

Written Testimony for Congresswoman Doris Matsui (CA-06)
House Judiciary Committee
Subcommittee on Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties
Hearing on “Discrimination and Violence Against Asian Americans”
Thursday, March 18th, 2021

Thank you Chairman Cohen, Ranking Member Johnson, and members of the committee for the opportunity to testify.

I am very proud to join this distinguished panel of our colleagues. And, yet, I wish it was not necessary for us to be here under such troubling circumstances – to address the disturbing spike in discrimination and violence against AAPI communities across the nation. Just a couple days ago, eight people, six of whom were Asian women, were shot and killed outside of Atlanta. This latest attack stands as a horrific reminder of the fear and pain felt by AAPI communities across our country.

I have lived an American story – I grew up on a farm in central California, went to UC Berkeley and got a great public education; I got married and settled in Sacramento with my husband where we raised our son, and I have had the privilege to work in public service in the White House and in Congress. Here at the Capitol, I identify with clean energy policy, good healthcare and jobs, and flood protection for my district.

But I feel I have a responsibility and a moral obligation to speak out about the normalizing of attacks on the AAPI community. Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have heard constant verbal hostile rhetoric directed at the AAPI

community, including from leaders in our government from whom we should expect more. There is a systemic problem here. We are dutybound to stop the spread of xenophobic and racist ideas that have escalated to physical assaults.

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who fought against discrimination in her remarkable life, used to talk about her mother and ask audiences what the difference was between a bookkeeper in Brooklyn's garment district and a Supreme Court Justice. Her answer: "One generation." As I am reminded in my service on the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution, this kind of family history is essential to understanding American History. We all share the charge to ensure that our country not only learns from but does not forget its past. Because of my history and background, I know I have a duty to speak up in this moment. Future generations are listening – more importantly my grandchildren Anna and Robby.

In 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, approving the removal of American citizens of Japanese descent to remote camps. My parents were among 120,000 forced to leave their homes and businesses. They were sent by their own government – our government – to a camp in Poston, Arizona. They lived in appalling conditions, surrounded by a fence, incarcerated solely because of their ancestry.

Despite the good fortune in my life, I am not even one generation removed from that experience. I was born in the Poston internment camp, but because I was only three months old when my parents were allowed to leave, I had no

personal memories. My parents rarely talked to me about their time there. I had an ordinary American childhood. I think my parents didn't want to burden me with that experience; they just wanted me to move forward and reach for the stars. I would hear conversations sometimes about someone they knew in camp who moved on to Chicago or some other city. I sort of knew that it happened, but I didn't experience their emotions at all. So, when I went to college at Berkeley, I met students whose parents were very affected by the internment. The vast majority of the people who were sent to camp were American citizens. And if you think about that, how did this wonderful country do that? I think it was then that I started realizing, "I have to learn more about this," and I started asking my parents about it, started having conversations about it. And when the story was told, the emotions came out. It was unbelievable.

During World War II, many were blinded by prejudice. Our government and many of its leaders advanced the myth that the Japanese American community was inherently our enemy. Americans across the country believed it – acceded to institutionalized racism and acted on it. It was not uncommon to accuse an innocent person of violating our country's trust – with no evidence or reason. This societal shift to accept and normalize wrongdoing was exactly what kept Japanese Americans imprisoned for over three years.

These were Americans living normal lives. They owned homes, shops, or were farmers. They were doctors, lawyers, teachers – regular folks who were betrayed by their country because of a dangerous spiral of injustice. Many families lost everything.

Last year, when I heard those at the highest levels of government use racist slurs like “China Virus” to spread xenophobia and cast blame on innocent communities, it was all too familiar. Comments like these only build upon the legacy of racism, anti-asian sentiment and insensitivity that seeks to divide our nation.

So yes, I was deeply shaken by the angry currents in our nation. I was appalled a few years ago when elected officials cited the Japanese-American internment – incarceration because of what they looked like – as a precedent rather than a warning. The former president called for a ban on Muslims entering the United States and invoked Japanese-American internment as a model for his dehumanizing policies.

The heated discourse at the highest levels of our government cannot be viewed in isolation from the ensuing violence in our communities. The fear of “the other,” whether racial, religious, or tribal, that works to suppress the better angels of our nature. We have seen the consequences when we go down this path. My family has lived through these consequences. This is what we are working to root out from its deepest place in our social conscience.

More optimistically, I know that our country can triumph over these demons. My late husband, Bob Matsui, was first elected to Congress in 1978 and after briefly serving on this distinguished committee, he moved to the Ways and Means Committee where he had an important career as a leader on

tax, trade, and social security policy. But he did devote enormous time to the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, by which the government apologized and paid token compensation to the Japanese Americans who had been interned. Bob said in the floor debate on that legislation that he believed it was possible because “this is a great and wonderful country.” Those words are engraved on his tombstone because they capture what motivated him throughout his career. I believe in that vision, too.

To anyone who has any doubt, I urge you to watch the video of Amanda Gorman reading her beautiful poetry at the inauguration last January. As she said, “we are striving to forge a union with purpose, To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and conditions of man; And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us but what stands before us.”

After the incarceration of the Japanese American community, our country moved on for decades without coming to terms with what our government did and what many Americans turned a blind eye to. It took decades for testimonies to be heard in Congress. It took decades for lawmakers to hear our pain. Today’s hearing is another reminder that our country is capable of growth – that this legislative body will no longer sit in silence while our communities suffer racism and hatred. Now is the time to recommit to moving forward with a shared vision for our future built upon basic human dignity.

I do want to mention that earlier this week, I introduced the Japanese American Confinement Education Act, which

would work to educate younger Americans about what the Japanese American community went through. We must tell the story because it is important not only to Japanese Americans, but to all Americans.

Again, I thank the Chairman, the Ranking Member and the entire committee for calling attention to this vital issue.

With that, I yield back.