

Japanese Internment Camps: Inequality in the Land of Equality

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Abstract

The unfair treatment of Japanese Americans started a few months after the Japanese warplanes bombed Pearl Harbor. In response, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which ordered Japanese Americans or Nikkei to be detained as long as they had 1/16 or more of Japanese descent. This was contrary to evidence given in the Munson Report of 1941 and findings from the FBI and other intelligence agencies that showed that there was no reason to fear the Nikkei community. Nikkei were used as scapegoats to ease the public shock of Pearl Harbor. Based on the analysis of several primary documents and secondary sources, this research paper examines the mistreatment of Japanese Americans through forced imprisonment in concentration camps during World War II, as well as the process that led to the decision of the internment. In particular, it examines how Japanese Americans in camps were treated like criminals and dehumanized by the U.S government and how the tumultuous events of World War II as well as the increasing anger and fear of the Japanese due to the increase of immigrants on the West Coast, led to their internment. The decision to intern Japanese Americans was a difficult one, but the process that the U.S. government used was unjust. The Nikkei lived in a country that boasted of their belief in equal rights for all human beings yet were still treated unequally. Most of the incarcerated Nikkei communities were U.S citizens, who by definition could not legally be interned. Thirty years later, President Gerald R. Ford repealed Executive Order 9066, stating that it was wrong to imprison the Nikkei as they were and are loyal Americans. Nikkei received a formal apology from the President and a symbolic payment of \$20,000. This admission and acknowledgement of wrongdoing underscores that the Nikkei community was treated unjustly – a conclusion that can also be drawn from close examination of visual evidence in the camps as this paper shows.

Keywords: Japanese Americans, Incarceration, Inequality

1. Introduction

It was 1939 when the Second World War started; a war that was between the Axis powers: Germany, Italy, and Japan and the Allies: France, Great Britain, and the United States.¹ The result of this war extended the powers of the Soviet Union to Eastern Europe. The lives of nearly 60 million people were taken in this six-year conflict.² On December 7, 1941, two years after the war started, Japanese warplanes bombed Pearl Harbor. This attack came as a surprise and led to the United States declaring war on Japan and her ally countries.³ It was also this attack that led to the mistreatment of Japanese Americans through forced imprisonment throughout concentration camps in California, Washington, Oregon, Arizona and Hawai'i.⁴ After President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, nearly 110,000 individuals of Japanese descent were evacuated from their homes and incarcerated from 1942 until 1945.⁵ Events of World War II, led to the fear of the Japanese, resulting in the decision to intern Japanese Americans. People see the internment as unjust, however, the United States had a tough decision to make during a tumultuous time.

2. Body

Before World War II began, the United States had a long hostile relationship with Japan. In 1894 the United States had a treaty with Japan, called Gentlemen's Agreement, which assured free immigration for Japanese workers in the U.S. However, as the number of Japanese workers increased, resentment grew towards the Japanese.⁶ In 1900, Japan agreed to deny passports to laborers wanting to come into the United States, but they did not deny passports for those who entered Canada, Mexico, or Hawai'i. This caused an increase in racial antagonism in the United States.⁷ A final note by the Japanese, made in February 1908, denied passports to laborers intending to enter the U.S. and that the U.S. had the right to exclude Japanese immigrants holding passports issued for other countries, made the Gentlemen's Agreement fully effective.⁸ The increase of Japanese presence on the West Coast caused an increase in Anti-Japanese sentiment and paranoia. Without evidence, Americans feared that the Japanese would act as saboteurs, and considered them a security risk.⁹

In 1940 after the war broke out in Europe and the Fall of France, President Franklin Roosevelt helped aid European democracies without direct involvement in the war, through the Lend-Lease Act, which permitted the lending, leasing, selling, or bartering of arms, ammunition and food to "any country whose defense the President deems vital to the defense of the US."^{10 11} However, this Lend-Lease Act put the U.S. further into the war. But it wasn't until the attack on Pearl Harbor and Hitler's declaration of the war with the U.S., that the United States entered the war.^{12 13}

The United States' involvement in World War II helped to intensify the anti-Asian paranoia. The Pearl Harbor attack provoked even more of the already decades long discrimination and anger against the Japanese.¹⁴ The decision to evacuate individuals of Japanese descent was fueled by all these different emotions against the Japanese.¹⁵ After succumbing to the popular opinion of the anti-Japanese paranoia, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, ordering of the concentration camps.¹⁶ While the decision for the internment was made after the tumultuous events that occurred and the fear of the Japanese, the way the government went about the internment can be seen as unjust.

On February 19, 1942, nearly 110,000 individuals of Japanese descent were evacuated from their homes and incarcerated from 1942 until 1945.¹⁷ It did not matter the age of who was imprisoned – men, women, children, babies, and the elderly were detained as long as they were 1/16 or more of Japanese descent.¹⁸ Of those 110,000, two-thirds were United States citizens, most of who did not know any Japanese.¹⁹ Although they lived in the U.S., a country promising equal rights for everyone, the Japanese Americans were outcasts and treated unequally because of their ethnicity.

During their incarceration, the Japanese Americans, also known as Nikkei, were treated like criminals. Within days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the FBI searched the homes of Japanese Americans. Anything that was foreign was considered suspicious because the agents were not able to read Japanese. As a result, unable to distinguish one item from another, they destroyed everything. Afraid of being arrested, Japanese Americans tried to distance themselves from anything Japanese; photos, letters, comic books, calligraphy scrolls, and phonograph records were discarded.²⁰ Their homes were scrutinized as if they were suspects in a crime; any diminutive thing was considered as evidence and was reason to detain the owners as a threat to the community. Besides taking away their homes, once they reached the relocation centers, the Nikkei community members went through a process of being body-searched, fingerprinted, interrogated, and inoculated. When they arrived at the camps, their luggage was searched and inspected for contraband.²¹ "Inmates" were photographed upon arrival at the camps, the style of photograph reminiscent of a criminal mugshot (Figure 1).²² All these procedures that the Nikkei went through was not unlike prisoners being interrogated for committing felonies. Once in the relocation camps, barbed wire fences imprisoned them. Their only physical possessions were those that fit into the suitcases and duffel bags they carried.²³



Figure 1. c1942. From Holt-Atherton Special Collections: *Kinenhi*

A picture by Toyo Miyatake, figure 2, shows young boys of Japanese ancestry held in their incarceration camp behind barbed wire fences. One can discern the fact that these boys could not do anything about their incarceration behind the fence, which depicts “the power and, the amount of force mobilized to contain them.”²⁴ This picture emphasizes the injustice that they faced during that time. The boys’ faces look like they are longing to be free of the so-called charges that they committed, yet the only “offense” was being of Japanese decent. The sites of Japanese American incarceration camps were all located in desolate environments, distant from major towns and cities. The government went to great lengths to use land in particularly remote areas of the country.²⁵ This kept them as far away as possible from the general population but also made their environment as miserable as it could be.



Figure 2. Toyo Miyatake photograph. “Boys Behind Barbed Wire.” Toyo Miyatake Collection.

Nikkei were forced to evacuate on the spot, often with no warning, or time to pack up their belongings (Figure 3). Evacuees were then given a tag with a number denoting what family they belonged to, effectively reducing that individual down to a number, stripping away their humanity.²⁶



Figure 3. 1942. “Fumiko Hayashida and her Daughter.” Seattle Post-Intelligence Collection. Museum of History and Industry.

The peremptory incarceration was also dehumanizing the Nikkei community. They were forced to renounce their heritage and be detained in relocation camps by the U.S. government “in which they pledged their allegiance to” and trusted.²⁷ Figure 4, a picture from the Wayne Collins collection depicts a Japanese American man being brutally dragged by two soldiers at a relocation camp.²⁸ From this image one can discern the fact that Japanese Americans were treated with violence and treated as if they were not human.



Figure 4. Wayne Collins photograph, “Segregation Concentration Camp at Tule Lake, CA, c. 1945.” Japanese American National Museum

Nikkei were also dehumanized as they were treated as animals. The living quarters for many relocation centers were made of shacks or from former horse stalls. A picture called “Horse Stall Housing” (Figure 5), illustrates how former racetrack horse stalls were used as housing for some relocation centers in California.²⁹ The picture elucidates how run-down some relocation centers were and how hastily it was cleaned up for the evacuee. The horse stalls only contained metal cots and mattresses that contained hay. Because of the conditions of the living quarters, it was nearly impossible to keep warm during the winter; the cold air seeped through the cracks and crevices of the walls.³⁰ Evacuees often did not have enough blankets, forcing some to bear with the cold.³¹



Figure 5. “Horse Stall Housing Hastily”

Despite their unjust treatment, many Japanese continued living their life, not forgetting their heritage. The relocation centers were originally established to provide communities where the evacuees could live and contribute to their own support by private employment as well as to serve as wartime homes for those that were unfit or unable to relocate to ordinary American communities.³² At the relocation centers, evacuees were provided with shelter, food, medical care, work opportunities, education, vocational training, leisure-time, and consumer enterprises. This shows that the internees were given an opportunity to establish a life in the relocation centers.³³ Figure 6 shows Japanese American children receiving their education at Tule Lake Internment camp.³⁴ Figure 7, shows internees playing baseball during their leisure time. These two photographs show that the internment was not all fallacious.³⁵

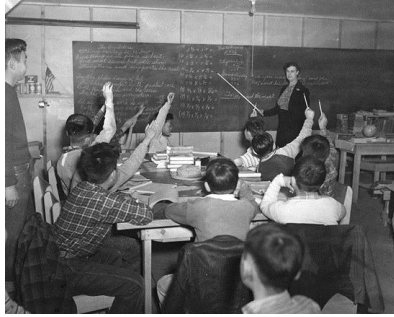


Figure 6. Tule Lake Internment Camp, J. Willard Marriott Library, The University of Utah



Figure 7. Tule Lake Internment Camp, J. Willard Marriott Library, The University of Utah

Regardless of their treatment, some of the Japanese Americans demonstrated their loyalty to the United States by contributing to the war effort.³⁶ Amongst other jobs, they worked in camouflage net factories, worked in a silk-screen poster shops, built model warships, staged scrap metal drives and war bond sales, and organized blood donations within the camps.³⁷ In a picture taken at Manzanar relocation center (Figure 8), women of Japanese ancestry are shown diligently making the camouflage nets for the war effort. Further analysis of the photo reveals that they are all wearing masks on their faces. Camouflage nets had chemicals in the dye, which caused rashes on the worker's skins.³⁸ A number of Nikkei were willing to harm their body and health to prove their loyalty to a country that betrayed them. While some of the women demonstrated their loyalty in this way, some of the men were willing to risk their life to demonstrate their loyalty. Nearly 33,000 Nisei men joined the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, an all-Nisei unit in the American armed forces. Although some were drafted from the camps where their families were staying, many volunteered for service. The 442nd Regimental Team was the most decorated unit of its size during World War II, earning seven Presidential Distinguished Unit Citations and 18,143 individual decorations. The 442nd's battle motto was "Go For Broke" which meant that they wanted to prove their loyalty to America, even if it meant dying to do so.³⁹ In the picture called "GI's Family" (figure 9), one can see a family holding a picture of their late son, who died fighting overseas with the American flag in the background.⁴⁰ The idea that Japanese Americans were forced to disregard their ancestors and could only call themselves Americans is illustrated in this picture. One can see the sadness in the mother's face. The father is looking away from the camera with his arms crossed. One can sense that he was proud of his son but cannot comprehend how the country can still treat them so unjustly even after making the ultimate sacrifice.



Figure 8. Manzanar Relocation Center. Manzanar, CA.



Figure 9. “GI’s Family.” This family portrait was made at Poston.

As a result of their incarceration, many Nisei were not willing to serve in the armed forces or defend the United States. They answered “no” to two significant questions that tested their loyalty to the United States. One question, question #27, was “are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States in combat wherever ordered?” The other, question #28, “will you swear unqualified allegiances to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or other foreign government, power or organization?” The name “No-No Boys” emanated from their decision.⁴¹ These Nisei men were considered enemies because of their answers and were sent to the camp at Tule Lake.⁴² Not only were there those that were not willing to defend their nation, but there were some internees who felt betrayed and rebelled against their internment. One man, named Fred Korematsu challenged Executive Order 9066, by remaining in San Leandro, an area that was banned to “all persons of Japanese ancestry.” His defiance of the order made him convicted, in which Korematsu appealed. In 1944, his case went to the Supreme Court where his conviction was upheld because the government felt that the need to protect against espionage outweighed Korematsu’s rights.^{43 44} He was arrested and sent to Topaz Camp in Utah.

Disregarding the Munson Report of 1941 and findings from the FBI as well as other intelligence surveillance showing that there was no reason to fear the Nikkei community, the Japanese Americans were still used as scapegoats to ease the public shock of Pearl Harbor. The Munson Report of 1941 was an order given by President Roosevelt to Curtis B. Munson, to gather information on the loyalty of Japanese Americans.⁴⁵ In spite of the report findings that the Nikkei were loyal and posed little threat, and after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the government decided to keep the report a secret and the Nikkei were incarcerated.

By signing Executive Order of 9066 President Franklin D. Roosevelt disregarded the Munson report and decided that there was a “military necessity” and turned the “Japanese problem” over to the U.S. Army. The War Relocation Authority (WRA) was created soon after. The WRA and the Army supervised the massive removal of Japanese Americans. Nikkei were taken from their homes and sent to temporary relocation centers.⁴⁶ Eleanor Roosevelt once said about Japanese Americans, “They were marked as different from other races and they were not treated on an equal basis. This happened because in one part of our country they were feared as competitors, and the rest of our

country knew them so little and cared so little about them that they did not even think about the principle that we in this country believe in – that of equal rights for all human beings.”⁴⁷

Around 30 years later, the Nikkei community started to protest and called for an apology from the government for “the injustice of the incarceration.”⁴⁸ In 1976, President Gerald R. Ford repealed Executive Order 9066 stating: “We know now what we should have known then – not only was that evacuation wrong, but Japanese Americans were and are loyal Americans. On the battlefields and at home, Japanese Americans names like Hamada, Mitsumori...have been and continue to be written in our history for the sacrifices and contributions they have made to the well-being and security of this, our common nation.”⁴⁹

3. Conclusion:

Decades before World War II, the United States already had growing animosity with the Japanese and it grew even more as more and more immigrants settled in the United States, especially the West Coast. As more immigrants came, they were viewed as a threat to the security of the nation. The United States involvement with World War II as well as the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese intensified the hostility that the United States had with the Japanese immigrants help lead to thousands of individuals being interned. Although the Nikkei communities lived in a country with equal rights for all human beings, they were treated unequally and unjustly for crimes that they did not commit, due to the growing paranoia against them. “Japanese Americans were stripped of their citizenship rights and incarcerated en masse.”⁵⁰ When the Japanese Americans were freed from their incarceration in 1945, many had to build up their life from scratch. Many faced poverty as they had lost their businesses, occupations, and property due to the incarceration. The newly freed internees also had to face the lasting prejudice against them.^{51 52} President Ford’s repeal did not adequately address the unjust treatment and sacrifices that the Nikkei still experienced and some wanted monetary compensation. Through the coming years, the Nikkei community’s redress movement became stronger and in 1988, Congress passed the Civil Liberties Act. This act included an apology from the President and a “symbolic payment of \$20,000 to persons of Japanese Ancestry whose civil rights were violated by the federal government during World War II.”⁵³ From this, one can conclude that the United States admitted to making a mistake in their treatment of the Japanese Americans and how irrational one can behave when one does not understand and is afraid of the unknown. By examining the internment of Japanese Americans one can learn and question what the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence stand for.⁵⁴ It can also show that history can repeat itself. The attack on Pearl Harbor as well as the treatment of the Japanese can be seen as being repeated in the September 11th attack on the Twin Towers and the treatment towards the Muslim community. We cannot blanketly be prejudice against people based on their ethnicity but have to treat them equally and make decisions based on evidence.⁵⁵

4. Acknowledgements

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