

# A Lesson on the Japanese American Internment

BY MARK SWEETING

WORLD WAR II, like so many other events in history, presents the teacher with an overwhelming range of topics. The rise of Nazism and fascism in Europe, the Holocaust, the military history and diplomacy of the war, the attack on Pearl Harbor and the war in the Pacific, the Nuremberg Trials, the dropping of atomic bombs, the beginnings of the Cold War—there is no way to cover all these events in a typical month-long unit.

One event that invariably gets neglected is the war-time internment of Japanese Americans from the West Coast of the United States. The reasons are numerous. But I suspect the main reason is that serious investigation of the internment would

contradict the traditional presentation of the U.S. role in the war—how U.S. ingenuity and power turned back Hitler, liberated the concentration camps, halted Japanese expansionism, and generally fought the good fight. Such an interpretation does not leave much room for aberrations, particularly one as anti-democratic as the Japanese internment.

However, I have covered the internment in my U.S. History classes in some detail. One reason is that I teach in Oregon, which, along with California and Washington, was one of the states most affected by Executive Order 9066, which initiated the internment.



Richard A. Cooke/CORBIS

*Shi and Mary Nomura returned in 1983 to visit the Manzanar internment camp in California where they and other Japanese Americans were once held.*

Executive Order 9066, signed by President Roosevelt on Feb. 19, 1942, empowered the Secretary of War to force Japanese Americans (two thirds of whom were U.S. citizens) on the coast into hastily built prisons in the desert regions of the American West. For the war's duration, 120,000 innocent and unaccused Japanese Americans were imprisoned. The order is perhaps the single largest collective civil rights violation in post-Civil War America. Even an abbreviated list of the constitutional rights violated by the executive order is distressing: freedom of speech, freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures, the right to be informed of charges, the right to a speedy and public trial, the right to legal counsel, the right to a trial by jury, and the right to equal protection under the law.

Fortunately, I was able to gather a lot of information and firsthand accounts of Japanese Americans' experiences in the internment camps. We read primary documents and did role plays, simulations, and interior monologues concerning the internment. (An interior monologue is when a student attempts to write from the point of view of a historical or literary figure.) My students were genuinely surprised by the cruelty and illegality of the act.

## Textbooks and the Internment

One of my students missed most of the topic due to illness. When he asked me about make-up work, I felt a bit trapped, because so much of what we do in class is interactive and participatory. I told him I would come up with a list of assignments. Desperate, I turned to the district-adopted textbook for the class: *The Americans* (Jordan, Greenblatt, Bowes, 1985). In looking for information on the internment, I found only two paragraphs conveniently buried at the end of a chapter on the initial stages of World War II. The heading for the paragraphs read: "Nation Relocates Japanese Americans."

*Relocates!* I did not expect to see this term still used to describe Executive Order 9066. I doubted whether anyone who had endured the internment would describe it as merely being "relocated."

From that heading I came up with the following activity, which I carried out the next day.

### 'Mark Relocates Jimmy'

When the students settled into their seats, I told them we were going to practice writing newspaper articles and headlines. I told them they were to write headlines for what happened in class that

day. As I was describing what was to be done, I interrupted myself in mid-sentence to "yell" at Jimmy, a student. (I had told Jimmy earlier that at some point during class I was going to get very mad at him, berate him, and then move his seat. I asked that he keep this secret and he was more than happy to go along.) As part of my "yelling" I said angrily and loudly: "Wait a moment. Jimmy! I've had enough of that. I want you to leave your books and your jacket and come up

here and sit at my desk where I can keep an eye on you! Right now! Move it!"

"What did I do?" Jimmy protested.

"I don't have to tell you anything, Jimmy," I answered. "Now move it!"

The class sat in bewilderment. Although they hadn't necessarily been watching Jimmy, they also hadn't heard him fooling around or distracting anyone. They also had never seen me lose my temper in class. I could see their uneasiness.

At this point I announced: "OK, assume you are a reporter for the school paper and you are going to write a headline to explain what just happened."

I gave them a few minutes and then asked them to read their headlines out loud as I wrote them on the board. Here is a sample:

"Teacher Forces Student Up Front!"

"Mark Screams and Humiliates Jimmy in Social Studies!"

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*The internment order is perhaps the single largest collective civil rights violation in post-Civil War America.*

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“Mark Forgets His Medication and Slams Jimmy!”

Each student read aloud his or her headline and most of them were along the same line—that I had gotten angry and made Jimmy move despite his pleas of innocence.

I then said, “Well, here’s my headline. What do you think of it: ‘Mark Relocates Jimmy?’”

Cries of “No!” came from the class.

“What’s wrong with my headline?” I asked. “Isn’t that what I did?”

More cries of “No!” from students. “*Relocates* is so weak,” one said. “*Relocates*, that word’s not right; it just doesn’t fit.”

“Why?” I asked. “Why do you think *relocates* is a weak word choice?”

The students and I then discussed the word *relocates* and used it in various sentences. One student remarked that sometimes people say they relocated for a new job. I offered that newlyweds often will “relocate” to begin their lives together. Through the discussion, we came to agree that the word *relocates* implies voluntary action or compliance by the person or persons doing the actual relocating.

I asked again if Jimmy was “relocated.”

“No!” they cried. He was forced to move by me, the teacher. I had not merely relocated Jimmy, but had in fact screamed at him, humiliated him for no reason, and then made him sit at my desk.

I then asked students to open their textbooks, *The Americans*, to p. 742 and read the heading in the middle of the page: “Nation Relocates Japanese Americans.” There was spontaneous laughter.

“Based on what we have seen and read and experienced about Executive Order 9066, would you say this was a fair headline?” I asked. The students immediately recognized the headline’s inappropriateness.

“‘Arrests them’ is more like it,” one student said. “The authors are just trying to make it sound better, more polite.”

In fact, the headline is worse than sleazy or polite. It is wrong. Japanese Americans were arrested and detained without charge or provocation or probable cause. In the years during and just after the war, the term used to describe the internment was “relocation.” That it is still used in textbooks to characterize the internment is discouraging.

The word *nation* in the headline is equally offensive. “Nation Relocates Japanese Americans” implies that Japanese Americans were not part of the nation, that they were somehow



*Japanese Americans wave a flag and flash “V for victory” signs, anxious to show their loyalty to the U.S. as they are en route to an internment camp.*

separate. Two thirds of those imprisoned were U.S. citizens, and many first-generation Japanese were forbidden to become citizens by laws never applied to Europeans. Even those who were not yet citizens were still entitled to equal protection under the law. Furthermore, the American “nation” did not imprison the Japanese; this was a decision by the ruling powers, carried out by presidential order.

As a result of this exercise, I appreciated anew the power of words. And I became even more

aware of how history teaching is shaped by the materials we use in our classrooms. American history textbooks, unfortunately, are filled with euphemisms and sanitized language for many indefensible acts. The internment is presented as an aberration, an unfortunate government reaction made during a stressful time. In fact, the removal of Japanese Americans from the West Coast was lobbied for, and beneficial to, certain groups of people, among them white farmers looking for a greater share of the thriving fruit industry. When something like Executive Order 9066 is still presented as a “relocation,” the event simply does not sound all that bad—or even wrong.

Far too often, oppressive events, if included in textbooks at all, are packaged and phrased in such a way as to take away blame or to remove any

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hint of ill-intent. Passive voice and vague language are two favorite techniques used by textbook writers to avoid controversy.

Even though newer textbooks present a greater number of controversial acts from our nation’s past, that is not enough. If we are going to use textbooks, we must examine how they present such controversies and analyze both what is, and isn’t, included. ■

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