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America Did Right by Interning Japanese

Learning from our mistakes so we do not repeat history is something that we all do on a regular basis. Some of these mistakes are very minute, while others have big impacts on our lives. However, to learn from our mistakes, we need to understand why we made the mistake in the first place. One mistake that America can learn from is when Japanese American citizens and aliens were interned during World War II. In order not to repeat this mistake Americans need to understand why Japanese Americans were interned. Even though today we know that putting the Japanese in internment camps was wrong, at the time of WWII, America did the right thing based off the information and facts around them. Before World War II started, there was already a racial prejudice against Japanese Americans that continued well into the war. President Franklin D. Roosevelt was only reacting to the influx of information he was receiving about Japanese aliens, and the American people themselves did not do enough to fight the military or government on the orders to intern the Japanese.

Well before World War II started, in the late 1800s, prejudice against Japanese Americans was already in the minds of American citizens. While some may argue that what happens in the past should not affect future decisions, this history of racist remarks and thoughts towards people of Asian descent did play a great role in deciding to intern Japanese Americans.

The prejudice against Japanese people started way before World War II even occurred, and even before World War I. According to Greg Robinson, who wrote *By Order of the President: FDR and the Internment of Japanese Americans*, when European settlers came over to America for the first time, they brought with them their opinions of Asia as an exotic, backward, and barbaric land. White Americans continued to foster this opinion into the late 1800s when

Chinese immigrants began to come to America. Americans were fearful of losing their jobs to these “barbaric” Chinese immigrants, so they started creating racial stereotypes to go along with the opinions they had already formed in their heads, that Chinese people were “treacherous, servile, and uncivilized” (Robinson 9). In 1885, White miners massacred 28 Chinese miners in Wyoming because the White miners did not want to lose their jobs (Shaffer 599). In addition, several Chinese Exclusion Acts were passed starting in 1882 (Robinson 9). After the exclusion acts, and incidents like the White miners, the United States started limiting the number of Chinese immigrants allowed into the U.S. This caused more Japanese immigrants to be allowed to come into the U.S. This influx of Japanese aliens caused Americans to change their prejudice against Chinese men to Japanese men, all because the Japanese had the same skin color as the Chinese. Upon the influx of Japanese, Americans began calling them the new “yellow peril” So many Americans were against these yellow-skinned people (a large amount which went to California to live), that one senator in California ran with the slogan “Keep America White” (Schaffer 599). This racial prejudice against Japanese Americans continued well into the war, further alienating the Japanese people from the American people in the United States.

In Mizuno Takeya’s article “An Enemy’s Talk of Justice” written in the *Journalism History*, Takeya talks about worldwide news broadcast Japan had (called Radio Tokyo) during World War II. This broadcast used white, black, and grey propaganda to further Japan’s own efforts in the war. White propaganda is intentional, but accurate information, black propaganda is information that is purposefully deceiving, and grey is a mixture of white and black. This combination of propaganda caused Americans to believe all sorts of different things about themselves, Japan, and the Japanese living in America during the war. One thing Radio Tokyo made clear through its broadcasts is that the war was a struggle between the different races, and

Japan was bearing the burden of the “yellow” man. If what Radio Tokyo was saying was true, then America did right by putting the Japanese Americans in the internment camp because the war was “white against yellow.” Another piece of information that did not help the Japanese in America is that in a May 1942 broadcast, Radio Tokyo said, “Obviously the constitutional rights of these American-born Japanese have been ruthlessly trampled upon.” This accusation only made Americans become defensive, as do most people when they are accused of doing something wrong. If the war really was one between the “white and yellow” races, then America did right by interning the “yellow” in America to protect the “white” in America from harm (Takeya 96-97).

President Roosevelt (FDR) is also a major cause of why the Japanese were interned during World War II. He is the one who signed Order 9066 which legally allowed for the internment of Japanese citizens and aliens in America. Some argue that it is solely President Roosevelt’s fault that the Japanese were sent to internment camps. However, if FDR did not have the support of Congress and the military, his Order 9066 would have had no effect because there would have been no one carrying out the Order.

Order 9066 was signed into law in February of 1942 (Dresner). There are many reasons as to why President Roosevelt signed this law. One reason is FDR had known of a secret Japanese plan since 1902. One of FDR’s friends that he met during his Harvard years, who is a Nisei (second generation) Japanese, told Roosevelt of a secret 50-year-plan that Japan had to obtain complete dominance of East Asia and the Western Pacific through a Naval buildup, and then from there Japan would go on to conquer Manchuria and the Philippines. This put Japan’s naval ships and ulterior motives on his radar well before Japan and the U.S. went to war in World War II (Robinson 12).

A second reason FRD signed Order 9066 is that some of the Japanese Americans had direct contact with the Japanese government. According to Roger Daniels, author of *The Decision to Relocate the Japanese Americans*, an argument for why interning the Japanese Americans was wrong is that no evidence of any espionage was ever found amongst a Japanese residing in America. However, while there was no evidence of espionage found, various Japanese organizations (that were cultural, business, or religious in nature) in the United States had direct ties to the Japanese government. While this connection to the Japanese government was mainly for financial support to Japanese organizations, interning the members of the Japanese organizations was the right thing to do to prevent a possible leak of information to the Japanese government (Daniels 6).

A third reason FDR signed Order 9066 is he was being fed false information by military personnel. One general had given Roosevelt false reports of espionage by Japanese aliens from a general who was very anti-Japanese himself (Dresner). This proves that Roosevelt was not alone in his feelings towards Japanese residents, and his desire to protect the other American people. This military general was not the only anti-Japanese person in contact with FDR. In Roosevelt's own cabinet he had Chicago newspaper publisher Frank Knox, and Martin Dies Jr (a member of the House of Representatives) were also very anti-Japanese. The anti-Japanese people also had great influence on FDR and his feelings about the Japanese in America (Daniels 8).

Roosevelt was also looking to history with other countries when he signed Order 9066. The American army and general public both became convinced that the fall of France in 1940 was caused by fifth columnists. A fifth columnist is a person or a group of people who undermine a larger group from within. In the case of France, it was resident aliens in France who were believed to cause this downfall by giving information about France's plans to their home

country (Daniels 16). Roosevelt was not alone in his concern about having this problem in his country as well. In Britain, all German and Australian aliens (mainly comprised of Jewish refugees) were sent to internment camps after the downfall of France to prevent a “fifth columnist” situation in Britain (Daniels 10). Roger Daniels wrote in his book that Major General Allen W. Gullion (the Chief Law Enforcement officer of the army) after hearing about the fifth columnists of France and seeing that Britain was taking precautions against potential fifth columnists as well, said, “the military would certainly have to provide for the arrest and temporary holding of a large number of suspects.” This means that he was prepared for the United States to intern the Japanese aliens to prevent a fifth columnist problem in the United States (Daniels 16). Also, once Germany and Italy declared war on the United States, Order 9066 was applied to the German and Italian aliens residing in America as well (Robinson 73). This shows that America was not exclusively targeting Japanese aliens—the government and Roosevelt were targeting all aliens of enemy countries during the war. The reason little attention was ever paid to the other enemy aliens during the war is that there were far more Japanese aliens than any other alien residing in America during this world war.

Where to place these internment camps was also a problem. Some governors were so against the Japanese that they did not want them in their state even as internees (Schaffer 601). This feeling of distrust towards the Japanese Americans was not solely in the beliefs of Roosevelt or the rest of the government and military—this feeling was rampant among everyday Americans as well.

Many argue that American citizens were against interning Japanese aliens and citizens, and that the feelings of fear and hostility towards them rested solely in the hands of the

government and military. However, while there were many Americans who were against internment, there were several more who were in favor of it.

Even though a majority of Americans were for interning Japanese aliens, there were protests made by Americans who were against the order. At Washington University, mothers of the Seattle Parent Teacher Association (PTA) in February 1942 made a demand for the removal of 27 Japanese secretaries from the university. Students started a petition to fight this, gaining over 1,000 signatures, but in the end the secretaries ended up resigning altogether to avoid further controversy (Schaffer 602). Another school teacher of seventh and eighth grade students had her students write down their feelings in a letter about how they felt about losing their Japanese classmates. While some wrote that their Japanese counterparts were their friends and they would be sad to lose them, other students wrote awful things about how these “Japs” needed to be locked up from the rest of America (Schaffer 606). Reverend Emery Andrews traveled more than 42,000 miles in one month going back and forth from Seattle to Manzanar (one of the internment camps) to deliver things to the Japanese who were interned there. These things would be gifts, news, and sometimes a car to a family who planned to leave and travel elsewhere (Schaffer 609). Despite all these cases where there was someone good fighting the internment of the Japanese Americans, the Japanese were still interned in the end. In most cases the majority wins, and in all these examples of good deeds made by non-Japanese Americans, the negative feelings of the rest of the American people dominated over the Americans who supported the Japanese citizens and aliens.

A big contributor to the negative feeling that dominated Americans is propaganda. Some headlines that were featured in newspapers were “Vegetables Found Free of Poison,” “Chinese Able to Spot Jap,” and “Japanese Here Sent Vital Data to Tokyo” (Daniels 12). Most of these

headlines speak for themselves. The Chinese residents of America would go against their fellow “yellow” Japanese in order to save themselves from persecution. The “Vegetables Found Free of Poison” title is speaking of Japanese Americans losing their license to sell produce after the attack on Pearl Harbor because America was fearful they would poison the produce in order to try and kill off Americans (Robinson 73).

Whenever there is no opposing force to an idea or plan, the plan usually gets carried out because there are no barriers blocking the progress. During World War II, there were many media outlets speaking out on behalf of minority groups in the country. One of these media outlets was the *Chicago Defender*. However, out of these media outlets (like the *Chicago Defender*), none of them ever spoke up on behalf of the Japanese. The Japanese had no form of propaganda that defended their credibility as an American resident of the U.S. and not just a Japanese resident of the U.S. (Takeya 94).

Today, Americans know that what was done to Japanese residents during World War II was “racist, short-sighted, unfair and very damaging” (Dresner). It was in the 1980s when the Federal Government admitted this wrong, and they gave compensation to survivors (or if they were no longer around, to their children) of the internment camps to try and make amends with the Japanese residents of America. However, while today America knows this was wrong, during World War II this was the right thing to do to protect America from war conflicts. Racism towards Japanese Americans had been around long before the war started, so many Americans, government officials, and personnel of the military already had suspicions about the Japanese in America. President Roosevelt was only acting out of the regards for the safety of his country at the time, and he was going off the history of events following France’s downfall when making his decision to intern the Japanese. The American people themselves were spreading anti-

Japanese propaganda and made insufficient efforts to fight Japanese internment. Even though today we know it is wrong, sending the Japanese Americans to internment camps during World War II was the right thing to do at that time in history.

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