

## Japanese Immigration and the Dark Prehistory of Donald Trump's Muslim Ban

*In this piece, Dr Cees Heere explores the historical precedents of Donald Trump's recent travel ban.*

*Author's note: I wrote this article in an effort to make sense of the ban on immigration from seven Muslim-majority countries to the United States, announced on 27 January 2017. The revised order introduced on 6 March remedies some of the original's more obvious legal deficiencies, yet does not, in my view, alter the core provisions against which my argument is directed.*

Executive Order 13769 – or the 'Muslim ban', as it has been unavoidably dubbed – categorically bans the inhabitants of seven Muslim-majority states from entering the United States. In doing so, it resurrects a practice that has not been used in US immigration law (or in most other Western countries) in over five decades: determining someone's right to entry on the basis of a collective criterion, like nationality, rather than on individual grounds. In other words, it makes the bureaucratic ritual of submitting and reviewing a visa application redundant: holding a passport from one of these seven countries is enough, no matter your individual circumstances.

Starting with the title, 'Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States,' President Trump has consistently justified his order by couching it in the evocative language of national security. Its stated purpose is to 'protect the American people from terrorist attacks by foreign nationals'. It explicitly refers to 9/11 – never mind the fact that none of the nineteen hijackers came from countries included in the ban. In short, it deploys a tried-and-true argument for the expansion of executive power, best summarised as 'better safe than sorry'.

These two distinctive elements, collective restriction, justified through appeals to national security, have a long-standing pedigree in US immigration policy. As Columbia historian Mae Ngai has **recently pointed out**, it is reminiscent of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the very first occasion on which the federal government imposed a collective bar on immigration. Others have **drawn parallels** with the Red Scare. My own work, on Japanese immigration across the Pacific, offers a similar analogy – and a set of warnings about where such policies can lead.

Japanese immigrants first began to make the journey to the United States in the 1880s, drawn in by a sudden deficit in the labour market that followed Chinese exclusion. Their presence was not, at first, particularly controversial, with local commentators noting their sober living habits and entrepreneurial spirit. Some thrived, such as Ushijima Kinji, from the Fukuoka prefecture in Kyushu, who arrived in San Francisco in 1889, taught himself English, changed his name to George Shima, and found employment as a farm labourer near Sacramento. At the time of his death in 1926, Shima's company produced over eighty percent of the state's potato crop. Popularly, he was known as the 'potato king of California'.

By the early 1900s, this attitude began to shift. Japanese immigration to the continental United States picked up pace, particularly after the American annexation of Hawaii (home to a significant Japanese population) in 1898. Japanese communities in cities like San Francisco and Seattle became larger and more visible. Moreover, Japanese immigrants were increasingly associated with the growing power of Japan itself. Following the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5), in which Japan unexpectedly defeated a white European power, unease tilted into panic. In February 1905, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, California's largest newspaper, declared Japanese immigration was now 'the problem of the hour', and it predicted that once Japan had won its war with Russia, the

inflow of Japanese migrants would become 'a raging torrent'. The California state legislature demanded an exclusion law. Finally, in October 1906, with tempers on edge following the recent earthquake, the San Francisco city council ordered the segregation of Japanese pupils from public schools. The immigration issue now became an international controversy, with tempers flaring up on both sides of the Pacific.

What marked out the Japanese 'crisis' against other immigration scares, was the frequency and consistency with which Japanese immigrants were identified as a security threat. Rumours began to circulate in the press: most of the new arrivals were young men, many of whom had seen military service in the Russian war – was it possible these were still soldiers? Anxious letter-writers reported spotting Japanese taking photographs of possible landing sites along the coastline, or suspiciously congregating near strategic points like railroads and bridges. As the scare spread northward across the Canadian border, one concerned militia officer reported that local Japanese fishermen had smuggled in secret stocks of arms and ammunition. 'It is understood,' he wrote, 'that men were prepared to concentrate on the frontier and raid USA territory.' Unhindered by a lack of hard evidence, such accusations slowly but surely linked individual Japanese together in a nebulous conspiracy to infiltrate the United States.

As this panicky rhetoric spread from California to the east coast, it galvanised the campaign for Japanese exclusion. The president, Theodore Roosevelt, who had been initially skeptical, now came to see the Japanese as a threat: a Canadian official who visited the White House in January 1908 quoted him as saying that the United States faced 'a silent invasion of foreign peoples, as effective as that of the Huns and the Goths that brought down the Roman Empire'. At Roosevelt's insistence, the Japanese government was pressed into accepting a wide range of restrictions – the euphemistically termed 'gentleman's agreement' that remained in force until 1924.

The popular agitation that accompanied the negotiations was, in any event, anything but gentlemanly: throughout the summer of 1907, San Francisco's Japanese inhabitants were subjected to a protracted campaign of harassment. Japanese restaurants were boycotted and vandalised. Dr Ōmori Fusakichi, one of the world's leading seismologists, was pelted with rubble while investigating the aftermath of the 1906 earthquake. Washington too, backed up its negotiations with threats of violence, as Roosevelt ordered the fleet concentrated in the Pacific. In July 1907 the US Navy completed 'War Plan Orange', its scenario for a war against Japan. In this climate of fear, the categorical exclusion of Japanese not only became thinkable – it came to be seen as a necessity.

The history of the anti-Japanese campaign is instructive today not just because it evokes the memory of past racism, but also because it offers a distinct set of warnings. First, the Japanese immigration scare was never a uniquely American phenomenon. The largest single instance of anti-Japanese violence during the 1906-8 crisis took place on Canadian, rather than American soil: the Vancouver riots of 7-9 September 1907. When the US navy visited Australia and New Zealand in 1908, it was greeted with signs saying 'Stars and Stripes, if you please, protect us from the Japanese'. Today, too, anti-immigration rhetoric is a transnational phenomenon. Far-right populists in France and the Netherlands applaud Trump's example. Nigel Farage has called for 'extreme vetting' of Muslim immigrants into the UK. There is a real danger that categorical immigration restrictions might again become an acceptable form of immigration policy.

Second, just as the anti-Japanese campaign spread outwards to other countries, it also turned inwards, eroding the rights persons of Japanese origin, whether they were recent immigrants, longer residents, or US citizens born on American soil. The anti-Japanese campaign did not merely result in a ban on immigration; it also created the conditions under which the civic rights of immigrants and their descendants could be eroded. Japanese, along with other East Asian people, were already barred from acquiring citizenship through naturalisation. In 1913, the state of California made it illegal for them to own land: even George Shima, the 'potato king', was forced to transfer his assets into a shell company. Most notoriously of all, following the American entry into the Second World War, the US government ordered the incarceration of over a 100,000 people of Japanese heritage, over two-thirds of whom were born in the United States, and therefore citizens.

Such a slippery-slope argument might be thought of as alarmist, were it not that some of Donald Trump's supporters **cited Japanese internment** as a precedent over the course of his campaign.

Third, the Japanese immigration ban left a deep scar on Japanese-American relations. To many ordinary Japanese, it served as a reminder that the United States would always view Japan as inherently different. It should be noted, of course, that immigration restrictions did not by themselves set Japan on its course to Pearl Harbor – yet they were a powerful propaganda weapon in the hands of extremists. The United States eventually dismantled categorical restrictions during 1950s and 60s in the knowledge that they were harming its standing in Asia in the Cold War. Their reintroduction now, at this juncture, threatens to undermine the argument that Trump's predecessors bent over backwards to make: that America's quarrel was with terrorism, not with Islam.

**Dr Cees Heere received his PhD from the LSE International History Department in January 2017.**

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