

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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MISSION US: "Prisoner in My Homeland"

George Takei: Internment, America's Great Mistake

George Takei is an Japanese American actor and activist most known for his portrayal of Sulu on the original Star Trek television series. As a young boy, however, Takei and his family were incarcerated in the Rohwer, Arkansas and Tule Lake, California incarceration camps. In the following excerpt from an opinion piece written in 2017, Takei reflects on his experiences, details the importance of pilgrimages back to the camps, and compares the events of his childhood with modern-day American politics.

...I was 7 years old when we were transferred to another camp for "disloyals." My mother and father's only crime was refusing, out of principle, to sign a loyalty pledge promulgated by the government. The authorities had already taken my parents' home on Garnet Street in Los Angeles, their once thriving dry cleaning business, and finally their liberty. Now they wanted them to grovel; this was an indignity too far.

A pilgrimage to Tule Lake also occurs every year, symbolically on July 4. I have gone three times. I remember a terrifying moment while I was held there when armed military police burst into the barracks and hauled away several young men.

On the pilgrimages, I finally saw where they had been taken: a concrete cell block called the stockade. On the concrete walls, there was graffiti, now made illegible by the passage of time. Also fading were brown splotches I was told were blood stains. This was what could happen in an America that had become un-American.

It has been the lifelong mission of many to ensure we remember the internment. Our oft-repeated plea is simple: We must understand and honor the past in order to learn from and not repeat it. But in the 75 years since President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 authorizing the internment of Japanese-Americans, never have we been more anxious that this mission might fail.

It is imperative, in today's toxic political environment, to acknowledge a hard truth: The horror of the internment lay in the racial animus the government itself propagated. It whipped up hatred and fear toward an entire group of people based solely on our ancestry...

My way of remembering the cruelties of the past was to help found the Japanese American National Museum, as well as to turn my family's experience into a Broadway show, "Allegiance," in the hope that more will heed the warning. The pilgrimages to camps like

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Manzanar, Rohwer and Tule Lake are another way of honoring those who suffered, and lost, and had to rebuild shattered lives. They remind us all today of the threat to American values from cynically manufactured fear and the deliberate targeting of a vulnerable minority.

Source: George Takei, "Interment, America's Great Mistake," *The New York Times*, April 28, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/28/opinion/george-takei-japanese-internment-americas-great-mistake.html>