

TEACHER'S GUIDE

5 Myths and Misconceptions

MISSION US: "Prisoner in My Homeland"

1. "Japanese" were "evacuated" to "internment" camps.

Using euphemistic words and phrases to describe the forced removal and incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II minimizes the injustices that occurred. Therefore, it is important to not use terms that misrepresent certain people and events. One such mischaracterization was that "Japanese" people were affected by these events and not Japanese Americans. Describing them only as "Japanese" ignores their American identities. About 80,000 out of the 120,000 people who were imprisoned were born in the U.S. and were American citizens. Most Japanese immigrants subjected to incarceration had been residents of the U.S. for years, if not decades, prior to WWII. There is no evidence they were trying to undermine the U.S. during the war or actively supported Japan's wartime actions. It is also misleading to say that Japanese Americans were "evacuated" from their homes. Being evacuated denotes some type of danger you are escaping (like being evacuated during a natural disaster); but Japanese Americans were not "relocated" to protect them from danger. Instead, they were forcibly removed from their homes and many of their possessions were confiscated. And finally, describing the places where Japanese Americans were sent to as "internment" camps hides another reality: Japanese Americans were imprisoned by the U.S. government, and therefore, describing what happened to them as being incarcerated is far more accurate.

2. Japanese Americans did not resist removal and incarceration.

Before, during, and after the war, Japanese Americans protested incarceration in many ways. In early 1942, leaders of the Seattle chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League spoke out, stating to Congress, "we are opposed to the idea of indiscriminate, en masse evacuation of all citizens and loyal aliens of Japanese extraction." Japanese Americans continued to protest in the prison camps. For example, workers went on strike when barbed wire fences were installed at the Heart Mountain camp and violent demonstrations took place in the Manzanar camp. After the U.S. government distributed a loyalty questionnaire in the spring of 1943, many Japanese Americans refused to sign because they did not want to officially declare their loyalty to a country that was actively imprisoning its own citizens. And others went to court to fight the government's actions, including Gordon Hirabayashi, Fred Korematsu, and Minoru Yasui, who took their fights against the restrictions, forced removal, and imprisonment all the way to the United States Supreme Court.

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3. People of Japanese descent were incarcerated because they posed a threat to American national security.

President Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 authorized the military to imprison Japanese Americans in part to supposedly protect the United States' national defense. However, there was no clear threat to national defense from the Japanese American community before the war, and no credible threat emerged during the war. In fact, a 1940 report commissioned by the State Department argued that Japanese Americans on the West Coast presented "a remarkable, even extraordinary degree of loyalty" to the United States. A report by the Chief of Naval Operations later concluded that any supposed "Japanese Problem" in the country was "magnified out of its true proportion, largely because of the physical characteristics of the people." Indeed, there is little evidence that persons of Japanese descent living in the United States were spying on or sabotaging U.S. national interests in any significant way. Only one case -- in which three Nisei women were found guilty of helping German prisoners escape a POW camp -- was ever reported during the war.

4. People in the Japanese American community were all alike.

One of the most damaging myths about any group of people is that they all think, act, and feel the same. This misconception certainly affected perceptions of the Japanese American community during World War II. But Japanese Americans were (and are) a diverse group represented in all sections of American society. They lived in major urban centers like Los Angeles and in smaller rural communities like Bainbridge. They had careers as lawyers, professors, businessmen, dock workers, farmers, and the like. Some were very wealthy, while others were not. When this diverse group was incarcerated and forced to share tight living spaces with one another, their social, economic, and cultural differences revealed themselves on almost a daily basis.

5. The impact of incarceration ended after the camps were closed.

After the last incarceration camp closed in 1948, Japanese Americans tried to restore their pre-war lives. However, after years of imprisonment, many families had lost their homes or were forced to forfeit their businesses and personal savings. Discrimination after the war made it hard for many to find new jobs and restore their livelihoods back at home. As a result, one-third of those formerly incarcerated attempted to start over in

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a new state. In the 1980s, the United States government finally admitted that incarceration was the result of "racial prejudice, wartime hysteria, and...failure of political leadership." The U.S. officially apologized and paid reparations of \$20,000 each to over 80,000 surviving Japanese Americans. But for some, no apology or compensation could undo the psychological impact of incarceration. As Ted Nagata—a Japanese American held at the Topaz camp—said of his mother, "It just affected her to the point where she couldn't carry on. She never did recover from [incarceration]. So my mother was a real casualty of Topaz, and I'm sure there were many others, too."