

World War II

From Citizen to Enemy: The Tragedy of Japanese Internment

by Julie Des Jardins

Although World War II is covered in most school curricula, the story of American citizens who were stripped of their civil liberties here, on American soil, during that war is often omitted. Yet what happened to first-generation Japanese immigrants, or Issei, and second-generation Japanese Americans, or Nisei, during World War II, is critically important to understanding the intensity of feelings prompted by the attack on Pearl Harbor and to assessing the impact of that war on our nation.

The day after the Japanese attack on December 7, 1941, the US government froze assets of the Issei, and the FBI began to follow community leaders with strong Japanese ties. As American citizens, Issei and Nisei had enjoyed the rights of any US citizen; now their own government imposed strict curfews on them and raided their homes for “contraband”—anything that showed special connection to their former homeland.

Within two months President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing the War Relocation Authority to force 110,000 Japanese and their American-born children into relocation camps. Internees relinquished their communities, homes, and livelihoods for cramped barracks in isolated interior areas of Arizona, Utah, California, Wyoming, Arkansas, Idaho, and Colorado. Officially, the government declared that the forced relocation was necessary for Japanese Americans’ safety. Unofficially, however, these citizens had become the enemy—and America had to be protected from them. There was widespread agreement that the Issei and Nisei needed to be removed from the coast where collusion with the Japanese was easy and, it was believed, likely.

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Some Japanese American families saw the writing on the wall and voluntarily left the West Coast before being forced to leave. Others tried to exist as normally as possible until they were given directives to pack up their lives and go. They were given a week to tie up loose ends, close businesses, and pull children out of schools before congregating at assigned assembly centers. They could take nothing with them other than what they could carry themselves, and these belongings would have to sustain many of them for the better part of four years since internment didn’t officially end until 1946.

Relocation wreaked havoc on traditional family and gender roles. Japanese men felt emasculated by the low wages they received for menial tasks in the camps, and women felt shamed in barrack commodes that left them exposed when they dressed and relieved themselves. Rather than sit for quiet family meals, fathers started eating with other men, while mothers fed their infants alone. Accommodations were so crowded that teenagers left for more privacy, further disintegrating the traditional Japanese family.



Notice of relocation for Persons of Japanese Ancestry, 1942. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

The PBS website for the internment documentary *Children of the Camps* provides wonderful first-hand accounts of children and adult internees, and Valerie Matsumoto's oral testimonials of daily life in the camps collectively paint the horrors of internment but also the sometimes positive changes that resulted from detainment. Matsumoto's accounts from the Nisei generation reveal feelings of disillusionment, but they also reveal a surprising expansion of intellectual and professional horizons. Girls, for example, took advantage of loosening family bonds to make inroads into higher education and careers that they likely would not have explored before internment. Matsumoto follows several Nisei women through the war years and beyond to show the drastic redirection their lives took, for better or worse, as a consequence of being interned.

My own students often greet these accounts of internment with disbelief. Surely American citizens could not be detained against their will and interned as the result of official policy. Surely this wasn't official policy, they protest. Surely other Americans didn't know this was going on. It is crucial, therefore, to help students understand the social and cultural milieu in which other Americans would be complicit with these acts. The attack on Pearl Harbor had unleashed a wave of aggression against Japanese Americans that had been sublimated but, in the wake of the attack, now found an outlet. Workers and businessmen who long competed with the Japanese for wages and profits were eager supporters of the removal policy. Anti-Japanese sentiment quickly became widespread among those who did not stand to profit immediately from the confiscation of property and the removal of business and labor competition. From Dr. Seuss cartoons to the covers of mainstream magazines, Japanese Americans were caricatured and referred to by the derogatory term "Japs." A prejudice that had manifested itself in the Immigration Act of 1924 and other racially discriminatory measures again reared its head in the internment camps.

After the war, the US government proved slow to apologize for these extreme wartime policies. It is only in the last two decades that apologies and reparations have been provided. But, perhaps how the experience has been preserved in our historical memory is more important than these apologies or reparations.

In 1992, the Civil Liberties Act authorized the National Japanese-American Memorial to be built on federal land, and the Japanese American community began raising funds and conceptualizing the narrative that the memorial would present to the public. What the memorial tells us—and what it remains silent about—suggests the complexity of confronting the past and honoring it in the present.

Initially, planners intended to honor Japanese Americans who served in the military during World War II. Then it was agreed that the memorial should also represent the internment experience and Japanese patriotism and valor more broadly construed. But the memorial planners quickly discovered that there was no universal way to define these heroic qualities, no way to represent them outside of a specific historical context, even though they were crucial in shaping a positive sense of Japanese Americans for visitors to the projected memorial.

The memorial committee decided to quote excerpts of a creed written by Mike Masaoka, a member of the Japanese American Citizens League who served as the organization's executive secretary until enlisting for military duty in 1943. In his creed, Masaoka wrote of his pride in being a citizen of a country who "boasted of her history" and "gloried in her heritage." He minimized the discrimination he experienced before the war and insisted he would continue to be a firm believer in "American sportsmanship" and "fair play." He would always defend America against her enemies, obey her laws, and respect her flag. He openly linked his own success to America's political supremacy in the world. But if the creed gave voice to Japanese-American patriotism, it could not preserve the historical memory of detention and relocation, for it had been written in 1940, before the policy of internment began.

Planners agreed that Japanese American men who served in the military—members of the 100th Infantry Battalion, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, the 1399th Engineer Construction Battalion, and members of the Military Intelligence Service—should be represented in the memorial. To lend stature to the project they also included quotations by Harry S. Truman and Ronald Reagan, whose words, probably out of context, seemed appropriate for such a structure. In addition, they agreed to include quotes by Congressman Norman Mineta, a man whose family was detained in a Wyoming camp, and Senator Daniel Inouye, who served in the 442nd. The successful public careers of these men seemed to prove that, despite overt discrimination against them, Japanese Americans could succeed in the traditional sense and live the “American Dream.”

But, in the end, the story told and the memories preserved by the memorial remain incomplete. Was military and political service the only way Japanese Americans could exhibit patriotism or valor? What about the ordinary Japanese American men and women who managed to keep their families intact while detained in the camps? Was theirs a story of heroism that deserved to be remembered and told? Should the men and women who actively resisted discrimination by dodging the draft, sabotaging War Relocation efforts, or secretly running businesses that had been declared illegal also be memorialized? In the end, the burden of a more complete account of the Japanese American experience during the war rests on the shoulders of historians and teachers.

Julie Des Jardins is associate professor of history at Baruch College, City University of New York, and the author of *Women and the Historical Enterprise in America: Gender, Race, and the Politics of Memory, 1880–1945* (2003), and *The Madame Curie Complex: The Hidden History of Women in Science* (2010).
