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America's Abuse of Social Minorities

We often like to say that history is necessary to learn about to prevent past mistakes from unfolding again. Unfortunately, history is a story, and stories are rarely the unequivocal truth. The majority power holder writes in their favor, not to teach constituents of their mistakes, but to hide them. Japanese internment was an inexcusable mistake that, at the time, was morally justified by the bourgeoisie; learning about the policy, environment, and consequences of the situation could have allowed us to prevent ostracizing an entire community. Somehow, we are currently living through a very similar situation, that is often put off using the excuse that the community is deserving of consequences: prisons. Although comparing prisons to Japanese internment can be incredibly reductive, there are explicit parallels between the two situations, and refusing to acknowledge the flaws in both situations would be ethically inconsistent. The country we live in functions on logical fallacies, spreading awareness is a way out.

On February 19th, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 giving authority to the War Department to prescribe military areas for which any or all persons may be excluded due to military and national necessity. Although the Executive Order had no declaration of Japanese Americans being the main group to be displaced, the order must have been created with the knowledge that Anti-Japanese sentiment was running rampant in the United States, and thus must have targeted the ethnic minority. Evidence demonstrates that FDR was incredibly uninvolved in the drafting of the order where the War and Justice Departments played remarkable roles, but with the stroke of his pen, he had started 4 years of incarceration, generations of trauma, and erasure of cultures. The reckless actions proved to be a vital attribute to the internment of Japanese Americans, specifically with a policy-makers understanding of the contemporary political atmosphere that they chose to neglect. Similar rhetoric was used during Nixon's presidency when state policies were set in place to target narcotics in specifically Anti-War Leftist and Black communities, as they were the main opposing candidates to his, horrific, campaign. The racist policies were set in place under the ruse of the "War on Drugs," meant to end substance use. His intentions were revealed as he moved cannabis into the most restricted drug category, which was used as a fear-mongering tactic towards the middle-class white constituents of the state. Nixon was not able to criminalize Black people or Leftists, but he knew that by getting the public to associate Leftists with marijuana and Black people with heroin, he could demonize them into suppression. Michelle Alexander argues that "convictions for drug offenses are the single most important cause of the explosion in incarceration rates in the United States…more than 31 million people have been arrested for drug offenses since the drug war began. Nothing has contributed more to the systemic mass incarceration of Black people in the United States than the War on Drugs," The obvious parallels between Executive Order 9066 and heavily criminalizing narcotics include the use of "bettering the nation" as an excuse, denying clear racial undertones behind the policy, and simply attempting to reduce hysteria by detaining a minority group. Similar to Japanese internment, the state is in control of

these people's perceptions and got away with horrendous acts of self-righteousness by creating the false narrative that these targeted people are inherently flawed.

It's clear that in regards to policy, there is often a disconnect between those in charge and the people living under their authority. The policies are set in place with malintent and lived through in terror. Although individuals who are not a part of the Japanese and Black communities may view the policies of Executive Order 9066 and the War on Drugs as well-intentioned, we must keep in mind that the government's entire career revolves around understanding contemporary political atmospheres concerning geopolitics; not acknowledging the government's clear mal-intentions with these decisions would make us accomplices to the horrific acts that have occurred in internment camps and that are currently occurring in prisons.

From 1942-1945, Japanese-Americans were kept in camps, a large one being Manzanar. More than 10,000 were forced to live in the hastily built barracks of Manzanar—two-thirds of whom were American citizens by birth. At Manzanar, temperature extremes, dust storms, and discomfort were common, and internees had to endure communal latrines and strict camp rules. A very pronounced attribute of these camps was a lack of privacy. Because these barracks were overcrowded, internees were forced to sleep in small units, use the restroom with no doors, and forced communal eating. They were prisoners. In prison, showering is communal and considered an environment that enables sexual and physical assault. Correctional officers do not provide any form of protection outside of the discipline and are often the people who cause physical harm to prisoners. People incarcerated for drugs face massive withdrawal to the brink of death and are provided no support or recovery. These drug incarcerations are grouped with people who have considered 1st-degree manslaughter and people who committed petty theft. And they must live in situations similar to those of barracks with tight sleeping and eating schedules, constant fear of sexual assault, with no protection as they are deemed "non-human" or "the enemy," and treated as such. The clear lack of resources for Japanese Americans and Black Americans draws these two situations closely together, as the conditions within these isolation units restrict any form of humanity and free-thinking, and lack any form of safety.

During their time in internment camps, Japanese Americans were exploited for their labor. Assembly Centers offered work to prisoners with the policy that they should not be paid more than an Army private. Jobs ranged from doctors to teachers to laborers and mechanics. A couple were the sites of camouflage net factories, which provided work. Over 1,000 incarcerated Japanese Americans were sent to other states to do seasonal farm work. They were rampantly underpaid compared to White counterparts, and some of the highest salaries of the camp only ranged to about $500. Before life in the camps, Japanese Americans made much more money than they did while interned. Their labor had not lost value, but to the bigoted U.S., their lives had. The Japanese internees also made a significant contribution to the nation's economy in terms of agriculture. Due to a labor shortage in 1942, some internees were temporarily released to perform seasonal farm work, but it was clear to end the economic recession, not to provide Japanese Americans with opportunities. Labor in prisons is also physically extenuating, Working

prisoners are trapped in state-mediated structures of exploitation. They perform hours of labor only to earn a fraction of what it's worth, which is a large part of the prison industrial complex. Black individuals are often the most abused within the system and their unpaid labor has been an extension of America's legacy of slavery. An entire economy has been stimulated through prison labor, yet prisoners are not even seen as people in the world, due to the rhetoric surrounding them, especially addiction. In both the Japanese Internment camps and prisons, the incarcerated people were used for economic gain for an oppressor with no economic gain themselves.

In 1946, the last of these internment camps were terminated and Japanese Americans were expected to assimilate back into society. Carrying the baggage of the injustices they endured, a large goal became public knowledge. Japanese Americans were forced to leave their homes and possessions behind and had lost ownership of any properties they earned, which meant that the resources and little money they may have made through servitude would not last them long. In addition to these tangible losses, many Japanese Americans were unable to separate themselves from the rhetoric they had internalized and carried trauma and guilt for their identities. Losing their footing within their society made starting businesses, attending schools, and making a livable wage, past-internees were left with each other. Though many Japanese American families faced devastation upon returning home, they rebuilt ravaged households, families, and fractured livelihoods. The mental illness post-internment in the Japanese community skyrocketed, but there were very few resources to rectify the betrayal they had faced. It took years for the stigma around Japanese Americans to deteriorate and many opportunities were taken from them. The difficulties in social reentry are also common in people who are released from prison. Lack of employment opportunities for former felons is easily one of the biggest factors in recidivism. If someone is unable to make a livable wage, how can we expect them not to turn to crime for survival? There are no resources provided for people who were recently released, and after facing the prison experience, many ex-felons have severe mental health issues. Turning back to addiction, committing self-harm, and even suicide is very common due to the PTSD, depression, anxiety, and other disorders people released from prison often face. Many landlords refuse to rent to former convicts as they are not a protected class of citizens, which leads them to couch-hopping, homeless shelters, and other places that would make them a vulnerable and targeted group. After other groups of people, Japanese Americans and a large community of Black Americans, society deems them as disposable.

The U.S. government's actions have resulted in constantly putting social minorities in the line of fire, leaving us with a deeply flawed and racist precedent. We can see that in the case of Japanese Internment, some of the major mistakes made were in regards to federal policy, the suppressing of hysteria over education, terrible living and working conditions within the camps, the industrial complex, and the loss of properties and identity following the incarceration. Although saying Japanese internment is equivalent to prison is a very reductive statement lacking both nuance and context, understanding the damaging nature of the mistake made would allow us to prevent prisons from being so harmful and dangerous to the people in them. As a

community, we must move past punitive justice and understand the importance of transformative justice, as punishment almost always is reactionary towards social minorities. Do I think Japanese internment could happen again? Yes. I believe that it is happening right now, but education is not being spread fast enough to prevent it. Prison is a racist, exploitative, and dangerous environment that homes far too many innocent people.