

Pearl Harbor and the Erosion of Citizenship

For many Americans – young and old – the Second World War occupies a privileged place in popular memory: It was “The Good War” fought by “The Greatest Generation” armed with “The Arsenal of Democracy.”

All wars, however, are complex. The wartime paranoia unleashed by the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor suspended rights and freedoms for many Americans, upending the very notion of citizenship. Between 1942-1948, suspicion of sabotage led to the forced relocation of more than 150,000 individuals of Japanese, Italian, and German ancestry. Never before had the federal government administered a program restricting the full movement of its citizens solely based on ancestry.

American popular memory sidelines these grim episodes, favoring instead the fable of “The Best.War.Ever.” Through television, film, and a steady stream of published works, the Second World War is at once both meticulously documented and mythologized beyond recognition.

December 7, 2016, marks the 75th anniversary of Pearl Harbor. With the focus on issues of citizenship in this year’s presidential election, it is perhaps more pertinent than ever to examine the tenuous historical relationship between “enemy aliens” and “inalienable rights.”

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