

# Enduring Lessons of Justice from the World War II Japanese American Internment

Nancy P. Gallavan and Teresa A. Roberts

In the spring of 1942, nearly 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry living along the west coast of the United States were ordered to evacuate their homes and abandon their businesses. These federal orders, giving Japanese and Japanese Americans just a few days warning before being rounded up and sent to internment camps, came less than four months after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent United States entry into World War II. Two-thirds of those evacuated from their homes were American-born citizens. More than half were children, exiled only because their parents had been born in Japan.<sup>1</sup> Evacuees were not told how long they would be held, nor were they charged with any crimes.<sup>2</sup>

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, giving the military commander power to select certain parts of the West Coast as military areas. People considered enemies of war or a threat to national security were forbidden access to those areas. On March 2, General John DeWitt, who had been named military commander, issued a proclamation designating military areas in the states of Washington, Oregon, California, and portions of Arizona. The proclamation, known as Public Proclamation No. 1, excluded certain persons from these areas, specifically Japanese, German, and Italian aliens.<sup>3</sup> On March 16, the states of Idaho, Montana, Nevada,

*We supported our families; we honored our culture; we believed in our country. We never thought to display any civil disobedience. The U.S.A. was our home too.*

—Reflections from an 80-year-old Japanese American internment camp detainee

and Utah also were designated military areas.

Then, on March 18, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9102 creating the War Relocation Authority (WRA) which established the orderly evacuation of designated persons living in the restricted military areas. Just a few days later, on March 21, Roosevelt signed Public Law 503 making it a federal crime for anyone to disobey General DeWitt's orders.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the spring and summer of 1942, Civilian Exclusion Orders directed all persons of Japanese ancestry, both immigrants and U.S. citizens, to report to control stations or assembly centers, consisting primarily of fairgrounds and horseracing tracks.<sup>5</sup> From there, Japanese Americans were transported to relocation centers, essentially prisons or internment camps constructed of wooden framed barracks situated in desolate, harsh, unsanitary sites.<sup>6</sup> The evacuees, separated from their extended families, former neighbors, and well-established lifestyles, were

detained for almost three and a half years at 10 WRA camps scattered across the western United States.<sup>7</sup> The internees were gradually released throughout 1945, the year World War II ended. For most Japanese Americans, their re-entry into the U.S. mainstream was a slow and painful process.<sup>8</sup>

## Honoring Fred Korematsu

One of the best-known Japanese Americans who fought the internment orders was Fred Korematsu. Korematsu, who was born in Oakland, California, was in his early twenties when he refused to report for transportation to an internment camp, even as his family and friends complied with government orders. Korematsu insisted that "it was wrong to subject innocent people to this treatment without trial or any evidence of criminal behavior"... and that the evacuation order "should be declared unconstitutional."<sup>9</sup> Korematsu was found guilty of violating Public Law 503; his case was appealed all the way to the United States Supreme Court. The Supreme Court decision upheld the exclusion order, and Korematsu was found guilty of a misdemeanor. However, the case provoked strong reactions on all sides for many years to come.<sup>10</sup>

Over time, presidents Nixon and Ford signed bills repealing the law for which Korematsu was convicted. In 1983, Korematsu's case

President Clinton presents Fred Korematsu with a Presidential Medal of Freedom during a ceremony at the White House Thursday, January 15, 1998. Korematsu's legal challenges to civilian exclusion orders during World War II helped spur the redress movement for Japanese-Americans.



was reopened and the conviction set aside.<sup>11</sup> In 1988, President Reagan signed the Reparations Act acknowledging United States responsibility for the injustice to Japanese Americans and promising payments to all living internment camp detainees. Ultimately, in 1998, President Clinton gave Fred Korematsu the highest civilian award: the U.S. Presidential Medal of Honor. Fred Korematsu died in the spring of 2005 at age 86. His case resonates throughout the legal events playing out in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.

The events connected with the Korematsu case offer historical lessons on fairness and freedom with which to consider similar issues of justice that have arisen since September 11, 2001. As law professor Jerry Kang declared shortly after the 2001 attacks,

It [*Korematsu v. U.S.*] has never been overruled ... the infamous decision is still considered 'good law.' I think we have too easily said that we have learned the

lessons of Korematsu. If more attacks come on the order of 9/11, all bets are off. It's when the next shoe drops that we're really going to test the mettle of the nation.<sup>12</sup>

Jamin Raskin, another professor of law, stated,

History makes clear that, when national security is at issue, civil liberties—rightly or wrongly—are among the first casualties. What seems unthinkable at one moment suddenly becomes plausible at another ... the notion of collective guilt once aimed at Japanese Americans might now be expressed not as wholesale internment but as a mandate for widespread profiling. People of Arab ancestry could be subjected to increased scrutiny, surveillance, or suspicion.<sup>13</sup>

Today many U.S. citizens struggle to protect minorities against discrimination and to safeguard civil rights.

(Originally, only Quakers and the ACLU officially opposed the 1942 Executive Orders. Teachers may want students to consider if the outcome might have been different had more people and groups publicly opposed these actions.) The Patriot Act of 2001 has increased scrutiny of Arab Americans and various foreigners in the United States, placing limitations on liberties ostensibly to protect the greater society, as allowed by the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights.

### Teaching about Justice

The study of the Japanese American internment provides the opportunity to engage learners (in grades 4–12) designed for reflecting on fairness, freedom, and justice. Such exercises require today's students and teachers to step back in time and view the past through a different lens, in order to examine the world of 60 years ago.

The powerful lessons learned from studying this event strongly support citizenship education, democratic principles, and social justice. While some information on the World War II Japanese American internment camps is available for high school and university students, little is written for elementary and middle school students. Mukai has identified six key components for teaching the World War II Japanese American internment:

- Setting context through an examination of civil rights;
- Mapping the Japanese immigration experience in the early twentieth century;
- Exploring various perspectives on Japanese Americans from the media following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor;
- Delving into the questions related to the concept of loyalty;

- Identifying the roles and responsibilities associated with redress and reparations; and
- Analyzing diverse perspectives on the Japanese American internment experience.<sup>14</sup>

These components are incorporated into this unit, which investigates the events of this era through reading and responding to the literature, collecting oral histories, participating in a moot court, and reflecting upon a variety of independent writing response strategies. The lessons are outlined in the accompanying tables, yet teachers are encouraged to modify the suggested activities to meet the needs and interests of their own students, and, most significantly, to make the learning relevant to contemporary issues.

### Responding to Literature

The research on teaching history using literature is increasingly abundant and offers many suggestions for guiding students in making connections with fiction, nonfiction, and historical fiction. Students can read about people like themselves, encountering events and experiencing challenges in a variety of sociocultural contexts.

This unit of learning requires students to familiarize themselves with a multitude of events and juxtaposed agendas. Students benefit by participating in open conversations exploring conflicting perspectives that influence society over time. To stimulate dynamic discussions, this unit features two texts: *Korematsu v. United States; Japanese-American Internment Camps* (Karen Alonso) and *Farewell to Manzanar* (Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston).

These two books vary in format and difficulty. The combination of texts offers students occasions to understand vocabulary, delve into contradictory viewpoints, question intricate issues, and initiate comprehension of the complex events of the time, particularly in contrast and comparison to today. Teachers are encouraged to preview texts, select an assortment of literature to cover the span of events, and facilitate a variety of appropriate reading response strategies (see Table 2).

### Collecting Oral Histories

By incorporating oral histories, students discover a place or learn about an event for themselves rather than having teachers tell them about it. As Cynthia Cohen stated,

**Table 1: Enduring Lessons of Justice from the World War II Japanese American Internment**

Unit Components		
Curricular Content	Teaching/Learning Strategies	Assessments
<b>Oral Histories</b>		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Japanese American internment camp internee with photographs (documents)</li> <li>2. World War II Navy veteran with photographs and medals (artifacts)</li> <li>3. Constitutional rights lawyer/expert or historian/expert on World War II</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Prepare appropriate questions</li> <li>2. Practice appropriate interviewing and listening techniques</li> <li>3. Summarize interview information including insights and limitations of personal experiences</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Summarize oral history data and share with class</li> <li>2. Determine which questions and responses provided the most insight</li> <li>3. Reflect upon importance of oral history interviews and primary sources</li> </ol>
<b>Moot Court</b>		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Access information related to the Japanese American internment, the Fred Korematsu court hearings, similar court cases, adult and children's constitutional rights, and moot courts</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Divide into groups and research information relevant to the Korematsu Supreme Court hearing</li> <li>2. Divide into groups and design a moot court on the Korematsu case</li> <li>3. Videotape moot court for class viewing</li> <li>4. Conduct moot court for other classes and/or family members</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Have groups submit five to ten important facts relevant to the case</li> <li>2. Have groups submit a draft of a moot court for Korematsu case</li> <li>3. After reviewing the videotape, groups submit five essential events from the moot court</li> <li>4. After presentation, groups submit five essential events from the moot court</li> </ol>

Oral history is a way of learning about the present and past by listening to the stories people tell. Life stories represent one approach to educating children about their own history and culture—about the lives of people just like and much different from themselves. Oral history projects provide opportunities for children to acquire the skills and sensibilities they need for intercultural competence.<sup>15</sup>

This unit highlights two oral history interviews with different perspectives on this historical era: a Japanese American woman who was detained in an internment camp and a World War II veteran who served on a minesweeper in the South Pacific. Both individuals, now in their early

80s, conveyed clear memories of these times and the impact on their lives.

The Japanese American internment camp detainee spoke of her family’s loyalty to the United States and of their willingness to volunteer for relocation. They wanted to support their country, and at no time engaged in civil disobedience despite the disheartening camp conditions. She emphasized the importance for today’s young people to understand the contextual elements involved in World War II and the internment camps.

The World War II veteran, whose ship hit a mine and sank at the end of a large invasion of the island of Palau, described his experiences and shared his picture and artifact collection; he showed the class his Victory Medal, awarded at the war’s conclusion to all military personnel who served from 1941 to 1946. On one side

of the medal were the words: “Freedom from fear and want: Freedom of speech and religion.”

Students compared and contrasted the experiences of the Japanese American woman and the World War II veteran. Both suffered as a result of having to leave their homes. Yet the veteran was honored for his sacrifice, while the Japanese Americans were humiliated and, in Korematsu’s case, convicted of a crime. Ironically, at the same time as the veteran was fighting overseas to protect U.S. freedom, it was being denied to his fellow citizens back home.

Prior to collecting the oral histories, students should practice crafting and posing appropriate questions that demonstrate cultural sensitivity as well as knowledge of the historical context. An oral history interview depends upon students’ abilities to listen carefully to each question

**Table 2: Enduring Lessons of Justice from the World War II Japanese American Internment**

Curricular Content	Teaching/Learning Strategies	Assessments
<b>Reading Responses</b>		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Compare and contrast life inside and outside a camp</li> <li>2. Note similarities and differences between life then and today regarding our sense of freedom and rights for adults and children</li> <li>3. Graph due process or ways of achieving fairness</li> <li>4. Conduct a survey and chart personal freedoms afforded different members of U.S. society</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Use graphic organizers (i.e., Venn diagrams, outlines, and concept maps) to arrange information</li> <li>2. Record information garnered from sources in reading response journals</li> <li>3. Illustrate due process through the court system and/or other institutions with a flow chart</li> <li>4. Record survey responses to most prized personal freedoms with charts and graphs</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Display and explain information using graphic organizers</li> <li>2. Create and describe story boards showing causes and effects related to World War II</li> <li>3. Design and introduce due process flow chart</li> <li>4. Contribute a selected number of items to a classroom display showing personal freedoms among the class, school, families, etc.</li> </ol>
<b>Writing Responses</b>		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Write a letter of appreciation to each oral history presenter</li> <li>2. Prepare a chronology of events with map sites</li> <li>3. Create a sample journal entry from the perspective of a child in an internment camp</li> <li>4. Compose a two-page paper describing a personal freedom</li> <li>5. Design a medal honoring the selected freedom</li> <li>6. Assemble a portfolio containing products created throughout the entire unit</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Share letters in class and send letters to oral history presenters</li> <li>2. In small groups, explain chronologies and maps</li> <li>3. Combine all sample journal entries and publish a class book</li> <li>4. Read the paper with class members</li> <li>5. Discuss the medal design with class members explaining honored freedoms and selected symbols</li> <li>6. Present portfolio of entire unit to other classes and/or family members</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Design and apply a developmentally appropriate rubric for letter writing</li> <li>2. Assess own chronologies; exchange and assess other students’ chronologies</li> <li>3. Share book with another class</li> <li>4. Create a developmentally appropriate rubric for the two-page paper describing a personal freedom</li> <li>5. Determine criteria for designing a medal and presenting it to the class</li> <li>6. Design and apply an appropriate rubric for the unit portfolio</li> </ol>

and response, and to be able to adapt their questions accordingly, thereby guaranteeing a smooth progression throughout the interview process. It is helpful if students are encouraged to summarize the interview orally and in writing immediately following their data collection.

### A Moot Court

Participating in a moot court enables students to gain a deeper understanding of the legal process by reviewing and reenacting particular cases. Students become familiar with the context and conditions of a case; they also learn specific legal language and procedures, dispelling myths that may have been acquired from television and films. Additionally, their involvement grows when they must dress the parts and are asked to role-play using the requisite dialogue.<sup>16</sup> A variety of valuable guidelines and resources for teaching the U.S. Supreme Court and Law-Related Education are available online.<sup>17</sup>

As a culminating in-class learning experience for this unit, students participate in a moot court based

on *Korematsu v. United States*. The teacher should provide each student with copies of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. In a group discussion, students are asked to consider the experiences of Fred Korematsu or any Japanese American detained in an internment camps as well as that of members of the U.S. armed forces fighting to protect the country. (Students will relate to this assignment easily after reading the literature and collecting several oral histories.)

The teacher should divide the class into cooperative learning groups with three students in each group. Each group elects one member to act as the Supreme Court justice; the other two students act as advisors. One group is selected to narrate and monitor the overall proceedings. (A variation is to select two groups to present oral arguments for and against Korematsu.)

After reviewing their detailed instructions, the narration/monitor group presents the facts and instruct the justices and their advisors to discuss the case among themselves. Each group's task is to identify the

rights and freedoms denied to Korematsu and to discuss whether they believe denial of these rights is justified. The justices make a ruling for or against Fred Korematsu and share their justifications.

The monitors facilitate the debate among the justices. Justices sit in a semi-circle with their respective advisors sitting immediately behind them. All advisors are equipped with small pieces of paper and pencils for writing notes to hand to their justices. Justices are allowed to speak only one at a time and must wait to be called upon by the monitors. Once the debate has concluded, the justices confer among their advisors and render their decisions substantiated by their debate and reasoning. A whole class discussion can center on how the student justices' rulings related to the actual ruling and what might account for any differences. The class also may wish to discuss the case's aftermath and the circumstances that finally brought U.S. leaders to overturn Korematsu's conviction and to honor him, as well as to apologize and make reparations to interned Japanese Americans.

**Table 3: Enduring Lessons of Justice from the World War II Japanese American Internment**

Curricular Content	Teaching/Learning Strategies	Assessments
<b>Cultural Competence</b>		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Show sizes of internment camps and rooms that housed entire families</li> <li>Identify typical items taken to the camps; compare to items one might take today</li> <li>Compare and contrast foods representing various tastes, beliefs, and cultures</li> <li>Show similarities and differences between life in the 1940s and life today, particularly in the areas of technology and entertainment</li> <li>Show similarities and differences in the economics of the 1940s and life today</li> <li>Discuss forms of stereotyping and discrimination evident in the 1940s through today</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create a drawing or model of an internment camp and compare with average living conditions of the time</li> <li>List typical items taken by Japanese Americans to the camps; identify items that might be taken today</li> <li>Describe foods typically eaten by Japanese Americans before and during internment; discuss cultural implications</li> <li>Contrast various forms of transportation, communication, and entertainment of the early 1940s with those of today</li> <li>Construct charts comparing 1940s costs of household goods and services with today's costs</li> <li>Share personal experiences related to stereotyping and discrimination</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Explain drawings or models to students detailing the use of space for various tasks and activities</li> <li>Share lists of items in small discussion groups describing the significance of the various items (both then and today)</li> <li>In a small group discussion, describe a time when food served was in conflict with one's personal or cultural beliefs</li> <li>In class, create a bulletin board of lists and illustrations depicting life in the 1940s</li> <li>Add charts of costs to the bulletin board illustrating life in the 1940s</li> <li>Share findings resulting from discussions about stereotyping and discrimination</li> </ol>

This 1942 photo shows the evacuation of American-born Japanese civilians during World War II, as they leave their homes for internment, in Los Angeles, California. The sidewalks are piled high with indispensable personal possessions, cars and buses are waiting to transport the evacuees to the war relocation camps.



## Conclusion

At the end of her book *Farewell to Manzanar*, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston recognizes the importance of revisiting the camps to make the traces of the past comprehensible.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, investigating World War II and the Japanese American internment camps makes the past more salient for young learners to understand their present and prepare for their future. The injustices of the past are less likely to be repeated by informed, reflective citizens who value constitutional rights and civil liberties for all people. Teachers should model inquiry and sensitivity while delving into lessons that enhance and extend

students' understanding of democratic principles, social justice, participatory citizenship, and constitutional rights. 🌐

### Notes

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2. Karen Alonso, *Korematsu v. United States; Japanese-American Internment Camps* (Springfield, NJ: Enslow Publishers, 1998), 10.
3. Roger Daniels, Sandra C. Taylor, and Harry H. L. Kitano. *Japanese Americans; From Relocation to Redress*; revised edition (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1991), xv-xxi; Michi Nishiura Weglyn, *Years of Infamy; The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1996), 29.
4. Alonso, *Korematsu v. United States; Japanese-American Internment Camps* (Springfield, NJ: Enslow Publishers, 1998), 31.
5. Jim Carnes, "Home Was a Horse Stall," *Teaching Tolerance* 4, no.1 (Spring, 1995), 50-56.
6. Rogers Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 66.
7. Roger Daniels, Sandra C. Taylor, and Harry H. L. Kitano. *Japanese Americans; From Relocation to Redress*; revised edition (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1991), xxi.
8. Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston. *Farewell to Manzanar* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), 149-203.
9. Alonso, *Korematsu v. United States; Japanese-American Internment Camps* (Springfield, NJ: Enslow Publishers, 1998), 11.
10. *Ibid.*, 70-88.
11. *Ibid.*, 95.
12. Eric Rich, "Arab-American Liberties Could Be Casualties of War," *The Hartford Courant Co.* (October 15, 2001) [www.newsday.com/news/nation-world/sns-worldtrade-liberties-hc.story](http://www.newsday.com/news/nation-world/sns-worldtrade-liberties-hc.story)
13. *Ibid.*
14. Gary Mukai, "Teaching about Japanese-American Internment," ED447066.
15. Cynthia Cohen, "Oral Histories," *Cultural Arts Resources for Teachers and Students* 3, (1999): 1, 3-4, 14.
16. Kathy Bell, "Using Moot Courts in the Classroom," *Social Education* 66 no. 1 (January-February 2002): 42-45.
17. Charles F. Williams, "The United States Supreme Court and the World Wide Web," *Social Education* 66, no. 1 (January-February 2002): 51-51.
18. Michael L. Cooper, *Fighting for Honor; Japanese Americans and World War II* (New York: Clarion Books, 2000).

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| <a href="http://americanhistory.si.edu/perfection/union/non-flash/justice_court.html">americanhistory.si.edu/perfection/union/non-flash/justice_court.html</a><br>A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and the U.S. Constitution | <a href="http://www.janm.org/main.htm">www.janm.org/main.htm</a><br>Japanese American National Museum                                    | <a href="http://www.nps.gov/manz/expanded.htm">www.nps.gov/manz/expanded.htm</a><br>Manzanar National Historic Site  |
| <a href="http://www.children-of-the-camps.org">www.children-of-the-camps.org</a><br>Children of the Camps – documentary  | <a href="http://www.lib.utah.edu/spc/photo">www.lib.utah.edu/spc/photo</a><br>Japanese-Americans Internment Camps During World War II    | <a href="http://www.sfmuseum.org/war/evactxt.html">www.sfmuseum.org/war/evactxt.html</a><br>Museum of the City of San Francisco  |
| <a href="http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/anthropology74/">www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/anthropology74/</a><br>Confinement and Ethnicity: Overview of World War II Japanese American Relocation Sites               | <a href="http://www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/aamhtml">www.memory.loc.gov/ammem/aamhtml</a><br>Ansel Adams's photographs: Born Free and Equal | <a href="http://www.uwyo.edu/AmericanHeritageCenterPrimarySourcesintheClassroom;HeartMountainRelocationCenter">www.uwyo.edu/AmericanHeritageCenterPrimarySourcesintheClassroom;HeartMountainRelocationCenter</a> |

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