The Japanese Internment

On December 7, 1941, during the early part of World War II, Japan bombed the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. The next day, the U.S. declared war on Japan. Japan was capturing many islands and territories around the Pacific Ocean, and the U.S. military was concerned about the safety of the west coast of the United States. Worried that people with Japanese ancestry might be loyal to Japan and become spies, the U.S. military issued an “exclusion order” for certain regions on the west coast. It required everyone with Japanese ancestry—even U.S. citizens—to leave the area and live in a military-controlled detention center. These centers were known as “internment camps.” Fred Korematsu, an American-born U.S. citizen with Japanese parents, refused to relocate. He was arrested for violating the exclusion order.

The Argument

Korematsu followed the same arguments used a year earlier by a man of Japanese ancestry who had refused to obey a curfew. The Court had upheld the curfew. Still, Korematsu argued the new order was unconstitutional because it discriminated against people based on their race. He argued that the government violated the 5th Amendment, which says no person may be “deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law.”

The Decision

The Supreme Court disagreed. In an earlier case, the Court had said that in normal circumstances racial discrimination is unconstitutional, but the situation during the war with Japan was different. The Court pointed to evidence showing that some members of the Japanese community were disloyal. Because the military said it was impossible to single out the disloyal people, the Court said it was constitutional to isolate the whole group. “Korematsu was not excluded... because of hostility to him or his race,” the Court said. “He was excluded because we are at war with the Japanese Empire [and our] military authorities... feared an invasion of our West Coast....” The Court refused to look back with “the calm perspective of hindsight” and second-guess what the military did during a time of urgent threat.

So What?

This case meant that during wartime it was okay for the U.S. government to violate people’s civil rights just because they looked like the enemy. In the years since, this opinion has met with severe disapproval. The issue took on new life after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Many people were concerned that people’s rights would be violated just because they looked Middle Eastern. In 2004, two American citizens being held as “enemy combatants” challenged the government’s right to keep them in prison without the opportunity to tell a judge their side of the story. The Court said those prisoners had the right to go before a judge. Even so, the rights of people who look like the enemy during wartime are still unclear.
Righting the Wrong. In 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed a law that would issue a national apology and provide restitution payments to Japanese Americans who were interned during World War II. Use the word bank to fill in the blanks and see what President Reagan said when he signed the law.

“We gather here today to right a grave wrong. More than ________ years ago, shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, 120,000 persons of ________________ ancestry living in the United States were forcibly removed from their homes and placed in makeshift ________________ camps. This action was taken without trial, without ________. It was based solely on ___________, for these 120,000 were Americans of Japanese descent. Yes, the Nation was then at ____________, struggling for its survival, and it’s not for us today to pass ________________ upon those who may have made mistakes while engaged in that great struggle. Yet we must recognize that the internment of Japanese-Americans was just that: a ________________. For throughout the war, Japanese-Americans in the tens of thousands remained utterly ________________ to the United States. Indeed, scores of Japanese-Americans volunteered for our ________________. Yet back at home, the soldiers’ ________________ were being denied the very freedom for which so many of the soldiers themselves were laying down their ________________.

“The ________________ that I am about to sign provides for a restitution payment to each of the 60,000 surviving Japanese-Americans of the 120,000 who were relocated or detained. Yet no ________________ can make up for those lost years. So, what is most important in this bill has less to do with property than with ________________. For here we admit a wrong; here we reaffirm our commitment as a nation to equal justice under the ____________.”

WORD BANK

families
legislation
internment
race

war
honor
Armed Forces
judgment

forty
jury
loyal
law

lives
mistake
payment
Japanese
“We gather here today to right a grave wrong. More than _______forty______ years ago, shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, 120,000 persons of _______Japanese_______ ancestry living in the United States were forcibly removed from their homes and placed in makeshift _______internment_______ camps. This action was taken without trial, without _______jury_____. It was based solely on _______race______, for these 120,000 were Americans of Japanese descent. Yes, the Nation was then at _______war______, struggling for its survival, and it’s not for us today to pass _______judgment_______ upon those who may have made mistakes while engaged in that great struggle. Yet we must recognize that the internment of Japanese-Americans was just that: a _______mistake_____. For throughout the war, Japanese-Americans in the tens of thousands remained utterly _______loyal_______ to the United States. Indeed, scores of Japanese-Americans volunteered for our _______Armed Forces_____. Yet back at home, the soldiers’ _______families_______ were being denied the very freedom for which so many of the soldiers themselves were laying down their _______lives_______.

“The _______legislation_______ that I am about to sign provides for a restitution payment to each of the 60,000 surviving Japanese-Americans of the 120,000 who were relocated or detained. Yet no _______payment_______ can make up for those lost years. So, what is most important in this bill has less to do with property than with _______honor_____. For here we admit a wrong: here we reaffirm our commitment as a nation to equal justice under the _______law_____."

** WORD BANK **

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Activity