

Denny Yasuhara, Redress Champion

No one will be surprised to learn that there was an inside and an outside battle to secure redress, one inside JACL and another outside in Washington. The indispensable leader inside was Denny Yasuhara of Spokane. Denny carried Harry Kajihara of Oxnard to a win over the tall, physically striking Rose Ochi of LA in the race for JACL National President at the July, 1985, Chicago Convention. Kajihara was the candidate of the Redress Faction on the National Board, and wanted the organization's focus to be kept solely on HR 442.

Ochi at the same Convention was the candidate of Japan Trade Faction, and wanted to use JACL to lobby the interests of the Japanese government and corporations in Washington. At the time, Japan's economy seemed ready to take over world, but trade disputes with American politicians threatened Japanese access to the American market.

Earlier both Yasuhara as Chairman of the Board of Governors and PSW's Ochi served on the National Board, where the Japan Trade faction had 6, sometimes 7, backers among the 16 members of JACL's governing body. The Redress Faction had 10, sometimes 9, backers, depending on how a particular motion speaking to the heated internal dispute was framed. The Japan Traders knew that the by-laws required 8 votes on the board to carry the day. A tie would give National President, Frank Sato, a Japan Trader, the right to vote to break the deadlock.

At series of crucial board meetings in 1983, 1984, and 1985, Denny, the Redress Faction's champion on the Board, kept the number at seven or fewer. Denny knew that using JACL to lobby on behalf of the Japanese government had virtually no support among the organization's rank and file members.

Even so, on the second day of the July 1985 JACL National Convention held in Chicago, Ochi was thought to have a commanding 10 to 15-vote lead among the 121 chapter delegates for National President. She was so physically striking that Norm Mineta was led to say that image projected by Ms. Ochi was exactly the image Japanese Americans should present to the American public.

But the problem with Mineta's opinion was that Rose Ochi was, in effect and in fact, the candidate of the LDP, the party of Japan's big corporate interests, for the leadership of an American organization. In fact, her candidacy was put into play by the Japanese Consul General in Los Angeles.

John Tateishi, a staffer relieved of his JACL redress duties in March of 1985, came to the Chicago Convention to argue that JACL should not become a single-issue organization, that it should instead have two priority issues, one of which was lobby the interests of the Japanese at all levels of government in the United States, and for that matter, to push their interests with anybody who would listen.

Some months earlier both Ochi and Tateishi were beneficiaries of gold-plated trips to Japan, where they were received as if they were major American dignitaries. Thanks to the PR people at the Los Angeles Japanese Consulate, Ms. Ochi's trip received front page coverage in the *Los Angeles Times*. And more trips were to come, and the trips looked to be only the beginning in what was to become a gravy train for a select JACL few -- but only if the organization was delivered.

The idea to use Japanese Americans for Japanese purposes was the hare-brained scheme of Wataru Hiraizumi, a Minister Without Portfolio in the Nakasone cabinet, who believed the Japanese Americans could back Japan with the same clout that American Jews backed Israel. He was totally misguided. Happily the junkets were put to an end by Nakasone himself after a JACL lobbyist and his friend, the Japanese Consul General in New York, got it to the Prime Minister that the trips and Hiraizumi's outreach to JACL endangered Japanese American redress. But that was to come three months later.

Back at the Chicago Convention, Denny relentlessly twisted arms behind the scenes and produced a Harry Kajihara win by 3 chapter votes out of 121 cast on the fifth day of the proceedings. The result kept JACL committed solely to redress and proscribed lobbying for the Japanese government or any Japanese interest.

Proscribed because a single story in a major media outlet would have destroyed Japanese American redress: if you're in bed with these people now, what were you up to in 1942? Back then you attacked Pearl Harbor and sunk the *Arizona*. Now you're decimating Detroit and buying up Pebble Beach. As a caller to a talk radio show put it, "Would you believe that the politicians are thinking about giving the people who bombed Pearl Harbor \$20,000 each. How crazy is that?"

In my judgement, two chapter votes in Chicago the other way would have meant the end of Japanese American redress.

But what was thinking of the Japan Trade Faction, which not only had the determined support of John Tateishi, but of National Director Ron Wakabayashi? Both the Faction and the staffers thought redress was a hopeless enterprise because the bill had been forever bottled up by a conservative Democratic subcommittee chairman in the House and an equally conservative Republican committee chairman in the Senate. Then there was conservative President Ronald Reagan, reelected in a 49-state landslide in 1984, whose Administration even before his reelection had announced public opposition to HR 442.

The Faction and the staffers felt that JACLers wanting to push redress were the politically naive teachers and social workers in the membership ranks. Why shouldn't JACL be used for something within reach? The bill was forever dead.

Denny, Grayce Uyehara, and Cherry Kinoshita felt deeply that the Japan Traders had to be stopped, that we owed it to the internees, morally obligated in fact, to give redress our absolute best effort, bad though the prospects for success seemed to be.

And our best effort needed National JACL and Grayce Uyehara to engage the *undivided* commitment of the 121 local chapters and 22,000 JACL chapter members found in congressional districts across the country. Why? Because only people living inside particular congressional district can vote for or against their House member in the next election. And for that reason, she will listen carefully to what her constituents have to say – to voters committed to an issue like ours,

willing to come to lobby her face-to-face in her district office or even come to Washington to make the same case for redress. Many of these JACL citizen lobbyists were Nisei women.

Nobody outside the House member's district really matters, unless he is a big donor or a member of the national media. A constituent lobbying his own Member of Congress lay at the heart of JACL's effort to put together 218 votes on the House floor for HR 442. And Denny's heroic work at arguably the important Convention in JACL history made it possible for us to put a Politics 101 dictum – that all politics are local – at the center of our lobbying strategy to win House passage.

The record shows, for example, that in New Jersey, an unlikely locale for Japanese Americans, 13 out of the 15 members of the state's congressional delegation voted "yea" on redress, thanks to the leadership of Tom Kometani. Only Cherry Kinoshita's Washington state produced better numbers, 10 out of 10. Results out of California were nowhere close to either state.

Among many others who helped to produce "yea" votes in unlikely locales were Gene Doi in Atlanta, Georgia – Republican Congressman Pat Swindall -- and Ruth Hashimoto in Albuquerque, New Mexico – Republican Senator Pete Domenici.

Denny Yasuhara, a middle school teacher, was barely 5'3" tall, really smart, and absolutely fearless. And it didn't hurt that he was a close personal and political friend of House Speaker Tom Foley, chief sponsor of HR 442. Both called Spokane, Washington, home. Denny died in 2002.

Most Japanese Americans don't know much about the world-class nitty-gritty it took to make redress a reality. Over time, more will as scholars and students look into the work of people like Denny Yasuhara. But I will say it now: No redress without Denny. Nothing, nada. zip.

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