Following President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066, issued on Feb. 19, 1942, more than 120,000 Japanese — American citizens and noncitizens — living in California, Oregon and Washington were incarcerated by the War Relocation Administration in “camps” in other parts of the United States and Hawaii. Although no American of Japanese descent had been convicted of espionage or sabotage, the mass evacuation, a product of racism and public hysteria, was justified as a “military necessity.” “A Jap is a Jap. There is no way to determine their loyalty,” Lt. Gen. John DeWitt declared. “We can cover their legal situation ... in spite of the Constitution,” Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy said in a memo. “The Constitution is just a scrap of paper to me.”
In "Infamy," journalist Richard Reeves, the author, among many other books, of "President Kennedy: Profile of Power," provides a sweeping and searching account of this appalling chapter in the history of the United States. The internment, he suggests, "is an American story of enduring themes: racism and greed, injustice and denial — and then soul-searching, an apology, and the most American of coping mechanisms, moving on."

"Infamy" is not without its heroes. About 30,000 Japanese Americans served in the U.S. Army, Reeves indicates, some of them in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team in Europe, which became the most decorated unit in Army history. Some principled and courageous non-Japanese Americans, Reeves reveals, took risks to assist their fellow citizens. In Fresno, Hubert "Dutch" Leonard, a retired major-league baseball player, managed a Japanese farm and returned it — and $20,000 in profits — to its rightful owners after the war.

Reeves reserves the heart of his book — and rightfully so — for a narrative of the heartbreaking experiences of evacuated individuals and families. Japanese Americans, he reminds us, were forced to sell their homes, land, businesses and belongings for a fraction of their market value. Government policies, which mandated that only nisei (who were born in the United States) could hold office in the camps, set issei (immigrants born in Japan), the older and more mature evacuees, against their children, "undermining the traditional structure of the hierarchical Japanese society."

By 1943, nisei who foreswore allegiance to the emperor of Japan and promised to go into combat when ordered were permitted to leave the camps to join the Army, get a job or go to college. But there were catches. They had to head east, not back to the West Coast. They could not attend a school located within 25 miles of a railroad line, or one with military connections, including the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps — which excluded almost every institution in the country.

And when the war was over, many evacuees had no home to which they could return — and faced hostility from some of their fellow Americans. In a straw poll conducted by the Los Angeles Times, Reeves writes, 10,598 respondents favored and 732 opposed deporting all Japanese from the United States. Reeves is saddened but not surprised, then, that a barber in San Francisco told Lt. Daniel Inouye, the future U.S. senator from Hawaii, who appeared in his shop in full uniform, with combat medals on his chest and a dead arm, "You're a Jap and we don't cut Jap hair."

The government of the United States has made amends, albeit belatedly and inadequately. In 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed legislation that included an apology for the internment and authorized a $20,000 payment to each of an estimated 80,000 survivors. The Supreme Court, however, has never overturned its 1944 decision upholding the constitutionality of Executive Order 9066. It remains, as Robert Jackson wrote in dissent, "a loaded gun" that could be invoked at any time to address real or imagined threats to national security.

For this reason, Reeves believes that the warning issued by Eleanor Roosevelt in a meeting with nisei women in Los Angeles, four days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, remains eminently relevant. If we cannot make the Bill of Rights "a reality for all loyal American citizens, regardless of race, creed, or color," the first lady proclaimed, "then we shall have removed the one real hope for the future on which all humanity must now rely."

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Infamy

The Shocking Story of the Japanese American Internment in World War II
By Richard Reeves

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