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NEWSLETTER NO. 100-7

COMMITTEE
APPROPRIATIONS

CHAIRMAN, INTERIOR AND
RELATED AGENCIES

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

September 21, 1987

Dear Friend:

In 1949 I wrote a newsletter which turns out to be most appropriate in connection with a bill passed by the House last week. This is what I wrote on May 13, 1949:

In one of the newspapers I saw an item on Etsu Masaoka. Etsu is the wife of Mike Masaoka, Legislative Director of the Japanese-American Citizens League. Her statement made a deep impression on me, just as did a statement her husband had made a few weeks ago, and I thought that you would be interested in knowing a little about the Masaokas. Their attitude, I believe, is representative of all minorities.

I came to know Mike when I joined with four other Congressmen in introducing H.R. 199, a bill designed to end the discriminatory immigration policy of the Oriental Exclusion Act of 1924, by permitting non-American born Japanese to become United States citizens. There are many such people within our District. They are known as the Issei. Their children, who have been born within this country, are American citizens and are known as the Nisei. I never knew a more hard-working, thrifty, honest group. They contribute generously of their time and money to the charity and welfare drives of the community and participate in every respect with its best elements. I was very happy when the House passed the bill.

Mike, like many of the Nisei of the Ninth District, was a combat veteran of the famous 442nd Regimental Combat Team. This was a fighting unit composed almost exclusively of the Nisei who volunteered for military duty from behind the barbed-wire fences of relocation centers and went on to win more citations and medals, including the Congressional Medal of Honor, than any other comparable unit -- and as many casualties in killed and wounded. These were the boys who were made honorary citizens of the State of Texas when they were sent out to rescue the Texas Lost Battalion of 200. They rescued the 200, but lost more men themselves than they saved.

Mike's voice was quiet when he spoke to the Committee of his comrades in the 442nd; his explanation sounded so simple:

"I say this not to brag about our outfit -- although I think it is an American trait to brag about a good outfit like that -- but I say it simply to indicate that here you had a great number of American soldiers of Japanese ancestry who believed in America; who so believed in it that even though they were incarcerated in virtual prisons they saw behind and beyond the barbed-wire fences; they saw beyond the watchtowers manned by armed MP's; they saw America, just and fairminded, willing to give them and their parents a decent break.... And that is why, even though they were suspected by their own Government, they went out and fought as well as they did."

The item about Etsu Masaoka was brief. It said:

"A Japanese-American wife who knew the 'stigma of confinement' in a war relocation camp in this country has contributed to the 250 million dollar United Jewish Appeal.

"Mrs. Etsu Masaoka stated: 'I hope that my little contribution to the United Jewish Appeal will help the displaced Jews of Europe find the same measure of security in Israel which we of Japanese ancestry have found in the United States. I was interned behind a barbed-wire fence in this country for a year while my husband served in the Army. I know the feelings, the hope and the aspirations of these people who were behind similar fences.'"

We must do our best to tear down all fences.

(over)

Last week the House considered the bill, of which I was a cosponsor, to redress the wrong done to Japanese Americans by the United States Government in jailing them in detention camps during World War II. The bill offered an apology to the Japanese Americans and twenty thousand dollars to each survivor of those incarcerated. The interesting and dramatic high point of the debate came when Congressmen Norman Mineta and Robert Matsui from California rose to argue in favor of the bill. Norman Mineta is Etsu Masaoka's brother. Both congressmen were with their parents when they were swept up from their homes by the army and sent to the camps. Mineta described it in this way:

One night in early 1942, when we did not know what events were to come, my Father called our family together. I had one sister in San Francisco, but the rest of us, the four of us, were still in San Jose. He said he did not know what the war would bring to my Mother and to him since they were resident aliens, my Dad having come in 1902 and my Mother in 1912, but with the Oriental exclusion law of 1924 they were not able to become citizens because they were prohibited by that racial exclusion law from becoming U.S. citizens. However, he was confident that his beloved country would guarantee and protect the rights of his children, American citizens all. But his confidence, as it turned out, was misplaced.

I was born in this country, as were most of those who were interned, yet at that time even citizenship was not enough if your parents or grandparents had come from Japan. So on May 29, 1942, my Father loaded his family upon that train under armed guard which was taking us from our home in San Jose to an unknown distant barracks. He was later to write to friends in San Jose, and he wrote in that letter about his experience and his feelings as our train pulled out of the station. I quote from the letter: 'I looked at Santa Clara's streets from the train over the subway. I thought this might be the last look at my loved home city. My heart almost broke, and suddenly hot tears just came pouring out, and the whole family cried out, could not stop, until we were out of our loved county.'

Mineta wiped a tear away as he referred to his parents.

I don't think any member now approves what our government did in 1942. None opposed the apology. There was opposition to the payment of \$20,000 to each survivor, about \$1.25 billion in all. Congressman Lungren of California offered the amendment to strike the monetary payment, saying, "the injustice cannot be translated into dollars... that history cannot be undone." I took issue with him and those who favored the amendment, asking them: "If several of your constituents were wrongfully arrested and imprisoned by police, would you deny them the right to compensation? American prisoners of war received compensation. Were not these Japanese-Americans also prisoners of war?" I reminded Lungren, a good lawyer, of the reply made by the distinguished lawyer, Clarence Darrow, to a woman he had successfully defended in court who cried: "Mr. Darrow, how can I ever repay you?" Darrow responded: "My dear madam, ever since the ancient Phoenicians invented money, there has only been one answer to that question."

But, prejudice dies hard. The assertion of one member that I found most disturbing was that approval of the compensation to the survivors would revive the same kind of racial hostility that prevailed at the time of the evacuation order. My response to him was that the best way to deal with that kind of insidious threat or warning was not to condone or accept it but to fight it by approving the bill.

The bill was approved by a vote of 243 to 131. The Reagan administration has threatened to veto the bill, another example of its indifference to human rights. One remembers playwright George Bernard Shaw's line in The Devil's Disciple: "The worst sin toward our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that's the essence of inhumanity."

Sincerely yours,

Norman R. Mineta