Detained in The Land of the Free:
The Japanese American Internment as a Contradiction to Individual Liberty in America

The internment of nearly 120,000 Japanese Americans after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1942 represents one of the major paradoxes in U.S. history. While Americans condemned the evils of Nazism overseas, the Roosevelt Administration committed significant human rights violations by forcibly removing Japanese Americans from their homes and transporting them to various relocation facilities, remote compounds in the desert surrounded by barbed wire and monitored closely by militiamen with rifles. The women, men, and children in these camps were innocent prisoners, incarcerated without trial for crimes they had not committed. Forty years later, the U.S. Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians admitted that “the detention of Americans of Japanese ancestry during World War II was not an act of military necessity but an act of racial discrimination” [1]. How, then, can one explain the 1942 decision to incarcerate hundreds of thousands of Japanese American citizens under the guise of the preservation of American security and, by extension, American liberty? Who is freedom reserved for in America, and who suffers when the government attempts to uphold that freedom in times of national distress?

The Japanese American evacuation and relocation situation seriously complicates the definition of “freedom” so often attached to the American lifestyle. In this essay I will use the internment to highlight the costs of freedom in a society that prides itself on “liberty and justice for all.” Using Isaiah Berlin’s concept of freedom from, I intend to prove that the historical roots of liberalism in America and its ideological prevalence during World War II perpetuated a power hierarchy that privileged white, wealthy Americans of European ancestry and thereby allowed for the systematic incarceration of Japanese Americans. To begin, I will explicate Berlin’s concept of freedom from and suggest that it lends itself to isolated individualism. This individualism, I will argue, bolsters power dynamics in which freedom is reserved only for a choice few. In regard to the 1942 internment situation, I will identify this privileged “choice few” as white Americans who assumed their freedom was in jeopardy in light of the Pearl Harbor bombings. Lastly, I will highlight the pitfalls of American liberalism by examining the damaging effects of internment on Japanese Americans as they withered in relocation camps for the preservation of freedom for white Americans. I will focus specifically on the tendency in liberalism to gloss over the cultural significance of community for certain ethnic groups by prioritizing individuality over group-based identity.

In his renowned essay “Two Concepts of Liberty,” Isaiah Berlin defines freedom from, or the “area in which man can act unobstructed by others,” as one of two common philosophical concepts of freedom (Berlin124). Freedom from focuses on the individual: I, as an individual, remain free until I am impeded by external forces. But in order to prevent the “social chaos” that would likely erupt if every individual’s freedom remained
self interested, philosophers such as Berlin insist on the importance of law to preserve social values such as “justice or happiness, or culture, or security, or varying degrees of equality” (Berlin 123). The glaring problem with this concept of freedom is that in enforcing laws that restrict human action, the state has a tendency to squander the very social values it attempts to uphold. In other words, “the freedom of some must at times be curtailed to secure the freedom of others” (Berlin 126).

Who, then, is freedom reserved for in America? Because American politics was established by liberal, white men of European ancestry who viewed diversity as being a destructive force in society and therefore attempted to obliterate difference with the creation of the U.S. Constitution [2], the emerging standard of normalcy was one that reflected the white ideal in contrast to “the other.” As asserted by Noel Ignatiev in Race Traitor, “whiteness” is now embedded in American culture as being an “unmarked category against which difference is constructed; whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations” [3]. When Berlin writes that “the minority who have freedom got it by exploiting it, or, at least, averting their gaze from, the vast majority who do not,” I believe this “minority” population with freedom refers, in the case of the Japanese American internment, to white Americans in positions of privilege and power (Berlin 125). To use Berlin’s model, freedom from in America is not simply the “area in which man can act unobstructed by others,” but the “area in which [elite] man can act

unobstructed by others” at the cost of extreme injustice for non-whites of varying economic backgrounds (Berlin 124).

The Japanese American evacuation and relocation situation provides the perfect example of the problems that arise in America’s attempts to insure national security and liberty under the pervading albeit erroneous assumption of “white” as “normal.” Mass hysteria and acute anti-Japanese sentiments in relation to the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 led to the incarceration of nearly 120,000 first and second generation Japanese Americans. While many white Americans, specifically those living on the West Coast where there were significant Japanese American populations, breathed a sigh of relief at a narrowly averted second assault from the “dirty Japs,” Japanese American families were ripped from their communities and placed in relocation facilities in the barren deserts of the Midwest [4]. The living conditions in these facilities, as described in a poignant essay by former internee Toyo Suyemoto, were less than desirable:

As we entered our barracks, we found the floor covered with a thick layer of alkali dust. Any movement raised white swirling clouds… There was no furniture, just army cots and two mattresses leaning against unfinished walls…we soon discovered how cold Topaz was at it’s highest elevation. Later in winter, milk bottles left on the windowsill would freeze and pop their lids (30-31).

Internees like Toyo Suyemoto were undoubtedly robbed of the freedom delineated in Berlin’s essay. Berlin writes, of *freedom from*, that “if I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree” (Berlin 122). Upholding this definition of freedom, the barbed wire, armed guards, and constant surveillance

McCluskey 5

experienced by internees constitute a blatant disregard for individual liberty. The internment situation highlights a direct conflict between the preservation of American security and the general welfare and equality of all American people. In an attempt to protect white America from the alleged threat of foreign attack, elected officials effectively imprisoned an entire ethnic minority community and denied them the most basic of human freedoms.

Because American liberalism as delineated by Berlin’s concept of freedom from favors the rights of individuals over the rights of social groups, those citizens who benefit most from theories of individual freedom are white, affluent citizens of European ancestry who do not generally rely on communal support systems for wellbeing. Dorothy Roberts, in a critique of racial inequality prevalent in the United States, reminds readers that “[c]laims for recognition and respect by ethnic groups around the world have brought to light the inadequacy of protecting individual rights. The focus of liberal political theories on the individual and the state has failed to account for the importance of membership in cultural groups” [5]. Before World War II, most Japanese Americans living in the United States functioned with a reliance on community that was disrupted by laws that upheld the preservation of individual rights. As Donna K. Nagata points out in her book Legacy of Injustice, the first measure of U.S. action against Japanese Americans immediately following the bombing of Pearl Harbor was to arrest large numbers of Issei leaders, or older generations of Japanese immigrants, and remove

them from Japanese American communities [6]. This move caused serious rifts within communities as younger generations of Japanese Americans clamored to replace their elder leaders. In light of the stress, fear, and anxiety already present in most Japanese American communities at the time, the disruption of leadership structure in communities by U.S. law enforcement officials further paralyzed these communities and made them increasingly susceptible to discrimination in the form of forced internment [7].

The paradigm of white power wittingly and unwittingly supported by liberalism not only allowed for the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II, but it also created an internalized sense of inferiority and displacement among the Japanese American community that has become embedded in the collective consciousness of Japanese Americans living in the United States today. In her essay “Legacy of Silence,” Jeni Yamada comments on the lasting effects of internment for younger generations of American men and women of Japanese ancestry: “I didn’t live the camp experience,” she writes, “But I didn’t escape it either” (Yamada 47). An excerpt from Nagata’s book conveys a similar sense of the deep confusion, anger, and sadness experienced by the children and grandchildren of former internees:

No matter how many times I hear, speak, or read of the internment there is an inevitable feeling of hurt, sadness, anger, and fear that wells up inside of me. I feel hurt for the thousands of people who had to experience the ordeal; sadness for the pain, suffering, and scars that it left; anger at the government (not the country) of the time for so blatantly infringing upon citizen freedom for ungrounded reasons, and fear of the possibility that it could, indeed, happen again” (149).

The preservation of freedom for white Americans and the consequences of the evacuation and relocation of Japanese Americans during the 1940s and 50s are therefore not fixed in one historical moment. To this day, the safeguarding of individual American freedom during World War II continues to haunt marginalized groups like Japanese Americans.

Narratives such as those published by Yamada and Nagata point to the silence that often follows mention of the Japanese American internment in U.S. history. The costs of freedom for white Americans during the Second World War left painful scars on the Japanese American community that continue to disparage contemporary Japanese Americans. And yet despite an ample body of literature, academic articles, and film documentaries exploring the evacuation and relocation situation, many U.S. citizens remain ill informed about the treatment of Japanese Americans after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Erica Harth, in an introduction to her anthology Last Witness, writes that today “the American public is still largely uninformed” about the atrocities of Japanese internment (Harth i), and an introduction to Nagata’s Legacy of Injustice begins with the assertion that “[d]iscussion of what happened has been conspicuously absent from classroom history books” (Nagata ix).

The pervading silence regarding reference to the Japanese American internment suggests the preservation of power hierarchies in America that continue to put individual freedom first, and thereby continue to privilege white, wealthy Americans at the expense of others. The concept of freedom in the United States that contributed to the internment in 1942 closely resembles the concept of freedom from delineated by Isaiah Berlin in his
essay “Two Concepts of Liberty.” This liberal definition of freedom obfuscates the political importance of community that was so essential to Japanese Americans during World War II. Because *freedom from* emphasizes the individual, and the individuals with the most political, economic, and social power in the U.S. are white and wealthy, freedom is reserved only for a choice few Americans who often usurp the freedom of others to preserve their individual liberty. A sea change in America in which freedom becomes a reality for all citizens can only take place through a new awareness among white U.S. citizens of the toll their individual freedom has too often taken historically on marginalized groups.
Works Cited


