

## **Fred Korematsu Day: A Time to Remember and Reflect on Civil Liberties**

**By**

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Every year on January 30, communities across the United States observe Fred Korematsu Day, honoring the life of civil-rights activist Fred Korematsu and reflecting on the importance of civil liberties, equality under the law, and the responsibility of citizens to challenge injustice. This day not only commemorates Korematsu's courage but also encourages schools, communities, and local governments to educate people about the consequences of prejudice and the value of standing up for justice.

Fred Toyosaburo Korematsu was born on January 30, 1919, in Oakland, California, to Japanese immigrant parents Tatsuo and Iwa Korematsu. His parents, part of the Issei generation, had come to the United States seeking opportunities and stability, bringing with them a deep respect for family, education, and hard work. Tatsuo Korematsu worked in various trades, while Iwa maintained the household and ensured that the family remained deeply connected to their cultural heritage. Fred, the eldest of three siblings, often helped care for his younger brothers and sisters, learning responsibility and leadership at an early age. The Korematsu household valued both Japanese traditions and American civic principles, a duality that profoundly shaped Fred's character and sense of justice.

Growing up in Oakland, Fred attended local public schools and developed a reputation for diligence, intelligence, and determination. He worked in metal shops and other trades, training at the Bay Area Industrial Training Center to prepare for industrial work. Despite facing subtle racial discrimination in his community, Korematsu excelled academically and socially, forming friendships across cultural lines while maintaining close ties to his Japanese American heritage. This formative experience of balancing identity and community values prepared him for the extraordinary challenges he would face in adulthood.

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, fear and suspicion of Japanese Americans escalated dramatically in the United States. The U.S. government issued Executive Order 9066, authorizing the forced removal and incarceration of more than 120,000 Japanese Americans from the West Coast. Korematsu, then in his early twenties, made the courageous decision to defy the order, refusing to leave his Oakland neighborhood. He was arrested and convicted for resisting evacuation, being sent to the Topaz War Relocation Center in Utah. Topaz was one of ten primary incarceration camps, with eighteen confinement sites used nationwide, including temporary "assembly centers."

Korematsu's family parents and siblings were separated and sent to other camps, an experience that left lasting emotional and social impacts.

Life in Topaz was challenging and marked by a mixture of resilience and despair. Inmates endured harsh weather, crowded barracks, and limited resources. Despite these conditions, Korematsu continued his education and observed the struggles and strengths of his fellow internees. He witnessed families striving to maintain cultural traditions while navigating a world that questioned their loyalty and identity. These experiences reinforced his belief in civil rights, justice, and the need to resist unconstitutional actions.

In 1944, Korematsu's case reached the U.S. Supreme Court in *Korematsu v. United States*, which upheld his conviction in a 6 – 3 vote, citing “military necessity” as justification. This decision remains one of the most controversial in Supreme Court history and stands as a cautionary tale about the fragility of civil liberties during times of fear. Decades later, in 1983, Korematsu's conviction was vacated after it was revealed that government officials had suppressed evidence and relied on racial bias to justify internment.

After the war, Korematsu returned to Oakland and resumed civilian life, working as a draftsman and metalworker. He later joined the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in San Francisco, contributing to programs designed to provide fair housing opportunities for marginalized communities. Throughout his life, Korematsu emphasized the importance of education and civic engagement. In 1976, he earned a bachelor's degree in political science from San Francisco State University, exemplifying lifelong learning and dedication to social justice. In 1997, he co-founded the Korematsu Institute, a nonprofit organization devoted to educating the public about civil liberties, constitutional rights, and the dangers of discrimination.

Korematsu's achievements were formally recognized with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, awarded by President Bill Clinton in 1998, the highest civilian honor in the United States. After a lifetime of advocacy, Fred Korematsu at the age of eighty-six, passed away on March 30, 2005, at his daughter's home in Larkspur, California due to respiratory failure. He was laid to rest at Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland, where his gravesite bears a replica of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, commemorating his extraordinary contributions to civil rights and justice.

Fred Korematsu's legacy continues to inspire both national and local communities. His portrait is part of the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery's “Struggle for Justice” exhibition, honoring civil-rights leaders who shaped American history. In 2017, Google dedicated a Doodle to him on what would have been his 98th birthday, introducing his story

to a global audience. The Fred Korematsu Congressional Gold Medal Act, recently introduced in Congress, seeks to posthumously award him the Congressional Gold Medal, acknowledging his courage and lifelong advocacy. California schools teach his life and Supreme Court case as part of curriculum on civil liberties, helping students understand the consequences of prejudice and the importance of standing up for justice.

The impact of Korematsu's life is particularly meaningful in Gilroy, where Japanese-American families have a long history in South Santa Clara County. Japanese immigrants arrived in the early 20th century, cultivating orchards, garlic fields, and vegetable farms, and establishing businesses that contributed to the local economy and culture. Families such as the Hirasakis, Hashiyas, and Matsus adapted to the challenging agricultural environment, creating innovative farming techniques and resilient farm communities. Figures like Kiyoshi "Jimmy" Hirasaki pioneered garlic farming, transforming the region into the "Garlic Capital of the World." Even during the internment period, these families-maintained connections, often communicating by letter and providing mutual support. After the war, they returned to rebuild farms, businesses, and community life, exemplifying resilience, and dedication.

Local landmarks like the Gilroy Yamato Hot Springs illustrate the community's strength. Purchased by Japanese-American families prior to World War II, it later served as a transitional home for returning internees, symbolizing resilience, and continuity. In schools and community programs, Korematsu's story is intertwined with the agricultural and civic contributions of Japanese-American families, helping students understand how national civil rights struggles affected their own community.

Korematsu's life exemplifies courage, resilience, and a steadfast commitment to justice. Beyond legal milestones, his advocacy inspired generations of civil-rights activists, educators, and policymakers. His speeches emphasized the importance of vigilance, awareness, and active participation in democracy. In Gilroy, his influence resonates through school programs, community lectures, and local historical initiatives that highlight the Japanese-American experience, agricultural heritage, and broader lessons of civil liberties.

The story of Fred Korematsu is more than a historical account; it is a living reminder that safeguarding justice requires ongoing effort. His life teaches that ordinary individuals, when guided by conscience and courage, can challenge injustice and leave an enduring impact. As communities across the nation and in Gilroy specifically observe Fred Korematsu Day, they honor not only a man who resisted oppression but also the collective strength of a community that persisted in the face of adversity. Through

education, civic engagement, and remembrance, Korematsu's legacy continues to inspire generations to uphold equality, fairness, and the enduring principles of justice.