

GREETINGS FROM GROUND ZERO

Seattle was where the first cases in the U.S. appeared, a distinction with little meaning now that 100,000 are dead nationwide, with 36,000 of them avoidable with earlier action from the White House. It's something we must never let them forget.

And in the great pandemic of 2020, I'm hearing echoes of the same things we heard in 1942: the fears of a nation under attack from a threat originating in Asia, which hit America first on the Pacific Coast, and which made anyone with an Asian face the target for kneejerk retaliation. These fears are inflamed by a white nationalist in the White House who declared himself a "wartime president" and closed the front door on travel from China only after the virus had arrived, while leaving the back door open to passengers from Europe whose infections ravaged New York; a president who inflames racial division by branding COVID-19 the "Chinese virus;" a president who insults Weijia Jiang of CBS News with, "Maybe that's a question you should ask China. Don't ask me, ask CHAI-NAH." No coincidence then that Seattle Police are investigating any number of racial assaults against Asians.

At the state capitol in Olympia and others across the nation, the president's brownshirts grieve lockdowns as egregious violations of their individual liberties, and equate them to Japanese American wartime incarceration, Jim Crow laws, and even slavery. "No," said Nina Wallace of Densho in Seattle, "We can't believe this actually needs to be said, but no, quarantine is not the same thing as incarceration." And she said the obvious out loud: "Your living room is not a concentration camp, and exposing service providers to hazardous working conditions so you can get a haircut is not an inalienable right."

"Show our American-ness" said former presidential candidate Andrew Yang, in a misplaced call upon his fellow Asian Americans to pitch in and demonstrate "we can be part of the cure" just as Japanese Americans tried to prove their loyalty in WW2 by volunteering for the U.S. Army. Jia Lynn Wang, a deputy editor at *The New York Times*, pointed out what many of us know: that the same strategy of "appeasing white America" was touted back then by the Japanese American Citizens League and Mike Masaoka in a misplaced call for formation of a suicide battalion to take on the most dangerous missions, with their immigrant parents held hostage by the government as insurance.

Just before the lockdown, we protested this president's thirst for racial exclusion and deportation at our local site for kids in cages, the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma. As a community with the living memory of such things we said, "Never Again Is Now," and called for the release of immigrants and asylum-seekers held in these incubators for viral spread. "I know a concentration camp when I see one," said Satsuki Ina, who led the fight to stop another such facility from opening not far from the camp that imprisoned her as a child with her parents. Satsuki was among those leading us in a mass march on the White House on June 6. The National Pilgrimage to Close the Camps had to be postponed, of course, with an online virtual rally in its place.

But someday we will come out of seclusion, and when we do it can be a moment to confront the huge structural inequities we've come to accept. Rather than a return to normal, we will have the chance to remake society into one that is more just and equitable, whether it takes the shape of a guaranteed annual income, universal health care, or some other shifting of the ground upon which we stand. This moment may be remembered as the turning point when we fundamentally reorder our world and shed division and fear. Or, the wheels that have been put into unseen motion can turn on us and plunge us into a decade of economic depression. Either way there's no turning back. Whichever way it goes we must never forget where it started, and whom to hold accountable.

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