

Three Key Questions:

- 1) Why did FDR issue Executive Order 9066?
- 2) What did the Executive Order Do?
- 3) Didn't anyone oppose?

1) WHY DID FDR ISSUE EXECUTIVE ORDER 9066?

After the Pearl Harbor attack, public fear and anger quickly turned on people of Japanese ancestry. These emotions stemmed, in part, from long-standing racial prejudices and rumors and accusations that predated December 7.

President Roosevelt and many of his military advisers had long worried about the loyalty of Japanese Americans. The Office of Naval Intelligence kept tabs on Japanese communities as early as 1936 and FDR ordered the creation of lists of Japanese Americans in Hawaii to be interned in an emergency. In 1940, Congress enacted the Alien Registration Act. It required adult resident aliens to register annually with the government.

On December 7, 1941, the FBI and local police began raiding homes to detain suspicious Japanese aliens, along with smaller numbers of German and Italian aliens.

In the coming weeks, suspicion of Japanese Americans increased. West Coast newspapers, military leaders, and political figures, including California Attorney General Earl Warren (a future U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice) claimed there was no way to distinguish loyal and disloyal Japanese Americans.

During this period, FDR received contradictory advice about further action. Military advisers recommended barring persons of Japanese descent, including American citizens, from the West Coast as a safeguard against espionage and sabotage. The Justice Department initially questioned the necessity of such action.

But the shock of Pearl Harbor and subsequent Japanese advances and atrocities in the Philippines fueled already tense race relations. In the face of political, military, and public pressure, Roosevelt approved the military's proposal.

2) WHAT DID THE EXECUTIVE ORDER DO?

Executive Order 9066 authorized the military to exclude “any or all persons” from areas of the United States designated as “military areas.”

Although the order did not identify any particular group, it was designed to remove—and eventually used to incarcerate—Japanese aliens and American citizens of Japanese descent. President Roosevelt’s order did not lead to mass removals of the large Japanese American population in Hawaii. Enormous logistical obstacles and worries about the impact on the islands’ economy made that impractical. But it was applied on America’s West Coast.

On March 2, 1942, Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, head of the military’s Western Defense Command, issued a proclamation establishing two military areas. Military Area 1 consisted of the western half of Washington, Oregon, and California (and the southern half of Arizona). Military Area 2 comprised the remainder of these states.

Later that month, the military announced plans to remove all people of Japanese descent from Military Area 1. They later extended the plans to include the portion of California in Military Area 2. The removal—which the government termed an “evacuation”—began that month. Eventually, approximately 110,000 individuals were transported to government camps in remote inland areas. Nearly all those incarcerated there were from the West Coast, but smaller numbers came from Hawaii and Alaska and others were later born in the camps. The total number of people confined was approximately 120,000. Roughly two-thirds were American citizens.

3) Didn't anyone oppose?

There was little organized opposition to Executive Order 9066 and the subsequent incarceration of Japanese Americans. A small group of progressive church organizations that included the American Friends Service Committee mounted protests and Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas circulated a petition to void FDR's order. The petition was signed by some 200 intellectuals and progressives, including novelist Pearl S. Buck, W.E.B. DuBois, and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, but had no impact.

Many Japanese American leaders and organizations felt they had no choice but to accept the government's actions. But some individuals spoke out boldly in opposition. "Has the Gestapo come to America?" asked journalist James Omura in testimony before a U.S. House committee, "Have we not risen in righteous anger at Hitler's mistreatment of Jews? Then is it not incongruous that citizen Americans of Japanese descent should be mistreated and persecuted?"

Others, aided by sympathetic lawyers, fought back in court. Attorney Minoru Yasui deliberately violated the military curfew established for people of Japanese ancestry to mount a case to end it. College student Gordon Hirabayashi disregarded both the curfew and the "evacuation" order to pursue a legal challenge to both. Fred Korematsu tried unsuccessfully to evade removal and, subsequently, sought to overturn the "evacuation" policy in court. The Yasui, Hirabayashi, and Korematsu cases eventually made their way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which upheld the curfew and "evacuation" policies.