



A Teacher's Guide

When Can We Go Back to America?: Voices of Japanese American Incarceration during WWII

By Susan H. Kamei

About the Book

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which put in motion the forced removal of persons of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast and their detention in desolate interior locations for the duration of World War II. Approximately 120,000 men, women, and children were detained in hastily constructed government facilities rimmed with barbed wire and armed guards. Two thirds of those incarcerated were American-born citizens. The US government justified wresting the Japanese Americans from their homes, educations, and livelihoods under extreme duress and imprisoning them as a “military necessity.” From the elderly to babies, all those with even “a drop of Japanese blood” were presumed to be disloyal and potential saboteurs, simply because they shared the race of a wartime enemy.

Through first-person accounts of individuals who lived through this harrowing time as young people, *When Can We Go Back to America?* delves into the real reasons for the incarceration and reveals the falseness of the “military necessity” narrative that has been perpetuated in the decades since World War II. Their stories tell of the profound consequences that the incarceration had on their lives and of the long-term social, economic, and psychological harm they have suffered as a result of the government’s unconstitutional actions. Yet their voices and biographies also share moving accounts of their resilience, bravery, and enduring belief in democratic principles. They speak to us over the passage of time to provide perspective on issues of racial identity, immigration, and the meaning of citizenship today.

Background

This book is structured as a guide to primary and leading secondary sources to support further inquiry into specific aspects of the incarceration. The chapter sources included in the book and the online bibliography provide the links to where digitized materials can be accessed. Certain key documents are included in their entirety or excerpted to highlight their importance and for ease of reference.

The voices are from sources such as testimonies at congressional hearings, interviews, and personal essays. The biographies of the individuals who are quoted as contributor voices are included to provide context for their perspectives and to connect to the real experiences of real people.

Many of the incarcerated were high school freshmen when Pearl Harbor was attacked, and they graduated high school from the detention camps. Their commencement addresses and other stories illustrate how much they and their families tried to create as “normal” of a high school experience as possible in circumstances that were far from normal. Many others were high school seniors or the age of college students when they volunteered to go to war, were drafted, or resisted the draft or the incarceration.

Discussion Questions

The discussion questions below have been designed to support the Common Core English Language Arts Standards/History/Social Studies RH.9-10.1, RH.9-10.2, RH.9-10.3, RH.9-10.4, RH.9-10.5; and the National Center for History in the Schools U.S. History Era 8, Standard 3C and Era 10, Standard 2E.

IMMIGRATION

1. Who were the first-generation Issei immigrants, and why did they come to the United States? [Chapter 2]
2. What were the major challenges that the Issei faced? In what ways were the experiences of their children, the American-born Nisei, the same or different from those of the Issei

generation? Compare the biography of an Issei, such as Kazuko [Ikeda] Hayashi or Riichi Satow, with a biography of a Nisei. [Chapter 2, “Saga of the People”]

3. How did the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 work against the ability of the Issei to establish themselves in the United States, the land of their dreams? [Chapter 2]

4. Read the poem “Saga of a People.” Describe what you learn about the Issei immigrant experience in the US. In what ways do today’s immigrants have similar experiences?

5. The stories of the Issei by and large were not captured, because they spoke little or no English. If you could interview an Issei pioneer, what would you ask them?

CIVIL LIBERTIES

6. Chapter one contains excerpts of a report by Curtis B. Munson, hired by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to investigate the Issei and Nisei on the West Coast in the fall of 1941 prior to the Pearl Harbor attack. Based on the answers provided in the report, what can you guess were some of the questions being raised about persons of Japanese ancestry?

7. What were the federal government’s reasons for forcibly removing Japanese Americans from the West Coast and detaining them during World War II? [Chapters 1—3]

8. What did the report of the Commission on the Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians conclude about the government’s wartime motivations and actions? [Chapter 11]

9. Civil liberties are the rights and freedoms that are guaranteed by the Constitution. How were the civil liberties of Japanese Americans affected by their forced removal and incarceration? [Chapters 3, 11]

10. What were some of the long-term consequences of the incarceration, including upon the third-generation Sansei? [Chapters 10, 11]

11. Can you think of ways in which the civil liberties of other groups have been or are being impacted by government policies and practices? Explain your answers.

JUSTICE

12. If you were ordered to leave your home, your job or school, and your friends and could only take what you could carry to unknown circumstances in an unknown destination, what would you take with you? [Chapter 4]

13. Compare and contrast two voices in the book that describe how the Nisei young people felt about their incarceration and how they reacted.

14. What motivated the Japanese American community to pursue redress from the US government, and what did the redress campaign achieve? [Chapter 11]
15. What is the significance of a Supreme Court ruling? After reading about the wartime Supreme Court cases and the coram nobis effort, what do you think is important about the role of attorneys, judges, and justices in our judicial system? [Chapters 9, 11]
16. How might governments provide a meaningful apology and redress for past wrongful actions? Can you think of examples? [Chapter 11]

LOYALTY

17. Read the poem “Loyalty” at the end of chapter eight. How was the loyalty of the Japanese Americans “slandered”? Do you think being a loyal American means taking “the bad with the good”?
18. In what ways did the draft resisters consider themselves to be loyal Americans? [Chapter 7]
19. What motivated young Nisei men who were incarcerated to volunteer for military service? [Chapter 8]
20. Read “Japanese American soldiers in World War II fought the Axis abroad and racial prejudice at home” (<https://theconversation.com/japanese-american-soldiers-in-world-war-ii-fought-the-axis-abroad-and-racial-prejudice-at-home-158512>). What do you think of the government’s decision to draft Nisei men held in the detention camps, requiring them to fight for their country that imprisoned them? [Chapter 8]

CITIZENSHIP

21. What rights and responsibilities as citizens did the Nisei seek to exercise during and after their incarceration? [Chapters 4, 7]
22. From the voices and biographies, choose one person or group of people whom you think changed the course of history. Describe why and how they were change agents.
23. Describe how the Nisei, with constitutional rights as US citizens, got lumped together with their Issei parents, who were prevented by law from becoming citizens and were classified as enemy aliens once the US was at war with Japan. [Chapters 1—3]
24. In his foreword, Secretary Norman Y. Mineta encourages everyone, especially young people, to become engaged civic leaders. Why does Secretary Mineta give this advice? What are some ways in which you could contribute to your local community as an engaged citizen?

25. What most surprised you as you read this book? Did you read anything that changed how you think about the rights of others?

Extension Activities

These activities are suggested to correspond to the Common Core Standards CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1, RH.6-8.4, RH.6-8.7, RH.6-8.9, and RH.6-8.10.

1. Primary and Secondary Sources

What are the differences between primary and secondary sources? How do you know which one you're working with? Choose a chapter and look at the back of the book for that section's sources. Identify one primary source and one secondary source that relates to the primary source. Explain what you learn from both sources and the relationship between them.

2. Incarceration Geography

Review the lists of assembly centers and War Relocation Authority (WRA) centers in the appendices. On a map of the United States, mark the locations of the assembly centers with an icon, and mark the locations of the WRA relocation centers with a different icon. Review the biographies of ten contributors for their hometowns or locations at the time of their forced removal and add those to your map with a third icon.

3. Role Models

From the book narrative or contributor biographies, identify someone whom you would consider to be a role model. Consult the book bibliography, other books, or internet sources to see if there is more information about them. In at least three hundred of your own words, describe their life, their characteristics, and/or actions that you admire and why.

4. Time line

Choose and study five of the contributor biographies of incarcerated individuals. Create a time line of the most significant events for these individuals. Then review the time line provided in the appendices. Do the significant events for these incarcerated individuals show up in the general time line? Why do you think they do or do not? What does this suggest to you about the relationship between time lines of major events and their relationships to individual lives?

5. Poetry and Prose

Choose one of the many short poems included within the chapters of this book. Identify a prose description in the same chapter with a similar topic. Compare the two accounts of the authors' experiences. What are the benefits of the poetic account? What are the benefits of the prose account? What might you conclude more generally about the strengths of poetry and prose in capturing personal and historical experiences?

This guide was created by Susan H. Kamei, the author of When Can We Go Back to America?: Voices of Japanese American Incarceration during WWII. She teaches about the Japanese American incarceration at the University of Southern California and regularly speaks with high school students, reading groups, and members of organizations about the relevance of the wartime Japanese American incarceration to the tension between national security and civil liberties issues today.

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