

INTERVIEW WITH MIKE MASAOKA

Russell Senate Caucus Room, Washington D.C./INTERVIEWED BY FRANK ABE
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MASAOKA:half the good of this commission is getting information out to [redacted] people, and fortunately we've had good coverage.

ABE: [redacted] Okay, this is for an independent radio documentary, and also a research article I'm putting together.

MASAOKA: Okay.

ABE: I noticed today that in your presentation you didn't make any recommendation for remedies.....to the panel.....

MASAOKA: That's right, because I never got around to it, I was still on definitions.

[redacted]
ABE: What is your recommendation?

M: Well I, as I pointed out, I don't think an apology even begins to, uh, and while [redacted] a code of wartime conduct is helpful, the bottom line is some kind of compensation. Now whether it's going to be big enough or whatnot is another matter. I'm afraid that realistically, [redacted] they may come up with some kind of [redacted] compensation or redress, whatever you want to call it, but that if it's a high amount, that's going to be awfully hard to sell to Congress.

ABE: Then what amount do you propose for the [redacted] compensation, or what form would you like to see taken, individual, or community grant, or?

MM: Well, see this is one of our problems. If Cong..., if they can't come up with [redacted] a good recommendation, Congress will buy, maybe in the alternate, they might come up with some kind of community fund. Now my case we, we used to talk about the retiring Issei, how we had to take care of them. Well, actually we Nisei are the ones who are left from this evacuation period, ^{there are} many of us, I understand, who are having [redacted] difficulty in our age with our health and others..... I'd like to see beginning of [redacted] retirement homes with medical and all these other facilities for Nikkei, and others....I'd like to see nationwide civil rights fund made available to other groups too, so that what happened [redacted] to us won't happen to them...I'd like to see an international^{al} cultural kind of educational or some other kind of fund to help international relations...I'd even go so far as to suggest that maybe we could even help the Vietnamese refugees and others. In other words, I think we might be able to give a group or combination of alternatives that Congress might buy.

ABE: Last year you did oppose the Mike Lowry bill which called for individual compensation....

MM: Yes. The reason for that is very clear. That bill I think makes two fundamental errors. Number one is that it provides for compensation in certain circumstances to alien Japanese who were never [redacted] even in the United States. The other is that the longer you stayed in camp, [redacted]

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MM: (cont) the more you got paid, and this I think is a little ^{bit} unfair to the volunteers, is a little bit unfair to the people who went out earlier as students and otherwise. But as far as the money is concerned, we're for it.

ABE: So if those two things, any other aspects of the bill could be corrected, would you ~~then~~ then support that kind of individual reparations concept?

MASAOKA: Reparations concept I've always endorsed. In fact, I started out with that and then when I was convinced pretty much that we wouldn't get very much, I thought ~~it~~ it would be better to get what we could get, than nothing at all. Now this commission idea was partly ours, and the reason for that was this: if we could get a commission of distinguished people and they would recommend something in the ~~way~~ way of money ~~in~~ in that, it should be easier to have them help us convince Congress, than our trying to convince Congress themselves, and that's our fundamental basic objection to ^{the} Lowry bill. We think that this really promotes individual or any kind of compensation in the end.

ABE: This morning we heard Senator Jackson oppose the idea of monetary compensation. Outside I asked him and he told me that part of his reason was because the community was split, and he said it was the older Japanese...and ^{he} used the example of yourself and Dan Inouye...who were opposed to ~~that kind of~~ monetary compensation, it was the younger ~~people~~ people who wanted it. Where did Senator Jackson, is Senator Jackson mistaken in that impression?

MM: I've never talked to Senator Jackson about compensation. The only things I've talked to him about is the commission bill in terms of ~~what~~ what it might do to help persuade the Congress of the United States better ~~than~~ than direct payment.

ABE: Ummm, okay, let me go back to...

MM:And I think Senator Jackson got the impression that I might be opposed to Lowry Bill because I expressed opposition to the Lowry Bill as such, and he may have become confused as to our position. That may be it, I think we have to give him the credit, benefit of the doubt anyway.

ABE: The other thing I wanted to ~~get into~~ get into ~~it~~ was the 1942 ~~era~~ era, and you mentioned ~~earlier~~ earlier the uh the fact that you were Moses Masaoka, the only ~~Christian~~ Christian.....

MM: Accused of being.....

ABE: Accused of being, ~~allegedly~~ allegedly, Moses Masaoka, the only Christian who led his people out of a civilized land into these camps. Do you regret in any way that perception held by many people?

MM: Well I don't like ^{to be} ~~accused~~ accused of being a ~~traitor~~ traitor or a Judas or anything, as I was called ^{but} ~~Basically~~ Basically I think the major decisions made by our group, though they might not have been popular then, though they might not be popular today, is largely responsible for the relatively

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MM:(cont) good status that we enjoy. Had we resisted movement in evacuation..... and by the way I think there ~~was~~ thought to be a point made here.... the decision on Executive Order 9066 was fought and opposed by us, all the way through, to the President, and ~~we~~ we even offered ourselves as hostages, and form a special combat team against the Japanese, and left, leave our families hostages, if they wouldn't evacuate us. And then we used ~~some~~ some of our non-Japanese friends like Dr. Galen Fisher and others, to advocate the use of Enemy Alien Hearing Boards, like they used in England. So we opposed the evacuation order. But once that order became in effect, we felt we had no alternative, responsible for the community and the group, to avoid bloodshed, to cooperate. Which we did.

ABE: In looking back over the records ~~though~~ though, I can't, in my research, I haven't been able to find any evidence that ~~the~~ the Army did as you have said they did, that they gave you a, that they threatened you and other JACL leaders with a contingency plan. Many times, at the last, at the ~~Senate hearings~~ Senate hearings you said that they threatened to bring tanks down the streets, armed soldiers with bayonets to ~~drive~~ drive us out of our homes and into these camps.

MM: This is the alternative that we ~~felt~~ felt was pretty well spelled out by John McCloy, Karl Bendetsen, and others, when they talked to us. And knowing, knowing the Army we expected that to happen.

ABE: Did they ever say that ~~to~~ to you in public or private, did they ever write that down?

MM: No, they never write down. They ~~didn't~~ didn't write down most of these things.

ABE: Okay, so when did they say it to you? Under what circumstances?

MM: They said it at a number of times, ^{as} I recall.

ABE: And where were these meetings held?

MM: Some in San Francisco, ~~some~~ some in San Jose, some in Los Angeles I believe.

ABE: ~~I'm~~ I'm a little troubled. As ~~I~~ I say I can't find any evidence of that anywhere.

MM: ^{That's right.} That's right. [^] There are a lot of ~~other~~ other things you ~~can't~~ can't find in writing either.

ABE: But you say there was this contingency plan of military force to evacuate the Japanese?

MM: I said ~~that~~ that there was a contingency force.... I think at one time, Colonel Bendetsen mentioned to the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco ~~a~~ some hint of this kind of proposition.

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ABE: This is crucial because, as I recall in Spokane I talked to a fella who said that you came to Spokane and the threat of a military evacuation, military force was the most convincing evidence they had from you that they would cooperate in the evacuation.

MM: But I think also you ~~have~~ have to take into effect what happened at Bainbridge Island and at Terminal Harbor, when the Army did move in ~~the~~ even ~~when~~ ~~the~~ their people helped to cooperate. Under those circumstances just ~~imagine~~ imagine how much ~~more~~ more they would do if the entire population didn't cooperate.

ABE: I have seen a written ~~statement~~ statement from Karl Bendetsen in which, this last April, in which he says, in which he denies making any kind of statement ~~that~~ that the army had a contingency plan. He says ~~that~~, "the allegation that any such peremptory order was ever issued by the Western Defense Command is totally false."

MM: Well, let's put it this way. I think that most of the people, including the non-Japanese Americans....unfortunately, I think most of them are dead....but Dr. Galen Fisher, Clarence Pickett, of the Friends Service Committee, and all of them agreed with us that this was the ~~the~~ alternative, and that we had better cooperate ~~in~~ in order to keep our people from bloodshed. This is not my own opinion alone. Lots of other Japanese Americans and ~~the~~ non-Japanese Americans ~~believed~~ believed in what now you're calling contingency plan, we thought more of it ~~as~~ as an alternative.....if we didn't do this, uh, I don't think they ~~ever~~ ever said we'll bring down guns and shoot you down, but they pointed out, I'm sure, that the ~~the~~ documents will show ~~this~~ ^{this}, if there are any documents left, will show that they pointed out to what happened at Bainbridge Island, what happened at Terminal Island. And also I think some of them even pointed out to certain incidents that happened with the Japanese army and ~~all~~ all.

ABE: Let me get your reaction to some of the ~~the~~ feelings I get from people I talk to in the state of Washington. The resentment they ~~all~~ feel is that you may have used that kind of information, about the military force, to kind of browbeat them into ~~the~~ collaborating with the JACL's motion to cooperate. Is that a ~~fair~~ fair assessment of your role at that time? Is it fair for them ~~to~~ to say that you in fact browbeat the western JACL chapters into accepting the evacuation decision?

MM: I wish I had that much influence on JACL or anywhere.

ABE: Many of them there gave you that credit.

MM: I understand that, and I understand ~~that~~ ^{I'm given credit} for lots of other things. But the point is basically this: faced with the alternative which we faced, and unfortunately I appear to be the ~~only~~ only one left who was involved in these things, faced with the alternative that we had, we felt that we had no alternative to the kind of cooperation which we made, and I think that the results and consequences of our cooperation have pretty much vindicated our judgement.

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ABE: ~~Today you sat next to Min Yasui and it~~ TODAY YOU SAT NEXT TO MIN YASUI AND IT SEEMS THE TWO OF YOU ARE GOOD ~~now~~ FRIENDS NOW.....

MM: That's right. We are. We always were.

ABE: AT ONE POINT IN 1942 YOU AND HE ENGAGED IN A SOMEWHAT ACRIMONIOUS DEBATE OVER HIS SUPREME COURT TEST CASE.

MM: Ah, I've heard ~~that~~ that before but neither Min nor I can recall ever corresponding on the issue or, as I ~~say~~ say we just can't recall this. I know that I wrote some things, called him a ~~publicity-seeking martyr~~ (chuckles) publicity-seeking martyr and all that but we questioned more his timing. After all, I think that had the decisions been considered after the war we woulda had a much better ~~chance~~ chance to win. I think that if we made any public criticism at all it was mostly as ~~to~~ ^{to} timing, although in those days, sure, I may have used some intemperate words, some ill-advised words, but we've always been ~~friendly~~ friendly.

IT SEEMED A VERY REASONED.....

ABE: ~~A~~ THE BULLETIN THAT YOU SENT TO ALL THE JACL CHAPTERS IN WHICH YOU DID CALL MIN ~~YASUI~~ YASUI A SELF-STYLED MARTYR..... (OUT TO GRAB HEADLINES).....

MM: ~~I may have. I don't deny that~~ I may have. I don't deny that but I say we've always been friendly. He knew what ~~he was doing~~ he was doing. We knew what we were doing.

ABE: OKAY, WELL DID THE GOVERNMENT EVER INDICATE THAT IT FROWNED ON THOSE JAPANESE AMERICANS WHO TOOK THE CURFEW ORDER TO COURT?

MM: No, no.

ABE: ON YOUR OWN ~~volition~~ VOLITION THEN (coughs).....(YOU DECIDED TO.....),,,

MM: ~~On my own volition~~ On my own volition I tried violating the curfew several times because it was very easy. ~~It~~ it was after eight o'clock at night, and before six in the morning, for more than five minutes, I'm sorry, five miles from the place of residence, many times I was way out there and I used to go to police departments and so on and say look, I violated ~~the law~~ the law, they put me in ~~their~~ their paddy wagon or whatever they had, take me back to my hotel and say, quit ~~bothering us~~ bothering us, and that's it. I ~~think~~ think other Japanese Americans had the same experience.

ABE: WELL THEN DO YOU TAKE ~~BACK~~ BACK ALL THOSE WORDS YOU SAID ~~THEN ABOUT MIN~~ THEN ABOUT MIN ~~YASUI'S CASE?~~ YASUI'S CASE?

MM: Well I still think the timing was bad.

ABE: HOW ABOUT YOUR OPPOSITION TO THE FORMATION OF A CIVIL LIBERTIES LEAGUE IN MINIDOKA? ~~DOCTOR GEORGE TANI OF PORTLAND WAS ORGANIZING~~ DOCTOR GEORGE TANI OF PORTLAND WAS ORGANIZING A GREAT DEAL OF SUPPORT FOR MIN YASUI'S SUPREME COURT CASE. IT WAS SEEN BY MANY AS....

MM: I don't recall ~~that~~ that. It could be, but I don't.

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ABE: [REDACTED] THE LAST QUESTION I WANTED TO ASK WAS ABOUT, IN THE LAST SENATE HEARINGS YOU WERE REPRESENTING THE NISEI LOBBY.....

MM: That's right.

ABE:AS AN ORGANIZATION. WHAT IS THE NISEI LOBBY?

MM: The Nisei Lobby was created by a number of us.... George Inagaki, unfortunately he's dead...Tom Hayashi, an attorney... some of us felt that we wanted a group that represented our point of view if necessary in public against some of those who were saying at that time at least, including some college professors, that those who renounced may have in many ways suffered more and were the more courageous ones as compared to those of [REDACTED] us who volunteered. We didn't agree with them. And so we decided we would form this organization, we held it in abeyance, we registered but we've never taken any action and the only time we've ever [REDACTED] appeared are before the House and Senate committees on this bill, so we're organized over ten years, and uh we've registered for over ten years.

ABE: YOU ORGANIZED, IN WHAT YEAR?

MM: About ten years ago I think, somewhere in the early seventies I think.

ABE: AND WHO WERE THE OFFICERS OF THE ORGANIZATION AT THAT TIME?

MM: Well at that time, and it was pretty informal; George Inagaki, who is a past national president of JACL; Tom Hayashi, an attorney, was a vice-president; Sam Ishikawa, who later became my partner in business, was the treasurer; and I was their Washington Rep. Now, with the death of most of these people, I've become president, Washington advocate, whatnot.

ABE: TODAY YOU ARE NOT HERE REPRESENTING THEM....

MM: No I made it very clear that I was speaking as an individual today simply because I had hoped that we would get around to asking certain questions about [REDACTED] JACL, about the Nisei Veterans and so on. And I wanted to be able to respond to each without the formality or whatever you want to call it of representing just a specific way of thinking.

FROM

ABE: THERE ARE SOME ON THE WEST COAST WHO [REDACTED] READING THE TESTIMONY IN THE HOUSE AND SENATE PERCEIVED THAT THE NISEI LOBBY WAS FORMED TO OPPOSE MONETARY COMPENSATION. IS THAT TRUE?

MM: Well we were organized over ten years ago and it's recorded [REDACTED] but I mean we never [REDACTED] even thought of those things.

ABE: I SHOULD SAY THAT THE PERCEPTION WAS THE NISEI LOBBY WAS IN OPPOSITION TO MONETARY COMPENSATION.

MM: The Nisei Lobby has always been in opposition to the Lowry bill, and particularly in the House where we made our particulars clear.

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MM (cont): We've never said we were against...as far as I know...
if I did I certainly didn't mean to...we've never been against
compensation.

END OF INTERVIEW