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pn la 24 Aug 69

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LOS ANGELES AP - A

dramatic change has come over the 100,000 or so Americans of Japanese ancestry living in the Los Angeles area, says Dr. Harry Kitano, professor of graduate social welfare at the University of California at Los Angeles.

In years past, the professor said in a recent interview, Japanese-Americans have been meek in the face of authority, but now they're willing to stand up and fight for their rights.

A case in point, he said, was this county's recent controversy over the firing of coroner Thomas Noguchi, a Japanese-born pathologist.

Noguchi was dismissed from his post March 14 after county administrative officer Lyndon S. Hollinger told county supervisors that Noguchi bullied his employes, prayed for disasters to enhance the glories of his office and took drugs.

Noguchi at first resigned, but then decided to fight the charges which he said were untrue. With help from the Japanese-American community, he hired a lawyer who represented him at a civil service reinstatement hearing. Hearing officers ruled there was no evidence to support the county's charges and ordered that Noguchi be reinstated to his job.

The rallying of Japanese-Americans to Noguchi's side, Kitano said, was "really a dramatic change. Very few would have predicted this. I would say that if this had happened 10 years ago they would have acquiesced."

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2: acquiesced.

"I once said that if a war-time evacuation situation occurred again as happened in World War II, the majority of the Japanese would merely go again. That was three years ago. After this incident I'm not so sure. The vast majority might try to resist."

Kitano was referring to the federal government's policy of relocating Japanese-Americans to interior parts of the country while the United States was at war with Japan. At the time, the country was swept with fear that the Japanese might invade the West Coast and be assisted by some Americans of Japanese ancestry.

At first, Kitano said, the Japanese-American community was horrified by the charges against Noguchi and even embarrassed by them. But as the case developed, he said, the charges seemed more and more unsubstantiated.

Gradually, said Jeffrey Matsui, associate national director of the Japanese-American Citizens league, the community's sense of fair play was aroused.

"As we watched the charges and found there was no foundation, we couldn't believe what was happening," he said.

"They had felt the government was evolving since the evacuation toward more justice and fair play, and then this came along. They were stunned.

"I don't think," Matsui continued, "those charges could have been leveled at anyone except an Oriental - the power-crazed man smiling over the bodies. The intention was to scare people like in World War II days. The community's last hope was that the government was fair. I think everyone had his fingers crossed."

Soon, a new organization was formed - Japanese United in the Search for Truth - known by the acronym JUST.

JUST staged dinners, sent workers door-to-door to collect funds and held news conferences to say Noguchi had been framed.

When finally the officers ruled in favor of Noguchi, the decision was proclaimed by the Japanese-American community as "a victory for the people of Los Angeles."

Wallace Ban, a real estate broker, was moved to tears.

"By goodness," he said, "what else can we expect-justice. With all the world searching for truth, we found it."