

“America at Its Best”

Speech by Eric Saul
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So why was it you Nisei, second generation, born in America, were willing to volunteer for the Army from the plantations of Hawaii, often when you were considered second-class citizens, or from concentration camps in America? Your parents couldn't become citizens or own land, so land was put in your name. Before the war, you wanted to be doctors, lawyers, and professionals, but you couldn't. No one would hire you. So you worked on your family farms, flower orchards, and shops, You were often segregated in the Little Tokyo's and Japantowns. You couldn't go where you wanted, be where you wanted, be whom you wanted.

Furthermore, your President, on February 19, 1942, signed an Executive Order that said you weren't Americans anymore, you were "non-aliens." So why did you join the army? Why did you become soldiers, and ironically become, of all things, the most decorated army unit that this country has ever produced? There were [Japanese] words like *giri* and *on*, which your parents taught you, which means "duty," and "honor," and "responsibility." You had to pay back your debt to your country.

Oyakoko: “Love for family.” Your parents couldn't become citizens, but you loved your families and you had to prove your loyalty at any cost. You used your bodies as hostages for your families to prove your love for democracy and justice when you volunteered from those camps.

Kodomo no tame ni: "For the sake of the children." Many of you didn't have children at the time, but you knew you wanted to have

families. And you knew that you didn't want your children to have to suffer as you did. You wanted your children to be able to be doctors, and lawyers, and professionals. If you went into the military, did your job, perhaps things would change. You knew it, and you fought for it. You even came up with your own regimental motto that's on this honored regimental flag in front of me. It was "Go for Broke." You set the tone for your own regiment, and lived up to its motto. You made democracy work. Because of your wartime record, your children can now be what they want in a country that you wanted for them.

Enryo: "Humility." There's an old Japanese proverb that says if you do something really good and you don't talk about it, it must be really, really good! You never talked about your wartime record. You didn't tell your children, you didn't tell your wives, and you didn't even tell the country.

Gaman: "Internal fortitude, keep your troubles to yourself." Don't show how you're hurting.

Shikata ga nai: "Sometimes things can't be helped." But other times, you have to go for broke, and you can change things.

Haji: "Don't bring shame on your family." When you go off to war, fight for your country, return if you can, but die if you must.

Shinbo shite seiko suru: "Strength and success will grow out of adversity."

When I was curator of the Presidio Museum, I wanted to know why you joined the Army. Why did you join from a concentration camp? A veteran from Cannon Company named Wally told me a story. His family was sent from Los Angeles to the Santa Anita racetrack, which was an Assembly Center for Japanese Americans. There, they were put in a horse stall. Before

the war, they had a flower shop, they had their own home in Los Angeles, and they were a middle-class family. Now they were living for weeks in a horse stall that hadn't been cleaned when they moved in, and it stunk of horse manure. Wally's father said to him, "Remember that a lot of good things grow in horse manure." It did.

I remember hearing a story from a Chaplain Higuchi, the chaplain of the 442nd, who was from Hawaii. I asked him, "How could the Niseis have joined the Army under these circumstances? How could they have done what they did?" Chaplain Higuchi said he himself couldn't understand, because he was from Hawaii and hadn't suffered the same discrimination. But his job as chaplain was to go through the pockets of the Niseis who had been killed in combat. He remembered going through the pockets of one mainland Nisei. In his wallet was a news clipping that told how the family farm had been burned down by racists near Auburn, California. Yet this Nisei still volunteered for the service. Chaplain Higuchi said that there was no medal high enough in this country to give to this Nisei who had been killed and was lying in front of him. Chaplain Higuchi had to write a letter home to his parents.

You Nisei fought for this country, your country. It has taken fifty-six years to get to this point, but you made democracy stand for what it really means. When you came home from the war, President Truman had a special White House ceremony for you. It was the only time that the President of the United States had a ceremony at the White House for a unit as small as a battalion. It was raining that morning in Washington, and Truman's aide said, "Let's cancel the ceremony." Truman said to his aide, "After what those boys have been through, I can stand little rain." He said to the Niseis, bearing their regimental standard with the motto of "Go for Broke," "I can't tell you how much I appreciate the opportunity to tell you what you have done for this country. You fought not only the enemy, but you fought prejudice and you won. You have made the Constitution stand for what it really means: the welfare

of all the people, all the time." Lastly, he advised the Niseis to keep up that fight.

So in the 1980s, you fought for redress. One of the reasons that redress passed so overwhelmingly in Congress was the overwhelming record of the 100th/442nd and the MIS. The Civil Liberties Act of 1988 provided an apology for your parents and for your suffering. So on the battlefields of France, Italy, and Germany, "Go for Broke" stood for the welfare of all of the people, all of the time.

You never lost faith in your country, and we are here today to celebrate that faith. The result of that faith is that your children can be anything that they want: professionals, doctors, and lawyers. The price that you paid for democracy was the highest combat casualty rate of any regiment that served in the United States Army. The 100th/442nd suffered 314% combat casualties. The 100th/442nd was an oversized regiment, with its own cannon and engineer company, and even its own artillery battalion. The four thousand men who started off in February of 1943 had to be replaced nearly three and one half times. Eventually, about 14,000 men would serve in the 100th/442nd.

I see many of my friends from I Company and K Company here today. In one battle alone, the battle for the Rescue of the Lost Battalion in October 1944, which you fought in, two thousand of you went in to rescue two hundred Texas soldiers who couldn't be rescued by their own division. You went and suffered almost a thousand casualties in that one battle alone, of almost five days of constant fighting. In K Company, you started off with 186 riflemen. By the time you reached the Lost Battalion, there were only eight men standing. I Company did worse. They started off with 185 men. By the time they reached the Lost Battalion, there were only four men still standing in the company. It was unbelievable! You rescued the Texas Lost Battalion, and for that

you won two presidential unit citations. The army designated the Rescue of the Lost Battalion to be among the top ten battles fought by the U.S. Army in its 230-year history.

You Niseis ultimately won seven unit citations, and no other unit for its size and length has won that many presidential unit citations.

Chet Tanaka counted how many citations and how many medals the 100th/442nd earned. Of the fourteen thousand men who served, there were eighteen thousand medals for heroism and service. You had become the most decorated unit in American military history for its size and length of service, and until recently, almost no one knew your stories. You really hadn't told anyone, including your families or children. You were truly *enryo*. If you do something that is really good and you don't talk about it, it must be really be good.

Toward the end of the war, in April 1945, the 5th U.S. Army asked you to create a diversionary attack to help break the German Gothic Line. The U.S. Army had three infantry divisions lined up to breach the Gothic Line, which protected the Po Valley and the entrance to Austria. And those three divisions couldn't do it - they were stalemated for six months. The Army then asked the 442nd, the "Go for Broke" Regiment, to break the stalemate. The commander and officers of the 100th/442nd said to the commander of the 92nd Division, "General Almond, we have a plan. We can create a diversionary attack and break the Gothic Line if you give us 24 hours." The General figuratively fell out of his chair and said, "Impossible. We've had three divisions hammering away at the Gothic Line." The Germans had their best SS Divisions on the mountains and it was considered an impenetrable fortress. He told the Niseis to "just create a diversionary attack and we'll do the rest." But you Nisei soldiers had your own plan. You were smart. Your average age was about twenty and your average IQ was 116,

which was eight points higher than necessary to be an officer in the army. You were barely a hundred twenty-five pounds soaking wet, but you were college-educated and you were going to "Go for Broke."

So you climbed up that mountain called Mount Fogarito, which the Germans had so heavily fortified. You climbed it where they didn't expect you. It was nearly a 4,000-foot vertical precipice. You climbed the mountain that was unclimbable, in combat gear. The Germans couldn't possibly expect an attack from that point. From nighttime until dawn you climbed, almost eight hours. Men fell down as they climbed the mountain, and no man cried out as he fell, so as not to give away the position. At dawn you attacked, go for broke. You took the mountain and you broke the Gothic Line. It didn't take 24 hours as you thought, or a few weeks, as the Army had planned. It didn't take six months. The U.S. Army reported that you broke the Gothic Line in only thirty-four minutes!

If the story of the 100th/442nd is unbelievable, there is a more unbelievable story. It is the story of the Military Intelligence and Language Service. More than 6,000 Niseis served throughout the Pacific in a super-secret branch of the military. Niseis provided the eyes and ears of intelligence and language skills that helped to break the stalemate in the Pacific. They broke secret codes, interrogated prisoners, provided valuable propaganda, and translated millions of documents to help win the war in the Pacific. By the war's end, General Willoughby, General MacArthur's chief of intelligence, declared that the Nisei shortened the war by two years and saved a million Allied lives. Never had so many owed so much to so few.

I only wish that a million people could be here to hear your story and know of your service. I wish every American could know your story. We owe a great debt of honor to you Niseis for what

you did for the country and for democracy. It is a debt that can never be repaid.

I am here to tell the story for your children, because I know you can't say it. It is a legacy that they must carry on and remember what you did for them and for all of us. Your legacy continues to protect us all.

I remember during the Iranian crisis that there was talk of keeping Iranian Americans possibly in protective custody. Senators Daniel Inouye and Spark Matsunaga said, "You can't do that. That's already been done, and you were wrong then."

So your wartime service protects all of us. You did make the Constitution stand for all of the people, all of the time. History works. You made it work, and you made it work for me, for your children, and for this country.

President Ronald Reagan remembered when he signed the bill enacting the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which was called House Resolution 442, that "Blood that has soaked into the sands of a beach is all of one color. America stands unique in the world, the only country not founded on race, but a way, an ideal."

You Niseis came home, and became what you wanted. Eventually, many of you entered the professions and could go where you wanted and do what you wanted to do. You went about your lives, but you made sure that your parents could become citizens. By 1953, you saw your parents naturalized. Your parents had to wait, in some cases, sixty-five years to become American citizens. And that they could own land for the first time. And that others of Asian descent could own land for the first time. Your greatest success was that your children could be what they wanted to be, without the discrimination that you suffered.

Some of you became lawmakers and entered the House and the Senate. There were more than 590 laws in California in the 19th and the early 20th century against Asians. You fought a fight to make sure those laws were challenged and overturned one by one. We thank the Japanese American senators, Sparky Matsunaga and Dan Inouye, veterans of the 100th/442nd, for doing that. We thank you for your providing the legacy upon which they could fight for those rights.

Justice prevailed, and your parents became citizens. We stand at a pinnacle of your history in your golden years. Redress passed and a nation apologized for a terrible injustice perpetrated against its own citizens. A few months ago at the White House, President Clinton belatedly awarded 20 Medals of Honor to Japanese Americans. Clinton stated in his speech of the Niseis that "in the face of painful prejudice, they helped to define America at its best."

Last night, I was speaking to one of my K Company friends, Tosh Okamoto, and he said to me, "You know, the awarding of the Medals of Honor to our boys is sort of the icing on the cake. I've sort of been angry for a long time at my country and what happened to us during the internment. Getting redress and the apology, and having the country recognize my buddies, lifted a cloud from my head. I now really feel like I'm truly American, and it was all worth it."

So this is the happy ending of the 100th/442nd/MIS story, and I thank you for sharing it with us. I salute you. God bless you. And tell your kids to tell the world!

"AMERICA AT ITS BEST" is a speech Eric Saul delivered at the William K. Nakamura (KIA) and James Okubo Medal of Honor Commemorative Program, March 25, 2001 in Seattle.

Eric Saul served as a curator of the Military Museum at the Presidio of San Francisco from 1973-1986. He has designed and circulated an exhibit on the soldiers of the 100th, 442nd and MIS that evolved into an exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution entitled "A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and the Constitution."

In 1980, Saul co-founded the Go For Broke 100TH/442ND/MIS Foundation, later called the National Japanese American Historical Society (NJAHS), where he served as curator from 1981-87. He curated an exhibit called "Unlikely Liberators" on the JA soldiers of the 522nd Field Artillery Battalion who liberated an infamous Jewish death camp at Dachau, Germany. In 2002, he helped create a national project, the Kansha project, to honor Caucasians who risked their reputations to help JAs during WW II.

He has been a consultant on numerous documentary films, including Yankee Samurai (1981), The Color of Honor (1982) and Nisei Soldier (1984).