Concern A: Protecting Against Enemy Collaborators

The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, sent shock waves throughout the United States. 2,300 sailors lost their lives in the attack, and some remain entombed in ships beneath the Hawaiian waters. The angry American people called for revenge. In the days after the attack, Congress and President Roosevelt called for war, not only with Japan but also with her allies, Germany and Italy. For the first time in history, the United States was in a two-ocean war, facing well-armed enemies on the far coasts of both the Atlantic and the Pacific. Nine Japanese submarines operated off the West Coast in the months following the attack. Four American ships were damaged or sunk. On February 23, 1942, oil facilities in Santa Barbara were attacked by a Japanese submarine.

Early investigations into the attack on Pearl Harbor placed responsibility on Japanese spies working in Hawaii. Some argued that the attack could not have been carried out without the help of spies to supply information to the attacking Japanese planes. The Roosevelt administration, military leaders, and the public wondered openly about enemies living in the United States. After all, Germany's successful conquest of France, Norway, Poland, and Austria were blamed on Fifth Columnists—citizens in those countries who had worked undercover to help the German forces. Many people were concerned about the loyalty of over one million Germans, Italians, and Japanese then living in the United States, especially since some of them were not citizens. One federal judge noted, "Our doors have been thrown open in the past to all kinds of people. Some of them now seek to harm us."

In the 1930s some Americans of German, Italian, and Japanese descent joined pro-fascist organizations. The German Bund, an organization of Germans who supported Adolph Hitler, numbered as many as 25 to 30 thousand members. A similar number of Italians were pro-Mussolini. Japanese membership in pro-fascist groups like the Black Dragon Society was much smaller, probably less than a thousand. Collectively, the presence of so many people living in the United States with sympathy toward the enemy was thought by some to represent a major threat. Others considered the threat much less significant since the vast majority of these people were American citizens, and many had family roots that stretched back for generations in the United States.

Critical-Thinking Question A: You are President Roosevelt's chief advisor on national security issues. What would you advise the president to do? Why?

A. Intern—place in armed camps—all Germans, Italians, and Japanese citizens and noncitizens (approximately one million people).
B. Intern only those Germans, Italians, and Japanese that appear to be disloyal.
C. Place all Japanese citizens and noncitizens, regardless of age, gender, or place of birth, in internment camps well away from strategic coastal areas.
D. Establish zones around military installations and strategic areas and require an entry pass.
E. Deal with Germans, Italians, and Japanese the same way as other U.S. citizens—on a case-by-case basis. Proven enemy collaborators should be sent to jail or interned.

Concern B: Carrying Out the Internment of Japanese

On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, directing Secretary of War Henry Stimson to designate military zones from which citizens could be excluded. While the order could have been used to intern Germans and Italians, they were deemed too numerous and too important to the war effort to intern. Indeed, Japanese living in Hawaii, who made up 37 percent of the island's population, were not interned as a result of the order. The commanding general in Hawaii resisted pressure to round up Japanese because they were too numerous and an integral part of the war effort. Japanese living on the mainland were not so fortunate. They fell under the control of General Dewitt, commander of the Western Defense Command, who stated, "A Jap's a Jap.... It makes no difference whether he is an American citizen or not.... I don't want any of them.... There is no way to determine their loyalty."

In March 1942 the internment began. Japanese Americans, carrying only their hand luggage, were forced to report to army-run centers at fairgrounds and other large public arenas. They were then transported to one of 10 camps located in remote, desolate areas of the western states. The camps were fenced in and dotted with tarpapered wooden barracks. Each of these barracks consisted of several one-room apartments, ordinarily with only partial walls, and was furnished with cots, blankets, and a bare light bulb. A single family or group shared each room. People also shared communal toilets, laundries, and bathing facilities, where they showered in full view of sentries. Guards with guns looked down at the internees from towers that encircled each camp. Powerful searchlights swept across the windows of the flimsy barracks, which were bitter cold in the winter and oppressively hot in the summer.

The internment orders were carried out swiftly and with thoroughness. Some Japanese had only 48 hours to take care of their affairs before being interned. Businesses, homes, and possessions were sold at only a fraction of their worth. Although Dewitt's orders suggested that persons over the age of 70 might be excluded from the internment, they were interned anyway. Even Japanese orphans were removed from orphanages run by Anglo priests and placed in camps.

Men in charge of the internment said that it was dictated by military necessity. The Supreme Court agreed. In three separate cases, the Court ruled against individual Japanese Americans who sued the federal government over the internment.

Critical-Thinking Question B: You are member of a congressional committee investigating the Japanese internment during World War II. What is your assessment of how Executive Order 9066 was carried out? Why?

A. The way it was carried out was absolutely wrong. What happened is shameful.
B. The way it was carried out was wrong but can be understood because the United States was at war.
C. The way it was carried out can be justified. It was a matter of military necessity.

Concern C: The Question of an Apology and Reparations

Several members of Roosevelt's administration disagreed with Executive Order 9066. Attorney General Francis Biddle and Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes tried unsuccessfully in 1942 and 1943 to convince Roosevelt to reverse his decision. In late 1944 the opponents of the internment finally convinced the president to dismantle the internment policy and release all internees.

The president's reversal was small consolation to the 117,000 Japanese held in the 10 major camps scattered throughout the rural areas and wastelands of the western United States. Internees had spent an average of 900 days in the camps. Ironically, not a single Japanese spy or saboteur was ever discovered. Only nine Americans—all white—were ever charged with aiding the Imperial Japanese government. Most internees were loyal citizens, and many had worked to produce war material to help defeat the Fascists. Many young male Japanese Americans, who were allowed to leave the camps to join the military, passionately defended the United States. The all-Japanese 442nd Regiment, which fought primarily in Italy, remains, man for man, the most decorated military unit in American history. Japanese-American interpreters working in the Pacific may have shortened the war by six months.

In 1980 a congressional committee was established to investigate the Japanese internment. The committee concluded that no real military threat had been posed by Japanese living in the United States during World War II. The committees' conclusions match those of some historians. One called the internment a "major blot" on the U.S. civil-rights record; another, the "greatest domestic violation of human rights during the war."

In 1988 Congress considered a bill that required an apology for the internment and a $20,000 reparation payment to every surviving Japanese American. The legislation had the strong support of most Japanese Americans. One said, "This action would vindicate Japanese Americans. It would correct history and make it clear that Japanese Americans were not disloyal." Sam Hayakawa, former senator from California, was one of the few Japanese Americans to oppose the bill. He stated, "If the war had gone badly for the U.S., the Japanese on the West Coast would have had a bad time. They should be grateful for [the internment] instead of asking for money for it." Another opponent, columnist James Kirkpatrick, said, "No payments and no apology are required. The past is past. Let it stay that way."

Critical-Thinking Question C: You are a member of Congress in 1988. What is your opinion of the proposal for a formal apology and reparation payments? Why?

A. The proposal for an apology and reparations does not go far enough. The payment should cover the true cost of the pain and suffering of the internees.
B. The proposal is appropriate just as it is.
C. The apology is appropriate but the payment is going too far. Who else will we have to pay?
D. No apology or reparations should be provided to the surviving internees.