By Bill Kaneko

Sunday, December 7, 1941 — a day that will live in infamy. It was on that treacherous morn when Japanese fighter pilots crippled the U.S. Naval fleet in the waters of Pearl Harbor. Smoke billowed, bombs burst, and men died as those sneaky "japs" marred the valor and greatness of America. That infamous day thrust the United States into the Second World War and has remained as one of the landmarks in the history of our nation.

However, February 19, 1942 has been ignored. It has been overlooked, avoided, and almost forgotten. Forty years later, Friday marks the anniversary of Executive order 9066 — the document signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, which enacted the internment of 110,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry in concentration camps during America's involvement in WWII. Because their ethnic origin and cultural ties had been linked with a government that had shattered American peace, Japanese Americans were put under custody without trial, for fear of their loyalty to Japan, sabotage, and the ultimate justification: military necessity. They had broken no laws, and had committed no acts of treason. The 110,000 internees were guilty of one crime: they were of Japanese ancestry. Executive Order 9066 will remain as one of the greatest injustices in our nation's history.

They came to America in the late 1860's to gain fortune in this land of opportunity, richness, and justice for all, with hopes of returning to Japan to live their remaining years in comfort. The first generation (Issei) worked hard and received few pleasures as they labored ten to twelve hours per day for a mere fifteen dollars a month. They were abused, oppressed, and unwelcome in the white man's country, and were soon labeled as the "oriental menace." Nonetheless, they toiled and persisted.

Horror, anger, grief, and fear flooded the hearts of Japanese Americans as the news of Pearl Harbor echoed through the countryside. A great sense of anxiety towards their future in America flashed before them. They were loyal Americans, but would their white neighbors agree? There were countless instances such as that of Shig Wakamatsu, a student at the College of Puget Sound at the time. He asked special permission to address the student body where he pledged his loyalty to the United States, and expressed his anger and shame. However, bigoted remarks typical of Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, the man in charge of the evacuation scheme filled the air. "A Jap's a Jap. They are a dangerous element...there is no way to determine their loyalty...it makes no difference whether he is an American citizen...you can't change him by giving him a piece of paper," he uttered before a congressional committee in 1943. Regardless of their clean record, all people of Japanese ancestry were uprooted from their homes on the West Coast. Some 1,500 people from Hawaii were also interned.

They could take only what was authorized by the military — bedding and linen, toilet articles, extra clothing, sufficient knives, forks, and spoons, and essential personal effects. All else could not be taken along. Frustrated, angry, and helpless, the Japanese sold what they could. Washing machines and refrigerators were sold for five to ten dollars. Shops and farms went for practically nothing as neighbors were all too happy to acquire them. Countless years of work, sweat, and tears soon dissolved. The 110,000 Japanese Americans, two thirds of whom were bona fide U.S. citizens, had lost all rights vested to them by the constitution. The land of opportunity had crushed their dreams for reasons of race.

They were herded like cattle to various temporary assembly centers until more permanent camps could be built. Racetracks, fairgrounds, and even jails were used. The stench of horse manure still lingered as the internees attempted to make the horsestalls somewhat liveable at the Santa Anita and Tanforan Racetracks in California. The Puyallup fairgrounds also served as an assembly center. They were then transported to camps in such places as Wyoming, Arizona, and Utah, all of which were located in desert-type geography. Their homes were tiny barracks made of tin and tar paper, unsuitable for the sub-zero temperatures of many camp locations. Also, there were barred wire fences and armed guards to serve as a constant reminder that they were prisoners in their own country.

At heart, they were loyal Americans. Although locked up against their own will, they practiced patriotism and loyalty to the United States within the camps. An all Japanese-American armed forces group, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, fought diligently in Europe while their parents, relatives, and friends remained behind barred wire. They proved their loyalty and

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died for America, as the 442nd "Go For Broke" Regimental Combat Team became the most decorated unit in the history of the United States army, suffering a three hundred percent casualty rate.

The torment, hurt, and pain suffered in the camps still lingers on for many Japanese-Americans. The explanation for this treatment — military necessity — is not justifiable, for no acts of sabotage were ever committed by Japanese-Americans. They were victims of racism and bigotry, stripped of all rights as U.S. citizens. Currently, Congress is examining the issue of redress and reparation regarding the internment of Japanese-Americans declared forty years ago. May this day, February 19, be deemed a Day of Remembrance for the injustice suffered by Americans of Japanese ancestry.

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