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It's in the Past

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The Backlash of WWII Fears

When the US first entered into WWII after many years of isolationism, many Americans were scared. Pearl Harbor had just been bombed in a surprise attack by the Japanese, which left America's top naval base at the time in pieces. America was in no shape to enter into a high stakes war, but it had no way of avoiding it either. However, it is in this fear and anxiety that America seemed to have placed a rather rash decision to separate those it deemed traitorous from the rest of the population. This can't be more accurate than in the case of what many Japanese-American families suffered in California as a result of powerful racism fueled by the panic of WWII. Japanese-Americans amongst German and Italian-Americans were part of a minority group of that period that were left to be treated more as prisoners of war than actual U.S. citizens. They were instead left holed up in internment camps in less than desirable conditions, as the government decided whether they could be trusted or not.

America's view on isolation with European affairs were as old as George Washington. This was mostly in part, as stated by the first president, because of their complicated and ever-changing political affairs (Vaughan, 9). However, this policy of isolation broke when the U.S. entered on the Allied side in WWI, after trying to remain neutral from the start. However, America wasn't entirely neutral and was sending supplies via merchant ships across the Atlantic to Allied country that needed it. Once Germany received word of this they sunk a passenger ship called the *Lusitania*, which was rumored to be carrying supplies as well. This outraged many Americans, and led to their involvement in the First World War (Tindall, 989).

After WWI was over and the allied side had claimed its victory, America took on their isolationist stance once more. The League of Nations was established in the efforts to quell another world war, however this proved to be unsuccessful in preventing the rise of Fascism that seemed to be gaining a stronghold on Europe and led to the rise of dictators Hitler, Mussolini, and the powerful militaristic run country of Japan. Even before WWII hate-fever had made its way to the U.S., the American Legion (an organization tied with Congress that originally aided veterans returning home from WWI), never once failed in their attempt to pass annual resolutions that targeted Japanese Americans (Hynes, 424). In their attempt to pass these resolutions, they dragged other groups with them like the Associated Farmers in California whose resentment of the race was based more on a competitive economic standard: Japanese-Americans could grow vegetables at a lower cost and they tended to own or rent more land than native California farmers (Hynes, 424). Many entrepreneurs in the West Coast at that time also believed that if they could get the Japanese interned or forced to sell their land or businesses, they could get it for a much cheaper price (Cross, 14). And then, in December 1941, a few days after the Pearl Harbor attack, the west coast's growing concern of sabotage began to become increasingly persistent with local authorities getting phone calls from worrying citizens daily on suspicious behavior from their Asian neighbors (Hynes, 422). This growing amount of antagonism and hatred towards one race could only be fueled more intensely by a war, but not sparked.

The extreme intolerance and distrust however, that followed after the bombings of Pearl Harbor led the government to believe that the Japanese-American population, especially within the borders of California, would be better when placed in the care of the U.S. On February 19, 1974 FDR signed Executive Order 9066, which gave the secretary of war permission to designate zones "from which any or all persons may be excluded" (Cross, 14). At first this

movement from the prohibited sections along the west coast was to be voluntary. The estimated population of 110,000 Japanese-Americans were merely told to just get out, and within three weeks 8,000 people did (Hynes, 424-425). They packed up what belongings they could, sold the rest, and quickly closed out their businesses to do as the government told them: head east. Most tried to head to Arizona, Kansas, Utah, Wyoming, or Colorado, all of which were reminded about how California had turned their back on these people for a reason and didn't want them in their states either. So, once again, the Japanese-American people were left abandoned in a nation they thought was their home. By March 29, the government had decided to forbid voluntary migration instead opting for a better form of controlled movement, and thus internment camps of the Japanese-Americans arose.

There were three different types of internment camps set-up along the coast of California. The first was the Department of Justice Camp which could hold 3,000 Japanese aliens in which the FBI considered a possible threat (Hynes, 421). The second were the ten or so barbed-wire centers spread out throughout the U.S., but mostly encompassed to the west coast region. The government decided in 1942 to place 110,000 Japanese decedence into these centers. (U.S. total population at the time was 127,000), a vast majority of them were born U.S. citizens, and only about one-third were alien (Hynes, 422). All 110,000 of these interned had resided along the west coast region, a vast majority in California. It had been decided by the military at this time that for "military necessity" all people of Japanese ancestry- whether they were originally citizens or not- were to be removed from the west coast military zone (Hynes, 422). Next, the interned were partitioned off even more. Those who had confessed their loyalty to Japan or were just unwilling to defend the U.S., a country which didn't trust them in the first place, were placed

in segregation centers. The remainder 17,000 Japanese-Americans were allowed to move to eastern states and find jobs. (Hynes, 422).

For the majority of Japanese-Americans that were left in these “Segregation Centers,” life of internment proved to be demeaning and hard. Many of these camps were run by the War Relocation Authority which was assigned with the responsibility, according to FDR, “of taking all people of Japanese descent into custody, surround them with troops, prevent them from buying land, and return them to their former homes at the end of the war” (Vaughan, 48). With the WRA’s aid, the ten “Segregation Centers” soon coined a new name when they were deemed to become a bit more permanent and changed to Assembly Centers which were also called Relocation camps in certain locations. They were well guarded by the Army and located on secluded federally-owned land that was usually placed somewhere out on desolate land with irrigable soil. Internees were usually given jobs like planting victory gardens to send to soldiers overseas, often times the food they planted here was not actually given to them as their meals which tended to be rationed for the whole majority of the camp: between 7,000 to 18,000. Japanese-Americans would be left to one Assembly Center, leaving the matter of privacy to be almost out of the question (Hynes, 426). Communal toilets and showers were provided and each family would only be allowed a 20-25 foot room to live in (Vaughan, 14). Razors, scissors, and radios were banned from the community, leaving little source of outside communication. Patriotism was taught by WRA officials to children who were able to attend school at the site, reading, writing, and arithmetic were placed at as high as a standard as learning to be a good American.

Many of the Japanese-Americans internees knew that German, Italian, and also Japanese aliens had been interned only when the FBI had reasons to suspect them. Second generation

citizens of German or Italian origin were not evacuated from California, nor were second generation Japanese-Americans elsewhere in the U.S. (Hynes, 426). Only about 2,000 German and Italian decedents had been placed in relocation camps in regards to the near 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry (Vaughan, 49). Hate and resentment soon began to take hold of many Japanese-American internees and though mostly situations in the camp remained quiet and uneventful, in June 1943, Tule Lake- which had been designated as a “segregation center,” erupted in frequent strikes and demonstration that forced the army to tighten its control (Vaughan, 49).

Not all Japanese-Americans were so quick to pack up their meagre necessities and head off to internment. Supreme Court cases did arise out of the atrocity, questioning if the government had the authority to violate the rights of the naturally born U.S. citizen. However, even in the extreme cases the courts always ruled that the threat of invasion and sabotage gave the military the right to restrict the constitutional right of Japanese-Americans (Vaughan, 14). Even though the talk about Japanese spy sabotage networks after Pearl Harbor proved to be fictional and boosted even more by civilian fears, the government remained warranted in their reasoning throughout the majority of the war. Japanese-Americans were even banned from serving the war until 1943. When the ban was finally lifted, 9,500 Japanese-Americans volunteered and of that number only 2,700 were accepted, and later down the line the U.S. finally allotted for a total of 17,000 Japanese-Americans to defend their country (Vaughan, 49).

It took forty-five years after WWII had officially ended for the United States government to finally apologize to the survivors of the interned or their heirs, giving out \$20,000 in reparations. U.S. internment camps of WWII times are to this day seen as more of the American’s government’s own strategy of racial appeasement in regards to the population

around them. The Japanese- American population along the west coast was targeted by its fellow Americans enough to where a need was placed to forcibly take the near entirety of the race into forced migratory work camps or what the government deemed “protective custody,” when other areas in the U.S. didn’t have to undergo such primitive shielding. Japanese-Americans living along the west coast had to endure extreme violations to their rights as American citizens and in most instances when being interned, having their citizenship removed to allow the government to do what they felt necessarily throughout much of the war. The loss of property of emotional devastation experienced at this time was immense, and utterly unnecessary.

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