

Korematsu v. United States / Background •

As you read the background summary of the case below, look for the **important vocabulary terms**. You can find definitions for these terms on the separate vocabulary handout.

The port of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, was attacked by the Japanese in December 1941. After this, the American government was worried that the West Coast of the United States would also be attacked. Many Americans were angered by the bombing of Pearl Harbor. They blamed Japanese Americans who were living in the United States. Some believed that the Japanese and Japanese Americans who lived there would help the Japanese military. At the time, there was no known case of **espionage** from any person of Japanese **descent**.

In February 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed **Executive Order** 9066. This order allowed the military to use **curfews** and move Japanese and Japanese Americans to special camps. Japanese Americans were only allowed to bring very basic items with them. Moving people to camps is called **internment**. They had to leave their homes and businesses until the end of the war.

Fred Korematsu was an American citizen. He was born in the United States and had Japanese parents. He wanted to be in the U.S. military, but he was not healthy enough. Korematsu did not want to go to the internment camps. He believed it was wrong to force him to go. He moved to a new city, went by another name, and changed the way he looked. But he was arrested later and sent to a camp.

Korematsu took his case to the courts. He said that Congress, the president, and the military authorities did not have the power to send people to internment camps. He also claimed the government was discriminating against him because of his race.

The government argued that the evacuation of all Japanese Americans was necessary. They said there was evidence that some were working for the Japanese government. The government claimed there was no way to tell the loyal people from the disloyal, so all Japanese Americans had to be treated as though they were disloyal.

The federal appeals court agreed with the government. Korematsu appealed this decision, and the case came before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Questions to Consider

1. Why was Korematsu (and other people of Japanese descent) forced to go to an internment camp?

2. The United States was also at war with Germany and Italy. People of German and Italian descent were also interned in the United States, but there were fewer people interned from these groups than who had Japanese ancestors. Why do you think people whose ancestors were from Japan were treated differently?

3. In times of war, governments have to balance national security with citizens' rights. In your opinion, did internment of Japanese descendants strike a good balance?