

San Diego State University

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NISEI HONORARY DEGREE CEREMONY

Keynote Address

By

Dr. Bob H. Suzuki

Good afternoon, and thank you, Vice Chancellor Ashley. I also wish to thank President Steve Weber for giving me the honor of speaking at this historic Nisei Honorary Degree Ceremony. Let me also commend the California State University and San Diego State University, in particular, for giving this very special recognition to our Nisei honorees. And I especially want to offer my heartiest congratulations both to the Nisei who are with us today and those who are here in spirit. The conferral of these honorary degrees is a wonderful idea; it is well deserved and symbolically very important.

As someone who experienced internment myself, this ceremony has a lot of personal meaning for me, as well as for you, the honorees. However, I was only six years old at the time and went through first through third grades in the Minadoka, Idaho internment camp. If I had been old enough to be in college, like all of you honorees, I can only imagine how you must have felt to be forced to terminate your higher education under those traumatic and demoralizing circumstances.

Your average age at the time of internment was about 19 and almost all of you were American-born citizens. I'm sure your education in American schools imbued you with a deep belief in such American ideals as democracy, liberty and freedom, making you among the most loyal and patriotic citizens of this nation.

Nevertheless, the U.S. government decided you could not be trusted and rounded you up along with about 120,000 other Japanese Americans, two-thirds of whom were American-born citizens, and incarcerated you, without trials or even hearings, sometimes with only 48 hours notice. You could only take what you could carry and were held initially in temporary holding facilities, the so-called Assembly Centers, such as the Santa Anita Race Track in Los Angeles County and the Tanforan Race Track in Northern California.

Our family of five was taken to the Portland, Oregon Livestock Pavilion, where the county fair was held every year. We were assigned an animal stall which still had the stench of its previous occupants and which was barely large enough to sleep the five of us. The conditions in the other Assembly Centers were equally atrocious.

After spending 8 months in the Assembly Center, we were moved to one of the 10 internment camps consisting of tarpaper-covered barracks that were hastily built in some of

the most desolate and god-forsaken areas of the country. As young as I was, I can still vividly remember our family of five housed in a single 20x20 foot room furnished with only a potbelly stove and some army cots. This was our home for 3 years.

Many of you probably have similar memories and may remember, as I do, the periodic dust storms in the summer when dust would seep through the cracks in the thin walls, and when snow and ice-cold wind would seep through in the winter. Yet, despite these miserable and demoralizing circumstances, through courage and determination, you made the best of the situation, and tried to lead lives that were as normal as possible. I can remember, as I'm sure you do, the movies that were shown in the central cafeteria, the various social events such as celebrating Oshogatsu and the kenjikai picnics, baseball games, and dances with live bands. Through such activities, you struggled with grace and dignity to maintain a sense of community.

But I'm sure you have many unpleasant memories as well, such as the suicides and mental breakdowns by some individuals, the barely edible and monotonous food in the cafeterias, conflicts and divisions caused by the administration of the so-called "Loyalty Questionnaire," and in a few camps, the killing by guards of several internees, and strikes and riots against the camp administrators, among other memories.

Ironically, despite suspecting your loyalty, which is why the Loyalty Questionnaire was administered, the government decided to subject the men in the camps to the military draft. Several hundred of the Nisei said in effect, "Hell, no, I won't go!", and refused to be drafted as long as they and their families were imprisoned. For taking this position, they were court-martialed and sent to federal penitentiaries.

Several thousand other Nisei agreed to be drafted—maybe including some of you—and were placed in a segregated, all-Japanese American Army unit, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. They joined several thousand Nisei volunteers from Hawaii, where more Japanese Americans lived than on the mainland. But the Japanese Americans in Hawaii, who comprised almost 40% of the population there, were never mass incarcerated even though they were 2,500 miles closer to the enemy and even though Hawaii was where the attack on Pearl Harbor had occurred.

The 442nd Regimental Combat Team was sent to Italy to fight the Germans in some of the bloodiest battles of the war. Many of these Nisei felt they had to literally prove their loyalty in blood, as signified by the unit's motto, "Go for Broke." The unit suffered a casualty rate of over 300% and is recognized as the most highly decorated unit in U.S. Army history. In 2000, over fifty years later, the medals of 20 of the soldiers in this unit were

upgraded to Congressional Medals of Honor because a study concluded that their original medals had been downgraded due to discrimination.

The heroics of these brave men went a long way to discredit those who questioned the loyalty and patriotism of Japanese Americans. By the way, I should also mention that several hundred Nisei women also volunteered for the WAC and served this country honorably during the war.

In speaking to many Nisei about their internment experiences, I came to realize what a profound psychological impact internment had on them and why so many of them have been very reticent to talk about it, even to their kids. This internalization of their pain was especially evident during the public hearings held in the early 1980's by the U.S. Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment, a body created by the U.S. Congress to consider the basis for compensating Japanese Americans for their unconstitutional incarceration.

My wife and I attended the hearings in Los Angeles. Numerous former internees, both Nisei and Issei, testified at these hearings, and almost every one of them broke down and started crying as they told their stories of the hardships they suffered and endured. I don't think anyone who witnessed those hearings would ever make light of the internment experience and deny the enormous toll it took on the victims.

It is certainly understandable that many Nisei would not want to share such pain with their children; to want to protect them, to shield them from such painful experiences so they could grow up seeing the promise and hope of America, rather than its injustices and cruelties.

But it should also be noted that even during the darkest days of our incarceration, there were glimmers of hope. Many non-Japanese friends and neighbors supported the internees through numerous, small acts of kindness such as sending them food and basic supplies, looking after their property, writing them encouraging letters, and carrying out various tasks they didn't have time to attend to before their incarceration.

Beyond these individual acts, there was also a broader effort that should be mentioned. Various organizations and educational leaders, such as the YMCA, the YWCA, Robert Gordon Sproul of the University of California, and the Quaker organization, the American Friends Service Committee, among several others, organized the Student Relocation Council. The primary purpose of the council was to help college-age Nisei in the camps continue their education. Through its efforts, nearly 4,000 Nisei were able to leave the camps and continue their college education at institutions in the Midwest and East Coast. However, many Nisei opted not to participate in the program either because they were fearful of the hostility toward

Japanese Americans outside the camps, or because they did not want to leave their families in the camps to an uncertain fate. And, of course, many of the Nisei men were drafted into the military.

For those who were not able to participate in this program and complete their college education, the awarding of these honorary degrees will, hopefully, help make up to a small degree for the involuntary disruption of their education and bring closure to this most unfortunate chapter in their lives.

But I also believe the awarding of these honorary degrees is important for the symbolic significance of the message it sends to all Americans. It tells us that part of America's greatness is because it can own up to and make amends for its mistakes. Perhaps more importantly, it also tells us that we cannot take our democracy for granted, but that all Americans have a responsibility and stake in preserving our freedoms and liberties for all groups in our society regardless of race, religion or nationality.

In this regard, I believe we must remind ourselves of the immortal words of Pastor Martin Niemoller, who, in recounting his experiences in Nazi Germany, wrote (and I quote):

"In Germany, they came for the Communists and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me--and by that time there was no one left to speak up for me."

In concluding, let me just say to our Nisei honorees that in accepting these honorary degrees, you are speaking up not only for Japanese Americans, but for all Americans. Your experiences should be both a warning and an inspiration to all Americans. It warns us that the U.S. Constitution alone will not protect our liberties and freedoms; that it's just a piece of paper which is given life only by the efforts and vigilance of all of us to maintain our democratic principles and ideals for all of our citizens.

And it inspires us because after the internment, you did not allow yourselves to be consumed in bitterness, but through hard work and determination, you rebuilt your lives and helped ensure a brighter future for upcoming generations of Japanese Americans.

So, on behalf of all Japanese Americans, and dare I say, for all Americans, I want to express our gratitude to the honorees and the entire Nisei generation for their fortitude, resilience and sacrifice that has left us with such an enduring and important legacy.

Again, my heartiest congratulations to all of you! I hope you enjoy this wonderful day to the fullest! Thank you very much!