The Rise of Internment: The Revealed Motivations of the Past

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Japanese Internment was one of the biggest mistakes in United States history, 120,000 Japanese Americans were thrown into internment camps in the name of public safety, although when you take the statistics, Japanese American history, internment’s supporters and opponents into consideration the true motivations are revealed. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor there was an explosion of support for Japanese Internment; suddenly there was paranoia of possible Japanese allies hidden within America, which led to an Anti-Japanese movement. The event marked the United State’s entrance into World War II unfortunately solidifying the image of the Japanese as the enemy. Some took advantage of this hysteria by pushing out Japanese propaganda in support of their internment. President Roosevelt was caught in this chaotic period, and despite being one of the most popular presidents to have ever served, Japanese Internment was a major blemish on his career. Due to the political, military and social pressure internment was realized and ruined the lives of many. Many argued it was merely a security precaution to protect the American public and on the surface, internment seems to be an unfortunate yet necessary precaution. Although the main arguments supporting it fall apart once facts are put in front of fantasies.

Many rumors circulated regarding the disloyalty of Japanese Americans although none were actually proven. Despite the lack of concrete evidence displaying the disloyalty of these Japanese Americans, their rights were stripped from and were treated as lesser as they were rounded up like cattle and put in these camps. Seattle magazine’s photograph of Fumiko Hayashida clearly shows the disregard for this group. She clutches onto her child as her house is stripped from her and she is labeled and shipped off to this Internment camps like an animal. The FBI searched and invaded Japanese homes like Hayashida’s without warrants, seeking items that could be classified as traditionally “Japanese”. With only what they had on their backs and in their hands the Japanese on the West Coast left their businesses, houses and prized possessions behind (which were often sold for a cheap price) for the barbed wire camps. Few had any idea of their destination when there were labeled with numbered identification tags at designated departure points.

When they finally arrived their treatment seemed to only get worse. They were under the eyes of military police and watchtowers as if they were prisoners themselves. These people were denied a speedy trial or legal representation, and could not call upon witnesses to defend their position, in fact they were not even told of the crime charged against them. Treatment within these camps took unnecessary measures towards a people whose disloyalty was never proven. There was a loss of religious freedom within internment camps. The Shinto religion was prohibited and Buddhism was banned while Christianity was strongly encouraged[[1]](#footnote-1). The rights of freedom of speech and the press were also denied to the Japanese within these camps. Their own language was prohibited within their public meetings and newspapers. They were denied the right to return home to vote, although elections were held in the camps, the internee “self government” had no power to regulate their own welfare or direct their own destiny[[2]](#footnote-2). Conditions within these overcrowded camps were “grossly inadequate”, medical care was poor and food rations were lacking. Japanese housed in tarpaper-covered barracks without plumbing or cooking facilities. These camps were often located in deserts or swamps with temperatures as high as 115 degrees and as low as 35 degrees below[[3]](#footnote-3). Internees only means of escaping these camps was enlistment in the US military, an opportunity only taken advantage of by 1,200 of these Japanese Americans[[4]](#footnote-4). This great Japanese Americans disservice occurred for reasons perhaps not as noble as many would like to admit.

Long before Pearl Harbor the Japanese population received an increasing amount of restrictions as their rights dwindled before their eyes. The attacks on this racial group were only amplified following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Soon Japanese Americans could not marry white people and were banned from public swimming pools and even certain neighborhoods. The constant generalizations made and negativity towards the Japanese in America strongly affected their businesses making them unmanageable at times. Americans attacked Japanese delivery drivers, threw rotten eggs at buildings and smashed the glass of Japanese owned businesses[[5]](#footnote-5). Henry Mclemore a popular newspaper writer of the San Francisco Examiner stated that he was “for the immediate removal of every Japanese on the west coast to a point deep in the interior”[[6]](#footnote-6).Tensions in California only rose as Japanese woman were even accused of “breeding like rats” and producing “unassailable children” who went to segregated schools by force. The bitterness towards the ethnic group was derived mainly from their huge commercial success in America.

There was a great sense of competition between American and Japanese workers to the point where Japanese Americans became a threat in the eyes of the American public, a threat that must be taken care of. Due to this profound and increasing resentment the Japanese Government stopped issuing passports for laborers heading to the U.S. (with the exception of Hawaii). Although this did not satisfy the resentful Americans. The Asiatic Exclusion League was formed on May 14th 1905 as an Anti-Japanese organization pushing for more restrictions on immigration. In response to the growing agitation, The Gentleman’s Agreement of 1907 was reached, essentially halting immigration to the United States from Japan for the moment.

Restrictions on immigration did not settle the problem; attempts were made to make California less attractive for Japanese people seeking to immigrate. As a result, the union-dominated San Francisco Board of Education submitted a plan to the board of supervisors to segregate Japanese public school children. During the 1909 legislative session in California over 17 anti-Japanese bills were introduced, in the 1913 legislative session there was more than 30 anti-Japanese bills proposed. It was at this point that measures concerning Japanese land ownership began to emerge. The Heney-Webb Alien land law of 1913 tied land ownership to citizenship. This act was a clear response to the commercial success of the Japanese as farmers. It made any aliens who were not eligible for citizenship limited by only allowing them to lease land for three years.

“It is unimportant and foreign to the question, whether a particular race is inferior. The single and simple question is, is the race desirable . . . It seems to limit their presence by curtailing their privileges which they may enjoy here” State Attorney General Webb[[7]](#footnote-7)

In 1922 the U.S. Supreme Courts ruled in Ozawa v. U.S. that Japanese immigrants could not become naturalized citizens. This in conjunction with the Heney-Webb Alien Land Law crippled Japanese American’s ability to continue in the farm industry. Despite these regulations the Japanese found a loophole in this and began obtaining property under the name of their American-born children. Although, State Senator J.M. Inman proposed an alien-land law which made it illegal for an alien to provide funds to purchase land if the title was held in the name of another person. At this point it became clear that the American farmers along with the labor unions on the West Coast desperately fueled the attacks on the Japanese. On November 2nd 1920, it become illegal for aliens to lease land; the vote was 668,483 to 222,086, a clear indication of the power and pressure of the public. California was aiming to eliminate Japanese immigration as they previously did with the Chinese. California’s goals were nearly achieved on May 16th 1924, under the Immigrant Exclusion Act all immigration of people ineligible for citizenship was halted. Despite the constant interference, Japanese dominance continued. By 1940 Japanese farmers produced 90% of snap beans, celery, peppers, and strawberries. They also produced 50-90% of asparagus, cabbage, cantaloupes, carrots, lettuce, onions and watermelons. Their overwhelming influence in the industry caused many to view them as the enemy, long before the two countries faced off in World War II.

Although these Anti-Japanese movements were not exclusive to California and the negative sentiment towards the Japanese soon spread to other regions. One of these regions was Salt River Valley in Arizona. The Japanese previously expanded into this area for agricultural purposes. As they had done before they achieved a great amount of success in their trade. The first 100 Japanese contact laborers arrived in Arizona during the late 1890s and again in 1905. Despite the Gentleman’s agreement of 1902, many Americans were not content as their population still continued to grow. Arizona residents had witnessed how the authorities in neighboring Sonora (a Mexican town where the native residents had complaints considering the Chinese immigrations coming in) successfully removed the arriving Chinese and achieved a goal very similar to the Americans. The Asiatic Exclusion League considered the “Japanese already on the Pacific Coast a ‘menace’ to American life” and went on to continue their campaign against the Japanese (in 1905)[[8]](#footnote-8). By 1920 the Japanese in Arizona had created a stable independent farming community known for the quality and quantity of their crops. The native white farmer’s negative sentiments only grew as the Japanese gained success through truck farming. The white farmers began to accuse the Japanese of unfair labor practices such as employing their woman and children and taking all of the best farmland. In 1922 the US Supreme Court resolved, that the “Japanese were outside the zone of those who could be naturalized”[[9]](#footnote-9). This idea can be seen as the seed for what was soon to be the Immigration Act of 1924. Although, the anti-Japanese movement in Arizona only intensified following these events and the worse of it was yet to come.

The fear of the Japanese “Colony’s” expansion in Arizona increased as time went on. The white farmer’s constant complaints put pressure on authorities to enforce the 1913 land law. Although, the Japanese became skilled at evading it, and by 1930 their population only continued to grow. Along with the constant growth of the Japanese, which the white farmers resented so much, the Great Depression was beginning to set in. At this time farmers began blaming the Japanese for widespread unemployment, reduced prices of farm produce and other so-called “economic evils”[[10]](#footnote-10). This anti-Japanese hysteria was furthered by local rumors in the summer of 1934, which suggested that a vast number of Japanese Americans were planning to migrate into Arizona from California. Among the rumors and perpetual success of the Japanese farmers was a critical and competitive threat during the worse of the Great Depression. In 1934, two years after the Sonoran’s in Mexico managed to banish the Chinese, farmers in the Phoenix area formed the “Farmers Anti-Oriental Society”. This marked the true beginning of the Salt Lake River Anti-Japanese movement.

With the formation of the Farmer’s Anti-Oriental Society the aggression towards the Japanese in Arizona greatly increased. The F.A.O.S. claimed that the Japanese obtained their land through illegitimate conspiracies. Following their declaration as a real and active organization they threatened that the Japanese only had ten days until they would be forced to leave Arizona on August 25th 1934. The decision to drive them out was announced on August 17th during a parade of 150 cars following a meeting attended by more than 600 white farmers all calling for their exclusion[[11]](#footnote-11). If their ultimatum was not followed they claimed that action would follow. At this point tensions rose to a point where the United States Federal government began to get concerned. Secretary of State William Phillips realized that any type of action might lead to conflict and potential violence between the two groups. This was a major concern considering at the time, the United Stated wished to keep their relationship with Japan untarnished. William Phillips told Governor Benjamin Baker Moeur that he hoped such a critical situation would be prevent, followed by a promise made by the local County Attorney’s office stating that the farmers protesting the Japanese situation will not resort to violence. The Governor published Phillips message in the newspaper and immediately after Phillips received a cable from the Anti-Alien Committee stating:

“Having read your telegram to the Governor of our state in our local newspaper we take exception to the attitude you have shown in championing the cause of the alien Japanese without hearing the side of your own American citizens . . .We claim that the Japanese residents of this valley are an organized bunch of criminals as they have thoughtlessly conspired to break our state laws year after year over a long period causing the small American farmer, the real pioneers who brought this valley out of the desert, great suffering and economic ruin”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Through this message the farmer’s typical conspiracy filled anti-Asian views are clearly reflected. The Anti-Asian Association Committee considered the Japanese bad Americans who could not be a part of the beautiful America, which belonged to whites. They continued to clamor regarding the lack of enforcement of the Alien Land Law. Despite the Governor’s willingness to assure that the law is being enforced to it’s full potential, the situation worsened. The Governor promised the Japanese population that the state would employ the National Guard to protect them and their property if necessary. Soon the Farmers planned to take matters into their own hands.

On September 14th 1934 the first of several reported assaults on the Japanese in Salt River Valley took place. It was claimed to be an attack on Japanese property, not the owners themselves. There were posters titled “Arizonans Resent Foreign Influx” depicted white farmers holding signs stating “One Jap Farms 1200 acres”. At the bottom of the poster it is said that there were hundreds of people carrying signs with a very similar message specifically shown in the poster. Although, reportedly six masked men fired two shots at George Todano’s truck and then pushed the machine into an irrigation canal. This was not an isolated event, nearly a week later three dams were blown up with dynamite at three separate Japanese farms. Although there was not real consequences following these attacks, and many took it as a sign of toleration for them. The Japanese noted this and questioned the Governor’s support, as the attacks continued and even more damage dealt. The verbal and physical abuse of the Japanese in Salt River Valley continued through the following months as the situation escalated to a national scale affecting the United State’s relationship with Japan. As tensions rose the House Bill 78 was proposed and supported by the Governor, which allowed all aliens to “occupy, use, cultivate, and transfer real property only to the extent and for the purpose prescribed by any treaty existing between the United States and the nation of which such alien is a citizen and subject and not otherwise”[[13]](#footnote-13). Although, the Japanese are not eligible as citizens and would be excluded from agriculture and could no longer function as they did. This controversial bill was fortunately killed and is considered the end of the anti-Japanese movement is Salt River Valley. The Japanese presence in Arizona did in fact decrease by 30% as they migrated to California simply due the racial animosity. The huge amount of pressure put on Government officials is the principal cause of their lack of intervention when it was most needed and their support of the white farmers despite their sympathies for the Japanese Immigrants.

Despite all the anti-Japanese laws put in place their dominance continued and one the crisis of Pearl Harbor erupted it reignited the anti-Japanese sentiments once again. Following the attack Newspapers began reporting rumors, which were claimed as fact. One rumor was that Japanese spies supposedly helped plan the attack, another which was found in The Los Angeles Times, claimed that the fliers whom attacked were wearing class rings of the University of Hawaii and Honolulu High School. Another claimed that a Japanese resident painted himself green and camouflaged himself in order to aid the attacking Japanese. Groups like the Native Sons of the Golden West and American Federations of Labor dubbed the Japanese immigrants the “yellow peril” and joined several local newspapers such as The San Francisco Chronicle to warn Americans that immigrants from Japan were becoming too numerous. These U.S. natives could not afford to lose their jobs, which they often considered to be their birthright. West Coast politicians clamored for the removal of Japanese immigrants as citizens. One of the major politicians that supported internment was General John L. DeWitt. On February 14th 1942, DeWitt sent a memo to secretary of war Henry Stimson recommending the removal of all Japanese immigrants and citizens of Japanese descent on the West Coast. According to DeWitt second and third generation Japanese Americans could never be trusted, declaring that the Japanese race is the enemy. DeWitt concluded that “the very fact no sabotage has taken place” was a “disturbing indication that such action will be taken”[[14]](#footnote-14). In addition he wanted to exclude German and Italian “enemy aliens” from the West Coast although his superiors at the war department overruled him. Francis Biddle (Attorney General) many years after WWII, stated that DeWitt was “apt to waver popular pressure . . . tending to reflect the views of the last man he spoke to”. The union-dominated government of California and John L. DeWitt seemed to be the biggest supporters of internment, which only seems to support the idea that internment was a result of competition and negative sentiments.

Although there was a strong support for internment, there was opposition to it as well, opposition which practically rendered the primary reasons for internment invalid. There was a constant fear on a Japanese attack, which only grew after a false alarm throughout San Francisco the day after Pearl Harbor. The wartime hysteria of the period could have been unnecessary, according to government agencies. Even before the attack on Pearl Harbor the FBI and Naval Intelligence maintained a list of around 250 suspects, which contained around 40 people whom were considered real threats. Within two days of the attack on Pearl Harbor all of the suspects and many others were detained. The FBI contended that these measures were substantial in protecting the nation. The evidence they collected led them to believe that the relocation of Japanese Americans would be an unnecessary feat. They knew that besides a few exceptions Japanese Americans were no danger, and those exceptions were already take care of. Out of all the Japanese that were sent to these internment camps including California, Oregon, Washington and Arizona, Hawaii only accounted for one percent. This is very strange considered Hawaii was the location of the Japanese attack and that one third of the population there were Japanese. Interment would have majorly affected Japan, although due to economic reasons it made less of an impact. Although, if National Security was such a priority, and considering that Hawaii would be the sensitive area, then why was it excused. Americans began to grasp for reasons to justify internment such as their farming success as an attempt to take over the West Coast or labeling them all loyal to Japan despite the fact that many have lived in America their whole lives. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover sent a secret 6-page memo to Attorney General Biddle in which he ridiculed General DeWitt’s Conclusions: “Every complaint in this regard had been investigated, but in no case has any information been obtained which would substantiate the allegation”. Despite the FBI in Honolulu stating that the Japanese were no more “disloyal than any other racial group in the United States with whom we went to war”[[15]](#footnote-15) President Roosevelt endorsed DeWitt’s plan. When the concern was looked into and the results came out it was clear that the situation concerning was not nearly as severe as the population perceived, although DeWitt’s plan continued anyway due to pressure from the people and officials within the affected states.

The court case of Fred Korematsu was a major event towards the end of internment. Korematsu, a Japanese American was initially charges with refusing to leave the military area following the creation of Public Law 503. Found guilty, he was sentenced to a five-year probationary term yet no jail time. Although the military was not content with the sentence and as a result took him into custody to report to an assembly center. Korematsu deemed DeWitt’s orders along with Public Law 503 unconstitutional. On September 11th 1942 Korematsu’s Attorney’s appealed his sentence although was upheld. The Government argued that Korematsu should not be allowed to challenge internment at all since he did not raise the issue at his original trial; even so, it was simply a safety precaution. They argued the War Power Clause of the U.S. Constitution allows special measures in order to win a war. The government also claimed that it was in the best interests of the Japanese Americans themselves to be removed from the West Coast and to be held in camps. They reminded the court that evacuees had suffered hostility at the hands of racist Americans and it was a means of reliving tension. Finally, the government believed that it was needed to prevent spying and keep peace and order within the West Coast; this made the Military’s Internment program proper under the War Power Clause. DeWitt claimed that the 120,000 Japanese Americans “at larger were potential enemies”[[16]](#footnote-16) and continued to rationalize them as threats in defense of the government. Edward Ennis and John Burling (American civil rights lawyers) challenged the accuracy of DeWitt’s arguments due to contradictions against information found by the FBI and Naval Intelligence. Despite their efforts, the case was sent to the Supreme Court. His attorneys argues Korematsu should have had a trial to determine his loyalty and should not have been treated differently simply because of his race. They cited the 5th and 14th amendment (which guarantees equal protection under the law) and stated that no state law could contradict any of the rights established in the Constitution. The case seemed to expose that any reasons for internment were based on racist beliefs rather than the factual information provided by the FBI and Naval Intelligence.

Japanese Internment was an event that affected thousands of innocent Americans and potentially ruined their lives simply because of their success and the angry resentment other Americans had built up towards them over the years. The facts that showed their innocence were shunned once the strong public opinion surfaced pressuring politicians to keep order. The knowledge of their innocence was not unknown, and often insisted that Japanese Internment should not happen. Yet the people overwhelming presence on the subject led to their internment. Ignorance and assumptions were the causes of Japanese Internment, not Pearl Harbor, not national security, not American disloyalty. It is an issue that still exists today. Recently, following the events of 9/11, anyone who slightly resembled the terrorist responsible for the attack were often racially profiled and the tension is still present today. People have been stopped simply for wearing a turban despite being a different ethnicity and having a different religion than the terrorists. They have been told to remove their turban, which is an extremely embarrassing and humiliating thing to be done in such a public place. In 2001 Representative John Cooksey stated “if I see someone (who) comes in that’s got a diaper on his head and a fan belt wrapped around the diaper on his head, that guy needs to be pulled over”. Basing decisions that impact people’s lives based of assumptions and sentiments is an issue that cannot continue. Japanese Interment is one of the most important mistakes in U.S. history, hopefully one we will learn from and use to progress as a society.

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Annotated Bibliography

1. Alonso, Karen. *Korematsu v. United States*. United States of America, Enslow Publishers, 1998. Print.

Korematusu v. United stated offered a great amount of detail describing the events that occurring in the conflict between Fred Korematsu and the United States government. It clearly showed the government’s defense for internment and helped proved that it was flawed.

1. Atival Bloch, Servando Ortoll. “The Anti-Chinese and Anti-Japanese in Cananea, Sonora, and Salt Lake River, Arizona during the 1920s and 1930s.” americanaejournal.hu. Americana. 2010. 2 January 2014.

Atival’s and Servandos passage offered a large amount of information regarding the uprisings occurring in Arizona. It helped display the anti-Japanese sentiment that I tried to display throughout my paper.

1. Douglas Daily Dispatch. “Arizonans Resent Foreign Influx.” 1934. Poster depicting protest. Americanaejournel.com

A primary source showing protesters in Arizona holding signs that say “One Jap farms 1200 acres.” It shows the anti-Japanese gathering that occurred and showed how vocal this citizens were.

1. Japanese American Citizen’s League. “Summary of Constitutional Rights Violated.” [www.jacl.org](http://www.jacl.org). 20 November 2013.

This documents revealed the illegalities of Japanese Internment and the process as a whole. It was a dense and informational source, which provided a lot of facts, which helped in making a hook for the reader.

1. John Seiler. “Skelton ignores Gov. Earl Warren’s crimes against loyal Japanese Americans.” [www.calwatchdog.com](http://www.calwatchdog.com). 15 October 2013. 21 November 2013.

This source has good quotes discussing some of this political figures involved with Japanese Internment at the time. It offered proof that there was no real threat and that this knowledge was no secret.

1. Kinoshita, Lisa. “Seattle Remembers the Japanese Internment.” Seattle. February 2012. 2 January 2014.

This source offered a good primary source as well as very personal accounts of the tragedies that occurred at this point in history making the topic more emotional and intriguing.

1. Murray, Alice. *What did the Internment of Japanese Americans Mean?* The United States of America, Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2000. Print.

Alice Murray did a great job of detailing the life that went on in these internment camps as well as provided useful information for prominent figures and events surrounding the topic.

1. Rico Villanueva, Shmuel Ross. “Japanese Relocation Centers.” www.infoplease.com. Pearson Education. 20 November 2013.

This source some good background information and great facts about Japanese internment that were not mentioned in my other sources and it presented them in a short and dense reference.

1. Steven Caudill. “Special Interests and the Internment of the Japanese During World War II.” [www.fee.org](http://www.fee.org). Foundation for Economic Education. 1July 1995. 21 November 2013.

This source offered a good amount of detail regarding the FBI and their involvement with Naval Intelligence throughout the process of Japanese Internment. It highlighted the opposition to it and had good material for that section of my paper.

1. The New York Times. “Arizona Farmers Demonstrate Against the Competition of Aliens.” 1935. Poster displaying anti-Japanese protesters. Americanaejournal.com

A primary source similarly showing the white farmers protesting like before although on a higher scale against the Japanese. On a truck there is a sign saying “you have passed the deadline” most likely referring to either their overproduction of farming or the fact that the Japanese did not leave by the date these white farmers assigned them personally.

1. J.A.C.L. , “Summary of Constitutional Rights Violated,” [www.jacl.org](http://www.jacl.org) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Alice, Yang, What Did The Internment of Japanese Americans Mean, 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rico Siasoco, Shmuel Ross, “Japanese Relocation Centers,” www.infoplease.com [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Karen, Alonso, Korematsu v. United States, 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, 20 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Steven Caudill, “Special Interests and the Internment of Japanese Americans During World War II,” [www.fee.org](http://www.fee.org) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Atival Bloch, Servando Ortoll, “The Anti-Chinese and Anti-Japanese in Cananea, Sonora, and Salt Lake River, Arizona during the 1920s and 1930s,” americanaejournal.hu [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Alice, Murray, What Did the Internment of Japanese Americans Mean, 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid, 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Karen, Alonso, Korematsu v. United States, 54 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)