



Takei, George (b. 1937)

by Linda Rapp

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Best known for his role as Mr. Sulu on the cult-classic television series *Star Trek* and subsequent films, George Takei has, since coming out as a gay man, also been an articulate advocate for glbtq rights.

The son of second-generation Japanese-Americans, George Hosato Takei was born in Los Angeles on April 20, 1937. Some of his earliest memories, though, are of Arkansas, where he and his parents were interned at a camp after the outbreak of World War II. They were later moved to another camp in northern California.

Only aged four to eight during the time of his family's internment, Takei was too young to understand the social and political context: "Yes, I remember the barbed wire and the guard towers and the machine guns," he stated, "but they became part of my normal landscape" along with catching tadpoles and watching them grow into frogs and seeing snow for the first time.

Once the family was out of the camps, however, he felt a sense of shame upon hearing a teacher refer to him as "that little Jap boy." His sense of being an "other" in society increased when he realized that he was gay. At the time, he "just swallowed the pain" in silence.

After graduating from Los Angeles High School, where he had been a member of the drama club as well as student body president, Takei enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley and declared as an architecture major in deference to the wishes of his parents, who were concerned that acting was too risky a profession.

While he was a student, however, Takei met an importer of Japanese science-fiction films who needed someone to dub the soundtracks. Uncredited, Takei did voices in *Gojira no gyaskushū* (1955, directed by Motoyoshi Oda) and *Sora no daikaijū* (1956, directed by Isihirō Honda).

After two years at Berkeley, Takei transferred to the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and changed his major to theater. He received his bachelor's degree in 1960 and then continued his studies at the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-Upon-Avon before returning to UCLA and earning his M. A. in theater in 1964. While pursuing his advanced degree, he also attended the Desilu Workshop for actors and appeared, sometimes uncredited, in both films and television shows.

His work brought him to the attention of producer Gene Roddenberry, who offered him the role of Mr. Sulu on the science-fiction series that he had created and that was destined to become a cult classic, *Star Trek*. The Sulu character, an American of Japanese and Filipino descent, was an astrophysicist in the pilot episode, but when the series began its run in 1966, he was changed to the position of helmsman in order to give Takei a more integral role in the show and to increase his interaction with other principal characters.

In a 2008 interview, Takei stated that Roddenberry "was an extraordinary man, a real visionary. He used to



George Takei at a Star Trek Convention in Hamm, Germany in 1996. Photograph by Diane Krauss. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike License 2.5.

tell the *Star Trek* cast frequently that the Starship Enterprise was a metaphor for the Starship Earth. And the strength of the starship was its diversity, the crew coming together and working in concert."

Takei added that Roddenberry was a person strongly opposed to "homophobia and . . . prejudice against equality" but also one who realized that "network television is the most conservative medium of communication. If he pushes the envelope too far, the envelope gets burned up."

As it was, Roddenberry had a hard time keeping *Star Trek* on the air. The show's ratings were not strong in its first year, and when the second season's results were also disappointing, NBC announced plans to cancel it. Devoted fans, later to become known as Trekkies, launched a letter-writing campaign to save the series but only won a reprieve: NBC continued *Star Trek* but buried it in an unfavorable late-Friday time-slot, dooming it to cancellation in 1969.

Takei continued his acting work, appearing on numerous television shows. He also entered the political arena, serving as a delegate to the 1972 Democratic National Convention and running for a seat on the Los Angeles City Council in a special election in 1973. He finished second in an extremely close race.

Also in 1973, Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley appointed Takei to the board of directors of the Southern California Rapid Transit District. A self-described "urbanist," Takei was a vocal proponent of the building of the subway, which he calls "vital to the mobility of our city." He also championed the Arts in Transit program "in which every Metro Rail subway station is given its own distinctive look, thereby fostering neighborhood pride." He remained on the board until 1984.

Takei launched a campaign for a seat in the California Assembly in 1980 but withdrew after meeting with the incumbent Assemblyman, Mike Roos, and resolving issues of contention.

In leaving the race, Takei also cited the "substantial financial losses" that would have befallen the actors, writers, and producers of the *Star Trek* series if Los Angeles television station KTLA stopped broadcasting reruns of the show in response to a demand by Roos that he receive equal time if the program remained on the air.

Despite its less than impressive original run, *Star Trek* proved immensely popular in syndication, attracting ever greater numbers of enthusiastic fans. A decade after the television series was cancelled, Takei and many of the other original cast members reunited to make *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979, directed by Robert Wise). Takei was also at the helm of the Starship Enterprise in *Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan* (1982, directed by Nicholas Meyer), *Star Trek III: The Search for Spock* (1984, directed by Leonard Nimoy), *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* (1986, directed by Nimoy), *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* (1989, directed by William Shatner), and *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* (1991, directed by Meyer).

Legions of Trekkies flocked not only to the films but also to Star Trek conventions held in cities large and small around the world. Takei and other original cast members continue to appear at many of these events.

"*Star Trek* has given me the opportunity, if not [of] trekking the galaxy, to at least trek this planet. I've been able to go to places where I never thought I'd be," stated Takei.

Star Trek conventions took him to "great cities: Paris, Kyoto, London, New York, Chicago." He "discovered New Orleans, which is a wonderful place" and enjoyed visiting smaller cities such as Helena, Montana, where he found "some of the architecture . . . absolutely fascinating."

He also traveled to "basket-case cities like Detroit" and was "able to study what makes them basket cases," knowledge that he could put to use in his work with the Transit District.

Takei continued his television career with appearances on numerous series, including *Murder, She Wrote*, *Heroes*, *Will & Grace*, *Ironside*, *The Simpsons*, and *Star Trek: Voyager* and *Star Trek: New Voyages*, spin-offs of the original show.

His movie credits include voicing the character of the First Ancestor in the Disney animated features *Mulan* (1998, directed by Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook) and *Mulan II* (2004, directed by Darrell Rooney and Lynne Southerland).

In 1995 Takei came out publicly as a gay man, citing California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's veto of a same-sex marriage bill as part of the reason for his decision: "Now that the movement is reaching this point, something unimaginable when I was a teenager, I think I have a responsibility to add my voice."

In a 2005 interview with *Frontiers* magazine, Takei called the revelation of his sexual orientation "not really a coming out, which suggests opening a door and stepping through. It's more like a long, long walk through what began as a narrow corridor that starts to widen."

He recalled his shame as a Japanese-American after his experiences in the internment camps and his shame upon realizing that he was gay and therefore different in a heteronormative and often homophobic society, but, he said, "with reading and talking to other people, your understanding of the situation starts to grow. And you think, 'It's wrong; this is not right.' And you start sharing it with more people and you find friends and organizations."

It was through the Los Angeles branch of Frontrunners, a glbtq running club that takes its name from the title of a novel by Patricia Nell Warren, that Takei met his life-partner, Brad Altman. Joining Frontrunners was a somewhat fortuitous event for Takei: "At a bar you see a paper, and you see a gay running club. 'Oh, I'll show up,' you think."

Takei has been a runner since his days on his high school cross-country team. He has run marathons and was a bearer of the Olympic flame during the torch relay prior to the 1984 games in Los Angeles.

At Frontrunners, Takei began training with Altman, then a journalist and now his manager. They soon fell in love and established a household that came to include Takei's mother when she was stricken with Alzheimer's disease. When the couple had first gotten together, Takei said, his mother "had some adjustments to make, but she got to like Brad very much."

"Brad was wonderful. He was a saint," declared Takei. "It's very difficult when you're dealing with someone with Alzheimer's. And some of the stages were . . . horrific. And Brad helped throughout that. [My mother] was with us for the last four years of her life."

Even before Takei came out publicly, his partnership with Altman was an open secret: "Our 18-year relationship was something well known to many friends and relatives," he wrote on his blog. "Indeed, we have contributed to non-profit institutions and have had our names together on donor walls, on theater seats, and in dinner programs--like so many other couples."

Takei joined the Human Rights Campaign's Coming Out Project, beginning an "Equality Trek" speaking tour across the United States in April 2006. In July 2007 he received the HRC's Equality Award. His *Star Trek* co-star Leonard Nimoy appeared in support to make the presentation.

In the wake of his coming out, Takei received "a torrent of media requests, phone calls, and . . . thousands of e-mails," most encouraging but also including "the few but inevitable hate letters, Bible lectures, and

vulgar diatribes." He took heart in that "the overwhelming majority"of the writers "truly understand the phrase that is the hallmark of *Star Trek*, 'infinite diversity in infinite combinations.'"

"Diversity working together is one of the strengths of our society," he wrote, "but when one group tries to impose their own particular values on the rest of society by using the law, that is not only disrespectful of others, it goes against the core values of our American democracy."

Takei was elated by the decision of the California Supreme Court in May 2008 legalizing same-sex marriage, which meant that he and Altman, after twenty-one years together, "can have the dignity, as well as all the responsibilities of marriage."

Looking to both the past and the future, Takei recalled the injustice of the internment of Japanese-Americans and the eventual recognition of the error of the policy and apology from the federal government. "With time, I know the opposition to same-sex marriage, too, will be seen as an antique and discreditable part of our history." he declared, going on to quote U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy remarks in the landmark decision in *Lawrence v. Texas*, which declared sodomy laws unconstitutional, "Times can blind us to certain truths, and later generations can see that laws once thought necessary and proper, in fact, serve only to oppress."

As one who had long faced discrimination, Takei could have been bitter, but he chose to embrace progress, however slow and partial: "Marriage equality took a long time, but, like fine wine, its bouquet is exquisite."

Takei and Altman were married on September 14, 2008 at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles. A Buddhist priest officiated at the multicultural ceremony. The couple was attended by two of Takei's *Star Trek* co-stars, Walter Koenig and Nichelle Nichols, who served as best man and "best lady."

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