FDR AND JAPANESE AMERICAN INTERNMENT

Today, the decision to intern Japanese Americans is widely viewed by historians and legal scholars as a blemish on Roosevelt’s wartime record.

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the FBI arrested over 1200 Japanese aliens throughout the United States. Over the next several weeks, President Roosevelt received contradictory advice about further action.

FDR’s military advisers recommended the exclusion of persons of foreign descent, including American citizens, from sensitive areas of the country as a safeguard against espionage and sabotage. The Justice Department initially resisted any relocation order, questioning both its military necessity and its constitutionality.

But the shock of Pearl Harbor and of Japanese atrocities in the Philippines fueled already tense race relations on America’s West Coast. In the face of political, military, and public pressure, Roosevelt accepted the relocation proposal. The Attorney General acquiesced after the War Department relieved the Justice Department of any responsibility for implementation.

On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 granting the War Department broad powers to create military exclusion areas. Although the order did not identify any particular group, in practice it was used almost exclusively to intern Americans of Japanese descent. By 1943, more than 110,000 Japanese Americans had been forced from their homes and moved to camps in remote inland areas of the United States.

*The documents contained in this selection are from the collections of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum and are intended to reflect the many sides of this issue*
FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover routinely forwarded information for the President through military aide and presidential secretary General Edwin M. “Pa” Watson. This December 10, 1941 letter and accompanying map show the locations of the 1,212 Japanese aliens considered to be disloyal or dangerous that were arrested by the Bureau within 48 hours of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Additional maps gave the locations of the 620 German and 98 Italian aliens taken into custody. (President’s Official File 10-B: Justice Department; FBI Reports, 1941; Box 15).
A former news reporter and columnist, J. Franklin Carter was a part of President Roosevelt's informal intelligence network. Carter had connections around the world with diplomats, government officials, the press, and business executives, including Chicago businessman C.B. Munson who was sent to the West Coast to assess the situation. This December 16, 1941 Memorandum from Carter to the President summarizes several earlier reports regarding the espionage threat, the reliability of other formal intelligence gathering agencies, and the loyalty of Japanese-Americans. (President's Secretary's Files; Subject File; Carter, John Franklin, Nov.-Dec. 1941; Box 97).
Assistant to the Attorney General James H. Rowe, Jr., was the most ardent critic of the proposal to relocate and intern Japanese-Americans. He denounced the proposal as unconstitutional, and believed that it was being forced on the administration by public hysteria. In this February 2, 1942 Memorandum to the President’s private secretary Grace Tully, Rowe warns the President of the growing public pressure and the constitutional issues involved. (James H. Rowe, Jr. Papers; Assistant to the Attorney General Files; Alien Enemy Control Unit; Box 33).
This Memorandum from Attorney General Biddle to President Roosevelt was Biddle’s last, best attempt to steer the President away from the massive, immediate evacuation and internment of Japanese-Americans being proposed by the military. In this memo, Biddle clearly tries to limit the Justice Department’s involvement in relocating American citizens, while at the same time warning Roosevelt not to bend to pressure from Congress and from the public outcry being created by outspoken columnists Walter Lippmann and Westbrook Pegler. Lipmann had recently written that “Nobody’s constitutional rights include the right to reside and do business on a battlefield”, and in a widely read column, Pegler had declared “The Japanese in California should be under armed guard to the last man and woman right now, and to hell with habeus corpus until the danger is over.” (President’s Official File 18: Navy Department, March-April 1942 (Box 7).
the F. B. I. have indicated that this is not the fact. It comes close to shouting FIRE! in the theater; and if race riots occur, these writers will bear a heavy responsibility. Either Lippman has information which the War Department and the F. B. I. apparently do not have, or is acting with dangerous irresponsibility.

It would serve to clarify the situation in the public mind if you see fit to mention it.

Respectfully,

[Signature]

Attorney General.
This letter from Sen. Harley Kilgore, a Democratic member of the powerful Senate Committee on Military Affairs, is an example of the political pressure to deal with the issue of Japanese-Americans on the West Coast that Roosevelt was receiving. The letter was received by the White House the day after Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066. (President's Official File 4805: Military Areas, 1941-1942).
Following established procedure, the Bureau of the Budget reviewed the final Executive Order prescribing military areas as drafted by the Justice and War Departments. In this letter transmitting the Executive Order to the President for his signature, Budget Director Smith makes reference to the “personal conference” held at Attorney General Francis Biddle’s house on the night of February 17, 1942 at which the Justice Department finally acquiesced to the issuance of the Executive Order as proposed by the War Department. James Rowe assisted in the revision of the language to ensure that the Justice Department would take no part in the implementation of the order. (President’s Official File 4805: Military Areas, 1941-1942).
This press release containing the text of Executive Order 9066 was issued on the day after Roosevelt signed the order. The original Executive Order is located at the National Archives in Washington DC as part of Record Group 11: The General Records of the United States Government. (Book and Printed Materials Collection; Franklin D. Roosevelt Executive Orders).