



Lessons from the Incarceration and Forced Labor of Japanese Americans During World War II

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Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans – two-thirds of them U.S.-born full citizens – were forcibly removed from their West Coast homes and sent to prison work camps across the country. The government called this process “internment” or “relocation” and labeled the prison centers “frontier camps.” But scholars and Asian American activists have recently called on the public to substitute the correct terms of “imprisonment” or “incarceration” and “forced removal” for government euphemisms. Explicit terms better recognize and memorialize the suffering of the American citizens who were unlawfully charged with the crime of subversion during World War II because of their race.

Although scholars now tend to agree that internment was technically wrongful imprisonment of thousands of American citizens denied basic rights of due process and fair trial, few have addressed what this episode tells us about the history of prison labor in the United States. If Japanese Americans were imprisoned during the war, then they in turn performed forced, prison labor while at the camps – including completing the construction of the camps themselves, growing food for the camps, harvesting crops for private farmers and business entities, and constructing infrastructure projects such as irrigation ditches on Native American reservations in Arizona.

The Incarceration Story

After the outbreak of war with Japan, West Coast politicians and military officials – especially Army Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt– pressured President Franklin D. Roosevelt to evacuate and detain Japanese “enemy aliens” as well as Japanese American citizens. The West Coast was seen as militarily vulnerable and California had the largest Japanese American population in the country. In February of 1942, President Roosevelt signed and issued Executive Order 9066, placing the military in charge of the temporary detainment of Japanese and charging the War Relocation Authority with transporting and assigning evacuees to prison camps.

Government planning focused on the need for manpower on the home front, particularly harvesting and planting crops such as cotton and sugar beets, completing infrastructure improvements, and producing combat necessities including camouflage netting. Not long after the ink dried on Executive Order 9066, the War Relocation Authority as well as state governors and military officials placed priority on locating prison sites in areas with shortages of agricultural labor or in need of workers to build and repair structures like irrigation ditches or help private corporations build and repair railroads.

Once Japanese Americans were removed from their homes, internment quickly morphed from a defense measure into a forced labor program. Although Japanese Americans were paid –skilled laborers received sixteen dollars a month; unskilled twelve – their rates were well below the prevailing market wage for similar

jobs and their working conditions were often unhealthy. For example, those assigned to work on the camo net project lacked proper facemasks, which led them to suffer chemical burns, pneumonia, and fertility and reproductive complications. Delays in the processing of checks often left prisoners without pay for months at a time. And when Japanese Americans were recruited to work for private employers harvesting crops near the camps, fees for transportation to and from the fields were deducted from their checks. To reduce taxpayer costs, inmates were expected to work to support the day-to-day operations of the camps.

Although prisoners technically volunteered for employment in camo net manufacturing and agricultural work outside of the camps, many Japanese Americans experienced pressure from the camp directors to perform these duties in order to prove their loyalty. In some camps such as Tule Lake and Manzanar in California as well as Poston, Arizona, Japanese Americans openly protested their treatment as workers and wrongfully-imprisoned citizens, mounting strikes that prompted the camp directors to reconsider camp rules and the treatment of employees.

What This Means

The experiences of incarcerated Japanese Americans during World War II are part of the longer story of prison labor in the United States and contribute to current debates about the rights and privileges of working prison inmates. Convict labor has a long past in the United States. Historians and scholars tend to focus on convict-lease labor in the southern United States following the end of the Civil War and Reconstruction, where convict-lease labor typically involved African American men arrested for crimes that violated discriminatory Black Codes and then leased-out to private employers, creating conditions not far removed from slavery. But scholarship tends to leave a gap between the phasing out of the convict-lease system in the 1930s and the rise of the profit-oriented prison industrial complex during the 1970s. What happened in the decades between?

I argue that Japanese American incarceration and forced labor created a precedent for denying racial minorities their civil rights and exploiting their labor for public and private profit. During World War II, the U.S. government itself invoked “national security” and “military defense” as rationales for detaining American citizens, abrogating their civil rights, and exploiting imprisoned workers. Understanding the underlying goals of Japanese American incarceration illuminates larger and more persistent connections. How does race shape incarceration rates? What kind of language do local, state, and federal governments use to describe the goals and processes of incarceration? More importantly, how do these themes shape labor relations and notions of the rights of laborers of various backgrounds in and outside of prison?

My research puts prison labor in a more continuous historical context, deepening our understanding of past and present trends in use of the incarcerated labor for public and private projects. Today, news outlets, policymakers, and citizens are paying more attention to the ways racism and biases can influence arrests and incarceration rates. Likewise, Americans are interested in how these forces relate to the often exploitative use of prison labor. As my research reveals, recent developments may be yet another chapter in a longstanding American story.

Read more in Stephanie Hinnert, *A Different Shade of Justice: Asian American Civil Rights in the South* (University of California Press, 2017).