

The JACL Story of Redress

Grant Ujifusa

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Thank you, David, for inviting me to speak today. Let me say that I am so happy to be back among members of JACL, an organization that was so much part of my life during the most important years of my life. (My photo/copy here)

Let me begin by asking all of you here at the Convention in Philadelphia to remember a JACLer from Philadelphia, Grayce Uyehara, who was the heart and the soul and the grit and the muscle of Japanese American redress. Also please remember the great and brilliant Cherry Kinoshita of Seattle. Nothing ever escaped Cherry's awareness of where redress was and what had to be done next. For me, Cherry was the single most intellectually gifted person in the redress movement.

You should also remember Peggy Liggett of Fresno and

May Takahashi of Clovis, both of whom who never tired of the work of redress.

I will say to you: No redress without these four women, powerhouses all and all forever unvanquished.

As a matter of general fact, I would say that Japanese American women made redress happen. Among much else, they were much more willing to lobby white Washington politicians face to face than were Japanese American men.

David asked me to speak to what lessons learned from the experience of redress might apply to the future of JACL as it seeks to advance the civil rights of Japanese Americans and all Americans in the years ahead. I would say four things.

First, the need for passionate and savvy leadership of the kind provided by Grayce, Cherry, Peggy, and May. I say savvy because none of them organized a single street demonstration, which while preaching to the choir, only riled up our opponents watching on local TV, the most powerful of whom was Republican Senator S. I. Hayakawa of California. He was sure he had us stopped. More on Hayakawa later.

Nor did the four JACL women write a single letter to Members of Congress from Topeka, Toledo, and everywhere else USA -- letters that were never opened let alone read. The youngest interns in the office were instructed to put letters not postmarked as coming from a Member's *home district* in the round file. Why? Because writers of those letters can't vote to re-elect any politician from Toledo.

At the White House, where mail was opened and counted for or against but not read, sentiment ran 6 to 1 against us. So for the impact of letter writing and street demonstrations on redress, I would say, as the Romans might have, "*post hoc, ergo propter hoc.*" Not hard to google that.

Second, the need for karma or luck, the kind when the 442 battlefield death of Sargent Kaz Masuda became part of the life of a 26-year-old movie star, Ronald Reagan, on December 9, 1945. Of redress karma I will speak in a moment.

Third, the need to win elections. A crucial example. When the Democrats retook the Senate in 1986, it was a win that opened the way for the tireless Spark Matsunaga, not Alan

Simpson, to put together a filibuster-proof 69-vote, bi-partisan majority for our bill in the spring of 1988. Before the Democrats flipped the Senate, a Republican Committee Chairman, Bill Roth of Delaware, had kept S.1009 buried for years. Roth (and his wife, a federal district judge) simply hated what we were trying to do. But the new Chairman of Government Operations with jurisdiction over our bill, Democrat John Glenn of Ohio, just loved Sparky. So the answer is: no Senate flip, no redress.

With a huge 76-seat Democratic majority in place, House passage in the fall of 1987 was easier, 243 to 141, once Barney Frank replaced Texas arch-conservative Democrat Sam Hall of Texas as Chairman of the House Judiciary subcommittee with jurisdiction over HR 442. Hall, like Roth, had our bill bottled up for years, while Barney powered HR 442 through the full committee and to commanding success on the House floor.

And fourth, a capacity to talk to the other side – the 1980s was a decade dominated politically by American conservatives, though they were conservatives mostly unlike Donald J. Trump.

In 1987, Newt Gingrich and Dick Cheney were persuaded to vote for our bill.

Now I want to tell you the **JACL story** of redress karma, of how Ronald Reagan, arguably the most conservative president of the 20th century and a longtime opponent of HR 442, came to sign our bill on August 10, 1988 – 30 years ago next month.

The hero of our story is Kazuo Masuda of Fountain Valley, California, where he 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 442. Sergeant Masuda was 24 years old, and was to be awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

While Kaz trained at Camp Shelby in Mississippi, he would visit his mother and father and his sisters Mary and June, who were imprisoned not far away in Jerome, Arkansas.

During one of his visits, Kaz said to Mary that if anything happened to him, he wanted to be buried in his hometown cemetery in Fountain Valley.

After Mary learned that Kaz had been killed, she got permission to travel to 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. In the China-India theater, Stilwell was the commanding officer of Colonel Frank Merrill of Merrill’s Marauders – a group of 2700 men, including 15 Japanese Americans of the Military Intelligence Service. All of the Marauders, all of them volunteers, fought, and died, and distinguished themselves behind Japanese lines in Burma.

Tying down an entire Japanese division for a year was not the only thing they did for their country. The Marauders suffered an 80% casualty rate, when 15% is considered astronomical.

Vinegar Joe respected and loved the Nisei soldier. So he got himself to Fountain Valley, and confronted the town fathers.

The General said, “This soldier is going to be buried here,

and I'm going to make an example of you SOB's and present the Distinguished Service Cross to Kaz's mother at a nice ceremony.

The town fathers backed down.

Invited to speak at the ceremony was a movie star, 26-year-old Army Captain Ronald Reagan, a movie star.

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 Mom, a General, General Stilwell is coming to give you the medal," Mary said. "I don't care who he is," Mrs. Masuda said. "No thank you."

Finally, it was arranged for Mary to accept the medal. After Stilwell spoke, Ronald Reagan 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, just as 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 into **President** Reagan to remind him? I saw and asked Bill Bennett, a graduate school friend, to help; then Ed Rollins, campaign manager for Reagan’s 1984 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’d been at it for ten years and we were running out of gas.

At that time, the summer of 1987, I was book editor in New York, and one of my writers was Tom Kean, the Republican

Governor of New Jersey. I turned to him for help.

Tom said that the President was coming to New Jersey to campaign for Republican state legislative candidates in October, 1987. The Governor said he would bring up redress with the President as they travelled by limo around the state together.

Reagan said to Tom that he thought Japanese Americans were sent to camp for protective custody – something California Senator S. I. Hayakawa told both the President and Attorney General Ed Meese. And “Sam,” as he was affectionately called by both men, also told them that upright, middle class Japanese Americans would never come to the government asking for money – only the group’s far left, like the campus radicals he pulled the plug on at San Francisco State. No Republican should give the radicals anything, Sam said.

In the limo, Tom said to Reagan, “No, no, it wasn’t protective custody and main stream Japanese American support redress.” The next day, Tom called me and said, “Write me a letter speaking to both points and I’ll get it to the President using a special line of access 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 into him too.”

June Masuda Goto wrote:

Dear Mr. President:

Thank you for taking the time to read my letter.

Perhaps you recall a very special day for our family, December 9, 1945, when you came to a ceremony honoring my brother Kaz Masuda in Fountain Valley, California.... The presence of you and General Stilwell greatly affected the community, and led to a better life for our family.

Many times I have been asked to speak at the Kazuo Masuda middle school. I speak to all the history classes, and quote your words to the students....

If HR 442 comes to you, I hope you will look upon it favorably. All of us in our family – and I believe Kaz as well — would be greatly honored if you would. I also believe that America, through you, would honor itself.”

The President read June's letter, called Governor Kean, and said, "I remember that ceremony for Kaz Masuda. I'm asking our people to reconsider everything."

After the President signed our bill, June Masuda Goto was led up to the podium to meet him. The President 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 Buddhist priest served our family while I was growing up. He once said, "Where there is gratitude, there also is civilization."

As we're here together today, I think we can be grateful to Kaz Masuda and his heroism on the battlefield, and grateful to Kaz's mother for resisting authority of the most imposing kind, and grateful to Mary for accepting life as it is, as it has to be; and grateful finally to General Stilwell for going the last mile to honor a fellow soldier.

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

Grant Ujifusa, JACL's Redress Strategy Chair, was knighted by the Government of Japan for reversing Ronald Reagan's opposition to HR 442. He lives with his wife Amy in Chappaqua, New York.



