

# Wyoming native to receive one of Japanese government's highest honor



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CHEYENNE — From 1942 until 1946, more than 110,000 Japanese-Americans living on the West Coast, the majority of whom were American citizens, were uprooted from their lives and forced into internment camps in Wyoming and six other states.

When they finally arrived back home after World War II ended, most had lost their jobs, savings and even property.

More than four decades later, a former Worland Warrior quarterback helped convince President Ronald Reagan to sign the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which apologized for the internment and paid out \$1.2 billion in reparations to those held in the camps.

Today, Grant Ujifusa will receive the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Rays, one of the Japanese government's highest honors, for his work to steer the Civil Liberties Act through Congress and reversing Reagan's publicly stated opposition to the bill.

Only two people per year receive the award, according to the Japanese Embassy in Washington, D.C.

“Grant is a sort of legend around the community as well as in our organization,” said Japanese American Citizens League Executive Director Floyd Mori.

Receiving such an honor isn't common for the son of a beet farmer from the Big Horn Basin, where Ujifusa's grandfather settled after coming to Wyoming to work a railroad job.

It was on the farm that Ujifusa experienced a personal connection to internment life. In 1944, Ujifusa's father hired some internees from the Heart Mountain internment camp, located on the other side of the Basin in Powell, to help during harvest season. Two-year-old Grant took a liking to one of the workers, a man named Joe Furuta, and grew to consider him a surrogate uncle.

“He was the first person outside of the family where I could think, ‘Well, I like this person. I like to be around this person.’”

The quarterback of the 1959 state championship Worland Warriors football team — playing against future lobbying targets Dick Cheney and Alan Simpson — Ujifusa graduated with honors from Harvard University in 1965.

Ujifusa rose to become a senior editor at Random House. But in Washington, D.C., he became a local celebrity as the founding editor and co-author of the “Almanac of American Politics,” a detailed reference book of the political makeup of every state and congressional district in the nation.

In 1982 Ujifusa was approached by Japanese-American leaders with a new task: help pass a law providing redress for those held in the World War II internment camps.

The odds were long, to say the least. Japanese-Americans, as a group, held little political clout. Of the 240 million Americans alive in the early 1980s, only about 760,000 were of Japanese descent — and half of them lived in Hawaii. And until then, the Japanese-American community was politically scattered and was never particularly active in national politics.

On top of that, the timing wasn't good: Americans were becoming increasingly hostile to Japan because of a growing trade imbalance, and growing numbers of conservative politicians — including the one in the White House — were wary of discrimination claims.

But Ujifusa went to work, using his knowledge of the inner workings of Capitol Hill to organize a plan to get a redress bill through Congress. And as the man behind the Almanac of American Politics, Ujifusa had access to members of Congress and the administration that few others enjoyed.

Ujifusa's biggest accomplishment was helping to win over Reagan.

He started by lobbying cabinet members and prominent administration officials, including Education Secretary Bill Bennett.

But, Ujifusa realized, the way to Reagan's brain was through his heart. And so he had Thomas Kean, then governor of New Jersey, share with Reagan a story of Kazuo Masuda, a young U.S. soldier who was killed in action in Italy.

When his family went to bury him in Fountain Valley, Calif., the city leaders told them that "we don't bury Japs in our cemetery."

Gen. "Vinegar" Joe Stilwell, heard of the slight and was incensed. Fountain Valley relented and permitted Masuda's burial.

One of the speakers at the funeral was Reagan, a young movie star and Army captain.

"The blood that has soaked in the sand is all one color," Ujifusa quoted Reagan as saying at the service. "America stands unique in the world, the only country not founded on race, but on a way — an ideal."

The idea, Ujifusa said, was to make a veto of the Civil Liberties Act a veto against Kazuo Masuda. And it worked: Reagan signed the bill into law on Aug. 10, 1988.

Ujifusa is quick to share credit for the victory with a number of others. But he said receiving the Order of the Rising Sun is important to him, as it ties in pride in his Japanese heritage with satisfaction of an accomplishment he describes as "more intense than beating the Casper Mustangs in 1958, 36-0."

Part of that satisfaction, he said, may stem from his childhood, when Buddhist priests would regularly show up in Worland to show a daily series of three Japanese movies. One of the organizers of the movies, Mrs. Nagata, always preferred the tragedies to the other, lighter movies, Ujifusa remembered.

"She said, 'A happy ending? We all know life is not like that.'" Ujifusa said. "And that really stuck with me.

"So you know one of the reasons I like thinking about the redress [victory]?" he said. "Because it had a happy ending. We won, Mrs. Nagata!"