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HIRABAYASHI V. UNITED STATES

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Term: 1940-1949 **1942**

Facts of the Case

In the wake of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt acted to prevent incidents of subversion and espionage from individuals of Japanese descent living in the United States. He issued two executive orders which were quickly enacted into law. One gave the Secretary of War the power to designate certain parts of the country "military areas" and exclude certain persons from them. The second established the War Relocation Authority which had the power to remove, maintain, and supervise persons who were excluded from the military areas. Gordon Kiyoshi Hirabayashi, a student at the University of Washington, was convicted of violating a curfew and relocation order.

Question

Did the President's executive orders and the power delegated to the military authorities discriminate against Americans and resident aliens of Japanese descent in violation of the Fifth Amendment?

Conclusion

The Court found the President's orders and the implementation of the curfew to be constitutional. Chief Justice Stone, writing for the unanimous Court, took into account the great importance of military installations and weapons production that occurred on the West Coast and the "solidarity" that individuals of Japanese descent felt with their motherland. He reasoned that restrictions on Japanese actions served an important national interest. The Court ducked the thorny relocation issue and focused solely on the curfew, which the Court viewed as a necessary "protective measure." Stone argued that racial discrimination was justified since "in time of war residents having ethnic affiliations with an invading enemy may be a greater source of danger than those of a different ancestry."

Cite this Page

HIRABAYASHI v. UNITED STATES. The Oyez Project at IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law. 28 March 2012. <http://www.oyez.org/cases/1940-1949/1942/1942_870/>.

Case Basics

Docket No.
870

Petitioner
Hirabayashi

Respondent
United States

Decided By
Stone Court (1943-1945)

Opinion
320 U.S. 81 (1943)

Argued
Monday, May 10, 1943

Decided
Monday, June 21, 1943