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## Chapter 10

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# Enemies in Their Own Land: The Internment of Japanese Americans during World War II

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Early in the morning on Sunday, December 7, 1941—what President Franklin Delano Roosevelt called “a date which will live in infamy” (Weglyn 2)—more than 350 Japanese warplanes launched a surprise attack on the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, sinking or beaching twelve battleships, destroying 164 aircraft, and killing 2,395 American service personnel and civilians (*Pearl Harbor*). The next day, the U.S. declared war on Japan. Two months later, President Roosevelt, at the urging of his military advisors, signed Executive Order 9066, which authorized the Secretary of War to designate military areas “from which any and all persons may be excluded as deemed necessary or desirable,” an order astonishing for the broad power it vested in the War Department.

Shortly after Executive Order 9066 took effect, the War Department declared much of the Pacific Coast of the U.S.—large portions of California, Oregon, and Washington, as well as some of the territory of Alaska, not yet a state—to be “military areas” and claimed that it was “necessary or desirable” to remove from these areas 110,000 persons of Japanese descent. About 40,000 of these individuals were Japanese immigrants, called *Issei* (“first generation”). The rest comprised their American-born children, the *Nisei* (“second generation”), who constitutionally were American citizens. Given only a few days to arrange for their businesses and homes, and having household possessions summarily confiscated, these families were taken first to “assembly centers” away from the Pacific Coast to be held until they could be absorbed by inland states. The Government established these temporary assembly centers in Puyallup, Washington;

Portland, Oregon; Mayer, Arizona; and a dozen sites in California. When other states refused the proposed influx of these families, the U.S. Government established inland "relocation centers," typically in inhospitable desert regions: Manzanar and Tule Lake, California; Poston and Gila, Arizona; Minidoka, Idaho; Heart Mountain, Wyoming; Granada, Colorado; Topaz, Utah; and Rohwer and Jerome, Arkansas (Weglyn 6). Eventually, some 120,000 persons of Japanese descent—enough individuals to fill both the Superdome and Fenway Park—spent the war years in these primitive camps. This dark chapter of American history is often overlooked by mainstream history texts, but its significance for contemporary Americans is profound. Owing to Japanese American historians like Michi Weglyn and writers such as Toshio Mori and Monica Sone, the details of the internment experience are well-documented and available.

### Inside the Camps

Many personal accounts of the camps attest to the difficulty of camp life. Typically very private people, the Japanese Americans in camp found themselves in small units within a block of barracks, where the walls separating one family from the next were thin and extended only partly to the ceiling, so that sound traveled freely from unit to unit. Uninsulated, the quarters were extremely cold in the winter and extremely hot in the long desert summer. The food consisted of military-style rations with large quantities of red meat, quite foreign to the Japanese diet high in fresh vegetables and fish. Moreover, meals were served in mess halls, disrupting the customary family-oriented dining favored by the Japanese. The mess halls themselves, like the living quarters, collected layers of dust from the windy environment. The camps were surrounded by barbed wire and, around their perimeters, sentry towers contained armed soldiers. Official leave from the camps was rare. Dysentery and boredom plagued the internees. Meanwhile, traditional family roles passed down for generations disintegrated in camp; no longer the primary support for their families, the *Issei* fathers "lost face" as their children increasingly chose to socialize with other *Nisei* rather than remain with their families (Chan 128).

### Government Justifications

Why did the U.S. Government force so many people—most of them American citizens—from their homes? The answer to this question is complicated. One must begin with the Government's rationale.

The nation's top military advisors convinced President Roosevelt that they could not easily distinguish law-abiding Japanese from those engaged in subversive or espionage activities. They also pointed out that many of the Japanese immigrants—the *Issei*—had been living in the U.S. for as long as twenty years without becoming American citizens. Therefore, argued the military leaders, one must question whether they are loyal to the U.S. or maintain allegiance to the Emperor of Japan. Finally, they claimed that the Pearl Harbor catastrophe resulted from the work of Japanese spies in Hawaii, and that a similar tragedy on the West Coast must be avoided at all costs. Swayed by these arguments, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, and these justifications were repeated to the American public.

### Critiques of Government Justifications

Historian Sucheng Chan notes that the military leaders' claim that they were unable to tell which Japanese were dangerous, and therefore all Japanese had to be relocated, was quite disingenuous (122–23). In fact, Gary Y. Okihiro has found that the military had been gathering intelligence on Japanese individuals in Hawaii and in the forty-eight states as early as 1918 (105). With this information, and with data from the 1940 U.S. Census which, despite promises of confidentiality, were given to the U.S. Army, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) took into custody more than 1,700 "enemy aliens," including 736 persons of Japanese descent, as soon as the U.S. declared war on Japan—two months before Executive Order 9066 was issued (Chan 123).

It is true that not a single Japanese immigrant had obtained American citizenship, but not because, as the Government implied, they were disloyal to the U.S. Rather, the laws governing naturalization at that time barred Japanese (as well as Koreans) from American citizenship; the right to naturalized citizenship was withheld from these immigrants until 1952. Chan notes that the supposed role of Japanese espionage in the Pearl Harbor attack is similarly spurious: "No evidence has ever been offered for these charges, which were based entirely on racist rumors" (125). Nonetheless, a committee led by Supreme Court Justice Owen J. Roberts stirred up anti-Japanese sentiments by making such claims (Chan 124–25), which helped the military press for the sweeping Executive Order 9066. Moreover, under orders from the president, the State Department conducted a secret study of the degree of loyalty exhibited by persons of Japanese descent in Hawaii and on the Pacific Coast. The investigation, under State Department official Curtis B. Munson, corroborated what

earlier military intelligence reports had found: "*It certified a remarkable, even extraordinary degree of loyalty among this generally suspect ethnic group*" (Weglyn 34, emphasis in original). The government suppressed this report for the duration of the war.

Furthermore, Chan points out several flaws in the reasoning of military officials. Why, for example, was not the Japanese population of Hawaii—the site of the Pearl Harbor attack— interned, but the more remote, smaller, and less concentrated Japanese population of the West Coast? Her conclusion is that Japanese laborers constituted about 37 percent of Hawaii's workforce; their internment would have shut down the territory's economy (127). One also is led to wonder about Pacific Coast residents of German and Italian ancestry, numbering 97,000 and 114,000, respectively (Chan 123). Told originally that they should be prepared for relocation, they never were forced to move, although the U.S. also had been at war with Germany and Italy. Apparently, only those who physically appeared to be different—that is, non-white—posed enough of a threat to be interned. As novelist James A. Michener put it, "These citizens were imprisoned for no reason other than their race" (29).

The most significant argument against the military's justifications for internment lies in the fact that 70,000 of the 110,000 internees were under the age of eighteen. They were the American-born *Nisei* and were American citizens. It is difficult to imagine that school-age youngsters posed much of a threat to the U.S., yet they constituted nearly two-thirds of the internees.

### Facing the Truth

It is easy, more than fifty years after Executive Order 9066 took effect, to recognize the immorality of that act. Yet, without excusing the deplorable actions of some highly-placed individuals, one must attempt to understand the complex forces at work during those difficult times.

First, students of this period must bear in mind the political and social context of Executive Order 9066. People around the globe expected the first World War to be the last; it was called "the war to end all wars." After the trauma of World War I, Americans were content to allow their armed forces to decline in numbers and strength and to focus their limited resources—this was during the Depression—on other priorities such as social services. Even as the atrocities of the Axis powers in Europe became evident, Americans were quite reluctant to enter another war. When the attack on Pearl Harbor shocked Americans into the realization that they

were unprepared to defend their own territory, military leaders, such as General John L. DeWitt and Colonels Karl Bendetsen and Frank Knox, seized the opportunity for self-aggrandizement and for the expansion of military power. (Michener calls such men "monomaniacal" [28].) Indeed, the early 1940s saw the greatest military build-up the nation had ever seen.

Without public support, however, the military leaders never could have carried out the mass internment of American citizens and their families. Military officers were not the only ones blinded by prejudice. In fact, the internment took place in a climate fostered by a century of anti-Asian sentiment in the U.S., especially on the Pacific Coast, where their numbers were largest. Because many white Americans already harbored distrust of Asians, it was remarkably easy to convince them that their neighbors of Japanese descent posed a grave threat to their own security.

In *Nisei Daughter*, her narrative of growing up in a Japanese American neighborhood of Seattle, Monica Sone relates her painful discovery of anti-Japanese prejudice. Seeking a summer vacation rental in the Alki Beach area of the city, her family responded to dozens of classified advertisements, only to be told time and again that the place was already taken or that the rent was much higher than first stated. Young and naive, she could not believe at first that these white property owners refused to rent to her family because they were Asian. The next day, she and her mother approached another potential summer rental. The white woman inside said, "I'm sorry, but we don't want Japs around here" (114). Sone writes, "My face stiffened. It was like a sharp, stinging slap. Blunt as it was, I had wanted to hear the truth to wipe out the doubt in my mind" (114). Although they finally succeeded in their quest for a summer home, she never again doubted the prevalence of anti-Japanese sentiment. Later, the narrator's family is relocated to the quickly-adapted horse stables at the fairgrounds in Puyallup, Washington, and then interned in the hot, dusty camp at Minidoka, Idaho.

Greed also played a role in public support for the evacuation. Typically, with only a few days to put business affairs in order, many Japanese owners were forced to sell their businesses for far less than their value. Others, unable or unwilling to sell their businesses, returned years later to find them taken over by whites. Japanese families also lost homes and land. Sone writes that "pressures from economic and political interests who would profit from such a wholesale evacuation influenced this decision" to evacuate Japanese families (159). Executive Order 9066, in other words, did not occur in a vacuum. Human weaknesses of greed, lust for power, and irrational xenophobia contributed to its implementation.

### Lack of Resistance

Many students of American history, when they belatedly learn of the Japanese internment, ask why the *Issei* and *Nisei* declined to resist Executive Order 9066. Again, though the question is simple, the answer is complex.

First, one must consider the only alternative: arrest and imprisonment. Refusing the order to relocate meant indefinite incarceration in a prison cell, away from family and in conditions even more spare than those in the camps. The lack of viable alternatives led many Japanese families to decide that they must simply make the best of the situation rather than openly resist. Toshio Mori, a Japanese American writer, poignantly conveys this attitude in his short story, "Slant-Eyed Americans," which depicts a family jolted by radio reports of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor:

Mother's last ray of hope paled and her eyes became dull. "Why did it have to happen? The common people in Japan don't want war, and we don't want war. Here the people are peace-loving. Why cannot the peoples of the earth live together peacefully?"

"Since Japan declared war on the United States it'll mean that you parents of American citizens have become enemy aliens," I said.

"Enemy aliens," my mother whispered.

Night came but sleep did not come. We sat up late in the night hoping against hope that some good news would come, retracting the news of vicious attack and open hostilities.

"This is very bad for people with Japanese faces," I said.

Father slowly shook his head.

"What shall we do?" asked Mother.

"What can we do?" Father said helplessly. (128-29)

Indeed, this family, like thousands of others in the same situation, had no viable alternative.

One should try to place oneself in the position faced by these individuals. Imagine how horrified and ashamed an American living in Japan might have felt when American bombs destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Although in no way personally culpable, such a person undoubtedly would have chosen to keep a low profile. Similarly, Sone conveys how she felt as an American of Japanese descent: "An old wound opened up again, and I found myself shrinking inwardly from my Japanese blood, the blood of an enemy. I knew instinctively that the fact that I was an American by birthright was not going to help me escape the consequences of this unhappy war" (146-47). Historian Michi Weglyn, whose family was in-

terned during the war, recalls similar feelings: "As a teen-age participant in this mass exodus I, like others, went along into confinement, trusting that our revered President in his great wisdom and discernment had found that the measure was in the best interest of our country. With profound remorse, I believed, as did numerous Japanese Americans, that somehow the stain of dishonor we collectively felt for the treachery of Pearl Harbor must be eradicated, however great the sacrifice, however little we were responsible for it" (21).

Although, understandably, Japanese and Japanese Americans offered little resistance to the evacuation order, they did take an active role in shaping their destiny within the parameters placed upon them, belying the stereotype of Asian passivity. Where abandoned barracks greeted the arriving internees, they created, with resources limited to those found in camp, spartan but serviceable quarters for their families. They painstakingly created gardens in some of the most inhospitable land on the continent. They organized schools and social events. Most remarkably, some enlisted to fight for the country that imprisoned them and their families.

Incontrovertible evidence of patriotism, many *Nisei* men, recruited in the relocation camps, chose to join the American armed forces. About 18,000 served in the famous 442nd Regimental Combat Team, the most decorated unit of its size during World War II (Chan 134-35). Of these numbers, six hundred died in combat. In a touching passage in *Nisei Daughter*, the narrator, after the war and the release of Japanese from the camps, visits the father of a family that had long been friends with her own. After she offers condolences for his son, George, who had died in battle, the aging man hands her a letter from his beloved son, in which the young man thanks his father for helping him overcome bitterness and restoring faith in his country (235). One can only wonder what course American history might have taken if the political leaders were as faithful to American ideals as were the majority of young *Nisei* like George.

It also is important to note that there were isolated cases of resistance. Internees launched protests and demonstrations in several of the camps. In Poston, Arizona, 2,500 internees demanded the release of two suspects in the beating of a *Kibei* (a *Nisei* educated in Japan) and maintained a five-day strike when officials refused. More than three thousand internees in Manzanar, California, demonstrated against the arrest of several *Kibei* suspected of severely beating an informer. When the protesters refused to disband, soldiers tossed tear gas into the crowd and opened fire, killing two internees. Residents of the camp at Topaz, Utah, held a

peaceful but pointed mass funeral for an old man shot to death by a sentry (Chan 129–30).

Although many young Japanese American internees volunteered for service in the U.S. Armed Forces, others participated in a significant movement against the army's attempt, beginning in 1943, to conscript eligible *Nisei*. When asked on the mandatory Selective Service questionnaire whether they were "willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered," and whether they would "swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America . . . and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese Emperor or any other foreign government, power or organization," more than four thousand of the 78,000 individuals required to register either refused to answer the "loyalty" questions or gave negative or qualified responses (Chan 130–31).

Those who answered both "loyalty" questions in the negative became known as "no-no boys." A novel by John Okada, *No-No Boy*, is a poignant, fictional account of the moral dilemma faced by such young men. Its protagonist, Ichiro, returns to Seattle from prison, where he had been incarcerated for refusing military service. His bitterness, shame, and anger stemming from his status as a no-no boy infuses the 1957 novel. "I wish with all my heart that I were Japanese or that I were American. I am neither," Ichiro states (16).

The internment experience, exacerbating the tensions between *Issei* and *Nisei*, takes its toll not only on Ichiro's family but on the entire community, as Elaine H. Kim notes: "The fragmented and warped Japanese American community in *No-No Boy* almost disintegrates during the course of the novel" (150). Largely ignored or rejected by Japanese Americans because of its uncompromising portrayal of the pain and conflict of the post-internment years, Okada's novel has gained popularity since its rediscovery in the 1970s. As Stan Yogi remarks, the war and the internment experience "left deep and lasting wounds on individuals and communities, and it would take decades before Japanese Americans could discuss the effects of the war publicly" (137).

The mass exclusion of Japanese and Japanese Americans ended in late 1944, but when the war ended in August 1945, 44,000 persons of Japanese descent remained in the internment camps because they no longer had homes to which they could return and because they feared the animosity of other Americans (Chan 139). It took months for the camps to empty.

### Redress

In 1978, the Japanese American Citizens League passed a resolution calling for \$25,000 in reparations for each surviving internee, but then withdrew its call for compensation and instead asked Congress to create a commission to "determine whether a wrong was committed against those American citizens and permanent residents relocated or interned as a result of Executive Order 9066."

Congress did appoint a commission to study the matter, concluding that Executive Order 9066 and the resultant evacuation and internment resulted from "race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership." In response to this finding, Congress, in 1987, passed a bill awarding \$20,000 to each internee still alive and—more importantly—issued an apology. Although President Ronald Reagan signed the bill into law, Congress declined to allocate any funds for the reparations. Reagan's successor, President George Bush, then signed a law that created a reparation program for the former internees. With that law, the U.S. Government officially apologized for the tragic mistake of Executive Order 9066.

Novelist James Michener, who had fought the Japanese in World War II, wrote thirty years later that "the stoic heroism with which the impounded Japanese Americans behaved after their lives had been torn asunder and their property stolen from them must always remain a miracle of American history. The majesty of character they displayed then and the freedom from malice they exhibit now should make us all humble" (31). Of course, some bitterness remains, but as Americans grow willing to cast an unflinching look at the internment experience and its root causes, relations between Japanese Americans and other Americans will improve. Americans of all ethnic backgrounds owe to their fellow citizens who are of Japanese descent, as well as to their own ideals of freedom and fairness, an accurate accounting of the internment tragedy.

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