

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D.C. 20500

Re: Memorandum in Support of Minoru Yasui's Nomination for a 2015 Presidential Medal of Freedom

Dear Mr. President:

We recognize that the nation's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, is presented to "individuals who have made especially meritorious contributions to the security or national interests of the United States, to world peace, or to cultural or other significant public or private endeavors."¹ The late Minoru "Min" Yasui merits this prestigious honor in recognition of his lifelong courage and principled, passionate commitment to defending, promoting, and achieving civil and human rights for all Americans. Lauded as "the ideal candidate to receive this highest honor"² and as "a visionary ahead of his time [who]...had a unique understanding of the path America needed to take" to reach its potential,³ Yasui was a leader for many individuals, communities, and social causes from the 1940s until his death in 1986. He spent his life overcoming barriers, challenging injustices to and taking action for Japanese Americans and other marginalized groups, and building bridges across and with many diverse communities. Yasui "personifies the characteristics the Presidential Medal of Freedom seeks to recognize"⁴ and "belongs in any conversation of those courageous Americans who helped ground our moral compass in the principles of equality and fair treatment we aspire to as a nation."⁵

I. AN EMERGING LEADER

The third son of Japanese immigrants Masuo and Shidzuyo Yasui, Minoru Yasui was born on October 19, 1916, in Hood River, Oregon. His family had settled in this bucolic town along the Columbia River with other Japanese immigrant families longing to pursue the American dream. When his father, Masuo, came to the United States as a teenager, he envisioned becoming a U.S. citizen and studying law. Unfortunately, federal law barred Asian immigrants from citizenship,⁶ which was required to enter the legal profession, so Masuo had to pursue other goals.⁷ Masuo and his brother opened a small store in downtown Hood River, serving other Japanese immigrants who worked the valley's logging camps, sawmills, and orchards. Over time, the Yasui brothers' store achieved much success and also stood as an important social center for the local Japanese community. Masuo rose to prominence as a community

¹ Executive Order 11085, 28 Fed. Reg. 1759 (1963).

² Bennet, Senator Michael. Letter to President Barack Obama. 18 Dec. 2014. TS. United States Senate, Washington, DC.

³ Alonzo, Christine. Letter to President Barack Obama. 16 Dec. 2014. TS. Colorado Latino Leadership, Advocacy & Research Organization, Denver, CO.

⁴ Blumenauer, Representative Earl. Letter to President Barack Obama. 23 Dec. 2014. TS. Congress of the United States, Washington, DC.

⁵ Bender, Steven W. Letter to President Barack Obama. 22 Dec. 2014. TS. Seattle University School of Law, Seattle, WA.

⁶ Naturalization Act of 1790, 1 Stat. 103.

⁷ Fujikura, Yuka Yasui. Letter to President Barack Obama. 20 Dec. 2014. TS. Gaithersburg, MD.

leader, with his mastery of the English language facilitating his role as a translator and advocate when his fellow immigrants needed the services of the Caucasian community. Setting an example that his son Minoru would later follow in his own life, Masuo became a “trusted intermediary” between the two communities.⁸

While Hood River provided opportunity and stability for the Yasui family, it was also deemed an “epicenter of anti-Japanese activity” through the early 20th century and in the years following the U.S.’s entry into World War II.⁹ Many local stores had signs pronouncing “NO JAPS,” and businesses often refused service to Japanese and Japanese Americans.¹⁰ These early experiences contextualize Yasui’s lens on social issues and mettle in the face of adversity.

From an early age, Yasui exhibited exceptional ambition and dedication to leadership. At the age of 15, he founded the Mid-Columbia (Hood River) Chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) and served as its president. He graduated salutatorian of his high school in 1933, followed by graduation from the University of Oregon in 1937 with *Phi Beta Kappa* honors. In 1939, he distinguished himself as the first Japanese American graduate of the University of Oregon School of Law and the first Japanese American member of the Oregon State Bar. Nonetheless, Yasui was unable to find employment with any of the state’s law firms.¹¹ Months later, he finally accepted a position as a consular attaché for the Consulate General of Japan in Chicago, which enabled him to use his bilingual versatility to bridge the Consulate’s communication with the mainstream community.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japan on December 7, 1941, led Yasui to resign his position in Chicago and return to Oregon, where he sought enlistment in the U.S. Army. An ROTC cadet at the University of Oregon and commissioned second lieutenant upon his graduation, Yasui had received orders to report to Fort Vancouver, “but there he was told that his service was unacceptable because of his ancestry.”¹² At the time, all Japanese American men of draft age, except those already in the armed forces, were classified as 4-C, enemy aliens, and forbidden from military service.¹³ Undaunted by multiple rejections from military service and determined to do what he could during this turbulent time, Yasui opened a law practice in Portland to help the Japanese American community.¹⁴ He was inundated with requests for legal assistance as the state’s only practicing attorney of Japanese ancestry.¹⁵

II. A LIFE OF PRINCIPLE, PASSION, AND COURAGE

⁸ “The Yasui Legacy.” *The Many Faces of Oregon’s Workers, circa 1900-1940*. N.p., n.d. Web. 8 Feb. 2015. <<http://library.uoregon.edu/ec/exhibits/manyfaces/yasui.html>>.

⁹ Kessler, Lauren. “Behind Barbed Wire.” *Stubborn Twig: Three Generations in the Life of a Japanese American Family*. New York: Random House, 1993. 238. Print.

¹⁰ Kessler. “The Overachievers,” 240-41.

¹¹ Hada, Kerry S., and Andrew S. Hamano. “Five of the Greatest: Yasui.” *Colorado Lawyer*. July 1998: 9-12, 9. Print.

¹² Iwasaki, Ron. Letter to President Barack Obama. 28 Dec. 2014. TS. Oregon Nisei Veterans, Inc., Hillsboro, OR.

¹³ “Fighting for Democracy: Japanese Americans.” PBS. PBS, n.d. Web. 11 Feb. 2015.

<http://www.pbs.org/thewar/at_war_democracy_japanese_american.htm>.

¹⁴ Yasui, Minoru. *Thoughts on Evacuation*. 25 Aug. 1982. TS. Collection of Japanese American Citizens League National Committee for Redress, 6-9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

Yasui's early choices signaled what would be common themes in his life: courage; a commitment to justice and equality; and service – especially to those least able to fight for themselves. In a hostile era when Japanese Americans were expressly denied constitutionally guaranteed rights of liberty and due process, Yasui bravely took a stand for himself and his community at great personal and professional risk to himself. He followed his conscience – and the law – even when doing so was illegal or perceived as unpopular or unwise. He adhered to these principles throughout his life, which he committed to justice and equality for all Americans.

a. World War II

The attack on Pearl Harbor forever changed the lives of the Yasui family and other Japanese immigrants and their U.S.-citizen children who faced the ensuing backlash. On February 19, 1942, bowing to public hysteria and unsupported fears of Japanese American loyalty to Japan, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which authorized the Secretary of War to “prescribe military areas...from which any or all persons may be excluded.”¹⁶ Ten days later, Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, in charge of the Western Defense Command, issued Public Proclamation No. 1, designating the entire U.S. West Coast as a military zone which, in a matter of months, led to the forced removal of “all persons of Japanese ancestry” to internment camps farther inland.¹⁷ On March 24, 1942, General DeWitt issued Public Proclamation No. 3, imposing a curfew and travel and contraband restrictions on all persons of Japanese descent.¹⁸

The promulgation of the military curfew order was a critical turning point in Yasui's life. Viewing it as unconstitutional discrimination against American citizens on the basis of race, Yasui knew the order had to be challenged in court. Noted by his lead *coram nobis* attorney, Peggy Nagae, as the one “who most explicitly aimed to vindicate constitutional liberties,”¹⁹ Yasui was the first Japanese American to intentionally violate the military curfew order as part of the integrally connected trio of individuals who independently resisted the World War II curfew and internment. The other two men, Fred Korematsu and Gordon Hirabayashi, have both received Presidential Medals of Freedom.²⁰ Yasui later wrote of his motivation to initiate a test case in his unpublished memoirs: “If we believe in America, if we believe in equal democracy, if we believe in law and justice – then, each of us, when we see or believe such errors are being made, have an obligation to make every effort to correct such mistake[s]...”²¹

On March 28, 1942, after instructing his secretary to inform the FBI and local police of his intentions, Yasui deliberately walked the streets of Portland after curfew hours. Eventually spotting a police officer in the late evening, Yasui presented a copy of the curfew order and insisted on being

¹⁶ 7 Fed. Reg. 1407 (1942).

¹⁷ 7 Fed. Reg. 2320 (1942).

¹⁸ 7 Fed. Reg. 2543 (1942).

¹⁹ Nagae, Peggy. Letter to President Barack Obama. 7 Feb. 2015. TS. Peggy Nagae Consulting, Portland, OR.

²⁰ Fred Korematsu received the honor in 1998 from President Clinton, and Gordon Hirabayashi was posthumously awarded in 2012 by President Obama.

²¹ Yasui, *Thoughts*, 11.

arrested. When the officer refused, Yasui went directly to the police station, where he was arrested and his legal ordeal began.²²

While awaiting his trial, Yasui was held at the Portland Assembly Center, where the government had confined Portland-area Japanese Americans pending their removal and incarceration. Yasui's one-day trial on June 12, 1942, before the Federal District Court of Oregon primarily focused on the question of Yasui's loyalty to the United States. Following the trial, Yasui was taken back to the Assembly Center, where he provided free legal services and educated other internees about his legal challenge. In September 1942, Yasui and the others at the Assembly Center were sent to the Minidoka Internment Camp in Hunt, Idaho.²³

On November 16, 1942, the District Court issued its decision in Yasui's case. In an unexpected double-twist, the Court declared the curfew unconstitutional as imposed on U.S. citizens, but found that Yasui had renounced his citizenship by working for the Japanese Consulate and was therefore an enemy alien.²⁴ Holding that the curfew applied to non-U.S. citizens, the court convicted Yasui and sentenced him to a one-year imprisonment.²⁵ Yasui spent the next nine months in jail under solitary confinement.²⁶

On appeal, the Ninth Circuit certified Yasui's case to the U.S. Supreme Court, which chose to review the case as a companion to *Hirabayashi's* similar constitutional challenge to the curfew order and other military orders leading to the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans.²⁷ On June 21, 1943, deferring to General DeWitt's supposed military judgment and resting its analysis on racial prejudices, unconfirmed innuendos, and tenuous speculations, the Court upheld the constitutionality of the curfew order in *Hirabayashi's* case.²⁸ Based on *Hirabayashi*, the Court then summarily affirmed Yasui's curfew violation, but did find that Yasui had not abrogated his U.S. citizenship, thus rendering the citizenship issue irrelevant. The Court remanded Yasui's case to the District Court for resentencing.²⁹

On remand, the District Court struck its finding that Yasui had renounced his citizenship and reduced Yasui's sentence to 15 days or time served since he had already spent nine months in jail.³⁰ Released from jail, Yasui was taken back to Minidoka and stayed there until his release in 1944.

b. Forty Years of Service to Diverse Communities

Yasui's wartime legal challenge was only one chapter in a life passionately dedicated to civil and human rights and justice under the law. Rather than "[going] silently into the night, 'get[ting] on' with

²² *Ibid.*, 11-12.

²³ Hada, 9.

²⁴ *See Yasui v. United States*, 320 U.S. 115, 116-117 (1943).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Yasui, *Thoughts*, 24.

²⁷ *Yasui*, 320 U.S. at 116.

²⁸ *Hirabayashi v. United States*, 320 U.S. 81 (1943).

²⁹ *Yasui*, 320 U.S. at 117.

³⁰ *United States v. Yasui*, 51 F.Supp. 234 (D. Or. 1943).

his career as a lawyer, bury[ing] his belief in the Constitution or – like so many of those interned – never again talk[ing] about what had happened,” Yasui “put his principles to work.”³¹

Following a brief time in Chicago after leaving Minidoka, Yasui moved to Denver. In 1945, he took the Colorado State Bar examination, and although he received the highest score of all candidates, he was denied admission to the Colorado State Bar because of his criminal conviction.³² Represented by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Yasui appealed the denial to the Colorado Supreme Court, which ruled in his favor.³³ This ruling enabled Yasui to set down permanent roots in Colorado. He married his fiancée, True Shibata, and they later had three daughters – Iris, Laurel, and Holly.

In Colorado, Yasui embarked upon a tireless career as a champion for civil liberties and human rights that ended only because of his death. He started his own law practice in downtown Denver – a veritable one-man legal aid office characterized by long hours and low pay, serving Japanese Americans seeking to recoup economic losses from their forced wartime evacuation, as well as other clients unable to afford legal representation elsewhere.³⁴ Yasui also extended his commitment to civil and human rights far beyond the Japanese American community to include African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, other Asian Pacific Americans, youth, those with disabilities, seniors, and the international human rights community. A “visionary well ahead of his time, [Yasui] recognized the struggle of all marginalized people and dedicated his life to advocating [on their behalf].”³⁵

i. *Cross-Racial and Cross-Cultural Leadership*

Distinguishing himself not only with his commitment to serve Japanese Americans, in his 40 years of public service after World War II Yasui demonstrated equal passion for justice on behalf of other marginalized groups. Denver’s current mayor, Michael B. Hancock, states in his letter endorsing this nomination that Yasui “had an inclusive nature and was concerned for all people,” and that he “knew how to build bridges in the community, realizing that to create change, partnerships and mechanisms for representation had to be in place.”³⁶

Yasui broke down barriers and became a leader for diverse communities. In 1946, he helped found and served for eight years on the board of the Urban League of Metropolitan Denver, a group dedicated to assisting local African Americans and others of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds to “secur[e] a first class education, achiev[e] economic opportunity, and obtain[] equal respect of civil rights by providing exceptional programs and services in a highly diversified city.”³⁷ In 1963, Yasui assisted in the founding of the Latin American Research and Service Agency (now the Colorado Latino

³¹ Romero, Anthony. Letter to President Barack Obama. 6 Jan. 2015. TS. American Civil Liberties Union, New York, NY.

³² Hada, 10.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Morial, Marc H. Letter to President Barack Obama. 9 Feb. 2015. TS. National Urban League, New York, NY.

³⁶ Hancock, Mayor Michael B. Letter to President Barack Obama. 10 Dec. 2014. TS. Office of the Mayor, Denver, CO.

³⁷ Brewer, Moses. Letter to President Barack Obama. 2 Jan. 2015. TS. Urban League of Metropolitan Denver, Denver, CO.

Leadership, Advocacy and Research Organization, or CLLARO), an organization formed to “develop research and provide services to help strengthen the economic conditions of the Latino community.”³⁸ Yasui’s leadership with CLLARO underscored his knowledge of “the importance of having community representation for all and by all,” and the organization drew lessons from Yasui’s “courage to take stances unpopular to the masses” that “[stood him] unwaveringly on the right side of history.”³⁹ In 1968 he helped to organize Denver Native Americans United (now Denver Indian Center), an organization dedicated to “empowering youth, families and communities through self-determination, cultural identity and education.”⁴⁰ Yasui established this organization when Denver, as one of five relocation cities for Native Americans searching for stability and opportunity, needed a “gathering place” to respond to the needs of a growing multi-cultural Native community.⁴¹

Yasui also dedicated his legal skills to civil rights cases that reached the U.S. Supreme Court. He contributed to *amicus curiae* briefs filed by the National JACL supporting those who had been discriminatorily targeted because of their race, nationality, and ethnicity. The cases included *Stainback v. Ho Hock Ke Lok Po*, 336 U.S. 368 (1949), to defend the rights of Chinese schools and individuals to teach the Chinese language in the then-Territory of Hawaii, and *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, et. al.*, 339 U.S. 637 (1950), a precursor to the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case, that addressed the right of an African American University of Oklahoma doctoral student to have equal accommodations on campus.⁴²

Not surprisingly, Yasui also became a community leader for particular social issues affecting citizens of all races. From the 1970s until his death, he chaired Denver’s Anti-Crime Council, an independent city commission that organized preventative and rehabilitation projects and promoted police-community relations,⁴³ and was a board member of Employ-Ex, a program for formerly incarcerated individuals.⁴⁴ He also served as a board member for his local chapter of the American Red Cross, and was a board member and chairman for Denver Opportunity, a War on Poverty program.⁴⁵

Yasui’s commitment to taking action against discrimination and working across racial communities led to his appointment to key municipal leadership positions. In 1946, Denver’s then-Mayor Benjamin Stapleton enlisted Yasui to help explore and establish a Commission on Community Relations (now Agency for Human Rights and Community Partnerships). From 1959 to 1967, Yasui served as a commissioner and later as elected vice-chairman and then chairman. In 1967, the mayor appointed Yasui as Executive Director of the Commission, a position Yasui held until his retirement in 1983. During his leadership tenure, the Commission oversaw police-community relations, affirmative action programs in employment, Denver’s fight against crime, youth services, and senior services, to

³⁸ Alonzo, *sup.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Lake, Donald E. Letter to President Barack Obama. 19 Nov. 2014. TS. Denver Indian Center, Inc., Denver, CO.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Ling, Christopher, and Toan Nguyen. Letter to President Barack Obama. 16 Jan. 2015. TS. Oregon Minority Lawyers Association and Oregon Asian Pacific American Bar Association, Portland, OR.

⁴³ *1977 Final Narrative Report*. Rep. Denver: Denver Anti-Crime Council, 1978. Print.

⁴⁴ Yasui, Minoru. *Biographical Data*. 31 Dec. 1983. Collection of Minoru Yasui Family, 3.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

name a few.⁴⁶ Yasui's Commission years also saw him intimately involved with the Denver Public Schools, including calming the contentious confrontations over desegregation in the late 1960s.⁴⁷ His time at the Commission's helm was "without question, the most challenging that any [of the agency's heads] have faced," given the "[existing] internal social conflicts in [the area's] communities."⁴⁸

Yasui also served on the Colorado State Advisory Committee of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, an independent agency established by Congress to inform the development of national civil rights policy and enhance enforcement of federal civil rights laws.⁴⁹ Assisting the Commission with fact-finding, investigations, and information dissemination on state and local civil rights issues,⁵⁰ Yasui was a member of the Advisory Committee from 1975, and later elected as chairman in 1979, a position he held until his death. In these positions, Yasui worked on issues of race relations, police-community relations, immigration, and cross-racial and cross-cultural collaborations.⁵¹

Notably, the 1950s to 1970s was a turbulent era in both the national and local landscape, with shifting economic and social issues and the birth of the civil rights movement. Mayor Hancock describes Yasui's leadership as being "...famously credited with avoiding the racial riots [in Denver] that ignited in other major U.S. cities after the 1968 assassination of [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.] because he had built strong relationships with the city's other minority groups."⁵² A former colleague with the Commission on Community Relations says that Yasui's "commitment to serving the civil and human rights of others was unparallel[ed] to any other person serving the Denver community."⁵³

Beyond the pursuit of justice and civil rights on U.S. soil, Yasui was also ardently committed to world peace and international human rights. In 1976, he helped found and served as president of People-to-People Corporation of Denver (later changed to Denver Sister Cities International). For more than a decade, from the mid-1970s until his death, he was a member of the National Association of Human Rights Workers and Agencies, which encourages education, training, research, and networking toward the improvement of intergroup relations,⁵⁴ and he served as a board member of the Colorado Council on International Organizations during the early 1980s.

⁴⁶ Armstead, David E. Letter to President Barack Obama. 26 Dec. 2014. TS. Louisville, CO.

⁴⁷ *Annual Report 1968-1969*. Rep. Denver: Commission on Community Relations, 1970. 4. Print.

⁴⁸ Okubo, Derek P. Letter to President Barack Obama. 4 Dec. 2014. TS. Agency for Human Rights and Community Partnerships, Denver, CO.

⁴⁹ "USCCR: About Us: Mission." United States Commission on Civil Rights, n.d. Web. 9 Feb. 2015. <<http://www.usccr.gov/about/index.php>>.

⁵⁰ "USCCR: About Us: State Advisory Committees." United States Commission on Civil Rights, n.d. Web. 9 Feb. 2015. <<http://www.usccr.gov/about/sac.php>>.

⁵¹ See Hearing Before the United States Commission on Civil Rights: Hearing Held in Denver, Colorado February 17-19, 1976. Washington, DC: United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1977. Hathi Trust Digital Library. Web. <<http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/011395171>>.

⁵² Hancock, *sup.*

⁵³ Armstead, *sup.*

⁵⁴ See "WHAT IS NAHRW?" *Home*. National Association of Human Rights Workers, n.d. Web. 15 Feb. 2015. <<http://www.nahrw.org/>>.

Yasui's extensive contributions to diverse communities were recognized beyond the specific efforts that he led or helped to lead. In 1983, the ACLU of Oregon honored Yasui with the E.B. McNaughton Civil Liberties Award for his lifetime commitment to and impact on civil liberties.⁵⁵ The following year, the ACLU of Northern California recognized him, along with Gordon Hirabayashi and Fred Korematsu, with the Chief Justice Earl F. Warren Civil Liberties Award for "being a prominent civil libertarian."⁵⁶ In 1984, the ACLU of Colorado presented Yasui with its highest honor, the Carle Whitehead Award, named after one of the organization's founders and given annually to an advocate who has demonstrated "unswerving devotion to the cause of human justice."⁵⁷ On March 3, 1984, Colorado's then-Governor Richard Lamm and Denver's then-Mayor Federico Peña – later U.S. Secretary of Transportation and Energy under President Clinton – proclaimed the day "Minoru Yasui Day" "...[i]n part, for being an active member of the civil rights movement in Denver, with his efforts cutting across ethnic lines addressing concerns of every ethnic minority to emerge in Denver."⁵⁸ These examples of the wide recognition Yasui received during his lifetime illustrate his influential impact on the broader changing civil and human rights landscape.

ii. *Commitment to the Japanese American Community*

Alongside his decades of service to diverse communities, Yasui continued to be a leader for Japanese Americans, building a lifetime of work that earned him recognition by the National JACL as "Nisei of the Biennium" in 1952 and, 30 years later, as "JACler of the Biennium" in 1982.⁵⁹ Today the organization continues to recognize Yasui as "an exemplary American and authentic national hero."⁶⁰

During his early years in Colorado, when anti-Japanese sentiment remained strong, Yasui was an outspoken advocate for the community. He lobbied vigorously against a state law prohibiting land ownership by Japanese immigrants.⁶¹ He also lobbied for the federal Evacuation Claims Act of 1948,⁶² for which he filed hundreds of claims for losses incurred by the wartime evacuation, and for the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952, which finally enabled his own parents and others of their generation, the *Issei*, to become U.S. citizens. After passage of the McCarran-Walter Act,⁶³ Yasui helped many elderly *Issei* in Colorado through the naturalization process.⁶⁴

⁵⁵ Romero, *sup.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ "ACLU of Colorado's Carle Whitehead Bill of Rights Dinner Award Nomination Form." *ACLU of Colorado*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Feb. 2015. <<http://aclu-co.org/wp-content/uploads/files/imce/2014%20Nominations%20Form%20and%20Former%20Awardees.pdf>>.

⁵⁸ Peña, The Honorable Federico. Letter to President Barack Obama. 7 Jan. 2015. TS. N.p.

⁵⁹ Yasui, Minoru. *Biographical Data*. 31 Dec. 1983. Denver, CO.

⁶⁰ *A Resolution of the National Council of the Japanese American Citizens League Relating to Endorsement of the Minoru Yasui Medal of Freedom Nomination and Campaign*. 10 July 2014. Japanese American Citizens League. JACL National Convention Council Meeting, San Jose, CA. Print.

⁶¹ Hada, 10.

⁶² Pub. L. No. 80-886, ch. 814, 62 Stat. 1231 (1948).

⁶³ Pub. L. 82-414, 66 Stat. 163 (1952).

⁶⁴ Hada, 10.

Yasui also never relinquished the fight that ignited his lifelong passion for justice, continuing to pursue broader redress for Japanese Americans who were deprived of their liberty during World War II. In the 1970s, as a founding member of the JACL National Committee for Redress, he helped build the movement that culminated in the passage of Civil Liberties Act of 1988,⁶⁵ signed into law by President Ronald Reagan two years after Yasui's death.

In 1981, while Yasui was advocating for legislative redress, researchers discovered evidence in long-buried government archives showing that the government had deliberately lied to the Supreme Court in the internment cases. This evidence refuted General DeWitt's claim that the forced removal and incarceration of Japanese Americans was justified by military necessity. In 1983, the astonishing discoveries led Yasui, along with Gordon Hirabayashi and Fred Korematsu, to file identical *coram nobis* petitions in their original courts of conviction to have their wartime convictions set aside based on the government's monumental fraud on the Court.⁶⁶

The government moved to dismiss the original indictments, hoping to render the petitions moot and avoid any inquiry into the charges of fraud as it affected the constitutional validity of the internment. In Korematsu's and Hirabayashi's cases, the courts rejected the government's ploy and granted the petitions.⁶⁷ In 1984, however, treating the charges as a dead issue, the Federal District Court of Oregon granted the government's motion and dismissed Yasui's petition, thereby vacating his conviction but denying an evidentiary hearing on the claims of governmental misconduct.⁶⁸ Yasui passed away while his appeal was pending. The Ninth Circuit dismissed the appeal as moot, and the Supreme Court denied review.⁶⁹

Only his death silenced Yasui and prevented him from continuing his decades-long fight for the justice that he had always believed would prevail. As Korematsu's legal team said in its endorsement of this nomination: "If people saw in Fred the best of the Common Man, and in Gordon a moral foundation of our nation's values, Min was the warrior patriot carrying on the spirit of Thomas Paine."⁷⁰ The National Council of Asian Pacific Americans, a coalition of 34 prominent and ethnically diverse national Asian Pacific American organizations, has also endorsed Yasui's nomination, noting that his relentless fight against the wartime treatment of Japanese Americans "represents the best of American optimism, determination, and engagement, even in the face of injustice."⁷¹

⁶⁵ Pub. L. No. 100-383, 102 Stat. 904 (1988). The Act formally apologized for the wartime deprivations of liberty imposed on Japanese Americans and granted redress of \$20,000 to each of the thousands who had been unjustly interned.

⁶⁶ See Nagae, *sup.*; Kai, Karen N. Letter to President Barack Obama. 4 Jan. 2015. TS. San Francisco, CA; Kawakami, Rodney L. Letter to President Barack Obama. 5 Jan. 2015. TS. The Law Offices of Rodney L. Kawakami, Seattle, WA. These letters were submitted on behalf of the *coram nobis* legal teams in the *Yasui*, *Korematsu*, and *Hirabayashi* cases.

⁶⁷ See *Korematsu v. United States*, 584 F.Supp. 1406 (N.D. Cal. 1984); *Hirabayashi v. United States*, 627 F.Supp. 1445 (W.D. Wash. 1986); *Hirabayashi v. United States*, 828 F.2d 591 (9th Cir. 1987) (granting the petition in full).

⁶⁸ *Yasui v. United States*, Civ. No. 83-151 BE (D. Or. 1983).

⁶⁹ *Yasui v. United States*, 772 F.2d 1496 (9th Cir. 1985), cert. den. 484 U.S. 971 (1987).

⁷⁰ Kai, *sup.*

⁷¹ Letter to President Barack Obama. 18 Sept. 2014. TS. National Council of Asian Pacific Americans, Washington, DC. This letter was submitted on behalf of 18 member organizations.

IV. AN ENDURING LEGACY

While Yasui was rightly recognized during his lifetime for his contributions to and accomplishments in the civil and human rights community, especially significant is how his legacy has remained vibrant nearly 30 years after his death.

Since his passing, Yasui has received extensive honors. For example, in 1994, he received an inaugural Trailblazer Award (now the Daniel K. Inouye Trailblazer Award) from the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association, the organization's most prestigious honor.⁷² Yasui is also the namesake for several awards and titles that promote the values by which he lived. In Denver, the Minoru Yasui American Inn of Court helps lawyers and judges rise to higher levels of community engagement and professionalism: "There was no namesake more apropos to remind the legal community of these values than Minoru Yasui."⁷³ The Minoru Yasui Community Volunteer Award, founded more than 40 years ago, continues to be bestowed today to "unsung hero[es]" serving the Denver community and is a "living tribute to the high principals and courage of an outstanding American citizen."⁷⁴ The Asian Pacific American Bar Association of Colorado annually presents the Minoru Yasui Community Service Award, which "honors an individual or organization whose goal of community service exemplifies the achievements of Yasui," and the Minoru Yasui Memorial Scholarships, which recognize law students continuing Yasui's work of promoting civil rights and public service.⁷⁵ In 2002, the University of Oregon School of Law established a Minoru Yasui Endowment for Human and Civil Rights Law to "[remember] the courage of one of the law school's most visionary alumni, and encourage[] young lawyers and academics to advance his legacy of justice in the years to come."⁷⁶

Yasui's story has also inspired efforts to educate new generations about heroism in the face of injustice. Several productions document Yasui's life, including *Unfinished Business* (1986) by Academy Award-winning filmmaker Steven Okazaki, *Family Gathering* (1989) by Lise Yasui, *Citizen Min* (1983) by Mike Goldfein, and a tribute film by Holly Yasui to be completed later this year. A staged reading, *The Constitution in a Time of War: The Trial of Minoru Yasui*, with narration written by Judge Denny Chin of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, has been presented to audiences throughout the United States. In addition, Hood River teacher Sarah Segal led her sixth- and seventh-grade class in an "Unsung Hero" project about Yasui during Fall 2014. The students interviewed Yasui family members, created a walking tour of Yasui's life, and wrote a letter and created an accompanying video endorsing this nomination for the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

⁷² "Daniel K. Inouye Trailblazers Past Recipients." National Asian Pacific American Bar Association, n.d. Web. 15 Feb. 2015. <<http://www.napaba.org/?page=TBpastrecipients>>.

⁷³ Pratt, The Honorable Charles M. Letter to President Barack Obama. 31 Dec. 2014. TS. Minoru Yasui American Inn of Court, Denver, CO.

⁷⁴ Silver, Darlene. Letter to President Barack Obama. 12 Dec. 2014. TS. Minoru Yasui Community Volunteer Award: A Program of the Denver Foundation, Denver, CO.

⁷⁵ Wang, Andrea, and Andrew S. Hamano. Letter to President Barack Obama. 22 Jan. 2015. TS. Asian Pacific American Bar Association of Colorado and Colorado Asian Pacific American Bar Foundation, Denver, CO.

⁷⁶ Moffitt, Michael. Letter to President Barack Obama. 26 Dec. 2014. TS. Office of the Dean, University of Oregon School of Law, Eugene, OR.

Yasui has also received official recognition in both Oregon and Colorado. Oregon's then-Governor Neil Goldschmidt issued a proclamation recognizing March 28, 1990, as "Minoru Yasui Recognition Day," because Yasui's "actions and words have helped to ensure and to strengthen civil rights for all Americans."⁷⁷ In 1999, then-Mayor Wellington Webb, Denver's first African American mayor, dedicated a downtown city building "Minoru Yasui Plaza," explaining in his letter of endorsement for this nomination that "generations should be aware of his courage and public service."⁷⁸ Yasui is also listed as a "Civil Rights Leader" in the *Oregon Blue Book*, an official fact book that includes a list of 75 "Notable Oregonians" who achieved significance in their pursuits.⁷⁹ Yasui occupies that list alongside other luminaries such as explorer Merriweather Lewis, Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce tribe, and U.S. Senator Mark O. Hatfield.⁸⁰

Today, elected leaders in Yasui's home states strongly endorse the nomination of Yasui for a Presidential Medal of Freedom. These leaders include U.S. Senators Jeffrey Merkley (OR),⁸¹ Ron Wyden (OR),⁸² and Michael Bennet (CO),⁸³ and U.S. Representatives Mike Coffman (CO),⁸⁴ Diana DeGette (CO),⁸⁵ Jared Polis (CO),⁸⁶ Earl Blumenauer (OR),⁸⁷ Suzanne Bonamici (OR),⁸⁸ and Peter DeFazio (OR).⁸⁹ U.S. Representative Greg Walden (OR), who shares Yasui's hometown of Hood River, has known members of the Yasui family for decades and reflects in his endorsement letter that "[Yasui's] life and work continue to inspire [his] own public service."⁹⁰ Other state and local officials supporting Yasui's nomination include Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper,⁹¹ Colorado Attorney General John Suthers,⁹² Colorado

⁷⁷ "Japanese-American Honored." *The Oregonian* [Portland] 29 Mar. 1990. Print.

⁷⁸ Webb, The Honorable Wellington E. Letter to President Barack Obama. 19 Dec. 2014. TS. Webb Group International, Denver, CO.

⁷⁹ "Notable Oregonians: Minoru Yasui - Civil Rights Leader." *Oregon Blue Book*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Feb. 2015. <<http://bluebook.state.or.us/notable/notyasui.htm>>.

⁸⁰ "Other Notable Oregonians." *Oregon Blue Book*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Feb. 2015. <<http://bluebook.state.or.us/notable/notother.htm>>.

⁸¹ Merkley, Senator Jeff. Letter to President Barack Obama. 13 Jan. 2015. TS. United States Senate, Washington, DC.

⁸² Wyden, Senator Ron *et al.* Letter to President Barack Obama. 26 Jan. 2015. TS. United States Senate, Washington, DC.

⁸³ Bennet, *sup.*

⁸⁴ Coffman, Representative Mike. Letter to President Barack Obama. 5 Jan. 2015. TS. Congress of the United States, Washington, DC.

⁸⁵ Honda, Representative Michael M. *et al.* Letter to President Barack Obama. 9 Feb. 2015. TS. Congress of the United States, Washington, DC.

⁸⁶ Polis, Representative Jared. Letter to President Barack Obama. 23 Dec. 2014. TS. Congress of the United States, Washington, DC.

⁸⁷ Blumenauer, *sup.*

⁸⁸ Bonamici, Representative Suzanne. Letter to President Barack Obama. 5 Jan. 2014. TS. Congress of the United States, Washington, DC.

⁸⁹ DeFazio, Representative Peter A. Letter to President Barack Obama. 31 Dec. 2014. TS. Congress of the United States, Eugene, OR.

⁹⁰ Walden, Representative Greg. Letter to President Barack Obama. 3 Feb. 2015. TS. Congress of the United States, Washington, DC.

⁹¹ Hickenlooper, Governor John W. Letter to President Barack Obama. 19 Dec. 2014. TS. Office of the Governor, Denver, CO.

⁹² Suthers, Attorney General John. Letter to President Barack Obama. 5 Jan. 2015. Office of the Attorney General, Denver, CO.

Attorney General-Elect Cynthia Coffman,⁹³ Oregon Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum,⁹⁴ and Multnomah County (OR) Chair Deborah Kafoury.⁹⁵

Elected leaders outside of Colorado and Oregon have also recognized Yasui as a national hero meriting a Presidential Medal of Freedom. The array of leaders crossing racial, ethnic, and party lines includes U.S. Senators Mazie Hirono (HI), Barbara Boxer (CA), Maria Cantwell (WA), Mike Enzi (WY), and Dianne Feinstein (CA),⁹⁶ and U.S. Representatives Mike Honda (CA), Judy Chu (CA), Juan Vargas (CA), Jim McDermott (WA), Tony Cardenas (CA), Joaquin Castro (TX), Sheila Jackson Lee (TX), Ted Lieu (CA), Beto O'Rourke (TX), Gregory W. Meeks (NY), Doris O. Matsui (CA), Eleanor Holmes Norton (DC), David Reichert (WA), Raul Ruiz (CA), Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan (MP), Robert "Bobby" Scott (VA), Adam Smith (WA), Mark Takano (CA), and Maxine Waters (CA).⁹⁷ Utah's Attorney General, Sean D. Reyes, has also submitted a letter of endorsement for this nomination.⁹⁸

The profound national reach of Yasui's legacy is perhaps illustrated most clearly in the invaluable lessons he left for the broader community that now carries on the mantle of justice and equality. Yasui's courage to build relationships and work across racial and ethnic communities, to break new ground, and to challenge the *status quo* "helped lay the foundation and shape the work that many [civil and human rights leaders] are engaged in today."⁹⁹

The cross-racial, cross-cultural, and grassroots-to-grassroots collaborations that were integral to Yasui's vision for achieving equality were revolutionary at the time, yet are recognized as fundamental to social justice work even today. The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, a coalition with a diverse membership of more than 200 national organizations,¹⁰⁰ notes in its letter of endorsement that Yasui had a "prescient understanding of the need for civil rights leaders to work for equality and justice across boundaries of race, class, disability status, and religion."¹⁰¹ Denver's first Latino mayor Federico Peña observes:

Minoru Yasui was decades ahead of his time and a true pioneer in the cross-racial and cultural fight for civil rights and human rights...He stands for taking action to effect positive change at all

⁹³ Coffman, Attorney General-Elect Cynthia. Letter to President Barack Obama. 5 Jan. 2015. Office of the Attorney General, Denver, CO.

⁹⁴ Rosenblum, Attorney General Ellen. Letter to President Barack Obama. 21 Jan. 2015. TS. Department of Justice, Salem, OR.

⁹⁵ Kafoury, Chairwoman Deborah. Letter to President Barack Obama. 2 Dec. 2014. TS. Multnomah County, Portland, OR.

⁹⁶ Wyden *et al.*, *sup.*

⁹⁷ Honda *et al.*, *sup.*

⁹⁸ Reyes, Attorney General Sean D. Letter to President Barack Obama. 11 Feb. 2015. TS. Office of the Attorney General, Salt Lake City, UT.

⁹⁹ Romero, *sup.*

¹⁰⁰ "Coalition Members of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights." The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Feb. 2015. <http://www.civilrights.org/about/the-leadership-conference/coalition_members/>. Many member organizations have independently submitted letters of endorsement.

¹⁰¹ Henderson, Wade. Letter to President Barack Obama. 15 Jan. 2015. TS. Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, Washington, DC.

levels – from the local to the national to the international, and from the grass roots to the Halls of Congress.”¹⁰²

Recognizing Yasui’s significant contributions to diverse communities, the dozens of prominent organizations and public figures endorsing this nomination for a 2015 Presidential Medal of Freedom stand as a testament to both the unique and universal influence Yasui has left on their work and for future generations.

V. CONCLUSION

Minoru Yasui’s bravery, bold initiative, and undaunted actions to achieve justice touched a rare breadth of American society and imparted lasting lessons that are carried by peers and a new generation of leaders from every background, walk of life, and corner of the country. “His life reflects his deep love of country and constitution and his unspeakable faith in the greatness of our nation” and “his extraordinary efforts to ensure a more perfect union for us all.”¹⁰³ Civil rights attorney Dale Minami, who led Fred Korematsu’s *coram nobis* team, said of Yasui:

His life was a testament to the commitment to live a life to breathe spirit into the Constitution, to help those whose disadvantages could be overwhelming, to speak for those who could not speak for their selves. And he did these powerful things daily, for the rest of his life, until he left us physically but with a monumental legacy of good.¹⁰⁴

For this lasting legacy, Minoru Yasui is a true American hero meriting a Presidential Medal of Freedom. Others have been justly honored for their courageous defiance of the World War II curfew and internment orders in furtherance of our nation’s most valued principles. Yasui is equally deserving of that same honor – not only for his actions to challenge these injustices, but also for the life he led in pursuit of civil rights and liberties and equality for all Americans.

Most Respectfully,

Peggy A. Nagae, Chair

Minoru Yasui Tribute Project

¹⁰² Peña, *sup.*

¹⁰³ DeFazio, *sup.*

¹⁰⁴ Minami, Dale. Letter to President Barack Obama. 23 Dec. 2014. TS. Minami Tamaki LLP, San Francisco, CA.