

Essay: Citizenship and Japanese American Incarceration

By The Asian American Education Project

Background:

The idea of the “Yellow Peril” (the fear of Asians invading and taking over) arose in the late 19th century and painted Asians as unassimilable, untrustworthy, and, ultimately, enemies. Japanese people in the United States were targeted increasingly after Chinese exclusion in 1882. As Japan’s military power grew overseas, white supremacist groups lobbied to stop all immigration from Japan, with a number of western states passing alien land laws to forbid Japanese immigrants from owning or leasing farmland. The height of the “Yellow Peril” fear happened immediately after Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

The attack by Japan came without a declaration of war or formal warning. President Franklin D. Roosevelt called the attack “a date which will live in infamy.” Japan later declared war on the United States that day, and Congress declared war on Japan the following day. A few days later, Germany and Italy each declared war on the United States, and the U.S. declared war in response, thus formally entering World War II. Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor only increased the existing anti-Japanese racism in the country. Newspapers, radio, and movies stereotyped Japanese Americans as untrustworthy and depicted them as spies, justifying the harsh treatment and discrimination against them. Throughout the entire war, no Japanese American was ever convicted of spying for Japan.

Vocabulary:

- **Civil Liberties:** fundamental rights and freedoms protected by the Constitution
- **Executive Order:** a signed, written, and published directive from the U.S. President
- **Fifth Amendment:** a citizen’s right that guarantees a person cannot be compelled by the government to provide incriminating information against themselves
- **Incarceration:** the placement of people in a prison for a lengthy period of time
- **Loyalty:** faith to a country, ideas or person
- **Reparations:** compensation to make up for a past wrong
- **White Supremacist:** a person who believes that white people constitute a superior race and should therefore dominate society, typically to the exclusion or detriment of other racial and ethnic groups

Read the text. Underline or highlight important ideas.

In this space, write down notes and questions:

On February 19, 1942, two months after Pearl Harbor in Hawai‘i was bombed by Japan, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order No. 9066. This order forcibly incarcerated more than 120,000 Japanese Americans (79,000 of whom were U.S. citizens). Anyone with at least 1/16th of Japanese blood was incarcerated, including infants. Since the United States was at war with Japan during World War II, Japanese Americans were seen as “the enemy.”

Japanese Americans who lived on the West Coast were forcibly relocated and held in ten different incarceration



camps that were distributed across the U.S., west of the Mississippi. No charges were ever brought against them, and there were no hearings held.

The U.S. government allowed Japanese Americans to bring only what they could carry to the camps, and were given only one week to dispose of the rest of their personal belongings. Many lost their jobs, homes, and property. They did not know where they were going or how long they would be incarcerated.

Japanese Americans also faced mistreatment inside the camps. Many families were separated, living and raising children in poor and harsh conditions. They lacked adequate food to eat, milk for babies, and coal for heat. Uprisings broke out because of these deplorable conditions. Several incarcerated were shot and killed by military police, and the suicide rate inside the camps was high.

Incarcerated Japanese Americans were also forced to answer a questionnaire regarding their loyalty to the United States. If they responded “no” to the loyalty questionnaire, they were transferred to the Tule Lake incarceration camp where they faced even harsher conditions.

Japanese Americans resisted and fought for their constitutional rights during this time. In 1942, Fred Toyosaburo Korematsu defied Executive Order 9066 and went into hiding instead of going to an incarceration camp. Korematsu was arrested in May 1942 and convicted of defying the government order. But, in 1944, he fought his case at the Supreme Court, arguing that his Fifth Amendment rights were being violated by incarceration. The Court however ruled against him and deemed it a military necessity that all Japanese be moved to prison camps on the West Coast under a justified measure to protect national security.

Later, Japanese Americans, especially the post-war generation, continued to resist, fighting for reparations and an apology for the grave injustice they had endured from their own country. In 1983, a federal report by the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians found that the broad causes of Japanese American incarceration were racial prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership. That same year, Fred Korematsu’s case was overturned. As a result of tireless campaigning by the Japanese American community, the U.S. government finally issued a formal apology for violating the civil liberties of Japanese Americans

guaranteed by the Constitution and provided reparations to living survivors of the camps through the Civil Liberties Act of 1988.

The Japanese American Incarceration during World War II is a stark reminder that a racial minority's civil liberties can be easily violated in the name of national security. It provides a cautionary tale of the need for vigilance in safeguarding the civil liberties of all people, particularly racial minorities, and others targeted and blamed for problems by the dominant group.

In this space, write a summary of the text in 2-3 sentences:

Bibliography:

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