

RIGHTING A WRONG: Japanese Americans and World War II

In 1942, the U.S. government rounded up more than 120,000 Japanese Americans and Japanese nationals living in the United States and sent them to incarceration camps. Forty years later, community members pushed the nation to confront the wrong it had done—and to make it right.

By exploring this history and asking questions about the past, we discover interweaving stories of oppression, perseverance, and triumph that help us better understand the choices we face today.



*“It shouldn’t have happened to us.
And it certainly shouldn’t
happen to anyone else.”*

—Bob Fuchigami, incarcerated at the Amache camp, Colorado



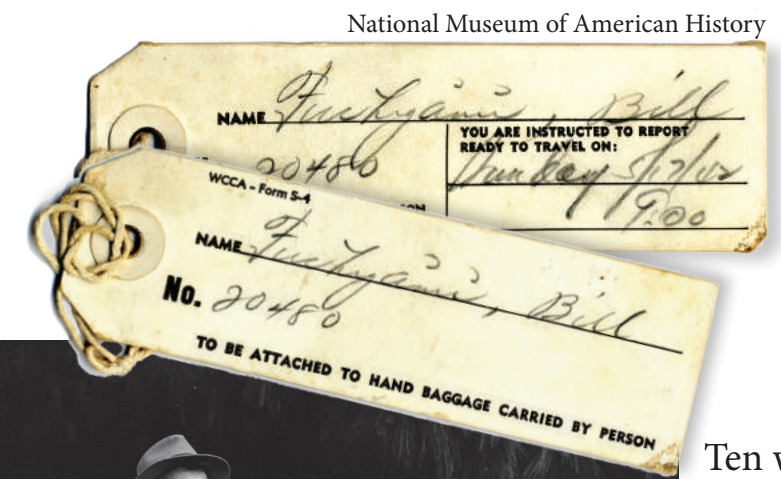
HOW
CAN WE
LEARN
FROM THE
PAST?

Righting a Wrong: Japanese Americans and World War II was developed by the National Museum of American History and adapted by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. The traveling exhibition and poster exhibition are supported by a grant from the Asian Pacific American Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, the Terasaki Family Foundation, and C. L. Ehn & Ginger Lew.

In 1942, overcome by fear that Japanese and Japanese Americans living on the West Coast were a threat to national security, the U.S. government summarily incarcerated them.



Lawrence Lithography Workshop, Kansas City



National Museum of American History



National Archives

Ten weeks after Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, under which nearly 75,000 American citizens of Japanese ancestry were taken into custody. Another 45,000 Japanese nationals living in the United States (but long denied citizenship because of their race) were rounded up and sent to incarceration camps.

How could this happen?

What's more important: personal liberty or national security?



Erich Schilling, Courtesy of Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University

In 1937, Japanese forces surged through eastern China. Japan's leaders proclaimed this the first step in creating a "new order." By 1941, Japan occupied resource-rich French Indochina (now Vietnam), then set its sights on Western colonies across the Pacific. Japan's advance fueled American fears of the "yellow peril."



National Museum of American History

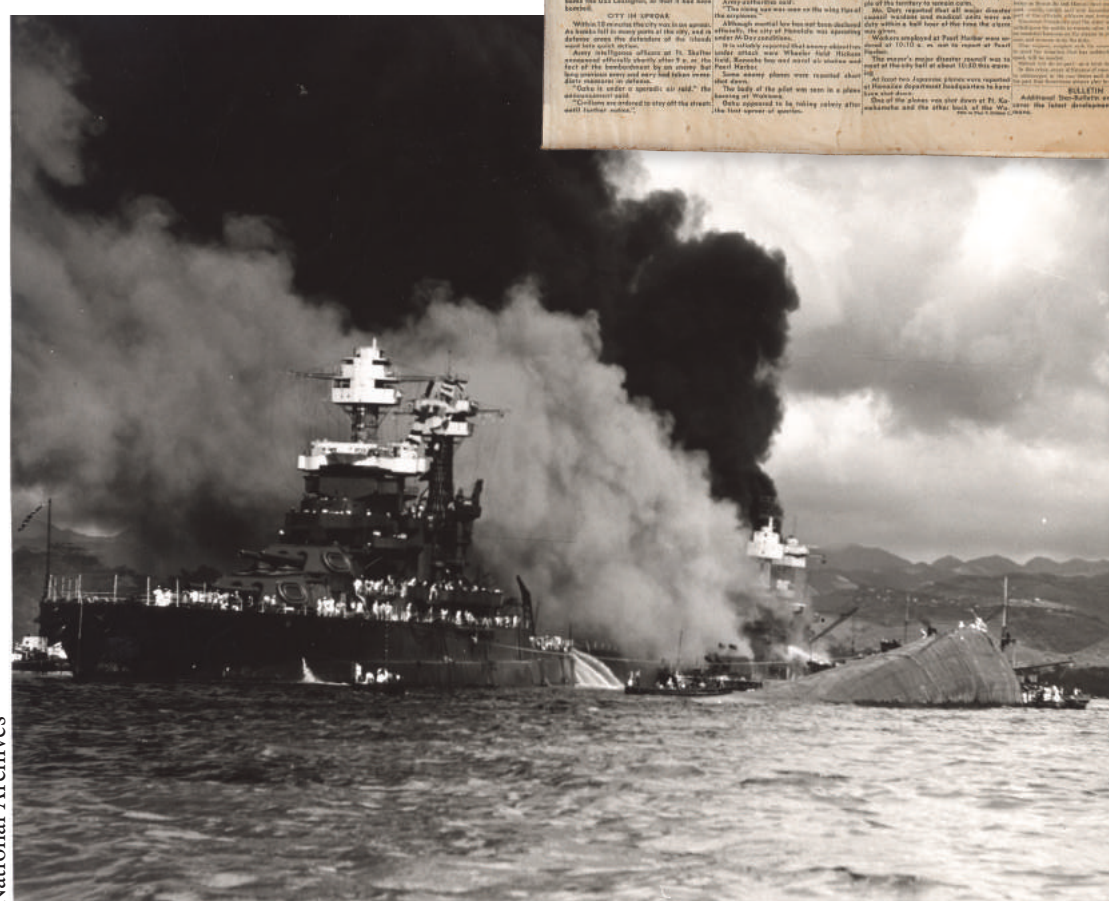
"I don't want any of them here. They are a dangerous element. It makes no difference whether he is an American citizen, he is still a Japanese. [W]e must worry about the Japanese all the time until he is wiped off the map."

—General John Dewitt, Commander of the Western Defense Command, 1943

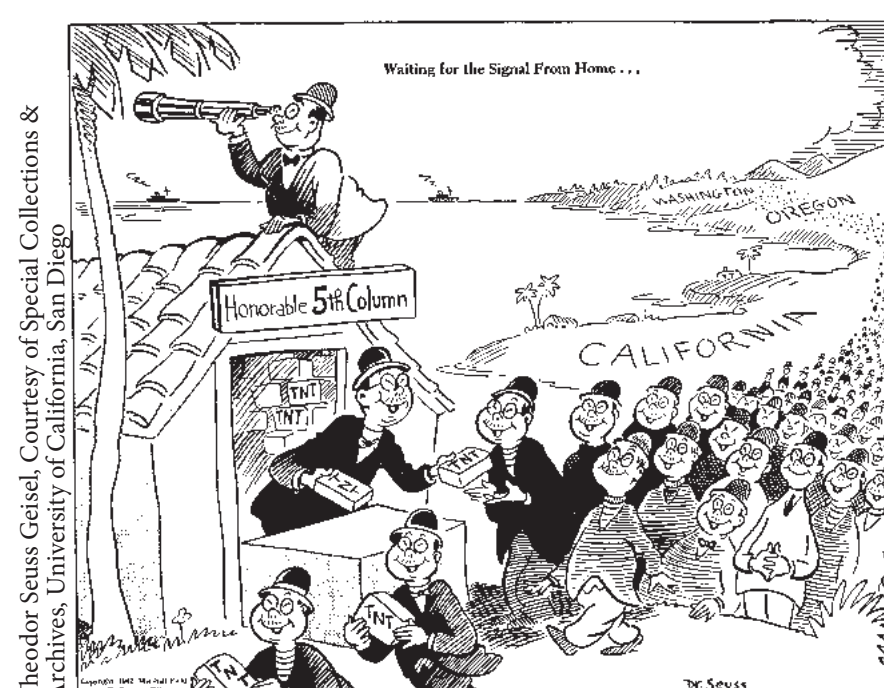


National Museum of American History

Fear of Japanese aggression intensified when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The next day, the United States declared war on Japan and entered World War II. On December 11, the U.S. declared war on Germany.



National Archives



Theodor Seuss Geisel, Courtesy of Special Collections & Archives, University of California, San Diego

Many Americans feared an attack on the West Coast, one they believed would come not from across the Pacific, but from inside the United States. They made the argument that anyone of Japanese ancestry could be part of an imbedded "fifth column," an internal group of enemy sympathizers who stood ready to engage in sabotage.

Long-standing anti-Asian resentment and racial prejudice exaggerated the nation's fear of those in the Japanese and Japanese American community.

Japanese first immigrated to Hawai'i in 1861 to work in the sugarcane fields. Many moved to the U.S. mainland and settled in California where they worked as farmers, fishermen, and small businessmen.



Ron Mori

Strawberry picking tray, National Museum of American History



National Archives

The children of Japanese immigrants who were born in the United States were Americans entitled to the full rights of citizenship.



National Archives

First and second generation Japanese and Japanese Americans were part of their communities. They interacted with neighbors, co-workers, and classmates. But systems of segregation, both legal and informal, impacted their daily lives.

How do we decide who belongs?

Where does the boundary between inclusion and exclusion lie?

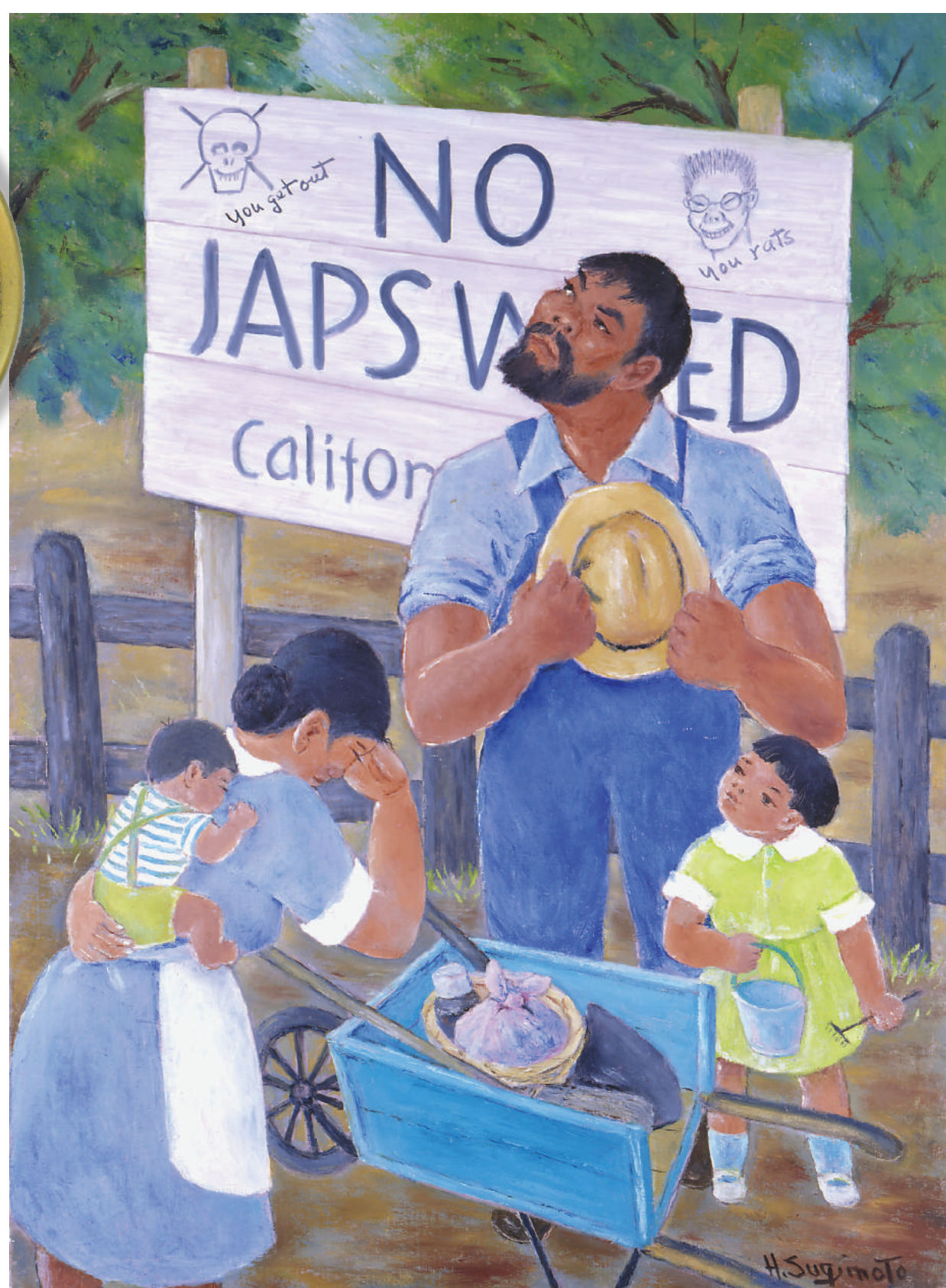
“These people were truly, in every sense, aliens. The color of their skins, the repulsiveness of their features, their undersize of figure, their incomprehensible language, strange customs, and heathen religion...conspired to set them apart.”

—Hubert Howe Bancroft, “History of California,” 1890



National Museum of American History

Perceived as alien and an economic threat, Asian immigrants who came to the United States faced prejudice, economic hardship, and social indignity. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1924 Asian Exclusion Act barred additional immigration and declared Asians ineligible for citizenship.

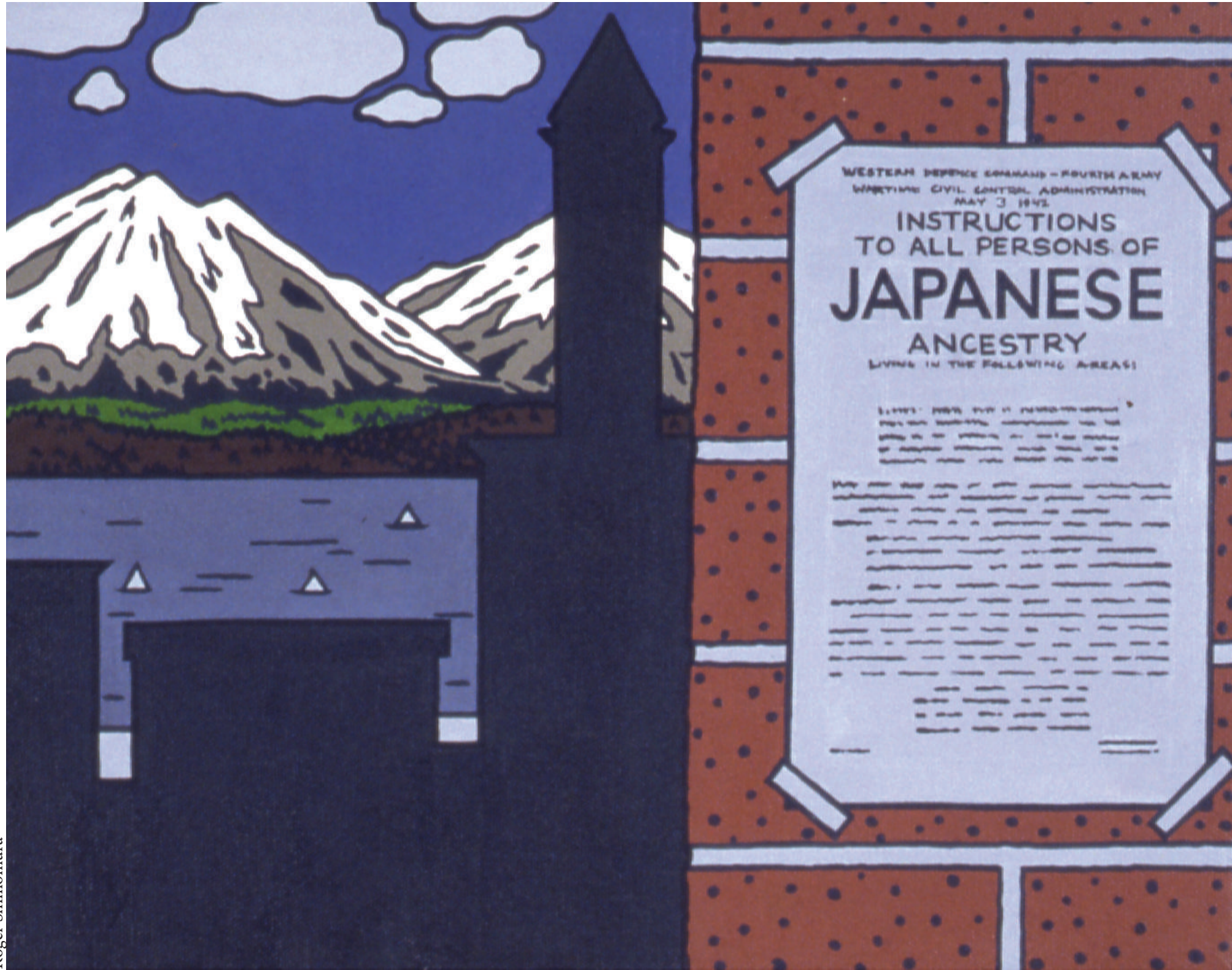


Japanese American National Museum (Gift of Madeleine Sugimoto and Naomi Tagawa, 92.97.122)



Courtesy of National Japanese American Historical Society

The U.S. government forced more than 120,000 Japanese Americans and resident Japanese into desolate incarceration camps.



Roger Shimomura



Seattle Post-Intelligencer Collection, Museum of History & Industry, Seattle, p128034

Executive Order 9066 authorized the military to establish a War Relocation Authority. Acting on 108 different “exclusion” orders, the military ordered Americans of Japanese ancestry and Japanese nationals living on the Pacific Coast and in southern Arizona to register and then report within a week for evacuation.

Who holds power?

What can result from unchecked authority?



National Archives

They had only days to dispose of businesses, homes, cars, and pets—which they sold at rock bottom prices or left behind.

“Right away, all of these junk dealers came into town, and oh, it was terrible. These guys would come in and offer ten or fifteen dollars and because they had to leave, they’d sell.”

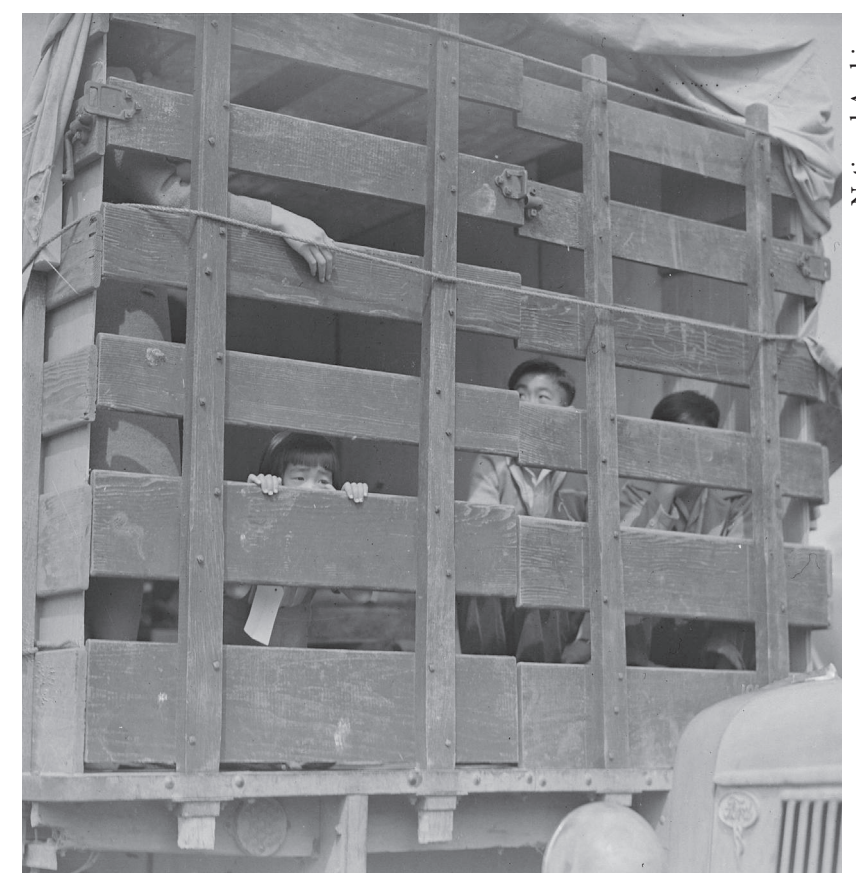
—Fred Fujikawa, incarcerated at the Jerome camp, Arkansas

Families and their luggage were tagged with their assigned numbers and transported to hastily prepared “assembly centers” within the restricted military zones. These were fairgrounds and racetracks where inmates were housed in livestock pavilions and horse stalls until they could be transported to camps.

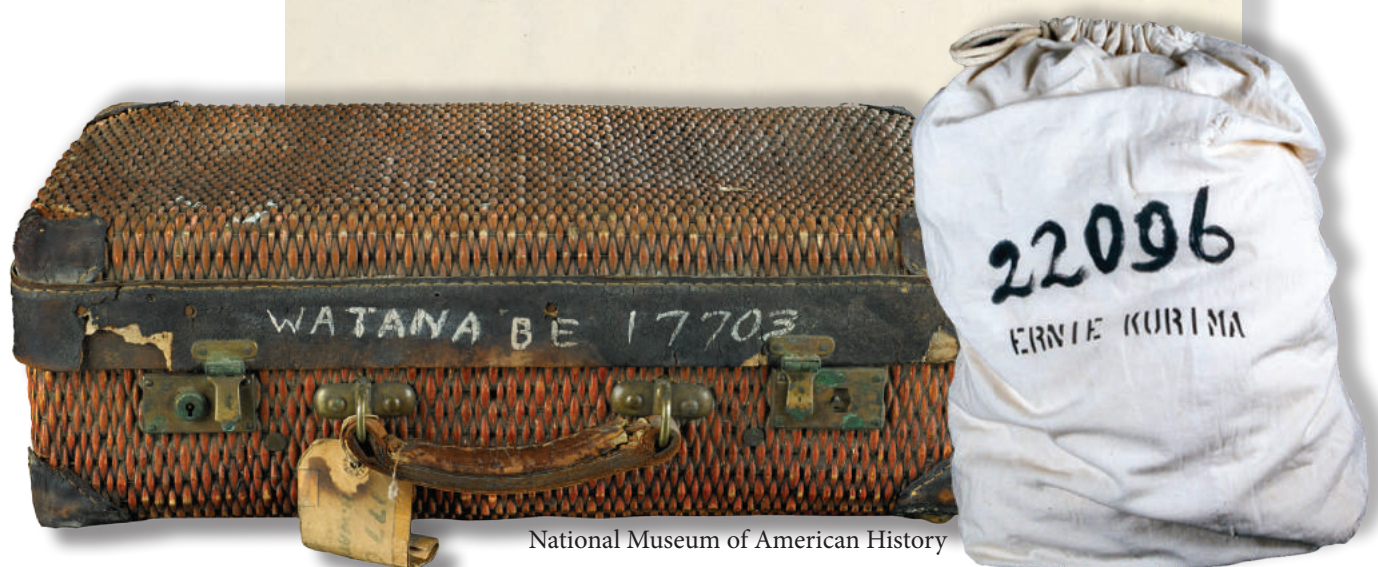
Emi Matsuoka Young



Seattle Post-Intelligencer Collection, Museum of History & Industry, Seattle, 2000.107.098.22.01



National Archives



National Museum of American History

Many in the camps declared their American-ness—and their resilience—by maintaining the routines and institutions of everyday life. Others joined or were drafted into the U.S. military.



Courtesy of Manzanar National Historic Site and the Kanjo Takamura Collection

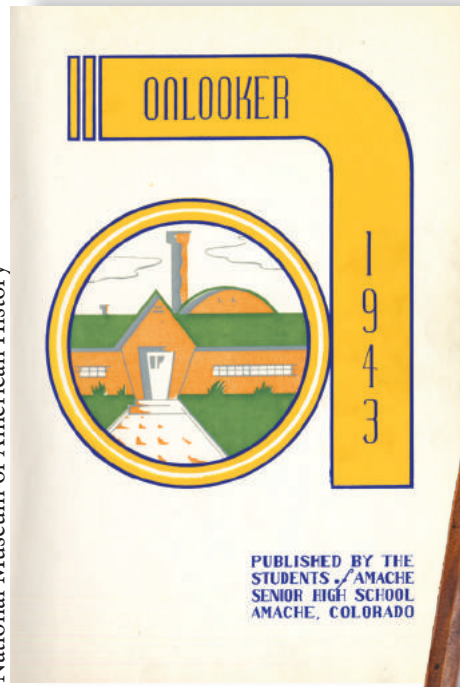
By the end of 1942, some 75,000 American citizens and another 45,000 Japanese nationals living in the United States were incarcerated. The War Relocation Authority held them in one of ten camps, all in remote inland areas—many in deserts or swamps. Inmates lived in temporary tar paper barrack-like structures surrounded by barbed wire, searchlights, and guard towers.



National Museum of American History



National Museum of American History



National Museum of American History



Under the constant gaze of armed guards, inmates endured the discomforts, regimens, and indignities of confinement. Even so, they strove to maintain some semblance of a normal life, starting sports teams, schools, and craft classes.

What counts as courage?

“Courage is something strong within you that brings out the best in the person.”

—Yuri Nakahara Kochiyama, incarcerated at the Jerome camp, Arkansas, 1942

How can persisting everyday be as brave as fighting in a war?



National Archives



Even as many of their families were incarcerated, more than 30,000 Japanese Americans volunteered for military service. Most were members of the 100th Infantry Battalion from Hawai'i and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, segregated units that fought together in Europe. In some of the most grueling battles of the war, they became one of the Army's most highly decorated units.

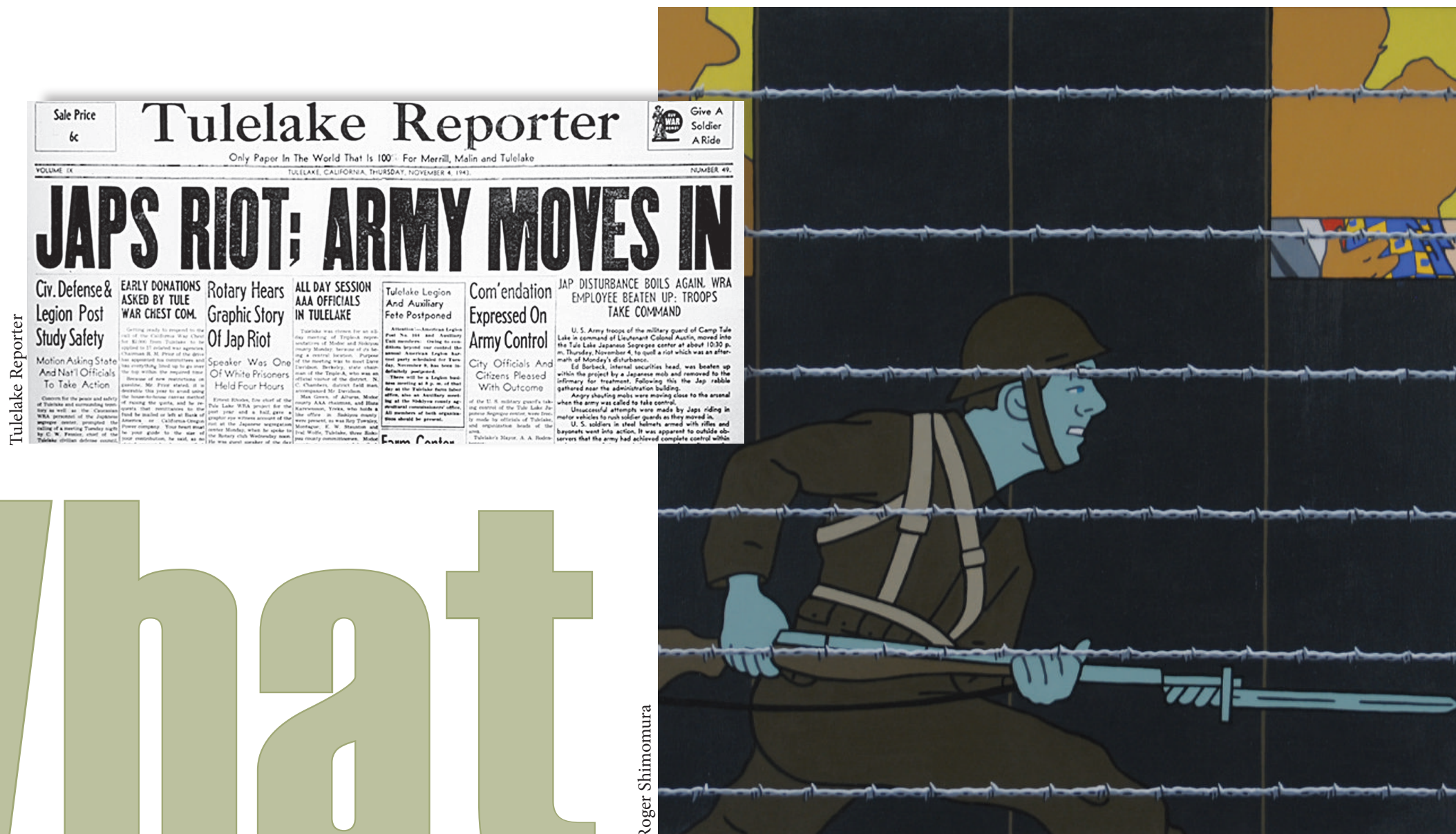
More than 6,000 other Japanese Americans served in the Pacific as translators and interpreters for the Military Intelligence Service. Japanese Americans also served in the Women's Army Corp.



National Museum of American History



Many resisted the injustice of their incarceration through protests and legal action.



“We could either tuck our tails between our legs like dogs or stand up like free men and fight for justice. Some of us chose the latter. We were going to resist.”

—Frank Emi, leader of the Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee

What choices can we make?

Is it better to conform or resist?



Most inmates endured the seemingly unbearable realities of incarceration with patience and dignity, adapting to the routines and regulations that ordered daily life in the camps.



Courtesy of Department of Special Collections and University Archives, University Library, California State University, Sacramento



National Museum of American History

Many resisted their imprisonment. Some participated in strikes and demonstrations within the camps. Some resisted the U.S. military draft. Others refused to pledge their loyalty to the United States or renounced their American citizenship.

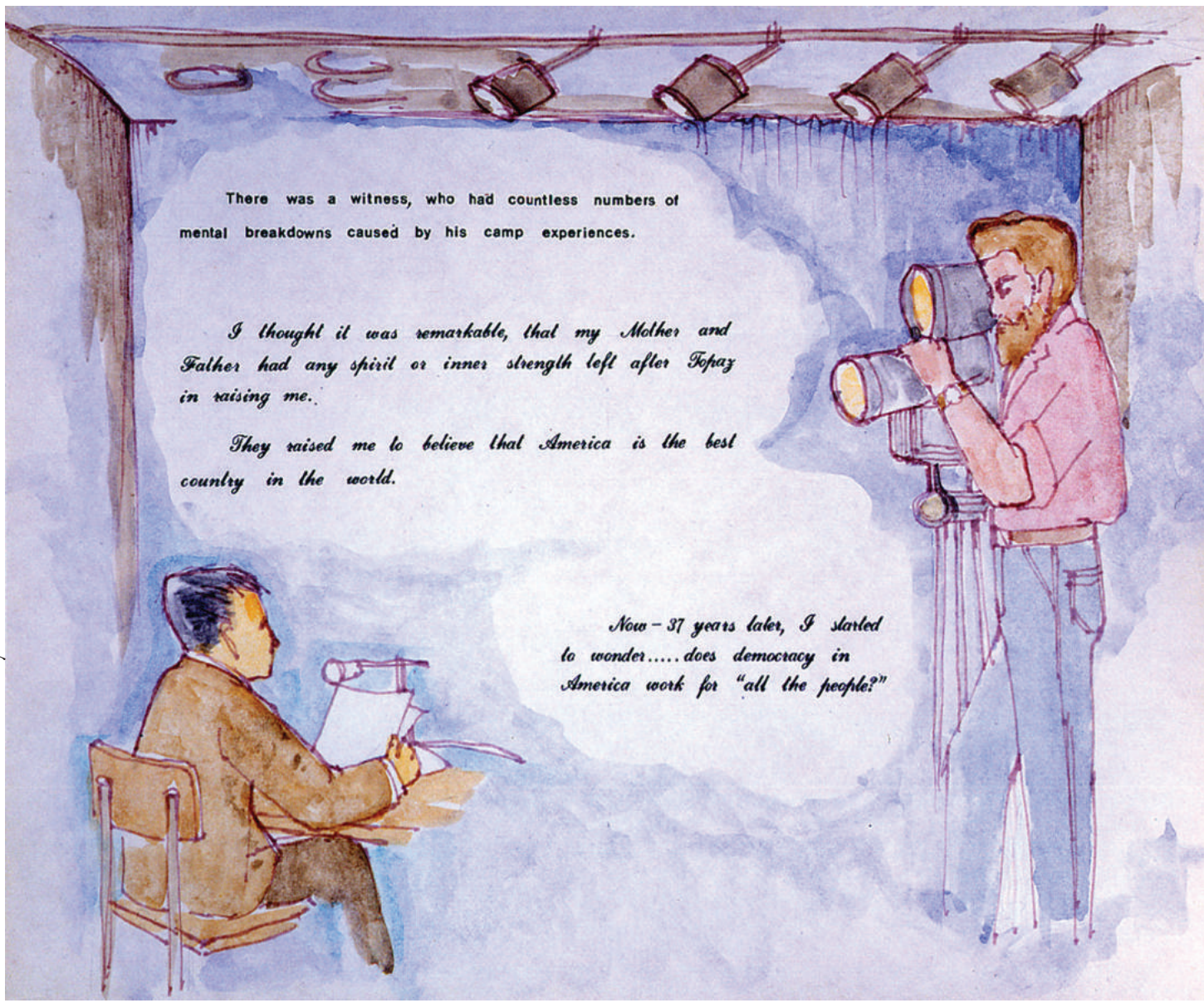
Those considered disloyal or troublemakers were sent to a maximum security segregation center inside the camp in Tule Lake, California, or even to federal prisons.



Used by permission, Utah State Historical Society

Mitsuye Endo, an American citizen held at the Tule Lake camp in California, then Topaz camp in Utah, went to court to challenge her incarceration. In 1944, the Supreme Court ruled in her favor, issuing a unanimous decision that loyal American citizens could not be held without criminal charges. After the Endo case, authorities started to empty the camps.

Some forty years later, the Japanese American community pushed the nation to confront the wrong it had done—and to make it right.



National Museum of American History



Courtesy of the Paul Bamai Collection, Densho

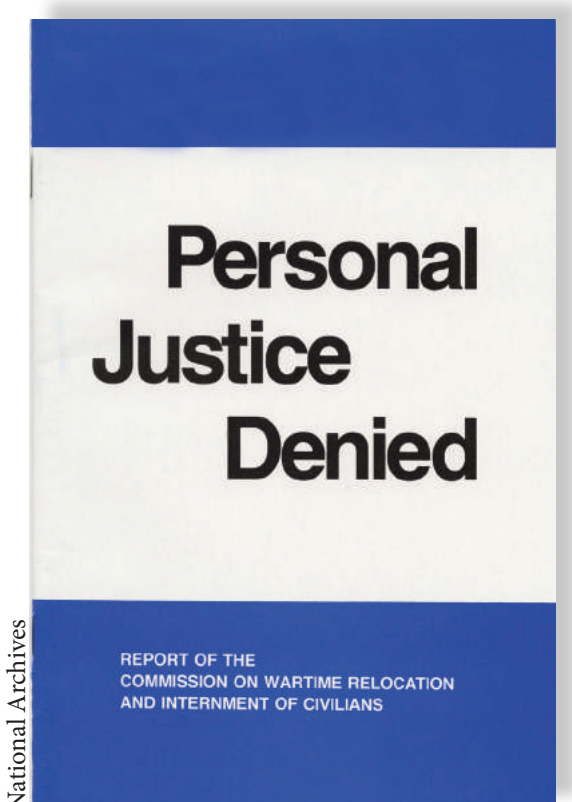
Through grassroots organizing, court action, and lobbying, the Japanese American community persuaded President Jimmy Carter to establish the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians in 1978. More than 750 witnesses testified at eleven hearings across the country.

How does democracy work?

“... we have learned from the tragedy of that long ago experience forever to treasure liberty and justice for each individual”

—President Gerald Ford, 1976, as he terminated Executive Order 9066

How can we have liberty and justice for all?



National Archives

In 1982, the Commission concluded that the incarceration had been the result not of military necessity, but of “race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership.”



Ronald Reagan Library, National Archives

President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, providing a national apology and compensation payments to survivors.



Gann, Matsuda

The Japanese American community continued to press its cause while waiting for redress payments to be processed. In 1990, the U.S. government issued the first \$20,000 redress checks and letters of apology signed by President George H.W. Bush. The effort to verify claims and locate survivors took ten years, so some received their apology letter from President Bill Clinton.

The country made a big and tragic error in 1942. Could it happen again?

How will “we the people” determine the balance between the rights of individual citizens and minority groups and the need for defense of the nation?

“There is a saying in Japanese culture, ‘kodomo no tame ni,’ which means, ‘for the sake of the children.’ And for us running this [redress] campaign, that had much to do with it. It’s the legacy we’re handing down to them and to the nation to say that, ‘You can make this mistake, but you also have to correct it—and by correcting it, hopefully not repeat it again.’”

—John Tateishi, who was incarcerated between the ages of three and six



Bill Manho Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming

More than half of the over 120,000 Japanese Americans and Japanese incarcerated during World War II were children.

Today, pilgrimages to the sites of the camps introduce new generations to the history of the incarceration.



Courtesy of the Klimek Family Collection, Denzho

NO MORE
MANZANARS



National Museum of American History

HOW WILL YOU SHAPE THE FUTURE?