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Korematsu v. United States: "Wrong the Day it was Decided"

An interview with Dr. Karen Korematsu

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"*Korematsu [v. United States]* was gravely wrong the day it was decided, and has been overruled in the court of history, and—to be clear—has no place in law under the Constitution."

Chief Justice John Roberts, from Trump v. Hawaii (2018)

Figure 1: Photo credit: *Spectrum*

On January 5, 2022, I interviewed Dr. Karen Korematsu about her educational advocacy work for The Fred T. Korematsu Institute *(KI) in San Francisco which is dedicated to the memory of her father, Fred T. Korematsu. The Institute primarily focuses on raising awareness in K-12 schools about the unconstitutional incarceration of Japanese Americans by the United States during World War II,*

and Fred Korematsu's own experience of incarceration and the legal battles he fought to challenge it. The Institute also highlights how this relates to issues in Asian American history and current civil rights challenges. Dr. Korematsu is the founder and executive director of the Institute.

Andrew Majeske: I was recently reminded of the fraught history of Asian Americans, and particularly Japanese Americans, when last fall I visited for the first time the Manzanar National Historic Site in California's remote Owens Valley, on the Eastern side of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Manzanar is the only one of the incarceration sites for Japanese Americans during WWII that has achieved National Historic Site status; your own parents were sent to the Topaz concentration camp. It was in the wake of this visit that I sought out this interview with you, and I would like to ask you if you first could comment upon the hardships suffered by Asian American groups, especially in the wake of President Trump's election in 2016.

Figure 2: *Photo by Andrew Majeske*

Figure 3: Photo from Topaz Museum

Karen Korematsu: Well, it didn't begin with Trump. Asian Americans have been marginalized since before the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Most people don't know this because they never learned about it in their schooling, or they have forgotten about it. Therefore, the Korematsu Institute has been active in supporting efforts to have state school systems adopt Ethnic Studies curricula. This is especially important in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, not just because of the way the pandemic has been politicized, but also because of all the misinformation that spreads on social media and by word of mouth. President Trump's attitude and rhetoric were especially problematic in further marginalizing already marginalized groups, and stoking violence towards Asian Americans with his comments such as describing COVID-19 as the "kung flu."

AM: Were Ethnic Studies part of the curriculum when you attended school in California?

KK: No, I first learned about Asian American culture and history in an educational setting wasn't in my own school—there was nothing remotely like Ethnic Studies in the K-12 curriculum back then. The first time I heard the term Asian American was when my father was asked to speak at an Asian American Studies class at UC Berkeley in 1969. The education we now associate with Ethnic Studies did not occur in K-12, or even in the fixed curricula at colleges and universities back then. There were no departments devoted to Ethnic Studies or Asian American Studies in higher education until 1969. The first Ethnic Studies Department in the United States started at San Francisco State University, in response to the 1968-1969 student strikes and demonstrations there. And while the trend to add Ethnic Studies and other departments specializing in the study of other cultures has steadily grown at US colleges and universities, there has been much less movement in the direction in K-12.

Figure 4: A Black Students Union leader addresses a crowd of demonstrators in December 1968. Photo credit, AP

AM: What do you propose for the K-12 curriculum?

KK: Well, of course in K-12 there is a need to emphasize STEM subjects, but I would argue that it is also critically important to understand the real history of this country. How else are we all going to come together to decide the best way to move forward? The story of the Japanese American Incarceration during World War II, of which my father's story is a part, is not just a Japanese American story, or only a West Coast story; it's an American story. Beginning well before the pandemic I was traveling over 90,000 miles a year, speaking all over the United States to organizations, law schools, universities, and of course to supervisors and administrators who set up and implement K-12 social studies curricula in the various states, to educate and spread this message.

AM: Dr. Korematsu, you suggested earlier that my use of "internment" was incorrect, and that I should instead use the term "incarceration," both because that is more accurate, and because using the correct term has an educational component. Can you explain a bit more about that?

KK: Yes, the words are important. "Internment" is a euphemism. Japanese Americans were incarcerated--they were forced into prison camps surrounded by barbed wire with guards in towers on the perimeters. These camps should not be called "internment" camps; they need be called what they really were, "concentration" camps—that is the accurate description. Many people I have met who grew up on the East Coast, and whose education skimmed over or skipped over this lurid piece of American history, don't really understand what occurred, and this is partly because the words obscure the reality of what happened.

AM: When I visited Germany in 2017, I learned that part of the German K-12 curriculum included a mandatory visit to one of the World War II concentration camps. Do you think the same sort of mandatory visit could become part of the curriculum for K-12 here in California, for instance? Maybe a mandatory visit to Manzanar could replace what has been the standard "Missions" project in most California schools. Many school districts are already moving away from this project, and I think UC Davis has proposed a replacement project geared towards teaching the history of California's indigenous peoples. Maybe students could camp at Manzanar, or better yet, stay in barracks-style housing similar to what was used for the incarcerated Japanese Americans.Then, while they experience first-hand such living conditions, they could learn about the site, its history, and the history of the Japanese Americans who were incarcerated there.

KK: That's a great idea. We need more people like you to come up with these ideas and take charge. I remember as a fifth grader making a model of one of the California Missions out of matchboxes, and you mentioned to me the Sacramento schools going to residential science camps that include panning for gold as part of a Gold Rush unit. And yes, a visit to Manzanar would be preferable in my opinion. But since both the Mission system and the Gold Rush were devastating to the indigenous peoples of California, a project or residential camp addressing this would be great too.

I fear the logistics of trying to set up some type of on-site camp at Manzanar would be daunting. I know that LA County Unified School District tries to have its students visit Manzanar because they are relatively close. But even for them, the trip is, at best, 3.5 hours one way, and that is if they don't hit traffic! That, of course, is a big problem with raising public awareness about these camps. They were purposely built in remote areas, and often on American tribal lands. That is another significant story of abuse and discrimination of course, but the discrimination against indigenous peoples overlaps here with the racism against Japanese Americans. There is a dire need for Ethnic Studies in K-12 school curriculums so that students can learn about this history and these connections.

AM: So, the locations of these concentration camps present a real challenge.

KK. Not only their location, but also their official recognition. Only a few of the sites are designated as National Historic Landmarks. We're working on having them all so designated, but Manzanar didn't become a National Historic Site until 1992. The challenge is that it takes time to build momentum for these recognitions. The first Manzanar pilgrimage didn't take place until 1969. So directly addressing the injustices of the incarceration system didn't really begin as a grassroots effort until the next generation, headed by the sons and daughters of those who were incarcerated. Former CA State Assemblyman Warren Furutani was still a student when he attended the first Manzanar pilgrimage, and by the next year, in 1970, he and Sue Kunitomi Embrey helped to create the Manzanar Committee, which ultimately pushed through the Manzanar Historic Site designation.

Being able to achieve that designation was so important in terms of acquiring additional resources to preserve and restore the site. Had they opened Manzanar Visitor Center and Block 14 Exhibits back up when you visited? I know it had been closed because of Covid-19.

Figure 5: *Manzanar graveyard.*
Photo by Andrew Majeske

AM: Yes, they were open, and we were very impressed with the Visitor Center's extensive and informative displays, as well as with the displays in the Block 14 barracks.

KK: The barracks that have been set up at Manzanar indicate what the living quarters and mess hall were like. These are powerful reminders of how inhumanely the Japanese Americans were treated. Keep in mind, these reconstructions are of much higher quality than the original barracks, especially in the first year. The construction of the barracks was still underway when Japanese Americans started arriving. The current reconstructed barracks now on display don't show the gaps between floorboards in the original barracks, or the tarpaper on the walls. The original barracks buildings were not insulated, and there was no central heating—you can see in the Block 14 reconstructions what the wood-burning stoves looked like—they provided the only heat. It is also important to remember that the food supply in the camps was inconsistent and of poor quality, and the food that was served initially was very different from the typical Japanese American diet at

the time. Also, the camps had big issues with hygiene; in the beginning there were dysentery outbreaks. The blowing sand at the concentration camps like Manzanar permeated everywhere—it would blow up into the barracks from the gaps in the floorboards, and it coated everything, including the food.

AM: What happened to the Japanese Americans and their belongings after they were forced to leave their homes and get bussed to the camps?

KK: They lost their homes, they lost their jobs, they lost their businesses and properties. They could only bring with them "what they could carry" in two hands. They lost their entire way of life. And there was no compensation for what they lost, or for the time they were incarcerated. Forty-six years later, the US Government officially apologized with President Reagan's signing of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988.

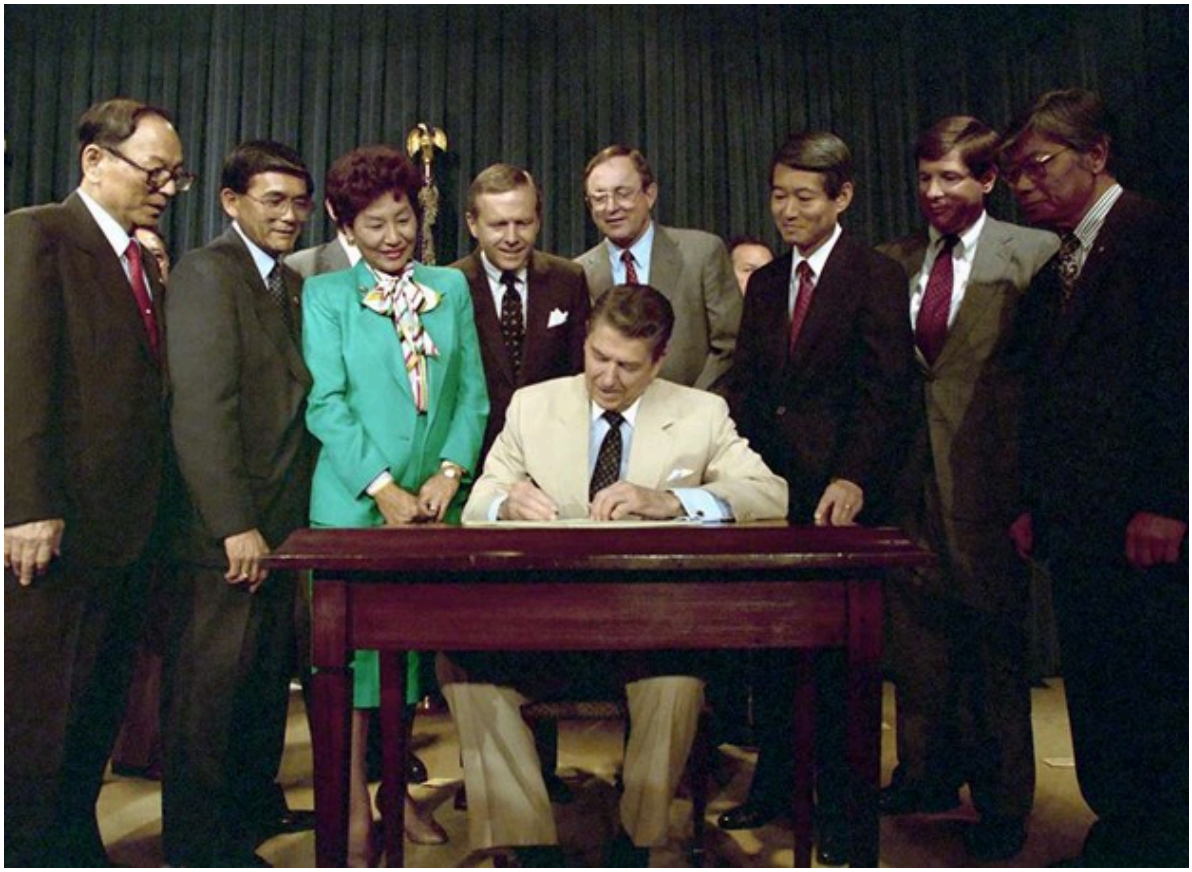

Figure 6: *President Ronald Reagan Signs "The Reparations Bill for Japanese Americans" with Pete Wilson, Spark Matsunaga, Norman Mineta, Robert Masui, and Bill Lowrey.*
The National Archives, photo no. 75856233.

The Act also designated reparations payments of $20,000 to camp survivors, of which there were only 80,000 Japanese Americans still living. By that time 40,000 of the original 120,000 Japanese Americans incarcerated had died, and the reparations could not be passed on to their living families. However, $20,000 was only a token amount in comparison with what they had lost concerning their livelihood and dignity.

AM: Did you ever get to visit the Topaz concentration camp where your parents were sent?

KK: No, not yet. My first visit to Manzanar was not until I founded the Fred T. Korematsu Institute in 2009. My father visited Manzanar before I did.

AM: Can you speak a little bit about the Ethnic Studies curriculum promoted by the Korematsu Institute?

KK: In the beginning, most of the Korematsu Institute's (KI) efforts went towards developing a curriculum focused on the Japanese American mass incarcerations, including my father's story. In 2012 I began working with the National Council for Social Studies (NCSS), the largest teacher and educator organization in the United States. I usually speak at their conferences, and I was the 2017 co-chair of the NCSS national conference held in San Francisco. Also, I am an honorary member of CS4, the Council for State Social Studies Specialists. We work with other state's social studies councils and educational organizations across this country. KI promotes the California State's Department of Education K-12 Ethnic Studies curriculum. However, each state has its own emphasis, and KI is now being asked to act as a consultant to help develop their ethnic studies curricula. It is a challenge and we are working to grow our capacity as demands increase.

AM: How do you get schools to adopt the Ethnic Studies curriculum?

KK: To establish the Ethnic Studies curriculum int K-12 schools, one needs to work state by state, and within each state, negotiate separate curricula for elementary, middle, and high schools—it's labor-intensive. KI is still working to determine which states and districts have Ethnic Studies curricula and which ones have curricula content that addresses AAPI (Asian American, Pacific Islander) cultures and history. Tony Thurman, the California State Superintendent of Public Instruc-

tion, asked me to be involved in the development of the California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum, which was adopted in March of 2021. The Model Curriculum has 12 different sample lesson plans for "Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies," including two that concern "The Japanese American Incarceration Experience Through Poetry and Spoken Word—A Focus on Literary Analysis and Historical Significance."

Now we can use the California model curriculum to work with other states. But we can't do this work without money as we are a non-profit organization, and fundraising is key to our national education advocacy work, especially in ethnic studies. The Institute's biggest fundraising events occur in late January of every year. In 2010, California Governor Schwarzenegger signed a legislative bill establishing, in perpetuity, the Fred Korematsu Day of Civil Liberties and the Constitution on January 30th. It is the first statewide day in US history named after an Asian American. Several other states now also recognize this day in perpetuity, and certain other states have adopted a single-year recognition. And as a special event this year, California declared January 30, 2022 simply Fred Korematsu Day in his memory and honor. The Fred Korematsu Day has a broad significance: it is about our "Civil Liberties and the Constitution" and civic education and participation. This is about all of us.

About the Authors

Karen Korematsu is the Founder and Executive Director of the Fred T. Korematsu Institute and the daughter of the late civil rights icon, Fred Korematsu. The Institute primarily focuses on raising awareness in K-12 schools about the unconstitutional incarceration of Japanese Americans by the United States during World War II, and about Fred Korematsu's experiences relating to his own incarceration and to the legal battles he fought to challenge it. The Institute also highlights how this relates to issues in Asian American history and current civil rights issues.

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