Americans in Concentration Camps

The world was forever changed the day that Nazi Germany invaded Poland in 1939, triggering the start of World War II. Thus began the bloodiest war in history, a war in which America had managed to stay neutral by staying true to the same isolationist policy observed in WWI – until the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese. Japan’s surprise military strike against the United States metaphorically was gasoline thrown onto the flames of a well-lit fire in America: the fire of xenophobia and anti-Japanese sentiment spurred on by Japanese war atrocities against China. The United States exploded, causing Franklin D. Roosevelt to sign Executive Order 9066, an order that effectively removed all Americans of Japanese descent from the Pacific Coast and relocated them to internment camps further inland. Almost immediately, the War Relocation Authority was established to handle this deportation of primarily US citizens to internment camps in conjunction with the US Army (Document A).

The United States government, of course, reassured the public that such things were necessary. The Supreme Court even upheld Executive Order 9066, saying, “… When, under conditions of modern warfare, our shores are threatened by hostile forces, the power to protect must be commensurate with the threatened danger….We are at war with the Japanese Empire….The properly constituted military authorities feared an invasion of our West Coast and felt constrained to take proper security measures….The military urgency of the situation demanded that all citizens of Japanese ancestry be segregated from the West Coast temporarily….” (Document D). The WRA took great advantage of the “military urgency” angle, maintaining that the West Coast had become a potential warzone and many “possible Axis agents capable of sabotage and espionage” were to be found dwelling among the over one hundred thousand Japanese-Americans sent to internment camps. There were Japanese-Americans living near naval air bases, shipyards, and oil wells; fishermen watching ship movements; farmers living near fighter planes – all of which were perfect chances for suspected spies to sow discord in the daily lives of Americans and disrupt military operations (Document A).

Not every American agreed with this narrative, however; a special representative of the State Department, Curtis B. Munson, carried out an investigation in October and November of 1941 and presented it to FDR on November 7, 1941: “There is no Japanese `problem' on the Coast. There will be no armed uprising of Japanese….The Japanese are hampered as saboteurs because of their easily recognized physical appearance….The Japanese here is almost exclusively a farmer, a fisherman or a small businessman. He has no entrée to plants or intricate machinery.” (Document B).

Spies or not, over sixty thousand American citizens were sent to internment camps simply because of their ancestry. Let us not forget how war hysteria and xenophobia had contributed to an instance in American history in which we sacrificed freedom under the guise of safety and military urgency. How many times must we make this sacrifice before we have no freedom left?