

## Fourth Grade Lesson on Japanese American Incarceration By Noreen Naseem Rodriguez

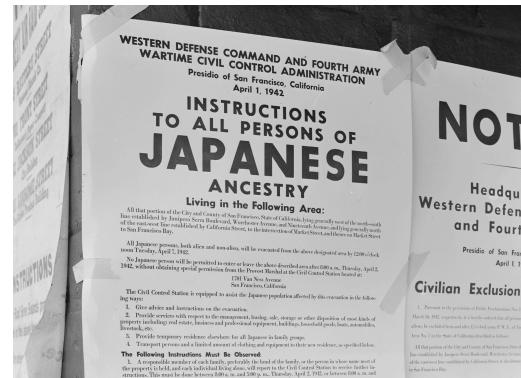
### GA Social Studies Standards:

SS4CG3 Describe the structure of government and the Bill of Rights.

### Background Information:

The United States brands itself as the land of the free and the home of the brave. But during World War II, it imprisoned 77,000 of its own citizens due to what the government decades later admitted to be "racial prejudice, wartime hysteria, and a failure of political leadership." As part of our nation's ongoing efforts to achieve the democratic principles it has claimed since its founding, young learners deserve opportunities to learn the difficult but important history of Japanese American incarceration.

Two months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order (EO) 9066 in February 1942. EO 9066 gave the military authority to create areas where people who were deemed to be threats to national security could be forcibly moved and detained under the direction of the Secretary of War. While the language of EO 9066 did not specify any particular group of people, it was overwhelmingly applied to Japanese Americans who lived on the West Coast, but not to German or Italian Americans. However, in the weeks prior to the Pearl Harbor attack, President Roosevelt received an intelligence report from Curtis B. Munson which found that Japanese Americans on the West Coast had "a remarkable, even extraordinary degree of loyalty" to the United States. Roosevelt applied EO 9066 to Japanese and Japanese Americans in spite of Munson's report.



Therefore, Japanese and Japanese Americans were targeted by EO 9066 not solely due to their ancestral homeland's identification with an Axis nation with which the U.S. was at war - if that were the case, then German and Italian Americans would also have been impacted in much larger numbers. In fact, West Coast Japanese Americans made up only 4% of the 1,100,000 enemy nationals living in the U.S. in 1942. But EO 9066 revived the idea of East Asians as a threatening "yellow peril," which first emerged as part of anti-Chinese rhetoric in the 1800s. Adding to the confusing application of EO 9066 was the fact that babies, the elderly, and the disabled were all subjected to military removal from their homes and imprisonment.



After the release of EO 9066, Japanese Americans living on the West Coast had a number of days to sell their property and belongings before reporting to one of 16 assembly centers, bringing only what they could carry with them. Between May and October 1942, they were transferred to ten hastily-built prison camps, with no sense of what the future held for them. The camps were located in isolated and inhospitable areas of Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming, each holding between 7,000-18,000 Japanese Americans. Camp barracks were crowded with little privacy,

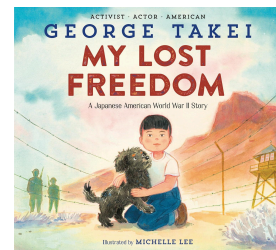
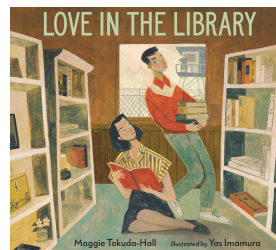
but families were innovative and salvaged what they could to make their miserable conditions feel more like home. They worked together and with support from nearby communities and friends to create schools, print newspapers, develop irrigation systems, plant gardens, and organize sports teams to make their lives in the camps have some semblance of normalcy until they were able to return home beginning in January 1945.

Perhaps this is sounding familiar, but you've heard these camps described in a different way - with the term *internment*. But that's technically incorrect! Because internment is a term legally reserved for foreign nationals of a country with which the United States is at war - this has been the case since the War of 1812! Two-thirds of the 120,000 Japanese Americans who were forced to live in the camps as a result of EO 9066 were U.S. citizens, so internment cannot be applied to them. Instead, these citizens were imprisoned without due process, which was a violation of their Constitutional rights. Due to this clear injustice, historians and critical scholars of U.S. history have used the word incarceration to more accurately describe what happened to Japanese Americans during World War II. To use internment or terms like removal or relocation that soften the inhumane treatment of Japanese Americans during WWII does an injustice to their experiences.



While many Japanese Americans who lived in the camps as children or adults felt too much shame about their ordeals to share them, the generations that followed have been tremendous advocates for sharing their stories so that the awful injustices they endured are not repeated. This had led to federal reparations, a wealth of youth literature and primary sources to teach this history to the next generation, and an impressive legacy of cross-racial solidarity. Thanks to the compelling and age-appropriate texts now available for young learners, students can read about firsthand experiences from camp survivors and their relatives from books like these:

- *My Lost Freedom* by George Takei
- *Love in the Library* by Maggie Tokuda Hall
- *It Began with a Page* by Kyo Maclear
- *The Bracelet* by Yoshiko Uchida
- *Baseball Saved Us* and *Heroes* by Ken Mochizuki



Teaching about Japanese American incarceration offers young learners opportunities to consider the complexities of citizenship and patriotism when confronted with racism. As families prepared to leave their homes on the West Coast after EO 9066, some people put up signs declaring, “I am an American, too.” In another example, camp prisoners were forced to respond to two difficult questions that put their loyalty to their homeland at odds with their loyalty to the United States - which was currently imprisoning them without due process! Some prisoners elected to join the military to prove their loyalty, and the military created segregated, all-Japanese American units like the famed 442nd Regimental Combat Team. Yet despite their valiant acts of heroism, Japanese American veterans had their names removed from community honor rolls and some local cemeteries refused to bury the remains of soldiers killed in action overseas. Even U.S. Army Captain Daniel K. Inouye, later elected to the U.S. Senate in 1962, was refused service in a San Francisco barbershop after walking in dressed in full uniform with all his medals.

So many examples from the experiences of Japanese Americans incarcerated during WWII resonate with recent events, from the highly publicized protests of athletes Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe to the

so-called Muslim Ban implemented by the Trump administration. Filmmaker Frank Chi filmed Muslim youth reading letters sent by Japanese American children describing their experiences in the prison camps to their beloved librarian Clara Breed. These letters are also described in the picturebook *Write to Me* by Cynthia Grady and the nonfiction book *Dear Miss Breed* by Joanne Oppenheim. Thanks to these and the many other child-friendly resources about Japanese American incarceration available today, there's no need to wait until high school to teach this important history!

**Images Used:**

1. Instructions to All Persons of Japanese Ancestry, Public domain
2. Dorothea Lange Collection, Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration (Public domain via Densho)
3. Map of WWII incarceration sites - Public domain
4. Maggie Tokuda-Hall, *Love in the Library* (Penguin Random House, 2022)
5. George Takei, *My Lost Freedom: A Japanese American World War II Story* (Penguin Random House, 2024)