

# Don't judge 1942 internment with '80s logic

**HISTORY. LIKE VEGETABLES**, is best served fresh off the vine. Left too long, it will dry out and change in shape, texture and color.

We are going to talk about the 1942 wartime internment of the Japanese-Canadians again. We are going to talk about perspectives. We are going to talk about who is best qualified to talk about it and who should shut the hell up about it.

Like vegetables left too long on the shelf, this story is not what it was when fresh.

This week, I presented the unusual story of one of the Canadian officials who was in charge of relocating the Japanese-Canadians. It was Frank Bernard's story and it fascinated me.

But it repelled some of my colleagues and about half the people who have called about it.

The reaction splits right down the middle of a time sphere. People who were here in 1941-42 tend to agree that relocation was necessary and was done fairly. I must add that the judgment of some of these people is colored

vividly by personal bitterness: some of them had relatives in the Canadian armed forces who perished at the hands of Japanese combatants or in Japanese prison camps.

On the other hand, people who were not here at that time deplore the internment. By whatever historic perspectives they speak from, they say the relocation was unnecessary, cruelly inspired by historic racism, and that the seizure and sale of Japanese possessions was despicable.

One young colleague dismissed the Bernard piece as "— Real —"

Another colleague said Bernard's story had jarred him. He said he planned to suspend the judgments he had made until he does a lot more reading on both sides of the story.

You can't judge what happened in January and February of 1942 with your nice, tidy 1980s logic and retrospective sense of fairness. Logic and fairness had nothing to do with what happened in 1942. It was all dictated by fear, by un-



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reasonable, overwhelming, smothering fear.

You young people with the clear, book-learned insights, have you any idea how unprepared we were for a Pacific war in 1941? Do you know how quickly Japanese armies seized all of Southeast Asia? Can you possibly understand how sure we were that we were next?

I was 12 in 1942. But I was issued a gasmask and a steel helmet. The gas mask, a horrible clumsy thing with plastic eyes and a heavy filter cannister that hung down like a lopped-off elephant's trunk, was standard issue to school kids. We were told how to put them on if the invasion army landed and hit the school with poison gas.

The steel helmet was special be-

cause I was my neighborhood's designated Air Raid Precaution messenger boy. In the event of the Japanese air raids we were certain would come, I and my steel helmet and my bicycle had a patrol area. I was to pedal between two groups of neighborhood men, making sure they had lots of buckets of sand and water to quench the incendiary bombs that would be falling on our streets and homes.

That was the fear of the time.

In 1942, you had to have black-out curtains on your windows. If you owned a car, you taped the headlights to show only a tiny slit of light. You could be arrested by your neighbors for showing light from your house at night that

might be targeted by Japanese bombers.

I was scared. Everybody on our street was scared. I'd guess the government people who moved the Japanese-Canadians were scared, too. Fear is not a noble motive; it does not make people wise, it just makes them move fast.

Let's deal with the time frames of some other retrospective arguments.

I hear people say the relocation and internment of Japanese-Canadians was proper because Canadian prisoners taken in Hong Kong were being starved and slaughtered in Japanese prisoner-of-war camps. That argument just doesn't apply as a motive for setting up our own camps. News moved with dreadful slowness in 1942 and the stories of Japanese atrocities were not known when Japanese-Canadians were being interned.

The argument, why them? If Japanese-Canadians were relocated, why not German-Canadians, Italo-Canadians? Well, as I recall, we were terrified that the

Japanese Navy would be off our coast at any time. We really didn't worry much that the German fleet would cross the Atlantic, go down the length of South America, come around Cape Horn, steam up past San Francisco and Seattle and invade British Columbia with the help of German-Canadian infiltrators.

And what about the seizure and sale of Japanese possessions? Why couldn't their fishing boats be mothballed for return after the war? Why weren't their seized houses left vacant so they could move back at the end of the hostilities?

I'll tell you about that. In 1942, when our Japanese citizens were moved out, the idea of being *able* to give back their boats and homes, ever, didn't seem likely. It seemed, then, quite likely that Imperial Japan would own *our* homes when it was over. We didn't know we were going to win.

That was the problem in 1942; that's what nobody takes into consideration today. We weren't smart enough to avoid mistakes. We were too scared.