

Dorothea Lange's Photos Of Imprisoned Japanese-Americans Need To Be Seen

The images are especially disturbing in light of recent comments from Donald Trump and his supporters.



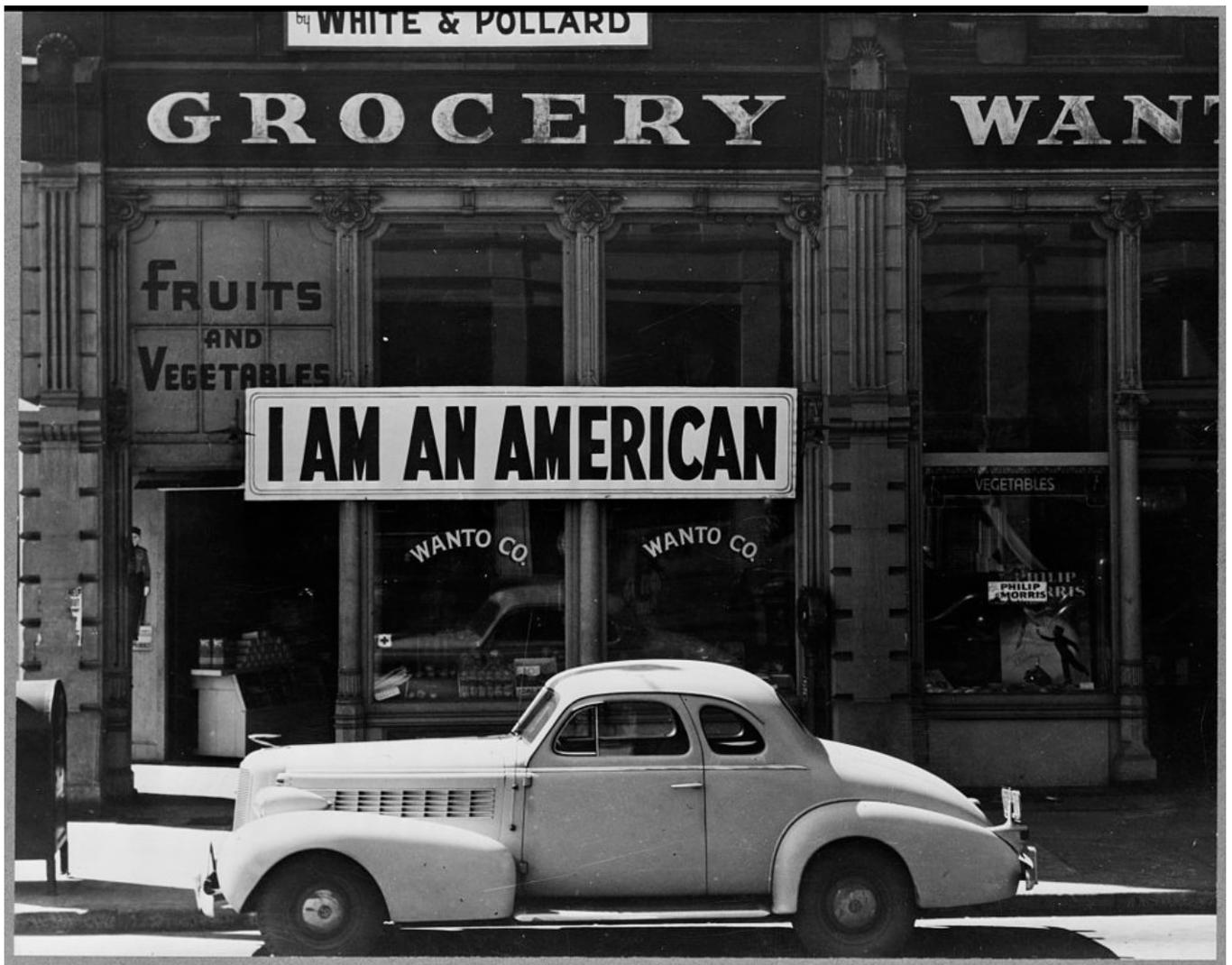
Dorothea Lange/Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

Ester Naite, an office worker from Los Angeles, is shown operating an electric iron in her quarters at a "War Relocation Authority center" in Manzanar, Calif.

Photographer [Dorothea Lange](#), well-known as a documenter of the Great Depression for the Farm Security Administration, captured the plight of

poverty-stricken Americans with empathy, respect, and unflinching honesty. Her most famous work, “[Migrant Mother](#),” reflecting the desperation and resilience of a mother working as a pea-picker, has become the defining image of that grim era in U.S. history.

She is lesser recognized, however, for her work chronicling the prison camps in California, as well as Washington, Oregon, and Arizona, where people of Japanese ancestry were incarcerated between 1942 and 1946 – reportedly because the works were [quietly censored](#) by military commanders who reviewed and disapproved of the work.



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A large sign reading “I am an American” placed in the window of a store on the day after Pearl Harbor. The store was closed following orders to persons of Japanese descent to evacuate from certain West Coast areas. The owner was a University of California graduate.

Directly following the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, American military

police began the systematic imprisonment of Japanese-Americans. A [chilling FBI report](#) from the time reads: “It is said, and no doubt with considerable truth, that every Japanese in the United States who can read and write is a member of the Japanese intelligence system.”

In 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued [Executive Order 9066](#), which, according to PBS, “[permitted the military to circumvent the constitutional safeguards of American citizens in the name of national defense](#),” calling for the evacuation and imprisonment of Japanese-Americans.

Over 120,000 persons of Japanese descent, many of them children, [were required by the military](#) to evacuate their homes and businesses and relocate to prison camps, where they lived surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards for up to four years. Some, however, died in the camps due to lack of medical care, emotional stress, or were killed by military guards. Over two-thirds of those incarcerated were American citizens.



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A view of the quarters at Manzanar, California, a "War Relocation Authority center" that is considered today to be a prison camp.

Lange, renowned for her work for the FSA, was recruited to create a photographic record of the "evacuation and relocation" processes by The War Relocation Authority. Despite, or perhaps because of, Lange's moral objection to the prison camps, she obliged. Lange visited cities around California, photographing Japanese-Americans packing up their belongings, being packed onto buses, and shuttling to ramshackle temporary housing facilities.

She made a visit to one of the nation's largest camps, Manzanar, in the Southern California desert, where she documented without reservation the conditions under which people were forced to live. By the time the camps were decommissioned, Lange had taken over 800 photographs, images that objectively captured the humanity of their subjects and the brutality of

their circumstances.

Some prisoners were supplied insufficient food and medical treatment, as well as substandard housing. Some, accused of resisting orders, were subjected to violence. Lange caught it all on camera.



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Residents of Japanese-Americans appearing at the Civil Control Station for registration in response to the Army's exclusion order No. 20.

When the War Relocation Authority surveyed the photos, Lange's political perspective was obvious. They promptly seized the images and, for decades, kept them from widespread public viewing.

In 1946 the prison camps were decommissioned and detainees – many of whom were impoverished, mentally ill, and elderly – were released. In 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed a Civil Liberties Act declaring that

the decision to incarcerate Japanese-Americans was spurred by “[racial prejudice, wartime hysteria and a lack of political leadership,](#)” formally apologizing to all living survivors.

Lange’s photographs, both powerful works of documentary photography and searing reminders of our nation’s grave historical abuses, [have been making the rounds online recently.](#) The photographs have become disturbingly foreboding in the wake of retired [Navy SEAL Carl Higbie’s comments](#) citing the wartime incarceration of Japanese-Americans as “precedent” for creating a federal registry for immigrants from Muslim countries.

Furthermore, President-elect Donald Trump himself has stated that, had he been alive during World War II, he might have supported the imprisonment of Japanese-Americans. “[I would have had to be there at the time to tell you,](#) to give you a proper answer,” he said.



An early comer, part of the first contingent of 664 residents of Japanese ancestry to be “evacuated” from San Francisco and later housed in prison camps.

As the country fearfully awaits what will become of the nation under a Trump presidency, Lange’s photos serve as a crucial reminder of what is possible when fear clouds judgment and hate obstructs human empathy. In the words of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: “[Now is not the time to tiptoe around historical references](#) ... It is the astute response of those who know that history gives both context and warning.”

We’ve compiled some of Lange’s searing photos, drawn from the archives of the Library of Congress, [here](#). Historical blogger Tim Chambers, who shared Lange’s work on his [blog Anchor Editions](#), is currently selling [Lange’s prints for \\$50](#), with half of all proceeds benefitting the ACLU, an organization that fought relentlessly against the unjust incarcerations and remains just as important today.



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An officer inspecting a woman's suitcase.



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Baggage belonging to prisoners of Japanese ancestry at an assembly center in Salinas, Calif., prior to a "War Relocation Authority center."



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Japanese-American agricultural workers packing broccoli near Guadalupe, Calif.

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