

## PALISADES PARK AND THE FIRST AMENDMENT

By Dennis P. Halpin

This month marks the first anniversary of an international incident that made the name Palisades Park, New Jersey, a household word on both sides of the Pacific. I am referring to the imbroglio over “comfort women” between the Japanese Consulate General in New York and the borough officials who reside in that town. Last month, I had the privilege of being invited to the annual Korean American Civic Empowerment (KACE) dinner in Flushing, New York. My hosts graciously offered to take me to view the modest, yet poignant memorial in Palisades Park that became the source of so much controversy.

Koreans on both sides of the Pacific were quite understandably upset over an attempt to rewrite history and gloss over a major violation of women’s rights during World War II. But when I told other U.S. citizens of what had transpired at Palisades Park—the Japanese governments’ repeated request to remove a small comfort women memorial in Palisades Park<sup>1</sup>—their first reaction was concern over the attempt to muzzle the First Amendment rights of U.S. citizens. “How could a foreign government and U.S. ally,” they invariably asked, “seek to interfere with free speech?”

The separate visits of the Japanese Consul General and four Members of the Japanese Diet to Palisades Park, as chronicled in the New York press, indicate the priority placed on removing this modest memorial in a little New Jersey town. Japan, however, is not the only Asian country where there is a keen interest in First Amendment-protected memorials in the United States.

Just a few months after the Palisades Park incident, Chinese Consulate officials in San Francisco sent a letter to the mayor of Corvallis, Oregon. Their demand: the removal of a mural commissioned by local businessman David Lin because it “tainted” U.S.-Chinese relations. The mural depicted a scene from Taiwan, Mr. Lin’s place

of birth, as well as of a self-immolating monk in Tibet. Corvallis Mayor Julie Manning responded with words that could have been written by James Madison: “the mural reflects protected speech under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.”

Still, the Chinese Consulate was not finished. Consular officials flew up to Corvallis to try to persuade the mayor, but like Mayor Rotundo of Palisades Park, she stood her ground. There was no mention of gifts, such as cherry blossom trees and library books, being offered by the Chinese, as was reportedly the case with Palisades Park.

Last fall, I visited the Japanese Foreign Ministry in Tokyo in my former capacity as a Congressional staff member on the House Foreign Affairs Committee. In a discussion of relations between America’s two major Northeast Asian allies, Seoul and Tokyo, the issue of Palisades Park was raised. I told my Japanese counterpart the Corvallis, Oregon story.

I explained that Americans expected Beijing, a communist dictatorship, neither to understand nor appreciate our Bill of Rights. But it is far more disturbing that an American ally, who aspires to the same democratic values that we do, would demonstrate such a lack of understanding.

Even these failed diplomatic missions to Palisades Park did not bring the attempts to undermine the comfort women issue in New Jersey to a halt. On November 4, 2012, an advertisement appeared in the *Star-Ledger*, prepared by a Japanese right-wing organization, the “Committee for Historic Facts,” that sought to dismiss the comfort women as a mere fabrication. I can attest, as a former House staffer, that a similar advertisement published in the *Washington Post* in 2007 backfired, with House Members eager to co-sponsor [House Resolution 121](#) (the comfort women resolution) in its aftermath. And,

similarly, these awkward approaches in Palisades Park have backfired, with plans for additional comfort women memorials around the United States wherever there is a sizable Korean-American community.

The truth is that these Japanese organizations should not waste money on these advertisements. It is nearly impossible to convince Americans of revisionist history on the Pacific War. Japan and America were adversaries, not allies, in that conflict. It was Imperial Japan that attacked Pearl Harbor on that “date which will live in infamy.” And it seems that Hillary Clinton was speaking not only as Secretary of State but as an advocate for women’s rights when she reportedly referred at a briefing last year to the comfort women as “enforced sex slaves.”

Japanese diplomats and politicians should not copy their Chinese counterparts in seeking to interfere with the exercise of constitutional rights by American citizens within the borders of the United States. And it is long overdue to salute the men and women of Palisades Park, New Jersey, who stood their ground on the principle of free speech.

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<sup>1</sup> For more details, see Kirk Semple, “In New Jersey, Memorial for ‘Comfort Women’ Deepens Old Animosity,” *New York Times*, May 18, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/19/nyregion/monument-in-palisades-park-nj-irritates-japanese-officials.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/19/nyregion/monument-in-palisades-park-nj-irritates-japanese-officials.html?_r=0).

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