

Japanese Internment: Legitimacy Crisis of American Wartime Authority

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1. Introduction

Since the mass outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020, there have been many cases of racist attacks, harassment, and hate speech towards Asians, particularly in the United States among other countries. Those who engaged in such attacks claim that the virus had been disseminated from China drastically increased in the United States and many other parts of the world, and thus Asian people became the easy target for such harassment. Then U.S. President Donald Trump referred to the virus as Chinese Virus or sometimes Kung Flu (BBC News, 2021), and was determined to blame China. Such scapegoating and negative stereotyping on Chinese people has had a tremendous impact on the American people's views about the citizens of Asian descent in the U.S. and led to an increase in harassment towards them (Cheng, 2020). In light of such development in racial issues against Asian Americans, it is time that we learn from history and revisit the racism institutionalized by the American government towards Asian Americans, namely the one towards Japanese Americans during the era leading up to World War II.

Historically, wartime government officials and policymakers have created legislation that rendered the civil rights of ethnic minorities vulnerable. This is particularly true in the internment of Japanese Americans in the West Coast of the United States during World War II. There is no doubt that the internment repudiated "nearly every provision of the Bill of Rights of the U.S. Constitution" (Chander, 2001). Was there actually a crisis in national security that necessitated the

internment of 120,000 U.S. citizens and residents? Was such “a massive deprivation of liberty” (Barnes, 1988) justifiable under a policy of national defense? This author believes that the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II was a carefully orchestrated act by the US government, and a combination of the unconstitutional disregard of civil rights based on race, the manipulation of contradictory evidence, and the virulent racial prejudice backed by the notion of eugenics. This resulted in what Justice Murphy referred to as the first “legalization of racism” (Korematsu vs. United States, 1944) of a country against its citizens, a crisis in itself in a democratic state in which the rights and freedoms of citizens are guaranteed by the Constitution.

2. Differential treatment of citizens

One of the most troubling aspects of this tragic event is the fact that the US government willfully deprived its citizens of their fundamental human rights solely based on race. Citizens of Japanese ancestry were “prohibited from living, working or traveling…without individual review” (Nakanishi, 2009). Such treatments of Japanese Americans illustrate that the powers of wartime authority were virtually “unlimited and largely insulated from judicial review” (Barnes, 1988, p.4). It was, however, a time of war and national crisis, some may argue, and desperate measures had to be taken, especially against ethnic minorities of the enemy countries. This may seem like a plausible justification. After all, during a wartime crisis, descendants of all enemy countries, not just Japanese Americans, can understandably be accused of acts of sabotage and espionage and thus be subjected to harassment. To be sure, American citizens of German and Italian descent were harassed during the war. German Americans had to change the names of their towns and foods. German music and language instruction was banned (Meyer, 1971). Italian Americans were similarly mistreated during the war because of their ethnicity (Fox, 2000).

This view, however, fails to take into account that such harassment, however cruel it may have been, did not result in their forcible detainment and relocation. The Germans and Italians were not stripped from their homes, businesses, and properties without due process just because they were of German and Italian descent. Rather, they were “treated with more sympathy, and no serious consideration was given to their removal” (Collins, 1985, p.13). A great majority of Japanese Americans, by contrast, were removed from their homes and relocated in camps, even though they had been loyal and patriotic Americans (Barnes, 1988).

3. Assumptions

3.1 Degree of Foreignness

What was, then, the difference? Obviously, the type of racism against the Japanese Americans

was significantly different from that directed against European Americans (Renteln, 1995). This author suspects two racially biased ideas behind this. One of them is the notion of white supremacy, which will be discussed more closely in 6. Eugenics section of the text. The other is somewhat related to the first but focuses on the degree of ‘foreignness’ to the Americans. By World War II, the population of German and Italian residents had dispersed to most areas in the U.S. Americans, therefore, regardless of their wartime attitudes toward them, had been accustomed to their presence because of a high degree of German and Italian residents’ assimilation into the mainstream American culture. After all, even though they were ethnic groups of enemy countries, they were Caucasians that did not look drastically different from the Americans. The Japanese, however, appeared more foreign to the Americans and thus more dubious and perhaps threatening.

3.2 Historical accounts on racism among government officials

This second assumption can be substantiated in two historical accounts of major figures in US history. One involves the three lawyers who reported to Attorney General Biddle. They made a recommendation to him that the isolation of persons of German or Italian background was not necessary because average Americans can “recognize particular individuals by distinguishing minor facial characteristics,” whereas “the Occidental eye cannot readily distinguish one Japanese resident from another” (Department of Justice, as quoted in Irons, 1983). These lawyers were willing to ignore millions of ethnic group members of the enemy countries who could have been engaged in espionage against America just because they were Caucasian.

The second account involves California Attorney General Earl Warren, one of the key proponents of internment policy. He alleged that loyalty was based on race: “We believe that when we are dealing with the Caucasian race we have methods that will test the loyalty of them, and we believe that we can, in dealing with the Germans and the Italians, arrive at some fairly sound conclusions because of our knowledge of the way they live in the community and have lived for many years. But when we deal with the Japanese we are in an entirely different field and we cannot form any opinion that we believe to be sound” (Schwartz and Leshner, 1983, p.11, as quoted in Renteln, 1995).

As is clearly evident, the decision to relocate the Japanese Americans was largely based on the racial prejudice, and more specifically xenophobia, of a few governmental officials. To be sure, despite Hawaii’s strategic location in the Pacific, Takaki (1988) argues, Japanese Hawaiians did not face mass internment because of Hawaii’s multiracial culture that did not allow for the kind of racial hostility experienced on the West Coast. This idea of determining threat and loyalty based on the degree of foreignness is nothing short of detrimental to national security.

4. Willful neglect of counterevidence

Another disturbing factor in the wartime internment of Japanese Americans is that the politicians

and policymakers, who were influential in formulating the internment plan, knowingly disregarded mounting evidence suggesting that the Japanese Americans in question were not engaged in any activities of sabotage and espionage. In fact, no claim of such activities was filed. Reports and evidence from various sources attest to this. In both Hawaii and the West Coast, where danger seemed most imminent because of their strategic locations and concentrations of Japanese Americans, federal and state authorities found no act of espionage or sabotage within the Japanese communities (Smith, 1988). Rather, a secret government investigation discovered a “remarkable, even extraordinary degree of loyalty” (Smith, 1988, p.80). An FBI agent, who investigated activities of Japanese Americans in Hawaii using local informants, found that they were “not organized for purposes of sabotage or subversive activity” and found no “indication of disloyalty to the United States” (Alaga, 1940, as quoted in Okihiro, 1992). Based on the lack of compelling evidence, General Delos Emmons, then Hawaii’s military governor, expressed his disagreement with mass internment, indicating “no intention or desire on the part of the federal authorities to operate mass concentration camps” (Takaki, 1998, p.380). By contrast, California Attorney General Earl Warren knew that the residences of Japanese Americans, which were close to dams, bridges, and harbors in California, had already been built before those facilities were. He, nonetheless, went on to warn of the danger such houses would pose to public security because of their proximity to important facilities (Smith, 1988, p.81). Finally, General DeWitt, President Roosevelt, and the Department of Justice had known that much more limited measures were readily available to prevent espionage in the Western Command than internment (Irons, 1983).

As is clear from these examples, not a single documented act of espionage, sabotage, or fifth column activity was committed by an American citizen of Japanese ancestry or by a resident on the West Coast. (Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, 1997, as quoted in Nakanishi, 2009). The wartime administration, however, disregarded such information and only used information that would equate Japanese ancestry with disloyalty and espionage.

5. Public appeal

The final argument focuses on how key government officials and policymakers successfully aroused racial prejudice among the American public against the Japanese in an effort to justify the internment and to gain public support. Renteln (1995) argues that “The fact that the Japanese Americans were portrayed as animals... may have helped convince the American public that inhumane treatment was acceptable” (p.620). How, then, was the U.S. able to portray Japanese Americans as animals? This author has thus far established how the internment policy was shaped by racial prejudice on the part of the U.S. administration. President Roosevelt was not exempt from holding racist views himself. He seemed to have believed in the genetic inferiority of racial

minorities, making such remarks as “Japs···whose skull pattern···being less developed than that of the Caucasians, might be responsible for their aggressive behavior,” and that America at the time was being “pushed around by a slant-eyed people to whom [it felt] racially superior” (Smith, 1988, p.80). He apparently held racist views on other ethnic groups as well, including the Jewish people, often making anti-Semitic jokes with Undersecretary of State Breckinridge Long in the Oval Office (Smith, 1988). Roosevelt also jokingly mentioned that the methods Hitler used to sterilize his “subjects” were very quick and effective (Smith, 1988, p.85).

6. Eugenics

Holding racist views is nothing new, some may argue, among politicians at that time, and that might have been true. Roosevelt, however, attempted to take his racial views into practice and sought scientific confirmation of racial superiority and inferiority based on the notion of eugenics. Eugenics is a belief that, based on the manipulation of genes, a superior human race can continue to exist by removing inferior humans. Renteln (1995) argues “Eugenics provided the justification for various repressive public policies. It led to such significant policy proposals as restrictive immigration. The basic idea was that the United States should be protected against the influx of defective ‘germ plasm’” (p.628).

This was not some silly pseudo-science for children. Some people with high political status believed in it. A prominent Republican, Henry Cabot Lodge urged Congress “to protect the blood of the nation from the contamination of ‘inferior’ racial strains” by limiting the influx of immigrants (Renteln, 1995, p.627). Assuming that Roosevelt did believe in eugenics, the idea would be greatly advantageous for him in rationalizing a racist policy, namely, the internment of a *defective* ethnic group, in this case, the Japanese Americans. Indeed, Roosevelt did ask Dr. Ales Hrdlicka, an anthropologist at the Smithsonian, to “undertake a study of race-crossing of Asian and European stocks” in order to find out if the Japanese’s aggressive characteristics might be “bred out of them.” (Smith, 1988, p.85). What result came out of it, if any, and whether or not Roosevelt actually used it is uncertain. However, it is apparent that he wanted some kind of scientific backing to make it easier to justify his approval of the internment, and his decision was “consistent with the administration’s prewar attitudes and policies toward objectionable minorities” (Renteln, 1995, p.631).

The belief in eugenics among politicians was also pervasive in the general population, resulting in widespread public support for the relocation of Japanese Americans to concentration camps. Testimonies from scientific experts such as Paul Popenoe, a leading scientist and proponent of eugenics, helped to augment the validity of eugenics. Because of its seemingly scientific respectability, eugenics gained much popularity among the public “despite the absence of any

scientific support for its tenets” (Renteln, 1995, p.631). Furthermore, coupled with the notion of eugenics is the enactment of anti-miscegenation statutes, which forbade interracial marriage between Caucasians and non-Caucasians. One radio debate program ended in applause when one side argued that it was impossible to allow interracial marriage with the Japanese because they were fundamentally different (McWilliams, 1994, as quoted in Renteln, 1995).

7. Portrayal of Japanese men as sexually aggressive

What is particularly disturbing is another factor that contributed to the widespread support of eugenics, namely the stereotypical portrayal of Japanese men as being hypersexual (Renteln, 1995). One of the stereotypes that the Americans had of the Japanese was that Japanese males were sexually aggressive (Ogawa, 1971, as quoted in Renteln, 1995). Was there a growing number of sexual misconducts involving Japanese males in the U.S. prior to the Pearl Harbor invasion? This, of course, cannot be substantiated by the number of sexual crimes committed by the Japanese Americans on record. It can only be assumed that this was yet another attempt of the government to portray the Japanese as animals or a certain kind of primitive creature (See Images 1 and 2). This, nevertheless, was successful in creating fear among the American public – a fear that “driven by a beastly sexual urge, the Jap would endanger the white female and the purity of the Anglo-American stock” (Ogawa, 1971, as quoted in Renteln, 1995, p.58). This fear, mixed with already-widespread ideas of eugenics and anti-miscegenation, was more than enough to raise the hatred of Japanese Americans among the public.



Image 1. *This is the Enemy* (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, n.d.)



Image 2. *This is the Enemy* (Maximum Advantage in Pictures, 2010.)

In popular culture, also, such hatred was evidenced. In a popular comic strip Captain America in 1944, a shadowy Japanese character is portrayed kidnapping a white woman, only to be defeated by

Captain America in the end (see Image 3). In the movie *The Cheat* (1915), a white woman becomes the subject of sadistic acts committed by a Japanese character (see Image 4). All of these racial ideas and images were purposefully manipulated to cause racist fears, disguised as a policy of national defense, then rationalized as a massive deprivation of liberty (Barnes, 1988).



**Image 3. *Captain America Comics* #39
(Marvel Database, 2021)**



Image 4. *The Cheat* (IMDB.com, n.d.)

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this author has demonstrated that the internment of the Japanese Americans was unconstitutional and was largely based on racial prejudice against the non-Caucasian race. It was also pointed out that the wartime administration willfully neglected and manipulated unfavorable information in order to gain support for the unlawful internment of US citizens. And finally, the idea of eugenics, miscegenation, and the false depiction of sexual aggressiveness of the Japanese all contributed to the creation of widespread anti-Japanese public sentiments, which, in turn, made the tragic incarceration of innocent citizens more acceptable. It was a crisis for the United States, as a leader of democratic states, whose legitimacy of authority was severely compromised by wrongfully depriving its loyal citizens of Japanese descent of their civil rights guaranteed by the Constitution.

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