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Why I Love a Country That Once Betrayed Me

By George Takei
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George Takei is an American actor, director, author, and activist of Japanese descent. Takei is well-known for his role on Star Trek, a science fiction television and movie series. In this TED Talk, Takei discusses his experiences being interned during WWII and how he feels about America today. As you read, take notes on what Takei values about America.

[1] I'm a veteran of the starship Enterprise.¹ I soared through the galaxy driving a huge starship with a crew made up of people from all over this world, many different races, many different cultures, many different heritages, all working together, and our mission was to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before.

Well — (Applause) — I am the grandson of immigrants from Japan who went to America, boldly going to a strange new world, seeking new opportunities. My mother was born in Sacramento, California. My father was a San Franciscan. They met and married in Los Angeles, and I was born there.

I was four years old when Pearl Harbor was bombed on December 7, 1941 by Japan, and overnight, the world was plunged into a world war. America suddenly was swept up by hysteria.² Japanese-Americans, American citizens of Japanese ancestry, were looked on with suspicion and fear and with outright hatred simply because we happened to look like the people that bombed Pearl Harbor. And the hysteria grew and grew until in February 1942, the president of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, ordered all Japanese-Americans on the West Coast of America to be summarily³ rounded up with no charges, with no trial, with no due process.⁴ Due process, this is a core pillar of our justice system. That all disappeared. We were to be rounded up and imprisoned in 10 barbed-wire prison camps in some of the most desolate⁵ places in America: the blistering hot desert of Arizona, the sultry⁶ swamps of Arkansas, the wastelands of Wyoming, Idaho, Utah, Colorado, and two of the



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1. the spacecraft from Star Trek, a science fiction television and movie series
2. **Hysteria** (*noun*) exaggerated or uncontrollable emotion
3. in a prompt or direct manner
4. the legal requirement that the state must respect all legal rights that are owed to a person
5. **Desolate** (*adjective*) deserted of people; in a state of bleak emptiness
6. hot and humid

most desolate places in California.

On April 20th, I celebrated my fifth birthday, and just a few weeks after my birthday, my parents got my younger brother, my baby sister and me up very early one morning, and they dressed us hurriedly. My brother and I were in the living room looking out the front window, and we saw two soldiers marching up our driveway. They carried bayonets⁷ on their rifles. They stomped up the front porch and banged on the door. My father answered it, and the soldiers ordered us out of our home. My father gave my brother and me small luggages to carry, and we walked out and stood on the driveway waiting for our mother to come out, and when my mother finally came out, she had our baby sister in one arm, a huge duffel bag in the other, and tears were streaming down both her cheeks. I will never be able to forget that scene. It is burned into my memory.

- [5] We were taken from our home and loaded on to train cars with other Japanese-American families. There were guards stationed at both ends of each car, as if we were criminals. We were taken two thirds of the way across the country, rocking on that train for four days and three nights, to the swamps of Arkansas. I still remember the barbed wire fence that confined me. I remember the tall sentry tower⁸ with the machine guns pointed at us. I remember the searchlight that followed me when I made the night runs from my barrack⁹ to the latrine.¹⁰ But to five-year-old me, I thought it was kind of nice that they'd lit the way for me to pee. I was a child, too young to understand the circumstances of my being there.

Children are amazingly adaptable. What would be grotesquely¹¹ abnormal became my normality in the prisoner of war camps. It became routine for me to line up three times a day to eat lousy food in a noisy mess hall. It became normal for me to go with my father to bathe in a mass shower. Being in a prison, a barbed-wire prison camp, became my normality.

When the war ended, we were released, and given a one-way ticket to anywhere in the United States. My parents decided to go back home to Los Angeles, but Los Angeles was not a welcoming place. We were penniless. Everything had been taken from us, and the hostility was intense. Our first home was on Skid Row¹² in the lowest part of our city, living with derelicts,¹³ drunkards and crazy people, the stench of urine all over, on the street, in the alley, in the hallway. It was a horrible experience, and for us kids, it was terrorizing. I remember once a drunkard came staggering down, fell down right in front of us, and threw up. My baby sister said, "Mama, let's go back home," because behind barbed wires was for us home.

My parents worked hard to get back on their feet. We had lost everything. They were at the middle of their lives and starting all over. They worked their fingers to the bone, and ultimately they were able to get the capital together to buy a three-bedroom home in a nice neighborhood. And I was a teenager, and I became very curious about my childhood imprisonment. I had read civics books that told me about the ideals of American democracy. All men are created equal, we have an inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of

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7. a blade that is fixed to the open end of a rifle
 8. a tower where a soldier is stationed to keep guard of a place
 9. a building or group of buildings, usually intended to lodge soldiers
 10. a toilet or outhouse
 11. **Grotesque** (*adjective*) comically or repulsively ugly or distorted
 12. an area in Downtown Los Angeles that contains one of the largest stable populations of homeless people in America
 13. a person without a home, a job, or property

happiness, and I couldn't quite make that fit with what I knew to be my childhood imprisonment. I read history books, and I couldn't find anything about it. And so I engaged my father after dinner in long, sometimes heated conversations. We had many, many conversations like that, and what I got from them was my father's wisdom. He was the one that suffered the most under those conditions of imprisonment, and yet he understood American democracy. He told me that our democracy is a people's democracy, and it can be as great as the people can be, but it is also as fallible¹⁴ as people are. He told me that American democracy is vitally dependent on good people who cherish the ideals of our system and actively engage in the process of making our democracy work. And he took me to a campaign headquarters — the governor of Illinois was running for the presidency — and introduced me to American electoral politics. And he also told me about young Japanese-Americans during the Second World War.

When Pearl Harbor was bombed, young Japanese-Americans, like all young Americans, rushed to their draft board to volunteer to fight for our country. That act of patriotism was answered with a slap in the face. We were denied service, and categorized as enemy non-alien. It was outrageous to be called an enemy when you're volunteering to fight for your country, but that was compounded with the word "non-alien," which is a word that means "citizen" in the negative. They even took the word "citizen" away from us, and imprisoned them for a whole year.

[10] And then the government realized that there's a wartime manpower shortage, and as suddenly as they'd rounded us up, they opened up the military for service by young Japanese-Americans. It was totally irrational, but the amazing thing, the astounding thing, is that thousands of young Japanese-American men and women again went from behind those barbed-wire fences, put on the same uniform as that of our guards, leaving their families in imprisonment, to fight for this country.

They said that they were going to fight not only to get their families out from behind those barbed-wire fences, but because they cherished the very ideal of what our government stands for, should stand for, and that was being abrogated¹⁵ by what was being done.

All men are created equal. And they went to fight for this country. They were put into a segregated all Japanese-American unit and sent to the battlefields of Europe, and they threw themselves into it. They fought with amazing, incredible courage and valor.¹⁶ They were sent out on the most dangerous missions and they sustained the highest combat casualty rate of any unit proportionally.

There is one battle that illustrates that. It was a battle for the Gothic Line. The Germans were embedded in this mountain hillside, rocky hillside, in impregnable¹⁷ caves, and three allied battalions¹⁸ had been pounding away at it for six months, and they were stalemated.¹⁹ The 442nd was called in to add to the fight, but the men of the 442nd came up with a unique but dangerous idea: The backside of the mountain was a sheer rock cliff. The Germans thought an attack from the backside would be impossible. The men of the 442nd decided to do the impossible. On a dark, moonless night, they began scaling that rock wall, a drop of more than 1,000 feet, in full

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14. **Fallible** (*adjective*) capable of making mistakes
 15. to repeal or do away with something
 16. **Valor** (*noun*) great courage in the face of danger
 17. unable to be captured or broken into
 18. a large body of troops ready for battle
 19. a state in which neither side is able to gain an advantage or win

combat gear. They climbed all night long on that sheer cliff. In the darkness, some lost their handhold or their footing and they fell to their deaths in the ravine below. They all fell silently. Not a single one cried out, so as not to give their position away. The men climbed for eight hours straight, and those who made it to the top stayed there until the first break of light, and as soon as light broke, they attacked. The Germans were surprised, and they took the hill and broke the Gothic Line. A six-month stalemate was broken by the 442nd in 32 minutes.

It was an amazing act, and when the war ended, the 442nd returned to the United States as the most decorated unit of the entire Second World War. They were greeted back on the White House Lawn by President Truman, who said to them, "You fought not only the enemy but prejudice, and you won."

- [15] They are my heroes. They clung to their belief in the shining ideals of this country, and they proved that being an American is not just for some people, that race is not how we define being an American. They expanded what it means to be an American, including Japanese-Americans that were feared and suspected and hated. They were change agents, and they left for me a legacy. They are my heroes and my father is my hero, who understood democracy and guided me through it. They gave me a legacy, and with that legacy comes a responsibility, and I am dedicated to making my country an even better America, to making our government an even truer democracy, and because of the heroes that I have and the struggles that we've gone through, I can stand before you as a gay Japanese-American, but even more than that, I am a proud American.

Thank you very much. (Applause)

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