

Japanese American Internment



The Mochida family awaits evacuation in Hayward, California, in 1942. Photograph by Dorothea Lange

On December 7, 1941, Japanese naval and air forces attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, bringing the U.S. into World War II. In the weeks following the attack, fear and suspicion grew of the sizable Japanese American community in the U.S. Might these immigrants and first generation Americans side with Japan against the United States? Based on those fears, combined with a long history of anti-Japanese immigrant sentiment, the U.S. government forced more than 110,000 Japanese Americans living along the West Coast into Internment Camps for the duration of the war. In a war that the U.S. fought to preserve liberty around the world, this event stands out starkly as a violation of the civil and human rights of tens of thousands right here at home.

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066—an order that gave the War Department the authority to declare any part of the country a restricted military area “*from which any or all persons may be excluded.*” California, Oregon, Washington, and southern Arizona were soon designated as such. The persons to be excluded were Japanese Americans.

Beginning in March of 1942, Japanese Americans were ordered to register with the War Relocation Authority (WRA) for “evacuation.” Families were told they could only bring what they could carry. Businesses, homes, and possessions had to be sold or entrusted to neighbors or friends. Pets had to be left behind. Of the more than 110,000 people sent to Internment Camps, two-thirds were Nisei—first generation Americans—and the other third were Issei—born in Japan. A great many of the internees were children and teenagers.

By October 1942 nearly all internees were housed in ten hastily built camps run by the WRA. These camps were located in isolated, often desolate locations. Barbed wire and military police surrounded them. Along with loss of freedom, families shared a single room (often without plumbing and little heat), ate in communal dining halls, endured harsh weather, and suffered mental and physical stresses of being confined against their will. Nutrition, education, and health care were all inadequate. Despite these sub-standard conditions, people did their best to make life in the camps as “normal” as possible. They established schools and governing bodies, organized baseball teams, created music and art groups, planted vegetable gardens, and held religious services—anything they could do to make life in the camps bearable.

In 1943 the U.S. government reversed its exclusion of Japanese Americans from the draft (they had been considered enemy aliens) and asked for volunteers from the camps to serve in the military. More than 800 men volunteered and became part of the 442nd Infantry Regimental Combat team. The 442nd, which fought in Italy, Southern France, and Germany, became one of the most highly decorated units of WWII. While these men fought for America, their families were living behind barbed wire in their own country.

In challenging the constitutionality of Executive Order 9066, Fred Korematsu argued that his rights and those of other Americans of Japanese descent had been violated. In *Korematsu v. United States*, the Supreme Court ruled 6-3 in favor of the government, saying that military necessity overruled those civil rights. In his dissent, however, Justice Frank Murphy stated that the exclusion of Japanese Americans “*falls into the ugly abyss of racism.*”

By 1946 internees slowly began to return home to rebuild their lives. In 1988 the U.S. government issued a formal apology to all former internees and paid \$20,000 to each surviving internee. The government acknowledged that the internment had been based on “*race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership.*” To this day, Japanese American Internment during WWII is studied as a cautionary tale of the need for vigilance when maintaining the constitutional rights of all Americans.

The Bill of Rights

Amendment I

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

Amendment II

A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.

Amendment III

No soldier shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house, without the consent of the owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law.

Amendment IV

The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.

Amendment V

No person shall be held to answer for a capital, or otherwise infamous crime, unless on a presentment or indictment of a grand jury, except in cases arising in the land or naval forces, or in the militia, when in actual service in time of war or public danger; nor shall any person be subject for the same offense to be twice put in jeopardy of life or limb; nor shall be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself, nor be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation.

Amendment VI

In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury of the state and district wherein the crime shall have been committed, which district shall have been previously ascertained by law, and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation; to be confronted with the witnesses against him; to have compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor, and to have the assistance of counsel for his defense.

Amendment VII

In suits at common law, where the value in controversy shall exceed twenty dollars, the right of trial by jury shall be preserved, and no fact tried by a jury, shall be otherwise reexamined in any court of the United States, than according to the rules of the common law.

Amendment VIII

Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.

Amendment IX

The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.

Amendment X

The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people.

AMENDMENT VIOLATION

Matching Activity

Directions: Match the event/action on the left side of the page with the Amendment it breaks on the right side of the page by drawing a line between the two. Some Amendments will be violated more than once and some none at all.

- A. Japanese who were suspected of spying, sabotage, or helping the enemy had their homes raided and had their things confiscated by the FBI.
- B. Before the signing of Executive Order 9066, Japanese suspected of helping the enemy were arrested and detained. They were never given a trial.
- C. Japanese were unwillingly removed from their homes and placed in internment camps.
- D. Although most Japanese were punished by being placed in internment camps, they never were put on trial and were treated as automatically guilty of disloyalty to the United States.
- E. Those who replied no to certain questions in a loyalty questionnaire administered to internees were taken to Tule Lake and considered disloyal. They were being punished for what they said.
- I. Freedom of speech, press, religion and petition—Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech.
- II. Right to keep and bear arms
- III. Conditions for quarters of soldiers- No soldier shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house, without consent of the Owner.
- IV. Right of search and seizure regulated- The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects against unreasonable searches and seizures shall not be violated.
- V. Provisions concerning prosecution- no person shall be held to answer for capital, or otherwise infamous crime, unless on a presentment of indictment of a Grand Jury.
- VI. Right to a speedy trial and witnesses- In all criminal prosecution, the accused shall enjoy the right to speedy and public trial by an impartial jury.
- VII. Right to a trial by jury
- VIII. Excessive bail, cruel punishment- Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted
- IX. Rule of construction of Constitution- The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.
- X. Rights of the states under Constitution