The Dehumanization of Japanese Americans

Equality, freedom, justice—words that most Americans optimistically think of when describing their country. Yet, these values that were once the foundation of the United States have had a diminished significance within the past several decades. One such instance in which these principles have gone to the wayside was the mass incarceration of the Japanese Americans during World War II. Rather than being treated humanely, the people of Japanese descent were not only stripped of their rights, but also their dignity. As the mystic Simone Weil writes, “[W]hen a man’s life is destroyed or damaged by some wound or privation of soul or body, which is due to other men’s actions or negligence, . . . there has been sacrilege towards that which is sacred in him” (Springsted 135). The Japanese Americans were robbed of their sacredness by their own government. In her book entitled In Defense of Internment: The Case for ‘Racial Profiling’ in World War II and the War on Terror, Michelle Malkin presents an argument in which she supports the U.S. government’s decision regarding the Japanese Americans during World War II. In doing so, she chooses certain terms that draw her readers’ attention away from the injustice that occurred, making them more likely to accept her argument. Thus, the consequence of agreeing with Malkin’s claims is the significant failure to recognize the deprivation of dignity of the Japanese Americans. Conversely, the historian Roger Daniels, in his book entitled Prisoners Without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II, criticizes the government’s treatment of the people of Japanese descent. He strives to enable his readers to realize what he knows—the
Japanese Americans were mistreated—by using language to focus their concentration on the inequities suffered.

Both Malkin and Daniels agree that the term internment is not appropriate to describe the actions that were taken against the Japanese Americans during World War II. Internment legally refers to the detention of enemy aliens during wartime. This is where their agreement ends, however. Malkin prefers to describe the process as evacuation and relocation as a means to support her claim that “the national security measures taken during World War II were justifiable,” as well as to avert her readers’ attention from the violation of human rights that took place (Malkin xxxiii). Conversely, Daniels prefers the term incarceration, which means imprisonment, in order to support his claim that “the wartime abuse of Japanese Americans . . . was merely a link in a chain of racism . . .” (Daniels 3). He argues that those interned had the right to a court hearing; therefore, since prosecutions were nearly eliminated from the equation, internment could not possibly be the correct term (Daniels 27). Daniels’ choice of words also acts to focus his readers’ attention on the inhumanity toward, and robbing of sacredness from, the Japanese Americans.

According to Malkin, her book “offers a defense of the most reviled wartime policies in American history: the evacuation, relocation, and internment of people of Japanese descent during World War II” (Malkin xiii). In order to argue her position, Malkin strategically makes claims and uses rhetorical language to downplay the violation of human rights and dignity that occurred. The title of Chapter 9 in her book is “The Myth of the American ‘Concentration Camp’” (Malkin 95). The word myth literally means an “invented story,” or “an imaginary or fictitious event” (Thorndike 738). Malkin’s use of this word is an attempt to persuade her readers that this event did not
happen at all, at least according to how her critics see it, diverting her readers’ attention away from the wrongs that were committed. The term concentration camp denotes “a camp where political enemies, prisoners of war, or members of minority groups are held by government order” (Thorndike 230). In reality, this term is accurate to describe the places to which Japanese Americans were sent. However, as Malkin quickly asserts, that term also connotes Nazi death camps, the Holocaust, and inhumane treatment. Thus, throughout the chapter, the author chooses to use alternative phrases to describe the areas, such as assembly centers and relocation facilities. These expressions do not evoke negative images and powerful emotions as does that of concentration camp. The use of these terms acts as a barrier through which the inhumane treatment is shielded.

According to Malkin, the images used today to depict the relocation campus are equated with those that portray the Nazi concentration camps, most likely to evoke pity from the audience. She objects to this approach, however, claiming that the two cannot accurately be compared.

She goes on to quote a passage from Roger Daniels’ book, stating that he “sermonizes” about the comparisons between the American and Nazi camps (Malkin 96). The word sermonize is used negatively to suggest that Daniels’ is trying to preach and push his views on others. Daniels recognizes the distinction between the two, however: “The American camps were not death camps” (Malkin 96). Seemingly ignoring Daniels’ distinction, Malkin quotes this passage in order to show her disagreement with it, as well as to evoke the readers’ anger at the fact that the destruction of the Holocaust is downplayed and “the experience of Holocaust victims” is “trivialize[d]” when the two are compared (Malkin 96). Yet, Malkin fails to realize that she is committing the same wrong in diminishing the experiences of the Japanese Americans.
Daniels, on the other hand, in disagreement with the U.S. government’s decision regarding the people of Japanese descent, makes certain that his readers fully understand the extent to which the rights of the affected population were violated. The analogous chapter in his book is entitled “Life Behind Barbed Wire” (Daniels 49). The word life sharply contrasts with the word myth; what was experienced was real and true rather than an exaggerated anecdote. Barbed wire induces images of a prison, holding captive those within its boundaries. In contrast to Malkin, he does not hesitate in referring to the areas in which the Japanese Americans were confined as concentration camps in order to evoke the sense of inhumanity and degradation that accompanies those words. Claiming that “the few Japanese Americans who were killed ‘accidentally’ by their American guards were just as dead as the millions of Jews and others who were killed deliberately by their German, Soviet, or Japanese guards,” Daniels justly acknowledges the importance and worth of every individual life (Daniels 47). He would most likely agree with John F. Kavanaugh, S.J., a philosophy professor at St. Louis University, who states in his article entitled Torturous Thoughts: Is there any evil you would not do in the name of defeating evil?, that “countless humans have been rendered expendable for the sake of some desired ‘good’” (Kavanaugh 10). In this case, thousands of Japanese Americans were stripped of their dignity and treated as dispensable objects for the “desired good” of protecting America against a few handfuls of radicals—a “utilitarian reduction of persons to numbers” (Kavanaugh 10). Daniels challenges this utilitarian view that argues that a few lives are worth sacrificing for the good of the whole.

Throughout the majority of her book, Malkin attempts to make the people of Japanese descent appear as dangerous enemies. Yet, when it comes to discussing the camps, she never refers to those affected as prisoners, convicts, or victims, but rather as
evacuees and internees, emphasizing the position that argues that the camps were not as horrible as most think they were. For example, Malkin uses the phrase “internees and their families,” as if the camps were just recreational gathering centers (Malkin 101). Evacuee means “person who is removed to a place of greater safety” (Thorndike 381). The use of this word strategically makes it seem like the people of Japanese descent were the ones who were in danger of being harmed, not the American people. Yet, according to Malkin, wasn’t the safety of the American public the main reason for these actions? Daniels, on the other hand, readily refers to the people of Japanese descent as inmates and prisoners, accentuating the negative features and prison-like aspects of the camps: “[There was] what the WRA called ‘community government,’ which was really a way of getting inmates to do most of the housekeeping chores for a wage that could not exceed $19 a month” (Daniels 66). He emotionally appeals to his readers by consciously incorrectly labeling the Japanese Americans with terms that suggest that they had done something wrong, which of course, in most instances, was not the case.

When describing life in the camps, Malkin’s strategy is to stress the positive characteristics while barely mentioning the negative aspects, again as a means to steer her readers’ focus away from the path of morality. She mentions numerous amenities that were available to the internees, such as sports facilities and libraries, as well as various activities in which they could participate, including going to theaters and giving concerts. All of these words evoke positive images, connoting advancement and education. She makes certain to point out the flower gardens planted in the camps, which suggest a sense of beauty and the feeling of being at home. Reference to the “library with three thousand books, open-air evening concerts and songfests, a weaving room, a dressmaking factory, and a trained dietitian on staff” works to justify the internment and balance any negative
features of the camps, in Malkin’s point of view at least (Malkin 101). Quoting passages from those praising the centers, she attempts to make it appear that the whole process was flawless and perfectly acceptable. She emphasizes the conversion from “desolate areas,” places that were barren and deserted, where the people were lonely and forlorn, to “home communities,” which connote solidarity and a place where people are cared for and loved (Malkin 104). The descriptions of everyday life in the camps are those of normal, routine activities, which imply freedom. Ironically, the position of the internees was the exact opposite. And was it not those normal activities, such as Japanese-language schools and religious services, which raised suspicion among the government before these people were evacuated and relocated?

Malkin correctly admits that there were “some” overcrowded conditions, “some” over-zealous guards, “some” unsanitary camps (Malkin 103). The word some, however, is quite ambiguous. “[A]rmed guards, barbed wire, floodlights, and watchtowers” are mentioned rather briefly, but are outweighed by the plethora of positive terms (Malkin 100). The word compound is used to describe the living facilities, which has no negative connotations. In an attempt to overlook the ruggedness of the sites, she states that there were those who wished to remain in the camps. However, she tends to ignore the fact that the Japanese Americans who did leave the assigned locations during the war were met with animosity from the American public. Shortly thereafter, Malkin categorizes those who complained about the conditions of the camps as “troublemakers,” as if they did not have the right to be upset about their treatment. Her strategy is to cast a positive light on the assembly centers, making it seem that complainers were in the wrong. If that was the worst those people did to be termed troublemakers, then the so-called threat to the nation was rather scarce.
In contrast, Daniels deliberately focuses his discussion on the destruction of the humanity of those in the camps. The Japanese Americans were treated as things rather than people as their lives were disrupted and their families were destroyed: “each family had been assigned a number and tagged, like baggage, with that number during the move by the army” (Daniels 66-67). The prison-like aspect of the camps is emphasized; yet, prisoners are treated more fairly and have better living facilities than the incarcerated. The living quarters were overcrowded and unsanitary, resulting in outbreaks of disease and sickness that spread throughout the camps. Daniels notes that most people were mainly concerned about surviving from day to day in the hopes of being able to leave captivity: “life behind barbed wire in America’s concentration camps was not, in the main, a story of resistance or of heroism, but essentially one of survival” (Daniels 65). Families were torn apart and relationships were destroyed as Japanese Americans were forced to comply with the government’s orders to move into the assembly centers. Not only does Daniels agree with the Redress Commission that a “violation of individual civil rights” occurred, but he also powerfully makes clear the infringement upon the dignity of the Japanese Americans (Daniels 102). In response to the argument of critics, which attempts to downplay the harshness of the camps, Daniels strongly asserts that

It must not be forgotten, however, that thousands of Japanese Americans had their lives destroyed and were never able, for one reason or another, to recover. There can be no more poignant evidence of that human waste and of man’s inhumanity to man (emphasis added) than the fact that thousands of exiles, persons who had been part of a free and self-supporting community, were so shattered by their wartime treatment at the
hands of their own government that they literally had to be evicted from concentration camps. (Daniels 87)

The emphasis on the debilitating effects of the camps and the inequality and injustice experienced by those within them leads the reader to recognize the evil that was committed against the people of Japanese descent. The fear felt by the Japanese Americans upon re-entering the surrounding communities was understandably intense, leading to their hesitation in leaving the camps. Many lives were permanently shattered as a result of the inhumane treatment from their own government.

As can clearly be seen, Malkin and Daniels aim at leading their readers down very distinct paths—Malkin, in order to present a viable argument, must shield her readers from recognizing the injustice towards the Japanese Americans, while Daniels, on the other hand, visibly presents the obliteration of humanity that occurred. If one accepts Malkin’s argument, he is unable to see that the values that are the building blocks of society as a whole, not only just America, were cast aside at the expense of the sacredness of the Japanese Americans during World War II. To be treated as a human being does not seem to be an unreasonable request.

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Judges’ Commentary on “The Dehumanization of Japanese Americans”