

**PEARL HARBOR AND SEPTEMBER 11:
JAPANESE INTERNMENT AND ISLAMOPHOBIA**

By Nick Gier, Professor Emeritus, University of Idaho
(nickgier@roadrunner.com)

Read Gier's essay "The Real Meaning of Sodomy" at
www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/sodomy.htm.

I'm a resident alien among you.

~Abraham to the Hittites, Genesis 23:4

Do not oppress the alien because you were aliens in the land of Egypt.

~Exodus 23:9

*I would carry fire in one hand and faggots
in the other to burn all the Quakers in the world.*

~Boston preacher John Norton

*When young people are indoctrinated into the Muslim ideal, how much
are they willing to carry it out? It's no different than the Japanese kamikazes.*

~GOP congressional candidate Marvin Scott

*I'm for catching every Japanese and putting them in concentration camps.
This is a race war and the white man's civilization has come into conflict
with Japanese barbarism. One of them must be destroyed.*

~Mississippi Rep. John Rankin, December 14, 1941

Our Protestant forefathers fled Europe because of religious persecution, but once they settled in the New World they did not always tolerate those of other religions or ethnic backgrounds. In 1649 Solomon Franco, a Portuguese Jew from Holland, arrived in Boston. Like many Jews of the period, Franco was not only a scholar but an agent for the Dutch trader Immanuel Perada. Franco was accompanying military supplies for Major-General Edward Gibbon, commander of the local militia. A dispute arose over his pay and three months later he was forced to leave the country.

On October 19, 1658 the General Court of Boston passed a law stating that any Quaker refusing banishment would be executed. The result was that Quakers kept coming back to

Boston with more zeal than ever. Before English authorities insisted that everyone (except Catholics) should be protected, four Quakers were hung in Boston from 1659 to 1661.

In May of 1844 Protestant extremists (terrorists?) burned down two Catholic churches and a seminary in Philadelphia. When the ashes settled, 14 people were dead and about 50 were wounded. On August 6, 1855, Protestant terrorists in Louisville, Kentucky declared war on recent Irish and German Catholic immigrants. When the violence subsided, there were 20 to 100 innocents dead, the higher number reported by the Catholic Bishop of Louisville.

The weapons used against the Catholics in Louisville were stored in the headquarters of the Know-Nothing Party. Party membership was limited to Protestant males of British heritage, and the name comes from the fact that they were a society whose secrets were protected by the oath "I know nothing." Today's anti-immigrants are very open about their bigotry and their views are riddled with a different kind of know nothing: namely, abysmal or willful ignorance.

In 1887 over 30 Chinese miners were murdered and mutilated in their camp on the Snake River in Oregon. Only four of the killers were captured and they were acquitted of murder charges in 1888. A local rancher George Craig described the incident as what we would now call a "hate" crime: "If they had killed 31 white men something would have been done about it, but none of the jury knew the Chinamen or cared much about it."

At the turn of the 20th Century conjured threats of the Yellow Peril led to restrictions on immigration and denial of citizenship for all Asians already in the country. Earlier many believed that the Irish were a separate race and of course inferior to them, but racist Americans reserved their most hateful rhetoric for blacks and Asians. During World War I Germans were depicted as human monsters, but later the Japanese were pictured as apes or insects.

In his book *Cultures of War* John Dower proposes the racism led to the U.S. lowering its guard before Pearl Harbor and the September 11 attacks. Even though we now know that there were clearing warnings that a Japanese attack was imminent, the commanding officer in Hawaii finally admitted that "I never thought those little yellow sons of bitches could pull off such an attack so far from Japan."

In early August 2001, while cutting brush at his Texas ranch, President George Bush received and then ignored an intelligence brief warning of terrorist attacks. (Bush broke his summer vacations only for campaign appearances and a special session of Congress to deny Terri Schiavo's husband's right to decide her fate.) Dower quotes a CIA agent who said that he could not believe that "a polyglot bunch of Arabs wearing robes, sporting scraggly beards, and squatting around campfires in Afghanistan could pose a mortal threat to the U.S." In two major attacks on the nation American racism came back on us with a vengeance.

The internment of 110,000 Japanese Americans—two thirds of whom were American citizens—was a major violation of basic human rights. President Roosevelt caved into bigotry and hysteria even after receiving a report that confirmed what the FBI had known for years: Japanese Americans possessed "an extraordinary degree of loyalty to the U.S." and "did not pose a threat to national security in the event of war with Japan."

The man who oversaw the internment was evidently not satisfied with these assurances. Lt. Gen. John L. DeWitt declared that “racial affinities are not severed by migration. The Japanese race is an enemy race and while Japanese born on United States have become Americanized, the racial strains are undiluted.”

The Congress was also complicit in this stain on America’s character. A week after Pearl Harbor Mississippi Congressman John Rankin ranted: “I’m for catching every Japanese and putting them in concentration camps. This is a race war and the white man’s civilization has come into conflict with Japanese barbarism. One of them must be destroyed.” In 1944 the Supreme Court upheld the legality of the action ruling that it was a “military necessity.”

Calling the “relocation camps” what they really were—“concentration camps” —Harry Truman and many others spoke out against the evil deed. Forty-six long years later the critics were vindicated when in 1988, President Reagan apologized to the Japanese American community and authorized the payment of \$20,000 to each survivor. Reagan was guided by the recommendations of a presidential commission, which concluded that the internment was based on “race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership.”

The principal reason given for internment was that there were spies among these hard-working innocent people. There were German, Italian, and Russian spies in the country during World Wars I & II and the Cold War, but no Russian was every imprisoned without due process and only a few resident alien Germans and Italians were interned at a camp in Crystal City, Texas.

During World War II there were about 4,000 high level Nazi detainees outside Washington, D. C. at Fort Hunt Park. Instead of putting them in stress positions and water boarding them, American interrogators played tennis and rode horses with the prisoners, and some were even invited off base to dinners at local restaurants. Some of the detainees were scientists with knowledge of the German atomic bomb project, but no coercive techniques were ever used and the Geneva Conventions were strictly followed.

Nazi Germany threatened Western civilization far more than Al Qaeda, so there must be deeper and darker reasons for the total disrespect shown to Muslim detainees. There was no question about the German prisoners’ participation in the war, but in Afghanistan most detainees were captured off the battlefield, rendered to the U.S. authorities for \$5,000 bounties, bound and gagged, flown half way around the world, and then subjected to the most gruesome interrogation techniques. Whereas there were efforts to save Fort Hunt Park detainees’ families, threats were made against the Muslims’ near and dear.

In the aftermath of 9/11 the Japanese American Citizens League was the first to speak out against the blanket condemnation of Muslims. Their families knew very well the suffering and humiliation caused by blaming every member of a religious or ethnic group for the crimes of a few. The Council on American Islamic Relations and the Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress currently special classes for 70 Japanese and Muslim students in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle. Spokeswoman Patty Wada said that the discrimination against Muslims is “sad and disappointing. This mentality just keeps repeating itself.”

Today Japanese and Muslim Americans share many achievements in common. They have higher incomes than the average American and they both value education very much. Muslim American women have more college degrees than their male peers, and Japanese American students have the best showing in advanced placement than any other ethnic group.

We Idahoans are most familiar with the internment camp in Jerome County where 9,000 Japanese were imprisoned from 1942-45. After their release some residents of the camp went on to become notable writers, composers, artists, attorneys, and businessmen. One was an Oregon State football player who was prevented from finishing the season, and another was an optometrist who was instrumental in introducing contact lenses.

Less known even for those of us who live in Northern Idaho is the Kooskia Work Camp where 256 Japanese men were housed and helped construct parts of State Highway 12. These men volunteered for this assignment and received wages for their work. State highway officials were impressed with the engineering prowess of their Asian workers. The men came from all over the Western Hemisphere: one had worked for Charlie Chaplin, another had set up the Buddhist Temple in New York, and several came from Latin America where they had been kidnapped by U.S. agents. Today we call this “extraordinary rendition.”

The Kooskia prisoners were the only Japanese Americans who were governed by the 1929 Geneva Convention, which gave them more rights than their compatriots in the other camps. University of Idaho archaeologists have uncovered hundreds of artifacts from their daily lives and there is evidence that people in the surrounding communities came to respect the peaceful, hard-working Asians in their midst.

Returning to the first Jew in America, it is worth noting that our Puritan Fathers did give Solomon Franco a small living allowance. This gesture fulfilled a portion of the Middle Eastern law of hospitality, which requires that you feed and house even your enemies. They, however, violated it quite dramatically by banning Franco for no good reason.

The name of the God to whom both Jesus and Muslims pray is the same: *allah* in Arabic and *alalah* in Jesus' Western Aramaic. According to Jesus the sin of the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah was not homosexual rape but brutal inhospitality (Matt. 10: 5-15). Earlier in the story Abraham had welcomed the same divine visitors by laying out a fine meal of bread and veal (Gen.18)

The literal meaning of the word “Hebrew” is “one who crosses over from one land to another,” and the ancient Hebrews were always dependent on the kindness of strangers. The Hittites were kind enough to give “the resident alien” Abraham a plot of land for Sarah's tomb (Gen. 23:4), and in Exodus we find the injunction: “Do not oppress the alien because you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (23:9). How did our Puritan Fathers and today's Islamophobs, all close readers of the Bible, miss this fundamental moral message?

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years.