

“I Am an American”

Goal: Students will become aware of the ways in which Japanese Americans were persecuted by the American government and other American citizens during World War II.

Objectives:

- 1) Students will read a short description about the ways in which Japanese Americans were persecuted during World War II.
- 2) Students will examine this treatment in light of the Bill of Rights of the American Constitution and make a judgment about whether or not the treatment violated any of these rights.
- 3) Students will create an artistic rendering of a scene of Japanese American evacuation to internment camps that expresses the emotions involved in this process.

Following the December 7, 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, anti-Japanese and anti-Japanese American sentiment exploded, particularly along America's west coast. Americans often referred to people of Japanese ancestry with the derogatory term “Japs.” Many west coast businesses posted signs such as this in their windows: “Keep the Japs out of California. The only good Jap is dead.” Restaurants also hung signs reading “No Dogs or Japs allowed.”

These feelings of prejudice had to do with more than the fact that Japan was an enemy of the United States. At the time, two-thirds of Japanese Americans had achieved American citizenship. Many were second generation Americans, meaning that their parents had become American citizens and that they had been born in the U.S. and were citizens by birth. The first generation of Japanese Americans called themselves the Issei, while the second generation took the name Nissei. Americans persecuting people of Japanese ancestry ignored the fact that many were American citizens and simply assumed them to be loyal to the Emperor of Japan.

Hatred of Japanese Americans resulted in terrible discrimination against this group. Assuming Japanese Americans to be spies, other Americans raided their homes and businesses to search for cameras, radios, or weapons that could be used against the U.S. Japanese Americans were not given the opportunity to defend themselves in a court of law. The government even implemented a 8p.m. to 6a.m. curfew for Japanese Americans.

Ultimately, in February of 1942, President Roosevelt signed an executive order to evacuate all Japanese Americans from the west coast, where they were most considered a security threat because of their numbers. Japanese Americans forced to evacuate to “Relocation Centers” had only forty eight hours to sell or provide for the care of their businesses, homes, farms, and/or possessions. Pawn shops or dealers, knowing the time limitation, offered ridiculously low prices for the goods Japanese Americans were forced to sell. People were forced to leave pets behind to fend for themselves in their rushed evacuation.

Armed military police oversaw the evacuation to camps typically located in the barren desert. Housing consisted of Army-style barracks or even converted horse-stables. Running water was often not available and the barracks were poorly lit and heated. Camp guards treated Japanese

Americans as prisoners and barbed wire and locked gates surrounded the camp grounds.

Despite all of the fears surrounding Japanese American loyalty, not one Japanese American was ever arrested for spying or treason during World War II. In fact, 33,000 Japanese Americans served in the American Armed Forces and two Japanese American units distinguished themselves as the most decorated of the war.

When finally allowed to return to their homes in 1944, the interned Japanese Americans often found that their businesses and homes had been looted and vandalized. Also, they found that the jobs they once held now often belonged to others. Many families simply had to start over again as if they had just come to the United States.

Finally, in 1983, the U.S. Government made a gesture of apology to Japanese Americans. A Congressional commission said that the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II was not necessary, but was caused by “race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership.” The government agreed to pay each affected Japanese American to make up for their experiences. However, by the time the first payments were made in 1990, more than half of the internees had died.

Exercises:

1) Read the Bill of Rights as stated in the American Constitution. Knowing what you do about the treatment of Japanese Americans during World War II, do you believe that the government treated Japanese Americans in accordance with this document? Cite evidence from the document to support your opinion.

2) Imagine the scene of Japanese Americans gathering at a train with their suitcases full of the few belongings they were allowed to bring to the internment camps. The people wear tags that tell the guards their destination. They do not know where they are going, only that they are being relocated away from their homes, jobs, and friends. Draw a picture of this scene. Try to show the emotions that you think the people might be feeling.

The Bill of Rights

Taken from *Thomas: Legislative Information on the Internet*

<http://memory.loc.gov/const/bor.html>

The Conventions of a number of the States having, at the time of adopting the Constitution, expressed a desire, in order to prevent misconstruction or abuse of its powers, that further declaratory and restrictive clauses should be added, and as extending the ground of public confidence in the Government will best insure the beneficent ends of its institution;

Resolved, by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled, two-thirds of both Houses concurring, that the following articles be proposed to the Legislatures of the several States, as amendments to the Constitution of the United States; all or any of which articles, when ratified by three-fourths of the said Legislatures, to be valid to all intents and purposes as part of the said Constitution, namely:

Amendment I

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

Amendment II

A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.

Amendment III

No soldier shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house, without the consent of the owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law.

Amendment IV

The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.

Amendment V

No person shall be held to answer for a capital, or otherwise infamous crime, unless on a presentment or indictment of a grand jury, except in cases arising in the land or naval forces, or in the militia, when in actual service in time of war or public danger; nor shall any person be subject for the same offense to be twice put in jeopardy of life or limb; nor shall be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself, nor be deprived of life, liberty, or property,

without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation.

Amendment VI

In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury of the state and district wherein the crime shall have been committed, which district shall have been previously ascertained by law, and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation; to be confronted with the witnesses against him; to have compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor, and to have the assistance of counsel for his defense.

Amendment VII

In suits at common law, where the value in controversy shall exceed twenty dollars, the right of trial by jury shall be preserved, and no fact tried by a jury, shall be otherwise reexamined in any court of the United States, than according to the rules of the common law.

Amendment VIII

Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.

Amendment IX

The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.

Amendment X

The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people.

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