

Natural Resources NPS Subcommittee Hearing on H.R.1931,
Japanese American Confinement Education Act
Testimony – 5 minutes
Congresswoman Doris Matsui (CA-06)
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Thank you Chair Neguse and Ranking Member Fultcher for calling this hearing today on these bills that will preserve and teach about our nation's past – an imperfect history that we must learn from to continue improving our society. I believe this legislation will help lay the foundation for a stronger and more inclusive future.

I have lived an American story. I grew up on a farm in central California, got a great education at UC Berkeley, and had the privilege to serve the public in the White House and in Congress.

Yet, I was born in an internment camp...on United States soil. Testifying here today, I am part of a Japanese American community whose story is becoming more and more challenging to teach younger generations.

The forced relocation and incarceration of more than 120,000 Japanese Americans through Executive Order 9066 is now considered an atrocious violation of American civil rights. However, the memory of

mass roundup and imprisonment of innocent American citizens has grown increasingly distant.

Mary Tsukamoto, an important Japanese American educator and activist, used to talk about her internment experience, saying “I will never forget the shocking feeling that human beings were behind this fence like animals [...] when the gates were shut, we knew that we had lost something that was very precious; that we were no longer free.” Today, I testify in front of you, my colleagues, as a member of this esteemed House. Yet – my first months were part of that pained experience. My parents were among those who lived in these appalling conditions, incarcerated solely because of their ancestry. These are the voices that my bill seeks to preserve.

As Japanese Americans were sent to remote camps throughout the United States, lives changed forever. These were Americans living normal lives. They were doctors, lawyers, teachers, farmers – regular folks who were betrayed by their country because of a dangerous spiral of injustice. The wake of mass incarceration decimated lively communities, as homes were abandoned, families were separated, and businesses were shuttered.

My late husband, Congressman Bob Matsui, also passionately believed in justice and devoted an enormous amount of time and dedication to the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, by which the United States government apologized to the Japanese Americans who were incarcerated. As President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act, he stated “here we admit a wrong; here we reaffirm our commitment as a nation to equal justice under the law.”

The story of Japanese Americans is something that both Bob and I have felt a responsibility to preserve – our family history, and the history of other families in the Japanese American community.

When I became a member of Congress, I worked on the original law to create the Japanese American Confinement Sites program. This is a modest program, funded at a little over 3 million dollars per year, that has facilitated confinement site reconstruction, story collection and educational interpretation of the Japanese American experience during World War II. Without reauthorization, this program will expire and no longer exist after next year.

This should not happen. My bill, the Japanese American Confinement Education Act, permanently reauthorizes this program, and allocates its original funding – a one time sum of \$38 million that can be used each year until it runs out. This would effectively fund the JACS program for around 12 years. I want to stress that this is not \$38 million per year as another member mentioned. It also creates a 5 year, 2 million dollar per year grant to create educational materials to raise the national awareness of the injustice and perseverance that has been woven into the Japanese American identity.

The essence of the American experience isn't that we're perfect. Our history is littered with failures, but the true American essence is that we continue to right our wrongs. Today, far too many people still experience discrimination. Far too many experience injustice. But we will continue bending the moral arc of this country by sharing our stories, by lifting our voices, and fighting so that we do not repeat the mistakes of the past. Our country will reach higher heights when we have the wisdom to listen to those that came before us. The Japanese American experience is a vital piece of this puzzle. It is a story that cannot afford to be lost in time.

I ask for your support of this important bill.