

“Dangerous to Its Peace and Security”: The Racial and Religious Basis of U.S. National Security

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The United States has, since its inception, constructed itself as a white, Protestant country. As a result, its very security as a nation—including its political and territorial sovereignty, control of borders, and foreign relations—has hinged on race and religion. In this paper, I examine the impact of racialized and religious-based ideas of national security, as imposed by American law, on Asian Americans. Because of anti-Asian racial projects like the “perpetual foreigner” (which categorizes them as fundamentally unassimilable and un-American) and “yellow peril” (which depicts them as social, cultural, political, and economic dangers to American society), Asian American life is often portrayed as antithetical to American interests. Accordingly, I draw on examples relating to immigration, land ownership, and wartime incarceration to argue that American law enforces notions of national security by restricting entry, political rights, and freedom to people deemed “enemies.” That label is inextricably linked to race and religion because of who is perceived as a threat to white Christian America. As a result, the law draws on hegemonic whiteness and Protestant Christian morality as it professes to protect the public good, particularly at an ideological level.

If law is a “social contract governing social commitments, expectations, and behaviors,” then it is inherently subjective, influenced by the norms and cultural values of the applicable society.<sup>1</sup> The United States government explicitly defined whiteness as a prerequisite for citizenship beginning with the Naturalization Act of 1790, undergirding state-sanctioned racism and white supremacy. Furthermore, because of the ascendancy of Protestant Christianity in the United States, American laws and institutions—even those that seem unrelated to religion—implicitly privilege a Christian understanding of morality and order, captured by the “Protestant Secular.” Therefore, legal efforts to enforce national security are rooted in the desire

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<sup>1</sup> Jesse Lee, “Defining Law and Secularism,” (lecture, Washington University in St. Louis, St. Louis, MO, January 29, 2025).

to fortify America's identity as a white, Protestant Christian nation.

Discourse around American national security begins with the policing of its borders as authorities determine who should and should not be allowed to enter. In 1888, Congress passed the Scott Act, stripping Chinese laborers of their right to return to the United States even if they had proper documentation. In *Chae Chan Ping v. United States* (1889), the Supreme Court upheld the legality of the act, arguing that immigration restriction is part of America's ability, as an independent nation, to exercise jurisdiction over its territory: "The power of exclusion of foreigners [is] an incident of sovereignty belonging to the government of the United States...their exercise [cannot] be hampered, when needed for the public good..."<sup>2</sup> The government framed Chinese exclusion as a way for America to establish its legitimacy as a self-governing entity and to benefit the public good—a public that was, for all intents and purposes, white and Protestant, and one that the state intended to keep that way to maintain its conception of a secure nation.

Nineteenth-century Chinese exclusion laws were justified by the widely held belief that Chinese people in the United States did not attempt to Americanize. According to Justice Stephen Field, this imperiled the nation: "...the government of the United States...considers the presence of foreigners of a different race in this country, who will not assimilate with us, to be dangerous to its peace and security."<sup>3</sup> Immigration restriction, as a result, was a tool to ensure national security by excluding people deemed unassimilable. The perpetual foreigner racialization, which builds on notions of Orientalism, contributed to fears that the influx of Chinese people to the United States was "approaching the character of an Oriental invasion, and was a menace to [American] civilization."<sup>4</sup> Characterizing Chinese people as a "menace" to the

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<sup>2</sup> *Chae Chan Ping v. United States*, 130 U.S. 581 (1889), 609.

<sup>3</sup> *Chae Chan Ping v. United States*, 606.

<sup>4</sup> *Chae Chan Ping v. United States*, 595.

“civilization” of the United States, officials drew a direct link between Chinese exclusion laws and the government’s prerogative to defend the country from political, economic, social, cultural, sexual, and moral dangers.

Chinese exclusion—introduced through statutory legislation like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Scott Act of 1888, and Geary Act of 1892, and reinforced through common law decisions—was not only linked to racial ideas, but also religious ones. Historian and religious studies scholar Kathryn Gin Lum argues that accusations of Chinese unassimilability were inextricable from perceptions of their heathenism. Lum explains, for instance, that Americans “held that the Chinese, like other heathens, made the fatal mistake of deifying creatures rather than their Creator,” and they used that to prove “Chinese incompatibility with American identity.”<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, Chinese religious practices, and by extension Chinese people, were denigrated as uncivilized and un-American. While some proponents of Chinese immigration believed that conversion to Christianity could help mitigate these heathen characteristics, opponents felt that admitting them into the country would jeopardize American institutions, identity, and ideals. For instance, Reverend J. H. C. Bonte, a priest in Sacramento, wrote that “the Chinese exercise as much influence among the people of this coast in favor of paganism as the church among the Chinese in favor of Christianity.”<sup>6</sup> The potent threat of Chinese heathenism to American Christianity meant that they needed to be legally barred to preserve the stability of the nation.

For Asian immigrants and their descendants in the United States, the government took steps to restrict their political rights to reinforce conceptions of national security. For instance, in states like Washington, Oregon, New Mexico, and especially California, “aliens ineligible for

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<sup>5</sup> Kathryn Gin Lum, *Heathens: Religion and Race in American History* (Harvard University Press, 2022), 161–63.

<sup>6</sup> Lum, *Heathens*, 170.

relationship between race, religion, and national security. Authorities withheld legal inclusion and political belonging from people of suspect “quality and allegiance,” emphasizing the racialization of Asian Americans as threats to white Protestant life and as harbingers of the yellow peril.

While Alien Land Laws meant to prevent the permanent settlement of Asian Americans, other restrictions on freedom and civil rights—including Japanese American incarceration during World War II—attacked their very presence in the United States under the guise of national security. The government detained people of Japanese ancestry, including some 70,000 American citizens, calling it an act of “military necessity” in Executive Order 9066.<sup>10</sup> *Korematsu v. United States* (1944) affirmed the constitutionality of Japanese exclusion from military zones and internment in detention centers. Writing for the majority, Justice Hugo Black argued that the removal of Japanese people was necessary because “the presence of an unascertained number of disloyal members of the group” made it “impossible to bring about an immediate segregation of the disloyal from the loyal.”<sup>11</sup> His reasoning drew on the logic of the yellow peril, rooted in feelings of mistrust, suspicion, and fear of Asian Americans, reinforcing the connection between race and national security.

The incarceration of Japanese Americans also demonstrates the impact of Asian Americans’ racialization as perpetual foreigners, especially when it comes to legal efforts to enforce national security. According to Black, Fred Korematsu, an American citizen of Japanese descent, was not targeted because of his race, but rather, because the United States was at war with Japan: “...military authorities feared an invasion of our West Coast...the situation demanded

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<sup>10</sup> Roger Daniels, “Korematsu v. United States Revisited: 1944 and 1983,” in *Race On Trial: Law and Justice In American History*, ed. Annette Gordon-Reed (Oxford University Press, 2002), 143.

<sup>11</sup> *Korematsu v. United States*, 323 U.S. 214 (1944), 214.

that all citizens of Japanese ancestry be segregated from the West Coast temporarily...”<sup>12</sup> While Black may have insisted there was no racial antagonism, the attempt to shore up national security by detaining people based on their Japanese heritage reflected the view that they would never be entirely American, even if they were American-born citizens. The fact that Japanese Americans were stripped of rights because of the diplomatic decisions of their nation of origin highlights their racialization as perpetually foreign. Moreover, as Justice Frank Murphy wrote in his dissenting opinion, German and Italian Americans (whose homelands were also at war with the United States) were not similarly detained on a broad, sweeping scale, underscoring the racist undertones of Japanese American incarceration.<sup>13</sup>

The wartime incarceration of people of Japanese descent not only represents racial discrimination, but also prejudice toward non-Christian religions. Duncan Ryuken Williams, a scholar of religion and East Asian languages and cultures, contends that religious bias was a critical part of the internment of “enemy aliens,” evident for example in the targeting of Buddhist leaders on the Hawaiian Islands.<sup>14</sup> According to Williams, the United States Army’s G-2 intelligence section, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Office of Naval Intelligence investigated Buddhism as a potential threat to national security years *before* the bombing of Pearl Harbor, when the country officially entered the war with Japan. Thus, even in peacetime—contrary to claims of the “military necessity” of Japanese incarceration—American leaders perceived Japanese Buddhists as a danger to the country, just as they had previously characterized Chinese religions as heathen. Williams cites an informant for the G-2, who believed Buddhist organizations were a “hindrance to Americanization,” as well as political tools

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<sup>12</sup> *Korematsu v. United States*, 223–24.

<sup>13</sup> *Korematsu v. United States*, 240.

<sup>14</sup> Duncan Ryuken Williams, “America: A Nation of Religious Freedom?,” in *American Sutra* (Harvard University Press, 2020), 20.

of the Japanese Empire: “Buddhism serves as an indirect agency in keeping the spirit of Mikadoism [Japanese emperor worship] alive in Hawaii and as one of the best mediums of pro-Japanese propaganda.”<sup>15</sup> Americans, in other words, were intimidated by the practice of non-Christian religions like Buddhism, seeing them as social, cultural, and political threats to their identity and institutions. The incarceration of Japanese Americans captures how racial and religious ideas, in tandem, undergird American efforts to enforce national security. It appears the government was less concerned with the political loyalty of people whose homelands were wartime enemies—as seen in discrepancies between the treatment of Japanese Americans and of German and Italian Americans—and more spurred to act by the purported racial and religious danger of Asian Americans who did not assimilate as they demanded.

The American legal system allows the government to enact legislation to ensure the security of the nation, but that is often rooted in racial and religious ideas because “security” is configured to guard against threats allegedly posed by non-white, non-Christian people. Claiming to support the public good, officials have imposed laws restricting the rights and freedoms of those considered “enemies” to American interests. In Chinese exclusion laws, authorities argued that the racial and religious unassimilability of Asian Americans endangered white Christian America; in Alien Land Laws, they aimed to limit the presence of Asian Americans by connecting physical land to allegiance, citizenship, and divine mandates; and in Japanese American incarceration, they drew on both lines of reasoning, emphasizing issues of questionable assimilation *and* potential disloyalty. Throughout American history—and even today—dominant groups have used the logic of national security to assert their power. For Asian Americans specifically, conceptions of national security are entrenched in Orientalism, allegations of Asian heathenism, and the perpetual foreigner and yellow peril tropes.

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<sup>15</sup> Williams, “America: A Nation of Religious Freedom?,” 27.

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