

President Franklin Roosevelt called it "a date which will live in infamy." Early Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, Japanese bombs fell on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. naval base in Hawaii. It was a scene of nearly total destruction. Two thousand Americans were killed and an equal number wounded. America's offensive naval power in the Pacific had been wiped out. The surprise attack meant war between the Empire of Japan and the United States.

The attack on Pearl Harbor was a tremendous shock to all Americans. Its aftermath was especially dreaded by Americans of Japanese ancestry. They feared that in the panic following the attack, hostility toward them might grow. They might be linked to the Japanese enemy abroad. There was good reason for them to feel alarmed. Prejudice against Japanese-Americans had been widespread, especially on the West Coast, for one half-century before Pearl Harbor.

Soon after Commodore Matthew Perry opened contact with Japan in 1854, some Japanese were issued passports for travel to the United States. Immigration from Japan to the United States remained a trickle until 1891. In that year the number of Japanese entering the United States reached 1,000 for the first time. The new immigrants were largely young, poor, single men. Many came expecting to return to Japan once they earned enough money to buy land there. Unable to save the necessary amount, some became permanent residents in the United States. The 1920 census reported 110,010 Japanese in the U.S. mainland.

The young Japanese males who settled in the United States were prevented by law and custom from marrying white women. Instead they took "picture brides." Often on the basis of only a photograph, their marriages were arranged by matchmakers in Japan. The young brides-to-be sailed to meet their prospective husbands, sight unseen.

The *Issei*, first generation Japanese-American immigrants, settled mostly in California, Oregon, and Washington. The majority worked in fruit orchards, vineyards, and farms. Others found jobs laboring for the railroads, in canneries, logging, and meat-packing.

At first the *Issei* were welcomed by the local residents. There was a high demand for their labor. Industrious and willing to work for low wages, they did not complain about their working conditions.

The ambitious *Issei* soon became unpopular. Unions regarded them as unwelcome competitors for jobs. Local farmers often resented the *Issei* success at growing citrus fruits, potatoes, and rice. The value

A Loaded Weapon

JAPANESE RELOCATION



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Japanese-Americans Being Evacuated, March 1942

It is no wonder that the Issei and their Nisei children dreaded what might be done to them after Pearl Harbor. In the aftermath of the sneak attack, well-publicized remarks by some prominent Americans stirred the panic. For example, a columnist for the *San Francisco Examiner* said:

Everywhere the Japanese have attacked to date, the Japanese population has risen to aid the attackers. . . . I am for the immediate removal of every Japanese on the West Coast to a point deep in the interior. Herd 'em up, pack 'em off and give 'em the inside room in the Badlands. Let 'em be pinched, hurt, hungry, and dead up against it.

U.S. Army General John DeWitt, military commander of the newly created Western Defense Command, envisioned immediate dangers on the West Coast. He expected naval attacks and air raids. Adding to the danger, the general believed, was the likelihood that Japanese living along the West Coast would commit acts of *sabotage* (destruction of property by enemy agents) and *espionage* (spying to obtain government secrets). In a report to the secretary of war, General DeWitt said:

In the war in which we are now engaged racial affinities are not severed by migration. 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. . . . It therefore follows that along the vital Pacific Coast over 112,000 potential enemies of Japanese extraction are alive today.

In January 1942, Earl Warren, then attorney general of California, declared that Japanese-Americans had "infiltrated . . . every strategic spot" in California. He added, "I have come to the conclusion that the Japanese situation as it exists in this state today, may well be the Achilles heel of the entire civilian defense effort. Unless something is done it may bring about a repetition of Pearl Harbor."

The remark that most fueled public hostility was a widely reported one made by secretary of the navy, Frank Knox. After inspecting the extensive damage at Pearl Harbor, he held a press conference in Los Angeles. There he said that the Japanese attack had been accompanied

of Issei farm crops grew from \$6 million in 1909 to \$67 million just ten years later.

Anti-Japanese feeling grew along the West Coast. Some of it stemmed from racial prejudice. Many white Americans would not accept nonwhites as equals.

Some California newspapers began writing about a *yellow peril*. This notion suggested that waves of Japanese immigrants would gradually engulf the state. The immigrants were portrayed as tricky, inscrutable, deceitful, and treacherous.

Official actions were taken against the Japanese. In 1906 the San Francisco school board established separate schools for Japanese children. Pressure exerted on President Theodore Roosevelt to stop Japanese immigration led to the "Gentlemen's Agreement" with Japan in 1907. As part of the agreement the Japanese government agreed to reduce immigration to the United States. In exchange, the United States promised not to adopt laws that discriminated against the Japanese. In 1907, 30,824 Japanese entered the United States. The year following the agreement, immigration from Japan dropped to 3,275.

In 1922 the U.S. Supreme Court declared that Japanese immigrants (Issei) were "aliens ineligible to citizenship." The basis for this denial was a 1790 act of Congress that limited citizenship to "free white persons." After the Civil War the law was expanded to include persons of African descent. The effect of the Supreme Court decision was that white immigrants from Europe and blacks from Africa could become naturalized U.S. citizens, but Asians could not. The children of the Issei, called *Misei*, were, however, legally U.S. citizens. According to the Constitution anyone born in the United States is a citizen.

The goal of halting Japanese immigration to the United States was accomplished in 1924. That year, while admitting immigrants from other parts of the world, Congress excluded all immigration from Asiatic countries. The action infuriated the Japanese government, which claimed the United States had violated the Gentlemen's Agreement.

There were other ways, though not enforced by law, that Americans of Japanese origin were branded with a badge of inferiority. For example, they were often refused housing in white neighborhoods. A California billboard of the period read: "Japs, don't let the sun shine on you here. Keep moving."

by "the most effective fifth column work that's come out of this war." The term *fifth column* refers to secret organizations within a country that aid an invading enemy.

Rumors circulated about Japanese-Americans pointing the way for Japanese pilots at Pearl Harbor or aiding the enemy in other ways. These rumors were false. Not a single act of sabotage or espionage by a Japanese-American in Hawaii was ever proven. Nonetheless, the scare stories were widely believed.

Contributing to public anxiety during early months of the war was grim news from the South Pacific. Japanese military forces were making swift progress there. Allied defeats at Manila, Guam, Wake Island, and Hong Kong weighed heavily on the hearts of Americans. By February 1942, the military position of the United States in the Pacific was perilous. It was a time of fear.

The war was moving closer to home. Japanese submarines attacked shipping near the California coast. There were reports of signaling from the Pacific Coast to enemy ships at sea, both by radio and by flashing lights. Residents of the coastal states expected a Japanese attack.

A growing sentiment for evacuation of Japanese-Americans soon resulted in government action. In February 1942 President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066. It gave the army authority to move civilians out of western coastal states.

In March, Congress unanimously passed Public Law 503, which provided for enforcement of the president's order in the courts. Under the authority of the new law, the army began issuing civilian exclusion orders. The Pacific coastal strip was divided into exclusion areas. About a week after orders were posted in an area, all Japanese, whether citizens or not, were required to prepare to evacuate.

One member of each family was required to report for registration. Within five days of registration all Japanese in an area were processed for removal. On the day of departure they were given identification tags and transported by bus or train to temporary assembly centers along the West Coast. They were to remain there until permanent inland relocation centers were ready for them. Over 120,000 Japanese, two-thirds of them U.S. citizens, were evacuated. Although the United States was at war with Germany and Italy, no German-Americans or Italian-Americans were evicted from their homes.

The federal government argued that mass evacuation was a military

necessity. Several reasons were given to support this argument. Some of the major ones were:

1. The Japanese-Americans posed a threat as enemy agents. Many of them lived around aircraft plants, ports, dams, bridges, power stations, and other strategic points.
2. Widespread distrust of the Japanese population lowered public morale on the West Coast. Evacuation would lift morale.
3. The Japanese themselves were in danger of attack by angry citizens. There had been several violent acts, including murders, committed against them. In relocation camps they would be safe.
4. Loyalty of Japanese-Americans to the United States was doubtful. There was no way to distinguish loyal U.S. citizens from those whose first loyalty was to Japan. All Americans of Japanese ancestry were considered citizens of Japan by the Japanese government. Some had sent their children to Japan for schooling. As a group, the Japanese in the United States had maintained their cultural traditions and had not blended into the mainstream of American life.
5. In total war, constitutional rights have to give way to drastic measures.

Yoshiko Uchida, in her book *Desert Exile*, describes what it was like for her family to be uprooted from their home in 1942. At the time of the evacuation, the Uchida family consisted of Yoshiko, a college student, her older sister, Keiko, and their parents. The girls were both Nisei. Their Issei parents had a strong devotion to their adopted country. The family lived comfortably in a house on Stuart Street in Berkeley, California. On national holidays Mr. Uchida hung an enormous American flag on the front porch.

At five o'clock on Pearl Harbor Day, Yoshiko came home from the library to find an FBI agent in the living room. Her father was gone. As an executive of a Japanese business firm, he was one of many *aliens* (noncitizen residents) considered especially dangerous by the government. They were seized immediately after the Japanese attack and sent to an internment camp in Montana.

In April 1942, Yoshiko, her mother, and her sister were ordered to report to Tanforen Assembly Center. They had ten days to prepare. They desperately tried to dispose of their household possessions. The

piano was left with one neighbor; other pieces of furniture with another. Like many others, they suffered financial losses in having to dispose of their property so quickly. Some had to sell their houses below market value. Others had to abandon their businesses or sell them at a loss.

On the day of departure the three women arrived at their church, the designated assembly point, carrying the few belongings they were permitted to bring. They were taken to a fenced-in camp that had been built at Tanforen racetrack. This was to be their temporary home until the government could construct inland camps far removed from the West Coast.

It had rained the day before their arrival. The grounds had become a mass of slippery mud. The girls helped their mother through the mud past tar-papered barracks until they reached Barrack 16, the one to which they had been assigned. It was a horse stable. Each stall was about ten feet by twenty feet, empty except for three folded army cots. The smell of horses hung in the air. The family stall was cold and dank and afforded little privacy.

Meals were served in a mess hall. Their first dinner at Tanforen consisted of two canned sausages, a boiled potato, and a piece of butterless bread. Meals improved but most of the time they were skimpy and starchy. Yoshiko and her sister were usually hungry.

Gradually the interned residents worked to improve conditions at Tanforen, a community of 8,000. A form of limited self-government was set up. Buddhist and Christian churches were established. A post office was opened. Education and recreation programs were organized. Yoshiko worked in the elementary school, for which she was paid \$16 a month. Eventually her father was allowed to join the family in their stall at the temporary assembly center.

After five months at Tanforen the family was sent to Topaz, a relocation center in the Utah desert. They found a crude, incomplete, and ill-prepared camp. Yoshiko and her family felt depressed in the bleak desert camp. Military police patrolled the barbed wire perimeter of the camp. Swirling masses of sand in the air constantly coated their bodies and clothing. There were few comforts, and life at Topaz was only slightly better than it had been at Tanforen. The Uchida family adjusted to the routine hardships of camp life, but they missed their house on Stuart Street. Yoshiko, homesick, angry, and despairing, characterized her life at Topaz: "No matter what I did, I was still in an artificial government-sponsored community on the periphery of the

real world. I was in a dismal, dreary camp surrounded by barbed wire in the middle of a stark, harsh landscape that offered nothing to refresh the eye or heal the spirit."

Some Japanese-Americans spent three years in one of ten government relocation centers like Topaz. The Uchida family spent just over a year in confinement. Upon their release they gradually returned to a comfortable life as Americans. The bitterness of their bondage lingered in their memories after the war.

The vast majority of Japanese-Americans, like the Uchida family, cooperated fully with government authorities during the relocation period. A dramatic demonstration of patriotism came from the men of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. After Pearl Harbor, Americans of Japanese descent were excluded from the armed forces of the United States. In 1943 the government allowed Japanese-Americans to volunteer for the army. An all-Nisei combat team was established. The unit fought in Europe with extraordinary bravery. It was one of the most highly decorated U.S. combat units of the war. It suffered over 9,000 casualties, including 600 dead.

Not all Japanese-Americans declared loyalty to the U.S. government. At Tule Lake, one of the relocation centers, a militant minority was openly pro-Japan during the war. More than 5,000 members of this minority renounced their U.S. citizenship. Also, at the end of the war, 4,724 residents of relocation centers chose to return to Japan.

A small number of Japanese-Americans resisted the evacuation when it began. One of them, born and raised in the United States, was Fred Korematsu. After graduation from high school in Oakland, California, Fred worked in a shipyard as a welder. At the outbreak of the war his membership in the Boilermaker's Union was cancelled because of his race. He took a job as a gardener and fell in love with a white woman.

The evacuation orders disrupted the couple's plan to marry. In an effort to escape detention, Fred had plastic surgery done on his face, changed his name, and posed as a Spanish-Hawaiian. The ruse failed. While leaving a post office near Oakland, he was seized by FBI agents. In federal court Korematsu was found guilty of breaking the law.

Fred Korematsu appealed his conviction to the U.S. Supreme Court. In the case of *Korematsu v. United States* (1944), the high court was asked to decide whether the evacuation and relocation of Japanese-Americans violated their constitutional rights. The nine justices of the

Court voted 6 to 3 to uphold Korematsu's conviction. Speaking for the majority, Justice Hugo Black said:

Korematsu was not excluded from the Military Area because of hostility to him or his race. He was excluded because we are at war with the Japanese Empire, because the properly constituted military authorities feared an invasion of our West Coast and felt constrained to take proper security measures, because they decided that the military urgency of the situation demanded that all citizens of Japanese ancestry be segregated from the West Coast temporarily, and finally, because Congress, reposing its confidence in this time of war in our military leaders—as inevitably it must—determined that they should have the power to do just this.

Three justices dissented from the majority opinion. Justice Owen J. Roberts argued that Korematsu was a loyal citizen of the nation. He added that it was a violation of constitutional rights to imprison a citizen solely because of his ancestry and without evidence of disloyalty.

Justice Frank Murphy added strong words in his dissenting opinion. He wrote that the order to exclude all persons of Japanese ancestry from the Pacific Coast “goes over the very brink of constitutional power and falls into the ugly abyss of racism.” He continued:

Being an obvious racial discrimination, the order deprives all those within its scope of the equal protection of the laws as guaranteed by the Fifth Amendment. It further deprives these individuals of their constitutional rights to live and work where they will, to establish a home where they choose and to move about freely.

“Racial discrimination in any form and in any degree,” added Justice Murphy, “has no justifiable part whatsoever in our democratic way of life.”

In the third dissenting opinion, Justice Robert H. Jackson agreed that it was unconstitutional to transplant Americans on the basis of their race. He wrote that by declaring the exclusion order constitutional, the Supreme Court was, for all time, accepting the principle of racial discrimination: “The principle then lies about like a loaded weapon ready for the hand of any authority that can bring forward a plausible claim of an urgent need.”

The decision in the Korematsu case upheld the constitutionality of excluding Japanese-Americans from the Pacific Coast during the Second World War. In September 1945, two weeks after Japan surrendered, the exclusion orders were rescinded.

The major sources for this story were:

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ACTIVITIES FOR “A LOADED WEAPON”

Write all answers on a separate sheet of paper.

Historical Understanding

Answer briefly:

1. Why did Japanese-Americans become unpopular along the West Coast?
2. What were the major terms of the 1907 “Gentlemen’s Agreement”?
3. Why were the Nisei citizens of the United States but not their parents?
4. What was meant by the phrase *yellow peril*?
5. Define the following terms: *espionage*, *sabotage*, and *fifth column*.

Reviewing the Facts of the Case

Answer briefly:

1. What were Executive Order 9066 and Public Law 503?