Japanese American Internment

In the uncertain weeks after Pearl Harbor, as Japanese forces expanded across the Pacific and Southeast Asia, many Americans—particularly those on the Pacific coast—feared enemy attack and saw danger in every corner.

Wartime fears combined with racial prejudice to lead to a great injustice. Early in 1942, civilian and military leaders on the West Coast—including California Attorney General Earl Warren (later U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice)—complained that members of the region’s large Japanese American community might be working with the Japanese military to plan acts of sabotage. Though no serious evidence of this existed, they pushed the Roosevelt administration for action.

On February 19, 1942, FDR issued executive order 9066, which led to the forced relocation of more than 110,000 Japanese Americans to inland internment camps operated by the military. More than two-thirds were native born American citizens. Abruptly forced to abandon or sell their homes and businesses, many lost everything. Yet they remained loyal, and some Japanese Americans from the camps served in the nation’s military, where they distinguished themselves with extraordinary valor.

The Supreme Court upheld the President’s order in two wartime cases. But in the 1980s, Congress acknowledged this violation of the civil liberties and voted to provide some financial compensation to individuals confined in the camps. The Supreme Court also vacated its earlier wartime rulings.

Similar wartime fears led Canada and nations throughout Latin America to adopt comparable expulsion measures against residents of Japanese ancestry.
Text of Executive Order 9066: Authorizing the Secretary of War to Prescribe Military Areas:

This press release containing the text of Executive Order 9066 was issued on the day after Roosevelt signed the order. The original Executive Order is located at the National Archives in Washington D.C. as part of Record Group 11: The General Records of the United States Government.