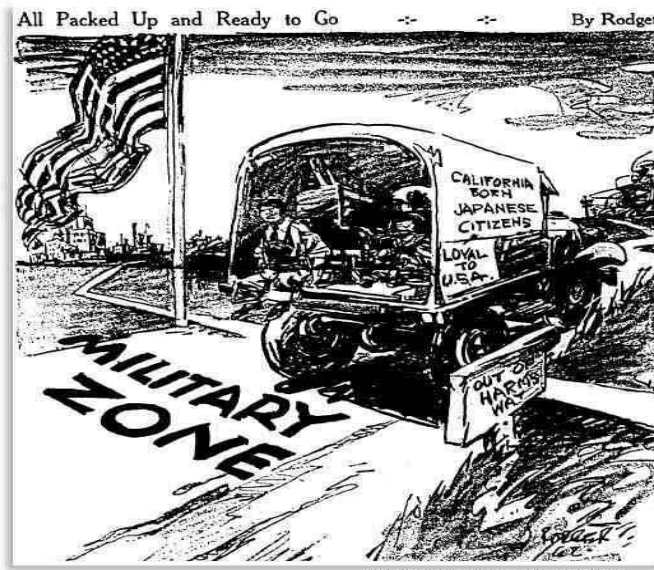


Japanese Internment during World War II*



San Francisco News—March 6, 1942

On May 21, 1942, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported, “For the first time in 81 years, not a single Japanese is walking the streets of San Francisco. The last group, 274 of them, were moved yesterday.... Only a scant half dozen are left, all seriously ill in San Francisco hospitals.” After six months of various proclamations issued by local leaders that witnessed daily FBI and police sweeps that not only harassed but also severely restricted the civil liberties of Japanese Americans, the city’s Japanese community was empty, its stores vacant and its windows plastered with “To Lease” signs. The scene in San Francisco was a microcosm of events occurring all along the West Coast of the United States.



National Archives

The internment of Japanese Americans reflected nearly a century of anti-Japanese sentiment that was prevalent not only the West Coast but also throughout the United States. This sentiment was rooted in racial prejudice and economic rivalry. The first Japanese arrived in the Western United States in 1850, the year that California applied and was granted statehood. The Japanese migration boomed as they labored in the gold hills and assisted in the construction of railroads throughout the western regions of the nation. Although the Japanese remained largely separated from the mainstream of American life—barred by state laws and local customs—some

achieved economic success in small business ventures and small to mid-sized farms that supplied fruit and vegetables to the burgeoning West Coast cities.

In the wake of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, nativist politicians and farmers whipped up the rage of white Californians playing on long held anti-Japanese sentiments. They pressed President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration to issue Executive Order 9066, which allowed the exclusion of any person that posed a threat to the nation's security—with an emphasis on only the Japanese—from designated military areas. The order was applied only to the West Coast and did not entail Hawaii, where the Japanese consisted of nearly 40 percent of the island's population. It did matter that nearly two-thirds of the approximately 130,000 Japanese ordered to evacuate their homes and communities were native-born citizens of the United States (called Nisei). Nor did it occur to the nation's political leaders to distinguish between the other one-third, of who were first generation Japanese immigrants (called Issei). According to Lieutenant-General John L. DeWitt, commander of the West Coast defenses, "A Jap's a Jap.... It makes no difference whether he is an American citizen or not."



Library of Congress



www.pbs.org/childofcamp

The Japanese were rounded up and sent to 10 internment facilities located in the remote mountain and desert regions of seven western states. These internment facilities were in reality concentration camps. The internees were confined in flimsy tar-papered barracks enclosed by barbed wire and placed under armed guard. The concentration camps in America did not mirror the horror of German Nazi death camps, but they were, like the Nazi camps, constructed on racism and fear.

Despite three dissenting judges, the Supreme Court, in *Korematsu v. United States* (1944), upheld the administration's relocation program as a wartime necessity. Forced to sell all they owned at whatever they could obtain, Japanese Americans lost an estimated \$2 billion in property and possessions. In 1982, the federal government concluded in a report entitled *Personal Justice Denied*, that the internment of the Japanese was not justified by military necessity. The report placed the blame of the Roosevelt's administration on war hysteria, racial prejudice, and a failure of political leadership. Congress acknowledged the injustice in the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 when it voted to pay \$20,000 in compensation for each of the nearly 62,000 surviving internees. In 1998, President Bill Clinton bestowed the nation's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, to Fred Korematsu, for protesting Roosevelt's evacuation decree all the way to the Supreme Court.

* **Further information on the Japanese Internment:**

For a collection of articles that appeared in San Francisco newspapers during the 1942 exodus of Japanese Americans, in addition to links to government documents and other related websites documenting the Japanese internment, visit <http://www.sfmuseum.org/war/evactxt.html>

Also, visit the webpage for PBS's 1999 Children of the Camps documentary at <http://www.pbs.org/childofcamp/index.html>