Seventy-five years ago, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing the forced removal of 110,000 Japanese Americans simply because they looked like the enemy.

A new war, a surprise attack on American soil, and longstanding prejudice against immigrants who looked and spoke differently created a perfect storm of fear and hysteria. Over 9,000 Japanese Americans in King County were taken from their homes and imprisoned by armed soldiers, but why did so few of their fellow Americans speak out to defend them?

Journalists and politicians used euphemisms like “evacuation” and “relocation” to convince the public that Japanese Americans were being treated fairly. Newspapers, including The Seattle Times, told readers this forced migration was merely a safety precaution—and anyone who protested was disloyal or unpatriotic.

It seems shocking that this could happen in a democracy founded on freedom and equality, but as we see high-level politicians express support for similar actions against Muslim immigrants, many Americans fear a repeat of the events of World War II.

Based on media coverage at the time, the public believed this mass removal was justified. Today, many of us still hold misconceptions about the Japanese American incarceration and other injustices in our past. What role does the media play in shaping our understanding of history and current events? How do we tell the difference between truth and propaganda? We’ll explore these questions with a look back at articles and photos published in The Seattle Times before, during and immediately after World War II.
Japanese immigrants began coming to the U.S. in the late 19th century, finding work in the railroad and logging industries, taking up farming, or settling in urban areas where they established businesses like the Tazuma Store pictured below.

News reports commonly used derogatory language and even racial slurs to talk about Japanese Americans and other ethnic groups. Popular media perpetuated stereotypes about Asian Americans as deceitful, unclean, and dangerous. Political leaders warned of a “yellow peril,” arguing that the “Jap tidal wave” threatened to undermine the American social order.

This hateful rhetoric led to real-life consequences. Workers afraid of losing jobs to immigrants used violence to expel Japanese laborers. Congress prohibited Asian immigrants from becoming citizens and banned East Asians from entering the country. Restrictive covenants excluded Japanese, black and Jewish residents from certain neighborhoods. Additional laws prohibited interracial marriage, forced students to attend segregated schools and denied the right to own land.

Despite these limitations, Japanese Americans found ways to resist discrimination, in some cases even bringing legal challenges against unfair laws. By 1940, there were almost 7,000 Japanese Americans in Seattle, the city’s largest ethnic minority group. They carved out a place for themselves, turning Japantown (in today’s Chinatown-International District) into a thriving business and cultural center. Farmers gained a major foothold in the area surrounding Seattle, with 75 percent of all produce grown in the region coming from Japanese-owned farms.

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Media Literacy: The Meaning Behind the Message

All media messages are created with a purpose: to inform, to entertain, to persuade. Sometimes that purpose is affected by motives like political power or profit—so it’s important to question our sources before accepting them as fact. The article below appeared in The Seattle Times on Aug. 9, 1908. Ask yourself:

- Who created this message and why?
- What writing techniques are used to grab your attention?
- How might different audiences interpret this message?
- Whose values and interests are being represented—and whose aren’t?
As Japan’s army advanced across Asia in the 1930s, the U.S. government became suspicious of Japanese Americans, conducting surveillance and compiling lists of people to be detained if war broke out. Within a few hours of the Pearl Harbor attack on Dec. 7, 1941, the FBI started making arrests. As news of the raids spread, a sense of fear gripped the community. “At that juncture, you had no idea if they were leading them off to imprison them or to execute them or to send them back to Japan or what,” recalled Akiko Okuno. “This is something that you don’t think happened in this country.”

On Feb. 19, 1942, President Roosevelt issued an executive order authorizing military commanders to designate high-security zones and remove “any or all persons” from those areas. The entire West Coast was soon declared off-limits to Japanese Americans. Over the spring of 1942, Japanese Americans in Washington, Oregon, California and Arizona were removed from their homes and, in most cases, transported first to temporary “assembly centers” and later to more permanent concentration camps called “relocation centers.”

This mass removal was referred to as an “evacuation,” as if they were being rescued from a natural disaster. Japanese Americans, even citizens born in this country, were described simply as “Japanese,” erasing their American identity. Newspapers remarked on the “orderly fashion” of the removal and ran photos of smiling, well-dressed families, giving the impression that Japanese Americans were content to have their lives uprooted.
MEDIA COVERAGE OF WORLD WAR II INCARCERATION: FACT OR FICTION?

TIMELINE OF JAPANESE AMERICAN WORLD WAR II INCARCERATION

1941

The United States enters World War II after the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in December. The FBI arrests 5,000 Japanese Americans, mostly Issei (first generation) community leaders. Newspapers warn of a possible second attack led by Japanese American spies, and argue for removal as a precaution.

1942

On February 19, President Roosevelt authorizes the exclusion of Japanese Americans from the West Coast with Executive Order 9066. A month later, Japanese Americans from Bainbridge Island, Washington are the first group taken to concentration camps. These removals continue through the summer of 1942, displacing over 110,000 people.

Resentment over conditions in the camps boils over into protests at several detention sites beginning in August. On December 6, military police fire into a crowd at Manzanar, Calif., killing two inmates.

1943

All inmates 17 and older are required to complete a “loyalty questionnaire.” Although most pass the test, some use it as an opportunity to criticize their treatment. The “disloyal” are sent to a special prison camp in Tule Lake, California. Those cleared as loyal can apply for resettlement outside camp, and many relocate to the Midwest or East Coast.

The army lifts a ban on Japanese American soldiers and forms a segregated, all-Japanese unit called the 442nd Regimental Combat Team.

Most Japanese Americans spent up to three years in the camps—although some had moved away from the West Coast to avoid confinement, while others arrested as potential spies and held in special “enemy alien” camps were detained for longer periods of time.

News coverage focused on the question of whether Japanese Americans were loyal to the United States. The media spread reports of Japanese Americans being “coddled” with special treatment, which proved to be false. Inmates were encouraged to prove their loyalty by not complaining. Those who participated in strikes and other forms of protest were called traitors.

The headlines reprinted here are a sampling of The Seattle Times’ coverage of World War II incarceration. Notice the difference in the words used to describe “good” Japanese Americans—like the slur “Jap” for those considered disloyal, or “Nipponese” to imply a connection to Japan rather than America. How might this have affected people’s thinking at the time? Do the photos tell the same story as the headlines?
MEDIA COVERAGE OF WORLD WAR II INCARCERATION: FACT OR FICTION?

TIMELINE OF JAPANESE AMERICAN WORLD WAR II INCARCERATION

1944

Japanese Americans begin receiving draft notices in camp. Most obey the orders, but 300 young men refuse to report for duty until their rights are restored.

Others express anger at the government by renouncing their U.S. citizenship and/or applying for repatriation to Japan. The majority of these “renunciants” are in Tule Lake, where extreme overcrowding and the implementation of martial law have added to the unrest.

Two legal challenges brought by Japanese Americans reach the Supreme Court. The Court rules that “concededly loyal” citizens must be released, but condones targeting Japanese Americans based on race as a “military necessity.”

1945

Roosevelt lifts the West Coast exclusion orders, and Japanese Americans begin returning to their pre-war homes—amid a wave of hate crimes against returnees. The WRA closes most of the camps, but keeps Tule Lake open to hold renunciants slated for deportation.

Words Matter

What happened to Japanese Americans during World War II is commonly called “internment,” but this term is misleading as it refers only to the detention of non-citizens. “Incarceration” is more accurate because two-thirds of those sent to camp were U.S. citizens.

What to call the camps can also be confusing. The euphemism “relocation center” made conditions sound better than they were, but the prison camps where Japanese Americans were confined—surrounded by barbed wire fences and patrolled by armed guards—meet the dictionary definition of a concentration camp. Use of this term is not meant to compare Japanese American incarceration to the Holocaust, where the term “concentration camp” might itself be considered euphemistic.

Seattle Times’ coverage of World War II tended to describe “good” and “bad” Japanese Americans as loyal, or “Nipponese” to imply a connection to Japan. How might this have affected people’s thinking at the time? Do the photos tell the same story as the headlines?
In January 1945—after securing his reelection in the 1944 presidential race—Roosevelt issued a declaration reopening the West Coast to Japanese Americans. The camps began to close. Incarcerated Japanese Americans were given $25 and instructed to leave. Ironically, many inmates protested what they saw as yet another eviction. People who had lost everything, especially the elderly and families with young children, felt they had nothing to return to.

Others were happy to finally be free of the camps, but they found that going home would not be easy. Soldiers were returning from the war with stories of atrocities committed by the Japanese Army, which fed misplaced anger against Japanese Americans. African Americans seeking jobs in the booming shipbuilding industry had left the Jim Crow South and relocated to the West Coast, moving into empty Japantowns after being denied housing in white neighborhoods. Returning Japanese Americans faced heavy competition for housing and employment, and discrimination was widespread.

News coverage glossed over these hardships and highlighted the success stories of families who were able to quickly bounce back. A story on the Kajimura family of Sumner, Wash. described “the older Japanese, quietly resigned to being pushed from their homes” as “happy to work their fields and head their families”—ignoring the reality that many elderly Japanese Americans had reentered the workforce out of necessity, not choice. Even as the media acknowledged the injustice of the incarceration, it downplayed the impact on people’s livelihoods and spread a narrative of Japanese Americans as quietly accepting their fate without bitterness.

I would call all these numbers in the papers advertising rentals. And the minute I said my name, ‘Oh, we don’t rent to Japanese, we don’t rent to Asians.’ So I called the real estate agencies, and they’d say the same thing: ‘We don’t sell to Japs, we don’t sell to Orientals.’

— Sue Kunitomi Embrey

I was down on Maynard and Jackson waiting for a bus and the bus stopped, and then the woman sitting on the window side, she had the window open. I was waiting to get on and she just looked down at me from the bus and she said, ‘You killed my son,’ and then she spit at me.

— Fumiko Uyeda Groves

Contrary to this report from August 1945, temporary hostels were crowded, makeshift facilities with little privacy. Far from being a “privilege,” for many residents they felt like “an extension of camp.” The children pictured above are standing outside the Japanese Language School Hostel, where they lived after returning to Seattle.

Densho, Ohashi Family Collection
After the war, Japanese Americans worked to rebuild their communities and address the discrimination that led to their incarceration. Alien land laws prevented Asian immigrants from purchasing real estate, while restrictive covenants kept many minorities confined to urban ghettos. The Japanese American Citizens League and African American allies together challenged these laws in the Supreme Court, where they were struck down as unconstitutional.

Japanese Americans benefited greatly from these and other victories of the civil rights movement. Japan had changed from enemy to ally as the U.S. became fearful of the rising power of communist nations like China and the Soviet Union. No longer seen as a threat, able to access better housing, jobs, and education, by the 1970s it looked as though Japanese Americans had achieved the so-called “American Dream.”

Media reports focused on that appearance of success. The idea that Japanese Americans worked hard and never complained grew popular as others became more vocal in their demands for equal rights. Politicians used their recovery from World War II to claim that racism against blacks, Latinos and Native Americans was overstated.

Many Japanese Americans embraced this “model minority” myth as a safeguard against further discrimination. But others pushed back, particularly young people who saw a connection between their parents’ incarceration and the struggles of other groups. Student activists fought for ethnic studies programs and better access to college education, supported farmworker strikes against unfair working conditions, and protested the Vietnam War.

Despite being stereotyped as a quiet, well-behaved minority, Japanese Americans eventually began to call for redress, the righting of a wrong, for the World War II incarceration. In the 1980s, congress formally acknowledged the “racial prejudice, wartime hysteria, and lack of political leadership” that led to the mass removal—and paid reparations to former inmates.
Media coverage shaped how Japanese Americans were viewed before, during, and after World War II incarceration. What connections do you see between these historic news reports and coverage of contemporary issues like police brutality, immigrant detention and Islamophobia? Are similar patterns playing out today?

Whether we realize it or not, the media shapes how we look at the world around us. Our beliefs about history and current events are based on information we get from the news, pop culture, social media, and public figures. How we choose to act on those beliefs has a powerful influence on the actions politicians take in our name. In 1942, Americans allowed a vulnerable minority to be scapegoated in part because the media failed to question government claims of “national security.” If we hope to learn from our history, we can—and should—seek out answers from diverse perspectives to ensure we don’t miss out on facts that could change our opinion and shape our civic engagement.

A Day of Remembrance
Since the 1970s, Japanese Americans have recognized February 19, the anniversary of Executive Order 9066, as a day to reflect on the legacy of World War II incarceration and what it can teach us about issues we face today. Seventy-five years after EO 9066—amid unprecedented levels of immigrant detention and heightened restrictions on Muslim and Arab Americans—this history of racial profiling and discrimination is an important lesson in what happens when fear trumps civil liberties.

Inspiring Future Generations
Densho (a Japanese term meaning ‘to pass stories to the next generation”) is a Seattle-based nonprofit that shares stories of Japanese American World War II incarceration to promote equity, address racism and bigotry, and encourage the preservation of our democratic principles in times of fear. Founded in 1996, Densho hosts a free digital archive of over 1,000 video interviews and 50,000 photos, documents and newspapers, as well as an online encyclopedia on Japanese American history.

In addition to these historic materials, Densho provides lesson plans and online teacher training workshops for educators. Free curriculum connecting the Japanese American experience to other stories of discrimination, both past and present, will be available in Fall 2017.

For more information on Densho and Japanese American incarceration, including links to oral histories and teacher resources, please visit www.Densho.org or find us on Facebook or Twitter @DenshoProject.

Partnering Organizations

Funding for this project was provided, in part, by 4Culture and Seattle Office of Arts & Culture