

BERT NAKANO DELIVERS SPEECH ON REDRESS

By BERT NAKANO

Below is the text of the keynote address delivered before close to 1,000 people in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles on August 27 at the redress celebration organized by the National Coalition for Redress/Reparations (NCRR).

Thank you. This is very exciting, and it is a great day of celebration.

As I recall, when the camps closed, there weren't any parties. There was certainly no community celebration. Many of you here today, and your parents and grandparents, had no idea what the future held. Their businesses had been ruined, some had no homes to go back to, no employment, their property stolen even their family burial plots vandalized. And signs everywhere saying: No Japs. So there was no celebration when the war ended and we returned home.

Well my friends, today we celebrate. We can finally celebrate, because we've made history!

On August 10, 1942 — eight months after Pearl Harbor — all of the Japanese Americans on the West Coast had been rounded up. They were either in Assembly Centers or the Concentration Camps. On August 10, 1988, we achieved what we have been fighting for decades. The Camps were our nightmare. August 10th marks the beginning of our dream — a dream many of us thought would never come true.

HR 442 provides individual reparations to each Japanese American survivor of forced relocation and imprisonment. But it does more. Our victory strikes a direct blow against racism and against governmental disregard of the Constitutional rights of all people. We recognize that reparations cannot bring back the homes, the property and the lost years. In that respect, the redress payments can only be a token gesture.

And with sadness and bitterness, we recognize that more than half of those who were imprisoned had died before the law was enacted. They never received redress and never saw the day when the President and Congress finally offered to them and you and me, an apology on behalf of the entire nation. But passage of the payment of reparations will be a deterrent and reminder to those who would commit a similar injustice against other targets of racism and national hysteria, whether they are Arab Americans, Iranians, or new immigrants from Asia or Latin America.

As a monument to equal justice, winning redress is a tremendous achievement. Even more significant to those of us in NCRR, is how this victory was won.

The National Coalition for Redress/Reparations arose from the community. It has no paid staff. It has no lobbyists. It doesn't contribute to political campaigns. We are not a powerful special interest group. When we first set up our little folding tables with petitions and leaflets on the streets of Little Tokyo, San Francisco, San Jose, San Diego, Sacramento and New York, almost everyone we met said we were right. But almost no one believed we could win. How did it happen?

Ours was a grassroots movement. Our strength comes from the community.

NCRR's demands came out of the overwhelming sentiments of the community, for individual restitution to the victims of the Concentration Camps. NCRR also believed very strongly that the necessary components to achieving victory were: 1) to involve the entire community behind the struggle and 2) to insist upon and strive for UNITY in the community. NCRR exists because of the courage and conscience of people like yourselves. We have inherited a history of struggle for justice.

We salute today the Japanese Americans who served in the military with courage and distinction, at Anzio and Cassino and the Philippines. We salute the conscience of those who resisted the draft and went to prison and fought injustice in the camps and said No No as a statement of principle. We salute the people who returned to build our communities, and those who after decades of pain, finally shared their anguish and anger at the Commission hearings, which led to the redress bill. We thank all those who have contributed to the redress movement over the years, attending the Day of Remembrance celebrations, signing petitions, donating money, sending letters and contributing to our lobbying campaign last year. We especially honor those

who challenged the relocation and detention in court, even up to the Supreme Court of the United States. One modest gentleman who did it for all of us, is here with us today. In the history of Japanese America, he is a true hero. Please greet Fred Korematsu.

We in NCRR always believed that the courage of a united community would bring us victory. And that is how it happened.

Of course, we are deeply indebted to the many members of Congress who worked to make this victory possible. We are especially grateful to Congressmen Norman Mineta and Robert Matsui and Mervyn Dymally, and to other key members of the House: Jim Wright, Tom Foley, Peter Rodino, Barney Frank and Pat Saiki. In the Senate, special praise must go to Spark Matsunaga, as well as Robert Byrd, Ted Stevens, John Glenn and Danial Inouye.

This campaign has taught us much. It has awakened for all Asian/Pacific Americans our tremendous potential political power. Our numbers are growing and we will never again tolerate anyone violating our rights. But we know this power cannot be used selfishly. Having suffered deeply from injustice, we must take the higher ground and speak out forcefully against injustices inflicted upon others.

We opposed the nomination of Dan Lungren as Treasurer of California, and he was defeated. We publicly deplored statements of Japanese Government officials that reflected racism toward Black people. We, as many groups who value our civil rights, opposed the nomination to the Supreme Court of Robert Bork. We protested and rallied against the ouster of Native Americans from Big Mountain.

Some believed that these outspoken stands would hurt our chances of winning redress. We disagreed. We were true to our highest principles. We took the path of conscience. And we formed alliances with other communities in the demand for justice. This made the Reagan administration take notice. Reagan's signature was no gift. His Justice Department had been fighting the bill since the beginning. But the political unity of the community, the historical record established by our own testimony, our alliances with other communities and the crucial work of our friends in Congress made it politically impossible for him to veto the bill.

And that is why, now, we can celebrate.

But after tonight's festivities, when the chairs are folded up, there will be more to be done. Even after victory, we cannot afford to slow down. Those of our older generation are slowly passing away.

First, the appropriation of funds. Each year, Congress must pass an appropriations measure to make the payments. We are pushing for the maximum appropriations — \$500 million — in each of the first two years, and the rest of the funds in the third year.

Second, we need to monitor the payment program to be sure it is implemented QUICKLY and FAIRLY.

Third, we need to ensure that community-minded people are appointed to the Board of Directors of the \$50 million educational trust fund, so that the intent of the legislation is carried out.

This will mean more work. We need your continuing support. We in NCRR call on you to stay involved. Without support, organization and, yes, your monetary contribution, we could never have achieved what we have. It must continue.

We have won a tremendous victory for justice. But we know that in the struggle for justice, there are many more battles to be fought. We know that the struggle against anti-Asian racism, for respect, and for full empowerment, continues.

But we can forge ahead, full of hope and confidence. We are strengthened by the lessons we have learned in the campaign for redress/reparations. We can hold our heads high, knowing that we stood up for what's right. When we, as a community stand up together, united and determined, we can win. As Jesse Jackson said, when those on the bottom stand up, all of society will move. We have moved America.

And as we continue to stand together and struggle together, for justice and democracy, we can all look forward to a brighter future for all people.

WE HAVE WON REPARATIONS — WE CAN WIN THAT FUTURE!

(Bert Nakano is a spokesman for the (NCRR) National Coalition for Redress/Reparations.)