Was the internment of Japanese Americans justified during World War II?

Viewpoint: Yes, the internment of Japanese Americans was necessary for national security because some of them were suspected of disloyalty.

Viewpoint: No, the internment of Japanese Americans was an unnecessary mockery of American claims of fighting a war for freedom.

No action by the U.S. government in the twentieth century is as difficult to justify as the internment of 120,000 Japanese nationals and American citizens of Japanese descent during World War II. Men, women, and children were forced from their homes and incarcerated in relocation camps in the deserts in Arizona, the mountains of Idaho, and backwater towns in the American South. Men and women of unquestioned loyalty to the United States government were denied the rights of citizens, while their government was fighting a war to protect liberty.

It all seems hypocritical, driven by racism, and intolerable for a democratic government. Yet, the policy was sanctioned by some of the most liberal men ever to hold public office in the United States: Franklin D. Roosevelt, the president who inspired a nation to resist tyranny; California governor Earl Warren, who would become the greatest chief justice since John Marshall; and Hugo Black, Supreme Court justice and consistent opponent of government suppression of liberty. Warren later acknowledged his error, and Roosevelt allowed the program to die on its own. However, Black never relented from his position that the wartime emergency justified this assault on citizens' rights.

This historical episode forces us to re-examine our own ideas about the history of the United States. The relocation and incarceration of American citizens is not the equivalent of the Holocaust. Is it, though, an aberration in American history, or was it a predictable policy for a nation that restricted immigration from most of the world and segregated its own citizens by race? Can Americans today look back on Americans of the 1940s and criticize their moral shortcomings? These questions are important to us as citizens. As historians, we must ask these questions, and other questions as well.

In these two essays scholars Patric O'Brien and A. Bowdoin Van Riper disagree about the relocation policy. On the one hand, O'Brien argues that the necessity of war made the policy reasonable, that attack by Japan, however improbable it may seem to us, seemed real to a nation which had much of its Pacific fleet destroyed in a surprise attack on 7 December 1941. The War Relocation Administration (WRA) actually may have helped prevent the kind of xenophobic hysteria that gripped the nation during World War I.

On the other hand, Van Riper argues that the whole policy was a needless persecution of innocent civilians and that it made a mockery of American pretensions to fighting a war for the betterment of all people of the world. To treat American citizens, and even resident aliens, in this way is shameful.

We can look at the policy in other ways as well. In many ways the WRA functioned as a typical New Deal government agency, and so its history could
be a useful subject for further study. The great historian Hannah Arendt has written of the banality of evil, and in the history of the Roosevelt administration we see many of the flaws inherent in the structure of bureaucracies. Created to administer a program, the bureaucracy does exactly that, with no member questioning the morality of the policy it enacts.

We can also examine the aftermath of the relocation policy. When the U.S. government officially apologized for its relocation policy, it did something few governments in the world have done. It admitted that it had been wrong and sought to make amends. History cannot be rewritten, but even governments can learn from mistakes. Learning from our mistakes, of course, is one of the most important reasons to study history.

Viewpoint:
Yes, the internment of Japanese Americans was necessary for national security because some of them were suspected of disloyalty.

On 7 December 1941, Japanese forces, in a “sneak and dastardly attack,” bombed the American naval fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii—crippling the U.S. Navy and allowing the Japanese to gain naval superiority in the Pacific. As the smoke from the damaged fleet at Pearl Harbor dissipated, fear of further Japanese attacks and a possible landing on the West Coast was rampant. The threat of war was no longer fanciful. The following day the United States declared war on the empire of Japan. As waves of nationalism, hysteria, fear, and anger spread throughout the nation, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued his infamous Executive Order 9066 on 19 February 1942.

The directive “gave to the Secretary of War and various military commanders, the power to exclude any and all persons from designated areas in order to provide security against sabotage, espionage, and fifth column activities.” Pursuant to this order, military authorities, under the leadership of Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, relocated nearly 120,000 Japanese Americans and immigrants of Japanese descent from areas of the West Coast to detention centers in the rural West. There is no doubt that the forced evacuation, relocation, and detention of these people during World War II stands as a prominent scar on the American heritage of constitutional liberties. However wrong and appalling the acts of Congress and decisions of the Supreme Court may appear, more than fifty years later it must be remembered that at the moment they appeared justified. The internment may be condemned as a constitutional failure, but Americans were engulfed in a personal nightmare during the early half of 1942—the sight of the tattered and burning fleet, the memory of the men who died at Pearl Harbor, and the possibility that the days of democracy were numbered in a new world order. It is within this historical context that the internment of the Japanese must be viewed.

At the outset of World War II military and government officials strongly believed that aliens, as well as citizens, of Japanese descent on the U.S. West Coast posed a grave security risk. These authorities argued vehemently that a strong “fifth column” would soon rise and threaten national security. Accordingly, Roosevelt promulgated 9066. Congress, moreover, unwilling to have security measures entirely a matter of executive power, successfully made criminal violations of the enforcement orders. Thus, both the executive and legislative branches had a hand in the relocation of Japanese Americans: additionally, the Supreme Court played a role as well. The decisions in Hirabayashi v. United States (1943) and Korematsu v. United States (1944) were regarded as examples of the Court joining the other branches in a united war effort. In Korematsu the Court noted that “the successful prosecution of war requires every possible protection against espionage and against sabotage to national-defense material, national-defense premises, and national defense utilities.” Furthermore, the Court conceded “ample power to Congress and the President to deal with a perceived threat to the survival of the nation.” Why did the three branches unite in a virtually unprecedented fashion? The answer is simple—the pervasiveness of war power.

Sections 8 and 9 of Article 1 of the U.S. Constitution, the Court argued, give Congress the power “to call forth the militia to execute the Laws of the Union, suppress insurrections and repel invasions,” and to suspend the writ of habeas corpus “when in Cases of Rebellion or Invasion the public Safety may require it.” The war power is, moreover, “the power to wage war successfully.” Forced evacuations were justified in 1942 as a way of reducing the perceived threat to national security posed by Japanese Americans living on the Pacific coast of the United States. In his concurring opinion in Korematsu, Justice Felix Frankfurter stated that “the validity of action under the war power must be judged wholly in the context of war. The action is not to be stigmatized as lawless because like action in times of peace would be lawless.” Individual rights are at risk in times of war and other crises. The danger at the time was imminent and imme-
The Japanese race is an enemy race and while many second and third generation Japanese born on United States soil, possessed of United States citizenship, have become "Americanized," the racial strains are undiluted. There are indications that these [Japanese-Americans] are organized and ready for concerted action at a favorable opportunity. The very fact that no sabotage has taken place to date is a disturbing and confirming indication that such action will be taken.

DeWitt’s report bases the War Department decision on several factors: a fear of signaling from shore to enemy submarines; arms and contraband found by the FBI during raids on homes and businesses; danger to evacuees from vigilantes; concentration of the ethnic Japanese population around or near militarily sensitive areas; and the presence of Japanese ethnic organizations which might shelter pro-Japanese attitudes or activities. In addition, the government defended the mass relocation on the grounds that the existing military emergency prevented identification of disloyal Japanese Americans on a case-by-case basis. Therefore, “a combination of factors and circumstances” faced DeWitt. “Here was a relatively homogenous, unassimilated element bearing a close relationship through ties of race, religion, language, custom, and indoctrination to the enemy.” Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson believed that protecting ethnic Japanese from vigilantes was justification alone for the policy. Though almost forty years later Executive Order 9066, and the arguments used to support it,
were found to be unjustified, a 1997 report concluded that any “account which relies on finding documents forty years after a decision may reasonably be questioned when it concludes that little or nothing in the record factually supports the reasons given at the time to justify the decision.” However racist and naive the arguments furthered to inter the Japanese appear, from the vantage point of Americans living during World War II they appear justified given the circumstances.

The second, and more persuasive, justification for exclusion was advanced in the so-called “Japanese Exclusion” cases. In Hirabayashi the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of a curfew applicable to only Japanese Americans as an exercise of an emergency war measure. The Court concluded that, though explicitly discriminatory, the “actions must be appraised in the light of the conditions with which the President and Congress were confronted in the early months of 1942.” Moreover, the “challenged orders were defense measures for the avowed purpose of safeguarding the military area in question, at a time of threatened air raids and invasion by the Japanese forces, from the danger of sabotage and espionage.” The curfew was, the justices argued, “within the boundaries of the war power. In this case it is enough that circumstances within the knowledge of those charged with the responsibility for maintaining the national defense afforded a rational basis for the decision which they made. Whether we would have made it is irrelevant.” Justice William O. Douglas, in a concurring opinion, added that “where the peril is great and the time is short, temporary treatment on a group basis may be the only practicable expedient.” In support of their decision the Court cited the solidarity of Japanese Americans to their heritage, nationalistic propaganda cultivating allegiance to Japan in the Japanese-language schools, and a history of discrimination toward Japanese Americans in the West.

The more notorious of the decisions was Korematsu, where the Court went further in upholding the constitutionality of the evacuation. Justice Hugo L. Black, writing for the Court, stated:

Like curfew, exclusion of those of Japanese origin was deemed necessary because of the presence of an unascertained number of disloyal members of the group, most of whom we have no doubt were loyal to this country. It was because we could not reject the finding of the military authorities that it was impossible to bring about an immediate segregation of the disloyal that we sustained the validity of the curfew order as applying to the whole group.

More importantly, the plaintiff, Fred Korematsu, was not excluded because of his race, but because the military authorities faced an imminent invasion. The Court argued that to “cast this case into the outlines of racial prejudice, without reference to the real military dangers which were presented, merely confuses the issue. Korematsu was not excluded . . . because of hostility to him or his race. He was excluded because we are at war with the Japanese Empire.” Moreover, “hardships are a part of war, and war is an aggression of hardships . . . [c]itizenship has its responsibilities as well as its privileges, and in time of war the burden always heavier.” This was the first case in which race was explicitly referred to as a “suspect” criterion. Henceforth, Korematsu was the last case in which a racial or ethnic classification survived the heavy burden of strict judicial scrutiny.

Though commentators have almost universally scorned Korematsu as one of the worst betrayals of American constitutional rights in the Supreme Court’s history, Justice Black did not regard the opinion as aberrational. Approximately twenty years later Black uncompromisingly defended his decision. Adamantly, he declared:

I would do precisely the same thing today, in any part of the country. I would probably issue the same order were I President. We had a situation where we were at war . . . had they [the Japanese] attacked our shores you’d have a large number fighting with the Japanese troops. And a lot of innocent Japanese-Americans would have been shot in the panic. Under these circumstances I saw nothing wrong in moving them away from the danger area.

Justice Douglas also later reaffirmed his position on Korematsu. Almost three decades after the decision he declared that our “navy was sunk at Pearl Harbor, and no one knew where the Japanese fleet was . . . the decisions were extreme and went to the verge of wartime power, and they have been severely criticized. It is easy in retrospect to denounce what was done, as there was no attempted Japanese invasion of our country.”

Executive Order 9066 was designed to protect against espionage and sabotage, and there was no time to weed loyal from disloyal residents. Time and speed were of the essence. American blood had been spilled. Military and government officials acted swiftly in the belief that what they were doing was correct. “We cannot possibly know all the facts which lay behind that decision,” nor sit in judgment “on the military requirements of that hour.” That an attack never materialized, and that the great majority of those interned were probably loyal to the United States, is not the issue. As noted by the Court in
EXECUTIVE ORDER 9066

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued the following executive order concerning the military security of the nation.

NOW, THEREFORE, by virtue of the authority vested in me as President of the United States, and Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy, I hereby authorize and direct the Secretary of War, and the Military Commanders whom he may from time to time designate, whenever he or any designated Commander deems such action necessary or desirable, to prescribe military areas in such places and of such extent as he or the appropriate Military Commander may determine, from which any or all persons may be excluded, and with respect to which, the right of any to enter, remain in, or leave shall be subject to whatever restrictions the Secretary of War or the appropriate Military Commander may impose in his discretion . . .


Hirabayashi, "the extent of the danger could be definitely known only after the event and after it was too late to meet it." The judges concluded that "military decisions must be made without the benefits of hindsight. The orders must be judged as of the date when the decision to issue them was made."

It cannot be said that officials, at a critical hour, did not act in good faith and with the firm conviction that public and military safety was in jeopardy. The exclusion of Japanese American citizens, however tragic, was justified under the war power. Frankfurter's admonition that wartime and peacetime actions be judged separately must be emphasized. Thus the internment of Japanese Americans, though morally and socially wrong, and without the benefit of hindsight, was at the time an expedient and safe way to avert a possible national security crisis.

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Viewpoint:
No, the internment of Japanese Americans was a mockery of American claims of fighting a war for freedom.
The order made no distinction between areas adjacent to defense installations and areas that just happened to be near the coast. It made no distinction between individuals born in the United States and those born in Japan—that is, between citizens and noncitizens. Eighty-thousand **nisei**, born in the United States to Japanese parents, thus found their constitutional rights abruptly suspended. Sent to designated assembly centers, and then to relocation centers, they suffered the loss of their liberty. Unable, on short notice, to secure or effectively market the houses, farms, and possessions they left behind, they suffered the loss of much of their property. There was no opportunity for a hearing or appeal; the sweeping nature of DeWitt’s relocation order rendered it pointless. Whatever the personal cost of leaving, no person of Japanese descent would be permitted to stay in the exclusion zone. The due process clause of the Fifth Amendment was cast aside as well, its guarantee of “equal protection under the law” pointedly ignored.

Coastal residents of German and Italian ancestry, both foreign-born aliens and native-born citizens, remained in their homes and businesses. Their evacuation, while clearly within the scope of DeWitt’s order and the presidential authority behind it, was stayed by intervention from Washington. Only individuals should be removed, the War Department cautioned DeWitt, and only when circumstances suggested a clear threat to national security. No contrast could be more striking: even German and Italian aliens were left alone unless specific grounds for their removal could be found, while American citizens were systematically removed for no other reason than their Japanese ancestry. No single fact more clearly demonstrates the moral and legal bankruptcy of the relocation process.

War Department officials justified the distinction by arguing that Japan, not Germany or Italy, was America’s enemy in the Pacific and that residents of Japanese ancestry thus posed distinct threats to the security of the West Coast. Organized into a resistance movement, a “fifth column,” they might act as spies or saboteurs. Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox stated, a week after the Pearl Harbor attack, that fifth-column activity by local Japanese had been crucial to the attack’s success. Knox was hardly a disinterested party, and his claim rested on rumor rather than hard evidence, but it had an immediate effect. Fears of a Japanese attack against, or even invasion of, the West Coast grew sharper. Calls for action against Japanese fifth-columnists grew louder and more frequent.

Action had, in fact, already been taken. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Office of Naval Intelligence had compiled lists of likely security risks before the war. Once war broke out, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover moved with characteristic zealotry against these suspected agents. FBI agents swept through Japanese communities on the West Coast, detaining Japanese-language teachers, community leaders, and officers of Japanese political and cultural groups. Hoover soon reported to President Franklin D. Roosevelt that the West Coast was secure from fifth-column activity and that surveillance of Japanese American communities there would be sufficient to maintain that security. Counterintelligence—spy-catching—was one of the FBI’s principal functions, and Hoover had already established a reputation for thoroughness. His pronouncement would, under other conditions, have likely been accepted without question.

Hoover’s confidence aside, the conditions prevailing on the West Coast in the first months of the war made Japanese sabotage wildly implausible. On the mainland, unlike in Hawaii, Japanese Americans made up only a relatively small portion of the labor force. They were a still smaller portion of the industrial labor force, reducing the chances that sabotage could be an “inside job.” A Japanese saboteur would, in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, have had to work his way into position from the outside, a task requiring either great stealth or good fortune, and would have stood out among the West Coast population far more than, say, a German saboteur on the East Coast. Approaching an installation of even the slightest military value would, therefore, have engulfed the saboteur in a smothering fog of suspicion.

Anxiety and rumors of sabotage persisted, merging with fears of an invasion, to shape the geographic and demographic boundaries of the exclusion zone. Indeed, the peculiar contours of DeWitt’s relocation order make sense only when seen as preparation for a Japanese invasion. If an invasion came, it might strike any point on the West Coast, and the authorities suspected that it would be residents of Japanese, not German or Italian, ancestry who would most likely rise up in aid of the invaders. That DeWitt considered the possibility of invasion is only reasonable. What beggars believe is that, after considering the possibility of invasion, DeWitt still took it seriously enough to take such sweeping and active measures against it. The relocation of 120,000 people in only seven months (March–October 1942) posed significant logistical problems. It demanded resources that, especially in the first months of the war, could have been put
to better use elsewhere. DeWitt chose, instead, to defend against an invasion that could never take place.

A Japanese invasion of the West Coast would have had to take place under the worst possible conditions. The need to first capture the Hawaiian Islands—essential for a mainland invasion, useless otherwise—would have telegraphed their intentions. The invasion force would thus be forced to attack the mainland coast of an alert enemy after a sea voyage of two thousand miles and to depend on a five-thousand-mile supply line stretching back to Asia. Tanks, guns, and aircraft required to make good initial losses would have to travel the entire length of that supply line. Defending U.S. forces, by contrast, would be able to rely almost indefinitely on road and rail transport. The Japanese would also have been at a distinct disadvantage in the air, able to operate only fighters and light bombers from aircraft carriers. With conventional airfields at its disposal, the Americans would have been able to employ more, and larger, aircraft. Finally, the necessary reliance on aircraft carriers and supply ships would have left the Japanese in a precarious position. The threat of a counterattack by the U.S. Atlantic Fleet would remain operative as long as the Panama Canal remained open.

Solving these tactical problems in 1942 would, paradoxically, have weakened Japan’s strategic position. Japanese forces had, by the beginning of March 1942, occupied key portions of China, Indochina, and Indonesia; seized the major naval bases and sunk the principal naval vessels of their two strongest enemies—the United States and Great Britain; bombed northern Australia; and, having seized Burma, directly threatened British-controlled India. Japan was, in short, well on its way to completing the Asian empire it had gone to war in order to create. The United States and Britain, committed to giving the European war precedence over the Asian, had limited resources with which to mount a challenge to the new Japanese hegemony.

An invasion of the American mainland would have required a massive redeployment of Japanese forces, leaving the newly captured territories lightly defended and committing Japan’s most experienced combat forces to a mission certain to experience heavy losses. America’s commitment to the “Europe first” strategy would have become moot if Japan invaded, and the Japanese would thus face both a fully mobilized United States in whose conquest little would be gained. The threat of a British attack against the then-vulnerable Asian empire it had worked so hard to build was another limiting factor.

American military leaders had long recognized the difficulty and ultimate futility of a Japanese invasion. Official U.S. strategy for a war with Japan, dubbed “War Plan Orange,” paid no serious attention to this possibility. Conceived just before America’s entry into World War I, and revised throughout the 1920s and 1930s in response to Japan’s growing belligerence and military strength, it grew steadily more pessimistic. At its grimmest, “War Plan Orange” envisioned the United States driven entirely from the western Pacific and forced to retreat to its traditional Pacific frontier: Alaska-Hawaii-Panama. The United States found itself, in early 1942, in nearly that position. The attack on Pearl Harbor was the only notable deviation from the pattern of events “Orange” had envisioned, and nothing about the air raid made a Japanese invasion of the mainland significantly more likely.

There is no question, however, that residents of the West Coast feared such a move. The image of the “yellow peril”—Asian hordes poised to overrun white civilization—had been a staple of anti-immigrant literature for decades. The sinister Asian foreigner, superficially polite but capable of unspeakable evil, was a stock character in sensationalistic literature. Serious novels from Homer Lea’s *The Valor of Ignorance* (1908) to Robert Heinlein’s *Sixth Column* (1941) used images of a Japanese invasion to unsettle readers. The timing of the Pearl Harbor attack—without warning, early on a Sunday—played directly into stereotypes of Asians as a barbarian horde and so lent a spurious air of plausibility to the old fantasies of invasion. Americans’ traditionally vague grasp of world geography reinforced fears of invasion. Anecdotal evidence suggests that, in December 1941, Hawaii’s status as a U.S. territory was significantly clearer to most Americans than its utter isolation. The shock of the attack left few civilians able, or perhaps willing, to dispassionately assess Japanese strategy.

The public’s dread of a Japanese invasion was real, though not justified. Fear, however, is a poor foundation for public policy. Officials charged with the defense of the continental United States had an obligation to act not on public apprehensions but on conclusions logically drawn from the best available intelligence. The officials most responsible for the relocation program had the capacity to draw such conclusions: DeWitt was a career Army officer who had served in the Pacific; Henry L. Stimson, U.S. Secretary of War, owed his appointment to his insight into military affairs; and Roosevelt, a lifelong naval enthusiast, had served as Assistant Secretary of the Navy during World War I. All three men could dispassionately judge the threat of a Japanese invasion. Stimson and Roosevelt, at least, knew that officers senior to DeWitt regarded it as a virtual impossibility. They should, in short, have known better.
That they did not "know better"—or, more likely, chose not to think too deeply about the issue—is easy to explain. Old suspicions about Asians, the shock of Pearl Harbor, and the desire to do something in response impinged on their thoughts as it did on other Americans. As public figures, they faced concerted pressure from columnists and congressmen. They would not have been the first public officials who felt, at a moment of crisis, the need to be seen taking action—whether or not it offered any real solution to the crisis. Stimson's rejection of a wholesale evacuation of Germans and Italians, driven by fears of a political backlash, shows his (and, likely, Roosevelt's) image-consciousness at work.

Explanation, however, does not constitute justification. That the actions of DeWitt, Stimson, and Roosevelt are comprehensible does not make them right. Indeed, the decision to relocate all residents of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast was not "right" in either sense of the word. It was neither a just act nor a solution appropriate to the problems of the moment.

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