

GERALD HASLAM

Hayakawa Among the Conservatives

Stranger in a strange land

When the famed author, editor, and lecturer Dr. S.I. “Don” Hayakawa, joined the faculty at San Francisco State College in 1955, his presence seemed to elevate the college’s reputation. It also led to a series of events that would make Hayakawa arguably not only America’s best-known citizen of Japanese ancestry but also, according to journalist Ed Salzman, “The only folk hero to have emerged from American higher education.” My own acquaintance with Hayakawa stretched over decades, in a relationship that never quite revealed who or even what he was, other than controversial.

The professor, a Canadian native who had only recently become a citizen of the United States, much impressed his colleague Manfred Wolf, who wrote: “It was fitting that after years in the Midwest he should have come to perform on the brighter, brasher stage of California.”

Hayakawa’s unusual academic specialty, general semantics, stimulated considerable buzz in the Bay Area, and his evening course in the subject enrolled an overflow 300 students. General semantics had been formulated by Count Alfred Korzybski as “an integrated science of man” through the understanding of symbols and their use in human affairs.

There was far more to Hayakawa than “GS.” Over the years he had been a poet, a columnist, an editor, a jazz maven, and even a fencing coach. Most of all, he and his talented wife, Margedant Peters, had been noted liberals, quick to embrace causes and eloquent in defending them, whether endorsing co-ops and racial equality or attacking anti-Semitism and price gouging, they seemed to be exemplars of progressive politics.

But Don Hayakawa, who had not been confined, was also a sometimes apologist for the World War II internment and relocation of Japanese Canadians and Japanese Americans. “Whatever the heartbreaks and losses created by the wartime relocation, there were unforeseen benefits. . . . almost all Nisei and many Issei were thrown out of

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By 1973, Hayakawa was an ex-president of San Francisco State University contemplating a political run.
COURTESY OF HAYAKAWA FAMILY ARCHIVE

their ghettoized Japan-town existence into the mainstream of American life. . . .” That position, and the frequency with which he repeated it, troubled many.

The “brighter, brasher” stage of California turned out not to have as much room for general semantics as originally seemed possible. As a result, Hayakawa’s dream of a “GS” major at San Francisco State was frustrated due to the opposition of colleagues. By 1966, when an editor of San Francisco State’s student newspaper wrote a column making fun of efforts of SFSC’s professors to organize a union, Hayakawa, who was then teaching only part-time, wrote him a note saying, in part, “Basically, I agree with you. . . there are a lot of lazy, oververbalized bores in any college faculty, including our own—people unfit for any other work but drinking coffee and chewing the fat with their juniors.” He, of course, refused to join the union,



Sensator SIH and President Reagan at the White House in 1981.
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and some colleagues wondered if he was festering over earlier rebuffs.

As student dissent began to crest in 1968, Hayakawa helped form a campus group called Faculty Renaissance that urged resistance to student demands. He contacted Chancellor Glenn Dumke then and, as a result of events that have never been fully explained,² Hayakawa was offered an appointment as acting president of San Francisco State. Conservative Governor Ronald Reagan reportedly said, “If he’ll take the job we’ll forgive him for Pearl Harbor.” It was a statement that would not have surprised Hayakawa, who felt Reagan had great political instincts but was often poorly informed. He took the job, and on December 2 of that year, Hayakawa (and his signature plaid Tam’-o’-Shanter) became symbols of resistance to student rebellion when he ripped out speaker wires on a sound truck and stopped an illegal demonstration—or denied First Amendment rights—or both. Many faculty opposed his actions, but the public, sick of academics capitulating to rude students, embraced him as the only college administrator with guts.³ Meanwhile, many in the general public also asked for the first time, who is this guy?

Samuel Ichiyé Hayakawa was born to immigrant Japanese parents in Vancouver, B.C., Canada, on July 18, 1906. When he and his younger brother were in their teens, their parents returned to Japan, leaving the boys in Canada.⁴ Samuel eventually graduated from the University of Manitoba in 1927, earned an M.A. from McGill University in 1928, and completed a Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin in 1935.



Left to right: Otoko Hayakawa, Marge and Alan Hayakawa, Great-Grandmother Hayakawa, SIH; Marge, Alan and Don visit Don's family in Kusakabe, in Yamanashi City, Japan, 1953.

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In that time of anti-Japanese sentiment,⁵ he could not find a tenure-track college teaching job, frequently losing out to white candidates who had no doctorates. He didn't bother to complain, but dug in and by 1938 had published enough to be considered a solid literary scholar and a promising poet. The young Canadian, then an instructor at the University of Wisconsin Extension, read Stuart Chase's book *The Tyranny of Words* and was enthralled. He then read Chase's inspiration, Alfred Korzybski's *Science and Sanity*, and decided to study general semantics with its developer, setting in motion events that would lead him to fame, to fortune, and finally to frustration.

In 1941, only days before the Pearl Harbor attack, his own book on general semantics, *Language in Action*, was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection and became a best seller. He embraced the sudden notoriety and would no longer be considered a literary scholar or a poet; he was a "famed semanticist." What he couldn't know is that GS would never penetrate the academic mainstream and neither would he, despite enjoying a degree of celebrity.

During World War II, while Japanese Americans on the West Coast were being interned and relocated, he was on the faculty at Illinois Tech in Chicago, where he and his wife remained prominent on the cultural scene. In the 1940s he became a popular lecturer nationally, the editor of a quarterly journal, *ETC.: A Review of General Semantics*, and a columnist for the *Chicago Defender*; his wife was a major

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figure on the co-op scene and an editor at *Poetry* magazine, as well as the mother of three young children.

By the 1950s, though, all was not well. S.I. Hayakawa had resigned his tenured position at Illinois Tech and was unhappy teaching only part-time for the University of Chicago evening division. Then his wife discovered that he was involved romantically with one of her associates at *Poetry*. Hayakawa had a standing offer of a professorship at San Francisco State College, where he had taught summer classes. Despite reservations about California's anti-Asian history, and with his marriage on the line, he relocated to SFSC in 1955.

Six years later, my new bride and I drove to San Francisco State College from the Central Valley where I'd been working as a roughneck on a drilling rig. We hoped to begin a life that would offer more choices than the oil-fields did. I met the famous professor in 1963 as a first-semester graduate student enrolled in his seminar on general semantics, a course based on a reading of the daunting *Science and Sanity*, which we discussed in detail. The professor listened intently to students, and then his comments revealed what seemed to me to be an extraordinarily broad base of knowledge.

In 1966, the strike erupted at SFSC. Hayakawa had favored some of the reforms demanded by students, such as the development of an Ethnic Studies program, but he opposed the tactics of strikers and their demand for total autonomy. Many of his colleagues, in turn, opposed Hayakawa's efforts, and each felt betrayed by the other. When the smoke finally cleared after 167 days, the immediate winner in the strike settlement was Hayakawa, whose great popularity among the general public—not merely conservatives—opened doors. But the tide of history was on the side of the young; eventually they would be the establishment, and many of their best ideas would be implemented while they outgrew others.

Hayakawa was for a time rudderless, due to rejection by his old liberal and progressive allies, but he had to decide



Senator S. I. Hayakawa with the Cambodian refugee kids at the holding center for Kampuchean in Thailand, in 1980.

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how to use his popularity. Earlier in his life he had considered politics, and by 1973 his ambitions matured. When his aide Gene Prat asked Hayakawa what he hoped to accomplish in office, he replied, “To be a statesman.” To accomplish that, he switched parties, becoming a Republican in 1975, and the next year ran for the United States Senate against Democratic incumbent John Tunney, even though he still held some of the liberal positions that had once led him to be called a “pinko.”⁶

In what seemed to be his greatest triumph, he won the Senate seat. During the years that followed I sent him letters complaining about this vote or that, and at first he replied, but finally I no longer heard from him—although I kept sending missives, because it seemed to me that he had become, politically at least, a mirror image of the man I had admired.

His largely conservative voting record in the Senate was deceptive. He at times seemed to be voting against liberals

rather than *for* anything. Never really active in California’s amorphous New Right, he soon learned that lone wolves accomplish little in Congress, so he joined the luncheon caucus of the Senate’s New Right, with colleagues such as Jake Garn, Orrin Hatch, Paul Laxalt, and Jesse Helms. Still, he was not easy to categorize, since his positive votes on public funding for abortions and on returning the Panama Canal to Panama, as well as his insistence on the privacy of behavior between consenting adults, perplexed liberals and conservatives alike. A few journalists began to refer to him as a libertarian.

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During his stint in Washington, an unacknowledged sleeping disorder undid his image. Friends had long noticed that he seemed to doze at unlikely times; I once saw him fall asleep mid-conversation. Johnny Carson soon picked up the sleeping-Senator theme. Carson, whose Tonight Show dominated late-night television, began joking about Don—“What would S.I. Hayakawa’s personalized auto license plate be?” “ZZZZZZ.” But Carson also offered the new Senator the opportunity to appear on the show in 1977. In addition to his skill as a speaker, Don was an engaging personality and on the national A-list of lecturers then. Members of his staff advised against an appearance on Carson’s show, a decision that would haunt them. One aide later explained to Hayakawa, “I think it was felt [by staff] that as a US Senator, it would not be appropriate for you to be going on ‘The Tonight Show’ as a guest.” As a result of that decision, many in the public came to know only the caricature.

When his Senate term ended, Don acknowledged that it was not considered successful. Asked what he’d be remembered for, he told *Los Angeles Times* reporter Cathleen Decker, “Sleeping, I guess.” An unlikely chain of events had brought Don Hayakawa the possibility of great success, and he had grasped it only to become its victim. This irony, of course, gave Hayakawa’s considerable list of enemies reason to rejoice and to mock him.

His post-Senate activity as spokesperson for US English and its campaign to declare English the national language resonated with a segment of the public. He perhaps exaggerated the need for a national language because he had seen his own immigrant mother trapped by a lack of English skill. Hayakawa’s more important work as special advisor for Secretary of State George Schultz, especially on MIAs in Southeast Asia, went largely unnoticed, subsumed under chuckles about “sleeping Sam.”

Nevertheless, Hayakawa never ceased promoting diversity and assimilation. As he once explained, “Who said being American—or Canadian—meant being white? Look at our vocabularies, look at our dining habits, our styles of dress, and increasingly our theological and philosophical concepts . . . look at our children and our grandchildren . . . those are by no means exclusively Anglo-Saxon.” He remained committed to a multiethnic American identity.

In the late 1980s, I received a phone call from him and, sounding as though we’d played poker just the night before, he said, “Gerry, would you and Jan like to join Marge and



By the late-1980s, the ex-senator was a spokesman for U.S. English, an advocacy group. COURTESY OF HAYAKAWA FAMILY ARCHIVE

me for lunch next Wednesday? I have something I’d like to discuss with you.” I was surprised, but also intrigued, so we accepted, and enjoyed a “reunion” meal. He asked if I’d like to collaborate with him on a new edition of *Language in Thought and Action*, but I had to defer because I was at work on a book on the Central Valley. Nevertheless, that lunch reestablished our relationship.

In 1991, I was reading from a new collection of stories at The Depot Bookstore and Café in Mill Valley when I noticed the Hayakawas slip into the back of the room, Don pulling a portable oxygen tank. Following the festivities and with two of my old SFSC professors, Thurston Womack and John Dennis, who had been strikers at San Francisco State, I greeted Don and Marge. That led to an invitation to their nearby home for a drink, which we three accepted.

Once there, though, Womack was startled when Don, who was clearly failing, looked up and asked, “Who are

you, again?” Thurston, once Hayakawa’s commute partner, identified himself, and then Don said, “Thurston, do you know I wasted six years of my life in the United States Senate?” That was the last time we three ever saw him.

S.I. “Don” Hayakawa was undone by a combination of his own limitations and by events beyond his control. He had a kind of hubris; his son Alan said S.I.H. could never understand why everyone didn’t agree with him if he was given a chance to explain his position. He also put all his eggs in the general semantics basket, and they ended up broken due to lack of acceptance in the academic mainstream. The success of his first book made him famous but limited his academic options, and his term in the Senate revealed flaws that bordered on caricature. Nevertheless, the sum of his accomplishments marks him as memorable; exactly how he’ll be remembered in the long run may depend on which version of his life one cares to believe. **B**

Notes

- ¹ Written in “Farewell to Manzanar: An unorthodox view of the World War II internment of Japanese-Americans,” *TV Guide*, 6 March 1976, 13.

- ² Including the resignation of President Bob Smith.
- ³ Apparent capitulations at schools such as Columbia, UC Berkeley, SUNY, etc., were creating a negative image of administrators and faculty alike. Herb Wilner and Leo Litwak, both pro-strike professors at SFSC, acknowledged that “it was a revelation to discover that we were among the bad guys, damned by eighty percent of the public. . . .”
- ⁴ SIH’s father had offices in Japan and Canada. He kept a mistress in Japan, and his wife in Canada found out, so she took her two young daughters to Japan to confront him, leaving the boys (who were barely able to speak Japanese). The senior Hayakawas remained in Japan thereafter.
- ⁵ The 1930s were a period of growing anti-Japanese sentiment in the United States and Canada as Nippon became ever more aggressive: 1931—occupied Manchuria; 1933—withdrawn from League of Nations; 1937—invaded China (Rape of Nanking followed); 1940—invaded French Indo-China.
- ⁶ Even two FOIA requests (one supported by the ACLU, the other by Representative Lynn Woolsey) could not force the US Department of Justice to open its files on Hayakawa. His kin, friends, and old neighbors reported that he had been called names, especially after he wrote a devastating critique of arch-conservative Superintendent of Schools Max Rafferty. He was also identified with Friends of KPFA, the co-op movement, and racial integration. This author personally heard him called “comsymp,” “parlor pink,” “pinko,” and other epithets in the late 1950s and 1960s.