

Changing Reagan's Mind

By GRANT UJIFUSA

A speech given in part to the 50th Reunion, Harvard Class of 1965, on May 26, 2015 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and given in its entirety to the annual meeting of the New York JACL Chapter on May 7, 2016.

I want to talk today about three dimensions of Japanese American redress. The first, and part of my direct experience, is about two largely unknown heroes of HR 442, Bob Matsui and Cherry Kinoshita, two people without whom redress would have come undone.

The second is a journalistic exercise, and it's why I think the camps happened — an exercise that takes some issue with *Personal Justice Denied*.

And third, again part of my direct experience of redress, is how and why Ronald Reagan changed his mind and signed HR 442.

Now about Congressman Bob Matsui of Sacramento. We learned in the spring of 1989 that what HR 442 had authorized — \$1.2 billion for 60,000 internees or \$20,000 per victim — was not the way the bill should have been written. Applications at the Justice Department for individual payments showed that there were nearly 80,000 living Japanese Americans eligible.

The actuaries got it wrong. The bill should have called for \$1.6 billion.

So we were looking at a \$400 million shortfall, and faced the prospect of having to run through all the weirdly shaped hoops of the authorization/appropriations process in Congress again for more money.

And we probably couldn't get it. Congress, tired of our issue, could only talk about deficit reduction and the big Japanese economic threat.

After hearing that we needed another \$400 million, Bob went to see Director Dick Darman at Bush I's Office of Management and Budget. There Bob got Darman to agree to an accounting ploy that got us the \$400 million quietly without having to go back to Congress for the money. But it was accounting you wouldn't want to use too often.

Here's how it worked. Let's say all the FICA money withheld from tens of millions of paychecks comes into the Treasury Department at 10 in the morning on a Monday. Then let's say two hours later the funds are wired to Health and Human Services, which then sends out a huge amount of money to cover part of what is needed to pay all the people getting Social Security checks.

But let's say instead that Darman agreed to keep the money at Treasury for not two hours, but 24 hours during which time millions in interest was thrown off. Then let's say that money was put into a cookie jar and sent to the Justice Department to be used to make redress payments. Then let's say after four or five such Mondays, \$400 million of interest could be found in four or five cookie jars.

Well, we can say that that is what happened. And we can also say that Bob Matsui performed a political miracle.

Few know what Bob did, but it was a huge contribution to redress. Without him, many younger Nisei and Sansei would have not gotten the money promised to them. But Bob made no effort whatsoever to take credit for what he did, even many years later. He never tooted any kind of horn or showed up at a Japanese American event to see and be seen.

Instead, representing the best in the Japanese tradition of restraint, Bob never slapped a single back in his whole life nor took bows for work he never did. He was a quiet, modest man, and also brilliant, totally committed to the best interests of our community.

It was Bob's idea that we work together to convince Newt Gingrich and Dick Cheney, members of the House Republican leadership, to vote "yea" on HR 442, and they did, even as a well-known Asian American congressman from San Jose voted "present." Bob voted "yea" and waived his rights to the \$20,000.

Bob Matsui was as important to House passage as Norm Mineta and Barney Frank. Bob died in 2005.

Another remarkably capable Japanese American was Cherry Kinoshita of Seattle. She actually read the Senate bill after it came out of the Government Operations Committee. I don't know anybody else who did. I didn't. And so it appeared that only two people really knew what was in the bill, Sparky Matsunaga and John Glenn, chairman of the committee.

But there was a third person — not one-time Boy Scout Alan Simpson, but a Japanese American woman, Cherry Kinoshita.

What she discovered was that if an Issei died before his payment turn came up, the bill would give his estate nothing. In short, the legislation was

written so that Issei and maybe some Nisei and Sansei would find themselves in an arm-wrestling contest with Death itself, and some of them would lose.

When Cherry called me about the problem, she was crying and said, "Grant, the Senate bill is worse than nothing." She was right.

I called Sparky about the problem, and he said, "It was the best that I



Cherry Kinoshita

could get." I said he couldn't bring his bill as written back to the community. Sparky soon enough agreed, and met with Glenn to get the provision changed. The chairman relented, but grudgingly. With conservative constituents living along the Ohio River across from West Virginia and Kentucky, the Ohio senator was a big deficit hawk, who felt compelled to save a little money at the expense of the Japanese American old.

But thanks to Cherry, our community was spared the tragedy of any number of arm-wrestling contests gone bad. What Cherry Kinoshita brought to redress was raw IQ and total *gaman*. She was, in my judgment, the single most intellectually gifted Japanese American in the entire redress movement. Cherry was really smart in the same way that Barney Frank is really smart.

Nothing got by her, even as she, as a Nisei woman, absolutely insisted on leading from behind. Cherry died in 2008.

Now I want to turn to why I think the camps happened. My view is perhaps to the left and perhaps harsher than the judgement Angus MacBeth reached in *Personal Justice Denied*: race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership. For me, the political failure was not, as the last term might imply, one of passive omission, but one of active commission. Franklin Roosevelt wasn't asleep at the switch and just let the camps happen. Only he could decide to sign Executive Order 9066. And that he affirmatively did. Why?

First, FDR, ironically the most liberal president of the 20th century, knew that competition in the truck farming business had for many years fed racial bigotry of a political ly-potent variety on the West Coast. As one white farmer put it, "The Japs came here to work and stayed to take over." By 1940, Japanese American farmers controlled 30% of the local fruit and vegetable market in California. This was something substantial that we had that others wanted.

So first, it was about money. You know, follow the money.

Second, the camps were the final installment of bigotry and political calculation of the usual sort. To put a brutal point on it: From the time just after the Gold Rush, the chinks and the japs to come later were the n-word plural of the West Coast. So it was simply good politics to run against the

japs, just as in the American South it was (and perhaps still is) good politics to run against the n-word plural.

And FDR was a supremely gifted politician, enjoying near unanimous support from the immigration restrictionist labor unions and the small, land-grabbing, left-wing farmers of the Grange. In California, only the big growers objected to our removal, fearing a loss of a diligent people who picked strawberries and packed lettuce.

In sum, Roosevelt was looking to get re-elected in 1944, and he knew that for many white voters on the West Coast, packing us off to the wastelands of the interior was almost as good as sending a bunch of slant-eyed foreigners back to their own country.

Third, after Pearl Harbor, mass and elite opinion, both hysterical about the Japanese Army poised to invade Long Beach, came together on what needed to be done. If there was no time or way to separate the loyal from the disloyal, the only answer was mass incarceration.

Among the most bigoted figures in the drama was Army General John DeWitt, deputized by Franklin Roosevelt to make the decision to remove the spies and then to remove them physically. In his report to the president, DeWitt wrote: "In the war in which we are now engaged racial affinities are not severed by immigration. The Japanese race is an enemy race ... and the racial strain is undiluted. ... Along the vital Pacific Coast over 112,000 potential enemies of Japanese extraction are at large today. There are indications that they are organized and ready for concerted action at a favorable opportunity. (Now this is the good part) The very fact they no sabotage has taken place to date is



General Joseph Stilwell pins a Distinguished Service Cross on Kazuo Masuda's sister Mary Masuda.

a disturbing and confirming indication that such action will be taken."

Among policy-makers who agreed with DeWitt's assessment were FDR; Secretary of War Henry Stimson, a true WASP Brahmin; Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy, a poor boy who later okayed Mike Masaoka's idea for the creation of the 442 and who after the war rose to become called the chairman of the American Establishment — the old one based inside the big New York banks and law firms; and finally and famously California Attorney General Earl Warren, who wanted to be elected governor in 1944 and was. Would he



to the Soviet effort. Karl Yoneda, openly a Communist, did something openly dramatic — he volunteered to help the government build barracks at Manzanar and then volunteered to serve in MIS to fight the Japanese in Asia.

Later Bert Nakano and most academics in Asian American Studies pointedly rejected Stalin and embraced Mao, Castro, Ortega, and a large dose of American identity politics. Or as John Ohta, an NCR leader, put it when asked why Reagan signed HR 442: "Because the masses of the Third World rose up and forced him to do it."

The shapers of mass opinion, which included *Time Magazine*, were later joined by Walter Lippmann of *The New York Herald Tribune* and Edward R. Murrow of CBS Radio, from whom the country's elites took their cue.

Finally, at the edges of elite opinion, there was Harold Ross, editor of the now fashionably progressive *New Yorker Magazine*, and, oddly, an



Rep. Robert Matsui

ardent young Stalinist who was later to become Dr. Seuss.

Not many disagreed with General DeWitt, but among them were J. Edgar Hoover (only a few needed to be watched), the always valiant American Friends Service Committee, and the great Eleanor Roosevelt.

Sadly, Roger Baldwin of ACLU chose to sit on his hands, apparently at the behest of two members of his board who were Fellow Travelers. At war with Japan, Stalin put out the word that the camps lent support

American people.

Now let's go back to the fall of 1987 after Barney Frank had pushed our bill through the House and Sparky Matsunaga was putting together an astonishing, 69-vote filibuster-proof majority in the Senate. As Dan Inouye put it, Senate passage was 10 parts Sparky and one part the other senator from Hawaii.

And, it would seem for the eyewitness Inouye, no parts for one-time Boy Scout Alan Simpson, who, as the *Congressional Record* shows, voted for Jesse Helms' amendment to strip all of the monetary compensation out of S. 1053, saying "the money sticks in my craw."

Moreover, as a member of the Senate Republican minority in 1988, Simpson had no power whatsoever to affect the flow legislation in John Glenn's committee or on the floor where Sparky managed the bill. In fact, Simpson cannot name a single senator he persuaded to vote for Sparky's bill. Senate passage was all Matsunaga.

But after clearing the Senate, we still faced a veto from the President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, who for two years had publicly opposed HR 442.

Let me tell you how Reagan, the most conservative president since Calvin Coolidge, changed his mind and signed our bill on August 10, 1988.

The hero of our story is Kazuo Masuda of Fountain Valley, California — a small town where Kaz grew up on a modest truck farm in then agricultural Orange County.

On August 27, 1944, Kaz was killed in action on the banks of the Arno River in Italy while serving as a member of the all-Nisei 442nd Regimental Combat Team. Sergeant Masuda was 24 years old, and was to be awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

Already in the Army on Pearl Harbor Day, Kaz volunteered for service in the 442. From Camp Shelby in Mississippi, where he was being trained, he would visit his mother and father and his sisters Mary and June, who were imprisoned not far away in the Jerome, Arkansas, internment camp. Kaz said to Mary that if anything happened to him, he wanted to be buried in his hometown cemetery back in Fountain Valley.

After Mary learned that Kaz had been killed, she received permission to leave the camp for Fountain Valley, where she went to City Hall to make arrangements for her brother. But the town fathers there said to Mary: "We're sorry, but we don't bury Japs in our cemetery."

Somehow word got to General "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell, back from the China-India theater, where one of his subordinates was Colonel Frank Merrill of Merrill's Marauders — a group of 2700 men, including 15 Japanese Americans of the Military Intelligence Service, who could read, write, and speak Japanese.

All of the men, all of them volunteers, fought and died and distinguished themselves behind Japanese lines in Burma. For a year, Merrill's Marauders tied down an entire Japanese division. The Marauders suffered an 80% casualty rate.

Vinegar Joe loved the Japanese American soldier. So he got himself to Orange County and confronted the town fathers.

The general said, "This soldier is going to be buried here, and we're going to make an example of you SOB's and make a big deal of it. I am going to present Kaz Masuda's mother the Distinguished Service Cross at a nice ceremony."

The town fathers said, "Oh, we're sorry."

Invited to speak at the ceremony was a movie star, Army Captain Ronald Reagan.

But there was a big problem: Kaz's mother refused to accept the medal. What she felt was this: "They push us off our farm and into a scary camp next to a swamp. Then they take my son, and he comes back in box. And they want to give me a medal? No thank you."

"But a general, General Vinegar Joe Stilwell, is coming to present the medal to you," Mary said.

"I don't care who he is," Mrs. Masuda said. "No thank you."

Finally, it was arranged for Kaz's sister Mary to accept the medal.

After Stilwell spoke, Ronald Reagan, then an FDR Democrat, got up and said:

"The blood that has soaked into the sand is all one color.

"America stands unique in the world, the only country not founded on race, but on a way — an ideal. Not in spite of, but because of our polyglot background, we have had all the strength in the world. That is the American way.

"Mr. and Mrs. Masuda, as just one member of the family of Americans, speaking to another member, I want to say for what your son Kazuo did, thank you..."

Many Japanese Americans knew that Captain Reagan spoke at Kaz's ceremony, but how could we get word to President Reagan to remind him

of what he did in 1945 and perhaps move him toward changing his mind about our bill?

I went to see Bill Bennett, a college friend, to ask for help; then Ed Rollins, Reagan's 1984 campaign manager of his 49-state landslide; and then Richard Wirthlin, Reagan's pollster.

None of them could do anything.

After a meeting in the White House, Wirthlin called me and said that the top aides around Reagan were dead set against us. Wirthlin suggested that we hold off for a year. I said we couldn't. We had been working for more than ten years, and we were running out of gas.



Sergeant Kazuo "Kaz" Masuda

At that time, August of 1987, I was book editor in New York, and one of my writers was New Jersey Governor Tom Kean, and I turned to him. Tom said that the president was coming to New Jersey to campaign for Republican state legislative candidates in October. The governor said he would bring up redress with the president as they traveled around the state together in the back of a limo.

This they did on two separate presidential trips to New Jersey. White House Chief of Staff Ken Duberstein was with them. Reagan said to Tom that he thought Japanese Americans were sent to camp for protective custody, because that's what Senator Sam Hayakawa was telling him and Attorney General Ed Meese. Tom said, "No, no, it wasn't that."

The next day, Tom called me and said, "Write me a letter speaking to that point and I'll get to it the president using a special line of access reserved for Republican governors."

I said, "I can also get a letter from Kaz Masuda's sister, saying please sign HR 442." Tom said, "I'll get her letter in to him too." June Masuda Goto wrote:

Dear Mr. President:

Perhaps you recall a very special day for our family, December 9, 1945, when you came to a ceremony honoring my brother Kaz Masuda at our farm house. The presence of you and General Stilwell led to a better life for our family. [For example,] many times I have been asked to speak at the Kazuo Masuda Middle School. I speak to the history classes, and quote your words to the students. If our legislation comes to you, I hope you will look on it favorably.

Reagan read June's letter, called Governor Kean, and said, "I remember that day at the ceremony for Kaz Masuda. I think redress is something I want to make happen.

White House visitor logs show that on February 14, 1988, Ken Duberstein told me in his office that Ronald Reagan was going to sign HR 442.

On August 10, 1988, the president made our bill the law of the land, and said he did it because of his admiration for the valor shown by Sergeant Kaz Masuda and the Japanese American soldiers of the 442.

June Masuda Goto, Kaz's sister, was then led up to the podium to meet the president. Ronald Reagan leaned down toward her, and asked, "Are you Mary?"

June answered, "No, Mary is dead. I'm her sister June." The president then clasped June's right hand in both of his. A photo of Reagan with June appeared on the front page of *The New York Times* the next day.

Long ago, a Buddhist priest served our family while I was growing up. He once said, "Where there is gratitude, there also is civilization."

I think that all of us here today can be grateful to Kaz Masuda for his heroism on the battlefield, and grateful to Mrs. Masuda for her defiance of authority of the most imposing kind, and to Mary Masuda for her acceptance of life as it was to be, and grateful finally to General Stilwell for going many miles out of his way to honor a fellow soldier.

We are the beneficiaries of the civilization that these four Americans helped to create.

.....

For reversing Ronald Reagan's opposition to HR 442, Grant Ujifusa was knighted by the Japanese government in 2012. For more on redress, go to: grantujifusa.org, click on "Reagan Himself on Video" and "Redress on CSPAN."

Advertorial