

JAPANESE AMERICAN VETERANS ASSOCIATION

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Grant Ujifusa's Keynote Speech at JAVA Quarterly Lunch in October 2013

Grant Ujifusa was the keynote speaker at the JAVA Quarterly Lunch on October 12, 2013. Mr. Ujifusa, a Sansei from Wyoming, is one of the founding editors of the "Almanac of American Politics," which George Will and Tim Russert called "the bible of American politics". The transcript of his speech follows below.

I am very happy to be here with you today to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the enactment of HR 442. Thank you for inviting me.

I am especially happy to be here with my friend of many years, Gerald Yamada, with whom I served on the Japanese American National Memorial Board in the late 1990s. Without him, I don't think the Memorial would have been built.

The largely unknown story is this. A group of five on the Board composed of thirty members absolutely hated the idea of Mike Masaoka's name going on the Memorial wall. And the five assumed that because Japanese Americans operated by consensus put together privately, they would get their way. If they didn't, they would simply block the project. If consensus was needed, the five had a veto.

But Gerald came up with a really simple way to break the deadlock: Take a vote, a roll call vote — yes or no on Mike from everybody in front of everybody. This was done on no fewer than four separate occasions at three separate board meetings, with all margins around 25 to 4. Four roll call votes were taken to make sure that word would get out to the community and to the National Park Service that no Japanese American norms were being violated.

And so we were able to move ahead with construction, and that I feel we owe to Gerald.

I am also happy to be here today with Terry Shima. He has lived a long and fruitful life hewing closely to the best in the traditions of Japan and America. Terry has been an inspiration to me for many years.

Now I would like to talk for a while about redress. We know that thousands of people made redress possible. But I would like to sum up my own experience of redress in Washington using five words: No Nisei Soldier, No Redress.

This means that the public, members of Congress, and the President Reagan himself knew the story of what Nisei Soldier did during World War II, and maybe even knew how “Go For Broke” became part of our everyday language. I am convinced that without that legacy left to us by the Nisei Soldier, redress, a long shot going in, would have had no chance.

And that legacy also became evident in what four specific Nisei Soldiers contributed redress: Mike Masaoka, Spark Matsunaga, Dan Inouye, and Kaz Masuda. Without them, I think we can also say that redress would have had no chance.

Let me begin by talking about the much-maligned Mike Masaoka.

I think he is the single most gifted leader we have had in our proud history in America. With nothing more than a shoe shine, a smile, and the story of the 442 – a story that he got out to American public while the fighting was going on – Mike pushed through Congress a bill that provided citizenship for Issei, something always denied to them. This was hard, harder than redress. In 1952, there were no Nikkei members of Congress and no one to help except his indomitable wife Etsu. In 1952, Congress was completely controlled by Southern segregationist politicians.

Later Mike came under attack by some Sansei who seem to understand history only through the prism of the 1960s – when protest was not only easy, but cool, even fashionable.

Anti-war protest was not cool after December 7, 1941. I once asked Mike if he ever lost any sleep over sending young Nisei men to fight and die in Italy and France. He said, “Not a minute. Under the circumstances, blood had to be spilled.”

But that was the way Mike was. He could think, speak, and act with great precision and compelling force.

One of Mike’s brothers was killed in action and another was totally disabled.

Another question I asked Mike. Did he have any regrets about co-operating with the government AFTER 9066 came down? “No,” he said. “They had the guns. We didn’t.”

We need to remember that Gordon, Min, and Fred were all young bachelors. We also need to remember that no Japanese American or Japanese American family in 1942 had to listen to anything Mike said, and could have resisted in any way they wanted. Only three did. And nobody else.

Cudda, wudda, shudda doesn’t count.

For me, critics of Mike stand on his shoulders and box him about the ears. For me, Mike’s critics should reread the history of Japanese Americans from the time of Pearl Harbor to the passage of the Issei citizenship bill.

In the twilight of his life Mike Masaoka was indispensable to the success of HR 442.

What Mike was, was both IQ smart and street smart — a big time problem-solver, as good as any lobbyist in Washington, and after 50 years in the trade, connected all over town.

A conversation I would have more than once with Mike after dinner around 9 in the evening:

“Mike, the wheels are coming off this thing, in Washington and inside JACL. You can’t believe what Mr. X did today. What are we going to do?”

Mike would say, “Give me the night to think about it.”

“But, Mike, you don’t understand. The wheels are coming off this thing.”

“Give Me The Night To Think About It.”

An example of a problem Mike solved.

In January of 1987, Barney Frank told me in his office that he was going to push our bill in a big way. This after years of being bottled up by subcommittee chairmen before him.

But Barney wanted bi-partisan Republican cover on his subcommittee, which meant that he was not going to send HR 442 to the full Judiciary Committee and then to the House floor where a vote could be taken unless Pat Swindall, the number one Republican on the subcommittee, would agree to support the bill.

I said, “Barney, this guy is a born-again Christian from Georgia. A really tough get.”

“I need to have him,” Barney said, “and you have to get him.”

I called Mike asked him what to do. He said, “I need the night to think about it.” In the morning, he told me to call Dave Brodie, the chief congressional lobbyist of the Anti-Defamation League, and ask to meet with him. Mike said that Brodie had taken many Southern born-again members of Congress to Israel on “fact-finding trips” – aka junkets. Mike knew that this was one way the Jewish Americans allied themselves with the more numerous born-again. Both had a big stake in Israel being taken care of.

I saw Dave in his office at ADL. On his desk, he had a small award maybe 20 years old from the JACL. Dave said he would set up a meeting with Swindall.

Dave and I met with Swindall, though Dave had already talked to him. Joining us that day in the Congressman’s office was his wife and their infant child. Swindall said he was going to support the bill in Barney’s subcommittee. He added that an aide who was half Japanese was also for the bill, and that helped. On the day of the vote on the House floor, Swindall made speech supporting Constitutional rights for Japanese Americans, rights he then said should be extended to the unborn.

Mike knew, as few Japanese Americans did, that to get Swindall on board in Barney’s subcommittee, you needed to travel first through Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

Mike was Spark Matsunaga’s best friend. So when Mike told Spark that I was okay, Spark was ready to work with me. There was no need to spend weeks, maybe months, building up trust.

No worked harder to make redress a reality than Spark. After three intense years, he put together a solid bi-partisan coalition of 69 yes votes largely by himself. And so to him we owe Senate passage of S. 1009.

The reason the bill received so much support was that nearly all of Sparky’s Senate colleagues just loved him. And if Sparky – the very spirit of Aloha — really wanted something, his colleagues were going to make it happen for him.

I remember in particular a group of seven people – all guests of Spark – at lunch right in the middle of the august Senate dining room. All around us were men wearing expensively tailored suits and sporting \$200 haircuts, but here we were: two huge Samoan guys in flowered shirts, a small Filipina woman, a nice Nisei couple, me, and the senator. Spark’s message: we are all Americans here. And Spark’s colleagues got the message and they loved and respected him for it.

Shortly before his death, here's what Dan said about Spark:

“The man who should take nearly all of the credit for the passage of the redress bill is Sen. Sparky Matsunaga. He is the one who sponsored the bill and organized the vote on that in the Senate. If Sen. Matsunaga's efforts were to be weighted at 10, mine would be one.”

I think Dan is wrong about that ratio. Without him, we could have passed the redress *authorization* bill, but to this day might never have received a nickel in individual payments. Dan made those payments mandatory like Social Security in an *appropriations* bill. The authorization, the-how-a bill-becomes law bill we all worked on. The entirely separate appropriations bill was the work of Dan Inouye **alone**.

For me, Senator Inouye saved redress from perhaps becoming a grand exercise in symbolism only. An apology is nice, but because of him, money changed hands.

For two years, President Ronald Reagan was publicly opposed to HR 442, but on August 10, 1988, he signed our bill. The hero of the Reagan 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.

Already serving in the Army when Pearl Harbor was attacked, Kaz volunteered for the 442. While he 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 the Jerome, Arkansas, internment camp.

During one of his visits, 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 internment 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. 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, who could read, write, understand, and speak Japanese. All of the Marauders, all of them volunteers, fought, and died, and distinguished themselves behind Japanese lines in Burma.

The Marauders suffered an 85% casualty rate.

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 we’re going to make an example of you SOBs and make a big deal of it too. I am going to give the Distinguished Service Cross to Kaz’s mother in a ceremony at the Santa Ana Bowl.”

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 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 asked Bill Bennett to help – I played touch football with Bill in college; then I asked Ed Rollins, Reagan’s campaign manager; 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. Wirthlin suggested that we hold off for a session of Congress. I said we couldn't. We had been working for more than 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 S. I. Hayakawa told both the President and Attorney General Ed Meese. Hayakawa was personally close to Meese, the President's oldest and most trusted advisor.

Tom said, "No, no, it wasn't protective custody." The next day, Tom called me and said, "Write me a letter speaking to that point and I'll get to the President using a 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 Santa Ana, 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....

Nearly all Japanese Americans deeply support the redress legislation now pending in Congress. If the legislation 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 day at the ceremony for Kaz Masuda. I think redress is something I want to do.”

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.”

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.

Thank you again for inviting me to speak.