

New Year Special

The Same Car to Both Guys

By Grant Ujifusa

I want to thank you, Mitch [Maki] and Harry [Kitano], for inviting me to this UCLA redress conference, which I think might turn out to become an important event in Japanese American history. You are to be congratulated for thinking up the idea and making it a reality.

All of us in the room can be proud of our contributions to redress success. It was long shot — a rare victory of spirit over numbers — of qualitative *gaman* over the quantitative expanse of the country. The effort was thoroughly American, but it did have a Japanese accent to it, didn't it? This, I feel, binds all of us here together.

I've often wondered why so many of us worked so hard. What were the springs of action to right the wrong of a racist reign of terror? One answer might be a personal heaviness of heart, combined with a sharp, even physical, pain of grievance — for me, lodged just below where the heart was heavy. A melancholy outrage, yet one without bitterness.

And if you're not bitter, you can work our political system.

Redress happened. And for me its success proves that we are not by any means a hopelessly racist country. We carried the day among more than 218 mostly middle-aged white males in the House, more than 51 mostly white guys in the Senate, and ditto a conservative white male in the White House.

I don't think the Turks in Germany, or the Algerians in France, or the Koreans in Japan could have made something like redress happen. As Norm Mineta said on the floor of the House: Only in America.

For the rest of my time, I want to talk a little bit about three things:

(1) How I tried to frame the issue; what my sales pitch was. This part is concept, not a story.

(2) What happened on Barney Frank's House Judiciary subcommittee; how redress got out of there. This is a little story, not a concept.

(3) How we got an hour of Reagan's time, enough for him to read and react to June Masuda Goto's letter about her brother Kaz. This is again a story, not a concept.

The sales pitch

Any marketing person wants the River Jordan for his product: the river is deep and the river is wide. Such a product is the Ford Taurus, and I imagined myself as car salesman with one stripped down, dark blue sedan in the showroom and two in the back lot.

In walk Barney Frank and Ronald Reagan, and it's my job to sell the same car to both guys. What's the feature that might make both into buyers? I decided to turn the car into the Constitution: Barney likes whole car — what the government can do for people, and what it shouldn't do to people. Ron only likes what the government shouldn't do.

So you sell what the federal government shouldn't do, or is never supposed to do, to people — which is where Barney and Ron come together. Also, the issue framed this way might keep Reagan and conservative members of Congress from thinking that redress is really just a big government payoff to a special interest constituency of the Democratic party — ethnic Japanese Americans. A rare politician willingly delivers what he thinks is pork to people who vote for his opponents.

The message you want the sales pitch to

leave behind: very bad things often happen when the government doesn't leave people alone.

This is as wide as I could make the River Jordan. How about deep? In every society, most of what happens doesn't come out of the coercive force of the law, but out of deep, often unconscious, habit and custom. In the case of redress, I think things go way back to some judges in England. Sam Ervin said something like this in the Watergate hearings about another presidentially-sanctioned break-in. Old Sam drawled there was once a power-mad English King who wanted to dissolve

“An excellent job of explaining what is truly effective in American politics — direct action is sometimes a satisfactory emotional outlet, but rarely a useful political tool. The insights into the process and the ability to tell stories well makes the exposition especially powerful.”

—Rep. Barney Frank

Parliament, and some members appealed to the judiciary. The judges said:

THE KING NEITHER DESIRES NOR DARES. The king backed off.

Another English judge Ervin quoted once said:

THE WIND AND THE RAIN MAY FREELY ENTER A YEOMAN'S COTTAGE, BUT THE KING OF ENGLAND MAY NEVER.

The Americans' way of putting it was this: “The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, etc.” This is the 4th Amendment, which for me began to look a whole lot like a stripped down, dark blue Taurus.

A nice car for both Barney and Ron. The only thing we're selling, guys, is the 4th Amendment in the Bill of Rights. You against that?

When you're lobbying a politician, she's asking herself two questions: what are the merits of this thing, and what are the politics?

Well, the merits in general are hard to deny if you compare what happened in 1942 to what you find in black and white in our Founding Document. Accordingly, the merits of the specific legislative case were very strongly advanced by the Commission [CWRIC], Coram Nobis and the NCJAR suit.

And what about the politics of redress for the Republicans we needed: In the 1992 election that Bush lost to Clinton, Asian Americans voted 53 percent Bush, even as he got only 37 percent in the general electorate. Republicans knew and know that Asians, though not blacks, are winnable.

How did the bill get out of the House Judiciary subcommittee?

The short answer is that we were ready for good luck to happen. A redress non-supporter, Sen. Phil Gramm of Texas, really helped. He wanted Republicans to take over seats held by conservative Democrats all over the South, one of whom was Sam Hall of Wichita Falls, Texas. Republican Gramm got Republican Reagan to appoint Hall a federal district judge. Hall, of course, had the bill bottled up for a long time.

With Hall gone, Dan Glickman from Kansas took over the subcommittee with jurisdiction over our bill. Bob [Rep. Robert Matsui] and I had lunch with Glickman, and it looked like he might move 442. He didn't because he was thinking about taking on Dole for the Kansas Senate seat, and redress was not going to help Glickman in Kansas. This was 1984.

In 1986, Glickman took over an open wheat subcommittee chairmanship on the Ag Committee. Since you can only chair one subcommittee, this left Pat Schroeder next in line, but she chose to chair a subcommittee on Defense. After Schroeder was Barney, and he took the job. As it turned out, Chairman Frank was as important to the passage of redress as Norm, Bob, Sparky [Sen. Matsunaga] and Dan [Sen. Inouye].

I met with Barney, who said we needed Pat Swindall, the ranking Republican on the subcommittee, to create a bipartisan majority. Swindall was a born-again Christian conservative from often high-income east Atlanta and a crescent of suburbs to the east of the city. Grayce Uyehara asked Gene Doi, a Swindall constituent, to talk to him. Meanwhile, I met with David Brodie, chief lobbyist for B'nai B'rith in Washington, who set up a meeting in Swindall's office.

Dave, Swindall and I talk. Swindall says he thinks he can support us. I couldn't believe it. On the street later, Dave Brodie explained: First, a good number of Jewish families in the textile and fashion trade live in Swindall's district and form an important part of his constituency. In fact, the old Georgia 4th might be called a “Driving-Miss-Daisy” district.

Second, Swindall is like many born-again who believe that the Messiah will not return until Israel is fully in place and secure. Brodie has flown many Southern born-again politicians to Israel on fact-finding missions, i.e., junkets. Dave plugged redress into the Jewish/born-again coalition.

Swindall told me he had a half-Japanese American aide who supported redress. When I heard Swindall definitely say he'd co-sponsor, I said, “Please call Bob Matsui right now. We absolutely need you.” Would you believe the hoped-for return of the Messiah pushed redress along? Only in America.

While we were trying to get Swindall, Bob also had me going after Newt Gingrich and Dick Cheney. These two very conservative men, like liberal Barney Frank, were big backers of Soviet dissidents. Human rights in Russia — what about here? Both said, “Sign me up as a co-sponsor.” I said, “Call Bob right now.”

How do you know I'm telling you the truth? You can write Gingrich and Cheney and ask them, or ask Bob, who's here now.

The day of the floor debate and the House vote arrived. Pat Swindall, in a strong pro-redress speech, tied constitutional rights for Japanese Americans to constitutional rights for unborn fetuses. You can look it up. Would you believe redress allied with the anti-abortion movement? Only in America.

An hour of Reagan's time

I had four lines into the White House, and I hoped that at least one of them might work.

The first was Bill Bennett, then Reagan's Education Secretary. I used to play touch football with him in college and we've been friends since, but he would sort of overpromise then, and sort of still does, I think. I met with him, and he said he would tell the President that he supported redress. I'm not sure Bill did, but he put me on to his buddy, Gary Bauer, now of Dobson's

Focus on the Family, then Domestic Policy Advisor. Gary said his father, a Pacific War Marine, hated the idea of redress, but he himself felt differently and would talk to the President. I think Gary did, but maybe didn't carry enough clout at the time. Gary is ideologically unfashionable, but he is a nice man.

The second was Richard Wirthlin, a mild-mannered and brilliant former Berkeley economics professor, who was Reagan's pollster. He met with Reagan every week to look at the numbers, and said he would talk to him about the bill. Wirthlin said he grew up with a Nisei boy in Murray, Utah, and knew the story of internment. My guess is that Dick decided not to pursue the issue aggressively. He did call me after House passage and said that the White House was dead set against, and recommended that we wait another two years. We couldn't and we didn't.

The third was Ed Rollins, who managed Reagan's landslide re-election in 1984. He said he would help out of respect for an East Bay Nisei who owned an ice company near Oakland. As a kid he worked for the Nisei, who told him the camp story and showed no bitterness. Ed said he loved that Nisei man. So far as I know, Ed never talked to the President, and I met with Ed three times.

The fourth was Governor Tom Kean of New Jersey, and he put himself out in a way that has become well known among Japanese Americans. After lobbying the issue with Reagan and his Chief of Staff Ken Duberstein, Tom put the letter from June Masuda Goto into a mail pouch that went directly to the President. I see Rudy Tokiwa here today, and there would have been no letter from June without Rudy, a 442 buddy of her fallen brother Kaz.

The effect of the letter on Reagan was something like this: Japanese American redress is not about protective custody, not about an ethnic Democratic constituency, but about the heroes of the 442 and about the ceremony in Santa Ana where I spoke years ago. And it's about the federal government barging into people's lives, when the federal government should just stay small and limited. I get it, I'm for this thing. I don't care what the Justice Department says, don't care what the deficit hawks at OMB think, I'm on board.

On Valentine's Day in February of 1988, I met with Ken Duberstein and his aide, a guy named Will Ball, in Duberstein's West Wing office. Ken was a smoker, and was running a little vacuum device attached to an ashtray. Ken told me that the President was definitely signing. Am I telling you the real story? Write Duberstein in Washington, and ask him.

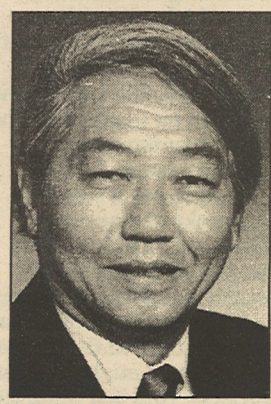
Walking back up Connecticut Avenue to the JAACL office where Grayce Uyehara was waiting, I was very happy.

Finally, I want to talk about Marie Blanco, an aide to Sen. Inouye. She worked with a Darman aide named Janet Hale at OMB [Office of Management and Budget] to assure the entitlement appropriation idea became a reality. For me, Marie represents the hundreds of redress people, especially younger Nisei women, who did tons and tons of work, but who get virtually no credit.

Thank you, Marie. We wouldn't be here today without you. Nobody can sell a car better than you.

Thank you all very much for listening. ■

Meet the Author



Grant Ujifusa

A Wyoming-born Sansei, Grant Ujifusa served as the JACL-LEC strategy chair following Congressional passage of the Civil Liberties Act, by the House in September 1987, and by the Senate in April 1988. A possible presidential veto loomed. While a network of JAACLers, Nisei veterans and former internees were contacting members of Congress, bipartisan leaders of congress were brought on board early as one of the necessary strategies to push the redress bill through Congress. Ujifusa, co-author of *The Almanac of American Politics*, used his connections to get through closed doors. He knew the mechanics of politics. The effort paid off, as we all know. In response to our request and from his friends, the text of his Sept. 13, 1997, speech given at the so-called UCLA redress summit, appears on this page. ■