

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF
**RICHARD
AOKI**



in his own words

Richard Aoki Memorial Committee



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From Richard Aoki's interview with
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When Elephants Fight, the Grass Suffers

I'm Japanese American. I'm a third generation born citizen of this country. My grandparents, both maternal and paternal, were immigrants from Japan to the United States at the turn of the century.

Both my parents were born here in this country and were American citizens by birth. This may not seem like a big deal at this moment, but it becomes an interesting fact as we go further into the history of the Japanese in the United States.

I was born in San Leandro, California, just before World War II. It was 1938. My mother was from Berkeley and my father was from Oakland. They settled in Berkeley after I was born. I spent the first three to four years of



Figure 1 (L) Richard and brother David

my childhood living in Berkeley until 1942, when World War II erupted, which changed the course of the Japanese and Japanese American community in the US, and the course of my family, as well as myself.

In 1941 the empire of Japan and the United States imperialism collided into an armed conflict in the Pacific. This was not surprising, although most people are under the illusion that December 7, 1941, a day which is supposed to be a day of infamy, was a random act of violence.

Going back, one must take a long view of history in understanding the events that led to World War II in the Pacific.

At the turn of the century, the US had annexed (another word for occupied) the Philippines in the Pacific, and was in the process of expanding their possessions in the Far East. At the same time, Japan had fought a war with China and a war with czarist Russia and occupied all of Korea to solidify

their empire in the Far East. If one steps back and looks at a map of the Pacific, one can see that those two countries were on a collision course for conflict.

Now in 1941 when the war occurred, it became bad news for people of Japanese and Japanese American ancestry here in the US. There's an African proverb that goes like this, "when the elephants fight, the grass suffers." The Japanese here were the grass in that case. A hundred and twenty thousand Japanese and Japanese Americans were interned in ten concentration camps, euphemized as "relocation centers," during the period of the war. My family was not an exception. My parents, grandparents and myself ended up in a concentration camp. During that period, both of my parents, myself and my younger brother were US citizens. Our civil liberties were grossly violated. We were not criminals. We were not prisoners of war. We were detainees. Does that term sound familiar to you?

Thus, the civil liberties of a hundred and twenty thousand Japanese and Japanese Americans were not only violated, but cases that went to the Supreme Court to argue the legality of the phenomenon ended up in negative decisions for our people. Another example of there really isn't any justice in this country.

I'm reminded of a joke by Richard Pryor that centered on justice. He once stated, "If you go down to the criminal courts, you will see 'justice', meaning *just*; j-u-s-t, *us*; u-s." In my dealings with the criminal justice system and the courts, I had noticed over the decades that looking at the courts racially can be illuminating. It's quite obvious. If you go down to the courts, what do you see, in the 60s and even today? *Just Us* in the courts. I made a visit to the criminal superior court hearing a couple years ago and thing have not changed that much. The defendants were people of color. The judge, the prosecutors, the defense attorneys all seem to be Euro-Americans, as well as the guards. Well now they've somewhat integrated the guard system.

Basically that's what it seems to come down to in this country today. If we look at the criminal justice system, the majority of the 2 million people in prison today are people of color: African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans. It may be appropriate that the statue of justice has a blindfold covering her eyes, so she won't witness the indignities that happen in the court rooms and prisons today.

Getting back to the concentration camps, there were 10 of them. My whole family ended up in Topaz, Utah. Primarily because distribution to the concentration camps somewhat depended on where one lived at the time of the war. Most of the people who lived in the San Francisco Bay Area, which included Oakland, Berkeley, Albany, El Cerrito, Richmond, who were of Japanese decent, ended up in Topaz, Utah. Just as people living in Southern California ended up in Manzanar, or Poston, Arizona. I believe Gila River was another camp in Arizona. People from the mid-California areas, like Yuri Kochiyama, Yuri grew up in San Pedro. Her family went to one of two camps in Arkansas--Rohwer and Jerome, Arkansas, which were two of the ten concentration camps.

My earliest childhood memories consisted of entering the Tanforan race tracks, which was a temporary holding center. It is now a shopping mall. But in those days we lived in the horse stables at the old Tanforan race track, until they could construct Topaz and transfer us from Tanforan to Topaz by

train in passenger cars with armed guards and the windows blacked out. I remember getting off the bus at Topaz and looking at this desolate landscape in the middle of the Utah desert in the southern part of the state. It was some god awful piece of property.



Figure 2 Topaz, Utah (L) Richard

We lived in army style barracks. Now I spent 8 years in the army and lived in a variety of barracks when I was serving. However, the worst army barracks couldn't compare to the barracks we lived in at Topaz.

Number one, they were shoddily constructed, and were not really weather proof. They needed to be

because in that area of the country. Summer time the temperature went up to 120 degrees in the shade. And in wintertime the snow drifts piled up to 6

feet high. We had no indoor plumbing. With six feet high snow drifts, and I was only about 4 or 5, it was a rough go.

The food to me was atrocious. My mother had commented I was kind of finicky about the mess hall food. Mess hall because we ate in a common dining barracks in the middle of the block. In addition to that, the toilets and shower stalls were in another barrack in the block. Again we did not have indoor plumbing. For heat, there was a pot belly stove to keep us warm during the winter time. I can recall getting so cold that one day when I was home alone in the barracks, I loaded up the pot belly stove with all the coal we had, and the stove turned cherry red and almost burned down the barracks. That goes to show how cold I thought it was that I needed something like that to survive.

In addition to the deplorable physical conditions of the living quarters, there was a small hospital in the camps. But it was perpetually short of necessary medical supplies, which was not surprising because medical supplies for detainees were not a top priority during war. It was so bad that I found out later after the war, a pharmacist in Berkeley, a Caucasian, sent care packages to our camp because he knew our family was interned there, and one of my uncles had written to him that we were short of medical supplies.

Random acts of kindness were rare towards the detainees. But I feel impelled to mention that there were a few people and a few organizations that protested and opposed the internment of the Japanese and Japanese Americans. Some even went to jail. I want to acknowledge that as I speak about the concentration camp part of my life. I'm grateful to those individuals who displayed compassion for our people during that time.

Barbed Wire Fences Pointed In

The camp had a complete school system. Japanese, you know being how they are, as far as education is concerned, I'm sure pushed hard to have a semblance of a K-12 system in the camp. At one point my father taught in the junior high school at the camp. The reason why he taught is he did a variety of jobs, when he was in the camp. I must mention that internees that worked in the camp, at whatever they did, whether they were cleaning trash or were doctors, were paid \$16 a month. I often wondered why \$16 a month was the basic salary for everybody in the camps. I suspect it was the

pay rate of a private in the US military. It is really a low amount. But that's the way it was in the camps. My father, who was a student at UC Berkeley before the WWII, did volunteer to teach in the system. But he told me he resigned after he was teaching a class in American history, and giving a lecture on the birth of this nation, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, all that bad time stuff. And while he was lecturing to the students about freedom, justice, and democracy, the students could look out of the windows and see the barbed wire fences, and the watchtowers with the search lights, and the armed guards and the machine guns.

I remember the first half track I ever saw. A half track is an army vehicle that was half a truck and half a tank. And you don't mess with that. It was always parked at the main gate to go after miscreants who might have decided to escape from camp. The government had said the barbed wire fences and the watch towers and the armed guards were to protect us from harm. But at the top of these fences, the barbed wire slanted in, which meant it was to keep us *in*, not outward, which would have been to keep people *out*. So that's another ugly lie the government had foisted on the people regarding the concentration camps experience.

And I might also add, euphemisms were widely used to describe the concentration camp period. Even to the point of referring to these camps as "relocation centers." Now, as late as the 1960s,--and I'll come back to the 60s in a moment-- it was not considered good form to call them concentration camps. The first time I ever saw a book that had the words "Concentration Camps" on the title was written by some member of the Communist Party. And all of the other books written by Euro-Americans or Japanese Americans had "Relocation Center" titles in their books.

But by the 60s, things had changed a little bit. The student movement, especially the Asian student movement, which included Japanese Americans, mostly Sansei's like myself, third generation Japanese, began to get a mindset change and started to demand that the appropriate title of "Concentration Camp" should be applied to that phenomena. Concentration camps historically are a Western imperialist invention. The first mention of concentration camps originated during the Boer War in South Africa around 1898 when the British and the Dutch were fighting for possession of that territory as their imperial empires were colliding on that continent. The British would round up the women and children of their opponents, the

Boers, and put them in what they called "concentration camps." This was their way of dealing with guerilla warfare or insurgent operations. The Boers were considered guerillas or insurgents. While the men were out there in the wild fighting with the British, the British went in and rounded up their women and children. The mortality rates in those concentration camps were abnormally high, which resulted in the public outcry by people in England who were sensitive about the mistreatment of civilians during wartime. It's kind of tragic that again, when the elephants fight, the grass suffers.

The highpoint of the word "concentration camp" seems to echo in the part of history when we deal with Nazi Germany. At this point I'm comparing and contrasting the Japanese American concentration camp experience with what happened in Nazi Germany. While the Japanese Americans did not end up in extermination centers, which was a major difference between those two systems, they were both produced by imperialist powers. They were both done for economic gain.

I was Citizen No. 13711-C

The Japanese American community in this country lost more than \$6 billion when their properties were confiscated during World War II. There was some effort to compensate the Japanese for their economic losses --and again, I'll get back to that issue at a later point. Getting back to the American versus the German concentration camp experience, I do know that everybody who was interned was given a number, just like they did in the German camps. My number was 13711-C. Again, there was a difference. They didn't tattoo the number on my arm like they did in Germany. But I had that number and that was my legal number during the war. I wasn't Richard M. Aoki. I was Citizen No. 13711-C. The dash C meant I was a child. Isn't that something?

Now, during my family's stay in the concentration camps, a number of things happened. My parents separated while we were in the camps. A normal marriage has enough stress in it that can drive couples apart. But you throw a concentration camp experience on top of that and you have serious problems. So it's not surprising that my parents separated. They didn't divorce because of cultural values within the Japanese and Japanese

American community here. Very conservative, and things like illegitimate children, divorces and the like are really frowned upon. It's almost legendary about the number of marriages within the Japanese American community that didn't end in a divorce, even though both partners separated and went on with their lives because divorce itself was a disgrace on the part of the couple and reflected negatively on the family or the clan. Speaking of the family or the clan, I recently discovered that my grandfather was one of three sons of a general in the Imperial Army of Japan who came to the United States. And of those three sons, one of them had the temerity to marry a Euro-American woman, for which he nearly was lynched. And she lost her citizenship because she married a Japanese national.

What I'd like to bring up at this time is the phenomenon of anti-Asian racism in the United States that was quite prevalent during the late 19th and early 20th century, as reflected in the anti-Chinese movement on the West Coast in the 1800s, which culminated in the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which legally stopped the further immigration of Chinese from the mainland to the United States. In 1907, the United States government outlawed the immigration of Japanese nationals to the United States. Then to compound the felony, they made it illegal for immigrants to become citizens of the United States, even after they came to the United States legally. It wasn't until the 1950s, I believe, that Japanese nationals were granted American citizenship, which is really a weird thought when you think about it.

Now, during the time I was growing up in the concentration camps, from 1942 to 1945, when I was about 4 until I was about 7 or 8, I thought the world was like the concentration camp. I remember in kindergarten I got my little primer, Dick Jane Dog Spot, and I couldn't believe other people, other children had houses with white picket fences and pet dogs named Spot. It wasn't until after the camps that I realized there was a bigger world out there.

From Topaz to West Oakland

In late 1945 my father brought me and my brother David to California to live in our family home in West Oakland. My father's family was originally from West Oakland and the family home which had not been confiscated during the war still remained there. My father, myself, my younger brother

moved into the family house with my paternal grandparents and a bachelor uncle. I lived there for about 10 years. Now the shock of leaving a concentration camp and being dropped into an inner city neighborhood was quite severe. But then let me explain a little about West Oakland.

Oakland is an interesting city in California. At one time it was the western terminus of the transcontinental railroad, which the western part, the Chinese built up. And as a result of that Oakland became the third largest industrial city in California. In fact they even had steel mills in Oakland. Oakland was like a minor Pittsburg on the West Coast with 1500 businesses that specialized in some ancillary part of steel making, light, middle industrial businesses such as cable making, and automobiles for example. In the Bay Area there were a number of automobile plants started by Chevrolet, Ford, General Motors. Plus there was truck making plants at one time in Oakland. I think Peterbilt trucks were manufactured in Oakland and mobile trailers were built in Oakland. So, Oakland was really kind of a classic industrial city, a smaller replication of Pittsburg and Detroit on the East Coast and Midwest. A hard city.

People, I try to think of Oakland as being the Newark, New Jersey portion and SF being the equivalent of NY. For a long time I didn't think that there was anything culturally relevant between NY and SF and the United States. But be that as it may, because of its manufacturing base there were a lot of jobs and opportunities in Oakland. However Oakland, especially West Oakland went through dramatic demographic changes over a period of 50 years from 1900-1950. Prior to WWII West Oakland was know as Little Yokohama because the large percentage of Japanese living in West Oakland. A lot of them came over from SF as SF J-Town became more populated. And in addition to the high concentration of Japanese living in West Oakland there were Italians, Greeks, Portuguese who were living in that part of town, again prior to WWII. Because of WWII, the most dramatic demographic shift occurred because of the internment of the Japanese and Japanese Americans which emptied West Oakland of our people and my family. In the vacuum that followed, African Americans began settling in Oakland more and more.

I might add there was also a longstanding African American population in West Oakland because of the railroads. One of the major leaders of the brotherhood of sleeping car porters, the first national black union, was C.W.

Dellums, the uncle of Ron Dellums. And the Dellums family also lived in West Oakland. By 1945 there was a massive influx of African American "immigrants" that arrived in West Oakland to work in the war industries such as the shipping yards. And that increased the population of the Blacks in West Oakland.

In fact 7th St. the main boulevard in West Oakland was a significant commercial area. There were shops, restaurants, dry good stores, shoeshine stands and businesses like that up and down 7th St. Nightclubs like Slim Jenkins and later on Esther's Orbit Room were located in West Oakland. They even had their own movie house, Lincoln Theater a nice place where I used to go in Saturday afternoons to watch the movies that had played in downtown Oakland and now shown in West Oakland.

Toughest Oriental to Come Out of West Oakland

The other thing that should be brought into the picture was that West Oakland was a segregated Black community by 1945, segregated by law and by custom. African Americans couldn't move to any other parts of Oakland at one time because of restricted housing covenants which prevented them from buying homes in the better areas. Now Berkeley also had a problem. At one time Japanese Americans could not buy housing north of University Ave. as late as prior to WWII. Again this was a reflection of separate but equal doctrine as laid out in the 1896 Plessy versus Ferguson Supreme Court decision. Again the Supreme Court, you can't really count on it for anything. In a recent election, they decided the presidency of the United States. What a gas. And see what has happened since that time.

Not very many of the Japanese and Japanese Americans came back to West Oakland after WWII. But my family did and settled back there in 1945. Between 1945 and 1950 the Oakland police department was put into receivership and run by the attorney general's office of the State of California because of brutality and corruption. I can testify as to the brutality of the Oakland police force during that period of time, because I was just a young kid running the streets and was a witness to gross violations of civil rights administered by the police department. And it wasn't surprising that they would be put into receivership for that particular issue.

As a Japanese American kid growing up there, it was quite interesting because I had gone from one segregated community, that is the concentration camps populated by my people, and ended up in another segregated community. But this was a different group. It was African Americans. And growing up in West Oakland, I learned to appreciate in general the culture of African Americans and began to learn the history of Blacks in America.

For example many of the African Americans I met were newcomers from the South. And I use to listen to their stories of racism and discrimination and lynchings with a great deal of horror at the fact that in other parts of the United States, conditions were worse than the worse that I had seen in West Oakland. For example seeing the cops beat up somebody is not like seeing somebody lynched. Then being a little precocious child, I began putting two and two together, and saw that people of color in this country really get unequal treatment and aren't presented with many opportunities for gainful employment, as they refer to it.



Figure 3: Saints jacket

And I developed friendships in that neighborhood during that period of time. Later on I ran into members of the Newton family, the Seale family, the Hilliard family. So growing up in my teenage years, along with the Dellums family, I had an exposure to families of people with whom I would have a greater connection during the period of the sixties.

I have to admit I wasn't a good little boy when I was growing up in West Oakland. I got quite skilled at five fingered shopping and second story work, another term for burglary. And I participated in the midnight auto supply business where early in the evening I'd go down to the local fence and ask him what he wanted that evening. And he would give me an order like "I need four Packard automobile hubcaps, a Chrysler hood ornament, (laughs), a Cadillac battery." And if I got it back to him, I'd get a whole dollar for a set of hub caps, fifty cents for a hood ornament. Now in those older cars,

they all had these fancy little hood ornaments. The fancier the car, the fancier the hood ornament. And I got real good at being able to unscrew them real fast and scoot down the road. I was definitely considered a juvenile delinquent. I got into street fights and things like that.

But as far as my pugilistic accomplishments were concerned, I had some advantages. Number one, my bachelor uncle I lived with for 10 years had a black belt in the martial arts, in jujitsu and aikido. So I learned that martial arts at home. Meanwhile my father was a bar room fighter and a boxing promoter at one period in his life. So I used to go down to the boxing gyms in Downtown Oakland. At that time there must have been half a dozen boxing gyms in Downtown Oakland because Oakland saw the birth of a lot of good professional fighters during the forties and fifties that came out of West Oakland. One middle weight, Leonard Marrow was an up and comer light mid-weight. And I remember he taught me how to handle myself in the ring.

Meanwhile, out on the streets because of how I was running, I had to learn basic street fighting, just to survive on the streets. But, the good news is that once the word got out that I was a formidable opponent and proved myself, things got much easier for me. I was accepted by the neighborhood kids and invited to join the gangs and had fun with the young ladies and things like that.



Figure 4 The Saints Club, top middle Richard

In fact at one point I had the title of being the "toughest Oriental to come out of West Oakland." A dubious honor at that, but there's a saying only the strong survive and there's a lot of merit in that statement. You do what you have to do. In retrospect, I've always felt that that period of my life growing up in West Oakland was one of the best periods of my life because I was exposed to a

different culture that I admired. Took the good parts of it and tried to deal with the bad parts.

I did quite well in junior high school. I was valedictorian of my junior high school class, a big accomplishment. When it came time to attend high school, rather than attending McClymonds High School, my father's alma mater, my mother made me go to Berkeley High School, her alma mater, because they had finally gotten a divorce and she had obtained custody of me. So I was forced to go from a West Oakland junior high school to Berkeley High School, which at that time in the 1950s was considered one of the top ten high schools in the country. And again I had to prove myself in a new arena. This time it was the academic arena because I had to learn how to play the intellectual academic game. The two and a half years at Berkeley High enabled me to do it. The reason why I only spent two and a half years at Berkeley was I went to summer school because I wanted to graduate early, because I had career ambitions. During high school I managed to retain my connections with West Oakland and eventually was in a social club that involved young males from both West Oakland and South Berkeley, which made it one of the largest gangs in the neighborhood.

Even though I grew up in West Oakland during 1945-1955, I ended up my formal education by attending and graduating from Berkeley High School. I completed 3 years of high school in two and half because I was in a hurry to reach adulthood. As I recall I was a pretty good student at Berkeley High School, probably among the top ten percent in the graduating class. Got good scores on my SAT. And was eligible for direct admissions to UC Berkeley at the time I graduated. But shortly prior to graduation I enlisted in the United States Army in my upper senior year while I was in high school. And delayed going on active duty until I received my high school diploma.

Enlisting in the US Military

Now the question emerges, why would I who was doing well in the academic track at Berkeley High School, considered one of the top ten high schools in the country, and a major feeder high school to UC Berkeley, would I go into the US military? Well the answer is simple and complex.

During that period of time of the Cold War, Universal Military Training, UMT was the law of the land. Every male was expected to serve in the military before they were twenty-six. Or if they were university or college students, they could defer being drafted until they were twenty-six. Well I was only seventeen at the time in 1956 when the Hungarian revolution broke out in Europe and the Soviet Union crushed the rebellion. It looked like there was going to be a war between the United States and the Soviet Union at the time.

So, being the eager beaver that I was, I went dashing down to the recruitment office at 16th and Clay in Oakland, the draft center. I couldn't wait to get into the military. The recruiter wanted me to delay my active duty status until I graduated from high school, which was going to be within several months. Meanwhile the economic picture for high school graduates as far as employment was concerned was pretty bad in 1956. There was an economic recession in the land known as the recession of 1956. So there weren't many full time jobs available. Impelling me to go into the US military was the fact that I was a descendant of samurai stock from the



Figure 5 Military Service

old country, the warrior class. And I was raised by my family to be a warrior. I enjoyed being exposed to the heritage of the samurai ethos. I incorporated the bushido code into my conduct and character. I was interested in things military. Plus I had grown up on the streets and had what the recruiters thought was a pretty good attitude regarding combat.

So, I enlisted. And three days after my graduation from high school, I was down at Fort Ord, California to undergo the first part of my military training. Basic training. Boot camp. I was so happy. The first day I was down at Fort Ord,

word spread to us new recruits that in the evening we were going to participate in an event called a G.I. Party. I was very excited all through the day looking forward to Partying. However that night the sergeant called us

together and said we are going to start our GI Party, which means we are going to clean this barrack from top to bottom. And here are some tooth brushes to help you clean the floors. And he wore white gloves to make sure we didn't miss any cracks in the walls or other parts of the barracks. We were up until midnight cleaning the barracks out. I chuckle at the fact I was so gullible and naïve that the word Party turned me on.

However, I view my military experience, a total of eight years of active duty, active reserve, and inactive reserve, as a very good foundation for what met me later in life. I was never a wartime hero. I did enjoy the service for about the first seven of the eight years. During that time there were periods I thought I had died and gone to hog heaven, primarily because I got to play with all the toys I wanted to play with when I was growing up. Pistols, rifles, machine guns, mortars, rocket launchers. Sometimes they let me play with the tank. That was awesome. Now because I was a good trooper and a happy camper, I steadily moved up in rank. And around the seventh year, became a junior drill instructor, which I took quite seriously, marching the troops up and down the parade field. I was happy. I must say going into the army was financially rewarding. As a buck private, I made \$72.50 a month. I was able to send half of it home to support my mother and younger brother who were living in Berkeley at the time.

However around the eighth year that I was in the service, I was in the reserves. I began to question the war in Vietnam. This was around 1963 or so. While it wasn't evident to the general public, the war in Vietnam was dirty and was going to be picking up in scope at the rate it was going. Being in the service, one gets a better idea of what's happening than the general public. And the war being dirty meant that as a soldier, I would have the task of taking out women and children. Well partly due to my bushido code background and other forms of thoughts of chivalry and good humanitarianism, you just don't kill women and children. Now don't get me wrong. I was ready to go "mano-on-mano" with the worst communist there was over there. But I didn't feel it was morally right to kill civilians, no matter what. As a result of that, there was an internal moral conflict on my part where it became apparent that a career in the service may not be the best path for me. Even though when I initially joined, I had a fantasy of being the first Japanese American general in the history of the United States Army. And I probably would have made it had I stayed in. I know that seems a little grandiose, but I said it was a fantasy on my part.

Now I wasn't like other people who served in the military during that time. The President of the United States managed to avoid the draft by enlisting in the Air National Reserve Guard of Texas. And this was quite a shock because I never heard the communist say they were going to invade Texas. At that he apparently didn't show up to work a lot of the time he was in the Air National Guard. Now the Vice President is another case. He received five deferments to the draft with the excuse he had better things to do. What all that boiled down to was working class males were drafted and sent over to fight the war. Those who were from classes of privilege avoided that type of duty. In other words, they didn't put their money where their mouth was. If they're so heavy about beating back the enemies of the state, why aren't they in there fighting? I believe during the Vietnam War, very few sons of Congress people served in the military. The bulk of the draftees were workers and people of racial and ethnic minorities.

The casualties reflect the outrageous nature of that differential service. The African Americans, the Latinos, and to a large extent Asian American soldiers would form the bulk of those 58,000 killed during the war in Vietnam. Well enough of those low lifers who didn't serve and didn't serve well. I served honorably until that eighth year. In talking with buddies coming back, I realized that it was a messy war over there and things were a bit more complicated now that I was a commissioned officer. The dilemma is, if you are in command and you have doubts, you shouldn't be in command because a split second thinking of the moral consequences at the beginning of a fire fight can not only get you killed, but will get the soldiers you are leading as well. So I decided I would not reenlist.

Well, the night I was to receive my honorable discharge, I went trotting down to the regimental headquarters and signed the papers getting me out of the military with an honorable discharge. As I was trying to exit the office, the regimental clerk shoved a set of reenlistment papers under my nose for me to sign, saying that the Colonel had the reenlistment papers prepared for another eight years because he was pretty sure I was going to re-up. I told the clerk that was not my intent. He freaked out, called the Colonel. The Colonel came out into the office in the middle of the night to interview me about my refusal to sign the reenlistment papers.

He was a good commanding officer. He and I chatted a bit and I expressed to him that I had doubts about the war in Vietnam. I had doubts whether I could be an effective leader under these circumstances. I was planning on leaving the army and checking out other things. And I may be back, but we don't know. In order to entice me to reenlist, he threw several chips on the table. The first one was, he promised me if I reenlisted that I would go directly to Officer Candidate School, OCS in Fort Benning, Georgia and become a Second Lieutenant after twenty-two weeks. We used to call them twenty-two week wonders, almost instant officers. Generally these were enlisted men who were chosen to be promoted.

Well I had taken the entrance exam several years earlier and was number three out of two hundred men who took that test. I was qualified and I served my time. And he said after OCS he would make sure that I would get into the Hundred and First Airborne Division, the Screaming Eagles, the parachute division. That's where you fly an airplane, jump out of it with a parachute, hope it opens, and you land behind enemy lines to give 'em hell. It's one of the most dangerous jobs in the military. But it was also a prerequisite for Special Forces. I had volunteered for the Special Forces several years before that, but didn't meet their qualifications at the time. So that looked interesting.

The third chip he threw down was he offered me a monetary compensation for reenlisting. I believe it was \$3500.00. Now re-up bonuses or reenlistment bonuses were beginning to become quite common for the US military in order to retain people that they wanted. We referred to the re-up bonuses as "blood money," meaning that you were signing up for money, signing up for the "blood," and dismissed it if you were cynical. That was trying to make the transition from a draft army to a volunteer army. You pay 'em good money. I don't know what the current reenlistment bonus is for Iraq veterans, but I think it's running around \$25,000. Be that as it may, I'll speak about the difference between the draft and the volunteer army later on as it becomes more contemporaneously relevant.

Anyhow, despite these offers, I walked out of the office, kept walking and never looked back. I will say without lying, I did enjoy the period I spent in the military because being in the military signified to me that I had grown up, that I was a man. So anybody out there that's going to get shot at has got to be a man. I mean, what can I say? It's like a rite of passage, culturally.

So I had already overcome that obstacle as I was growing up and I was still growing.

People Change, History Moves On

Politically, I would be labeled a conservative at the time, because of the fact that I voted for Richard Nixon in the 1960 presidential election, when he ran against John F Kennedy. Now I will explain the logic of my political position to you as weird as it may sound today. First and foremost, Richard Nixon was from California. Kennedy was from Massachusetts. Richard Nixon was a homeboy. Kennedy spoke with a foreign Boston accent. Richard Nixon married a good housewife. Kennedy married some arrant socialite later to be known as Jackie O. Richard Nixon grew up poor and humble. Kennedy grew up rich. I think his father's or his family's fortune was based on the rum running trade during the prohibition days when alcohol was outlawed here in the United States. I think rumor has it that his family built their fortune up smuggling (laughs) hard liquor across the border.

Richard Nixon was a Quaker. The Quakers were the only religious group that, or were one of the few that opposed the internment of the Japanese Americans during World War II. Kennedy was a Roosevelt man, and Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 that put us Japs in the camps. So, it's payback time... Meanwhile, one of the other reasons why I voted Republican was the fact that Abraham Lincoln, who was the first presidential candidate of the Republican Party, freed the slaves. And to me and my sensitivity to African Americans, indicated that I should be in favor of somebody that emancipated the slaves.

Well in a nutshell I was politically conservative in my late teens and almost early twenties. But it was a principled conservatism. It didn't have any racial tinges to it. In general, people who are politically conservative in this country tend to be racist. Tend to be. But I've seen several exceptions as I've gone along in life. And I'm definitely anti Racist. And I'm not saying that the Republican Party, today, is not racist. People change. Institutions change. History moves on. As far as I'm concerned, Republicans and Democrats are different sides of the same coin. I'm merely echoing what Malcolm X had to say when he was speaking about electoral politics in the

United States. He didn't differentiate between the Republicans or the Democrats. What can I say.

Now, after my honorable discharge from the United States Army, I spent a weekend in San Francisco. Blew out, (laughs) blew my muster out, my back pay, my travel pay, and ended up looking for a job. And so, in the first year or so I was out of the military I worked in a variety of jobs that can be classified as working class/proletarian type jobs. I worked as a hospital orderly. I was a truck driver. Worked on a factory assembly line. And I even spent one day as an agricultural worker, which was one of the worst days I have ever worked in my life.

Picking Strawberries

Now agricultural work in the Bay Area was quite common during the '40s, '50s and even early '60s, because large chunks of land around the metropolitan bay area were still farms and orchards. For example, at one time San Jose was one big strawberry field, unlike what it is today, a developed, thriving metropolitan community of several million people. But fifty or so years ago, the land was primarily agricultural in production.

So, what I did was, got up early one morning, went down to the bottom of Broadway in Oakland where the labor contractors from the fields in San Jose came up to recruit workers, who were mostly, the ones who showed up in the morning shift were winos, bums, skid row inhabitants who just needed to work for a day to get their alcohol. Because you were paid in cash and all it required was one day's worth of work.

But I learned a lot of things that day. I went through a quick exposure to what it was like being an agricultural worker. Had to get my butt up early. Had to get downtown there, and fight to get myself on one of the buses to get trucked down to San Jose to the fields there.

Well that day they were looking for strawberry pickers. I said, oh well, I'll do that. Strawberry picking is stoop labor. You're hunched over there, for more than eight hours a day under a blazing sun. At first it seemed like easy duty. The strawberries tasted good. I was sampling the strawberries as I

was picking them. One strawberry in the box. One strawberry in my mouth. But after a while, it got old.

Then I looked around to see who else was working with me out there. Again, they were your regular homeless inner city dwellers. Homelessness was not wide spread in the '50s and '60s. The only people who were considered homeless were the skid row bums or hobos, knights of the road, those who road the railroad cars around town, around the country.

Then there was another group, Latino--mostly Mexican workers out there picking the strawberries, men and women. There were little kids. And I said to myself, that's a little strange. Those kids should be in school! What are they doing out here in the hot sun, pickin' them strawberries?...But I later found out, when I became a professional, that there were only three social workers assigned in the State of California to look after the social welfare needs of migrant labor children. Only three in the whole state. And there were thousands of young children out working in the fields.

Now it may be because I'm biased towards people getting a formal education. And I'm not out there saying, oh get an education, get an education, just to get an education. But I think its very important, especially young people to get a formal education, and a good one. I though it was a waste that these children were out there, not in school.

But then there is the other part of their condition. And that's the fact that they have to be with their parents, following the crops as they're out there maturing in the fields. So they are never in one spot long enough to benefit from education. They might be in five, six, or seven school districts in a school year because of the migratory patterns that their parents are forced into by being farm workers.

I once saw a map of the working patterns, geographically, of migrant laborers in this country. And was stunned see how these workers would have to travel thousands of miles in a given year to be continuously employed in the agricultural industry. I mean, one week they may be in Texas picking grapefruit, the next week in Kansas picking pecans. I don't know what they grow in Kansas. But that's the nature of the economic beast. That's bad enough. But when you have kids running loose in that type of environment, that to me is not good social policy and is unnatural.

OK, I kind of spent a lot time on the one day I spent in the fields. But, when the farm workers began their struggle a couple of years later in the vineyards, I understood almost immediately where they were coming from. The low wages, the working conditions, and the ancillary problems. And I have to admit I didn't make that much for the one day I spent out there pickin' strawberries. I ended up with a stomach ache and about three or four dollars. The labor contractor hit me for the bus ride, the water, the baloney sandwich for lunch. By the time he got through deducting for all my expenses, I barely had enough for a bottle of wine. I mean that's how bad it was. And I swore I'd never go back to agricultural work again.

Merritt Community College in North Oakland

I decided even though I was eligible for direct admissions to UC Berkeley, since I had graduated qualified from Berkeley High School, I would attend Merritt College, a two year community college, in order to save money. Plus it was located in my neighborhood in North Oakland.

While I was dancing around in the halls, I ran into Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. In fact it turned out I knew their families from the days I had lived out in West Oakland. Bobby had grown up in North Oakland, Huey in West Oakland. I might parenthetically add, David Hilliard was from West Oakland as well, who I later connected with also. All three of us were interested in the pressing social issues of the day, namely, the problems facing people of color here in this country. At that time in 1965 or so, the civil rights movement was in full force in the country. However I believe by that time Malcolm X had been assassinated a year or so earlier. However, Black nationalist revolutionary thoughts were being examined by Bobby and Huey.

Opposing the Vietnam War

Because I was planning to go to UC Berkeley, I spent a lot of time at UC Berkeley even though I was a student at Merritt. There were a lot of political things happening at Berkeley. For example it was the birth of the Free Speech Movement and the headquarters of the national anti-war movement. The Vietnam Day Committee, the VDC was a Berkeley

concoction. I joined the Vietnam Day Committee to protest the war in Vietnam, a sort of logical extension of what I was feeling about the war when I left military service. So it made sense that I did a flip-flop. I went from being for the war to being opposed to the war. I went from one extreme of the position to the other extreme. When I was in the army, I was all for, "let's nuke 'em." When I was in the VDC, "let's stop the troop trains."

Be that as it may, because of that experience, I ran into people like Jerry Rubin, Mike Delacore, Stu Albert, and to a lesser extent I think Abbie Hoffman was in and around at the time. A lot of what are known as the old Berkeley radicals were quite active during that period as students at UC Berkeley. Through the Vietnam Day Committee, I became more politically militant. I started studying the basic works of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Even before that I studied Hegel, in order to prep myself to study Marx, Engels, and Lenin. As a member of the Vietnam Day Committee, I was elected to be the head of the international committee of the VDC, which merely meant I was to handle the correspondence from Asia, Africa, Latin America from anti-war groups who were active in protesting the war all over the world. It had its culmination at a big march on Washington in '65. I flew there to attend as a representative of the international committee of the Vietnam Day Committee.

What was amazing to me about the anti-war movement, was that when I got out of the service, I went to one of the first anti-war demonstrations held in San Francisco and there were only about 2,000 demonstrators. The crowd was so small and feelings were so high, that the Longshoremen's Union supplied their membership as security to keep us safe as we marched down Market Street, because so many reactionaries and the police wanted a taste of us. But then several years later I was in Washington with a quarter of a million people marching down the street protesting the war in Vietnam. I brought up that illustration up to point out how overnight things can change in this country. That a small demonstration of 2,000 people one day, can end up being a quarter of a million several years later. It's amazing, things happen. But that period from 1965-1970 was one of the most intense social periods in United States history.

The decade of the 60s, people are still dwelling on that. Looking back at it, some with nostalgia, others with disillusioned feelings. I look back at the period and see it as historically awesome. I had a chance to play a minor

role in moving things along progressively during that period, whenever I had the opportunity.

The Formation of the Black Panther Party

Now going back to Merritt College, Bobby, Huey, and I were running around trying to get things together. To make a long story short, we talked a lot for the first year or so. But it became quite apparent that talk was not enough to produce significant social transformations. One needed a Party to do it with a program. So Bobby and Huey really drafted the ten point program and wanted me to critically analyze it before it was finally produced. The three of us cranked out the first draft of the program by mimeograph machine, and went around passing out the flyers announcing the formation of the group with the ten point program.

One of the things that seems to be odd is that, here I am. I'm a Japanese American. This is an African American based organization. So meeting

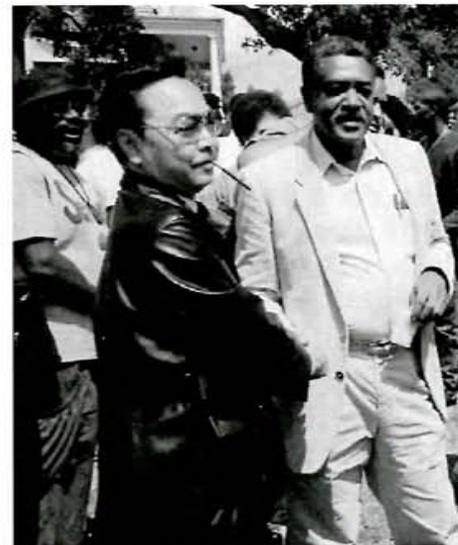


Figure 6 : Richard and Bobby Seale

there the first night of the founding, Huey asked me to join the Party. I looked at him and I looked at Bobby and I said, "I know you two guys are crazy, 'cuz we drafted the program together. Are you blind as well? I'm not Black." Then Huey responded by saying, "That's not the issue, Richard. The struggle for Freedom, Justice, and Equality transcends racial and ethnic barriers. As far as I'm concerned, you Black. And we're asking you to join the Party." And so I did. We went out there the first couple of weeks. When the programs were distributed, there were ten points on it. And we asked the community, "Which of the ten points do you want us to concentrate on?" Almost to a person, they said, police brutality. As Bobby indicated, the police are like an

occupying army in our communities. Not unlike the United States army in Iraq at the present time. (I just thought I'd get that one in.) And they are brutalizing the people. And the Black Panther Party will stand up for the people. And we started what was known as the shotgun patrols where we would follow the police while they were patrolling and observe them when they were making arrests. We had cameras and tape recorders to chronicle what was going on.

Now the reason why the police didn't do anything about it (don't tell me they weren't mad), was because we had the right to do it based on the US constitution. Huey majored in pre-law at Merritt. Bobby was in pre-engineering. I was social science. And Huey reminded the police that we had the right to observe. The police would have taken our cameras and tape recorders, smashed them, beaten our butts, and arrested us, except for the fact that Huey had a loaded 12 gauge pump action shotgun. Bobby had an army Colt 45 semi-automatic. And I had a Smith and Wesson Model 66 357. So they weren't about to touch our equipment, or to touch us. Needless to say, it was a little dangerous during that kind of community service work. But it made an impact on the community in the sense that we weren't just talking the talk, we were also walking the walk.

The big break through came when Denzel Dowell, a seventeen year old African American youth in North Richmond was shot down and murdered by either the Richmond police or the Contra Costa sheriff department in cold blood. His mother wanted to use the local park to air her grievances, but they wouldn't issue her a permit. And so she and her family and friends asked the Black Panther Party if we would secure the park so that she could speak.

By that time we had chapters of the Party in West Oakland, North Oakland, East Oakland and Berkeley. I was the branch captain of the Berkeley chapter. When the Berkeley chapter was formed, there was only one member, myself. And Huey made me branch captain with the instructions to go out and recruit. He quoted the Bible, "Be fruitful and multiply."

So one day we went out to North Richmond, three car loads of us, armed to the teeth, rifles, pistols, and shotguns. And we secured the park. We stood off several hundred police officers who had helicopters, canine units and

everything to intimidate us. But the event went off as planned, and Mrs. Dowell was able to publicly air her grievances against the police.

Now here's something strange. For decades, hostility, violent warfare between West Oakland and North Richmond was the norm. Even white gangs growing up in both neighborhoods would fight each other. That's how bad it is. I'm sorry to say, today it seems to be the same case. I understand Asian American gangs in Richmond are fighting Oakland gangs of the same ethnicity. It's really a kind of waste. But up until the time the Panthers appeared in North Richmond in 1967 to assist the community, that's the way the conditions were. That night there was a big barbeque in North Richmond where the North Richmond community hosted the Oakland Panthers and thanked them for helping them out. In fact I believe that every male member of the Dowell family joined the Party that day. As I said, that was one of the key initial activities of the Party that brought it to the attention of the public, the nation, and the world. The rest is kind of history.

Transfer to UC Berkeley

In 1966, I transferred from Merritt Community College to UC Berkeley with the idea of majoring in one of the Social Sciences since I had a general Social Science major when I was at Merritt College. My reason for going to Berkeley was not the usual reason. I wasn't attending there to get the degree, get a good job, move out to the suburbs and have my 2.4 children. I wasn't going there because I had a deep intellectual interest. I was going there, because I was on a mission, being a member of the Party. It was felt that since I was one of the few eligible for admission to Berkeley, I should attend there. So I focused on the major of sociology for my upper division work from 1966 to '68.

I arrived at the University as quite a unique figure. Number one, I was an older student. My military service and being at a community college had made me a bit older than the average undergraduate student. I was also Japanese American - a racial minority. And at that time, Japanese Americans and other students from Asian and Asian American backgrounds were called Orientals. Well, that changed shortly after I got to UC Berkeley. One other feature that differentiated me from the average Berkeley student was also my political ideology. By that time I was an avowed Marxist-Leninist,

bordering on Maoism. So that made me a little different. Contrary to popular opinion, most of the students at Berkeley were kind of apolitical. I was among the few that were considered militant.

Meanwhile I'm going along and the founding of the Party coincided with my transfer to UC Berkeley. Then my life really got complicated. There I was a student at Berkeley as well as a captain of the Black Panther Party.

I have to admit I did very well at Merritt College. Got good grades and continued my formal education at Berkeley. Decided to major in sociology. At first I looked over the other majors: rejected psychology for their subjective approach to the problems of the world, and philosophy as nothing but thought, mental masturbation. Political science, I couldn't deal with that at Berkeley, because at the time the Poly-Sci department at Berkeley was politically conservative. In fact some of the professors worked for the CIA and that was public knowledge.

It's not surprising that academics sometimes work for the system. To give you an example of how they fit into the exploitation and oppression of people all over the world, I met a graduate student from Brazil when I was at Berkeley, who was from one of the indigenous populations in Brazil. In his village, he said that the social scientists from America went in there to study his people. Once they figured out the social structure of the village, things got nasty.

What they did was determine who the unofficial leaders of the village were. In other words, if the regular formal leaders of the village were taken out, who would emerge to replace them? This is important because you need to know who your potential enemies are. So the social scientists, anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, political scientists studied his people in his village. When they left, the army came in, killed not only the chief, but everyone else who could have been a leader in that group except him. He happened to be a student at the time that it happened. He swore that when he returned, he would make sure that these social scientists would not be welcome wherever he would be in control.

A lot of times, the academics here, intellectual elites like to think of themselves above the masses. But when push comes to shove, they're part of the masses and many of them work for the oppressor. This is something

that should be noted. They talk about their academic integrity, their intellectual neutrality, that's a lot of BS. Push comes to shove, many of them can become agents of the system and do things like turn on regular academicians who incur the disfavor of the system.

At this point I'd like to stick up for Ward Churchill. I think his so called colleagues are doing him an injustice by trying to railroad him. Sell him Down the River, even though he is one of the most honest academics I had the pleasure to be aware of in this post 9-11 period.

Third World Internationalism

As I was settling into Berkeley and doing my political work, I began to discover another political tendency or ideology that would be merged with the domestic Black liberation struggle. And that was the international Third World mindset.

Now I'm sitting in this coffee shop and we're talking Third World, and I look at the person and say, "Has there been the discovery of another planet that I'm unaware of?" And then I was told, "No man, hey this is what it's all about."

What it boiled down to is the Third World represented the oppressed and exploited masses of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Because of my work with the international committee of the Vietnam Day Committee, I had networked with a lot of people overseas and a lot of the foreign students at UC Berkeley who were radical. I'm not saying all of them were radical. At a certain point I was only one of two American born members of a group known as the Tri-continental Progressive Students Association at Berkeley. And because the two of us were the American born members, we assumed the responsibility of the organization on paper. In other words, our fellow students could not acknowledge they were members of the group.

What could have happened is that many of these, had it been known they were members of our group, their home countries would not have appreciated that. There were instances of some of them being killed for being members of the group because their countries of origin prohibited so-

called communist type membership links, etc. At one point I ended up being the official spokesperson for the group. And at one point I was nearly indicted for treason and sedition by the United States government. That was a very shocking experience. I knew I was playing with dynamite. But treason and sedition charges? That was serious. I mean we talk about, what's the term? Don't make a federal case out of it.

Building Third World Student Unity

Well, once I started matriculation at Berkeley, I started tightening up my relationships with other racial/ethnic and political groups, mainly, the Tri-Continental Progressive Students' Association which consisted of radical foreign students at Berkeley who had organized themselves. There were students in that group from Asia, Africa and Latin America. Having been the chairman of the International Committee of the Vietnam Day Committee, it was quite natural for me to run in those circles and exchange political ideas with them. One of the political ideas I came across was the concept of the Third World.

Meanwhile, parallel to that, Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee were also at Berkeley at the time. Yuji was in graduate school. They got together and decided to form an "Oriental" group. In the process of getting together, the group decided to name themselves, the "Asian American Political Alliance." This was probably the first time the term "Asian American" was used to label "Orientals." Now, when we look at the term "Oriental," I think of oriental rugs to be stepped on, to be beaten. That's the way we students looked at that term.

We also looked to see how the African American population of the United States was beginning to change consciously. How they were rejecting the term "Negro" and adopting the term, "Afro" or "African American." It seemed logical for us to name ourselves "Asian Americans," because the Asian part referred to our cultural heritage. The American part referred to our citizenship.

The thing that separated us from the "House-Orientals" was the fact that we had a radical program. We believed in self-determination. We supported the Black Panthers. We opposed the war in Vietnam. And we declared we

were anti-imperialist. Now that was a quantum political leap foreword for students of Oriental background at Berkeley at that time. The Asian American Political Alliance then began to take political action by supporting "Free Huey" demonstrations, participating in anti-Vietnam war demonstrations, and endorsing and participating in local labor struggles such as those being conducted by the Filipino and Filipino Americans in the agricultural fields. Some of us also opposed the militaristic rearming of Japan, as well as supporting the regimes in North Vietnam and mainland communist China. This definitely set our group, AAPA, apart from mainstream student organizations.

However, we had several other advantages organizationally and ideologically. For example we could be considered one of the first pan-Asian organizations because our membership consisted of not only Chinese Americans, but Japanese Americans, Filipino Americans and some Korean Americans.

When a University of California professor was informed of our existence, he "poo-pooed" the group, saying that those four groups have historically been at each other's throats. He didn't see any future in AAPA. What he neglected to consider was our politics, our program, transcended any past animosities amongst our groups. To be truthful, we were young people. And to a certain extent, the older generation did harbor ill feelings against other groups. But we didn't let that stand in our way. We minimized our differences and maximized our similarities. We stood for freedom, justice and equality. And we were against imperialism, exploitations and political oppression.

AAPA was quite active in late 1968 and began to reach out to other nationalist oriented student groups on campus such as the Afro-American Student Union, which at that time consisted of a number of different political groups. There were the Black Panther faction in that group, a Republic of New Africa chapter in that group and a number of cultural nationalists that could be counted in their group. Amongst the Latinos, the Mexican American Student Confederation was the most active of the Latino groups and it included MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán) and the Brown Berets. And several students, I believe, were also members of the communist party at that time. Then there were the Native Americans. There were only 7 Native Americans, I believe, enrolled at Berkeley at that

time at both the undergraduate and graduate level. They had a group called the Native American Student Association, NASA.

In the fall of 1968, we formalized our relationship by forming what was called the Third World Council. And we began discussing our mutual problems and seeking to come up with a solution. The major issue at the time was the creation of a Third World College, an autonomous academic component of the University, whereby we could have classes that were relevant to our communities. Whereby we could hire our own faculty, determine our own curriculum. That was a modest proposal at the time. The University was intransigent in their opposition to the creation of such as new academic discipline, because they thought it was too politically charged. After months of fruitless negotiations with the University of California, we decide to go on strike.

Third World Liberation Front Strike for a Third World College

In the winter academic quarter of 1969, we launched the Third World Liberation Front Strike. Prior a series of meetings of the council discussed whether we should go on strike and what kind of strike would we conduct.

Since San Francisco State had already started a strike for a Third World academic component in October of 1968, we invited

representatives from that group to advise us as we were discussing the possibilities of Berkeley going on strike. Number one, to assist the San Francisco strikers, because many of us had already begun to battle on the

SOLIDARITY!



Figure 7: Richard Aoki, Charles Brown and Manuel Delgado

campuses by going over to San Francisco State from Berkeley by the car loads to help the State strikers. Plus we had our "local issue" of having a component at Berkeley along the same lines.

I recall Benny Crutchfield, Roger Alvarado, and Alfred Wong - three of the key representatives of the San Francisco State student strikers were at a meeting where we discussed the organizational component of our group at Berkeley. We decided that we would have a sixteen person central committee that would run the strike. That each of the four groups would get four representatives. Now, the Africans Americans, Latinos and Asians had more than enough to come up with four representatives. But only two Native Americans stepped forward to fill their four positions.

So in the spirit of solidarity, we set aside two of their positions by saying they had the right for four representatives, but since they could only come up with two volunteers, that we would keep those two positions open and when they were able to fill it, they would have the right to do it. This was a tremendous leap forward for participatory democracy. We were giving equal weight to each group, because each group had their own unique beefs with the system.

The African Americans could have argued that they should have the majority of representation on the central committee since their national minority population was the biggest in the country. The Latinos could argue their population was the biggest in California. The Asians could argue they had the most students at Berkeley. The Native Americans, the poor souls, they only had seven students -- a reflection of the historic oppression of Native Americans - whom all of the groups agreed was the most oppressed, depressed, suppressed racial minority in this country at that time. But we were able to settle questions of power in a friendly fashion.

In addition to that, each of the groups was to select one representative from their group to speak for the group. And the African Americans came up with several that they rotated as sole representative. So did the Latinos. The Asian Americans selected me as the spokesperson for the Asians. The Asian American Political Alliance elected me Chairman of the organization for the duration of the strike.

Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee had left the area when the strike started,

because Yuji had picked up a job offer in New York and therefore had to cut short his studies. Nobody in AAPA wanted to fill the post of chairmanship once Yuji was gone. However, since we were facing a battle coming up, somebody had to speak for the group. I reluctantly accepted the dubious honor of representing the Asians in part because - I may sound a little stereotypic - Asians are quiet people. I had a loud mouth and I was willing to step forward. Meanwhile the Native Americans selected their leader from their group of two, LaNada Means, who was just off the reservations. And being sponsored by the BIA - the Bureau of Indian Affairs - endangered her student status at Berkeley by stepping forward.



Figure 8: Arrest of Richard Aoki at Bancroft and Telegraph.

The leadership of the Third World Liberation Front strike at that time consisted of usually transfer students who were veterans, who had grown up in the inner cities. For example, the pool of leadership amongst the African American students included Charles "Downtown" Brown from Watts or Compton, CA, who had been in the Coastguard. His backup was Don Juan Davis, who had been in the Navy. His backup was Jim Nabors, who was the West Coast Consul General of the Republic of New Africa. Among the Latino leadership included Manuel Delgado from East LA, Ysidro Macias who had been in the Marine Corp, and Jaime Solis, I believe he had been a member of the Brown Berets. Among the Asians, I was the only one that had military experience. That formed the basis of the combat wing, or the military part of the Third World Liberation Front when we went on strike.

One of the things that the San Francisco State strikers cautioned us on was to hammer out our differences before going on strike. Build up trust amongst ourselves, prior to going into battle. Primarily, we wouldn't have the time to deal with petty stuff, if we went on strike. They even said, "Don't go on strike if you can't hammer out your differences."

So over a weekend, we sat down and ironed out our differences. We agreed to concentrate on those matters that affected all of us, such as economic oppression, racial discrimination, and pushing for a relevant education at Berkeley. And agreed to minimize our differences over petty little issues. And held to that policy throughout the strike. That was one of the major reasons why we won. We hung in there tough.

The strike lasted three months. It was the longest, bloodied, costliest student strike at Berkeley in the history of the University of California at Berkeley. It lasted for 90 days - a whole academic quarter. We brought that University to a still. They brought in the Alameda county sheriff's department to maintain law and order. Or as we called it, when they talk about law and order, their idea is they make the laws, we keep the order. We were going to change that. It was the bloodiest strike in the sense of 147 of us were arrested - some of us more than 2 or 3 times. But we were willing to go to jail behind what we believed in, we were willing to get expelled from the University. I was eventually brought up on charges for conduct unbecoming a student during that period of time, but I was acquitted by a jury of student peers. Justice sometimes prevails.

It was the costliest, because the University spent millions of dollars for police presence on the campus, which just fueled the violence. In addition to that, destruction to campus properties ran into the millions, including the 5 million dollar burning of Wheeler Auditorium, the largest lecture hall on the campus, during the course of the strike. The destruction of that building, the University tried to blame the Third World Liberation Front. But we denied we had anything to do with that event. Why would we want to destroy our property? We paid our taxes, we built those buildings. We weren't about to burn them down. We wanted a relevant education with academic rigor. We didn't want any of their white-bread, cookie-cutter type of education. We wanted the knowledge to be able to help our communities. And the major reason why I fought for the Third World College was to provide students with a different academic track at Berkeley. I didn't mind if the average Oriental student attended Berkeley, took their classes, got their degrees, got their jobs, got their houses in the suburbs with their 2.4 children. That was fine for those brain-washed Orientals. What I personally fought for was an academic institution that would train us to help the community.

Rather than have a brain-drain, we wanted to reverse the brain-drain. My experiences with the foreign students showed me how the Third World countries were sending their best and brightest to the United States in general and to Berkeley in particular to get an education. But many of these students didn't return home to their native countries. Just as many students of racial and ethnic backgrounds in this country were being lost to the communities by going there, getting their education and doing the middle class American thing. Again, my membership and mission in the Black Panther Party somewhat dictated how I felt things should go. We had such a dearth of professionals in our communities, we needed to address those needs. Anyway, to make a long story short, that long strike ended after three months when the University capitulated and granted us our Ethnic Studies department.

Now, I was directly affected by the movement as it went along during that period of time. I was in graduate school in Social Work and my major was Community Organization and Public Administration. My goal was to pick up that degree and return to the community to assist in building institutions parallel along those lines that were fitting with my political goals and objectives. But at the end of the strike, I was appointed to the faculty at the University, primarily because I had just acquired my Master's degree and met minimum qualifications for appointment, and the students demanded that I be placed on the faculty.

I was also elected president of the School of Social Welfare's graduating class of 1970 while I was sitting in the Berkeley city jail. My fellow students arranged it so that I could run in the school election and they felt that my being president of the student body would enhance my chances of acquittal in the trials that were coming down behind the various charges I had been hit with. I thought it was a joke that I could be elected president of the student body while sitting in the Berkeley city jail. But I endorsed that idea because I remembered that Eugene Victor Debs, a Socialist Labor leader, who opposed United States entry into World War I, ran for President of the United States at that time and while he was in prison for opposing the war and got somewhere around 3 million votes. I felt it was worth a chance and it paid off.

Once I was appointed to the faculty, the Asians demanded that I became the first coordinator of the Asian American studies program. Thus, I began my

professional career with decidedly political overtones. I taught at Berkeley as a Teaching Assistant Instructor and Lecturer by exception. Meaning I was just barely qualified, but met the minimum qualifications for those teaching positions thanks to the mentorship of one of the professors on the faculty who was also a dean in one of the colleges, who somewhat shepherd Asian American Studies along. He sponsored the first prototype class of Asian American studies offered at Berkeley. Asian American Studies 101, where I was one of the four teaching assistants in that particular class. It was conducted during the Third World Strike, but the class meetings were held off campus. More than 200 students were enrolled in that particular class and we used that as an organizing forum for the strike. People Power pays off and student power does pay off.

Returning to Merritt College in North Oakland

In 1971 or so, I left Berkeley to go to work for the Peralta Community College district in the East Bay. The president of Merritt College approached me due to the fact they were going to move the old Merritt College up into the Oakland hills from the North Oakland base where it began. He was trying to save the North Oakland campus and came up to Berkeley to recruit me. He and I had stayed in contact even after I left Merritt. He informed me that I was eligible for teaching credentials in about 10 subject matter areas, a counseling credential to work with student services, and an administrative credential because of my experience at Berkeley.

He gave me an offer I couldn't refuse, and that started my professional career, as well as reunited me with the Black Panther Party. Throughout the period of the Third World experience that I underwent, I didn't highlight the fact that I was a member of the Party and a ranking officer, because it would detract from what I was doing. I was focusing primarily on Asian American political advancement and reaching out to other like-minded groups and the Latino and Native American communities. Thus in 1970, when Huey was released from prison, the opportunity came up where he and I could reunite to get me back into the swing of the Black Panther Party's organization and activities, when I started working at Merritt College on the Flatlands.



Figure 6: Richard in Asian American anti-war contingent. Nikki Arai photo.

Richard Masato Aoki, 1938-2009.
Fearless Leader and Servant of the People

Richard Aoki passed away on March 15, 2009 at the age of 70.

Born on November 20, 1938, Richard was a righteous fighter and a warrior in the truest sense – he dedicated his life to his beliefs and the struggle for human rights. He was a field marshal in the Black Panther Party, a founding member of the Asian American Political Alliance, a leader in the Third World Liberation Front Strike at UC Berkeley, coordinator for the first Asian American Studies program at UC Berkeley, an advisor for Asians for Job Opportunities, and served twenty-five years as counselor, instructor and administrator for the Peralta Community Colleges.

We will remember him for the personal impact he made on our lives and the social impact he made on the community movements of people of all colors.