

I would like to thank the SF Chapter of the JACL for honoring me with your Community Justice Award. I've been involved with issues for truth, justice and peace for over 37 years, but I think most of you here know me through my work on Japanese Latin America (JLA) redress.

For the former JLA internees and our families, we are very appreciative of this award because we feel that, not only my work, but the ongoing struggle for JLA redress is also being acknowledged, supported and reaffirmed by the SF Chapter of JACL.

It is very significant for us because our experiences have never been in the mainstream history books and our experiences are just beginning to be included as part of our own Japanese American (JA) community's narrative. Our story is a hidden part of our Nikkei community's history. It is a suppressed part of US history.

For our families, this award is timely because 2008 is going to be a very busy year for the JLA redress issue. On the litigation front, we are waiting for a ruling from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which is a body of the Organization of American States. They will be making a decision whether or not to hold the US government accountable for the ongoing failure to provide proper redress for the war crimes and crimes against humanity which were perpetrated against our families. Today we hear about extraordinary rendition; the JLAs experienced WWII-style rendition.

On the legislative front, Senator Inouye of Hawaii and Representatives Becerra and Honda of California have introduced the JLA Commission Bill, which would establish a congressional commission to continue the investigation into the wartime treatment of JLAs that was begun by the 1981 Commission and to make recommendations based on its findings. We are now pushing for a House Judiciary Subcommittee hearing on this JLA Commission Study Bill. You'll be hearing more about this from the Campaign For Justice and the JACL as we build up to the Day of Remembrance. So please expect to sign letters, contribute donations if you can, and consider joining us on a community delegation to DC to testify before the House Judiciary Subcommittee.

And on the education front, we definitely need your help to get the word out about JLA redress, to get endorsements from key opinion makers and organizations inside the JA community and in other communities. By the end of February, we want to add 50 more organizations to our list of supporters. We need your help to bring on board religious institutions, labor unions, civic associations, community organizations. Everyone in this room either belongs to such an organization or knows someone who does. Whatever you can do to help us accomplish this task would be very much appreciated.

As I learned about JA internment and the JLA wartime experience, I began with a more intellectual connection to our history because I hadn't lived through it myself. But as family and friends shared their stories and more information was revealed, I also developed an emotional bond. Now after 911, the history of my family and my community is a part of me...intellectually, emotionally and also viscerally. I now have a better sense of the fear, the terror our own Issei and Nisei felt. Now I feel that fear because I am afraid of my own government. I am afraid of what the US government is doing to other communities and that those policies and actions will be turned on our own community, our activists, on everyone of us in this room.

The Nikkei community knows what has been done in the name of national security – not just the mass internment of both citizens and “noncitizens” but also the human impact of that traumatic experience on our families and communities in the immediate aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor, through the

years of internment and its continuing effect on the succeeding generations. And we are now realizing that it wasn't just our JA community who was targeted. The US government also went after others targeted as the "enemy": immigrants of German, Italian and Japanese ancestry in the US and from Latin America.

So while mass incarceration in the US isn't -- yet -- happening today, we do see that history is repeating itself through government policies and actions with even more sinister twists and turns...racial profiling, discriminatory immigration policies, detentions without charge or due process, expedited deportations, kidnapping, sexual assault, torture, murder. These policies have sown the seeds of distrust and divisiveness throughout the country, and we see the rise in hate speech, physical violence, hate crimes, discrimination and exploitation in the workplace and political disempowerment.

I am afraid, but I am also angry. Now in the halls of Congress, in the courts and in all sectors of our society, we are confronting "war on terrorism" abroad and here at home. We are seeing our civil liberties being curtailed in the name of national security, while many in the US and other nations feel that the world is becoming increasingly less safe. There is no end in sight for the occupation of Iraq and even those in the military are questioning the legality and morality of the war. And the conflict in that region continues to intensify in Gaza and expanded to invasion and destruction of Lebanon. Threats to invade Iran raise the possibility of nuclear war. Billions of dollars are spent each month on foreign wars; budgets are being cut for domestic education, health care and social services; and the profits of war profiteers soar. Government corruption, cronyism, incompetence, negligence....need I mention the man-made Katrina disaster? Conflicts of interest in our courts, Congress and the media. Subversion of our electoral system. We are in the midst of a crisis in our country...a constitutional crisis, a crisis for our democracy, an all-sided political, economic, social, cultural, and moral crisis.

Now is the time for all people of conscience to step forward to protect our democratic processes and institutions, to restore our Constitution and apply international law to the US. Now is the time for all people of conscience, including our Nikkei community, to speak out and take action on the main issue facing our country and the world: the invasion and occupation of Iraq, which is going on 5 years.

This is a war not of self-defense, but by choice, for profit and domination. Weapons of mass destruction, ties to Al Qaeda and ties to 911 never existed. Government officials tainted with election fraud intentionally manipulated the evidence presented to Congress, the public and the world to make the case for war. And we, the people, are not able to hold our Congress and this Administration accountable for the violation of domestic and international law against preemptive war, for the violation of time-tested laws banning torture and degradation of prisoners of war....all being carried out in our name.

For the Nikkei community, this is being crystalized in the case of Lt. Ehren Watada. He is the first and only commissioned officer in the US military to refuse deployment to Iraq because he believes this war is illegal and immoral. He is refusing to participate in the war in Iraq and for publicly stating his reasons why. And for his decision of conscience, Lt. Watada is facing a second court martial hearing and the possibility of 6 years in a maximum security military prison.

I am appreciative of the National JACL position to support the right of Lt. Ehren Watada to due process within the US military justice system and under the US constitution. He has right to a fair and impartial trial, which includes the right to have a trial presided over by an impartial judge and to be protected from double jeopardy. He has broken no law but the code of silence and unquestioning loyalty.

We need to support Lt. Watada by demanding that the military accept his decision of conscience and accept his resignation. Lt. Watada should get no jail time. And we must ask ourselves, why is it that Lt. Watada is being persecuted for his refusal to commit war crimes? And why have no military officers nor civilian leaders been held accountable for the torture and killings at Abu Ghraib and other detention sites around the world?

So I stand before you, speaking of my fears, my anger. But I also have hope and renewed determination, because I know that I stand side by side with you. During this year, I look forward to continuing to work with the SF Chapter of the JACL, not only to secure proper redress for the JLAs but also to inform the public about the history of our community and what lessons can be learned for the challenges we face today.

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