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Mike Masaoka: JACL Origins, JA Identity

A talk, revised and extended, given at the JACL National Convention in Las Vegas on July 15, 2015.

By GRANT UJIFUSA

I want to thank David Lin and Priscilla Ouchida for inviting me to speak tonight. David, always the complete gentleman, shows that JACL has become an Asian American organization.

Priscilla joins a group of extraordinary Japanese American women who have stepped forward to lead us — among them, Grayce Uyehara, Cherry Kinoshita, and Peggy Liggett.

And I am so happy that the National Council voted unanimously yesterday for the resolution offered by Mas and Marcia Hashimoto to praise and honor Mike Masaoka.

I think this: Because Mike was the father of the 442, he is also the father of JACL as we have known the organization for more than 70 years.

How did this come to be? We need to know because origins matter and mostly determine identity. We need to know in particular that Mike Masaoka was the number one “inu” — a loyalist, a running-dog Americanist — in all the camps. To bewildered and shocked internees, he in fact counseled loyalty — shall we call it *Allegiance*? — to the only country Japanese Americans really had. Mike then asked young Nisei men to fight and die for that self-same country — one that had grievously betrayed them and their families.

Initially only 1,256 men volunteered out of the ten camps, which showed the influence that sometimes included physical violence wielded by the vocal pro-fascist Japan faction among the internees — a faction who by extension also wanted Hitler's Nazi Germany to win World War II.

Eight hundred of the volunteers were selected to serve. These early few and those to come later, especially the men who were killed in action, proved what we tragically had to prove, and that was Japanese American loyalty to the United States of America.

Try arguing, Mr. Redneck Politician, with a young man who has come home in a box.

I once asked Mike if he ever lost any sleep about sending young Nisei men to fight and die in Italy and France. He said, “Not a minute. Under circumstances, blood had to be shed.”

One of his brothers was killed in action, and another was badly wounded.

I also asked Mike if he ever regretted counseling cooperation with the government AFTER FDR's 9066 came down. He said, “No. He had the guns. We didn't.” We now need to remember that Min, Gordon, and Fred were all



Masaoka brothers at Camp Shelby: Left to right, Ben (KIA), Mike, Tad, and Ike (totally disabled).

young bachelors. And how were the rest of us supposed to protest? Hold hands and sing “We Shall Overcome?” After which members of the U.S. Army, some showing fixed bayonets, would relent and let us go home?

A look back shows that Mike could think and act with clarity and precision, as he took on the most liberal president of the 20th century, his labor union and land-grabbing small farmer allies, plus virtually all of the country's elites, including Walter Lippmann, Edward R. Murrow, Roger Baldwin of the ACLU, and Harold Ross, editor of the now fashionably progressive *New Yorker Magazine* — all standing hard by the side of their president.

Against them, Mike put forward the only thing he had: the lives of our young men. He did it because as our 27-year-old wartime leader in 1942, he was already thinking about what our lives were to be like after the war was won and the camps closed. And thanks to the fighting skill and heroism of our young men, what Mike wanted we soon enough got, which was acceptance into the American mainstream of a small group of people once as intensely hated and feared as perhaps no other in our country's history.

But the day after Pearl Harbor, we were Al Qaeda cleverly disguised as gardeners and small shopkeepers, right there in L.A. with the Japanese Army poised to invade Long Beach.

Meanwhile, newspaper headlines screaming about the atrocities committed on the Bataan Death March and during the Rape of Nanking did nothing for us.

After FDR jailed us, Mike kept saying to the WRA people that it was all a mistake, that we were all loyal. Then they would look out the window to see and hear banzai-shouting demonstrations going on. The WRA's response was Question 28, the “forswear

allegiance” question. Everybody who said “No” was sent to Tule Lake, where the demonstrations grew louder, while the other nine camps quieted down.

The reality was that a great many of those who went No-No, about 6% of all internees, says *Personal Justice Denied*, were supporters, some of them ardent, of militarist Japan — not people protesting their treatment out of constitutional principle. That form of high-minded protest was instead demonstrated only by some Yes-Yes Boys, who later became the heroic draft Resisters of Conscience at Heart Mountain.

When their resistance began, the No-No Boys had already been sent to Tule Lake, where they spent the duration ineligible for the draft or any kind of military service.

Mike had no real problem with the Heart Mountain Resisters, a small group, but he had big problem on his hands with the pro-Japan No-Nos and Renunciants, who perhaps numbered 7,000 people and comprised roughly half of a reconstituted Tule Lake. The Draft Resisters and the No-No Boys are often conflated, but they were two entirely separate groups.

It struck Mike as ironic that during World War II, the only place Japanese Americans could exercise their First Amendment rights of assembly and free speech was inside a camp. Among those taken to Tule Lake rallies was someone who was to grow up to become a notable show business personality. His mother was a Nisei who renounced her citizenship and requested expatriation to Japan; his father was a resident alien who requested repatriation.

But as you can imagine, there was no way that on the outside any pro-Japan demonstration would have been tolerated nor that any Japanese American would have wanted to show up

at one.

And it would probably be equally ironic to Mike today that the Japanese American Marxist left of 2016 celebrates Renunciation and Repatriation of the far-right cheerleaders of emperor-worshipping cult of Imperial Japan of 1943.

But ironies of our experience are not what we need to remember tonight. It is instead that our story did not end by saying No-No to our country, and that we owe to Mike, to the 442, and I will say to JACL. Together I think he, they, and we wrote an immigrant story more powerful than that of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock. For me, that story — of young Nisei men out of the camps dead in Italy and France — gives our being together here tonight the depth of immeasurable gratitude and weight of inconsolable loss, as it has for JACLers for more than 70 years.

Mike was the principal author of the Japanese American story. A heroic one. Which is one reason why we honor him tonight.

There is another reason, of course. After the war, as our political leader and representative in Washington, Mike showed that he was both IQ smart and street smart. And what did we expect of our leader? The answers to two questions, the second usually more important than the first: What we should do and how should we do it?

In the twilight of his life, Mike was an indispensable leader of how we did redress.

Understand that Mike was a big-time problem-solver, as adept at making things happen in Washington, a very strange place, as any lobbyist in town — after 50 years in the trade, he was connected and trusted nearly everywhere.

A conversation I had 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. Let me tell you what Mr. X is up to now. 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 big 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 bipartisan 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 and asked him what to do. He said, “I need the night to think about it.” In the morning, he called and 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 to Israel on “fact-finding trips” — also called junkets.

Mike knew that this was one way the Jewish Americans allied themselves with the more numerous born-again. Both a big stake in Israel being taken care of. And so, besides the trips, campaign money was often raised for incumbent Republican politicians in places like Georgia.

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 I knew that Dave had already talked to him. Swindall so eager to make sure Dave was happy that joining us that day in the Congressman's office was his wife and their infant daughter. Effusive introductions were made all around, including to the daughter.

The Republican congressman from Georgia then told me that he was going to support the bill in Barney Frank'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 a speech supporting constitutional rights for Japanese Americans, rights he then said should be extended to the unborn.

Mike knew, as perhaps no one else on the planet did, that to get Swindall on board in Barney's subcommittee, you needed first to travel through Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

I think Mike Masaoka 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 savvy of his indomitable wife Etsu, Mike got Congress, in his time dominated by Southern segregationist committee chairmen, to agree to Issei citizenship, to the War Brides Act, and to the Hawaiian statehood bill. Then there was the repeal of the Alien Land Laws, job openings for Nisei college graduates, and Mike's indispensable role in the success of HR 442.

That's what Mike Masaoka did. Now. Tell me. Just exactly what have you done?

A rooting interest on the correct side in what passes for the compelling issues of the day doesn't count.

For me, Mike's critics, academics and others supremely confident of their opinions, stand on his shoulders and box him about the ears.

For in the end, the story of the 442 and HR 442 triumphed over EO 9066.

And so tonight, Mike, JACL honors you for all you did for JACL, for Japanese Americans, and for our country. I was honored to have known you. Rest in peace.

For reversing Ronald Reagan's opposition to HR 442, Grant Ujifusa was awarded the Order of the Rising Sun, a knighthood from the Japanese Government. An honorary member of K Company, 442 RCT, he lives with his wife in Chappaqua, N.Y. For more of Grant's experience of redress, go to:

grantujifusa.org

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