

REDRESS AND REPARATIONS: AN HISTORIC VICTORY

Statement by Bert Nakano, NCCR National Spokesperson

President Reagan's decision to sign into law the Japanese American and Aleut reparations bill is a tremendous and sweet victory, especially for Japanese Americans, but also for all Americans and people everywhere who treasure Constitutional freedoms, civil rights and simple justice.

Just as the wartime concentration camps are an indelible part of our history, a turning point, so too is this victory. We the Japanese American people have forced the highest official bodies in the land to acknowledge and make amends for the grave injustices perpetrated upon us 46 years ago. It is a moment as brilliant and joyous for us as the concentration camps were dark and dismal.

The legislation calls for an official apology and reparations to Japanese Americans who in 1942, without a shred of due process, were rounded up by the U.S. government and incarcerated in desolate camps, surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards; and also to Aleuts who suffered hardship, disease and death as a result of government relocation during World War II.

The government's drastic actions gave official sanction to patently false accusations that all Japanese Americans were potential spies and saboteurs. Finally, with the formal enactment of this measure, we can say that these vile accusations have been laid to rest once and for all.

A Deterrent and Reminder

As we have maintained since the beginning, this legislation strikes a significant blow against government abuses of Constitutional rights. It also helps to reaffirm the principle that minorities, racial or otherwise, have equal rights and protections, which the government and the majority are bound to respect.

The token compensation cannot bring back the lost, broken and disrupted lives, hopes and careers, but we believe it will serve as a deterrent and reminder to those who might be tempted to repeat history, whether it be with Latin Americans, Arab Americans or any other group that may become the target of racism and national hysteria. We hope our victory will serve as an inspiration to other groups that are similarly seeking redress for the grievous social injustices they suffered or are suffering.

Key Congressional Supporters

We want to take this opportunity to express our most profound thanks and gratitude to all of the many members of Congress who helped enact this bill. In addition, we must also acknowledge the special roles played by Senators Spark Matsunaga, Robert Byrd, Ted Stevens, John Glenn and Daniel Inouye, Speaker of the House Jim Wright, House Majority Leader Thomas Foley, and Representatives Norm Mineta, Robert Matsui, Pat Saiki, Peter Rodino, Barney Frank and Mervyn Dymally. The dedication and personal effort of these and other supporters were indispensable and should never be forgotten.

Unprecedented Grassroots Campaign

But most of all, we want to credit the former internees and other members of the Japanese American community who, against all odds, overcame many obstacles to mount and sustain an unprecedented grassroots campaign over the last decade. This

campaign was the very foundation for today's victory. It made all the difference in the world. Above all, this victory belongs to these grassroots heroes and heroines.

It was they who endured and, more often than is realized, resisted the wartime violation of their rights. Many of them were treated as criminals for their resistance. It is they who sacrificed so selflessly on the battlefields of Europe and the Pacific during the war to vindicate the honor of their families back home behind barbed wire. It is they who uncovered in dingy archives documentation of the government's suppression of evidence, and who forced the courts to vacate the Supreme Court-upheld convictions of Fred Korematsu and Gordon Hirabayashi.

It is they who cast aside their fears and desire to forget in order to testify so eloquently at the Commission hearings in 1981. And it is they who rallied the groundswell of support from Americans of all colors and organizations of all creeds, urging them to pass resolutions, contact their representatives and send tens of thousands of support letters and mailgrams. It was this tremendous show of support that set the stage for Congress and the President to act.

Asian American Political Strength

This campaign has helped to awaken Japanese Americans and Asian Americans to our potential political strength. We now understand much better how the political system works. We recognize more clearly that we have the ability and duty to speak out for our rights and work toward social justice for all. During the long campaign for redress, we in the NCRR became involved in a number of other issues, including opposing the nomination of Rep. Dan Lungren as Treasurer of California, opposing the nomination of Robert Bork as a U.S. Supreme Court justice, and opposing the eviction of American Indians at Big Mountain.

We believe that this victory is not the end, but rather just the beginning of a new stage in our development. Now more than 6.5 million strong and still growing fast, never again will we or other Asian Americans tolerate being shut out of the political system or seeing our legitimate rights and concerns disregarded.

Those Not Here to Celebrate

Even in the midst of this triumph, however, we recall with deep sorrow all those who are not here to share in this momentous occasion. Of the more than 120,000 Japanese Americans who were incarcerated in 1942, up to 80,000, or two-thirds, have already passed away. Sadly, they did not live to see their names cleared or hear the government's apology, and neither they nor their children born after the camps will see any compensation at all for their long years of humiliation and pain. At the outset, we sought to have such heirs included in the bill, but, to be sure, we did not win everything we originally sought. We did, however, win much more than anyone believed at all possible just a few years ago.

Don't Further Prolong the Wait for Justice

We understand that the bill, as signed, provides for the payments to be made over a period ranging from 3 to 10 years. We call upon Congress and the next President to end the 46-year wait for justice by expediting appropriations so that all those eligible can be paid in the shortest possible period of time. We in the NCRR plan to follow through by closely monitoring the level of funds appropriated to carry out this new law. We trust that we can count on each and every one of our supporters, in and out of Congress, to help ensure that this law is fairly and rapidly carried out.