

## **JACL History**

JACL, the nation's oldest and largest Asian-American civil rights organization, was founded in 1929 to address issues of discrimination targeted specifically at persons of Japanese ancestry residing in the United States. In California, there were over one hundred statutes that limited the rights of anyone of Japanese ancestry.

Amidst this hostile environment, JACL was established to fight for the civil rights primarily of Japanese Americans but also for the benefit of Chinese Americans and other peoples of color. Although still a small, California-based organization, JACL was one of the few in the 1920s and 1930s willing to challenge the racist policies of the state and federal governments. With limited resources and virtually no experience in politics, JACL set the course for civil rights for persons of Asian ancestry on the West Coast as well as the federal level.

The true test of JACL came when Japan attacked the Pearl Harbor naval base and launched America into World War II. Within hours after the attack, the FBI swooped down on all Japanese communities in the West Coast states and arrested elders identified as leaders, thrusting a young JACL leadership in the difficult position of having to confront a hostile U.S. government whose intent was to exclude and imprison the entire population of people of Japanese ancestry.

Throughout the war, JACL continued its efforts to ensure some measure of protection and comfort for Japanese Americans imprisoned in government detention camps. The organization argued for and won the right of Japanese Americans to serve in the U.S. military, resulting in the creation of a segregated unit, the famous 442nd Regimental Combat Team, which joined with the 100th Battalion from Hawaii and became the most highly decorated unit in U.S. military history despite having only served in combat for a little over a year in the European theater of the war.

Following the war, JACL began a long series of legislative efforts to win back the rights of Japanese Americans. In 1946, JACL embarked on a hard-fought campaign to repeal California's Alien Land Law, which, enacted in the early years of the century, prohibited Japanese aliens from purchasing and owning land.

In 1948, JACL helped found the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights and succeeded in gaining passage of the Evacuation Claims Act, the first of a series of efforts to rectify the losses and injustices of the WWII internment. In 1949, JACL initiated efforts in the U.S. Congress to gain the right of Japanese immigrants to become naturalized citizens of the U.S., a right denied to them for over fifty years.

The 1951 Walter-McCarren Act, which was essentially a JACL-initiated bill, included language that opened a back door that gave women in this country a foothold on broadening their rights of participation in the democratic process. Among its major accomplishments, the organization committed its lobbying efforts for passage of the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act, the culmination of the great civil rights movement of the 1960s.

In 1970, at its biennial convention in Chicago, JACL passed a resolution calling for recognition of, and reparations for, the injustice of the WWII internment of Japanese Americans. It formalized the debate as a priority within the organization despite the Japanese-American community's tepid response to the issue. In 1978, JACL launched a major campaign to seek redress from the U.S. government for the imprisonment and loss of freedom of Japanese Americans during WWII. JACL was determined to seek some measure of legislative guarantee that the violation of constitutional rights visited upon Japanese Americans would never again be brought upon any group in the U.S.

Within two years of launching the campaign, a JACL-sponsored legislation to create a federal investigative commission was approved by the Congress and signed by President Carter. The Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians was established to investigate the circumstances surrounding WWII internment and provide its findings to the Congress and the president. The commission's report in 1982 found that the government's actions were unjustified and unconstitutional, and based on this substantiation of its claims and on the commission's recommendations for monetary redress, JACL sought legislation calling for monetary redress and a presidential apology.

The redress campaign culminated with the signing of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which provided monetary compensation and a formal apology to the victims of the WWII internment. After ten years of campaigning in Washington D.C. and across the country through its chapters' grassroots efforts, JACL successfully brought to a close a final episode in one of the darkest chapters in the constitutional history of the nation.