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Migrant children: ‘Lies just big enough to stick’ are all too familiar to George Takei, who was interned in America during WWII

Samantha Schmidt

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George Takei never thought he would have to say the words “at least during the internment . . .”

When he was 5 years old, Takei and his family were sent to a racetrack and forced to live in a horse stall. They were among 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent who were forcibly shipped out from the West Coast and confined to internment camps during World War II “because we happened to look like those who had dropped the bombs,” the actor wrote Tuesday in [Foreign Policy](#).

Takei said he sees haunting echoes of this time in scenes of migrant children, some [housed in metal cages](#), separated from their parents at the border. First lady Laura Bush drew similar parallels in an op-ed in [The Washington Post](#), saying the images today are “eerily reminiscent of the Japanese American internment camps of World War II, now considered to have been one of the most shameful episodes in U.S. history.”

But, Takei said, “in one core, horrifying way, this is worse.” At least during the internment, Takei and other children were able to stay with their families, he wrote. His parents told him they were “going on a vacation to live with the horsies.” When they were moved to a mosquito-infested camp in rural Arkansas, his parents “put themselves between us and the horror,” Takei said.

“At least during the internment, we remained a family, and I credit that alone for keeping the scars of our unjust imprisonment from deepening on my soul,” Takei wrote.

In some ways, what’s going on now with migrant families is very different from the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Notably, most of those forced into internment camps — 70 percent — were U.S. citizens.

But there are numerous parallels. One that stands out is the rhetoric and falsehoods used by the government, both then and now, to instill fear in the public and justify sweeping policies against a group of people.

Although government officials in 1942 had no evidence that Japanese Americans were trying to sabotage the United States by collaborating with Japan, some officials claimed that they did anyway. They convinced the public that “we must be planning something truly hidden and deeply sinister,” as Takei wrote.

“It was a lie, and a big one, but it was one repeated enough, and said with enough conviction, that the rest of the country went along with it,” Takei wrote. “We were the murderers, the thugs, the animals then — and since you couldn’t tell the good from the bad, you might as well round up everyone in the name of national security.”

Trump became president on a campaign that painted undocumented immigrants as criminals and rapists. He has referred to unauthorized immigrants as “animals.”

“You wouldn’t believe how bad these people are. These aren’t people. These are animals,” he said in a conversation at the White House last month. He asserted that he was referring to the gang MS-13. But as the Cato Institute’s Julian Sanchez argued, Trump’s words conflated groups, lumping undocumented immigrants with gang members, and all gang members with animals.

On Tuesday, Trump used the word “infest” to refer to people entering the country illegally — as if they were vermin. The president tweeted that Democrats want “illegal immigrants, no matter how bad they may be, to pour into and infest our Country, like MS-13.”

“The broad brush of ‘criminal’ today raises echoes of the wartime ‘enemy’ to my ears,” Takei wrote. “Once painted, both marks are impossible to wash off. Trump prepared his followers for this day long ago, when he began to dehumanize Mexican migrants as drug dealers, rapists, murderers, and animals.”

Trump has promised his supporters to be tough on illegal immigration, and his administration’s “zero-tolerance” policy aims to prosecute as many border-crossing offenses as possible.

U.S. officials during World War II had their own “zero-tolerance” policy, Takei argued.

“Being tough on Japan easily translated into being tough on the Japanese here in America,” Takei wrote. “No matter that most of us weren’t even Japanese nationals; nearly two-thirds of those imprisoned were U.S. citizens, after all. But as the Wartime Relocation Authority made clear, ‘a Jap is a Jap.’ ”

Here’s just one of many examples. On Feb. 9, 1942, the Associated Press distributed across the country an article about a report of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, which proposed that all Japanese on the West Coast be removed at least 500 miles inland and interned.

The reason: The committee claimed that Japanese Americans had promoted “systematic espionage” and even “prepared the way for the attack on Pearl Harbor.”

“The United States has been and still is lax, tolerant and soft toward the Japanese who have violated American hospitality,” the House report said. The article’s sub-headline read, “The fifth-column peril is still acute.”

This phrase, “fifth-column,” used often by officials and the news media, was understood by everyone then because of reports from Europe of disloyalty in countries that were being overrun by Nazi Germany. Now it was being applied to Japanese Americans.

A week after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox returned from an inspection trip to Hawaii and asserted that “the most effective fifth-column work of the entire war” had aided the Japanese.

He accused people of Japanese ancestry in Hawaii of helping carry out the attack. Rumors spread accusing Japanese Americans in Hawaii of guiding the Japanese fleet or even planting pineapple fields in the shape of arrows pointing to Pearl Harbor.

(An extensive official government inquiry in 1982 by the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians documents the whole story in great detail.)

But none of it was true, as that inquiry showed.

During all of World War II, not one example of espionage or disloyalty by a Japanese American was ever documented. Intelligence reports disputed the fifth-column theories, even though the term was used by the U.S. Supreme Court when it upheld the treatment of Japanese Americans in a series of now-infamous decisions.

The executive order implementing the roundup came from President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Across the country, it faced little opposition from a fearful nation at war, which already had been fed a steady diet of racist stereotypes and conspiracy theories about Japanese Americans by, among others, high officials of federal, state and local governments.

Lt. Gen. John L. DeWitt, head of the Army's western command, wrote in a report that the entire Japanese race was an "enemy race":

"In the war in which we are now engaged racial affinities are not severed by migration. The Japanese race is an enemy race and while many second and third generation Japanese born on United States soil, possessed of United States citizenship have become 'Americanized,' the racial strains are undiluted."

In a phone call with Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy, DeWitt argued, according to a report in *The Post*:

"If they the Japanese Americans are allowed to remain where they are, we are just going to have one complication after another because you just can't tell one Jap from another. They all look the same. Give a sentry or an officer or troops any job like that, a Jap's a Jap, and you can't blame the men for stopping all of them."

If the government officials prompted the hysteria, the media fueled it. Hearst columnist Henry McLemore argued in a January 1941 column for the removal of every Japanese person on the West Coast "to a point deep in the interior."

"Herd 'em up, pack 'em off and give 'em the inside room in the badlands," he wrote. "Let 'em be pinched, hurt, hungry and dead up against it. . . . Personally, I hate the Japanese. And that goes for all of them."

Several California papers supported Japanese American internment, according to Juan González and Joseph Torres's "News for All the People: The Epic Story of Race and the American Media."

The Los Angeles Times called for the removal of the Japanese, declaring, "A viper is nonetheless a viper wherever the egg is hatched — so a Japanese American, born of Japanese parents, grows up to be a Japanese, not an American."

The federal government also subsidized radio programs that dehumanized Japanese people. One government-sponsored series aimed at promoting the sale of war bonds aired an episode titled “A Lesson in Japanese.” It described the Japanese as monkeys, reptiles and “savage beast[s],” according to González and Torres. Another episode portrayed a U.S. soldier dismembering a Japanese soldier’s genitals.

In March 1942, a message from a government agent on the West Coast warned Washington that newspapers were publishing many stories “concerning the Jap infiltration of ownership of land surrounding vital areas . . . some feel it is better to send a thousand innocent people away than risk sabotage by one.”

More than 75 years later, we are once again “flinging ourselves into a world of camps and fences and racist imagery — and lies just big enough to stick,” Takei said in his Foreign Policy piece.

And “unless we act now,” Takei said, “we will have failed to learn at all from our past mistakes.”