

A Step in Forming the Redress Commission

by Clifford Uyeda

Although the subject of redress has been on the minds of Japanese Americans since the camp days, no serious or concrete proposal was brought forth until, in the early 1970's, a group in Seattle came up with specific demands for individual payments.

The Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) redress meetings were battles royale between those who insisted on individual payments and those who sought a trust fund for community projects. This was the first divisive confrontation within the Japanese American community.

The 1977-78 JACL national redress committee went to the 1978 national convention with a proposal which sought *both* individual and community redress--\$25,000 per individual and a community trust fund to be administered by a presidential committee of which the majority were to be Japanese Americans.

It was this redress proposal adopted by the JACL national council in the summer of 1978 that was brought to Washington and presented to the Nikkei Congressmen: Senators Daniel Inouye (D-HI) and 'Spark' Matsunaga (D-HI); Representatives Norman Mineta (D-CA) and Robert Matsui (D-CA) in January 1979. The Nikkei congressmen were very supportive. Senator S.I. Hayakawa (R-CA) had not been invited to the meeting due to his publicly expressed opposition to any attempt for redress.

The focus of the meeting shifted to the legislative implementation of our goal. We listened to Senator Inouye's logic: The Congress and the American public

knew very little about what had happened to Japanese Americans during World War II. He felt that educating Americans about this episode was key to the campaign's success. What better way for wide media coverage, he reasoned, than

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to hold public hearings throughout the country on the subject?

Returning to the hotel, the JACL representatives (national president, national redress committee chair and another member of the committee) and the national director pondered the new strategy deep into the night. There seemed to be an agreement that Senator Inouye's statement was most sound.

However, thirty-five years had passed since the mass incarceration. Commission hearings would postpone the introduction of the redress bill by several years. Redress advocates knew the Issei who suffered the most were mostly in their mid to upper eighties and may not live to see the outcome or receive compensation in time. The frustration of the those who could not wait for commission hearings was to be expected.

The full JACL national redress committee was scheduled to meet in the spring. It was a fiery meeting. The critics stated angrily that a "study commission" was unnecessary. Advocates of the commission route argued for the necessity of major media publicity on the wrongs committed against Japanese Americans. This was the second serious division within the Japanese American community.

Those in favor of the commission prevailed. The die was cast.

Both Senators from Hawaii were confident that they could get the commission bill passed through the Senate. They felt, however, that a Japanese American senator opposing the bill could influence many, especially those in the House, from voting for the bill. It was, therefore, thought prudent to either have the junior senator from California, Hayakawa, become a co-sponsor or, if that was not possible, to convince him not to oppose the bill.

The three Nikkei Senators, their aides, and JACL representatives (national president, Washington representative) met in the Senate office building on August 1, 1979.

"We want to bring our case before the commission and the American public," I said.

"That is for the historians to look into," said Senator Hayakawa.

Senator Inouye stated: "What

happened to Japanese Americans during World War II was an official act of the U.S. Government. Our government's official position is that we did no wrong, that what we did was correct and constitutional. It is up to us, the Congress, to correct this." He looked squarely into Senator Hayakawa's eyes.

"I have drafted a bill which I would like to introduce," said Senator Hayakawa. "It's short, but to the point." It was a bill to "prohibit relocation or internment of citizens or permanent residents" based on "race, color or national origin."

Commented Senator Matsunaga: "This is OK for the future, but it doesn't address what we're speaking about. Also, we have already done what you are asking for back in 1971 with the repeal of Title II of the Emergency Detention Act. Our bill was much stronger than your proposal. It stated that such acts cannot be done without the approval of the Congress."

"Senator Hayakawa ...we would like you to join us in sponsoring this bill."

Senator Hayakawa looked surprised, and visibly embarrassed. "You did?" he asked.

Further objection to the draft of our bill was made by Senator Hayakawa's chief administrative assistant. He stated that recommendation for a remedy is the function of the Congress and not that of a commission.



Planning redress strategy, L. to R.: Assoc. Director J.D. Hokoyama, President Clifford Uyeda, Nat'l. Director Karl Nobuyuki. Courtesy of National Japanese American Citizens League.

"A commission can recommend anything," said Senator Inouye. "The purpose of this commission is to inquire and to recommend. It does not bind the Congress, which can accept or reject the recommendations."

"Senator Hayakawa," said Senator Matsunaga, "We would like you to join us in sponsoring this bill."

After thinking it over for a while, Senator Hayakawa replied, "You shall have my answer within an hour."

Ron Ikejiri and I waited in Carolyn Sugiyama's office (Senator Inouye's aide) for a reply from Senator Hayakawa. We all speculated on what the answer might be. "I really didn't see much opposition from Senator Hayakawa," said Ron.

"I think Senator Hayakawa is going to consent to co-sponsor," said Carolyn.

The phone rang on Carolyn's desk. It was a call from Senator Hayakawa's office. She nodded to

us with her eyes. "Senator Hayakawa has agreed to co-sponsor the bill," she said to us after hanging up the receiver.

The Commission bill was introduced into the Senate on the afternoon of August 2, 1979, co-sponsored by Senators Daniel Inouye, 'Spark' Matsunaga, S.I. Hayakawa, Alan Cranston, (D-CA), Frank Church, (D-ID), and James McClure, (R-ID).

The Commission bill passed the Senate and the House, the latter after intense campaigning by Representatives Norman

Mineta and Robert Matsui. President Jimmy Carter signed the bill creating the Commission on War-time Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC) on July 31, 1980.

To many of the American public, the commission hearings were their first exposure to American concentration camps where innocent victims were held for only one reason--ancestry.

To former inmates, it was their opportunity to express their humiliation, shame and anger that had been pent-up for over four decades.

The establishment of the CWRIC was a highly successful public relations effort which revised the official explanation of the mass exclusion and detention of Japanese Americans. ❀

JACL, January 1979:

National President (National Redress Chair, 1977 - 1978) - Clifford Uyeda; National Redress Chair - John Tateishi; National Redress Committee member - Ron Mamiya; National Director - Karl Nobuyuki; Washington, D.C., Representative - Ron Ikejiri