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Mr. Honda goes to Washington

By Spencer H. Kim



Most Americans have always liked the iconic Hollywood film "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington."

It is the suspicion that our politicians are prone to careerism and cynicism for sure, and maybe even corruption, that makes us long for the simple honesty of an office holder like the fictional Mr. Smith.

Recently, I have been able to spend some time with U.S. Rep. Mike Honda, who represents the Silicon Valley area in the U.S Congress.

He is famous in Korea for authoring the 2007 House of Representatives resolution which stated that Japan should formally acknowledge, apologize, and accept historical responsibility for the comfort women issue and educate current and future generations "about this horrible crime." Many Koreans wonder why Honda, of Japanese descent, would do such a thing.

As he explained, the purpose of the resolution was not to bash or humiliate Japan, but "We must teach future generations that we cannot allow this to continue to happen. It was not a Japan-Korea thing. It was the right thing. It was the right thing on a human level and on a strategic level for the future of Pacific Rim peace and prosperity." Did Mike Honda take some flak from some quarters in Japan? Yes. Did he care? No. Did he glory in the praise he got from Koreans? Again, no.

The key to what makes Mike Honda a model politician for me is that he came to the Congress fully primed.

It wasn't his chosen career and he didn't learn on the job. He had a full life of experience before going to Congress. Congress is not his career, it is his time for giving back.

Mike knew what it was to face discrimination as he spent part of his boyhood in the World War II internment camps for Japanese.

His wife, a Japanese immigrant, was a survivor of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. He learned Spanish in the Peace Corps and worked for the human rights of migrant workers from a young man on. He had a career as a high school science teacher, rising to become a principal and serving on school boards. He also had practical experience as a county supervisor and state assemblyman.

He represents a sophisticated area of the U.S. and he understands the issues — education, civil rights, environment, foreign policy, immigration, transportation, and technology — with a depth that only comes from experience and empathy. And he takes action based on that understanding and empathy, not on what the reaction of some political force that might affect his political career is going to be.

An earnest, honest and knowledgeable Mr. Honda went to Washington. That's good news.

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