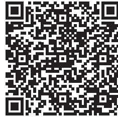
Module 6
Redress and Solidarity

By Stan Yogi



Scan to read chapter online

Supporting Questions

What were the various strategies to win redress and reparations?

What lessons can we learn from those strategies?

How have Japanese Americans allied with other groups targeted during a time of crisis or unrest?

1. How was the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans possible?

In this module, we will discover how Japanese Americans built a multiracial movement to secure an apology and monetary redress from the United States government. You will also learn about Japanese Americans' contemporary support of other groups suffering from current and historical government policies based on race, religious beliefs, and immigration status.

2. The Long Silence

Many Nisei whom the government had imprisoned during World War II did not tell their Sansei (third-generation Japanese American) children about their incarceration. If Nisei mentioned spending time in "camps," they did not explain that these were prison camps, not summer camps. Consequently, many Sansei did not learn until high school or college that the federal government had imprisoned their parents and grandparents.

When they came of age and participated in the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements from the 1950s to the 1970s, many Sansei asked their elders about what they experienced during World War II. But most Nisei offered evasive or vague responses often focused on the superficial aspects of camp life, rather than the violations of their constitutional rights. For most Nisei and Issei, revisiting the forced uprooting from their homes was too emotionally painful.

3. Righting a Wrong

In 1970 Nisei activist Edison Uno advocated at the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) national convention that Japanese Americans demand reparations from the US government for their unjust imprisonment. But the prospect of receiving monetary redress seemed like a pipe dream at the time. Few Japanese Americans talked openly about their wartime incarceration, even within their families. Public knowledge about the mass imprisonment of Japanese Americans was virtually non-existent. Nevertheless, support for reparations grew over many years, first within the Japanese American community and then among allies.

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s had raised national awareness of government-enforced anti-Black racism. The Black Power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s inspired young Asian Americans to develop pride in their ethnic heritage. Both movements set contexts for Japanese Americans to demand that the government acknowledge and take responsibility for its racist policies targeting them during World War II.

In the late 1970s, the JACL, following the advice of Japanese American members of Congress, lobbied for a federal commission to study the causes and consequences of the wartime incarceration of Japanese Americans, and to recommend remedies. In 1980 President Jimmy Carter approved legislation creating that body, the **Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians,** which held hearings in ten cities.

A grassroots group of activists formed the **National Coalition for Redress/Reparations (NCRR)** and ensured that former inmates, not just those considered community leaders, would testify before the commission. It was challenging to convince people to testify, because

most Nisei and Issei found it too painful to speak, even privately, about the war years. But many did testify, and their testimonies were cathartic—for those who shared their memories and emotions, as well as for the larger Japanese American community.

In 1982 the federal commission issued a report titled **Personal Justice Denied,** concluding that the wartime incarceration was the result not of "military necessity," as the government argued at the time, but of racism, wartime hysteria, and a failure of political leadership. The commission recommended monetary reparations and a formal government apology to all Japanese Americans who had been incarcerated.

The commission's recommendations had to be translated into law to take effect. Over nearly a decade, hundreds of Japanese Americans and their allies of all races educated members of Congress about the wartime incarceration of Japanese Americans and advocated with federal legislators to support redress. Min Yasui quit his job with the Denver Commission on Human Relations and devoted himself to speaking around the country about the redress campaign.

Finally on August 10, 1988, President Ronald Reagan approved the **Civil Liberties Act of 1988,** authorizing a formal government apology to Japanese Americans who had been wrongfully incarcerated during World War II, and payments of twenty thousand dollars to each survivor.

At the same time that JACL, NCRR, and others pursued a legislative route to redress, another group, the **National Council for Japanese American Redress (NCJAR),** pursued a judicial remedy by filing a class action lawsuit on behalf of Japanese Americans who had been incarcerated during World War II. A federal court dismissed the lawsuit, and the Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal, ending the case. NCJAR's efforts nevertheless raised awareness among the general public about the constitutional violations and property losses that Japanese American suffered during the war.

4. Reopening Cases

As the **redress movement** was gaining momentum, Min Yasui, Gordon Hirabayashi, and Fred Korematsu challenged their wartime criminal convictions. Their original convictions took place nearly forty years earlier, for violating curfew and mass exclusion orders imposed on Japanese Americans. They based their lawsuits on recently discovered official documents proving that, during World War II, government attorneys had intentionally suppressed evidence of Japanese American loyalty to the US. They also misled the Supreme Court into

believing there was a military need to impose a curfew on Japanese Americans and to force them from their West Coast homes.

In the 1980s federal judges overturned the criminal convictions of all three men.

5. Redress for Japanese Latin Americans

As part of a coordinated strategy under the guise of Western Hemisphere security, thirteen Latin American countries deported more than two thousand Japanese Latin Americans during World War II and sent them to the United States, where the government incarcerated them in WRA camps. The US government then exchanged some of these Japanese Latin Americans for Americans held captive in Asia by the Japanese.

After the war, US officials deported more than nine hundred Japanese Latin Americans remaining in the United States to a war-devastated Japan. Several hundred stayed and eventually obtained US citizenship. They were largely excluded from the government apology and monetary payments authorized by the Civil Liberties Act of 1988.

Japanese Latin Americans filed a lawsuit in 1996 to obtain reparations. To resolve the litigation, the US government agreed to apologize to Japanese Latin American incarcerees and provide them five thousand dollars each. Most Japanese Latin Americans accepted the settlement. But a handful did not. They filed four lawsuits and pursued federal legislation to obtain redress equivalent to the twenty thousand dollars that Japanese Americans received. All of those efforts were unsuccessful, but advocacy groups today continue to call for the government to recognize and compensate the detained Japanese Latin Americans.

6. Remembering Incarceration Spurs Solidarity

Many Japanese Americans today educate people about the importance of civil liberties, especially for groups targeted during times of crisis.

Remembering the discrimination that they and their families experienced—and the allyship that contributed to the success of the redress movement—many Japanese Americans have connected their community's history with the prejudice and hatred directed at other groups, including Muslims, immigrants, and asylum seekers.

Japanese Americans were some of the first to speak out in support of Muslim, Arab, and South Asian communities confronting violence, hatred, and government scrutiny after terrorists attacked the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Virginia on September 11, 2001. The JACL issued a press release on September 12, 2001, warning the government not to forfeit civil liberties and denouncing discrimination against Arab Americans and Muslims.

In 2003 Fred Korematsu submitted a "friend of the court" brief to the Supreme Court on behalf of hundreds of Muslim, Arab, and South Asian men whom the government was detaining indefinitely without charges, fair hearings, and access to lawyers.

Cross-community coalitions developed among Muslim and Japanese American organizations. Their intercommunity activities include Muslims participating in the annual pilgrimage to the site of the Manzanar concentration camp and Japanese Americans participating in community iftars, the meal Muslims eat to break the daily fast during the holy month of Ramadan.

In 2019 the Trump administration detained at a facility in Dilley, Texas, hundreds of Central American mothers and children seeking asylum. That detention center was forty miles from Crystal City, the site of a camp where the government had imprisoned Japanese and German immigrants and their families during World War II. The Crystal City camp also housed Japanese Latin Americans who had been deported from their home countries.

In response, Japanese Americans organized a protest at the Dilley detention center. Many of the protesters had been incarcerated as children at the Crystal City camp or were their descendants. They issued a nation-wide call among Japanese American civil rights and community groups to fold ten thousand origami cranes to be hung on the fences surrounding the Dilley facility. By the time of the protest, they received thirty thousand origami cranes from around the country. The individuals who organized the protest called their group Tsuru for

Solidarity, as “tsuru” means “crane” in Japanese.

Many Japanese Americans acknowledge that the redress movement would not have been successful without the support of Black political leaders and the civil rights groundwork laid, at great sacrifice, by Black activists. Since Japanese Americans are the only ethnic group to receive an apology and reparations from the federal government, some Japanese Americans believe they have a moral imperative to support reparations to Black people for slavery. Japanese Americans have been at the forefront of supporting House Resolution 40 (H.R. 40) to establish a federal commission, like the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, to study slavery and discrimination against African Americans, and to make recommendations for remedies.

Informed by knowledge of their families’ and community’s history, Japanese Americans continue to speak out for the rights of people that the US government targets because of their religious beliefs, ethnic backgrounds, or immigration status. In doing so, they are demonstrating the kind of support they wished their families had received during World War II. From within the Japanese American community and beyond, a multiracial coalition of Americans is carrying on the legacy of activism in the fight for justice, redress, and reparations.