

‘When Can We Go Back to America?’

A fitting memorial to truth, honor and courage

By Don DeNevi
Contributor

To begin with, no book review can do justice to an author who can so easily sear herself into the imagination of the reader.

Through her amazing amalgam of devotion to parents and ancestry, inherited high intelligence and gracious sensitivity, author Susan Kamei not only illumines one of the darkest political and social periods in American history, but she also disinters its true nature and aftermath.

From the fountainhead of great reportage, her perceptive eye for unsparing detail, commingling with the precision and economy of language, the ability to remain resolute

while concealing tears and anger and, above all, the intrinsic urge, nurtured and nourished by mom and dad, to tell the truth, has guided her into heartbreaking injustice where other writers avert their gaze.

Kamei’s stunning compendium, “When Can We Go Back to America — Voices of Japanese American Incarceration During World War II” (*Simon & Schuster*; 2021, 711 pp, \$22.99), is being hailed as a priceless literary achievement and reference. Sec. Norman Y. Mineta acclaims the compiled years of research, editing and writing as “a landmark” in WWII literature.

As someone who, like Kamei, was friends with and knew Mike Masaoka — the valiant, decorated combat war veteran and first national secretary of the JACL who fought so hard to restore the rights of Japanese Americans — I’m certain he would no doubt, were he still with us, applaud this book.

Taking the liberty to channel his thoughts, I’m certain he would tell her something like: “I don’t know whether your cogent, near-masterpiece will be the ultimate book to come out of our four-year concentration camp plight. That’s a pretty large order. But your steadfast drive to

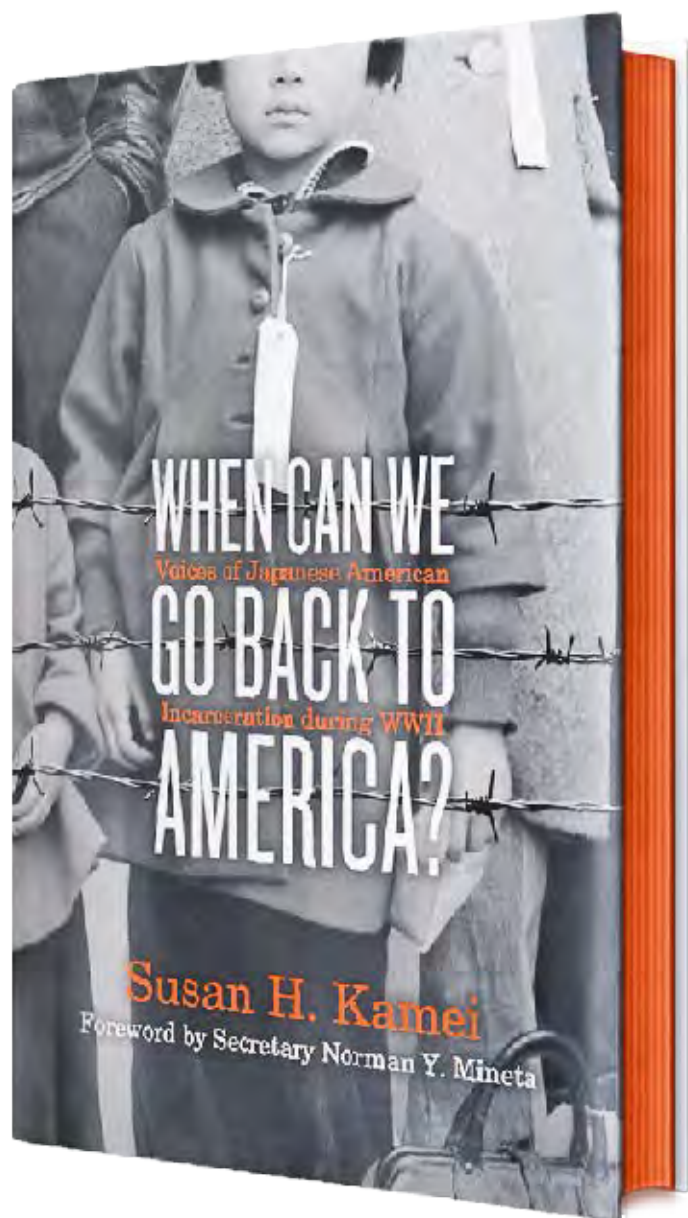
complete a hard, self-imposed commitment brings deserved recognition to you personally for believing in writing the story lest fellow Americans, our very neighbors, begin to forget that we of Japanese blood lived in a climate that demanded if any one of us had one-sixteenth Japanese blood in us we must of had to be herded into strict disciplinary camps, American style; that all young American men

of Japanese ancestry had to be castrated or sterilized or ‘... we would breed like rats,’ or, all 120,000 of us should be placed on a small island in the Pacific, and the island blown up . . .

“So, dear Susan, I wish and hope all America reads your book, the product of a wonderful, powerful, compassionate mind, reminding the world of that cold, gloomy, often terrifying ‘climate’ of hate, prejudice and often, even jealousy, as well as what happened to us. And, yes, we are Japanese, but Japanese AMERICAN! Not in the sad, sick way Lt. Gen. John L. DeWitt, commander of the 4th California District, who so gleefully carried out our evacuation and publicly screamed, ‘A Jap’s a Jap and no matter what you do with him, and his American citizenship, he’s still a Jap.’ I agree what you say about him in your book. So, Susan, I, too, am enormously proud of what you’ve created in your book. Thank



Author Susan Kamei



you for giving America, and the world, your extraordinary eyewitness to history.”

Of course, Mineta and Masaoka’s (imagined!) statements, along with the inordinate number of interviewees, or contributors who have dealt with her directly, Kamei’s mesmerizing “When Can We Go Back to America” is unequivocally the most-important portrait yet written on what it meant to be a Japanese American citizen whose ethos and ethnicity condemned them to isolation during the duration of the war. For most non-Japanese Americans, reading her book will create a hitherto unknown, unexperienced historical event.

Historians, scholars, novelists, buffs and researchers of all persuasions heap great

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praise on those responsible for the author’s superbly crafted Table of Contents chapters and standard subject headings, all beginning with Dec. 7, 1941, and concluding in the early 1980s, followed by comprehensive Appendices and pages of Further Resources. Especially helpful for further research and study are countless encyclope-

dic articles, all accessible by a full index.

Of note, readers will be enthralled with the Epilogue. Most Japanese Americans know by heart 18-year-old Marion Tsuruko Konishi’s “Valedictorian Address” delivered at Amache Senior High School, Granada War Relocation Authority Center, 1943, that Masaoka often referred to when non-JA visitors paid their respects in his D.C. office. This reviewer says, “If tears don’t well up in your eyes upon reading her words than . . .”

Sad, in the section that follows, that facial photos aren’t attached to the 118 Biographical Sketches of Contributors in Part Six. The 180 pages that follow conclude the mammoth volume with a list of assembly centers and their addresses; War Relocation Authority centers; Department of Justice Internment Camps for Enemy Aliens; U.S. Army Internment Camps for Aliens; a 40-page Timeline; a Glossary; Contributor Notes; List of Abbreviations; and Chapter Sources.

Susan, a personal note from this reviewer who insists there is no reviewing your book other than to write that you’ve achieved what you deemed to accomplish, based upon the natural goodness, the beauty, and light your dad and mom imbued you with — you Preserved Honor (thank you, Kristen Taketa) of the Good People far beyond unconscionable injustice.

Don DeNevi was born in 1937 and raised in south Stockton, Calif. He retired as a teacher, then worked for the California prison system. He has written more than 30 nonfiction books, which are available on Amazon. Growing up, he had several Nisei neighbors, and his friends’ disappearances beginning in 1942 is marked indelibly in his memory, as is the return of the 11 members of the Nishimoto family from the Rohwer WRA Center in the fall of 1945.