

## **What America Learned from the Japanese-American Incarceration of World War II**

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***"Those who sacrifice liberty for security deserve neither."  
-Benjamin Franklin***

On February 19, 1942 President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, forcing the relocation and/or imprisonment of over 127,000 people of Japanese descent. This was done in the context of a country reeling in fear from the recent attack of Japan on Pearl Harbor, and the knowledge of entering a savage world war.

In 1942, the racial makeup of America was predominantly Caucasian. Many Americans had never met an Asian individual. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, an anti-Asian sentiment swept across the United States amongst the backdrop of the war and the lack of knowledge most Americans had about Asian cultures. The government wanted to show the American public that it was in charge, and that some immediate retribution was to be paid for the loss of American lives at Pearl Harbor. Though the enemy would more likely look Caucasian, it was easier for the general population to single out the mysterious Japanese as a scapegoat. This was simply because the more different someone looks from us, the easier it is to see them as enemy.

Executive Order 9066 was made hastily and set a dangerous precedent for our country. Fear, prejudice, and fighting never go out of style, so it is no wonder that we wrestle with the same

issues today. It is for this very reason that we must study the past. We must learn from the mistakes we have made and endeavor not to repeat them. Our country was founded on principles of freedom, and when we sacrifice our ideals we diminish ourselves. In researching this matter, I found that imprisoning Americans of Japanese descent did nothing to protect our country. Instead, it disrupted thousands of lives unnecessarily for generations. Perhaps the sacrifice of these people and families can help guide us towards more sensible policy as similar issues arise now and in the future. The most current parallel is the relationship of the United States, the Middle East, and the Muslim culture.

On September 11, 2001, it is well known that we sustained a terrorist attack at the World Trade Center in New York - with loss of thousands of innocent American lives. Responsibility for this atrocity was proudly acclaimed by radical Islamic terrorists, and began our venture into the Iraq war and our search for Osama Bin Laden. Similar to what the Japanese-Americans experienced in 1942 after the Pearl Harbor attack, Muslim-Americans also suffered from prejudice for simply belonging to the same culture as the attackers.

Many people would be surprised to learn that more than 200 American-Muslims lost their lives in the attack on the World Trade Center. Ever since September 11, 2001, American-Muslims have been viewed with suspicion in the eyes of most Americans. Unfortunately, this is because Muslims are more easily identifiable due to their distinct appearance and dress. In reality, most Muslims in America are simply trying to live a peaceful life as an American citizen. In 2015, there is still unease between many American citizens and

Muslim-Americans. Many United States citizens still do not feel comfortable being on planes or buses with people of Muslim backgrounds.

The point is, whenever America is attacked by a certain culture, that particular race will suffer in America. Whenever America responds, they will suffer again. After Pearl Harbor was bombed, Japanese-Americans suddenly became a perceived threat to the United States. Even though America should have been much more threatened by the European countries, they decided to quickly gather and imprison all Japanese-Americans. It is was easy to have bias against people whose appearance differ from our own, which is why today Muslims are still viewed with varying degrees of suspicion.

I do believe that America did learn from its mistakes with the Japanese-American internment. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, America imprisoned many Japanese-Americans and made no effort to hide it. This was made public to all of the United States, and portrayed with biased reasoning to the media. The Internment did not prove to make this country any more safe, and was an embarrassment for a culture that considered itself civilized. Fortunately, the victims of this event have not let it be forgotten.

When the attacks of 9/11 occurred, America's first priority was to ensure the safety of as many people as they possibly could. However, they did not blatantly capture all Middle-Eastern Americans without reasoning. Instead, they attempted to gather accurate information prior to taking action. That being said, the United States was certainly not perfect. It used the wave of

anti-Middle Eastern sentiment to rationalize a war in Iraq, and began to incarcerate prisoners in Guantanamo Bay without a trial. Though imperfect, the response in 2001 was significantly more patient and humane than that of 1941 - particularly with regards to the people that shared the culture of the attackers.

It is no question that America still carries prejudice of race, class, and culture. Over hundreds of years, this has steadily decreased, but is undeniably present. The internment of thousands of Japanese-Americans was a situation in which this country tried to act in the best interest of the majority of the country. Despite good intentions, far more lives were ruined rather than benefited. Blind fury and confusion made our leaders come to irrational decisions that would eventually have major consequences. If our government had simply been more patient and tried to understand the Japanese-American culture, more than 127,000 lives would have remained undisrupted. When the Japanese-Americans were released, many did not have much to go back to. Homes and businesses had been lost or sold. The U.S. government did eventually apologize and attempt to compensate for the losses of the families and individuals, but obviously this was impossible. Many victims of the internment were interviewed after being released and discussed what they experienced and the harsh conditions they had to endure. When the media saw what had happened from the Japanese-American's perspective, most of the country was shocked.

Over seventy years have passed since the Japanese-American Internment, and fortunately these events did not occur in vain. This was a tragic experience for many that undoubtedly

opened this country's eyes. Unfortunately, thousands of Japanese-Americans suffered in order for this to happen. But, this suffering did help our country realize that the enemy isn't always a race that seems foreign and different. Just because you do not understand a culture and its differences does not mean you should be threatened by them, which is a valuable moral this country is still working on embracing today.

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