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Japanese Internment Camps

One bag packed in a hurry, other belongings sold, and tradition ignored. This was the situation of more than 120,000 Japanese Americans on the West coast from 1941 to 1946. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the U.S. entered World War II and many sought restitution for the attack through racial prejudice. The Japanese internment camps were one of the most blatant forms of discrimination because only the Japanese on the West Coast were affected, many lost belongings and land, and their traditions were completely discounted.

Only two months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which forced Japanese Americans on the West Coast to relocate to internment camps. There were many factors at play in this decision besides the Pearl Harbor bombing. According to Foner and Garraty of Houghton Mifflin, “The Roosevelt administration was pressured to remove persons of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast by farmers seeking to eliminate Japanese competition, a public fearing sabotage, politicians hoping to gain by standing against an unpopular group, and military authorities,” (History.com Staff). Much of the U.S. public saw this order as a protection against sabotage, and it served to assuage their fears, but the fact that the relocation order was focused only on the West Coast shows that the ultimate motive was most likely to eliminate Japanese competition and promote military authority. Order 9066 did not apply to Hawaii, where the Pearl Harbor attack took place and where one-third of the population was Japanese American.

Because the relocation act focused only on the Japanese and happened so quickly, many lost belongings and property. They were forced to sell their belongings and land as quickly as possible, at drastically reduced prices in order to get anything out of their property. They had no idea how long they would be in the relocation camps, so keeping property was nearly impossible. Jack Werner, a first sergeant in the U.S. Army, said, “They would have to leave the farm, take one pack or luggage with them, and report to the railroad station. The trains would be evacuated to an unknown place, detention camps, in the West” (History.com Video). Detention camps were located in Idaho, Utah, California, Arkansas, Arizona, Colorado, and Wyoming (Japanese). They would have to decide between packing items for survival and packing personal items, with only one bag allowed per person. Many who refused to sell their homes before internment, returned to find them in ruins.

The final straw in the discrimination of the Japanese was the obvious disregard for their traditions. Once the Japanese arrived at the internment camps, those who were American born, the Nisei, were given positions of authority at the camps, while their ancestors, the Japanese born Issei, were not given their traditional respect. More than five thousand of the Nisei refused this blatant discrimination and even renounced their American citizenship, while inside the walls of the camps (History.com Staff).

These three factors, the focus on the West coast only, the loss of Japanese property, and the destruction of tradition, made the Japanese Internment camps one of the worst breaches of American civil liberties in history. Jimmie Kanaya, a Japanese Army medic, whose family was interned while he was at war, commented, “I visited their camp and it had a barbed wire enclosure all around the camp, and watchtowers every 200 hundred yards or so,” (History.com Video). Although financial restitution was made many years later, no amount of money can compensate for the pain of such discrimination.

Alternate Thesis: The Japanese Internment camps were implemented in 3 phases, first Roosevelt gave order 9066, then the Japanese were sent to internment camps in the West, finally they received restitution payments several years later.

Works Cited

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