

Case Study: Japanese American Incarceration

Instructions: Read the overview **two times**. On the **first read**, underline the laws and policies that led to the detention of migrants and asylum seekers in recent years. On the **second read**, circle the practices and attitudes that led to these detentions.

Part I

Overview: Japanese American Incarceration

Throughout U.S. history, U.S. immigration laws have limited or, in some cases, banned certain groups of people—from parts of Europe, from Asia, from Latin America, from the Middle East, from Africa—from immigrating to and becoming citizens of the United States. Important examples of these laws and policies include the Naturalization Act of 1790, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the 1924 Immigration Act, and the Zero Tolerance Policy of 2018.

These laws and policies have used race, religion, wealth, education status, or some combination of each as justification. When these laws discriminate against people based on race, they must be understood as racist. Throughout its history, U.S. immigration policy has created categories of “others,” people who are not “wanted” in the country or allowed to become American citizens. This form of “othering,” of wanting to keep certain groups of people out, is called xenophobia.

Racist and xenophobic immigration policy doesn't only work to exclude certain people from the United States. It can also affect immigrant communities and their U.S.-born children for generations. This is especially true when immigrant communities from certain parts of the world are described as threats to national security or economic stability. One example of the effects of this racism and xenophobia is the incarceration of more than 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry living in the United States during World War II.

After the American naval base at Pearl Harbor was bombed by Imperial Japan on December 7, 1941, the United States declared war on Japan. On February 19, 1942, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which authorized the forced removal of all persons of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast of the United States and their incarceration in ten detention facilities in the interior of the country. Roosevelt's Executive Order was based on race, as even U.S.-born citizens of Japanese descent were incarcerated alongside Japanese immigrants.

Roosevelt and other government officials publicly justified incarcerating Japanese Americans in these camps by arguing that they would not be loyal to the United States and were a threat to national security. As history would show, this was an unfounded fear fueled by anti-Japanese racism. Roughly 120,000 Japanese Americans had to leave their homes, jobs, and friends behind.

Important U.S. Immigration Laws and Policies

The Naturalization Act of 1790 limited citizenship in the United States to free white persons.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 suspended immigration of Chinese people to the United States for ten years and made Chinese immigrants ineligible for citizenship.

The 1924 Immigration Act established quotas for immigrants by country and completely excluded immigrants from Asia.

The Zero Tolerance Policy of 2018 established that every migrant – including asylum seekers – attempting to cross the U.S. border without authorization anywhere other than at an official port of entry was to be detained and criminally prosecuted. The policy led to the systematic separation of newly arriving adult migrants from children who had accompanied them.

Part II: Analyzing Sources

Sources: Rationales for Incarceration of Japanese Americans

Instructions: Read Sources 1 and 2 below. As you read, underline each rationale (reason) for the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II.

Source 1. Henry L. Stimson, Secretary of War, 1942

"Their racial characteristics are such that we cannot understand or trust even the citizen Japanese."

Source 2. Austin E. Anson, Managing Secretary of The Salinas Vegetable Grower-Shipper Association, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor

"We're charged with wanting to get rid of the [Japanese] for selfish reasons.... We might as well be honest. We do. It's a question of whether the white man lives on the Pacific Coast or the brown men. They came into this valley to work, and they stayed to take over.... If all the [Japanese] were removed tomorrow, we'd never miss them in two weeks, because the white farmers can take over and produce everything [a Japanese person] grows. And we don't want them back when the war ends, either."

Conditions in Detention

Instructions: Read Sources 3-5 below. As you read, underline each description of the conditions Japanese Americans experienced in detention.

Source 3. Interview with Mutsuo Homma, incarcerated at Amache detention facility in Colorado, reflecting on her experiences during incarceration, April 1997 (Source: Densho Visual History Collection)

"[In] Amache camp [we were] guarded by very young soldiers. One time soldier stop me and, "Hey you." "You want to talk to me?" He said, "Yeah. Are you a human being?" I said, "Yes. Don't you think so?" "Yeah, you look like a human being, but when I came from South Carolina, they said that [Japanese] is not a human being. They are like a gorilla so if you want to, kill them. That's what I learn when I came. And then I looked from top every day and you people look like a human being and you people all wearing beautiful clothes." Because old clothes, we throw that away and then selected one case of, suitcase, good clothes only."

Source 4. Grace Kubota Ybarra on her memories of being incarcerated at Heart Mountain detention facility in Wyoming as a child, August 1993 (Source: Densho Digital Archive)

"You know, we were all the same. We all had the same color hair, we all had the same eyes, and we were all in the same position. So life as a three- or four-year-old kid was great fun. I didn't know that there was anybody different from us.... The one thing that was the real limitation was that we were always told, Mother always told us never to cross the barbed wire fence. And she used to point to the guard up there and said, "You know, he has a rifle and he's going to shoot you if you cross the barbed wire fence." I remember she put enough fear in us that we never went near the barbed wire fence, because she said, "You know, there was a little old man who was collecting some rocks and he crossed the barbed wire and was shot and killed." Maybe everyone grows up with certain limitations of, caveats and warnings that a parent puts on, but the barbed wire fence and the guard in the tower is still in my mind's eye after fifty years."

Source 5. Masao Watanabe on his analysis of the experience of being incarcerated in the United States, June 1998 (Source: Densho Digital Archive)

"But, anyway, it was...boy, it was a real traumatic type of living, where you're in the former stalls where the pigs and the cows and everything else were. Temporary shacks, just the walls were so many feet off the ground, and families of six and seven were crowded into one little spot...."

Name: _____

"I just felt that all this liberty and crap was all crap. You know, it just, you read so much about democracy and all this and it was a real eye-opener to see what could happen to citizens and what does citizenship mean. 'Cause it just bothered the heck out of me to think that I tried to be a good citizen and, man, they are tossing me into joints like this. I didn't like it. I can't imagine anybody liking it or having positive images of being locked up."