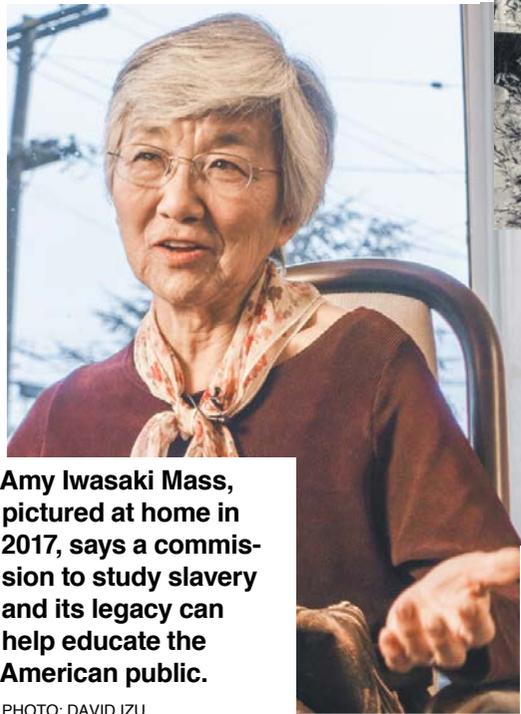


The Iwasaki family. (Clockwise from left) Matriarch Misa, brother Naomi, father Genichiro and Amy lived in barrack 1-9-B in Heart Mountain, Wyo.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF AMY IWASAKI MASS



Amy Iwasaki Mass, pictured at home in 2017, says a commission to study slavery and its legacy can help educate the American public.

PHOTO: DAVID IZU



During WWII, the Miyamoto family left the Santa Anita horse stalls for Parker, Utah. “We remained refugees in our own country, which was poisoned with hate of Japanese,” wrote Nobuko in her HR 40 support letter. She is pictured here in 1944 as a child in suspenders.

PHOTO: HARRY HAYASHIDA



In 1981, Mass told the government commission the scars from the WWII incarceration of JAs “are permanent and deep”

PHOTO: COURTESY OF VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS



In 1973, Miyamoto participated in a demonstration for the Republic of New Africa.

PHOTO: NOBUKO MIYAMOTO COLLECTION

FORMER JAPANESE AMERICAN WWII INCARCEREES SAY A BILL TO STUDY SLAVERY IS A ‘MORAL OBLIGATION’

Modeled after the Japanese American successful reparations campaign, HR 40 seeks to create a commission to study slavery and its legacy.

By Lynda Lin Grigsby, Contributor

What happened to Japanese Americans during World War II caused a deep scar invisible to most. In silence it grew and festered, unwittingly handed down from generation to generation until it received permission to speak its truth.

“The truth was the government that we trusted, the president we idealized, the nation to which we pledged our loyalty had betrayed us, had turned against us,” said Amy Iwasaki Mass in her 1981 testimony before the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, a nine-member government body tasked with studying the WWII incarceration of JAs.

Mass, a clinical social worker, testified on the devastating effects on JAs from wartime hysteria and racism as part of a panel of mental health experts. In video footage of her testimony, she wears a white suit. She is composed while reading her prepared statement, occasion-

ally directing a pointed gaze at the Congressional representatives.

Her voice is even until she tells the story of a stop in Butte, Mont., on her way home to Los Angeles from Heart Mountain in Wyoming. Mass’s mother and her friends try to enter a restaurant, but looks of hatred stop them. The Issei ladies do not see the “No Japs Allowed” sign in the window, but 10-year-old Mass sees it, so she shepherds them away.

This is where her composure breaks during the testimony. She shifts in her seat. She clears her throat, then talks about how her feeling of shame overlaps with love of country. Her voice breaks with emotion, then regains resolve.

“On the surface, we do not look like former concentration camp victims, but we are still vulnerable,” she says sounding every bit like a mental health specialist. “Our scars are permanent and deep.”

On a crisp February day from her home in Albany, Calif., Mass, 85, reflected on her testimony.

“At some level, it made me nervous,” she said. On Zoom, her hair

is longer than in the 1981 video, but it’s still perfectly coiffed. “It was good that I spoke, even with my doubts.”

Mass’s testimony, along with many other victims’ voices that told personal stories of pain and loss from the WWII incarceration, are widely credited as being the driving force behind the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988.

The voices of the Nisei — second-generation Japanese Americans — made the U.S. government recognize and atone for its betrayal and provided for JAs a transcendental moment of truth and reconciliation.

The truth was the U.S. government unjustly incarcerated 120,000 JAs during WWII in the name of national security after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. In 1988, the government officially apologized and paid reparations to former JA incarcerated.

Without the cloak of silence, the healing began.

Redress flipped the narrative on Japanese Americans as long-suffering victims to victors now with what many are calling a “moral obligation” to help others in need of racial healing.

In February, Mass wrote a letter to her Congressional representative, Maxine Waters (D-Calif.), calling for support for HR 40, a bill to establish a commission like the CWRIC to study the institution of slavery, its legacy and its effects on Black

Americans today.

“I found the Commission approach for Japanese Americans was a useful way to educate the larger American public to information they had been blind to,” she wrote. “I hope HR 40 can do the same for African Americans.”

Intersections of History

Former WWII JA incarcerated and their descendants have written 312 letters to support HR 40, said Lisa Doi, co-chair of Tsuru for Solidarity and president of the Chicago JAACL chapter.

The letters are heartbreakingly personal — stories of trauma, dislocation and even deaths in the WWII camps punctuated with calls of support for a reparations commission for Black Americans.

Tsuru for Solidarity, an organization of JAs and allies working to end immigration detention centers, organized the letter-writing campaign. Their effort highlights the intersections of social justice issues and racial histories.

HR 40 would fund a commission to study slavery and discrimination in the U.S. and recommend remedies. Activists say HR 40 is connected to the JA incarceration during WWII.

“These are all sort of like a multi-headed Hydra of things that sort of come from the same corrupt place,” said Doi, 29. “So if any one of these

things is something that you’re passionate about, then you really need to be all-in on all of them because we’re not going to really see through justice until we move forward together on all of these issues.”

The JA redress campaign came after the civil rights movement. These intersections of history show a need for a multiracial coalition of wounded ethnic communities to bend the arm of justice together.

To talk about JA history, one needs to talk about how it intersects with the history of Black America’s fight for equal rights. For Nobuko Miyamoto, the intersection of both communities came through her activism in the Black Panther Party.

“They called me sister,” said Miyamoto, 81, about the Black power political party she was introduced to in 1968. “And they welcomed me as a person of color. They understood about camp, also. And so they saw us already as an oppressed people.”

Miyamoto was a child during WWII when her familial legacy of trauma was sowed at Santa Anita Racetrack in Arcadia, Calif. Living conditions in horse stalls triggered eczema, an itchy skin inflammation. She scratched until she bled.

Pictures document Miyamoto’s political awakening and activism. A black-and-white image shows her stoically demonstrating with a black nationalist organization in 1973.

Nobuko Miyamoto is centered here in 2018 with her family.

PHOTO: ZOHAIH MOHSEN



Another shows her in a summer gathering of activists, singing into a microphone with shoulders thrown back and head held high.

Asian America was born out of the embers of the Black struggle for equal rights. Miyamoto's 1973 song "We Are the Children" became the unofficial soundtrack for Asian Americans coming together politically for the first time. The lyrics are a triumphant cry of a community's newly awakened self-consciousness:

*We are the children of the
migrant worker
We are the offspring of the
concentration camp
Sons and daughters of the
railroad builder
Who leave their stamp on
America.*

Pictures also document Miyamoto's beautiful multiracial family and show how legacies of trauma can converge through one family. On one side of the family, JAs smile through deplorable living conditions in camp. On the other, a portrait of a smiling Mamie Kirkland, a centenarian, who in life fled Ellisville, Miss., to escape lynching.

Without a national moment to examine injustices inflicted on an entire community of people, intergenerational trauma endures. The commission hearings can provide a redemptive pause, activists say.

Nobuko Miyamoto's song "We Are the Children" became the unofficial soundtrack for Asian Americans coming together politically for the first time. She is pictured here singing at a summer gathering of activists in 1972.

PHOTO: MIKE MURASE



Tsuru for Solidarity Co-Chair Satsuki Ina raises a fist in support of Black Lives Matter in San Francisco during a 2020 rally.

"Part of our healing as Japanese Americans is our support of Black people in their long struggle for equality, justice and now redress and reparations," wrote Miyamoto in her letter of support for HR 40.

In the Feb. 17 House Judiciary Committee hearing on HR 40, Kathy Masaoka, co-chair of Nikkei for Civil Rights and Redress, called the bill "a necessary first step toward justice."

The bill needs to pass through committee before it can be debated and voted on by the full House.

Named after the post-Civil War government's broken promise to distribute "40 acres and a mule" to former slaves, HR 40 was first introduced in 1989, one year after JAs won redress. Since then, the bill has been reintroduced every year without gaining traction.

This time, buoyed by high-profile support from the White House, the legislation is gaining momentum.

A Commission Almost No One Initially Believed In

Established in 1980, the CWRIC was a bipartisan federal commission directed to review the circumstances leading up to Executive Order 9066 and its impact on JAs. The nine-member government body held hearings in major U.S. cities to hear from more than 750 victims of the WWII incarceration. The commission submitted its findings in a 1983 report, "Personal Justice Denied," which paved the way for the passage of HR 442, the JA redress and

reparations bill.

Despite the success of the commission model, many JA leaders disagreed about it being the best path to redress.

"Initially, I hated the idea," said John Tateishi, then chair of the JACL's National Committee for Redress. Community leaders and groups would bring up the idea of a commission. Each time, Tateishi dismissed it.

"I said, 'Nah, you know, I have no interest in that. Commissions are a waste of time.'"

But in a January 1979 meeting in Washington, D.C., with JA members of Congress — including Spark Matsunaga, Norman Mineta and newly elected Bob Matsui — Daniel Inouye suggested the commission idea again as a vehicle for public education and a chance for the Nisei to tell their own stories.

The decision for the commission model was controversial, with some community members splintering to choose more direct paths to reparations. But Tateishi was on board, in part, because many Americans did not know what happened to JAs during WWII.

In televised nightly news segments and news articles on the commission hearings, Americans heard about stories of pain and loss directly from the Nisei — most for the first time.

A fundamental part in any reparations movement is truth-telling. One by one, Nisei revealed their invisible scars.

"You cannot get redemption or atonement until that truth is spoken. And it can only be spoken by the victims. And it's a really, really powerful tool," said Tateishi, 81, author of the new book "Redress: The Inside Story of the Successful Campaign for Japanese American Reparations."

The civil rights movement successfully challenged racist practices

and laws, said HR 40 lead sponsor Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Texas), in an opinion piece for the ACLU. But it was not followed by a commitment to truth and reconciliation, so racial inequalities persisted.

If HR 40 passes, the commission framework established by the CWRIC might stay the same, but testimonies will look different. The institution of slavery started in the U.S. more than 400 years ago, so activists say testimonies should be from everyday Black Americans talking about what it is like to be Black in America.

"That sort of shifts some of that power in terms of educating a broader American audience into the hands of regular Black Americans," said Doi, a Yonsei.

This Is How We Did It

In 2015, the JACL National Youth Student Council led an effort to pass a resolution in support of HR 40.

"It took 42 years from the departure of the last incarcerated from the camps to pass redress in 1988; it's now been 43 years since we got ours — it's time for them to get theirs," said David Inoue, JACL executive director.

Activists say support of HR 40 is a "moral obligation" for JAs who felt the pain of racism and won the fight against the government to prove it.

"What we can offer is a face, and a voice of the one group that's been able to achieve what they seek to achieve," said Tateishi. "We are that one voice able to say, 'This is how we did it.' And that we believe in your cause. And so we're here to support it."

Akemi Kochiyama is certain her grandmother would encourage JAs and Asian Americans to support HR 40. Her grandmother, Yuri Kochiyama, who died in 2014, was a lifelong activist and famous ally of Malcolm X.

"Yuri learned from Malcolm X that our solidarity with other oppressed peoples is critical to achieving freedom and human rights for ourselves" said Akemi, 49. "Mobilizing the Japanese American community nationally would be a powerful act of solidarity and an important way to protect and advocate for the rights of all American citizens in the future."

There is a school of thought in psychotherapy that says each adult carries an inner child within who needs continual love and parenting. When trauma occurs in childhood, the inner child may carry the wound until the source is addressed.

If this is true, how many Nisei have an inner child still trapped behind barbed wire? How many Black Americans still have an inner child shackled by slavery?

Mass says her inner 10-year-old still carries the hurt from that day in Butte, Montana, when her mother tried to enter the restaurant. The looks of hatred burned her soul. If given the opportunity to speak to her inner child, she would encourage her younger self to share all her feelings.

Then the retired clinical social worker would tell her inner child how wrong it was to be treated that way.

The commission to study slavery and its legacy could function in the same way. It could nurture a community's inner child and acknowledge wrongdoings.

"I think the value of commission hearings is to learn from African Americans their personal experiences that we have not had," said Mass. "After we are educated, I hope we will learn how we can respond with policies to help." ■

Join the HR 40 Educational Forum

March 24, 5 p.m. PST

The forum seeks to educate the public about HR 40 and Japanese American redress history. The free virtual event will be co-hosted by ACLU and the National African American Reparations Commission with Tsuru for Solidarity and ACLU of Washington.

For the most updated information and link to the forum, visit tsuruforsolidarity.org/hr-40/.



This is the room where it happened in 1979 when Sen. Daniel Inouye suggested establishing a commission to allow the Nisei to testify about their WWII experiences. Seated (from left) are Sen. Spark Matsunaga, Inouye, Rep. Bob Matsui and Rep. Norman Mineta. Standing (from left) are Karl Nobuyuki, JACL national director; Ron Mamiya, Seattle JACL; Dr. Clifford Uyeda, JACL national president; Ron Ikejiri, JACL Washington representative; and John Tateishi, JACL chair of the National Committee for Redress.



John Tateishi writes about the successful JA redress and reparations campaign in his new book.

PHOTO: JAMI SMITH