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Turning One of the Worst Wholesale Violations of Civil Rights into a Teachable Moment about "Equal Justice Under Law"

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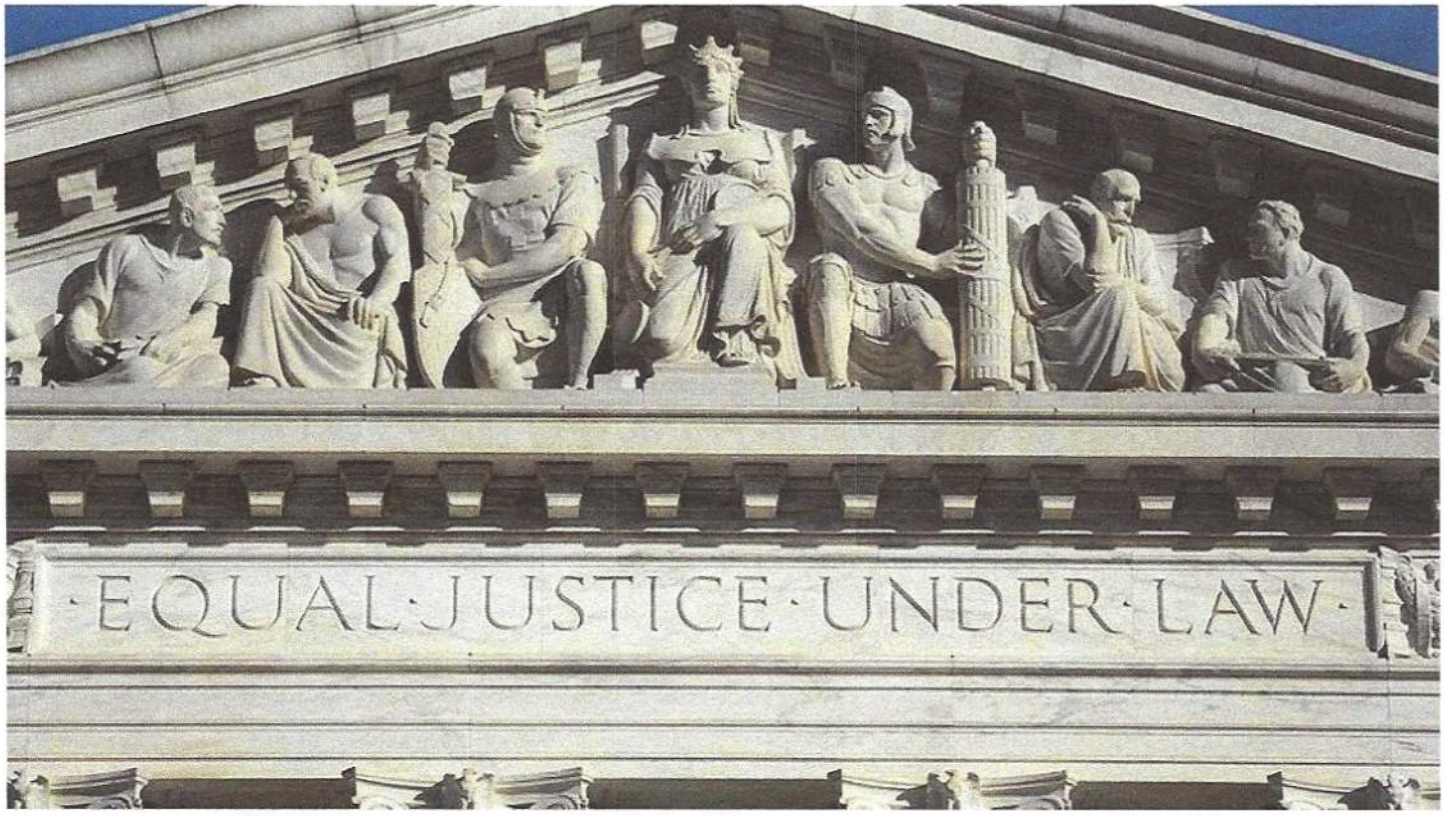

In the 1940s, Americans faced issues related to xenophobia, immigration, the exclusion and detention of individuals in camps, constitutional protections, race relations, and civil liberties.

Today, in the year 2025, Americans are dealing with those same exact issues.

There are many parallels between the tensions and issues of the 1940s and 2025, and it is vital that America remember this history and learn its lessons. Principal among them is to preserve our nation's commitment to the U.S. Constitution and the principle of "equal justice under law."

The year 2025 marks 80 years since Japanese Americans wrongfully incarcerated during World War II (WWII) were allowed in 1945 to return to their former hometowns on the West Coast. In releasing the individuals, the government provided each person with $25 and a one-way train ticket home.

The 80th anniversary of this event can be used as a teachable moment in conjunction with a noteworthy Harvard teaching case and a timely national poll about Americans' views on the incarceration.

Closing of the Jerome Concentration Camp, Denson, Arkansas. Residents, carrying their hand luggage, wait at the chair car entrance as a War Relocation Authority official calls names from the list. Photo by Hikaru Iwasaki. Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration, Densho Digital Repository, ddr-densho-37-616.

Teaching case on Japanese American redress

The year 2025 marks another milestone—the 35th anniversary since the Harvard Kennedy School (HKS) published a redress teaching case in 1990 entitled "Against All Odds: The Campaign in Congress for Japanese American Redress."[1]

I pitched the idea for this case to HKS staff in 1989 when I was a Master in Public Policy (MPP) student there. HKS said yes, and I co-authored it with Esther Scott, a HKS case writer.

The case chronicles the campaign that led the United States Congress and President Ronald Reagan to apologize and provide redress and reparations to the Japanese American community.

President Ronald Reagan signs the Civil Liberties Act of 1988. Courtesy of the Kinoshita Family Collection, Densho Digital Repository, ddr-densho-10-6.

The case is about advocacy, lobbying, coalition building, the legislative process, ethnic minority challenges, civil rights, the importance of the U.S. Constitution, and more. Universities are now educating students about this part of American history, imparting vital lessons, and enlightening students about how most of America ultimately recognized how wrong the incarceration was.

The teaching case is still being used at the HKS and has been used at a number of other schools, including the following partial list: University of Oxford (Blavatnik School of Government), City University of New York – Baruch College, Duke University, Georgetown University, National University of Singapore, New York University Hospital – Manhattan, UCLA, University of Chicago, Upper Iowa University, New York University School of Law, Rutgers University, California State University System, Evergreen State College, and the University of Tennessee.

Mark A. Peterson, professor of public policy, UCLA, who has long assigned the case in class, said, "I have used the case most enthusiastically for many years. Keeping these memories alive is essential to help ensure that no group is ever subject to that kind of unconstitutional abuse."

Recent national poll about the incarceration

In addition to the 35th anniversary of the teaching case, a YouGov national poll was conducted in 2025 that reveals Americans' views about the WWII incarceration of Japanese Americans.[2]

This is the first time such a poll has been completed in 83 years. The poll was led by Kathy Frankovic, a veteran survey professional (e.g., she served as director of surveys for CBS News for over 30 years).

The only other national poll on this subject was conducted by NORC in 1942 shortly after the incarceration began.

Provocative findings of the 2025 YouGov poll include:

- The evolution on Americans' attitudes nationally over eight decades, which varies by demographics
- 33% of Americans today do not know that most of the incarcerated Japanese were U.S. citizens
- By over a 2-to-1 margin, Democrats view the incarceration as shameful versus Republicans (57% versus 22%)
- While many Americans support reparations for Japanese Americans, fewer support the idea of reparations for Black descendants of slaves

There are many more provocative findings that shed light on the sources and nuances of people's views.The poll results will become part of the historical record on the WWII incarceration of Japanese Americans. The survey on public attitudes will be referred to for all time.

Parallels between then and now

It's disturbing to see the parallels between the 1940s and today around xenophobia, immigration, the exclusion and detention of individuals in camps, constitutional protections, race relations, and civil liberties.

It is vital that America remember history and learn its lessons. We can turn one of the worst wholesale violations of civil rights into a teachable moment.

So, communicate to others the significance of the 80th anniversary of the release of incarcerated Japanese Americans. Read the Harvard teaching case and encourage teachers that you know to use it in their classes. Finally, review the YouGov poll and communicate its findings when apt in your conversations with peers and others.

By collectively engaging in these types of communication, we can help ensure that such an injustice never happens again to any minority or marginalized group. We can help ensure that the United States preserves its commitment to the U.S. Constitution and the principle of "equal justice under law."

Notes:

1. John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, "Against All Odds: The Campaign in Congress for Japanese American Redress, C16-90-1006.0," (January 1, 1990)

2. Kathy Frankovic, "How American opinion has changed since World War II about the incarceration of U.S. residents of Japanese ancestry," *YouGov*, (April 8, 2025); poll details can be found here.

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civil rights equality justice law social justice

About the Author

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Calvin Naito is a native of Los Angeles who still lives there, and he is a strategic communications professional. He is the principal of Calvin Naito Enterprises, a multiple award-winning independent communications consulting firm. His work over his career has been honored forty-five times. More information about him can be found online at www.CalvinNaito.com.

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