

# Online exhibition essay: a more perfect union

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At the height of the internment of the Japanese Americans during World War II, the number of individuals relocated and housed at the internment camps reached a staggering 120, 000 individuals.

Spread over 10 camps nationwide, that were defined by remoteness and remove from the general structure of American society, these people many of which were born American citizens lived their lives under lock and key simply because of their cultural ancestry.

Not only men, but women, children, and the elderly were classified as “ enemy aliens” following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Using national security as justification, the U. S. government displaced and imprisoned these Japanese Americans for 2 years, taking not only their freedom but their assets as well.

Given the information contained in the Smithsonian’s exhibition, A More Perfect Union, the justification of national security was faulty and played off prejudice rather than common sense. The Japanese migration to Hawaii and the U. S. mainland began in 1861 and continued through to 1940. During this time over 275, 000 individuals immigrated.

Many of the first generation Japanese who came to the U. S. worked on sugar cane fields in Hawaii and on fruit and vegetable farms in California. There they established communities and were able to surround themselves with cultural familiarity but as their population grew, animosity against them also began to grow.

Within a couple years of their first arrival, the Hawaii legislator passed laws restricting theimmigrationof Japanese. By 1907, the U. S. had restricted the

travel of Japanese from Hawaii to the mainland. The exhibit notes that by 1940, forty percent of the population of Hawaii owed at least part of their ancestry to Japanese.

In California, the Japanese Americans fought similar odds as their tenacity and success made them easy targets of racially fueled jealousy.

The racism against them, however, was not limited to the unsuccessful farmer down the road but rather reached into every branch of government. Unable to own land or become citizens, many Japanese placed their properties in the name of their children who had been born in the U. S. and were therefore citizens.

The Supreme Court itself, played on the side of the oppressor, ruling against Japanese immigrants and upholding racist laws and restrictions.

Anti-Japanese propaganda was also common place in the years leading up to Pearl Harbor, including bubble gum cards sold to children and political cartoons, editorials and speeches. Once the Japanese American population established itself as a living and growing community in the United States, the hatred became more concentrated.

With the drop of the bomb on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the Japanese Americans fate was sealed. Americans had followed the Japanese Army's support of Hitler and Mussolini, they were aware of the military power. What Americans were not prepared for was for that military power to reach across the Pacific and tap them on the shoulder.

The exhibit notes that in the panic that ensued along the West Coast, along with the prejudices already in place and made policy, the Japanese

Americans became an easy target for political kowtowing and venting the prejudices which had until then only bubbled. With President Franklin D. Roosevelt's issuance of executive order 9066, the situation exploded into full blown segregation.

What is interesting to note, is that though the U. S. was also in a war against Germany and Italy, Italian American and German Americans were not targeted under E. O. 9066, " While German or Italian enemies were often viewed as misguided victims of despotic leaders, Japanese people were referred to as " yellow vermin," " mad dogs," and " monkey men." Racist wartime propaganda further exacerbated fears of invasion and prejudice against people of Japanese decent."

Much of the political and military justification for the removal of Japanese Americans was blatantly fueled by individual racism and not sound strategy. Congressman from the West Coast, who had their own individual prejudices against their own Japanese American communities were some of the strongest supporters of the measure.

The initial order was for the military to remove persons from their jurisdiction who were seen to be threats to national security but the removal wasn't limited to individuals near air bases or the coast but stretched far across the country, uprooting them from their homes and leaving them to take only what they could carry. Disobeying the order was not an option nor was it considered correct.

Japanese American, Morgan Yamanaka, in recalling her own experience explains that it wasn't in their upbringing to disobey the authority of the

federal government, " I think one has to appreciate what our parents, the immigrant parents taught us: " Always respect order coming from the people above you. Respect your teachers, respect the government, respect the law.

Be obedient, be reserved, be a good Japanese according to good Japanese traditions." Though I doubt it was willing, there was little protest on the part of the Japanese Americans. However, perhaps this loyalty and obedience to the U. S. government despite the criminal nature of E. O. 9066, was also a factor in the survival of spirit and their reemergence back into American society following the camps.

The camp experience though far less extreme, despite the designation of internment rather than the Nazi concentration camps, did not differ so much from the Jews experiences in Germany during the same time.

Fenced in by barbed wire and soldiers with guns, they were housed in substandard barracks and worked for minimal wages to help support the camp and war effort. Many used their opportunities at work as ways to continue their lives outside the context of the camp, while remaining imprisoned.

The things which occupied their time such as artwork and making of furniture, the expression of their freedom through imagination are what I would most recommend to someone viewing the exhibit. The works, though deeply disturbing in the recurrence of the fences and general feeling of entrapment present in some, shows a freedom that no imprisonment can stifle.

While the body is imprisoned, the mind continues to go forth into the world even if it is only a recoloring of the same landscape, dusty and isolated. To maintain artistic expression under such duress is a true show of the strength needed to survive becoming an unknowing enemy.

By 1943, the U. S. government was asking all residents of the camp to fill out a questionnaire to determine their loyalty to the U. S. Some, feeling tricked and manipulated by the maneuver and the questions on the forms, chose to reply no to certain questions, such as "" Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States... and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, to any other foreign government, power or organization?"

The exhibit explains that some of the interned Japanese Americans saw the question as a double edged sword. If they were to answer yes, than they would be implying that they had ever been disloyal to the U. S. government and to answer no was to seal their fate. The ones who were deemed loyal were able to start on the road back to a normal life, the others were segregated further.

Among these were children and natural born U. S. citizens. At the end of the war, over 4, 000 Japanese Americans (all but 100 under the age of 20) were repatriated to Japan.