

SERVICE TO DEMOCRACY



Fred Korematsu, Gordon Hirabayashi, Michi Weglyn, William Hohri, Aiko Herzig Yoshinaga, and Harry Ueno in front of the Supreme Court in Washington, DC, on April 20, 1987, the day the court held a hearing on the National Council on Japanese American Redress class action lawsuit. Photo by Jack Herzig.

8 Since the Japanese American National Museum was first incorporated in 1985, it has conscientiously preserved and shared the story of people of Japanese ancestry in America as an integral component of the history of the United States. After all, Japanese Americans as a group have always fought for their place in American society, despite decades of institutional discrimination and widespread societal bias against them. From the earliest Issei immigrant workers who demanded fair wages and conditions to the three Nisei

coram nobis plaintiffs who asserted their rights as citizens during World War II to the campaign for redress in the 1980s, Japanese Americans have historically engaged the tools of democracy to better themselves and their country.

In a simple and powerful way, the Japanese American story illustrates both the pitfalls and virtues of American democracy. In documenting Japanese American history from this perspective, the museum has encapsulated the inherent tension within the American republic through its exhibitions, public programs,

video documentaries, national conferences, and collaborative projects. As the museum has written in support of its mission, “We believe in the importance of remembering our history to better guard against the prejudice that threatens liberty and equality in a democratic society. We believe that our work will transform lives, create a more just America and, ultimately, a better world.”

In keeping with that sentiment, the 2018 Japanese American National Museum Gala Dinner, *Service to Democracy*, honors



Hawaii's United States Senator Mazie K. Hirono and Nisei activist Aiko Herzig Yoshinaga, each with its Award of Excellence. Both embody the spirit and determination that have been fundamental in the Japanese American community's fight for social justice.

Senator Hirono, born in Japan, immigrated to Hawaii when she was eight with her mother and brothers. Similar to the first Issei, Hirono and her family left a difficult life in Fukushima for an uncertain but promising future in the United States. "Like many immigrants," Senator Hirono recalled, "our new life was not easy. We didn't have much, but we persevered." Her mother worked low-paying jobs and ensured that her children could take advantage of the educational opportunities in Hawaii. During her time at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, Hirono became involved in protesting the Vietnam War, which "opened [her] eyes to a life in public service and advocacy."

That would eventually lead her "to elected office as a way of being of service." Hirono served in Hawaii's House of Representatives and as Hawaii's Lieutenant Governor. She was elected to the US House of Representatives in



Hirono as a child with her family in Fukushima, Japan. L to R: Mazie, her mother holding brother Wayne, and brother Roy. Photo courtesy of Sen. Hirono.

2006 and was elected to the United States Senate in 2012. She was the first Asian American woman elected to the Senate and the first woman to represent Hawaii in the Senate.

Herzig Yoshinaga has been recognized as a hero of the successful redress campaign that culminated in the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988. This act provided an official government apology and monetary compensation to victims of the wartime forced removal and incarceration of West Coast residents of Japanese ancestry. A Nisei born in Sacramento, she spent countless hours researching at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), where she found the so-called "smoking gun" document, the tenth and only surviving copy of the original

printing of General John DeWitt's Final Report from the Fourth Western Defense Command. This original copy conclusively proved that the government had suppressed information about the absence of military necessity that was the pretext for the forced removal and mass incarceration of thousands of innocent people of Japanese ancestry.

In particular, Herzig Yoshinaga's discovery exposed that wartime US Solicitor General Charles Fahy had suppressed certain government reports when he argued to uphold the government's convictions of Fred Korematsu, Minoru Yasui, and Gordon Hirabayashi before the Supreme Court. Those suppressed reports refuted



DeWitt's false claims of spying by Japanese Americans and his argument that all persons of Japanese ancestry should be viewed as potentially subversive. The recovery of the "smoking gun" led to the *coram nobis* court challenges by Korematsu, Yasui, and Hirabayashi, the class action lawsuit by the National Council for Japanese American Redress (NCJAR), and the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC) report that condemned the government's actions. All of these proceedings enabled the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988.

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The role of institutions like JANM is to provide a documented foundation of Japanese American history. Given the government's own role in obscuring the truth of the forced removal and mass incarceration of Japanese Americans, few people who lived through the war fully understood what had actually happened. Just as important, the redress movement could not have succeeded without legal documentation. As Herzig Yoshinaga recalled, "There was no way we could do [redress] before [the 1980s]. We didn't have the facts to begin with."

Historians argue that to properly understand what



Curator Akemi Kikumura (at right) shows visitors elements of the *Issei Pioneers: Hawaii and the Mainland, 1885-1924* exhibition.

happened to Japanese Americans during the war, one would first need to learn about what had happened to the Issei. In 1992, JANM premiered its inaugural exhibition, *Issei Pioneers: Hawaii and the Mainland, 1885-1924*, curated by Dr. Akemi Kikumura. The founders of the museum wanted to pay tribute to the immigrant generation, but the exhibition also emphasized the determination of the Issei in fighting against institutional discrimination in a prejudicial climate.

As scholar Gary Okihiro wrote, "The *issei*, however, were not merely 'docile and obedient,' but challenged racism and exploitation through the courts asserting their human dignity and thereby helping to democratize America." As early

as 1894, they challenged their exclusion from naturalization in court. The Issei formed a number of associations to try to overturn alien land laws and would join together with other workers to strike for better wages. If they didn't succeed for themselves, the exhibition made clear, the Issei fought for the future of their children and grandchildren.

More than just redress, Herzig Yoshinaga's contributions changed the way many of the former inmates looked at their own wartime experiences. She inspired many researchers and scholars to dig deeper into the Japanese American World War II experience. JANM produced its first and most important look at this



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JANM Trustee Frank Sogi (left) and Joe Imai at the America's Concentration Camps: Remembering the Japanese American Experience exhibition.

crucial chapter of US history in 1994. That exhibition, curated by Karen Ishizuka, featured maps of all the major camps, restored home movie footage, and a fragment of an original barracks building recovered from the Heart Mountain, Wyoming, site.

Ishizuka wanted to title the exhibition, *America's Concentration Camps: Remembering the Japanese American Experience*. Considerable debate within the museum ensued over the use of "concentration camps," since the term often evoked comparisons to the Holocaust. Ishizuka spoke to many former inmates on the issue of terminology. Some were ambivalent, while others wanted to disregard the government's official language. It was Herzig

Yoshinaga, among others, who saw things clearly.

"During the course of my work as a CWRIC researcher," she recalled, "I learned that 'relocation center,' 'non-alien,' and 'evacuation' were only a few of many euphemisms that were deliberately used to obscure and conceal what was done to American citizens under the fraudulent rationale of 'military necessity.'" *America's Concentration Camps* became the title. Thousands toured the exhibition and for some Japanese American families, it was the first time they had a serious discussion about the war with a clearer understanding that the government had violated the Constitution in its biased treatment of Japanese Americans.

Mazie Hirono and Aiko Herzig Yoshinaga share a common trait with many other Japanese Americans: an abiding faith in American democracy. As a US Senator from Hawaii, Hirono follows in the footsteps of World War II veterans Daniel Inouye and Spark Matsunaga. Both chose careers as elected public servants beginning in the 1950s as a way to secure their community's place in America.

Former Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta, the Chairman of the Board of Trustees for JANM, agrees with the importance of that

goal. Mineta cites an Issei farmer named I.K. Ishimatsu, who "always said that one of the reasons why we were evacuated and interned was because we had no connection to the political world." Ishimatsu would solicit small donations from the San Jose community in order "to send two people to the Democratic Jackson Day dinner or two people to the Republican Party Lincoln dinner, just to get exposure of young Japanese Americans into political connections."

Senator Inouye, who served as the Chair of the JANM's Board of Governors for many years, strongly pushed the ideals of American democracy through the museum. In 2005, the museum's initiative, the National Center for the

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Senator Daniel Inouye speaks as the National Center for the Preservation of Democracy prepares to open. Photo by Norman Sugimoto.

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Students visiting Fighting for Democracy: Who is the “We” in “We, the People?” soon after its opening in 2005.

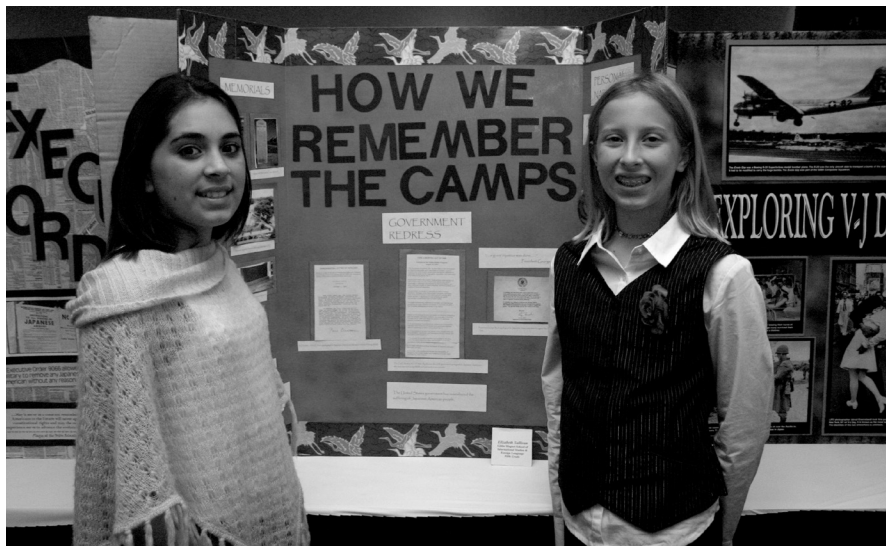
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Preservation of Democracy (NCPD), opened the Tateuchi Democracy Forum and unveiled the exhibition, *Fighting for Democracy: Who is the “We” in “We, the People?”* That exhibition highlighted the contributions of seven diverse individuals who served during World War II while their communities were still denied equality domestically. When President Truman discovered that outstanding units like the 442nd Regimental Combat Team/100th Infantry Battalion, Tuskegee Airmen, and Navaho Code Talkers were denied equal treatment upon their return home, he desegregated the Army. Senator Inouye hoped that when students learned these stories, they would be inspired to become more civically engaged as adults when they realized that constructive change was possible through the democratic process.

Another JANM initiative that promoted important aspects of democracy was the organization of national conferences. Beginning in 2001 in Los Angeles with the “All Camps Summit: Ensuring the Legacy” that marked the 60th anniversary of Executive Order 9066, the museum partnered with foundations, corporate sponsors, educational

institutions, and regional organizations for these major events. The other gatherings were located in Little Rock (“Camp Connections: A Conversation about Civil Rights and Social Justice in Arkansas,” 2004), Denver (“Whose America? Who’s American? Diversity, Civil Liberties & Social Justice,” 2008), and Seattle (“Speaking Up! Democracy, Justice, Dignity,” 2013). All four conferences brought together historians, educators, students, and individuals who lived through World War II for in-depth presentations and discussions on the Japanese American experience and its implications to the Constitution in the 21st Century. As the titles of the conferences emphasized, participants were encouraged to discuss, question, and speak out on current issues armed with an insightful historical perspective.

JANM itself has spoken out as well in recent years. In 1998, when the *America’s*



Local students displayed their projects at the 2004 “Camp Connections: A Conversation about Civil Rights and Social Justice in Arkansas” national conference in Little Rock, AR. Photo by Tracy Kumono.



The entrance of Japanese American veterans of all wars kicked off the Opening General Session at the 2013 national conference in Seattle, titled "Speaking Up! Democracy, Justice, Dignity." Photo by Tracy Kumono.

Concentration Camps

exhibition was scheduled for installation at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, some within the National Parks Service and the New York Jewish community objected to the show's title. Though the various parties did not agree completely, JANM and the American Jewish Committee released a joint statement that summarized the various applications of the term "concentration camp." It distinguished between the US concentration camps and those in Nazi Germany and concluded, "Despite differences, all had one thing in common: the people in power

removed a minority group from the general population and the rest of society let it happen."

Significantly, after the 9/11 tragedies, JANM released another statement that compared the existing situation to 1942 after the Pearl Harbor attack. Noting that both events were followed by strong emotions, including anger, hate, vengeance, and patriotism, the museum cautioned against repeating the mistakes made by the government during World War II. Instead, the museum highlighted those "who refused to turn against their friends and neighbors. There were individuals who proved to be true defenders of democracy.

As we struggle with the natural desire to do 'something' in response to the horrific acts of destruction on our soil, let us remember that as Americans—living in one of the few true democracies in the world—we have a choice. Let us choose to learn from America's history and respond with civility and dignity at this very difficult time."

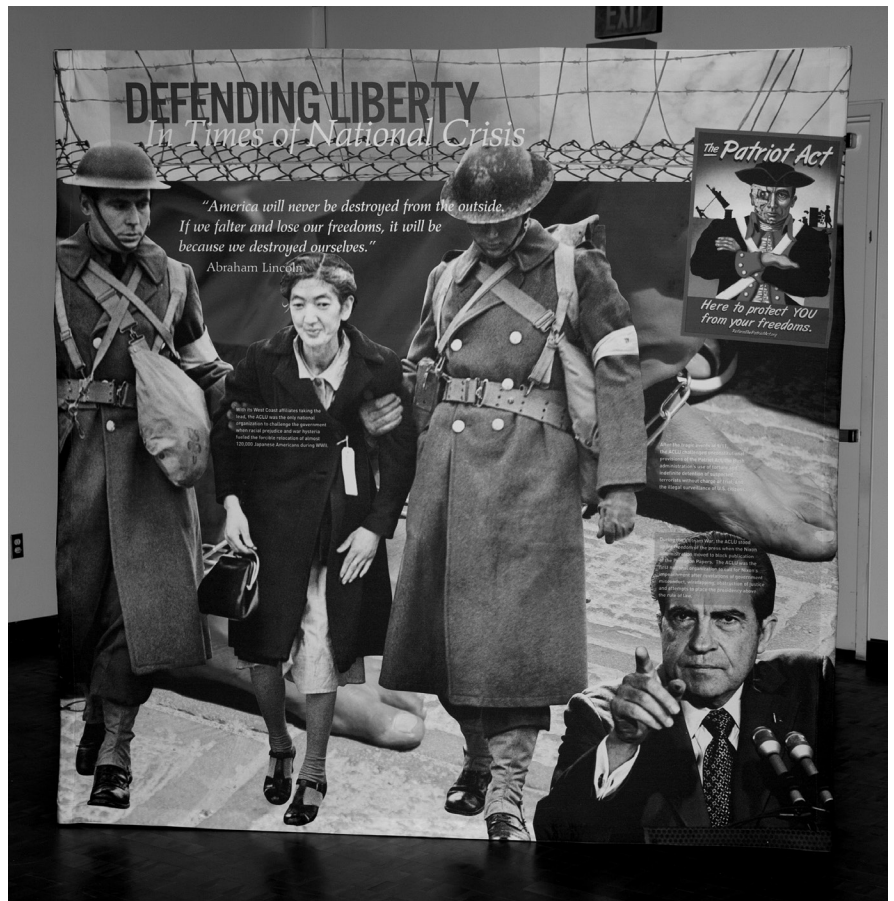
Since the 2016 election, with a growing amount of contentious and even hateful rhetoric, the museum has sought to inject an authentic historical viewpoint into the dialogue. When some commentators suggested that people of



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the Muslim faith should be imprisoned en masse, JANM publicly objected. “The Japanese American National Museum will continue to speak out against bigoted public discourse that harkens back to the tragic incarceration of people of Japanese ancestry during World War II,” stated Ann Burroughs, the museum’s President and CEO. “Racist remarks that suggest incarceration camps should be implemented for people of the Muslim faith are abhorrent and contrary to the fundamental values of this museum and this nation.”

In 2017, the museum premiered its *Instructions to All Persons: Reflections on Executive Order 9066* exhibition on the 75th anniversary of its signing into law in 1942. As with so much of the museum programming, this exhibition, featuring original documents from the National Archives never before displayed in the Western United States, engaged visitors to better understand how the



From the ACLU's 90th anniversary exhibition titled *No Victory Ever Stays Won*. Photo by Richard Murakami

Japanese American World War II experience continues to be relevant today. Said President and CEO Burroughs, “This is an exhibition that everyone who cares about civil rights, democracy, and justice needs to see.”

In 2010, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) installed its 90th anniversary show at JANM with the title, *No Victory Ever Stays Won*. Tonight’s Gala

Dinner reinforces the Japanese American National Museum’s dedication to American democracy and its need for constant vigilance.

This essay was authored by Chris Komai, who worked at the Japanese American National Museum from 1991 to 2012.

