

Japanese-American Internment During World War II

By Jerry D. Morelock

One of the most controversial actions taken by the United States government during World War II was the early 1942 relocation of about 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast and their internment for much of the duration of the war in well-guarded, isolated camps farther into the U. S. interior. Likely only the U. S. atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 that ended the Pacific War have generated more controversy than the Japanese-American internments. Approximately 40-percent of those interned were Japanese "resident aliens" (non-U. S. citizens, although many had lived in the United States for decades); but the majority, about 60-percent, were U. S. citizens of Japanese ancestry.

Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, that brought the United States into World War II, outraged Americans and sparked a wave of anti-Japanese sentiment across the country. Many blamed all Japanese for the attack, directing their anger and frustration even at Japanese resident aliens and Japanese-Americans who had done nothing that would bring into question their loyalty to the United States. Residents of the U. S. West Coast, where the majority of Japanese-Americans in the continental U. S. lived, also feared that their Japanese-American neighbors represented a potential "Fifth Column" of spies and saboteurs who could target critical defense industries or even help pave the way for an invasion by Japanese military forces – a fear that seemed to Americans on the West Coast real enough in the confusion and chaos of the war's early months. The decisions by U. S. political and military leaders that led to the internment of Japanese-Americans played out within this super-charged atmosphere of fear, uncertainty and, indeed, racial animosity.

In the decades following World War II, however, the internment of Japanese-Americans has generally been acknowledged as a national embarrassment, a shameful episode that stands as a blot on America's record during the "Good War" that defeated Nazism, fascism and Japanese militarism. In the 1980s, Congressional legislation provided \$1.6 billion in monetary redress (about \$20,000 to each surviving internee). Yet, despite the belated monetary redress, the wartime Japanese-American internment remains an emotionally divisive and highly controversial action.

In recent years, the issue of "internment" has evolved from being merely a nearly seven decade-old, controversial historical incident to become one of the subjects brought into the ongoing national debate about the disposition of War on Terror "internees" (such as the "detainees" now held at Guantanamo Bay). Although the circumstances are certainly different (Japanese-American citizens living in the U. S. versus enemy combatants captured on the battlefield), some of the underlying Constitutional questions seem relevant – for example, the government's authority to hold "internees" indefinitely and what Constitutionally-protected rights (such as habeas corpus, speedy trial, etc.) ought to be extended to them. In 1944, the U. S. Supreme Court sided with the government; in a 2008 decision, however, the Court ruled that Guantanamo detainees were entitled to the protections of the U. S. Constitution. The 1942-45 internments, therefore, are of much more than merely historical interest.

ARGUMENTS AGAINST INTERNMENT

In the decades following the World War II Japanese-American internment, the major arguments presented condemning the action have been:

Racism, not National Security, Was the Real Motivation. White racial prejudice and hostility against Japanese Americans, particularly those living in the Pacific Coast area where the overwhelming majority of Japanese Americans in the continental U. S. resided, was widespread and dated back decades before the start of World War II. When the flood of Japanese immigration to the U. S. began at the turn of the 20th century, white Pacific Coast residents (where 90-percent of Japanese immigrants settled) immediately resented the influx of a people they saw as racially inferior. This prompted discriminatory laws, such as the 1905 California Anti-Miscegenation Law that forbade the marriage of Caucasians and "Mongolians" (referring to both Japanese and Chinese) and the 1906 San Francisco law that mandated Japanese and Chinese students attend segregated schools. In 1924, pressure from West Coast legislators forced Congress to pass the Oriental Exclusion Law that forbade Japanese from achieving U. S. citizenship (the major reason why 40,000 Japanese living in America for decades by 1941 were still not U. S. citizens when WWII began). Widespread racial prejudice was

intensified by economic competition, since whites resented the success of Japanese farmers and businessmen. Indeed, in 1942, Austin Anson, president of the Salinas Vegetable Grower-Shipper Association told a reporter, "We're charged with wanting to get rid of these Japs for selfish [economic] reasons. We do." Racism seems obvious when it is considered that DeWitt's original plan for relocation also called for including 44,000 Italians and 20,000 Germans – yet only the Japanese were relocated (except for some Italians and Germans on an individual, case by case basis). Racism very likely overrode any genuine national security concerns in the decision to relocate Japanese Americans in 1942.

Other Means Existed for Ensuring Security. The stated motivation of the Exclusion Order, which formed the basis for the relocation of Japanese Americans, was an overriding concern at the time for "national security" (i.e. the protection of military bases and key defense industry factories). Yet, the draconian measures taken – round up and relocation of 110,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans living within Military Area Number 1 was a gross overreaction and ignored the fact that other means of achieving adequate security existed. Military and civilian guards at bases and defense factories could relatively easily have detained any "suspicious" persons venturing too near a sensitive facility (and in particular, anyone of obvious Japanese ancestry would stand out), and all West Coast citizens had, beginning immediately after Pearl Harbor, been constantly encouraged to remain vigilant and to report any suspicious activity observed to the FBI for immediate investigation. No verifiable incident of espionage or sabotage by a Japanese American was discovered during the war. Even FBI director J. Edgar Hoover opposed the mass relocation of Japanese Americans because he was convinced that the most likely spies or potential saboteurs among that population had already been rounded up in the initial sweep of "enemy aliens" between December 7 and 13, 1941. During searches of Japanese American residences conducted by the FBI beginning in early February 1942, the Department of Justice reported that "We have not uncovered through these searches any dangerous persons that we did not otherwise know about."

Constitutionally Protected Rights. Executive Order 9066 violated the constitutionally protected rights of the 71,000 Japanese Americans among the 110,000 relocated who were U. S. citizens (although the 40,000+ Japanese who were not U. S. citizens were not in this same constitutionally protected category). Specifically, the relocation targeting only those of Japanese ancestry violated the provisions of the Fourteenth Amendment which prohibits depriving any person of life, liberty or property without due process of law. Even though the U. S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of Executive Order 9066 (in re *Korematsu vs United States*, 1944), the Court specified that its decision referred only to the constitutionality of the exclusion order itself, stating that the order's provisions singling out people of Japanese ancestry was a separate provision outside the scope of the trial proceedings.

Evacuation's Unnecessary Hardships. Even before arriving in the remote relocation camps, Japanese Americans suffered severe and unnecessary hardship due to the timing and conduct of the evacuation. Relocated Japanese Americans were given unnecessarily short notice, sometimes only hours, to report to collection centers for transport to the camps. Many were told to bring only "the clothes on their backs" and had to abandon virtually all of their personal property. Japanese farmers were in most cases forced to sell or abandon their farms, and only a few were able to enlist non-Japanese to look after their property while they were away. Those that were able to sell their farms usually had to suffer great financial loss, particularly when forced to sell their land to unscrupulous white farmers or land speculators who coveted the property. Although government provision was made to store their property, much of it was destroyed or looted while in government storage. The evacuation was particularly hard on the approximately 60-percent of Japanese Americans who were women and young children, forcibly uprooted from their homes and transported to the primitive living conditions in the internment camps. Although President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 which became the basis for the mass relocation on February 19, 1942, the military authorities delayed the issuing of the evacuation order until May, then demanded that Japanese Americans report immediately to collection centers. The evacuation itself caused unnecessary suffering in the manner in which it was announced and conducted.

Deplorable Camp Conditions. The majority of the camps were established on Indian reservations in remote areas of the West where weather conditions were significantly more severe than the conditions on the Pacific Coast where most Japanese Americans who were relocated lived. In many cases, those relocated were not able to bring warm clothing to withstand the below zero weather encountered in the camps. Living conditions were primitive, with multiple families sharing austere, barracks-like quarters. Most common accommodations were non-insulated, tar paper-covered wooden barracks without cooking or plumbing facilities of any kind. Beds were cots, toilets were un-partitioned, and internees lived on a subsistence budget allocated at only 45-cents per day. Barbed wire enclosures surrounded the camps and armed guards manned watch towers to prevent internees from leaving. Schooling and social activities were minimal.

Physical and Emotional Distress. Internees suffered both physical and emotional distress during their internment. Armed guards constantly were on watch, and some internees were shot and killed by guards when they ventured outside the camp limits. One of these, James Wakasa, was shot and killed by a guard at Topaz internment center in Utah. Other internees died or suffered extreme physical problems due to inadequate medical care provided by the camp authorities. In addition to physical distress, many in the camps suffered severe emotional debilitation. Dillon S. Meyer, one of the camp administrators, reported in June 1945 that many of the internees suffered from depression, overwhelming feelings of helplessness and severe insecurity. No monetary compensation, as was done belatedly beginning in 1988, could make up for the physical and emotional suffering inflicted on the internees. The deprivation of individual liberty and the lost educational and business opportunities suffered by internees defy fixing any monetary compensation figure.

ARGUMENTS FOR INTERNMENT

~~Despite the solid arguments against the Japanese-American internment, some arguments in favor of it have been raised.~~ The basis of these "for" internment arguments largely center on the actual situation existing at the time the evacuations were ordered – i.e. not those arguments made decades later when America was no longer under attack and with the full advantage of hindsight:

Threat to the U.S. Pacific Coast. A real threat to the U. S. Pacific Coast was widely thought to exist in the first months after Pearl Harbor. After the U. S. Navy's Pacific Fleet was crippled by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, the American Pacific Coast was virtually defenseless if the Japanese had decided to launch attacks on the West Coast. Indeed, on February 23, 1942 (four days after President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive order 9066), a Japanese submarine surfaced off the coast of Goleta, California and shelled the Elwood oil refinery complex causing widespread panic extending all along the coast to Los Angeles. Military and civilian leaders (led by California politicians) clamored for the government to create restricted zones around West Coast military bases and key defense plants (principally aircraft factories since many were concentrated in California in that era). As early as December 7 & 8, 1941, President Roosevelt directed the Army and the FBI to round up and intern Japanese, German and Italian "enemy aliens" (non-U. S. citizens) on the West Coast (831 were interned by December 13 – 595 Japanese, 187 Germans and 49 Italians). Further fueling public fears of espionage and sabotage was the January 25, 1942 release of the Roberts Commission report on the Pearl Harbor attack that cited "widespread espionage in Hawaii before Pearl Harbor, both by Japanese consular agents and by *Japanese residents of Oahu.*" Although the report's claim that "Japanese residents of Oahu" had committed espionage was proved false after the war, a widely publicized incident in which one Japanese resident and two Hawaiian-born Japanese American residents of Niihau had used violence against their neighbors to aid a downed Japanese pilot who had bombed Pearl Harbor incensed the public and inflamed fears that the West Coast was in danger of an enemy attack supported by Japanese Americans. Although, in hindsight, it is clear that the Japanese military never intended to attack the Pacific Coast, there was a genuine fear by U. S. political and military leadership, and the public at large, at the time that such an attack was imminent and that when it came it would be supported by espionage and sabotage by West Coast Japanese residents.

Historical Precedent. The Constitution is not a suicide pact, and a precedent for President Roosevelt suspending habeas corpus (in the case of the 71,000 West Coast Japanese who were American born U. S. citizens) exists in the actions of former Presidents. During another time of great threat to the country – the American Civil War – President Abraham Lincoln arrested and detained, without trial, thousands of suspected secessionists, closed newspapers hostile to his administration, and used military force to keep key Border States (e.g. Maryland and Missouri) in the Union. When the Chief Justice of the U. S. Supreme Court, Roger Taney, issued a writ of habeas corpus to force Lincoln to release imprisoned Maryland state legislators, Lincoln simply ignored it. Roosevelt's genuine fear for the security of the Pacific Coast prompted his issuing Executive Order 9066, and in 1944 the order's constitutionality was affirmed by the Supreme Court (unlike Lincoln's actions which were not affirmed by the Court). Another presidential precedent, although directed against Germans and German-Americans living in the U. S., and also against any Americans opposing the war, are the actions by President Woodrow Wilson during America's participation in World War I (April 1917-November 1918). Wilson pushed through Congress the passage of the Espionage Act of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918 which he used to suppress anti-British, pro-German and anti-war opinions in the American public and to deport foreign-born radicals. Using the acts, Wilson ordered the U. S. Postal Service to refuse to carry any written materials critical of the war, a move that seriously interfered with the circulation of dozens of newspapers whose position on the war Wilson objected to. He also encouraged the activities of the Committee on Public Information (Creel Commission), the National Security League and the American Defense Society which distributed propaganda, whipped up anti-German hysteria, harassed German-Americans and anti-war activists, questioned the loyalty of anyone who opposed the war, and engaged in "Gestapo-like"

tactics in neighborhoods across the country to enforce support for Wilson and the war effort (with the help of the U. S. Dept. of Justice in many instances). Finally, Article 1, section 9 of the U. S. Constitution clearly provides for the suspension, in time of emergency, of the right of habeas corpus when it states "The privilege of the writ of habeas corpus shall not be suspended, *unless when in cases of rebellion or invasion the public safety may require it.*"

Protection of Japanese-Americans. Whatever the merits (or lack thereof) of the white population's suspicion regarding Japanese-Americans' loyalties, such hostility existed even prior to the outbreak of the war against Japan in December 1941, but constantly increased in severity in the weeks after the Pearl Harbor attack. One early 1942 report from a Navy officer stationed in Los Angeles, for example, contained a typical of that period warning of imminent "outbreaks of riots and other civil strife" directed against the Japanese-American population. Therefore, the removal of Japanese-Americans from California and the western portions of Oregon and Washington state almost certainly prevented uncontrolled acts of mob violence being perpetrated against large numbers of Japanese-Americans, likely saving lives and preventing physical injuries to, potentially, thousands. Although it must be acknowledged that the conditions existing in this "protective custody" were harsh and primitive, it almost certainly prevented many injuries or death inflicted by a mindlessly enraged white population.

Sacrifice for the War Effort. All Americans during World War II were required to make sacrifices to aid the war effort, including the supreme sacrifice made by 416,800 American military personnel who died during the war. Rationing of items like food and gasoline, dislocation of large sections of the U. S. population due to war factory work, and the general disruption in normal civilian life impacted the lives of virtually all Americans during the war. Although the sacrifices required of Japanese-American internees were mandated by authorities and not voluntary, the living conditions in the relocation camps approximated those in military training camps and were not significantly more severe than those experienced by the 16,000,000 U. S. military personnel who served during the war. Indeed, the relocation camp conditions were much less severe than what military personnel endured overseas in combat theaters. And although the internees' coming and going in the camps was severely regulated by the authorities, such regulation approximated that experienced by all military personnel serving in the armed forces during the war who had to get permission any time they wanted to leave training camps or the bases to which they were ultimately assigned.

Freedom of Movement. Eventually, prior to the January 2, 1945 official lifting of the exclusion order, almost all relocation camps permitted internees to go beyond the confines of the camps. By the end of the internment period in 1945, nearly one-quarter of internees had been permitted to leave the camps to live and work elsewhere in the United States outside the declared exclusion zones. Eventually, many were even allowed to return to their homes in the exclusion zones under sponsorship of a family or agency. Additionally, under the National Student Council Relocation Program, college age internees were permitted to leave the camps and attend colleges and universities, and by December 1943 the number of internees taking advantage of this program was 2,263.

Although this issue will undoubtedly remain a controversial event in American history, knowing the facts and the major arguments both "for" and "against" the Japanese-American internment will help provide a better understanding of how and *why* it happened.