

BECOMING US

THE JAPANESE AMERICAN INCARCERATION:

How Should a Wrong Be Righted?

Student Deliberation Guide



George, Risa, and Yasubei Hirano pose in front of an American flag at the US government War Relocation Authority incarceration camp for Japanese Americans in Poston, Arizona. Risa is holding a photograph of her son Shigera, a US World War II serviceman, in uniform.

*National Archives and Records Administration,
War Relocation Authority Records.*

<https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/hirano-family>



INTRODUCTION

On February 19, 1942, about two months after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and brought the United States into World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which paved the way for the forced removal of over 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast and in southern Arizona. They were made to leave their homes, jobs, and businesses and go to barbed-wire-encircled camps, where many would remain until the war's end. Although Executive Order 9066 ceased to be enforced toward the end of World War II, it would not be terminated for decades to come.



George, Risa, and Yasubei Hirano pose in front of an American flag at the US government War Relocation Authority incarceration camp for Japanese Americans in Poston, Arizona. Risa is holding a photograph of her son Shigera, a US World War II serviceman, in uniform.

*National Archives and Records Administration, War Relocation Authority Records.
<https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/hirano-family>*

At a White House ceremony on February 19, 1976, President Gerald R. Ford finally terminated Executive Order 9066 by official proclamation. “We now know what we should have known then,” Ford declared. “Not only was that evacuation wrong, but Japanese Americans were and are loyal Americans.” He asked all Americans to join him to ensure “that this kind of error shall never be made again.”¹ Ford’s proclamation marked a growing awareness of the wrong that had been done to Japanese Americans during World War II. Most Japanese Americans welcomed Ford’s gesture. But some saw it as only a small first step toward justice. They had long been asking how the wrong could be righted.

Imagine that you are there, in 1976, among the many Americans who plan to celebrate two hundred years of US independence. However, you have become aware of how the United States failed in its commitment to “liberty and justice for all” through its treatment of Japanese Americans. After you read this guide, you will be asked to deliberate the best ways to address this injustice from the perspective of someone who has just learned of Ford’s proclamation. But before you join the deliberation about what form justice should take, it is important to understand more about the history of Japanese Americans in the United States.

Japanese Americans before World War II

Approximately 100,000 immigrants from Japan arrived in the continental United States in the first quarter of the 1900s. Even more settled in Hawai‘i, which was a US territory at that time. These Japanese-born immigrants to the US were called **Issei** in Japanese. They created thriving communities under challenging circumstances: US law barred Japanese immigrants from becoming citizens or owning property. However, their American-born children, called **Nisei**, were US citizens by birthright and had the right to own property.

Japanese Americans from both generations played key roles in the US economy. They harvested sugarcane, picked fruit in the orchards, and gathered vegetables in the fields. They owned shops in towns and cities and ran commercial fishing boats on the Pacific coast. Some became lawyers, dentists, and doctors. Japanese immigrants were especially successful in the field of agriculture. While comprising only two percent of the population of California in 1941, Japanese Americans owned or operated 6,000 farms in the state and generated 40 percent of its produce.

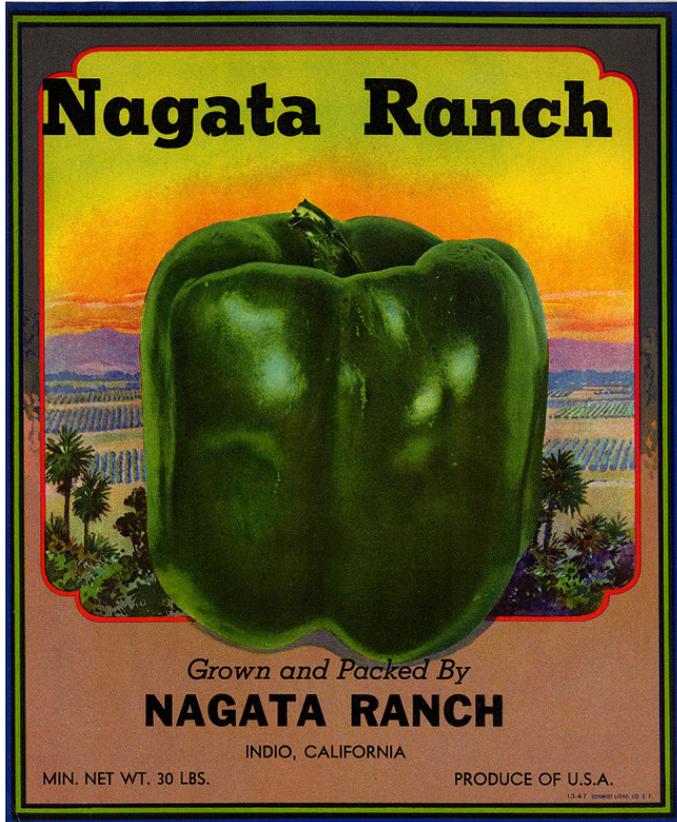


Japanese American agricultural workers packing broccoli near Guadalupe, California, 1937.
Dorothea Lange, Library of Congress.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2017769673/>

“Enemy Aliens” During World War II

After the United States entered World War II, President Roosevelt gave broad authority to federal agencies to take “enemy aliens” into custody. These were people with Japanese, German, or Italian backgrounds suspected of disloyalty to America. While more than 120,000 Japanese Americans living on the West Coast were incarcerated, about 31,000 other suspected enemy aliens were also taken into federal custody. In addition, the US government encouraged Latin American countries to arrest suspected enemy aliens and deport them to the United States to be incarcerated. More than 6,000 suspected enemy aliens, including 2,000 of Japanese ancestry, were sent to camps in the United States under this program. There is no reason to think that most posed a security risk.



Vegetable crate label from Japanese American ranch, 1920s.
National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

<https://americanhistory.si.edu/righting-wrong-japanese-americans-and-world-war-ii/japanese-immigration>



A resident of Hollywood, California, makes clear her sentiments to any Japanese people looking for housing in her neighborhood, around 1923. National Japanese American Historical Society.

<https://americanhistory.si.edu/righting-wrong-japanese-americans-and-world-war-ii/racism>

Japanese Americans succeeded despite a long history of anti-Asian racism in the United States that impacted their daily lives and led to severe restrictions on immigration from China, Japan, and other Asian nations in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Nevertheless, by 1941 about 158,000 people of Japanese ancestry lived in Hawai'i, and more than 120,000 lived in the continental United States, most on the West Coast. About 60 percent of the ethnically Japanese population of the continental United States were US-born citizens. Many of these Nisei identified more with US culture than they did with the culture of their parents' native land.

Executive Order 9066 and the Incarceration Camps

On December 7, 1941, Japan launched a surprise attack on the US naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawai'i. Bombs destroyed a large part of the fleet stationed there and killed more than 2,000 Americans. Although the United States had provided Great Britain with military equipment to fight Nazi Germany, it had officially been neutral in World War II up to that point. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the US declared war on Japan and its allies, Germany and Italy.



Photograph of the capsized USS Oklahoma and a slightly damaged USS Maryland at Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941.
National Archives and Records Administration.

<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/306553>

Even before Pearl Harbor, people of Japanese ancestry living in the United States and its territories had fallen under increasing suspicion as the Japanese empire had expanded in the Pacific. After Pearl Harbor, anti-Japanese fervor spread rapidly, fueled by false rumors of sabotage plots and by anti-Asian racism often motivated by economic competition. California governor Culbert Olson accused Japanese Americans of being disloyal; slurs, discrimination, and attacks on them grew more frequent.

On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt gave in to anti-Japanese hysteria and signed Executive Order 9066. This authorized the Secretary of War to exclude any person from an area of the United States where national security was considered threatened. It effectively cleared the way for the removal of people of Japanese descent from the western coasts of Washington, Oregon, and California, and from southern regions of Arizona.

EXECUTIVE ORDER

AUTHORIZING THE SECRETARY OF WAR TO PRESCRIBE
MILITARY AREAS

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 as defined in Section 4, Act of April 20, 1918, 40 Stat. 533, as amended by the Act of November 30, 1940, 54 Stat. 1220, and the Act of August 21, 1941, 55 Stat. 655 (U. S. C., Title 50, Sec. 104):

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 person to enter, remain in, or leave shall be subject to whatever restrictions the Secretary of War or the appropriate Military

Executive Order 9066, February 19, 1942.
National Archives and Records Administration.

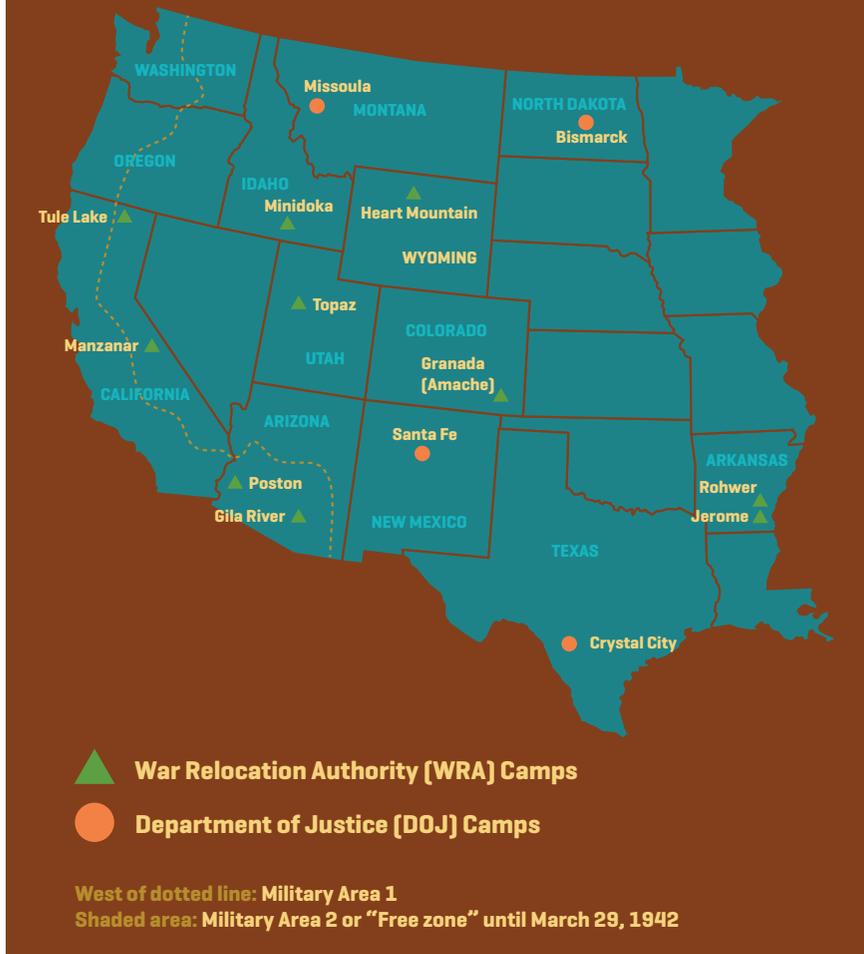
<https://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/todays-doc/?dod-date=219>



Civilian exclusion order #5, posted at First and Front streets in San Francisco. This followed Executive Order 9066 and directed the removal of all persons of Japanese ancestry from the military zones specified by April 7, 1942. Dorothea Lange, Library of Congress.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3a35053/>

Incarceration Camps



Map of Incarceration Camps and Exclusion Zones. National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

<https://americanhistory.si.edu/righting-wrong-japanese-americans-and-world-war-ii/behind-barbed-wire>

Japanese Americans were forcibly relocated to 10 isolated camps constructed and managed by a newly created US government agency, the War Relocation Authority (WRA), as well as several smaller camps run by the Department of Justice (DOJ). The Japanese Americans removed from their communities could only take what they could carry with them and were often forced to sell their homes, farms, businesses, and possessions for a fraction of what they were worth or abandon them altogether. The camps were fortified prisons ringed by barbed wire and patrolled by armed sentries stationed in watchtowers with orders to shoot anyone who tried to escape. Children, women, and men were crammed into hastily built shacks furnished only with cots and coal-burning stoves. Some 1,862 people died of illness while incarcerated, and seven were killed by guards.



Residents of Japanese ancestry in line at a US civil control station to register for forced removal, 1942. Dorothea Lange, Library of Congress.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2001705938/>



A resident of Japanese ancestry awaits forced relocation, 1942.
Dorothea Lange, Library of Congress.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2001705936/>

“I will never forget the shocking feeling that human beings were behind this fence like animals . . . when the gates were shut, we knew we had lost something very precious; that we were no longer free.”

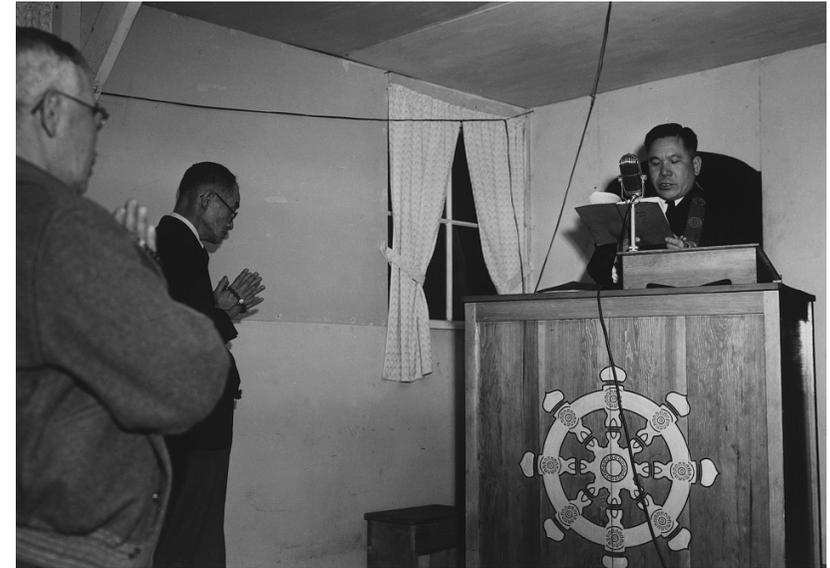
—Mary Tsukamoto, incarceration survivor²

The disciplined effort and ingenuity of Japanese Americans made the camps livable, even though the buildings provided inadequate protection from extreme heat in the summer, cold in the winter, and the choking dust in desert camps. Inmates built community in small towns, creating new post offices, places of worship, newspapers, and extensive gardens. Children went to school and played on sports teams. Families lived as normally as possible under the circumstances.



Roy Takeno, Yuichi Hirata, and Nabou Samamura read the Los Angeles Times at Manzanar camp in California, 1943.
Ansel Adams, Library of Congress.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2002696017/>



Men worship at a Buddhist service at Manzanar camp, 1943.
Ansel Adams, Library of Congress.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/ppprs.00360/>



*Students attend high school at the Heart Mountain camp, 1943.
National Archives and Records Administration, War Relocation Authority Records.*

<https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/japanese-relocation>

Despite being held as prisoners by the US government, many young Japanese American men volunteered to serve in the US military. The 442nd Regimental Combat Team was composed entirely of Japanese Americans. It served with distinction in Italy, France, and Germany and became the most decorated unit of its size in US history.

As the war progressed, many of those who had been sent to the camps left to join the military, attend universities outside the exclusion zone, and work outside the camps. But others remained incarcerated. As the end of the war approached, the Roosevelt administration—anticipating that the Supreme Court would rule in favor of a lawsuit brought by Japanese American inmate Mitsuye Endo—issued a proclamation on December 17, 1944, that began the process of closing the camps. When a camp closed, former inmates were provided train or bus tickets and travel money and then sent on their way. Many had little to go home to.



Inmates leaving Manzanar camp permanently for work, 1943.
Ansel Adams, Library of Congress.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/ppprs.00292/>

After World War II

Hostility toward people of Japanese ancestry on the West Coast remained high for several years following the war. Life was often harsh. Japanese Americans had been forced to sell many of their businesses and properties for pennies on the dollar before incarceration; the buildings they abandoned were often vandalized or repossessed. It was hard to find shelter; many landlords refused to rent to Japanese Americans. Families sometimes slept on the floors of schools and churches, in conditions similar to those of the camps. The 1948 **Evacuation Claims Act**, designed to compensate Japanese Americans for their lost property, fell far short of its goal and did little to meet their immediate needs.



This Japanese language school in Seattle served as a hostel for individuals and families who had lost their homes due to incarceration. Some returnees lived in the school for years before finding a better situation. Today the school is a Japanese American community center. Japanese Culture and Community Center of Washington.

<https://www.jccw.org/hunt-hostel>

In the 1950s, Nisei often felt compelled to “Americanize” and embraced popular US culture, taking common Anglo names and not speaking Japanese to their children. Economically, many Japanese Americans again began to thrive. The children of the Nisei, called **Sansei**, often did not know much about their parents’ experiences during the war.

Many, like Janice Sakamoto, only learned of the camps through textbooks and films:

“I first learned about the camps when I was in high school . . . in one book, I came across this one small paragraph on the concentration camps. . . . My mom had prior to that time said nothing, and I was shocked, and I was hurt and angry. . . . I knew that the Japanese were not disloyal like the article was saying. . . . That was the first time that really provoked a lot of interest for me in my family and the experiences that they went through as well as other Japanese Americans.”

—Janice Sakamoto, daughter of incarceration survivors, from a 1983 interview³

During the 1960s, some Japanese Americans became involved in the civil rights, free speech, and anti-Vietnam War movements. Activists marched, demonstrated, and participated in nonviolent acts of civil disobedience to advocate for the passage of important civil rights laws. Seeing these successes, younger Japanese Americans were inspired to seek justice for their own communities. Activists like Edison Uno, William Hohri, and John Tateishi believed that the US government was obligated to compensate Japanese Americans for incarcerating them during World War II. These leaders began to demand action from the **Japanese American Citizens League (JACL)**, the oldest Japanese American advocacy organization in the United States.



Japanese Americans participate in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, 1963. Mike Masaoka Photograph Collection, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

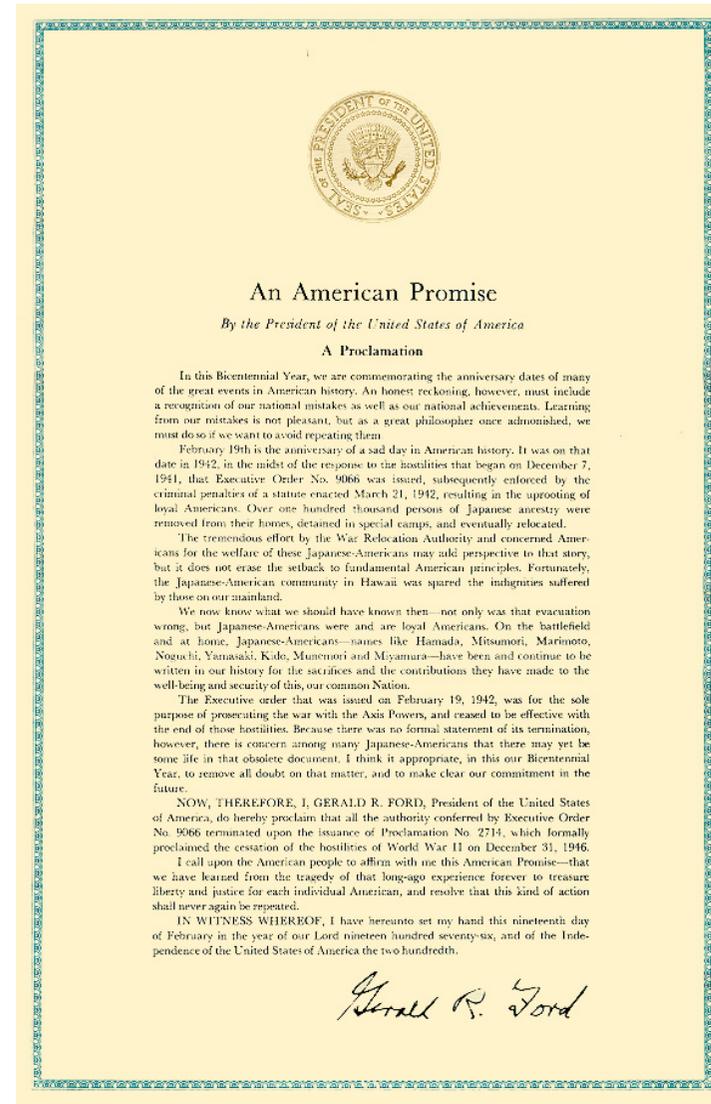
<https://collections.lib.utah.edu/details?id=993769>

Founded in 1929, the JACL had been politically non-confrontational during World War II, supporting the US government’s declaration of war against Japan and presenting Japanese Americans as patriotic citizens. When President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 in 1942, the JACL had urged Japanese Americans to comply. In 1970 Edison Uno introduced a resolution at the JACL national convention calling for monetary compensation and an official US government apology to atone for the imprisonment of Japanese Americans on the West Coast during World War II. But JACL leaders and members were divided on the issue. The organization adopted Uno’s resolution but took little further action on **reparations** (financial compensation for past wrongs).

Reparations Discussions in 1976

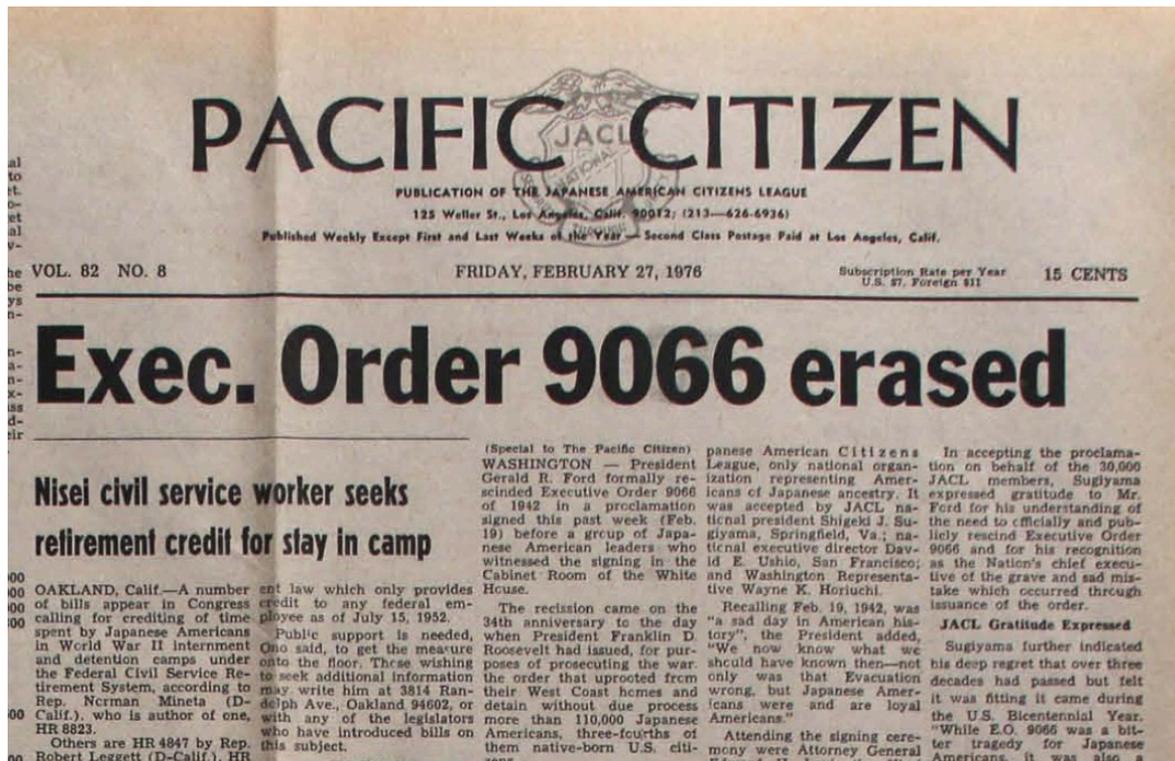
Now, in 1976, it looks as though the campaign for reparations is gaining momentum. Not only has President Ford acknowledged that it was wrong for the US government to incarcerate Japanese Americans, but prominent Japanese American leaders have begun to support reparations. JACL leader Mike Masaoka, who had previously opposed the idea, has changed course. And the JACL has created a committee to study the concept.

Although some Japanese Americans have become enthusiastic advocates for reparations, the majority of the community has yet to be convinced. Many feel a sense of shame about what happened during World War II. As John Ohki, an incarceration camp survivor, explains, “You feel *hazukashii* [ashamed] because you were sort of being punished. . . . You felt like you did something wrong. They made you feel like you were guilty, guilty of being of Japanese ancestry.”⁴ Many who feel ashamed of the past wish to leave it behind and not revisit it by asking for reparations. Other Japanese Americans think that monetary compensation seems too much like **welfare**, and they are concerned about asking for money during a time of economic recession in which Japanese American families earn more than the average US family. Some even argue that because Japan started the war, the Japanese government should fund any reparations.



Ceremonial Copy of Proclamation 4417, which terminated Executive Order 9066, 1976.
Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum.

<https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/speeches/proc4417.jpg>



Headline from Pacific Citizen, the official publication of the JACL, proclaiming President Ford's termination of Executive Order 9066, 1976. Pacific Citizen digital archives.

https://pacificcitizen.org/wp-content/uploads/archives-menu/Vol.082_%2308_Feb_27_1976.pdf

Among those who think something must be done to right the wrongs of the past, opinions differ. Some believe that an official apology is enough, while others hold that individual camp survivors should receive direct monetary payouts from the US government. Others agree there should be financial reparations but argue that money should be funneled into a communal fund to promote the well-being of Japanese Americans now and in the future.

Next, we will look more closely at each of these ideas about **redress**, which is the term that the JACL adopted to describe both monetary and non-monetary means of obtaining justice. Pay close attention to the options and decide which actions you agree and disagree with. As you discuss the options, keep in mind that some within the Japanese American community would reject all three options, as would many other Americans. You might decide that none of the options is a very good idea. You also might suggest changing or adding actions associated with the various options.

OPTION ONE: RESTORE HONOR AND SET THE RECORD STRAIGHT

“Honest reckoning calls for the recognition of mistakes as well as achievement . . . these mistakes should not be forgotten. The achievements never are. We who have been victims of this mistake can insure the ‘American Promise’ by continued retelling of this tragic story.”

— From a 1976 editorial on the termination of Executive Order 9066⁵

Americans now and in the future need to know the truth about the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. This is the only way to ensure that, in President Ford’s words, “this kind of error shall never be made again.”

One way to set the record straight is for the US government to officially admit its wrongdoing and apologize to Japanese Americans. This will guarantee that the truth gets into the history books. It will also restore the honor of those who were wrongly incarcerated and make it less likely that the US government will commit any similar injustice in the future.

Some Japanese Americans feel that this is the best option because they are opposed to monetary reparations. In the past, community leaders have argued that to put a price tag on what was endured by those who were imprisoned would be insulting.⁶

As a Japanese American respondent to a 1975 survey on reparations put it, “...shaking our fists and demanding cash reparations for a 30-year-old injustice somehow cheapens the strength of Japanese spirit and pride.”⁷

POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

1

An official presidential or Congressional apology should be sought. Sympathetic members of the presidential administration and of Congress should be lobbied to support legislation that officially admits wrongdoing and apologizes to Japanese Americans.

2

It will take more than a government apology to set the record straight about the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. Educators, historians, and concerned citizens should work to ensure that accurate descriptions of Japanese American history are provided at public institutions such as schools, museums, and libraries. These should include accounts of discrimination against Japanese Americans and of their incarceration during World War II as well as examples of the contributions they have made to American society.

3

In terminating Executive Order 9066, President Ford acknowledged that it was wrong to incarcerate Japanese Americans during World War II. Some believe that this statement, although not an official apology, is as much of an apology as is necessary. If that is true, no further government action is necessary.

CONSEQUENCES AND TRADEOFFS:

1

This option does not compensate former inmates for the economic losses they endured. Working Japanese Americans were deprived of valuable income, and many lost their businesses and homes when they were forced into incarceration camps. An apology would not compensate for this economic injustice.

2

Continued public discussion of the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II may force some former incarcerated to relive experiences they would rather leave in the past.

The Seattle Plan and the Columbia Basin Plan

In the mid-1970s two different visions of reparations for Japanese Americans incarcerated during World War II emerged in the Japanese American community. The Seattle Plan originated in that city's chapter of the JACL and called for money to be paid to living individuals who had survived the incarceration camps. This plan is the basis of Option Two. The Columbia Basin Plan emerged from a JACL committee on reparations and called for reparations to be made to the Japanese American community as a whole through the establishment of an endowed foundation. This plan is the basis of Option Three.

OPTION TWO: REPAIR THE HARM DONE TO INDIVIDUALS

“...We believe that we are entitled to seek compensation from the government for first, the prolonged loss of our personal liberty; second, for the loss of normal wage and salary incomes; and third, for the loss of business income for those who owned their business and farms.”

— A Japanese American proponent of the Seattle Plan, 1976⁸

Justice demands that wrongly incarcerated individuals receive financial compensation for the injustices they suffered. According to research published in *Pacific Citizen*, the official newspaper of the JACL, camp inmates lost a total of \$600 million in wages, salaries, and business profits in 1942 dollars. That is the equivalent of nearly \$11 million today. Many feel that the US government should repay incarcerated Japanese Americans for this missing income in addition to their lost years of liberty.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

1

Congress should pass legislation to compensate incarcerated individuals. All camp survivors should receive a check to compensate for the loss of liberty and income. This should be done as soon as possible to ensure that older people will be compensated during their lifetimes.

2

Japanese American organizations should work with allied organizations to generate national support for this plan and minimize backlash.

3

Private individuals and organizations should create their own means of supporting the Japanese American community.

CONSEQUENCES AND TRADEOFFS:

1

The families of those who died while incarcerated or those who have died since would not receive reparations from the government under this plan.

2

Some Americans may be resentful of reparation payments to Japanese Americans. Reparations might spark a new wave of anti-Japanese racism.

OPTION THREE: FOCUS ON THE COMMON GOOD

“Trust foundations would serve as a constant reminder to all future Americans of their need for constant vigilance to protect the principles of American liberty and democracy against unjust erosion.”

— A Japanese American proponent of the Columbia Basin Plan, 1976⁹

The entire Japanese American community, including the children of inmates and those born after World War II, has been affected by economic loss and displacement. Japanese Americans need to work with existing institutions and establish new ones to support their communities and promote a deeper understanding and respect for Japanese American culture in the United States. One way of doing this would be to create a communal fund to promote the well-being of Japanese Americans now and in the future.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

1

Congress should fund the creation of a Japanese American trust **foundation**, which would develop and manage programs that would improve the lives of Japanese Americans. The foundation would focus on economic aid, education, and community building designed to benefit both current and future generations.

2

The foundation should fund public relations efforts that enrich understanding of Japanese American culture and heritage and promote the foundation's perspective on current events.

3

Private individuals should donate money and time to the new foundation or other organizations that support the Japanese American community. They might also find new ways to promote Japanese American well-being, such as the creation of community centers.

CONSEQUENCES AND TRADEOFFS:

1

Although a foundation could fund beneficial projects for many years into the future, less money would be immediately available than with Option Two. Also, this option would not provide direct reparations to survivors.

2

The leadership of the foundation would determine its priorities, and those priorities might not always match those of the broader Japanese American community.

SUMMARY OF OPTIONS

OPTION 1:

RESTORE HONOR AND SET THE RECORD STRAIGHT

This option preserves the dignity of Japanese Americans and sets the historical record straight.

OPTION 2:

REPAIR THE HARM DONE TO INDIVIDUALS

This option provides economic justice to former inmates.

OPTION 3:

FOCUS ON THE COMMON GOOD

This option addresses the Japanese American community's needs and ensures that the lessons of incarceration are not forgotten.

ACTIONS

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| 1. Seek an official apology from the president and/or Congress. | 1. Seek money from Congress to fund reparation payments to individuals. | 1. Call on Congress to create a foundation to promote the well-being of Japanese Americans. |
| 2. Work to ensure that an accurate description of Japanese American history is provided at public institutions. | 2. Work with allies to generate national support for this plan and minimize backlash. | 2. Use foundation resources to promote Japanese American culture and perspectives. |
| 3. Accept President Ford's statement as an apology and move on. | 3. Establish programs through civic organizations to aid former incarcerated and their families. | 3. Encourage private individuals and organizations to donate time and money to the foundation or create their own means of supporting the Japanese American community. |

CONSEQUENCES AND TRADEOFFS

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| 1. Would not provide direct financial compensation to those incarcerated | 1. Does not provide reparations to families of deceased inmates. | 1. Would make less money immediately available than Option Two. |
| 2. May force Japanese Americans to relive experiences they would rather leave in the past. | 2. May cause resentment among other Americans and fuel anti-Japanese sentiment. | 2. The priorities of foundation leaders might not always be those of the broader Japanese American community. |

GLOSSARY

Evacuation Claims Act: Signed into law by President Harry Truman in 1948, this act provided a mechanism for compensating Japanese Americans for property lost because of their incarceration during World War II. Although 23,000 Japanese American claims totaled more than \$131 million, the act only funded \$38 million in compensation. Many claimants were not paid in full, and many more received no compensation at all.

Foundation: A foundation is a nonprofit organization that supports scientific, educational, cultural, religious, or other charitable work by making grants or running programs. Most foundations use the profits from a large investment to fund their work.

Issei: The Japanese word for first-generation immigrants who came to the United States from Japan. US law forbade these individuals from owning property and becoming US citizens.

Japanese American Citizens League (JACL): A civic association founded in 1929 to promote the interests of Japanese Americans. It encouraged compliance with government orders during World War II although it protested their fairness. It came to support reparations by the mid-1970s.

Nisei: The Japanese word for the American-born children of the Issei.

Redress: remedy or compensation for a wrong or grievance. Redress is not necessarily monetary. An acknowledgement of wrongdoing, an apology, and other gestures of conciliation can be considered redress.

Reparations: attempts to compensate victims of past wrongs, usually through monetary payments.

Sansei: The Japanese word for third-generation Japanese Americans, the children of the Nisei.

Welfare: In the context of public policy, welfare is financial support that is provided by the government to people in economic need.

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