

The U.S. Constitution: An Ideal Not Matched in Deeds

Below are excerpts from the welcoming speech to 120 members of a redress lobbying delegation organized by the National Coalition for Redress/Reparations (NCCR). The delegation met from July 25 to 29 in Washington, D.C. with 101 members of Congress or their aides, urging them to vote for bills H.R. 442 and S. 1009.

By Bert Nakano

This is a critical time for the Civil Liberties Act of 1987, also known as H.R. 442 and S. 1009 in Congress. For the first time ever, H.R. 442 has been reported out of subcommittee and the Judiciary Committee, and now the stage is set for a vote by the entire House of Representatives.

Sacrifices in Vain?

We feel a deep sense of urgency about passing the bills. We know that every month, every year that goes by, more and more of the internees pass away. Only about half remain. Also, more and more of the veterans of the 422nd R.C.T., the 100th Battalion and MIS are passing away. And as they do, we wonder if their enormous sacrifices and those of their fallen comrades will have been in vain.

We have worked for 10 years and more to ensure that those sacrifices and the terrible injustice inflicted on all those in the camps shall not have been in vain. We initiated this unprecedented grassroots lobbying delegation to take our message directly to Congress, the highest law-making body in the nation. And the response we have gotten to the delegation has shown clearly that we truly represent the strongly-felt sentiments of the vast majority of Nikkei.

Issue of the Present

Recent events have also shown us that redress is not just

an issue of the past concerning Nikkei only, but rather, it is an issue of the present and one that affects the entire country.

The flurry of hate mail directed against Sen. Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii) after the testimony of Lt. Col. Oliver North shows us that the racism that led up to the camps is with us still today. Despite Inouye's heroic military record and his distinguished tenure in the Senate, too many bigoted elements in the country still dismiss him with a racial epithet. We say if this can happen to someone like Inouye, how far have we really come since the camps?

Debate on the trade issue is continuing to heat up, and with it, the tendency on the part of some to make it a racial issue. We recognize the importance of trade and the economy, but we are concerned at how easily anger and frustration at the difficulties in the U.S. economy can lead to anti-Asian violence. The murder of Vincent Chin by two unemployed auto workers who thought he was Japanese and therefore to blame for their loss of jobs brought this into sharp relief.

More Concentration Camps?

It has also come out recently that Oliver North was involved in drafting contingency plans for dealing with national emergencies, including reportedly a plan to round up and detain Black Americans in concentration camps in the event of civil unrest. It also included a plan to suspend the Constitution under certain circumstances, although these things have been hushed up.

So it is quite appropriate for us to be here and for Congress to vote on the Civil Liberties Act of 1987 during the bicentennial

of the U.S. Constitution.

We learn in school how the Constitution and especially the Bill of Rights guarantees equal rights for all, regardless of race, creed or color, and undoubtedly we will hear this repeated many times during the bicentennial celebrations.

Bitter Lesson

But those of us who were in the camps learned a painful and bitter lesson—that too often, the Constitution has been an ideal not matched by deeds. This has been true not just for us, but also in the case of American Indians and the black slaves that the Constitution legally recognized as property of their owners. In the case of women, it was not until well into this century that the Constitution was amended to allow women even the right to vote.

The Constitution and the civil liberties it identifies are, in the end, what we the people make of them. Our effort to redress the camps is one of many efforts to make the ideals of that historic document correspond with our daily reality.

Therefore, our fight to win long-overdue justice has much broader significance. If we are successful in passing the Civil Liberties Act of 1987, we will not only be vindicating the Nikkei affected in WW2, but also helping to reaffirm, reestablish and strengthen basic constitutional and human rights *for all*. The individual payments, if passed, should prove to be a powerful deterrent to any future such injustice.

With all this in mind, let's go for broke and get this bill passed!

(Bert Nakano of Gardena, California, is a former internee. He is also NCCR's national spokesperson.)