The Japanese American internment consisted of the relocation and incarceration of more than 110,000 persons during World War II. It is one of the most significant federal government programs targeting Asian Americans or any racial group, and it has been the defining experience of Japanese Americans. It generated landmark Supreme Court decisions and eventually led to a successful redress movement. The internment occurred within the context of pre-existing racial antagonism directed toward Japanese Americans. A minority population, it was concentrated along the West Coast and in the territory of Hawai'i. Unlike early Chinese American settlements that consisted of male workers, Japanese American communities included families. The first generation was called *Issei*, the second generation, *Nisei*.

From the earliest arrival of Japanese Americans, sentiment against them was strong. Following the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the city established a segregated oriental school. The ensuing controversy between Japan and the United States resulted in the Gentleman's Agreement restricting migration from Japan to the United States.

Additional legal measures discriminated expressly against Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans. Many states enacted anti-miscegenation laws prohibiting intermarriage between Caucasians and Asians, including Japanese. They passed alien land laws restricting ownership of property to curtail Japanese success in farming. They also passed other statutes prohibiting aliens ineligible to citizenship from obtaining licenses to participate in professions, including fishing. Due to the racial bar on naturalization, confirmed by the Supreme Court in the case of *Ozawa v. United States*, the Issei could not become citizens; their children, the Nisei, acquired birthright citizenship.

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese Imperial Navy launched a devastating military operation against the United States Pacific Fleet headquarters in Hawai'i. This attack on Pearl Harbor provided the rationale for internment. Although conflict had been underway in both Europe and Asia for years, the United States did not formally enter the hostilities until December 8, when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously declared the attack on Pearl Harbor “a day which will live in infamy” and asked Congress for a declaration of war. The surprise attack had been highly effective because Japanese diplomats and their American counterparts were in the midst of negotiations regarding neutrality.

Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, commander of the Western Defense, was a leading proponent of what came to be the evacuation and relocation of Japanese Americans, including aliens and citizens alike. DeWitt claimed it was likely that individuals of Japanese ancestry would be loyal to the Japanese emperor. He argued that their descent would influence them to commit acts of espionage, sabotage, and treason. He also asserted that, because of racial characteristics, it would be difficult to assess their likely loyalty to the United States.

Other public officials and commentators suggested that the assimilation of Japanese Americans was a trick, citing the treacherous nature of the Pearl Harbor attack. They also said that prior racial
discrimination against Japanese Americans likely made them resentful toward the United States. Journalist Westbrook Pegler proposed the establishment of a reprisal reserve from which Japanese Americans could be drawn for execution.

In Hawai'i, there was not the same sentiment favoring mass detention. Japanese Americans there made up much of the agricultural workforce.

German Americans and Italian Americans, who had faced considerable bias during the Great War (World War I), were not subject to the same degree of prejudice despite German American Bund rallies and the German U-boat (submarine) operations off the East Coast. However, specific persons of German and Italian background, typically who had not naturalized, and Aleuts would be imprisoned along with Japanese Americans.

**Implementing Internment Policies**

The federal government accepted General DeWitt's argument that military necessity required the removal of Japanese Americans. President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 authorizing the military to institute the internment. Without determinations of guilt, and in some instances with only a few days' notice, persons of Japanese heritage within his jurisdiction were ordered to report to assembly centers such as the Santa Anita racetracks outside Los Angeles.

A Japanese American man named Tom Kobayashi looks out from the Manzanar internment camp in California in a photograph by Ansel Adams taken around 1943. The Japanese American internment consisted of the relocation and incarceration of as many as 110,000 people during World War II and was one of the most significant federal government programs to target any racial group.

They then were transported to 10 camps in isolated places such as Manzanar, California. These facilities were called relocation centers, though some official references also designated them concentration camps before that term came to be predominantly associated with Nazi death camps.

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More than two-thirds of the individuals sent to these camps were United States citizens. Others were confined at Crystal City, Texas, with those of German and Italian heritage, as well as Latin Americans of Japanese heritage who had been handed over by their governments.

**Legal Challenges**

The Supreme Court heard four cases involving the internment during World War II. The companion cases involving Gordon Hirabayashi and Min Yasui approved of the early stages of the internment. The criminal prosecution of Fred Korematsu, who refused to comply with the military orders, set the precedent that government's use of racial classifications would be subjected to the highest level of judicial review, called strict scrutiny. The justices held that Korematsu had not been excluded from the geographic region because of race but rather due to the war. In the case brought by Mitsuye Endo, however, the government conceded that she was loyal. The justices then ruled that she could not continue to be held in custody.

**Military Service in World War II**

In 1943, the government changed its policy on military service by Japanese Americans. It had earlier sought to discharge all Japanese Americans from the armed forces. It then instituted the draft.

Thousands of Asian American men joined the army. They were assigned to the segregated 442nd Regimental Combat Team and the 100th Infantry Battalion. Fighting in Europe, these units' troops became the most highly decorated in American history for their size and length of service. Other men were recruited for the Military Intelligence Service, in some instances functioning as interpreters and spies throughout Asia, and women were recruited for the Women's Army Corps.

The government required Japanese Americans to respond to a loyalty questionnaire. Two of the questions asked about serving in the armed forces on combat duty and swearing “unqualified allegiance” and be willing to “defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces,” respectively. There was a movement to answer no and no, and the men who did so were called No-No Boys.

At the Heart Mountain, Wyoming, internment camp, a group called the Fair Play Committee organized 63 draft resisters. They stated they would serve in the military if their civil rights, and those of their families, were restored and respected. In a mass trial, they were found guilty and sentenced to three years in a federal penitentiary.

The War Relocation Authority (WRA)'s policies for granting leave from the internment camps had the intention and effect of dispersing Japanese Americans to the East Coast and Midwest and breaking up their West Coast neighborhoods and communities. When the camps were finally closed in 1945, Japanese Americans were free to return to the evacuated areas. In the postwar decades, the Nisei generation surpassed the Issei in educational levels and achieved upward occupational and social mobility. Continuing this trend, the third-generation Sansei attained a higher college completion rate than European Americans.

**Redress and Litigation**

As early as 1946, Japanese Americans sought reparations for losses incurred due to their wartime incarcerations. The 1948 Evacuation Claims Act provided limited financial compensation for documented property losses. The program was criticized for its lengthy and burdensome claims processing, low levels of payment, and failure to cover lost earnings and intangible human costs. By the
1970s, a grassroots redress effort was renewed and expanded, fueled by increased Japanese American political engagement, the election of Japanese Americans to Congress, student protests over the Vietnam war and ethnic studies programs, the civil rights movement, and calls for action from the Japanese American Citizens League. Significantly, on February 19, 1976, as part of the bicentennial, President Gerald Ford signed a proclamation revoking Executive Order 9066 and acknowledging that evacuation was wrong.

Due to the leadership of Japanese American legislators, in 1980, Congress passed legislation creating a fact-finding commission to make findings and recommendations on the causes and consequences of the internment. The key findings of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC) report, *Personal Justice Denied*, were that Executive Order 9066 was caused by racial prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership and was not justified by military necessity.

Using a rare legal petition for a writ of *coram nobis*, an extraordinary remedy for manifest injustice, lawyers for Fred Korematsu, Gordon Hirabayashi, and Min Yasui asked three different federal courts to consider newly discovered archival evidence that showed no military necessity existed to justify internment and that the government had suppressed and fabricated evidence in arguments to the U.S. Supreme Court during World War II. The cases wended their way through the courts from 1983 to 1988. Ultimately, all wartime convictions of the three petitioners were voided. The *coram nobis* decisions provided the judicial conclusion that the internees’ constitutional rights were violated.

Using a different litigation strategy, in 1983, the National Council for Japanese American Redress (NCJAR), led by William Hohri of Chicago, filed a class action lawsuit seeking redress on behalf of all former evacuated and interned Japanese Americans. District of Columbia Federal District Judge Louis Oberdorfer dismissed the suit, saying it was not timely filed. The appeals court reversed and sent the suit back for trial. In the final analysis, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously agreed with Judge Oberdorfer’s decision on the timeliness argument and voided the decision of U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit. On remand, the appeals court affirmed Judge Oberdorfer’s ruling.

The CWRIC's recommendations became the basis for the successful redress legislation. The Civil Liberties Act of 1988 established an educational fund and provided $20,000 compensation to each surviving internee. It was accompanied by a presidential apology. However, funding had to be secured through the competitive congressional appropriations process. After Congress made a redress entitlement program, thereby guaranteeing appropriations, redress was paid out over a three-year period. By the end of the third year, redress compensation had been paid to 75,000 former internees.

**See Also:** 1900 to 1949 Primary Documents; 1979 to 1999 Primary Documents; 2000 to 2013 Primary Documents; 442nd Regimental Combat Team; Japanese American Authors; Japanese American Citizens League; Japanese American Literature; Japanese American National Museum; Japanese Americans; Japantowns; Korematsu v. United States; National Council on Japanese American Redress; No-No Boys; Pearl Harbor; World War II; Yellow Peril

**Further Readings**

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