

Prisoner in My Homeland Myths and Misconceptions

*Below are some common misunderstandings about the history of Japanese American imprisonment during World War II. Each of the bolded statements is **incorrect**.*

1. Myth: “Japanese” were “evacuated” to “internment” camps.

Sometimes, when Americans talk about what happened to Japanese Americans during World War II, they use euphemisms, words that make it sound not as bad as it really was. But it's important to be as accurate as possible. It is not correct to say that “Japanese” people were affected by this history because it hides the fact that they were Japanese *Americans*. About 80,000 out of the 120,000 people who were put in prison were born in the U.S. and were American citizens. Most of the others had been living in the United States for a long time before the war. There's no proof that they were trying to harm the United States during the war or help Japan.

It's not right to say that Japanese Americans were "evacuated" or "relocated" from their homes because that sounds like they were leaving to escape danger, like during a natural disaster. What really happened is that they were taken from their homes by force, and the government confiscated many of their belongings.

Lastly, it is not correct to call the places that Japanese Americans were taken “internment camps.” They were prisons, so it is more accurate to say that they were imprisoned or incarcerated.

2. Myth: Japanese Americans did not resist or protest being imprisoned.

Before, during, and after the war, Japanese Americans stood up and spoke out against being put in prison. In 1942, leaders from the Japanese American Citizens League protested to Congress. Japanese Americans also protested in the prison camps. In some camps, prisoners went on strikes from the jobs they had been assigned. In other camps, there were even violent demonstrations.

In 1943, the U.S. government gave Japanese Americans a loyalty questionnaire. Many of them said they couldn't sign it because they didn't want to say they were loyal to a country that was locking up its own people. Some Japanese Americans also went to court to fight against what the government was doing. People like Gordon Hirabayashi, Fred Korematsu, and Minoru Yasui took their fights all the way to the United States Supreme Court.

3. Myth: Japanese Americans were imprisoned because they were a threat to the safety of the United States during the war.

President Roosevelt said that he allowed the military to imprison Japanese Americans in order to protect the United States during World War II. But there was never any clear danger from Japanese Americans before or during the war. In fact, government reports said that Japanese Americans were very loyal to the United States and that they were only treated with suspicion because they looked different from white Americans. There was only one case of a person with Japanese heritage living in the United States who worked against the country during the war.

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4. Myth: Japanese Americans were all alike.

It is always a harmful assumption when people think that everyone in a certain group thinks, acts, and feels exactly the same. During World War II, many Americans believed this about Japanese Americans. But the truth is, Japanese Americans were (and are) a varied group who lived all over America, in big cities and on small farms. They had different jobs, like being lawyers, professors, businesspeople, dock workers, or farmers. Some were rich and others were poor.

5. Myth: Japanese Americans went back to their normal lives after the camps closed.

After the prison camps closed, Japanese Americans tried to go back to their normal lives, but it was difficult. Many families had lost their homes, had to give up their businesses, and had no money left. Even though the war ended, many people in the United States still didn't trust or treat Japanese Americans fairly. It wasn't until the 1980s that the U.S. government admitted they were wrong for putting Japanese Americans in prison camps, and that it was the result of racial prejudice. The U.S. officially apologized and gave \$20,000 each to more than 80,000 surviving Japanese Americans. But for many of them, the apologies and money didn't make up for all the pain and problems they went through from being imprisoned.