer and political commentator at the time, drew an analogy to how George Washington, our founding father, would have to prove his identity and prove that he had no ill intentions if he wished to enter military grounds: "He has to register, sign papers, and wear an identification button. Then, perhaps, if he proves his case, he is escorted by an armed guard while he does his errand, and until he has been checked out of his place and his papers and his button have been returned," (Lippman, 2.). He then inquires if George Washington had his rights violated or if his loyalty to the country had been called into question – which clearly, they have not. However, this is a poorly thought out analogy. The two matters have no connection to each other at all. To put a group of people into internment camps and to verify Washington's identity are two entirely separate things. Washington has not been detained because of his ancestry or blood that runs through his veins.

Despite this argument, national security and the safety of the people is extremely important as well. The bombing of Pearl Harbor, a naval base, had an impact on thousands of people and destroyed many of our ships. Because of this, suspicions began to rise. There should have been communication and lots of planning and preparation between the mainland and the U.S. to prevent the country from being vulnerable to the attack. Thus far, there has been no account of espionage from the Japanese, which worried the American government. In the court case of Korematsu v. United States, the Supreme Court chose to defend military action. According to Mr. Justice Black, the court said they, "upheld the curfew order as an exercise to the power of the government to take steps necessary to prevent espionage and sabotage in an area threatened by Japanese attack" (Black 1). The military felt it necessary to place this curfew upon the Japanese in order to protect America. Military authorities claimed the curfews did not provide adequate protection to the American citizens, and therefore, required extensive action. Orders which only apply to certain groups of people – especially a certain racial group, are heavily weighed and considered. It is not something the government takes lightly. However, in respect to the urgent public endangerment, that can be validated and rationalized. In order to protect their citizens, the government took these actions.

During the war, there didn't seem to be much hope for Japan. They had suffered numerous casualties and were greatly hurt. However, despite that, the Japanese government refused to back down. The debut of the first atomic bomb was on Hiroshima, Japan, by the United States after which the U.S. dropped another atomic bomb called "Fat Man" (History Channel). Six days later, the Japanese government surrendered. Around 90,000 people died because of the first attack on Japan, but they didn't admit defeat. Why were the Japanese so resilient? Why did they continue to pursue a hopeless war? Just what were they planning to gain from this?

Conclusion

The issue of Japanese internment is a difficult one. Matters like this tend to be situational, and no one has a magic ball to look into the future. That is why we need to take a deep look into our past. Perhaps, there was no right answer. But the most important thing to gain from this is a lesson, one that will stick with us to guide us through our future– after all, that's why we study our history in the first place.

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