Japanese American Internment During World War II

Author: Heather Steven, Glen Burnie High, Anne Arundel County Public Schools
Grade Level: High School
Duration: One class period
Overview:

Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942 and authorized the internment of 110,000 Japanese Americans for the duration of World War II. At the time of the order the nation was reeling from the attack on Pearl Harbor and citizens, especially along the West Coast, feared another attack was imminent. Many believed that Japanese Americans were still loyal to Japan and would act as spies, even though almost two-thirds of internees were United States citizens. Racial stereotypes and propaganda pieces that were prevalent before and during the war depicted the Japanese as less than human and barbaric in nature. Internees in most cases lost their homes, businesses and possessions when they were interned. Despite this, many Japanese Americans thought that the best way to prove their loyalty to the United States was by participating in activities that aided the war effort, including making uniforms and parachutes. Almost 33,000 served in the military as Nisei soldiers.

In this lesson students will discuss Executive Order 9066 and the decision to place Japanese Americans into camps. They will examine pieces of propaganda and other primary source documents to investigate what stereotypes existed against the Japanese. Images of camp life will also be studied. Students will be asked to determine alternatives to internment.

Content Standards:

Era 8: The Great Depression and World War II (1929-1945)

Standard 3: The causes and course of World War II, the character of the war at home and abroad, and its reshaping of the U.S. role in world affairs.

Historical Thinking Standards:

Standard 5: Historical Comprehension
D. Evaluate alternative courses of action.
E. Formulate a position or course of action on an issue. Formulate a position or course of action on an issue

· Students will examine the government’s use of propaganda in gaining support and cooperation for wartime policies.

· Students will evaluate the decision of the government to relocate Japanese Americans to internment camps during the war.
In 1942, two months after the Japanese attack on the naval base at Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued Executive order 9066\(^1\) authorizing the Secretary of War Henry Stimson to move civilians as necessary into “relocation camps”. Military officials on the West Coast, acting under the directive moved over 110,000 Japanese Americans into internment camps. The internment camps remained open until 1946, during which time those in the camps showed loyalty to the United States by assisting in the war effort. Some Americans questioned whether the US government went beyond its wartime powers in stripping the civil liberties of citizens. In 1944 the Supreme Court ruled in *Korematsu v. United States* that Executive order 9066 was constitutional, stating that the need to protect against espionage outweighed the individual rights of Americans of Japanese descent.\(^2\) In 1980, President Jimmy Carter appointed a committee to investigate Japanese American internment. The committee concluded that the Japanese Americans were put in internment camps not because they posed legitimate threat to national security, but because of racial prejudice and hysteria.\(^3\) Afterwards Congress issued an official apology and gave $20,000 for each survivor of the internment camps.

The origins of the Pacific War lay in the challenge that a rising Japan posed to U.S. and European imperial rule in the region. Already a regional colonial power by the 1930s, Japan was determined to assert its status as a great power and guarantee its self-sufficiency by conquering markets and raw materials controlled by its European rivals. Japan's aggression in China in the late 1930s and the closing off of Asian markets posed a deadly challenge to the US desire for a more open world economy. The U.S. responded by embargoing the sale of oil, iron and steel to Tokyo and increasing military aid to

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\(^2\) *Korematsu v. United States*. Hugo Black.  
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Chinese forces fighting Japan, driving Japan to invade other Asian countries in quest of these resources.\(^4\) Japanese officials proposed negotiations with the US, but would not meet FDR’s demands for a retreat from China and commitment to free trade in the region.\(^5\) Negotiations were never held, and on December 7, 1941, the Japanese launched a surprise attack on the American naval base of Pearl Harbor.

The attack on Pearl Harbor worsened an already prominent racial hatred directed at Japanese Americans and Asian immigrants more generally, dating back to the late 1800’s. This hatred and fear manifested itself in discriminatory laws against Japanese Americans, especially the Issei, who were Japanese Americans born in Japan. By law they could never become citizens and were subject to laws preventing them from owning land, marrying American citizens, or working in certain jobs decades before US entry into WWII.\(^6\) In addition, there was a strong history of anti-Japanese sentiment on the west coast for more than 40 years before the attack on Pearl Harbor.\(^7\) In 1907, the United States government worked out an informal understanding known as the Gentleman’s Agreement. Under this agreement the United States asked Japan not to issue any passports to any citizen bound for the United States. The agreement stemmed directly from pressure from anti-Japanese groups in California where students were also required to attend segregated schools.\(^8\) Legal and social discrimination stemmed partially from a sense of economic competition. Despite the fact that Japanese Americans owned a small proportion of farmland, their successes in agriculture caused a disproportionate amount of fear and anxiety.

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\(^5\) Ibid., 48.
\(^7\) Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, Personal Justice Denied, 4.
\(^8\) Lawson F. Inada, Only What We Could Carry: The Japanese American Internment Experience, 11.
resentment. American farmers were all too happy to see Japanese American agriculture eliminated by
their forced internment. There were also nativist fears of the Japanese gaining influence in the West
Coast and expanding at a more rapid rate than white Americans. Many felt that the Japanese were too
different to assimilate in the way that European groups had. Popular belief held that the Japanese
practiced different religions, were educated in Japanese schools, and still had Japanese citizenship.

Following Pearl Harbor, the U.S. government and private organizations began releasing anti-
Japanese propaganda, much of it full of racial stereotypes. Films, posters, and songs encouraged
Americans to hate the Japanese as a people, rather than to simply desire the defeat of the Japanese
military, comparing them to vermin or subhuman beasts. Even more moderate newspapers and other
popular culture outlets referred to the Japanese as less than human. “Nip” (short for Nippon, which is
“Japan” in Japanese), “Jap”, and “yellow” were among the least offensive terms used by almost every
American source during the war. More extreme depictions of Japanese included picturing them as apes,
various insects, rats, demons, and other beasts.

Today, many Americans are ashamed of the relocation policy that robbed Japanese Americans of
their constitutional rights. However, the relocation policy enjoyed widespread popular support during
the war, in part because of the aforementioned propaganda. In fact at the time, many complained that the
government was not doing enough to prevent another attack. The process of interning Japanese
Americans was influenced by the way that Americans had portrayed them as animals or less than

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9 Greg Robinson, By Order of the President. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press,
2001), 9.
10 Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, Personal Justice
Denied, 4.
11 Ibid., 5.
12 Stephen Ambrose and Brian Loring Villa. “Racism, the Atomic Bomb, and the Surrender of Japan,”
In The Pacific War Revisited, ed. Gunter Bischof and Robert Dupont (Baton Rouge, Louisiana:
Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 180.
13 According to John Dower, this was perhaps the most common form of dehumanizing the Japanese
human. Japanese Americans were rounded up like cattle and forced to move into converted stables and animal pens.\textsuperscript{14}

The decision for Japanese internment was made by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He was heavily influenced by many of his advisors, most notably Lieutenant General John DeWitt and Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson. Both men were major proponents of internment and were profoundly racist against the Japanese, believing that they were all likely to be subversive terrorists because it was in their blood. The main reason cited for internment, of course, was that Japanese Americans may still be loyal to Japan and could act as potential spies. Also, because anti-Japanese sentiment ran so strongly in the US after Pearl Harbor, the government felt popular pressure to address the issue with immediate and drastic action.

Executive Order 9066 was signed in early 1942, authorizing the relocation and militarized internment of all “resident aliens”. The document never specifically states anything about persons of Japanese descent, but was written specifically for those of Japanese descent in America—both resident aliens and American citizens. In fact, two-thirds of those interned were actually US citizens.\textsuperscript{15}

After Pearl Harbor, there was a widespread public belief that people of Japanese descent living in Hawaii aided in planning the attack by providing intelligence. This was the main reason that the American government initially cited for interning the Japanese Americans. Despite the claim that the action was necessary to prevent further espionage by Japanese Americans living in this country, it was later revealed that there was no evidence to support the military necessity of internment.\textsuperscript{16} The FBI investigated the possibility of shore-to-ship signaling from ethnic Japanese, but found no evidence. In

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 82.
\textsuperscript{15} Robinson, By Order of the President, 6.
\textsuperscript{16} This idea came from several government reports made by Secretary of War Henry Stimson and General John L. DeWitt, which are cited in the Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians. Personal Justice Denied., 6.
addition, several radios and other communications devices were confiscated from Japanese American homes that were searched largely without reasonable cause, but these devices were commonly found in many American households.\(^{17}\)

As the war went on and the Japanese were interned, the American public was being shown video footage and pictures that suggested internment was the only proper course of action. American movie theaters showed footage of Japanese Americans happily working in their internment camps, pleased to be aiding the United States and eagerly awaiting American victory. Other media prominently discussed Japanese war atrocities against Chinese civilians and the mistreatment of American POWs in the Philippines.\(^{18}\) Japanese barbarism and their vicious and cruel ‘nature’ were emphasized. Soldiers were constantly exposed to depictions of the Japanese as fanged animals. Soldiers were required to watch a series of government-produced films entitled *Why We Fight*, also shown in general movie theaters, which used Japanese footage to depict the Japanese people as imperialist barbarians bent on global domination.\(^{19}\) Official and unofficial propaganda encouraged what one historian has called an “exterminationist” mentality towards the Japanese that seemed to legitimize the mass murder of civilians as well as soldiers – part of a more general erasure by all sides in the war of the lines separating combatants from non-combatants.\(^{20}\) Therefore, many soldiers felt the same way as the American public—that the Japanese were not human— and many believed in killing as many Japanese as

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\(^{18}\) Ambrose and Villa, “Racism and the Atomic Bomb”, 182.


\(^{20}\) Ibid., 26-28.
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possible. The Japanese were seen as others, not white, but yellow—and in every way the opposite of the US.

Immediately after the attack, Japanese American community leaders and anyone suspected of having ties to Japan were arrested. The U.S. Treasury froze the bank accounts of anyone born in Japan. A mandatory curfew was placed on Japanese Americans, who had to carry identification cards on their person, and their homes were subject to searches without warrants. Many Japanese Americans were instructed to pack up only what they could carry and were forced to sell their homes, possessions, and businesses for an extremely small sum or just give them away because they had no other choice. They had only a few weeks to pack, and dispose of all other possessions. The internees were only allowed to carry bedding, clothing, and toiletries—whatever they could carry themselves. Many tried to sell the rest of their possessions or leave them with reliable neighbors. However, some did not have a chance to sell their belongings and were forced to leave them. Worse still, as “voluntary” relocation day neared, bargain hunters descended like vultures on the Japanese offering them little for their possessions and sometimes vandalizing or stealing. The Japanese did not know where they were going or for how long they would be gone. They were loaded onto trains and busses and moved first into temporary assembly centers before they could be moved into the relocation centers, or internment camps. Japanese Americans were taken prisoner and placed in heavily guarded military camps in the middle of the desert.

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21 This was a common thread throughout all of the oral histories collected from American soldiers by Studs Terkel. Studs Terkel, “The Good War”: An Oral History of World War II. (New York: Palgrove, 1984).
22 Dower, War Without Mercy, 82
23 Lawson F. Inada, Only What We Could Carry, 69.
24 Ibid., 69.
25 Ibid., 31.
26 Evacuation procedures, Ukiah, California. Wartime Civil Control Administration, May 17, 1942. Source: Inada, Only What We Could Carry, 8-9.
Internment was not merely carried out on the West coast of the US, but also in Canada and several Latin American countries over which the US had influence.\(^{27}\)

Inside the internment camps, Japanese Americans were faced with barracks type housing within isolated desert patches. They were under military confinement, surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards on all sides. Schools, houses, hospitals, and other buildings were quickly constructed and were not very sturdy. The buildings were hot and sand blew in through wide crevices. Snakes and insects could also easily come into homes. Since the internment barracks were often converted horse stalls, the heat of the desert also magnified the stench of old horse manure and brought horseflies.\(^{28}\) On the whole, there were inadequate medical supplies, workers, and care in hospitals. Ultimately the government hoped for the camps to become self-sustaining and did not want to put any significant amount of money into a situation viewed as temporary, especially not with skyrocketing defense costs abroad. Therefore, there was a shortage of all kinds of supplies, workers, and aid to those in the internment camps. Adding to the hardship this situation placed on the Japanese Americans, sometimes families were separated during this ordeal. Japanese Americans who were suspected of being traitors or even trouble-makers were isolated from their friends and family.\(^{29}\)

Despite these troubles, many Americans, including those of Japanese descent, believed that the best way for the Japanese Americans to prove their loyalty was to voluntarily enter internment camps and aid in the war effort, and this sentiment was widely disseminated through the media.\(^{30}\) Japanese Americans living in internment camps were often engaged in the same activities that other Americans engaged in to support the war effort. Japanese Americans were assigned jobs such as making uniforms

\(^{27}\) Dower, War Without Mercy, 79-80.
\(^{28}\) From drawings made by Mine Okubo reproduced in: Lawson F. Inada, Only What We Could Carry, 87-97.
\(^{29}\) Terkel, The Good War, 16-18.
and parachutes for the troops, and were paid little for doing so. Many also grew and canned food both for their own uses and to send to the troops. Factory work and service jobs within the camp were deemed appropriate wartime occupations for loyal Japanese American citizens by the American government. Many also joined the Japanese American Citizens League to prove their loyalty.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of all came from the highly decorated Nisei soldiers. Even before they were drafted or Japanese internment was ordered, thousands of Japanese Americans had already volunteered to serve their country. Over 33,000 Nisei soldiers served in WWII, despite the fact that many of their families were being detained in internment camps. Most Japanese soldiers, especially those that were drafted into the military served in European campaigns because of the pervasive fear of potential disloyalty if they served in the Pacific. However, some Japanese Americans did serve as translators and were trained in the Military Intelligence Service Language School. The Nisei soldiers proved their loyalty and frequently earned high praise. One example is the 100th Battalion, which served in the North African and Italian campaigns. This unit suffered many casualties and earned 900 Purple Heart medals. Another example was the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, mainly composed of Nisei coming from the internment camps.

Japanese American racism was prevalent from before the attack on Pearl Harbor to the vicious merciless fighting in the Pacific and even factored in the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan. The scope of racism that existed on both sides of the Pacific war was far greater than German-American racism, which had existed in the First World War, but was largely lacking in the Second. This is

31 Ibid., 254.
32 Ibid., 254.
33 Ibid., 256.
34 Ibid., 257.
35 Ambrose and Villa, Racism and the Atomic Bomb, 179.
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partially because of the percentage of Americans that were of German ancestry.\(^{36}\) It is important to note, however, that Executive Order 9066 did not exclusively apply to the Japanese Americans. Thousands of German and Italian Americans were also classified as enemy aliens and forced to move.\(^{37}\)

As the war progressed, some officials began to debate the continued internment of Japanese Americans; the costs involved in running the camps were high, but the public was still fearful of subversive acts.\(^{38}\) As a way to screen out those loyal to the United States, questionnaires entitled “Statement of United States Citizenship of Japanese Ancestry” were filled out by the internees. These questionnaires were also used in determining which Nissei were loyal enough to be drafted into the armed services\(^{39}\). There was a second questionnaire taken by those not eligible for military service—women and Issei. This was entitled “Application for Leave Clearance” suggesting that those who were considered loyal may be leaving the internment camps soon.\(^{40}\) Gradually, interned citizens were released, provided they not return to the west coast.\(^{41}\) The last camp did not close until 1946 and no substantial reparations were made to the Japanese American citizens who had been uprooted, robbed of their possessions and their civil rights.

When the internment camps were closed, the government granted Japanese Americans fifty dollars per family or twenty five dollars per individual and train fare.\(^{42}\) During the 1940’s the Japanese American Citizen’s League and the American Civil Liberties Union filed lawsuits questioning the rationale behind Executive order 9066. Prosecution lawyers argued that none of the citizens detained in internment camps had ever been convicted of espionage or treason. Four of the cases reached the

\(^{36}\) Ambrose and Villa, Racism and the Atomic Bomb, 179.
\(^{37}\) Lawson F. Inada, Only What We Could Carry, 69.
\(^{38}\) Ibid., 263.
\(^{39}\) Lawson F. Inada, Only What We Could Carry, 263.
\(^{40}\) Ibid., 263.
\(^{41}\) Robinson, By Order of the President, 204-205.
Supreme Court in 1943 and 1944 and the constitutionality of the internment camps was upheld each time. In 1943 *Yasui v. United States* and *Hirabayashi v. United States* were tried and the court found that curfews placed on Japanese Americans were constitutional during wartime.\(^{43}\) In *Ex parte Endo* the Court ruled unanimously that though the government could detain Japanese Americans in internment camps, once released the government could not prevent them from moving back into Military Area 1 on the west coast.\(^{44}\) In *Korematsu v. United States* the Court upheld the conviction of Fred Korematsu, who had ignored the order to report to the Topaz internment camp. The Court ruling was solely based on Korematsu’s refusal to follow Executive order 9066 and did not take into account the constitutionality of the order itself.\(^{45}\)

Reparations were not immediately made to Japanese Americans. In 1978, the Japanese American Citizen’s League launched a campaign to secure from Congress $25,000 per internment survivor, an official apology, and an educational trust fund for descendents of internees.\(^{46}\) In 1980, President Jimmy Carter and the Congress created the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians to investigate Japanese American internment during World War II. The Commission’s report, “Personal Justice Denied”, found that the internment was unjust and recommended that the government issue an apology, $20,000 per internment survivor, and create an educational trust fund as the Japanese American Citizen’s League demanded.\(^{47}\) The first redress legislation was not presented in Congress until 1983, and was not passed until 1988 due to objections based on lack of funds and the Supreme Court rulings of the

\(^{43}\) Nanette Dembitz, McClain ed. *The Mass Internment of Japanese Americans and the Quest for Legal Redress* 35.  
\(^{45}\) Ibid., 18.  
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1940’s. The Civil Liberties Act of 1988 was signed by President Ronald Reagan on August 10th and funds were finally authorized for reparations to internees.\(^{48}\)

**Bibliography:**


**Nisei:** a person of Japanese descent, born and educated in the U.S. or Canada.

**Issei:** a Japanese citizen who immigrated to the U.S. or Canada after 1907 and was not eligible until 1952 for citizenship; any Japanese immigrant to the U.S.

**Espionage:** the act or practice of spying; the use of spies by a government to discover the military and political secrets of other nations.

**Internment:** confinement during wartime; the act of confining someone in a prison (or as if in a prison); placing private property in the custody of an officer of the law.

**Orthodox:** of, pertaining to, or conforming to the approved form of any doctrine, philosophy, ideology, etc.

**Compliance:** the act of conforming, acquiescing, or yielding; conformity; accordance: in compliance

Sabotage: Destruction of property or obstruction of normal operations, as by civilians or enemy agents in time of war, treacherous action to defeat or hinder a cause or an endeavor; deliberate subversion.

Alien: a resident born in or belonging to another country who has not acquired citizenship by naturalization

Propaganda: information, ideas, or rumors deliberately spread widely to help or harm a person, group, movement, institution, nation, etc.

Teaching Procedures:

Motivation:

1. Present the following lead questions:
   
   **How would you feel if the police arrested you as a suspected terrorist with no evidence?**
   
   **What would you do?**
   
   **What about if you were forced to move in a short amount of time because of your race, ethnicity, or gender?**
   
   **How should the United States treat resident enemies in wartime?**

2. Start a discussion of students’ responses to the motivational questions.

Procedures:

1. Discuss how students think Americans would perceive people of Japanese descent (previous lessons should have covered the oil embargo, Pearl Harbor, and American entry into World War II).

2. Provide students with a brief overview of the Japanese internment using the content narrative or other lecture notes.

3. Distribute the document packet (RS #1-9) and document analysis sheet (RS #10).

4. Instruct student to independently read the documents and summarize them using the document analysis sheet.

5. Lead a class discussion of students’ responses to the document analysis sheets.

Closure:
1. Have student participate in a class discussion of alternatives to Executive Order 9066, which established internment.

2. Divide students into small work groups and distribute to each group one “Solutions to the Japanese American ‘Problem’” (RS#11).

3. In groups students will develop three alternatives to internment and will weigh the pros and cons of each.

4. Each group will select one person to present their best option and supporting evidence to the class.

Assessment:

1. Ask students to create their own “propaganda.” It will focus on showing Americans the positive efforts made by Japanese Americans during the war or what life was like in an internment camp.

Extension Activities:

1. Write a diary entry as a Japanese American living in an internment camp.

2. Write a speech to be played on American radio announcing the decision to intern Japanese Americans and the reasons why the government felt it was necessary.

3. Clips from video primary sources can be used in this lesson - actual footage of the internment camps and propaganda that was played in American movie theaters depicting camp life. There are several good video sources including Peter Jennings’ This Century series; Topaz, directed by Ken Verdoia; or The Atomic Bomb Café. Textbook’s ancillary materials may also provide additional sources.


http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/learning_history/japanese_internment/munson_report.cfm

-This excerpt from the Munson report was written in November 1941 when foreign relations with Japan were becoming strained. The report was written by Curtis B. Munson, a Special Representative of the State Department, by the request of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in order to determine the loyalty of Japanese Americans. Reading part of this document will help the students see that relations with Japan were starting to sour before Pearl Harbor and they will be able to see some of the early intelligence that FDR had access to before his decision.

http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/digital_detail.jsp?&pg=1&rn=1&tn=513601&st=b&rp=details&nh=1

-This poster was created during the war by the government to encourage Americans to buy bonds and produce. It is included so that students can see the racial stereotypes of the Japanese disseminated by the government and show the depictions of the Japanese that Americans were exposed to.


-Executive Order 9066 was issued February 19, 1943 by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. It basically authorizes the military to move and detain any person in militarized areas at their discretion to protect the nation against espionage. It also indicates that this suspension of freedoms may concern “alien enemies”. This document allows students to read the actual act which permitted the government to intern Japanese Americans.

http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/wcf/images/wcf093.jpg

-This photo shows the posters ordering all Americans with Japanese ancestry to move to the relocation centers after Executive Order 9066. It gives students an idea of the process of relocation and a sense of the treatment the Japanese Americans received.

http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/digital_detail.jsp?&pg=1&rn=1&tn=195524&st=b&rp=details&nh=1

-This document shows how Japanese American families were loaded onto trains and moved to the internment camps. It is included to show students that they could not take everything with them as well as how disruptive this event was to Japanese Americans’ lives.

http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/twhp/wwwlps/lessons/89manzanar/89locate2.htm
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-This map illustrates the assembly and relocation centers for Japanese Americans. It is designed to show students where the government moved those of Japanese ancestry and to show that the majority of Japanese Americans were living on the West coast.


http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/i?ammem/manz:@field(NUMBER%2B@band(ppprs%2B00196)):displayType=1:m856sd=ppprs:m856sf=00196

-This picture shows a Catholic Church in the Manzanar internment camp. It was taken by Ansel Adams and published in 1944. It is included here to show students what life would be like in an internment camp.


http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/i?ammem/manz:@field(NUMBER%2B@band(ppprs%2B00211)):displayType=1:m856sd=ppprs:m856sf=00211

-This picture shows Japanese Americans working on a farm in an internment camp. It was taken by Ansel Adams and published in 1944. It is included here to show students what life would be like in an internment camp.


http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/i?ammem/manz:@field(NUMBER%2B@band(ppprs%2B00200)):displayType=1:m856sd=ppprs:m856sf=00200

-This picture shows a Japanese American internment camp from the military watch tower. This shows the isolation of the camps and the military supervision that residents were under. It was taken by Ansel Adams and published in 1944.