



Relocation of Japanese Americans (1942)

Franklin D. Roosevelt and Tara Shioya

Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The United States entered World War II on December 8. Slightly more than two months later, President Roosevelt signed into law the relocation order removing Japanese Americans from the West Coast. More than 100,000 were sent to internment camps in the interior. Many of these were U.S. citizens. Some relocated Japanese Americans were classified as 4-C Enemy Aliens and were considered potential spies and saboteurs for Japan. After the war, it was found that at least some of the people who had agitated for the internment of Japanese Americans had seen them more as business competitors than as security risks. Still others took advantage of the Japanese Americans' defenselessness and bought their farms and businesses for far less money than they were worth. The first selection (A) is from Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order setting up camps and allowing for the internment of the Japanese Americans in them.

A year after the relocation order was issued, the government found that it needed more soldiers. Thus, it set up all-Japanese units to fight in Europe and the Pacific. White officers were placed in charge of these units. The second reading (B) is from a more recent newspaper article about Japanese Americans who had fought in World War II.

A. Executive Order for Relocation, February 19, 1942

Whereas the successful prosecution of the war requires every possible protection against espionage and against sabotage to national defense material, national defense premises, and national defense utilities. . . .

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 who he may from time to time designate, whenever he or any designated Commander deems such action necessary or desirable, to prescribe [set up] 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 person 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. The Secretary of War is hereby authorized to provide for residents of any such area who are excluded therefrom, such transportation, food, shelter, and other accommodations as may be necessary.

B. The Conflict Behind the Battle Lines

Tara Shioya, San Francisco Chronicle, September 24, 1995

At Poston, the Arizona detention camp where his family had been sent, [Shiro] Takeshita, then 21, settled into camp life and his duties as a recreation director. Anger faded to resignation. But when camp officials announced that the U.S. Army would allow Japanese Americans to serve in a special segregated unit, Takeshita decided to volunteer. "It was the only thing I could think of to do," said Takeshita, now 74, a retired San Leandro [California] logistics engineer. "I felt that was the only way we could be recognized as being loyal Americans."

That sentiment rang true for many of the 18,000 Nisei—second-generation Japanese Americans—like Takeshita and his three brothers, who fought in the all-Japanese 442nd Regimental Combat Team and the 100th Infantry Battalion during World War II. . . . As a military unit, their record in North Africa and Europe was extraordinary. After almost two years of fighting, the 100th/442nd emerged from the war the most highly decorated unit in U.S. military history. They fought in seven major campaigns in Europe, made two beach-head assaults and captured a submarine. In France, they liberated Bruyeres, and rescued the "Lost Battalion"—275 Texas infantrymen who had been trapped inside German territory for almost a week.

. . . The unit's valor earned more than 18,000 individual citations

and eight Presidential Unit Citations. Known also as the "Purple Heart Battalion," with more than 700 men killed and 9,500 Purple Hearts, they suffered the highest casualty rate in U.S. Army history.

Today, the veterans of the 442nd and the 100th are in their 70s and 80s, and among them is a growing sense of urgency to tell their stories before it is too late. . . . "We weren't going around bragging about what we did, because we didn't think we did anything special," said 442nd veteran George Oiye, 73. "It was just part of the war, as far as I'm concerned." . . .

At a 1945 White House ceremony honoring the 100th/442nd, President Truman commended the Nisei soldiers on their wartime accomplishments. "You fought not only the enemy, you fought prejudice, and you have won." But that wasn't entirely true. Even during training, the Nisei were scrutinized [watched] and treated with suspicion. At Camp Shelby, the Army searched their mail, confiscated their diaries and kept files documenting their daily activities. As if the Nisei needed reminding, "Remember Pearl Harbor" was assigned as the official motto of the 100th Infantry Battalion.

After rejoining his family in Detroit, Shiro Takeshita moved back to the West Coast. In 1950, he and his new bride were looking at apartments in Alameda [California]. At one building, the couple who managed the apartment peered at the Takeshitas from the window as they walked up to the door. "It's been taken," the man said. But the Takeshitas knew that was impossible. They had called just moments earlier.

Even in the years after the war, as anti-Japanese state and federal laws were gradually dismantled, Japanese Americans continued to feel the sharp sting of racism. Some Caucasian Americans, remembering Pearl Harbor, bore a deep hatred for anyone of Japanese ancestry. In the late 1980s, Nisei veterans led the campaign for redress [setting right] that resulted in a formal apology and compensation from the U.S. government to Japanese Americans who were interned.

In the living room of his home in the San Leandro hills, Takeshita admits he was disappointed at how little the racial climate changed in postwar America. Still, Takeshita said the decision to volunteer was unquestionably worthwhile. "I think we were very successful, seeing the record of the 442nd," he said. "As far as I was concerned, I was satisfied."

Review Questions

1. Why did the U.S. government place many Japanese Americans in internment camps during World War II?
2. In what ways did some Americans take advantage of Japanese Americans who were interned?
3. What constitutional role of the chief executive was President Franklin D. Roosevelt illustrating when he signed the Executive Order for Relocation?
4. Why did some incarcerated Japanese Americans join the U.S. armed forces during World War II?
5. How were Japanese Americans discriminated against (a) during World War II? (b) after World War II?
6. Do you think that Japanese-American citizens should have been placed in internment camps in 1942 just because of their ancestry? Explain your answer.
7. What lessons, if any, can the relocation of Japanese Americans by the federal government be applied in the post-9/11 era? Explain your answer.