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MY TURN

■ **Dmae Roberts**



This is America

Children locked up in Hurricane Fence cages. Recorded cries of children calling for their mothers. The images and sounds of babies, toddlers, and adolescents separated from their parents are heartbreaking. Reports say just under 3,000 children were detained. Most still have not been reunited with their loved ones, many of whom are refugees seeking asylum. People decry that this isn't the America they know. For people of color, immigrants, and refugees, however, this is America. It's our history.

America was wrested away from indigenous Americans. In 1877, the Dawes Act stole Native American land and created the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Indigenous children were taken from their families and communities and forced into government-run boarding schools to make them "assimilate" into white culture.

The United States was built on slavery which began even before it was a country. While poor British immigrants arrived as indentured servants or as convicted criminals serving out their sentences, African slaves provided a lifetime of free labor and often saw their children ripped away from them. Before the Civil War emancipated slaves, Oregon passed an act in 1844 that prohibited slavery, yet at the same time excluded Blacks and Mulattoes. The same act required Blacks in Oregon — be they free or slave — be whipped twice a year "until he or she shall quit the territory." Later this was deemed too harsh and was reduced to forced labor.

America invited Chinese immigrants to build the Transcontinental Railroad. Paid less than their white counterparts, Chinese laborers risked their lives often performing the more dangerous jobs such as dynamiting mountains. Yet when the railroad was completed, America had no thanks for these workers. Instead, unfair, discriminatory exclusion laws were implemented.

The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act passed by the U.S. Congress made it illegal to be Chinese in the country and opened the floodgates for anti-Chinese violence, including mobs who chased out Chinese people in Oregon City and Portland. The act was not repealed until 1943, when China became an ally to the U.S. during World War II.

America welcomed 20 million white immigrants through Ellis Island in New York from 1892 to 1924, but detained and imprisoned thousands of predominantly Chinese immigrants at the Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco Bay between 1910 and 1940. Women, children, and men were locked up for as long as two years in fenced-in,

stark barracks and forced to endure daily interrogations. Officials would ask them the same questions each day; if they did not answer exactly as before, they faced deportation.

The U.S. forcibly evicted more than 120,000 Japanese Americans from their homes and into internment camps during World War II. Most lost their property, possessions, and land. This unjust incarceration is a vivid reminder to people of color that American laws can quickly change to exclude and punish them.

The United States welcomed foreign white brides of American servicemen after World War II. The War Brides Act of 1945 made it possible, but it excluded Asian women who married American servicemen. Eventually, several amendments to the act allowed Asian military brides into the country.

America has also excluded people of color with legislation whenever their numbers seemed too great. The Immigration Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act, was a federal law that set quotas on the number of immigrants from certain countries while providing funding and an enforcement mechanism to carry out a longstanding ban on other, non-white immigrants.

America virtually banned all Asians from immigrating until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which eliminated the quota system based on racial and national origins, and allowed family reunification for immigrants of color. The current U.S. administration calls reunification "chain migration," which feels like coded wording for an excuse to bring back racial and national origin bans on immigration.

America enacted the United States Refugee Act of 1980 to establish a method for refugees seeking asylum. Thousands of Southeast Asian refugees fled for their lives because of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. For the most part, these refugees have made strong and positive contributions to the U.S.

Recent detentions and incarcerations along the Mexico border have largely involved refugees fleeing Central America to seek asylum. Much of our country's involvement there since the late 1970s has set in motion the current immigration crisis.

Immigrants and refugees have always contributed to the soul of America. Our nation needs to look at its immigration laws, which have roots in institutional racism and demonize people fleeing in fear of their lives or seeking a better life. The government needs to unify the imprisoned children and families and give them a fair and timely hearing. This is what America should be.