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LIFE AFTER REDRESS

By MIYA IWATAKI

I think it is particularly significant that at the National Coalition for Redress and Reparations (NCRR) statewide meeting—which was held on Saturday, Jan. 20, in San Jose—the topic was “Life After Redress,” as opposed to the question form, “Is There Life After Redress?”

The meeting seemed amazingly efficient. We covered everything on the agenda and even adjourned 10 minutes early. Upon reflecting back, it is clear that each chapter was so like-minded that our reports blended into one another. We were absolutely unified on the major questions. (It's the smaller questions: methodology, organizational structure, nuts and bolts, that take time to hammer out.)

Background

Redress and Reparations is an issue that united our community. Every Japanese American, regardless of their age, whether or not they were born in camps, and whether or not they recognize it or admit it, has been touched by the camp experience. Yes, as always there are those few anti-redress Nikkei. But the overwhelming sentiment in our community is pro-redress; and thousands of people were activated, energized and empowered by one of the most dramatic campaigns for justice this country has ever witnessed.

In the 10-year victorious battle for redress legislation, we were witness to the political education of an entire community. Never before had so many Asians, let alone Japanese Americans, walked the Halls of Congress.

We made history. And brought our fight for justice to the forefront of American consciousness. We made history. Legislatively, and through the Judiciary.

We made history. Tens of thousands who had suffered through the indignity of the camp experience, and should have received their compensation long ago, are no longer with us. And several thousands more who were alive when President Reagan finally signed our bill on Aug. 10, 1988, and should have been the first to receive compensation, are no longer with us. Our hope is that they passed on knowing that we had finally won justice, that through our work we had become themakers of history.

Finally, the end is in sight. The community is at a crossroads. Is there another issue like Redress that has such a fundamental and clearly unifying basis? How can we maintain and build on the spirit, the organization and the activism that has emerged and grown over the past 10-year campaign? These are the questions that NCRR is grappling with.

We began with the “givens”:

1. NCRR WILL STAY TOGETHER AS A NATIONAL ORGANIZATION. In California alone, Asian Pacific Islanders continue to be the fastest growing group. This fact alone underlines the growing need for organization and leadership: an organized and unified voice is a stronger and more effective voice. And an organization based upon clear principles of unity has a unified voice that can respond quickly to issues.

The 1990 Census (even with the expected undercount) will reveal how quickly our Asian Pacific communities are growing. With that growth comes the need for organization, leadership and empowerment as a social, economic and political force.

On the other side of the coin, our growth and political clout is a threat to many and we are already witnessing an alarming increase in anti-Asian violence and bigotry. We need a national organization that will respond quickly to these assaults on our community.

2. OVER THE NEXT TWO YEARS OR SO, OUR MAIN FOCUS WILL REMAIN REDRESS AND REPARATIONS WORK, UNTIL THE REDRESS PROCESS IS COMPLETED. This means:

- a. Continued Eligibility follow-up and assistance to survivors.
- b. Educational work, i.e., curriculum projects for Japanese American history in the schools, oral history projects (which NCRR San Jose is already working on), and so on.
- c. Continued discussion and investigation around the idea of a “Community Fund” which could be used for basic needs (i.e., Nikkei senior citizen housing). The legislated Trust Fund can only be used for “educational” purposes.
- d. Other miscellaneous related work such as supporting amendments or riders to the bill addressing non-Japanese Americans who went to camp, working to see Day of Remembrance become a recognized statewide or national calendared day, etc.

3. NCRR WILL REMAIN BASED IN THE JAPANESE AMERICAN COMMUNITY. There is still a need for a vehicle for involvement as Nikkei, not only in Nikkei issues, but issues affecting Asian Pacific Islanders, people of color, people fighting for justice. NCRR will continue our work in these areas.

4. NCRR WILL CONTINUE TO BE MULTI-GENERATIONAL. We will maintain our Nisei base as well as recruit more Sansei and Yonsei who have a desire to become active in the community.

5. NCRR WILL CONTINUE TO BE A GRASSROOTS, PROGRESSIVE ORGANIZATION.

Areas of Future Work

In the initial discussion, all of the regional chapters of NCRR were unified on the following major areas of involvement for the future. These are “broad strokes” that will be refined, and may be changed based on future discussions and the changing needs and concerns of our community.

● **Human and Civil Rights Work**—taking up a broader range of issues confronting racism and other forms of discrimination, anti-Asian violence and bigotry.

● **Multinational Coalition Building**—the key to any successful campaign. Taking up issues involving other groups, from a Japanese American perspective. Initiate informal roundtable discussions with other communities. continue support work with other groups.

● **Politics**—Continue to build the political empowerment of our community. Continue our “grassroots diplomacy” work. Work to develop an Asian Pacific agenda: platforms, issues, stances that could be used to measure political candidates that seek our support.

● **Discussion about the pros and cons of having an office and staff, while maintaining NCRR's grassroots, activist, progressive, independent character.**

● **A multitude of other issues** ranging from redistricting, textbook review boards, Asians image in media, university admissions policies, apartheid, fingerprinting, housing, etc. There are more than enough areas of need.

In November 1980, the National Coalition for Redress/Reparations was born at our founding convention in Los Angeles. Ten years later, in November 1990, we will again organize a convention in Los Angeles to refine and ratify our future direction. And, to address some of the difficult questions we face as we meet the challenge of the new decade, and move on towards the Year 2,000.

Forward Ever! Backward Never!

(Miya Iwataki is national legislative chair for the National Coalition for Redress/Reparations.)