Genuine fear can be a powerful and crippling sensation; when given complete control, fear can even taint, transform and manipulate our ideas and actions. On a greater and more powerful and influential level, fear is what so dramatically shook government officials in the United States after Pearl Harbor and British and Irish officials in Northern Ireland during the early 1970s in the midst of religious and political violence. Charged by these fears, both governments were driven to implement undeniably racist and unlawful internment policies on specific ethnic groups in a desperate attempt to regain peace and security for their people. Political officials were open both before and after each case about the racist or discriminatory beliefs that fueled the internment of both Japanese-Americans and Republican Catholics suspected to be members of violent paramilitary groups.

The question then becomes whether or not we should excuse these prejudiced governmental decisions in light of the panic from which they arose and the desperate need for national security that citizens felt at the time. Those enacting and enforcing internment both in wartime America and within a Northern Ireland fraught by civil violence understandably considered these racist detentions justified in order to procure the intended end result of safer and more peaceful nations. By basing their policies solely on these racist preconceptions, however, neither of these governmental policies could have possibly accomplished their goals. Neither safety nor security were ensured for the people of either nation, as proper citizens were rounded up and stripped of their rights and the protection of their government. Both cases of internment undeniably stand not only as gross examples of racist political blunders but even more pointedly as wholly ineffective policies that contradict their very promise of national security.

The idea of Japanese internment arose directly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941. An attack of such shocking and harrowing impact produced a general fear of espionage and sabotage and directly influenced President Roosevelt’s issuance of Executive Order 9066 in 1942, which allowed for local military commanders to deport any persons they saw fit to arrest. This proclamation, and others that followed, were influenced by General John DeWitt, military commander of the Western Defense Command, and eventually led to the detainment of thousands of Japanese families and individuals in internment camps in the middle of the country.

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Children reciting the Pledge of Allegiance in a San Francisco public school, April 1942.
A look at General DeWitt’s Final Report: Japanese Evacuation from the West Coast, 1942 provides us with a direct insight into both the blatantly racist personal views of the political officials in charge of internment, and the prejudicial basis of the internment policy itself. In his report, DeWitt emphasizes the necessity of internment largely because of the supposedly untrustworthy nature of the Japanese communities along the coastlines. DeWitt states that thousands of American-born Japanese had gone to Japan to receive their education, subsequently becoming “rabidly pro-Japanese.” With this statement, DeWitt automatically assumes that anyone “pro-Japanese” must be “anti-American”; the two cannot exist simultaneously. Furthermore, by DeWitt’s logic anyone educated in Japan and thus taught Japanese ideals and values might be plotting against the United States and cannot be trusted. DeWitt clearly does not understand, identify with, or condone the foreign culture of these Japanese-Americans, and his misunderstanding of their culture leads to gross exaggeration and demonization of Japanese-American beliefs and rituals. To DeWitt, anyone who maintains traditions that conflict with those of the United States, or even more frighteningly, anyone who appears to expressly reject American traditions and culture, must be an active threat to national security.

DeWitt continues his condemnation of Japanese-Americans by insisting upon immediate military action to counteract the menace they present to society:

The continued presence of a large, unassimilated, tightly knit and racial group, bound to any enemy nation by strong ties of race, culture, custom and religion along a frontier vulnerable to attack constituted a menace which had to be dealt with... it is better to have had this protection and not to have needed it than to have needed it and not to have had it — as we have learned to our sorrow.

DeWitt’s words here perfectly exemplify both the intense national fear during this period and the racism that grew out of it. The general is of course referring to the great tragedy of Pearl Harbor, an attack for which the United States was not prepared and that subsequently resulted in the deaths of many American citizens. While the need for immediate political action is surely undeniable, it is DeWitt’s choice and means of action that is not only extremely discriminatory, but also futile in creating security for the people. Not only is the General targeting and demonizing one racial group in particular, referring to Japanese-Americans as a “large, unassimilated [and] tightly knit [...] group,” and even as a “menace which had to be dealt with” but by doing so, and through his internment of these people, he directly contradicts his original intent of creating safety. What DeWitt refuses to take into account is that this “racial group” is actually composed of American citizens whose safety and way of life he is supposedly trying to protect. Through his language, the General creates a distinct separation of “us” vs. “them”: he places a great emphasis on the fact that Japanese-Americans are a unified “racial group” appearing to maintain very different cultural and social values perhaps even rejecting American traditions. Through these racist assumptions, Dewitt essentially claims that Japanese-American citizens are not in fact Americans, which justifies his decision to inflict harm on the very people he is supposedly trying to protect.

General DeWitt goes on to comment on the location of Japanese communities “adjacent to very vital shore installations, war plants, etc,” remarking that he cannot be sure whether they were created by accident or design. He states that there was “insufficient time in which to make such a determination; it was simply a matter of facing the realities that a positive determination could not be made, that an exact separation of the ‘sheep from the goats’ was unfeasible.” Because of the lack of time, DeWitt “had no other alternative but to conclude that the Japanese constituted a poten-
tially dangerous element from the viewpoint of military security—that military necessity re-
quired their immediate evacuation to the interior.” Here too, DeWitt comments on the lack of time presented to him to make any real investigations and the need for immediate action, and his frequent insistence questions the policy’s legitimacy and effectiveness from the start.

While DeWitt’s concerns are very real and credit concrete instances of attack, basing his internment policy upon racially prejudiced assumptions instead of concrete evidence of certain guilty individuals ensured that it could never have been successful in ensuring the peace and safety he promised. DeWitt asserted throughout the period of internment that the military maintains an obligation to its people and that the people’s safety is of primary importance. Because DeWitt based the evacuations on race and racial assumptions alone, he could not be certain of any real threat, and so his internment plan failed one of its most basic goals: to isolate any dangerous individuals and secure the safety of the American people. What he never takes into account, of course, is that the 117,000 people who were rounded up were in fact, part of this obligation. How was their safety ensured during this time? How were their rights secured? These American citizens were surely not protected from attack; instead their own government inflicted an attack upon them.

The detention of this specific group of people significantly affected not only Japanese-Americans both during and after their internment, but every American. Not only does this kind of internment prompt racism among the people, as the group in question is deemed a violent and untrustworthy “enemy,” but it can also cause other citizens to doubt their safety under the power of the government. If these individuals, born, educated and working in and for the United States can be suddenly imprisoned without warning or reason, who then is next? What ensures anyone else’s safety? This case of intern-

ment only divided and hurt all Americans by instigating hate, suffering and distrust.

Over the period of more than forty years, history has not only proven Dewitt’s policy prejudiced and unsuccessful but also illuminates this very failure of the American government in its duty to protect its people. The Civil Liberties Act of 1988 as well as an address made by President Ronald Reagan in response to the Redress Act of the same year directly acknowledge and apologize for the discrimination and racism that inspired the internment of Japanese citizens during World War II. Nearly half a century after the threat of Japanese attacks had disappeared, the true cause of this horrible occurrence is finally clear. The Civil Liberties Act states that these actions were carried out without adequate security reasons and without any acts of espionage or sabotage documented by the Commission, and were motivated largely by racial prejudice, wartime hysteria, and a failure of political leadership. (United States)

The Act goes on to label internment “a grave injustice” and a “fundamental violation of the basic civil liberties and constitutional rights of these individuals of Japanese ancestry” (United States). Removed from the immediate situation and its accompanying feelings of imminent danger and fear, Congress clearly sees the attendant racial prejudice in its evaluation of and apology for the events that occurred during the War.

President Reagan finds similar fault in the American government’s decisions concerning internment in the 1940s. He notes, “this action was taken without trial, without jury. It was based solely on race, for these 120,000 were Americans of Japanese descent” (Ronald… Act). He too attributes internment to wartime fears and anxieties, but does not use them to excuse the events that occurred and what he classifies as a “mistake.” Reagan states what DeWitt never bothered to consider: the fact that “throughout the war, Japanese-Americans in the tens of thousands remained utterly loyal to the United States.” Reagan
not only asserts that this case of discriminatory internment was unconstitutional and unjust, but he also implies that it failed to ensure public safety, as it actually impaired the security of the thousands who were evacuated. Both the Civil Liberties Act and President Reagan’s speech reveal the counter-productivity of DeWitt’s policy. The individuals interned were legitimate American citizens, subjected to unfair treatment by the government itself. During the internment process, Japanese-Americans were “forced to sell their homes, property, and sentimental belongings for very little compensation” and suffered through “stressful living conditions in camp, […] loss and deprivation, […] separation or division of family and community ties […] and a disruption of identity” (Yates, 111-112). Aimee Chin of the University of Houston even concludes from economic evaluations of internees that “annual earnings of males [were reduced] by as much as 9%-13% 25 years afterward” due to the labor market withdrawal (Chin 491). The effects of internment upon these American citizens were serious and long lasting. Harmful to all involved and ultimately entirely unproductive, the internment of Japanese-Americans was undoubtedly a grave mistake.

Thirty years later and across the Atlantic Ocean, a very similar situation took place in Northern Ireland. The people of this region, already distraught by sectarian violence for decades, was subjected to a comparable experience of internment, enacted by government officials in the hopes of pacifying violence. Much more complicated and lengthy than America’s conflict with Japan, the so-called “Troubles” in Northern Ireland are rooted in centuries of British occupation, influence and oppression. The conflicts that overtook this portion of the nation were religious, political and social, as predominately Protestant Loyalists (those loyal to England) and predominately Catholic Republicans (those who strove for Irish independence) fought, frequently violently, for mutually exclusive political goals. By the late 1960s, a “campaign for internal reform of the Northern Ireland state” initiated by Catholic republicans “rejuvenated militant republicanism, in the form of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA/IRA) [which then] in turn prompted violence from Protestant loyalist militants” (Darby). As the intensity of the violence escalated and the general safety of the people of Northern Ireland was greatly threatened, a policy of internment was introduced in 1971 by British officials, influenced by the unionist-controlled Northern Irish government as a “last attempt to impose control” (Darby).

The intents, methods of implementation, and overall effect of this case of internment are uncannily similar to those of Japanese internment in the United States. “Operation Demetrius [the initial rounding up of suspected militants]… relied on lists drawn up by the RUC Special Branch” and included almost exclusively alleged IRA members, many of whom were later proven to be innocent (Melaugh). The prejudicial basis of this policy is undeniable, as the IRA was only one of several paramilitary groups operating in Northern Ireland at the time. Furthermore, Loyalist paramilitaries, which the government largely ignored, were actually responsible for more violence than the IRA. Out of ten violent incidents between 1968 and 1971, seven were instigated by Protestant or Loyalist paramilitary groups, compared to a mere three by Catholic or Republican forces. Furthermore, eight Catholics or Republicans were killed during this time, compared to three Protestants or Loyalists (McKenna and Melaugh). Nonetheless, records from the time show that during the entire period of internment, “1,981 people were detained; 1,874 were Catholic [and or] Republican, while 107 were Protestant [and or] Loyalist” (Melaugh).

Even more objectionable than the detainment of almost exclusively Catholic paramilitaries is the fact that mere Catholic citizens who were not allied with paramilitaries in any way were among those interned. Indeed, “The lists [used to identify
suspects for internment] were so out of date that 104 people had to be released within forty-eight hours. [...] The army quite often simply picked up the wrong people, a son for a father, the wrong ‘man with a beard living at no. 47’ and so on” (Melaugh). Innocent or not, these Catholic internees were subjected to physical and psychological abuse by the British Army: “...by the time they were released, a number had suffered quite brutal treatment, as had those still detained [...] Internees were beaten with batons, kicked and forced to run the gauntlet between lines of club-wielding soldiers” (Melaugh). Therefore, just as the American government ruined any chances of their internment policy actually ensuring safety, so too did Northern Irish officials, as both governments based internment wholly on prejudiced profiles and assumptions. Catholics of all ages and political affiliations were pegged as being potentially dangerous, stripped of their rights, and abused by their own government, just as anyone of Japanese decent in the United States was deemed the “enemy” and detained.

*The Compton Report*, presented to Parliament in November of 1971 by the British Secretary of State for the Home Department, discusses the alleged mistreatment of those detained after many of the arrests and allows us to directly see the racism at hand within this internment policy. It also provides us with other key details of the events that occurred during the internment authorized by Sir Edmund Compton, English Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration, and the then Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Brian Faulkner. Their accounts and statements, provided in the report, reveal the perceived necessity of internment due to paramilitary violence and the fears of the Northern Irish population. In his report, Compton explicitly lists all the terrorist events involving explosives as well as all known weapons belonging to the IRA in Northern Ireland. He states that the “campaign of murder and intimidation has included gun attacks on military and police patrols, explosive attacks on offices and buildings... killing and injuring members of the general public” (Compton Report). He then goes on to say:

> [the] preservation of law and order in Northern Ireland is primarily the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Government... the deterioration in the situation in Northern Ireland had reached the point where they felt it necessary, with the agreement of Her Majesty’s Government, to resort to their powers of internment.

Compton implies that the relentless violence and terrorism of the IRA necessitated an attempt to pacify Northern Ireland and to assure the people of some safety in their region, just as General DeWitt claimed that the bombing of Pearl Harbor made Japanese internment a necessity. While officials from both countries claim that they would have wished to abstain from initiating internment policies, they felt that it was the only solution to the problem at hand.

Furthermore, just as in the case of Japanese internment, the actual method and reasoning behind the British internment of Irish Catholics ensured its ineffectiveness. Although paramilitary terrorists posed a real threat in Northern Ireland, the internment of alleged IRA members only targeted one group of a multi-sided battle, and the violence perpetrated by Loyalist paramilitary groups went almost entirely unnoted. This fact illustrates not only an intense prejudice among both British and Northern Irish officials, but also the overall ineffectiveness of the policy that they implemented. Whether internment improved the safety of Irish Protestants or not is debatable, but clearly it did little for Irish Catholics who were the target of Loyalist attacks.

In a statement announcing his decision to introduce internment in August of 1971, Prime Minister Faulkner further reveals the racism of this policy by claiming that a united society and economic and social development are “not possible in a climate of terrorism and violence,” and that, “the outrages to which we have been subjected
now threaten our economic life and create every day deeper divisions and antagonism within our community.” These statements alone are reasonable, but Faulkner goes on to identify the terrorists in question exclusively as those that belong to the “IRA… [whose] terrorist campaign continues at an unacceptable level, and [thus] had to conclu- ded that the ordinary law cannot deal comprehensively or quickly enough with such ruthless viciousness.” Faulkner condemns only the IRA; he targets them as the primary cause of these “outrages” that “threaten [the] li[ves of those] within [the] community” without really analyzing the complexity of the issue. Violence of such “ruthless viciousness” as Faulkner describes was surely caused by both Catholics and Protestants alike. The IRA were, of course, a reactionary group, acting out against what they felt to be discrimination by the government and the Protestant majority, and whatever “terrorism” they inflicted upon the community must have been in reaction to a perceived threat from Loyalist paramilitaries.

By ignoring Loyalist paramilitaries, British officials only intensified the already surging tensions between the two parties; Republicans and Catholics were angered not only by the arrests of innocent individuals on their side without trial or due process but also by the apparent lack of attention given to equally violent Loyalists. Some historians argue that this treatment led to “increased support, active and tacit, among the Catholic community for the IRA,” which resulted in a growing level of civil unrest and paramilitary violence within Northern Ireland (Melaugh).

Thus, by acting out of prejudiced assumptions and attempting to neutralize only one side of the conflict, the government intensified the problem they sought to eliminate, making everyone in Northern Ireland less safe rather than more so. The internment of Irish Catholics had no hope to establish the safety or protection of the people, and perhaps even created more violence.

Just as was the case of Japanese-American internment, the obvious flaws in the British government’s plan became even more apparent after the policy was repealed. The article “Internment and Detention without Trial in Northern Ireland,” written by R. J. Spjut in 1986, analyses the aftermath of the detention and reveals the racially-charged thought process of the government officials in charge. Spjut includes direct interviews with politicians of the time. Viscount William Whitelaw, then the Northern Ireland Secretary, directly addresses the issue of discrimination and an unfair bias within the resurgence of internment during the 1970s. Responding to the author’s question of whether or not the high proportion of releases by commissioners suggested weak evidence for detaining individuals, the Viscount admits:

Anti-Internment mural in the Bogside, the largest Catholic neighborhood in the city of Derry, Northern Ireland
I have the greatest of doubts looking back on it whether internment was ever right... I question whether internment is right unless you have really good intelligence and I think that the mistake that was made initially was that internment was used as a weapon before intelligence was good enough to use effectively (Spjut 729).

Whitelaw admits to poor intelligence on the part of government officials in their initial arrests and also directly questions the idea of the internment of so many innocent individuals because of a racist generalization. Because of insufficient intelligence, government officials acted out of mere prejudice and unfounded assumptions by rounding up solely alleged IRA members. The policy was therefore a failure from the beginning—it didn’t and couldn’t have created a sense of security for the people. Irish Catholics both in and out of paramilitary groups actually felt threatened by their own government, and ultimately the government’s actions caused Catholics to react against them, leading to even more violence. Moreover, by failing to question Loyalist paramilitary members, the government left them free to their own devices, and their destructive behavior went unchecked.

Later in his article, Spjut addresses the flawed reasoning behind this political and ethical blunder at greater length. According to Spjut, Whitelaw argued that the reason behind the detention of so few Loyalists was the fact that security forces had been able to move freely about Loyalist areas and thus keep better accounts of their violent actions. Because of this, they were then able to initiate criminal prosecutions far more easily for these paramilitary groups than their Republican counterparts (Spjut 736). But in a 1972 interview, Whitelaw undermined this argument in an extremely transparent way:

Everything was targeted. The Stormont Government [thought] quite reasonably, in their view, if you were a Protestant you were a loyal figure, loyal to the government, loyal to the ethos of Northern Ireland against the South, against the Pope... Therefore you were a loyal person until proved otherwise.

Whereas over the years the exact opposite was regarded of the minority community who was associated far more with the IRA than many of them actually were. And they, of course, were guilty of being on the side of the IRA until proved otherwise. [...] And therefore, there was no intelligence or very little intelligence about militant Protestant groups. [...] For the best of possible reasons. The whole apparatus of the state wasn’t directed against them (cited in Spjut 736).

In this telling quote, Viscount Whitelaw directly admits an unfair bias and prejudice against the Republican and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland. It is now not so much that Republican paramilitaries were more difficult to survey, but that they were already deemed “guilty” and “disloyal” to the State. Within the Northern Irish Government, Loyalists were given the benefit of the doubt, while Republicans were more often than not suspected of violence. The Viscount essentially states here that Republicans were not treated as proper citizens who had rights because of their opposition to British rule and Protestantism. The logic of this blatant prejudice is not only inherently unethical, but also completely useless in its attempt to ensure safety and security. While Loyalist paramilitaries were not perceived as a direct threat to the government, as made clear by Viscount Whitelaw, they were undoubtedly a serious threat to Northern Irish citizens, whose wellbeing is, or should have been, the responsibility of the government. Even if better intelligence had been implemented in this particular case, it still would have been primarily directed toward Republican Catholics, while Loyalists would have gone largely overlooked. Because of this, safety could not be ensured for citizens of either party or of any political or religious affiliation, and the plan’s purpose and goal of eliminating danger failed entirely.
Brainstorm v. III (2011)

Both of these isolated cases of internment in America and Great Britain reveal a disturbingly similar effect of racism and prejudice upon political policy. Both policies grew out of powerful fears that overtook whole societies and created divisions within their people. While fears and anxieties must be addressed to ensure progress and functionality within communities of people, they need not lead to the harm of innocent individuals or to discrimination and unlawful treatment. In both of these cases, isolated events and certain characteristics led to national prejudices against all people even remotely associated by race, religion or cultural beliefs and practices. These prejudices prevented either case of internment from being even remotely effective, as the safety that it had promised to deliver was severely compromised.

While it is easy to remark today on the blatant prejudice found in either of these cases and the unjust treatment that ensued, this kind of racism and the overall pattern of fighting against “alien enemies” continues. One must only look as far as Park51, or the “Ground Zero Mosque,” and the gross miscomprehension and intolerance among so many American citizens in regard to Muslims and the Islamic faith in general after September 11th. Park51’s builders want it to be “a platform for multi-faith dialogue” and a “promot[er] [of] inter-community peace, tolerance and understanding locally in New York City, nationally in America, and globally” (“Frequently Asked Questions”). However, critics have called Park51 a “victory memorial to Islam” and an insult to the victims of September 11th simply because the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks were of the Islamic faith (Limbaugh). A better understanding of both Japanese internment in America and IRA internment in Northern Ireland would surely emphasize that reactionary generalizations and assumptions like these can never lead to a safer or more effective environment for American citizens. In order to truly assure safety and security, both as individuals and as members of a larger community, we must address the world as being composed of many different cultures, religions and traditions that don’t necessarily conflict with one another. The question is how to maintain respect and understanding, especially in times of crisis when miscomprehension can lead easily to fear, and fear to accusation. If there is any hope for the “inter-community peace, tolerance and understanding,” as promised by Park51, we must put aside our racial, religious and cultural differences, or we will undoubtedly encounter another prejudiced and ineffective political and social catastrophe comparable to those of Japanese internment in the United States and sectarian violence in Northern Ireland.
Works Cited


Livesey, “Interning Our Rights”