



Kathy Masaoka speaks to demonstrators at First and Alameda Streets, Los Angeles Little Tokyo, at a vigil for Lieutenant Ehren Watada. October 8, 2007. Photograph by Mary Uyematsu Kao

“Building a Movement to End this Illegal and Immoral War”

The Nikkei for Civil Rights & Redress
September 11 Committee

We want to share with *Amerasia Journal* readers how Nikkei for Civil Rights & Redress, formerly the National Coalition for Redress & Reparations, sees its task of building a progressive movement of Japanese and Asian Americans. In the 1980s and 1990s, this involved building a broad coalition to fight for and win reparations for Japanese Americans and eventually, partial reparations for Japanese Latin Americans who were forcibly brought to the United States during World War II.

Since September 11, 2001, one of our major efforts has been to build ties to the Muslim and Arab American communities in Los Angeles through the process of supporting their struggle for civil rights and against scapegoating and profiling. Another major effort has been to help win hearts and minds to oppose the war in Iraq. The remarkable and heroic stands taken by Lt. Ehren Watada, U.S. Army Chaplain James Yee, and others have been very effective in building this anti-war movement.

We in NCRR have intentionally prioritized building a broad-based movement on the critical issues of the day over settling old historical scores. The rigorous study of our history is valuable for everyone. Let the chips fall where they may, as our main purpose is to understand and illuminate the struggles our peoples have faced and their various responses, and to valorize their continuing resistance to political, legal, and racial oppression.

The Movement to Win Redress

NCRR was established in 1980 to build a grassroots movement for monetary redress and reparations for the U.S. government's

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incarceration of 120,000 Japanese Americans and Japanese Latin Americans. A number of us had come out of the struggles of the Little Tokyo People's Rights Organization. We had struggled against Japanese corporate projects and demanded that the New Otani Hotel not be built until senior housing, a community center, and a small business shopping mall were constructed.

In the years after the end of World War II, it was acceptable, even fashionable, for speakers to eloquently denounce the concentration camps as violations of our civil rights, and for organizations to pass resolutions of the same. However these feel-good expressions were not accompanied by organized efforts to actually achieve redress. It was only in the early 1980s that activists in NCRP and other organizations began strategizing, raising funds, and organizing for redress and reparations. NCRP had a common vision that it would take a strong grassroots movement, backed by a broad institutional coalition that could win monetary redress. Ultimately, success required pressuring President Reagan and a Congress dominated by Republicans and conservative southern Democrats to allocate one and a half billion dollars to redress this injustice.

NCRP has always supported the raising of individual voices about the incarceration experience. In fact, it can be argued that the redress movement only became an actual political movement after the 1981 Presidential Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC). Over 750 former internees brought their stories forward: no-no boys, 442nd veterans, and Japanese Latin Americans alike. Despite their divergent views, all shared the underlying theme of a tremendous injustice done. In Los Angeles, NCRP pushed for more people to testify, worked with individuals to prepare their stories, struggled with the officials to get a larger room for the hearings, translators for the Japanese-speaking Issei and an evening hearing at the Little Tokyo Towers for working people who could not come to the daytime hearings. It was through this experience that NCRP adopted a stance that the diversity of experiences needed to be heard and respected. After all, this was the first time that many people had talked about what had happened to them since the closing of the camps. While writer Frank Chin belittled the testifiers and the hearings as "a circus of freaks," NCRP viewed this democratic process as critical to galvanizing mass sentiment against the injustice of the camps and for individual monetary redress.

This was the essential position that supported the building of a united front of Japanese American organizations across the country to work—a campaign that we were prepared to be in for the long haul.

We started NCRR with the belief that a strong grassroots movement of Japanese Americans and our allies could be decisive in winning redress and reparations rather than relying on Washington lobbyists. In fact, NCRR organized a community delegation of 125 people—Nisei, Sansei, and Yonsei; truck drivers; teachers; 442 veterans and draft resisters. Moreover, we never saw this as a campaign for Japanese American interests alone, but as part of a wider, multiethnic movement for social change. Over the years, we actively supported Native American land rights, the unionization campaign at the New Otani Hotel, and upheld immigrants’ rights. We opposed apartheid in South Africa and the fingerprinting of Koreans in Japan, and the JAPSS Hair Salon. After September 11 we have built ties with the Muslim American, Arab American, and South Asian communities and worked together to end the war in Iraq.

Response to September 11, 2001:

The Candlelight Vigil in Little Tokyo

Immediately after September 11, we heard the hateful and racist voices on the airwaves, and imagined what it was like for the Issei and Nisei generations, and the fear and isolation they felt during World War II. Realizing that others in our community were in a similar situation as our community had once been, NCRR together with other community organizations, organized the candlelight vigil on September. Over 300 people gathered at the corner of Alameda and First in Little Tokyo behind a banner that read “In Remembrance—Embrace Life and Justice Not Revenge—Oppose Hate Crimes.” We expressed our support not only for the victims of 9/11 but also for the Muslim American and Arab American communities being blamed for the attacks. One of the important lessons we learned from the redress campaign was to support the civil liberties of others.

Lillian Nakano, a Nisei and NCRR member, spoke out against the killing of an Egyptian storeowner in El Monte and urged the public not to be silent as it was during the incarceration of Japanese Americans. Michel Shehadeh of the Arab American Anti-Discrimination Coalition (ADC), Omar Ricci of the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), and Ra’id Faraj of the Council on

First Break the Fast at Senshin Buddhist Temple in December 2001 with Reverend Mas, Salam Al-Marayati, and another MPAC member.

Photograph by Janice Yen



American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) thanked the Japanese American community for being the first to call their organizations and mosques to offer support and explained that Islam does not condone or encourage acts of terrorism.

NCRRC knew that this one vigil was not enough to prevent the scapegoating and hate crimes. We needed to build a real relationship with the Muslim American, Arab American, and South Asian communities. After the candlelight vigil, people met to form an ongoing committee called the NCRRC 9/11 Committee. Our first decision was to conduct outreach to the different communities.

Building Relationships with the Muslim American, Arab American, and South Asian Communities

One thing that the NCRRC 9/11 Committee realized very quickly was how little we all knew about Islam. In meetings with the Muslim Public Affairs Council we decided to hold a “break the fast” together. The first “Break the Fast,” held on December 8, 2001 at Senshin Buddhist Temple, focused on understanding Islam and Ramadan with a sharing of our Buddhist traditions and values. During World War II, Buddhist ministers were among the first to be rounded up after Pearl Harbor. Over 100 people gathered to do the Buddhist chant, hear the call to prayer, and eat together. From Salam Al-Marayati, we learned that Ramadan is a training to become a more just and compassionate person, an important Buddhist value as well. However, Rev. Mas Kodani emphasized that we do not have to look for similarities in our religions in order to support each other. Our humanity and our experiences as Japanese Americans obligate us to act.

In four consecutive years, we jointly hosted “Breaking the Ramadan Fast” events between our communities, each organized differently to reach more people. The second “Break the

Fast” brought many more Muslims to Senshin who shared readings from the Koran and a resolution that read: “We American Muslims and Japanese Americans share many values and have common commitments, among them a reverence for the dignity and honor of every human being. Our communities, represented by MPAC and the NCCR September 11 Committee, pledge to further strengthen our dialogue to promote peace and justice in the community and safeguard our civil liberties. In the spirit of celebrating our diversity, we gather to share a Ramadan *iftar* at the Senshin Buddhist Temple in Los Angeles, on Saturday, November 16, 2002.” In 2003, we collaborated with Great Leap to bring the Latino and Native American experiences into the exchange and called it “To All Relations: Sacred Moon Songs.” With the hope of drawing more Japanese Americans, Christian and Buddhist, the fourth “Break the Fast” was held in Little Tokyo at both the Higashi Hongwangji Temple and the Centenary Methodist Church with the theme of “Communities Under Siege: Keeping the Faith.” Starting at Higashi Buddhist Temple, an interfaith panel of Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, Native American, Catholic, and Muslim participants presented their views on the war, civil rights, and issues in their own communities. The sharing of food, cultural performances, and support continued at Centenary Church and ended with the words “we stand on your shoulders” from MPAC.

Continuing to Educate through Programs and Days of Remembrances

Educational Programs

As we built relationships we also saw the need to educate ourselves and our community about issues and concerns in the Muslim American, Arab American, and South Asian communi-

Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) awarded “Muslim Appreciation Award” to NCCR on September 8, 2002 at the Islamic Center. MPAC and NCCR members are pictured below.

Photograph by Janice Yen





Michel Shehadeh of the Arab American Anti-discrimination Committee speaking at Day of Remembrance 2002.

Photograph courtesy of Janice Yen

ties. One of the first programs we held was on the conditions Afghan Women face and the work of the Revolutionary Association of Afghan Women, which builds schools for young women. In addition, we needed to understand the Middle East conflict between Palestine and Israel and organized an educational called "Prospects for Peace in the Middle East" to give us insight into the reasons "why they hate America." With the help of Dr. Mahmoud Ibrahim of California Polytechnic University, Pomona; Yosshi Khen, a former Israeli soldier; and Kamal Al-Shamshieh of MPAC, we learned both the history and

the personal feelings of the people in Palestine and Israel regarding the current conflict and efforts to establish peace.

Hearing that the FBI was picking up individual Arab Americans and concerned that again the civil liberties of people were being violated, NCCR organized a program in the spring of 2002 called, "Civil Liberties and the Need for National Security: Does One Negate the Other?" The late Fred Okrand of the American Civil Liberties Union, Carol Sobel of the National Lawyers Guild, Michel Shehadeh of ADC, Omar Ricci of MPAC, Ra'id Faraj of CAIR, and Lillian Nakano of NCCR spoke to the limitations of rights in the Patriot Act and how that would affect all of us. In 2003 we followed up with a more in-depth program on the Patriot Act called "The USA Patriot Act and the World War II Internment Camps: Never Again!" with Judge Robert Takasugi and Nagwa Ibrahim of MPAC. Cosponsored with MPAC, the program traced the history of these kinds of acts from the Palmer Raids to the concentration camps for Japanese Americans and discussed how the USA Patriot Act would do nothing to combat terrorism. The CAIR, MPAC, and the American Muslim Council (AMC) and other civil rights organizations had formed a coalition to repeal and amend this law and oppose a proposed Patriot Act II. Following the transition from U.S. control to an Iraqi interim government, we asked a panel of Middle East experts including Dr. Maher Hathout of MPAC to speak about what it would take to bring peace to Iraq.

Days of Remembrances

Our Days of Remembrances expanded on these topics over the next several years.

Michel Shehadeh, one of the LA eight (seven Palestinians and one Kenyan woman) still fighting charges for passing out leaflets as a college student fifteen years ago, was a keynote speaker at the 2002 Day of Remembrance. He spoke about the wounds that are left not only on the people who are seen as "suspects" but also on the children.

Congressman Mike Honda keynoted the 2003 Day of Remembrance and spoke to the theme, "Race Prejudice, War Hysteria, Failure of Political Leadership: Then and Now," which were identified by the Commission on the Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians to be the root causes of the incarceration of Japanese Americans.

In 2004, we premiered the film *Stand Up for Justice*, co-produced by NCCR and Visual Communications. Here, NCCR wanted to emphasize the important lesson from the action of Ralph Lazo, a Mexican American high school student from Belmont who joined his friends at Manzanar during World War II. He did not believe his friends were disloyal and felt what was happening to them was wrong.

"When Loyalty is Questioned. . .from Tule Lake to Guantanamo" was the theme in 2005. We examined the meaning of loyalty and how Muslims and Middle Eastern people were immediately suspect just as Japanese Americans had been. People who had been incarcerated at Tule Lake during World War II spoke about their decision to answer "No," "No" to questions #27 and #28 on the "loyalty questionnaire" which stated: "Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty wherever ordered?" "Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or to any other foreign government, power or organization?" The program included comparisons to Guantanamo and the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison and stressed the importance of questioning actions and decisions of the government when they seem to be violating the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, and the Geneva Conventions.

The 2006 Day of Remembrance, "Claiming History: Justice Along Color Lines," drew comparisons to the forced deportation of over one million Mexican Americans in the 1930s and

the abduction of Japanese Latin Americans from thirteen Latin American countries for the hostage exchange program. Japanese Latin Americans are still seeking justice and redress today and though the California Senate passed a bill calling for an apology, the federal government has yet to fully acknowledge its role in the betrayal of Mexican Americans. Finally, the 2007 Day of Remembrance focused on the use of Executive Power and the need to challenge it when presidents abuse that power. Panelists spoke to the theme, "From Military Necessity to National Security—Challenging the Use of Executive Power from World War II to Iraq." Helga Aguayo, wife of Agustin Aguayo, talked about how Agustin's request for conscientious objector status had been denied and how he was facing a court-martial for his refusal to fight in any war. Laila Al-Marayati explained how charitable organizations in the Muslim American community had been shut down and Muslim leaders arrested and charged with supporting terrorism.

Mobilizing and Acting

When the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), now the Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE), announced plans in 2002 to register and interview nonimmigrant males, sixteen years and older from certain countries, mainly Middle Eastern, under the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS), many of these communities cooperated. However, many of these men were detained and jailed for visa violations due to the backlog in the INS itself. Many had been waiting for their applications for permanent residency or for their status adjustments to be approved. In the meantime, their visas had lapsed. MPAC and CAIR called on supporters to act as monitors to observe the registration at the INS offices keeping the process as public as possible and perhaps preventing further arrests.

The 2003 Day of Remembrance program was coupled with a press conference condemning the statements of Congressman Howard Coble (R-N.C.) who had recently stated he supported the government's decision to incarcerate Japanese Americans during World War II. This was alarming coming from Coble, the Chair of the Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security, who was responsible for congressional oversight of the newly created Department of Homeland Security. Not hearing any criticism from the White House, Attorney General John Ashcroft or the Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert, NCRR

feared that the use of the concentration camps for “terrorists” or “enemy combatants” was now an option. We along with others called for his resignation and began a letter writing campaign to Congress.

Broadening Support to End the War in Iraq

NCCR took a position against the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and submitted a statement to the *Rafu Shimpo* in the hope that others would also write their congressperson. Ours was addressed to Senators Feinstein and Boxer and cautioned against war hysteria and political expediency. “We now witness President Bush exercising political expediency as well in his call for possible preemptive military action against Iraq. But the preemption principle, striking first based on a perceived threat, is so dangerous to our democratic system, our nation of laws.” We also talked about mistakes occurring from the abuse of presidential power. “Instead of acting preemptively against Iraq, perhaps we can be preemptive in avoiding mistakes that could have tremendous implications in human cost and the United States credibility when it comes to the rule of law and respect for the views of other nations.” NCCR organized a contingent in the early marches against the war and joined with other Asian Pacific Islander organizations to build opposition to the war.

Support for Chaplain James Yee

As our concern for our own civil liberties increased so too did our shock at the continued abuses of prisoners and innocent people of Iraq. In October 2005, the NCCR September 11 Committee organized a weeklong speaking tour for Chaplain James Yee, the Chinese Muslim who had been charged with spying and possession of pornography after serving at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. His duties were not only to minister to the religious needs of the detainees but also to recommend changes that would help the prison run more smoothly. He worked with the high command, including Major General Geoffrey Miller of Abu Ghraib fame, and was given high evaluations yet he was charged with espionage and thrown into prison for seventy-six days. Eventually all the charges were dropped but his military career was destroyed. Chaplain Yee spoke to college campuses and to an overflow crowd in Little Tokyo about the abuses at Guantanamo and the fact that many of these prisoners had committed no crimes yet were being held without the right to an attorney or a trial. See

Yee's book, *For God and Country: Faith and Patriotism Under Fire* (New York: Public Affairs).

Support for Lt. Ehren Watada

Lt. Ehren Watada, a commissioned officer and a Japanese American, had refused to go to Iraq because he believed that the war was illegal and immoral. NCCR was eager to offer support. Although by now, most Americans knew that the reasons for invading Iraq were false ones (there were no weapons of mass destruction) and that Saddam Hussein had no connections to Al-Qaeda, the movement against the war was not very strong. In late summer 2006, NCCR was asked to coordinate a Southern California speaking tour for his father and stepmother, Bob Watada and Rosa Sakanishi. They came not only to ask for support for their son but also to build a stronger movement against the war. Bob and Rosa spoke at colleges, to the media, to religious leaders, to a thousand high school students in Oxnard, and to junior high school students who asked very sharp questions. Close to 200 people welcomed the Watadas to Little Tokyo at a reception sponsored by the NCCR and the Asian American Vietnam Veterans Organization (AAVVO). This group, composed of former Vietnam veterans and their families, had recently formed to support Vietnam veterans and had taken the position opposing the government's policies in Iraq and supporting unconditionally the fighting men and women stationed in Iraq.

Welcome in Little Tokyo in October 2006

Just as there were people in our community who opposed redress for various reasons, such as fear of backlash or not wanting to bring up the past, there were some veterans' groups who opposed Lt. Ehren Watada and called him a coward for not following orders. We had hoped that there could be a dialogue and that these programs would provide an opportunity for people to hear and think about why Ehren believed that as an officer, it was his duty to uphold the Constitution and that he could not obey an order he knew to be illegal and immoral. After exchanges both in person and in the media, it became clear that there was no room for dialogue.

In the end, we decided to spend our energies building support where we could. The reception in Little Tokyo included Heart Mount draft resisters, Frank Emi, and Yosh Kuromiya who talked about resistance and Army Chaplain George Aki and Rev-

erend Dickson Yagi who added their words of admiration for Ehren. NCRR expressed how Ehren followed in the tradition of those in our community who stood up for principles whether anyone else agreed or supported them and how we had learned about individuals who had challenged the government thanks to the civil rights movement, ethnic studies, and the movement for redress. NCRR has honored these individuals, such as Frank Emi, the Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee, James Omura with the Fighting Spirit Award at Days of Remembrance programs. The tour not only raised over \$10,000 for the Watada legal fees but also created, as Aiko Herzig said, "the beginnings of a new anti-war movement."

NCRR continued to build support for Watada by circulating petitions, setting up tables for letter writing in Little Tokyo, and organizing an educational activity about the effect of the war on Iraqi veterans. At this program, Helga Aguayo eloquently explained how her husband, a medic, had served in Iraq but could no longer kill or participate in a war in good conscience. She, along with her daughters, won the hearts of the audience. Both NCRR and AAVVO supported Agustin Aguayo and Ehren Watada equally. In preparation for the court martial of Watada in February 2007, the two organizations organized the largest march of youth, Nisei, Latino, and Asian Americans in Little Tokyo since the 1970s. With Helga and Carolyn Ho, Ehren's mother, in the lead, the marchers chanted, "Drop the Charges Now" and "Free Aguayo" all the way to Higashi Hongwanji Temple. The standing-room only crowd gathered there to give more encouragement to Helga and Carolyn and to send off the four NCRR representatives who would attend the court-martial at Ft. Lewis, WA. Charged with missing a movement and conduct unbecoming an officer, Watada faced up to eight years in prison and a dishonorable discharge.

Court-martial in February 2007

Four women, June Hibino, Kimi Maru, Kathy Masaoka, and Robin McClaren, representing the Whittier Peace Coalition, were able to attend all three days of the trial and make connections with others from across the country who had also traveled to Ft. Lewis, WA. Additionally, they were able to meet Ehren and express support from our community and to renew their friendship with Bob Watada and Rosa Sakanishi, who had suffered a stroke while speaking in Washington D.C. During the trial, we learned

from his commanding officers that Watada was an exemplary soldier and had followed all the procedures outlined by them when he shared his decision to resign. Experts on military law and his commanders also said that, if a soldier believes that an order is illegal or immoral, it is his duty to disobey that order. On the third day of the trial when Ehren Watada was expected to speak, the judge declared a mistrial over the objections of his defense attorney, Eric Seitz. Judge John Head did not expect Watada to speak in his own defense since Watada had signed an agreement affirming that he had missed his deployment in June and that he had made public statements against the war. He assumed that Watada was admitting his guilt. Lieutenant Watada's position was that he had the right to explain why his actions were not only justifiable but followed military law. It was clear the military did not want Watada to talk about his position that the war was illegal and immoral.

Where We are Now

Almost a year later, Lt. Ehren Watada awaits a second court-martial under the objections of his attorneys who are arguing that this constitutes "double jeopardy" or trying a person twice for the same offense. After news of renditions and torture and with almost 4,000 United States soldiers killed and over one million Iraqis dead, the majority of this country now agrees that this war is immoral and illegal. After the invasion of Iraq most of the marchers were older people who had protested against the Vietnam War but today the marches include many youth. NCRR and AAVVO continue to support Watada with weekly vigils in Little Tokyo and a petition calling for the military to drop the charges against him and for the district courts to uphold his Fifth Amendment protections against "double jeopardy." We also oppose any retrial for Lt. Ehren Watada and any persecution of other military war resisters. From the redress campaign NCRR knows that there are ups and downs in any movement and that it takes time to build. We did not give up on the fight for redress and we will not stop until this war is ended.

Afterword

What we have written can also be read as our response to what we believe are Frank Chin's misstatements about NCRR and its representative at the Welcome Reception for Bob and Rosa in his blog,¹ reprinted here in *Amerasia Journal*. Chin is apparently

critical that we did not use this occasion to fault the JACL for the collusion during World War II, between Mike Masaoka and the JACL leadership with the FBI against those who opposed the JACL. Mike Masaoka and other JACL leaders, including Min Yasui, tried to intimidate the Heart Mountain draft resisters into reversing their decisions. Had we raised these criticisms, audience participants would have rightly wondered, “What does this have to do with Lieutenant Watada and the war in Iraq?”

Let the people judge, make, and interpret their own history. The history of the NCCR is clear. We stand by our unwavering support of the draft resisters. Frank Emi, one of the leaders of the Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee joined NCCR in 1984 after meeting some members at California State University, Los Angeles where he spoke about his resistance for the first time since the camps. He and Reverend Paul Nakamura were the first to be honored with the “Fighting Spirit Award” in 1987.

Notes

1. Frank Chin, “Lt. Ehren Watada—Will JapAmerica Resist this Time?” Chin Talks Blog, <http://chintalks.blogspot.com/>.

MPAC invited NCCR to their Burbank/Glendale chapter picnic in Sierra Madre in 2002.

Photograph courtesy of Janice Yen

