



Respect: The Bridge Between Natural Rights and a Free Society

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which authorized the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans for the purpose of defending the U.S. from “espionage and against sabotage” to ensure a “successful prosecution of war” (United States, Executive Office of the President [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] 1). Several months earlier, on December 7, 1941, Japan launched a devastating assault on Pearl Harbor which prompted considerable suspicion of Japanese Americans. As public and political pressure mounted, President Roosevelt forcefully relocated Japanese Americans to internment camps. Even the Supreme Court justified the decision; in *Korematsu v. United States*, the court described internment as being necessary for the security of the nation during wartime (“*Korematsu v. United States*”). It would be several decades before the government would acknowledge its injustice.

As a sixth grader in American history class, learning about internment was perplexing and disillusioning. The notion that the government would so blatantly contradict its own principles was almost completely inconceivable to me. I had believed with great conviction that America was a country which invariably pursued equality and justice for its citizens, and I was unable to understand how such a patent miscarriage of justice could have occurred less than a century ago in a country which prides itself on its dedication to preserving freedom. It was an overt attempt to strip American citizens of their natural rights, a concept which has been central to the American Republic since its inception.

It was English Philosopher John Locke who first introduced the concept of natural rights and defined them in three simple words: life, liberty, and property. Locke himself was a part of the enlightenment movement which had flourished in Europe and sought to, among other things, define the relationship between the government and the people (Weston). In 1776, Thomas

Jefferson penned the Declaration of Independence which consisted heavily of enlightenment rhetoric and stated that all individuals were born with “certain unalienable rights” including “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” and that, if such rights were infringed upon, the people were obligated to “abolish” such a government (US 1776). Thus, the purpose of establishing natural rights was to set a boundary on governmental power and protect the people from existing under despotic rule. How then, did a country which fought a revolution for these principles stray so far from them? Discrimination against Japanese Americans intensified greatly after Pearl Harbor as individuals like General John DeWitt questioned Japanese-American loyalty: “A Jap’s a Jap. They are a dangerous element, whether loyal or not” (Frail). Thus, it was the prejudice which polluted the minds of many educated individuals that ultimately led to the incarceration of American citizens. The infringement upon Japanese Americans’ rights stemmed from the pressure exerted by the public who failed to respect the humanity of their fellow citizens at a time when prejudice and paranoia plagued much of the international community. Even with this justification, I was still fascinated by the notion that the Constitution could not prevent such an injustice. Not long ago, I discovered a video of actor George Takei speaking about his experience in Japanese internment camps. Takei described his journey to reconcile what America stood for versus what America had done to him, ultimately coming to the conclusion that “our democracy is a people’s democracy” and that “it can be as great as the people can be, but it is also as fallible as people are” (TED, 2014). Takei’s assessment made a profound impact on my view of American democracy, as I realized that our democracy is dependent on the people, and that no document or piece of legislation can accomplish the goals laid out by the founders. Only the people can maintain a free society, and they can only do so by understanding what makes one free and respecting the differences among the citizenry, such that we vehemently object to the violation of these rights in any and all cases.

In the end, the Declaration of Independence did not lay out a set of principles which were immediately put into practice and enforced, but rather a set of goals for America to pursue. Internment has demonstrated that the Constitution is not what maintains our free society, nor does any one piece of legislation. The citizenry are the pillars upon which our free society is built. We, as a people, must understand the rights which the founders sought to preserve, and we must have the respect and decency to recognize the humanity of others and object when they are stripped of their basic liberties. America may never come as close to a free society as it claims or wishes, but if the people are unaware of the true essence of that very goal, we will stray ever further from accomplishing it.

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