

Memorial Day Remarks
Monday, May 26, 2008
Davis Cemetery

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen and honored guests.

Thank you all for attending today's Memorial Day services here at the Davis Cemetery, in the heart of my District, District Four.

I am pleased to welcome you today, especially to all those who have traveled long distances to join us as we remember all those who have made the supreme sacrifice so that we might continue to live in peace and liberty.

I am deeply humbled to be a guest speaker this morning, and to share time with members of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and 100th Infantry Division, the all Japanese American segregated units during World War II. Together with Yolo County Veterans Services Officer Ted Puntillo and VFW Post 6949, we are taking time to honor their living history and their dual fight against the enemy abroad and discrimination at home.

I have attended Yolo County Memorial Day observances for many years as a member of the audience. Each year, I have listened and learned from many distinguished guest speakers as they have described their unique experiences in military service to America.

At the same time, I will confess that each year, I would also have thoughts about my own family's wartime experiences. My parents, grandparents, and brother and sisters were interned in the Manzanar War Relocation Center in Inyo County, in a harsh and desolate desert area approximately 230 miles northeast of Los Angeles. They were interned for four years, from 1942 to 1946.

My grandfather was considered a community elder, and was initially separated from the family and sent to Crystal City, Texas for special interrogation. He was returned to Manzanar some 14 months later. Ironically, my Uncle Ko Yamada, joined as a member of the MIS, helping with the U.S. war effort as a translator.

My mother, Kimiko, was a young mother with three children ages 8, 6 and 7 months. Following the instructions on the evacuation order—to take only what you could carry, was in itself a daunting task. All she could carry was my older sister, Margaret Aiko, and a small bag. There were no disposable diapers then, so I can only imagine what my mother's first several weeks living in the horse stalls of the Santa Anita racetrack were like.

I can't imagine what her next four years were like, raising my siblings in tar paper barracks in the blazing desert heat and the bitter winter winds, walking long distances with children in tow to communal mess halls and latrines, standing in long lines all the while surrounded by barbed wire and armed soldiers in guard towers.

My family was released from Manzanar in 1946 and my father moved everyone to Denver, Colorado. I was born four years later. Although I did not experience camp life firsthand, I inherited the aftermath as I watched my father struggle to start over with an unexpected new baby—me—to add to the stress.

With an 8th grade education, he first took a job as a dishwasher, then as a factory laborer, and finally establishing his own small business as the proverbial Japanese gardener. Many of his "day workers" were from Mexico. Working side-by-side, our survival depended on each other.

My lifelong commitment to the pursuit of fairness was forged through this prism of poverty and rising above injustice, and is foundational to my work as a social worker and county supervisor today.

My belief in America's better nature was borne out when I lived in Washington, D.C. in the 1980s. I had the privilege of covering the congressional hearings held by the Commission that had been established to review the circumstances leading up to the internment, and make recommendations to the Congress on potential restitution.

I will never forget the day my mother received her redress payment and a letter from the White House. The internment that had been set in motion in 1942 by an Executive Order signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt came full circle with a letter of apology signed by President Ronald Reagan in 1988. I remember her setting aside the restitution check and focusing instead on the letter of apology. She read it over and over, and over again.

And then she cried.

Today is not a day for comparing who suffered more. The truth is, we all suffered—the Japanese Americans who were interned, the courageous men and women who served overseas, and the people left behind. We were all affected by the internment, we were all diminished by it.

But I believe in America's better nature—I saw it play out in my mother's tears when she read a President's apology.

It is never too late to correct an injustice, or to acknowledge those who have gone underrecognized. Thus, it is with great honor that I now introduce Mr. James Iso, who will speak today on behalf of the veterans joining us for today's special recognition.

Today is about the service and sacrifice of Japanese Americans during World War II, about their motto, "Go For Broke", putting everything on the line without hesitation.

I thank you for this opportunity to speak.