

Lessons Learned by the U.S. Regarding the Japanese-American Incarceration
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Adrenaline is a chemical generated by the human brain. When humans feel threatened, large amounts of this logic-impairing chemical are pumped through the body, overcoming all other mental influences with the need to take action. Nowhere is imminent threat more prevalent than in a country at war, especially in the double conflict of World War II. With Hitler on one hand and the Japanese on the other, the U.S. certainly had cause for anxiety. They had no cause, however, to imprison thousands of Japanese-Americans in concentration camps. In hopes of capturing a few spies, the U.S. government incapacitated an entire group of Americans. After this incarceration, the U.S. learned that dehumanizing an entire minority is easier than anyone likes to think.

After the December 7, 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese, a national rumor swept the country: Japanese-Americans were "plotting to sabotage the war effort" (Foner)! On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, sending about 127,000 Japanese-American citizens (Foner) to ten prison camps in Arizona, California, Arkansas, Utah, Idaho, and Wyoming (Wheeler).

Many Japanese Americans did not understand why they were being relocated. The U.S. Navy uprooted the first 500 families from their homes on Terminal Island on February 25, 1942 (Ikeda). More soon followed, with final numbers over a hundred thousand (Foner). They boarded a train, still confused regarding what was happening. For a time, they lived in horse stalls at a racetrack "assembly center" while the camps were constructed. Later, they were moved to the prison camps themselves, which were not much better. Japanese-Americans showered in a communal bathroom, with no stalls, and ate in a large mess hall. Often, two families shared a

single cabin, with a blanket down the middle to allow a modicum of privacy. Even so, cabin walls were thin, with no insulation, letting in heat, cold, dust, and conversations from the neighboring cabins. There was no real privacy anywhere (Yoshikawa). Many prisoners farmed to produce food, trying to make life in the camps as close to comfortable as it ever could be (USHistory.org).

Every Japanese-American citizen in the camps was required to take a "loyalty test." There were two main questions on this test designed to determine whether a person was faithful to the United States: questions 27 and 28 (Yoshikawa). Question 27 asked, "Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?" (Ikeda) Girls were asked if they were willing to serve as a nurse (Yoshikawa). Question 28 read, "Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any and all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance to the Japanese Emperor or any other foreign government, power, or organization?" (Ikeda) Those who answered "no" to both questions were considered "troublesome," and were sent to more secure camps, such as Tule Lake (Yoshikawa). They became known as the "no-no boys," and were regarded as traitors by other Japanese-Americans, both in and out of the camps (Ikeda).

The antithesis to the no-no boys lay in a group of Japanese-American men who voluntarily enlisted in the United States Armed Forces. They formed the 442nd Regiment. Their motto, "Go For Broke," accurately sums up the fierceness and loyalty with which they fought. Since their only other option was to return to the prison camps, they felt they had nothing to lose (Yoshikawa). In a letter to the Organization Commanders, the headquarters of the 92nd Military Division described the soldiers as being "as thoroughly loyal as German Americans, Italian

Americans, or any other American of foreign ancestry" (What Was the 442nd). They were awarded, among other honors, "21 Medals of Honor, 52 Distinguished Service Crosses, and 9,486 Purple Hearts" (Brewer) placing them among the most decorated regiments in U.S. history (Brewer).

Although many Japanese-Americans believed that they would never leave the camps, every prisoner was released between 1944 and 1946 (Yoshikawa). Most had nothing to return to. When they went to the camps, families sold everything they couldn't carry with them, or gave treasured items to a friend for safekeeping. One family gave their belongings to the local sheriff to hold until they returned. When they were finally released, they found that the sheriff had died, and their possessions had been sold (Yoshikawa). Most families had sold all their land, so they had to begin again from scratch. Anti-Japanese sentiment was still prevalent in society, and Japanese-Americans were constantly discriminated against. Signs were posted: "No Japs Allowed." This treatment continued for months after the war ended (Yoshikawa).

On April 20, 1988, over 40 years after the last Japanese-Americans were released from the prison camps, the U.S. Senate voted in favor of the Civil Liberties Act, which declared the need to make reparations to the Japanese-American citizens. A letter of apology was sent, along with 20,000 dollars, to each of the Japanese-American citizens who had, at any point, been imprisoned in the so-called "internment camps." The money was tax free, and was awarded only to those who had actually lived in the camps, not to the estates of former "internees" who had since passed away (Molotsky). The letters were sent on October 1, 1993. In them, President Clinton offered "a sincere apology to you for the actions that unfairly denied Japanese Americans and their families fundamental liberties" (Satsuki). Although neither the money nor

the apology could make up for the years spent in prison camps, they were an indication that the U.S. was aware of how cruelly Japanese-Americans were treated, and a promise that this level of injustice would never happen again.

Never since World War II has the U.S. experienced such levels of national stress and fear. The closest it came was the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001, when two airplanes were crashed into the Twin Towers, destroying them and killing thousands. In the aftermath of the attack, Americans were in a state of panic. Frantically, new safety measures were added to immigration, to law enforcement, and to travel. Just as in the Japanese-American incarceration, word spread quickly: "The attackers were Muslim," causing anyone who practiced Islam to be regarded as a potential threat. Similarly, an entire group of people became feared, hated, and disrespected due to the violent actions of a few extremist individuals. Once again, out of terror, the American people unfairly discriminated against those who had done no wrong. Looking back on history, it is easy to see how quickly an entire minority can be dehumanized, separated into "them" and "us." As President Clinton's letter of apology says, "In retrospect, we understand that the nation's actions were rooted in racial prejudice, wartime hysteria, and a lack of political leadership" (Satsuki). This must never happen again. The land of the free must stay free. The President's letter continues: "We must learn from the past and dedicate ourselves as a nation to renewing the spirit of equality and our love of freedom. Together, we can guarantee a future with liberty and justice for all" (Satsuki).

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