

Introduction

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September 11, 2001 was not the first time there was a massive attack on the United States. The first was of course December 7, 1941, at Pearl Harbor. While in some ways the immediate reactions to the two events were very different, in others, there were troubling similarities.

After Pearl Harbor and the United States' subsequent declaration of war on Japan, the government decided that the safety of the nation required the rounding up of a hundred and twenty thousand Japanese-Americans. They were placed into what were politely called relocation camps, where they were forced to remain for the duration of World War II. The United States Supreme Court upheld that unconscionable violation of human rights.¹ And yet not a single one of the interned Japanese-Americans was ever convicted of spying or of any other anti-American activity.

The illegality of the government's behavior was formally acknowledged in 1981, when the Federal Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians determined that the major cause of the mass incarceration was, in its words, Aracism, opportunism and the failure of political leadership."² The Commission recommended that the former inmates be given an official government apology, which Congress did in the Civil Liberties Act of 1988. It also awarded former inmates of the camps token remuneration of \$20,000 each

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for the substantial amount of property they lost.³ Those actions amounted to a recognition that the government of the United States had stigmatized an entire people, and that this was an egregious wrong.

Contrast the events of 1942 with the reaction to the terrorism of September 11, 2001. President George W. Bush went to a major service at the National Cathedral, which was opened by a Muslim cleric. Congress included in the Patriot Act of 2001, the “anti-terrorism” law, a finding that Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans are as American as anyone else.⁴ The difference between 1942 and 2001 was marked.

And yet, one might wonder at the perceived necessity for the congressional finding. Its conclusions ought to be so obvious that its inclusion in the Patriot Act suggests two things. One, happily, is that we are very much aware of the Japanese-American experience and want not to repeat it. From that point of view, Congress’ attempt to educate the population about stereotyping is welcome. The second and equally clear implication, however, is that the impetus to racism that led to the stereotyping of Japanese-Americans has not vanished from our shores.

Two weeks after September 11th the media was carrying reports of more than two hundred incidents of verbal and physical violence a day against Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans. By the time of the Woodrow Wilson Center’s conference on American Arabs, held on November 1, 2001, over one thousand people had been rounded up by the federal government and were still in prison, although they had not been charged with any crime. They were

overwhelmingly either Arab-Americans or Arab immigrants. The widespread societal suspicion of all Arabs, whether Muslim or Christian, and of all Muslims, Arab or not, indicated that one of the problems for both the government and the general public was a sense of "us" and "them" that stemmed in large measure from a lack of popular information about American Arabs. That failure was all the stranger since Arab-Americans were and are much more visible in the life of the country than the Japanese-Americans had been at the time of the Second World War.

There is a substantial number of American Arabs in public life. Former U.S. Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, for example, is an American Arab. So are Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham, former Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala, former U.S. Senators James Abourezk and James Abdnor, long-time White House correspondent Helen Thomas, and former New Hampshire governor and White House Chief of Staff John Sununu. And yet, for the most part, non-Arab Americans still know little about American Arabs.

It was in the hope of helping to rectify that situation that the Division of U.S. Studies of the Wilson Center quickly organized a conference on the identity of Arab-Americans, their history in the United States, and issues such as gender, family, religion, and activism. The purpose was to bring together a relatively short and accessible collection of information that would be useful to policy-makers, teachers, and the general public. What follows is a slightly edited version of the proceedings.

The Division of U.S. Studies is grateful to Omar Kader and Pal-Tech for contributing much of the funding for the conference. We were also fortunate to secure the services of Philip Mattar, a 2001-2002 scholar at the Center, who helped plan the conference and moderated one of the two panels. Thanks go as well to Susan Nugent for her invaluable organizational skills. Above all, the conference benefited from the willingness of some of the nation's leading scholars and activists of the American Arab community to put aside their usual schedules and come together so as to give us the benefit of their knowledge.

¹ *Korematsu v. United States*, 323 U.S. 214 (1944)

² United States Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, *Personal Justice Denied: Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982).

³ Civil Liberties Act of 1988, 50 U.S.C. 1989.

⁴ Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT ACT) Act of 2001, PL 107-38.