

Opinion

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Tom Brokaw: Friends Across Barbed Wire and Politics

By Tom Brokaw

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Credit...Laura Lannes

Cody, Wyo. — This year is the 75th anniversary of one of most shameful acts in American history. In 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 two months after the Pearl Harbor attack, consigning more than 110,000 Japanese-Americans on the West Coast to crudely constructed concentration camps in remote areas.

Without hard evidence or due process, the targets of 9066 were considered “security risks,” even though young Japanese-American men were volunteering for military

service and many of their elders were appalled by the militaristic mania that had taken over Tokyo.

Japanese-American businessmen, farmers, fishermen, educators and doctors, even Japanese-Americans who fought for the United States in World War I, were sneeringly lumped together under a denigrating shorthand: Japs.

This summer I attended a reunion of camp survivors and their offspring at Heart Mountain, a barren slice of north-central Wyoming where 10,000 Japanese-Americans lived in primitive barracks surrounded by barbed wire, watched over by armed guards.

Heart Mountain was a vivid and enduring lesson for two men who met there, a lesson that reverberates today.

Norman Mineta, the son of a prosperous Japanese-American insurance agent from California, arrived at Heart Mountain as a 10-year-old, a Cub Scout and a baseball enthusiast whose bat was confiscated because it might be used as a weapon.

Despite the prisonlike environs, some parents organized a Boy Scout Jamboree, inviting nearby Wyoming troops to join them. Only one did, from neighboring Cody.

Among that troop's members was a gregarious teenager named Alan Simpson, and he had reservations about spending time at a concentration camp. "There was barbed wire, guys in towers with searchlights and a gun," he recalled to me. "Why would I want to go there?"

But he did go, and quickly formed what turned into a lifelong friendship of common interests and shared values with Mr. Mineta. Who could have guessed that the two scouts would someday serve together in Washington? Mr. Simpson, the tall, conservative Republican, became a senator; Mr. Mineta, a liberal Democrat, was elected to the House and became secretary of transportation under President George W. Bush.

When they found themselves together again in Washington in the late 1970s, they were on opposite sides of the aisle, but the bonds of their relationship transcended conventional political divisions.

Mr. Mineta recruited his friend for the dogged congressional fight to get reparations for the Japanese-Americans who had been imprisoned, many of whom lost their businesses, farms and real estate — but never their determination to be full and equal American citizens.

It took 10 years, and it wasn't easy — but they succeeded in enacting legislation that President Ronald Reagan signed in 1988. Mr. Simpson says many of his Republican colleagues resisted, asking: "Who's next? African-Americans? Do we do Native Americans?"

Mr. Simpson said he countered: “That’s not the issue. I was there. I saw what they went through.” He also remembers a sign on a Cody business: “No Japs allowed, you SOB’s killed my son.”

This son of Wyoming says it was one of the most important votes he cast in his three-term Senate career, and it was a matter of principle more than a gesture of friendship.

As secretary of transportation, Mr. Mineta was a key figure after Sept. 11 in grounding air traffic immediately after the attack and then setting up new airport security measures. He vividly remembers Representative David Bonior, a Democrat from the Detroit area, reminding President Bush that he had many Muslim constituents and that they were very worried about having their travel restricted or being rounded up and detained — as Mr. Mineta had been.

So Mr. Mineta was surprised and relieved when the president said, “We don’t want to have happen today what Norm went through in 1942.”

Mr. Simpson and Mr. Mineta, both 85, are similarly appalled by the hyperpartisan political climate in Washington today. Mr. Mineta uses their friendship as an example of what has been lost.

“We got to know each other,” he said. “Now members of Congress don’t know each other. They don’t have personal relationships. They’re too reliant on staff and lobbyists.”

As for his own party, Mr. Mineta said: “They’re trying to find a message. It’s too early to tell.” He added, “Running up and down the street with a placard isn’t the answer.” He also urged young people to get into public service “to be at the table.” “If you’re not there,” he said, “other people are making decisions that impact you.”

His Republican friend, typically, is more blunt. “It’s embarrassing,” Mr. Simpson thundered when asked about the current political environment. He said that Sept. 11 “injected something into us called fear.” And that fear, he worries, is overriding an important lesson of history: that patriotism, forgiveness and tolerance can coexist.

The senator likes to recall the words of Justice Frank Murphy, one of only three dissenting votes when President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066 was upheld by the United States Supreme Court in 1944. Justice Murphy wrote that “the broad provisions of the Bill of Rights” are not “suspended by the mere existence of a state of war. Distinctions based on color and ancestry are utterly inconsistent with our traditions and ideals.”

Today, Justice Murphy’s carefully worded statement would no doubt set off a tweet storm of epic proportions, blowing through the lessons of history.