



2020

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### Recommended Citation

Nakayama, Clarisse M. (2020) "Democracy Revoked: How Foreign Relations and Domestic Opinion Led to the Internment of Japanese Americans During World War II," *The Macksey Journal*: Vol. 1 , Article 187. Available at: <https://www.mackseyjournal.org/publications/vol1/iss1/187>

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# Democracy Revoked: How Foreign Relations and Domestic Opinion Led to the Internment of Japanese Americans During World War II

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## **Abstract**

This research project aims to explore the internment of Japanese Americans during World War Two through the lens of intersecting pressures from both the American federal government, headed by the War Relocation Authority, and public opinion through media and pop culture. The paper illustrates how these factors culminated in the dissolution and seizure of personal freedoms and constitutional rights of a minority for the sake of national security. Through the discussion of pre-existing scholarship and primary sources ranging from government documents and newspapers to letters and memoirs, my research re-evaluates the causes of American paranoia at the time, as well as how foreign relations and domestic policy influence and directly relate to each other. Although the internment of Japanese Americans happened almost eighty years ago, echoes of the same rhetoric, stereotypes, and misconstrued information remain in our society today through the idea of "false news" and xenophobic perceptions of the other. The presentation will show how the internment of Japanese Americans can be used as an example of fear and paranoia taking precedence over the truth, as well as what can happen when democracy is revoked.

*Keywords:* Military History, Race, Ethnicity, and Postcolonial Studies, United States History

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On December 8, 1941, less than 24 hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor, a grocery store in Oakland, California had a new sign in its window. The sign stated, in all capital letters, “I am an American” (Lange). After hearing the news of the attack, the owner of the store, a graduate of the University of California, had a painter make the sign. He, along with thousands of other Japanese Americans—the majority citizens—would soon be forcibly removed to internment camps as decreed and carried out by the United States government, specifically the Justice Department and War Relocation Authority. With just four words, the sign spoke volumes. It illustrated the immediate shockwaves of Pearl Harbor and the clairvoyance of Japanese Americans, who feared what was to come for them. As we now know today, they had a right to be concerned, and the photo of a simple sign remains a reminder of how distrust, prejudice, and xenophobia would come to shape the fate of Japanese Americans during the Second World War.

Less than two months after Pearl Harbor, on February 19, 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which authorized the Secretary of War to establish military areas and proceed with the internment of Japanese Americans, German Americans, and Italian Americans. Beginning in March of 1942, a series of 108 exclusion orders and the creation of military zones gave approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans no choice but to pack up their belongings, abandon their homes, and arrive at one of the sixteen assembly centers. From there, the government forcibly removed them to ten relocation centers, in places scattered throughout the country, with most in and around California, and a few as far east as Arkansas. As several historians have argued, a combination of wartime paranoia and racial prejudice, are to blame for the internment of Japanese Americans (Hayashi, Reeves, Robinson, Weglyn). The question remains, however, as to the relationship between the American public

and the Presidential administration in carrying out and approving of what would later be remembered as a dark moment in United States history.

The Roosevelt administration's domestic policy towards Japanese Americans was molded by years of public contempt against the population, reinforced by a newfound fear of Japan during the war. This led the country to become complacent in the loss of freedoms for others if it meant overall security and preservation. The xenophobic mindset of the country permeated every decision that the government made in regards to the Japanese American population, and their civil liberties were taken in order to ease their own overwhelming anxiety that the United States had an enemy from within. Although the removal and internment process was carried out by the military and the heads of administration at the time were strong proponents of getting rid of the Japanese, the camps could not have existed without the support or even silent approval of the millions of Americans who were aware of what was happening. The use of Japanese Americans as a scapegoat for the United States' fears during World War II is a clear example of how foreign relations can become fused with domestic ideology and can become so powerful that they supersede basic constitutional and civil liberties.

Historians and scholars on the subject of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II have agreed on the root causes, but differ in assessing which factors contributed the most to the internment. In earlier scholarship, sociologists heavily contested the conflation of and connection between "race," "culture," and "loyalty" (Hayashi 3). Michi Nishiura Weglyn's *Years of Infamy* was the first well-known comprehensive overview of the internment, specifically at Tule Lake, and argued a hostage theory, in which the detainment of Japanese in the Western Hemisphere to ensure humane treatment of American prisoners of war captured by Imperial Japan (Weglyn). A more recent re-examination of the internment leads to more

arguments towards the importance of domestic factors such as intellectual trends, land and water rights, and economic exploitation (Hayashi, Reeves). In the end, foreign relations with Japan at the time of the war lit the match that fit in perfectly with increasingly aggravated domestic opinion, and the public quickly shifted from questioning to consent of the internment process, which they were fully aware of. The racial prejudice both on the part of the government and reflected through mass media, mixed with the overall paranoia of the public that pushed Japanese Americans into a corner, showing the internment was less about the Japanese themselves and more about quelling the fear of the public to show America's power by dividing its own country apart.

The study of how foreign relations and pre-existing domestic opinion regarding Japanese Americans reinforced each other in assuring their internment and exclusion from basic civil rights has several applications for today. The removal and internment of Japanese Americans stands as a stark reminder to America of what can happen even in the heart of a liberal, democratic society, based on the very values that it was depriving its own people of. It is crucial to be mindful of these misperceptions and the ways in which such an action was allowed, particularly when thinking of the ways in which foreign policy guides government rhetoric and the ways in which we think about the "other." In America today there still remain marginalized groups of minorities, and it is important for our society to remain politically conscious and able to put aside prejudice and stereotypes in order to seek the truth, as this is what will prevent such a dark period in American history from happening ever again. The case of the Japanese Americans also shows how the targeting and alienation of a single minority can drive deeper divisions between other minority groups, particularly with the Chinese American population at the time. On the other hand, it shows what can happen when minority groups stand up for and

support each other, as seen through the eventual reparation acts towards Japanese Americans affected by internment with the rise of the civil rights movement. By assessing the legal and civil aspects of the internment, we can begin to understand how such an event could even take place to begin with, and what it will take for America to ensure that it never happens again.

The reputation and image of Japanese Americans from a geographic, economic, and social perspective created an easily alienated population and explains how they could be perceived as disloyal by the public. Inheriting the racial prejudice that was at first given to the Chinese immigrant population in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there existed a growing anti-Asian sentiment especially among the white population in California, where the highest concentration of Japanese Americans lived at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though they were withdrawn and viewed as outcasts in society, Japanese Americans were at the center of Orientalist stereotypes filling the minds of the public, painting them as sly, cunning, and not to be trusted. The media at the time sensationalized and solidified this sentiment, which can be seen in the title alone of an article published by the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1905: “The Japanese Invasion, the Problem of the Hour” (Ivey and Kaatz 19). As the Japanese became the new enemy, Chinese Americans even began wearing buttons that said “I am a Chinese” in order to avoid being mistaken as Japanese and being assaulted (Weglyn 36). These distinctions drew even deeper wedges between not only American society, but between immigrant populations themselves, showing how negative stereotypes were being perpetuated by the public on all sides.

The question of Japanese citizenship at the time is a reflection of the immigration policy throughout the century leading up to the internment camps. Japanese immigration began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Kingdom of Hawaii received around 124,000 Japanese to work on the sugar plantations. Due to the Naturalization Act of 1870, anyone of Asian descent was unable

to become a citizen, as it refers to only those of white or African descent, leaving Asian immigrants with little desire to stay (Ivey and Kaatz 19). With Japan-U.S. relations dwindling, the Immigration Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act, put an immediate end to all immigration from Japan. Both Japan's restrictive emigration policies and the United States' immigration policies led to a small population of only around 127,000 Japanese in America at the time of internment, the majority residing in California and Hawaii (Ivey and Kaatz, 20).

Although the Japanese worked primarily in the agricultural sector, with no citizenship they were unable to own land, and were limited by a 1913 land law that prevented leases lasting longer than three years. As a solution, the Issei, or first generation of Japanese immigrants in America, would simply purchase the property in the name of their citizen children, or Nisei (Weglyn, 37). Despite these legal restrictions that the Japanese had to maneuver around, their small minority still managed to control almost one half of commercial crops in California (Weglyn, 37). This created a sense of contempt toward the Japanese for taking jobs and monopolizing a large section of agriculture from specifically white farmers at the time, further muddying their perception in the public eye. These farmers, especially in California, would later be one of the largest advocates for internment, driven largely by self-interest.

Attempting to work and live in a country that was set up to discourage Asian immigrants from staying, the Japanese were also subjected to constant monitoring and tests of loyalty. Monitoring, secret reports, and surveys throughout the 1920s continually tested the faith of Japanese Americans time and time again. Two of these reports, the Munson Report and the Roberts Commission, show the extent of escalation and heightened pressures and potential threats that the government saw. Through the comparison of these two, we can begin to

understand how these threats would ultimately manifest themselves in the preventative actions of the Roosevelt administration in the months to come.

Roosevelt's suspicions towards Japanese American loyalty led to the creation of the Munson Report, submitted to the White House just two months prior to Pearl Harbor. In the fall of 1941, Roosevelt commissioned John Franklin Carter, who was hired to build a network of secret intelligence, to prepare a study on the "Japanese situation" on the West Coast and Hawaii. Carter then chose Curtis B. Munson, a Midwestern Republican businessman, who met with local FBI leaders and the leader of the raid on the Japanese Consulate in Los Angeles the previous year. In the final report, submitted on November 7, 1941, Munson concluded that Japanese Americans presented little to no threat, stating, "[The Nisei] are universally estimated from 90 to 98 percent loyal to the United States if the Japanese-educated element of the Kibei is excluded. The Nisei are pathetically eager to show this loyalty" (Munson). Munson stated that he believed only imported agents would carry out sabotage and espionage. He pointed out that the Kibei, who received their early education in Japan, were the most dangerous element, but the Issei, or first generation, was not a large threat, as they had "made this their home" and had "brought up children here" (Munson). The Sansei, or third generation, could be largely disregarded as they were too young. His report was summarized into five passages that Carter compiled into a summary to send to the President. The first of these five was, "There are still Japanese in the United States who will tie dynamite around their waist and make a human bomb out of themselves... but today there are few" (Munson). No doubt the fear of even just a few Japanese willing to go to such lengths would scare Roosevelt, who already felt pressure both abroad and by his own administration to act.

Though the government largely ignored Munson's claims that the Japanese were overwhelmingly loyal and posed no threat to the security of U.S. interests, it is also necessary to point out that the recommendations for future action towards Japanese Americans were to be reassured by the President or Vice President to reinforce a negative public opinion of them. While the military governor in Hawaii put an end to fifth-column rumors while ensuring equal treatment to aliens and citizens who remained loyal, Secretary of the Navy, Frank Knox, would report to the Tolan Committee in March of 1942 that the Japanese Americans had used "radio sets, successfully preventing the commander in chief from determining in what direction the attackers had withdrawn..." in the Pearl Harbor attacks" (Weglyn 52). This diversion of blame for the attacks and suppression of the Munson Report led more citizens to think of all Japanese as untrustworthy and suspicious. Meanwhile, the Japanese were quick to notice the lack of support, as one woman, Kiyo Sato, recalls the negative rhetoric by government officials in her memoir, such as Attorney General Earl Warren saying, "The fact that nothing has happened means that they are planning something," and General John DeWitt repeatedly quoted as saying, "Once a Jap, always a Jap" (Sato 92).

The Munson Report would soon come to be overshadowed by the Roberts Commission, which quickly earned national attention and played a large role in shaping public opinion at the time. The Commission, carried out by Supreme Court Justice Owen Josephus Roberts, was presidentially appointed to investigate the Pearl Harbor attacks. The report was released on January 23, 1942, and consisted of ambiguous conclusions and vague references to Japanese Americans' involvement in espionage in Hawaii before Pearl Harbor (Robinson). The report was released to the public the next day and appeared in the headlines of newspapers across the country. The government made no differentiation between the spies who were hired or brought

from Japan and the resident Issei and Nisei populations of Japanese Americans. Media along the west coast, however, was the most extreme. The *Los Angeles Times*, which had supported the Nisei as good Americans a week earlier, not called for the “immediate relocation of both aliens and American citizens” (Robinson 96). This shows a clear shift in the narrative, from one of understanding and support for the Japanese Americans who had lived in America their whole lives, to one of fear for all Japanese, regardless of residential status in the country.

As public opinion steadily increased towards alienating the Japanese and blurring the lines between foreign spy and domestic resident, pop culture also reflected a revitalized hatred in the face of the enemy. An example of this can be seen in an issue of *LIFE Magazine* at the end of December 1941, immediately following Pearl Harbor. The article, in between an ad for Ten High bourbon and a Christmas letter from Lockheed Aircraft Corporation, is dedicated to helping the average American distinguish the physical characteristics of the “friendly Chinese” from that of the “enemy alien Japs” (“How to tell”). Not only did the article discuss the difference in height and proportions of bodies, but it also included a side-by-side comparison of General Hideki Tojo and a Chinese public servant, Ong Wen-hao, complete with notes on facial features (“How to tell” 82). The article, which was biased and clearly geared towards targeting the Japanese enemy, showed a complete lack of consideration for actual loyalty or citizenship, and this further illustrates the ways in which Japanese were painted as the enemy on the terms of race alone. While public opinion was largely misguided and misinformed, it is clear that prejudice dominated the domestic reaction to the war.

A recurring theme of the scholarly discussion on Japanese internment is the failure of political leadership to give in to paranoia and fear. *By Order of the President*, written by Greg Robinson, gives a thorough examination of the President through his own letters and internal

documents in order to understand the reasons behind his decision (Robinson). General John DeWitt was one of the most vocal proponents of the immediate removal of the Japanese following Pearl Harbor. In a Conference at the Office of the Commanding General in January of 1942, DeWitt remarked, “I have no confidence in [Japanese] loyalty whatsoever... We have got to be able to enter their homes and premises, search and seize immediately without waiting for normal processes of the law” (U.S. National Archives). Mounting pressure on Roosevelt from all sides, both abroad and domestically, led him to make what was, at the time, a “pragmatic decision, made by a practical-minded President in a time of crisis” (U.S. National Archives 23). Colonel Karl Bendetsen and Secretary of War Henry Stimson were also pro-internment, believing the Issei and Nisei would hardly be able to “withstand the ties of race” (Weglyn 43). On the other hand, Francis Biddle, Roosevelt’s Attorney General, was one of the strongest opponents of removal, and strongly criticized journalists at the time as “acting with dangerous irresponsibility,” and wrote later in his postwar memoirs that “American citizens of Japanese origin were not even handles like aliens of the other enemy nationalities... but as untouchables” (Weglyn 68). As an old friend of the President, Biddle still remained outspoken, and his opinions fell to the background in the decision-making of the Roosevelt administration.

The use of language by the government in their removal orders shows how they framed the expulsion of Japanese Americans in ambiguous and seemingly harmless terms. Executive Order 9066, announced by the President on February 19, 1942, authorized the Secretary of War to create military zones. The language in the document itself, however, is extremely ambiguous, and Roosevelt leaves room for interpretation, as when he states that the Secretary of War may “prescribe area in such places and of such extent as he or the appropriate Military Commander may determine, from which any or all persons may be excluded” (“Transcript”). Roosevelt gave

the Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson, unlimited control in carrying out the details, with no guidelines or rules about who could then be excluded. Following Civilian Exclusion Order No. 34, announcements were posted calling for the immediate removal of all persons of Japanese descent. The posting calmly announced that by a certain date, “All Japanese persons, both alien and non-alien, will be evacuated from the above designated area” (“To all persons” This phrase alone shows the careful wording of the Western Defense Command in phrasing the forced removal. Citizens in this case are merely referred to as “non-aliens,” and the idea of being “evacuated” from an area gives off the connotation that there is something that they need to escape, when in reality, the only threat to the Japanese Americans was by those carrying out the removal.

Japanese Americans were largely cooperative during the removal process, which only aided the government in saying that the removal process was a necessary one. As Kiyoko Sato’s family boarded the train at the Poston Internment Camp, she recalled women greeting each other using the phrase “Shikataga nai ne” (Sato 119). This phrase, roughly translating to “it can’t be helped,” was the general reaction by the Issei and some Nisei when being detained. While this at first seems like the Japanese were complacent in their own exclusion, they only acted in such a way that was respectable, as they still had a commitment to the United States, and were merely confused and hurt as to what they were being forced to do. They resisted the process by resisting victimization, and endured the hardships of internment in the face of justice being denied.

Many Japanese Americans sent letters to political officials to show their loyalty to American values and argue for their freedom as citizens. Lawrence T. Kagawa, a Japanese American dual citizen, wrote a letter to a delegate in response to his family being detained in Hawaii and sent to Camp McCoy in Wisconsin. His letter, dated March 12, 1942, stressed the

American Constitutional values while also discussing his personal character and patriotism (Kagawa 72). He wrote, “the Constitution gave me the absolute sacred right as American citizen upon my birth” (Kagawa 72). The question of constitutionality would be one that many who opposed the internment would use in their arguments, but would be answered by the administration’s executive decisions. Kagawa also writes in support of the war effort, claiming that he was “praying every day for my freedom so that [he’ll] be able to serve the country properly” by fighting (Kagawa 73). This expression of dedication to the American cause also underscores the harsh irony in detained citizens wanting to go abroad and defend the very ideals they were not given, as seen with the thousands of Japanese Americans already in the army (Reeves 145). Hawaii also did not have representation in Congress, and the non-voting delegate that Kagawa wrote to most likely did not act on the letter (Kagawa 72).

Meanwhile, the War Relocation Authority justified their actions to the American public through propaganda. The Office of War Information produced a newsreel titled “Japanese Relocation” was produced by the Office of War Information in 1942 (*Japanese Relocation*). Milton Eisenhower, the younger brother of Dwight D. Eisenhower and original director of the WRA, directed the newsreel, and he narrated the reasons for removal and relocation of the Japanese Americans. In the newsreel portrayal, the removal process as shown in the newsreel went smoothly, and clips of government agencies helping the Japanese lease their businesses or find tenants with “Christian decency” for their farms reassured the average American watching that there was nothing wrong. The image of cooperation of the Japanese with their “sacrifice” for the loyal American citizens was to protect everyone until the disloyal have left (*Japanese Relocation*). Films like these contributed to the overall sense that the process was being

undertaken in a civil, democratic manner, and that the Japanese wanted to go in order to help their country.

It is important to note that some American citizens also opposed internment and would come to question the implications of such an act in the face of an American democracy. In one letter from Marion R. Weddell to President Roosevelt at the end of 1943, she wrote, ““If we cannot all stand before the law in equal liberty and freedom—to live our lives, regardless of race, creed or color— then What Price Democracy?”” (Weglyn 103). Many wondered how such a process could happen in their own country, questioning the integrity of the democracy they lived in. Truman B. Douglass, a minister from Missouri, wrote a pamphlet questioning the ideology of the government, titled “70,000 American Refugees: Made in U.S.A (Douglass). Douglass wrote about the injustices being committed and the dismal camp conditions, and further expressed the sentiment that Americans were being affected, regardless of what their race or ethnicity.

German and Italian American citizens and aliens were not targeted as directly as Japanese Americans at the time, further demonstrating the racial prejudice that existed. In a letter from President Roosevelt to Governor Herbert H. Lehman in June of 1943, he made a point to reassure him that ““no collective evacuation of German and Italian aliens [was] contemplated at the time”” (Weglyn 134). The persecution faced by German Americans at the during and after World War I had left the German alien community in America to have to defend themselves throughout, and as Timothy J. Holian explains in his book, *The German-Americans and World War II*, mass media played an influential role in the public perception of the German community, and, similarly to the Japanese, little was done to distinguish loyal German Americans and aliens from pro-Nazi elements (Holian). In total, 11,000 ethnic Germans and less than 2,000 ethnic Italians were detained by the U.S., and there were no mass removals ordered for either (Weglyn 73).

Some Japanese Americans resisted the evacuations any way that they could, raising questions of the constitutionality that would define the government's stance on the issue.

*Korematsu v. United States* is one of four challenges to the curfews and evacuations that reached the Supreme Court. Fred Korematsu, who lost his job after Pearl Harbor, refused to report to the Tanforan Assembly Center on May 9, 1942. Korematsu went as far as changing his facial appearance through plastic surgery, change his name, and finding a new job in San Francisco to change his identity. Arrested on May 30, Korematsu brought his case to challenge the constitutionality of the evacuations with the help of the ACLU. Judge Adolphus rejected the argument that Korematsu was being denied due process, and Korematsu was later convicted in federal court for violating Executive Order 9066 (Reeves 96). This legalized the process as an exercise of war power, and as Weglyn wrote, "the military-necessity rationale... was firmly vindicated... justifying the 'exclusion of an entire group' because of the 'finding of the military authorities that it was impossible to bring about an immediate segregation of the disloyal from the loyal'" (Weglyn, 227). The stance of the Supreme Court in the case of Korematsu shows how the government justified the mass evacuation under war suspicions and nothing else.

Despite facing the rampant racist views and continuous exclusive legislation, the majority of Japanese Americans surprisingly stayed extremely loyal while they were in the camps. For the most part, Japanese Americans still believed in and were faithful to Roosevelt. Many believed that he was ill-advised or misinformed in his decision to intern them, and that he was on their side. Several wrote to him as well, expressing their support of the war effort and ask him to improve conditions in the camps (Robinson 253). Because of this, the death of Roosevelt came heavily, and the mourners included Japanese Americans themselves, who were deeply saddened by the news. The Japanese American Citizen League sent telegrams to Washington and wrote in

their newspaper, “His humanitarianism knew no political or geographical boundaries, no limitations fixed by race or color or creed (Robinson 254). Inside of the camps, special memorial services were held, and 3,000 people attended the service at Manzanar, where Catholic, Protestant, and Buddhist clergymen held a joint service (Robinson 255).

Reintegration and the lifting of the Exclusion Orders would give Japanese Americans hope of starting their lives in society again, but this would only be the start of a long journey to find a home in a country that had displaced them. Responding to a letter inquiring about the atmosphere upon returning home, J. Elmer Moorish, a banker who kept up with the finances of Japanese who were expelled from Redwood City, California, wrote back that “it would be best to delay returning a few months until the general public got used to the idea of the return” (“Figure 20”). When Imperial Japan surrendered in 1945, there remained around 55,000 evacuees left in the camps. At Tule Lake, the last internees were given \$25 and a train ticket back to where they had been picked up (Reeves 265). Many Japanese lost their homes, businesses and farms to new owners who had taken over their property, leaving them to have to begin again with nothing. There were also many cases of violence, and anti-Japanese rallies were rampant along the east coast. One anti-Japanese, Christian organization, the Home Front Commandoes, distributed brochures titled “SLAP THE JAP: No Jap Is Fit to Associate with Human Beings” (Reeves 260). The rampant backlash from their release led many to move to other parts of the country rather than going back to the Pacific Coast.

After the end of internment, a combination of the Nisei wishing to return to normalcy and the old age of the Issei led to the voice of the Japanese American community falling silent. Many Japanese did not want to talk about the events that had unfolded, and chose to appreciate the new life they had been given. However, the rise of the Civil Rights Movement led to a reawakening

and promotion of civil liberties for the African American community, and no other group could relate more to such a cause than Japanese Americans. In 1976, President Gerald Ford signed Proclamation 4417, terminating the Executive Order 9066, and stating, ““We now know what we should have known then, not only that evacuation was wrong, but Japanese Americans were and are loyal citizens”” (Reeves 275). Despite the additional Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which passed and made individual redress payments to Japanese Americans who were detained and relocated, no amount of money or government recognition can reverse the emotional damage already done (Reeves 275).

The week before Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, Kiyoko Sato, a young girl at the time, had just won an essay, titled “What America Means to Me” (Sato 118). The internment of Japanese Americans raises larger questions about what Constitutional rights are worth in the face of executive authority and wartime hysteria. The power of media and the communication between the public and the government played a huge role in securing the expulsion and detainment of more than 120,000 Japanese Americans, and the use of misconstrued, sensational information as a way of fitting into a certain type of narrative led to a twisted understanding of the internment camps. While Japanese resisted playing the role of the victim, their sufferings should not go unnoticed, as they originally did. Sometimes regarded as a footnote in the pages of history regarding World War II, the memory of the camps and their lessons must not be forgotten. In a world where fear and distrust of the “other” are still prevalent, the effects of events in the 21<sup>st</sup> century such as 9/11 or the “Build the Wall” sentiment on the American public is extremely important, and determines if we will uphold American Constitutional values of freedom and equality in the face of stereotypes and discrimination. The Japanese internment

remains a strong reminder for those who might forget that silence is deafening, and that injustice can happen anywhere.

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