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**Transition:** Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

**Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](https://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

**Music:** “Huddle Formation” from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. There's one version of George Takei, who is my guest on this week's show, that you probably know: the guy who played Commander Sulu on *Star Trek*. That's now almost 60 years ago. He's continued playing that role. He's appeared in animated *Star Trek* shows as recently as 2023. There's also George Takei the—I don't know—I guess social media brand? He has nearly 10,000,000 followers on Facebook. Another 4,000,000 on Instagram and Twitter. If you don't follow him there—I mean, I bet dollars to donuts that you have an aunt or a brother-in-law who loves to send you his posts.

Then there's the George Takei who was a child living with his family in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles in 1942. American soldiers showed up in his driveway and forcibly removed Takei and his family. They were incarcerated first at a local horse racing track, then near a swamp in Arkansas, then at a remote mountain camp near the border of Oregon and California.

And then, finally, there is the George Takei who—until he was 68 years old—lived in the closet. And when he finally did come out as a gay man in 2005, he didn't do it because he felt especially comfortable, but because the then-governor of California had vetoed a bill that would've allowed marriage equality.

There's a new book out. It's called *Rhymes With Takei*, and it shows a new side of George Takei: graphic novelist. It's a memoir that focuses on Takei's journey of discovering an important part of his identity, hiding it, and then how it felt for him to finally come out publicly. It's wonderful to welcome George Takei back to *Bullseye*. Let's get right into our conversation.

**Transition:** Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

**Jesse Thorn:** George Takei, welcome back to *Bullseye*. It's so nice to see you. Thank you for taking the time to come in.

**George Takei:** Good to be here and be talking to you.

**Jesse Thorn:** Why did you want to write your story in this form? In graphic form?

**George Takei:** Well, I have been actually in prison most of my adult life. My childhood was behind very real barbed wire fences—courtesy of the United States government. We had nothing to do with Pearl Harbor but looked like this. And then when we were released and I

was nine or ten years old—living in East LA, all Mexican American neighborhood—I realized I was different in another way. But this difference was not visible. It was inside me. I thought the other guys were very attractive, but the other boys didn't feel that way. I was different again.

**Jesse Thorn:** Let's talk briefly about your internment as a child. You were—what?—five years old?

**George Takei:** Five.

**Jesse Thorn:** So, do you remember it? I mean, not being in the camp, but do you remember finding out that it was going to happen? Do you remember leaving home?

**George Takei:** I remember the leaving home part. I remember the excitement and the anxiety that my parents exhibited. But that particular morning when my father walked into the bedroom I shared with my brother Henry, he dressed us quickly and said, “Wait in the living room,” or “Play in the living room. I'm helping your mother pack.” And our baby sister was in a crib in their bedroom, and so we went to the living room. There's nothing to do. And so, Henry and I were standing by the front window just gazing out at the neighborhood, just—you know, whatever was happening. And suddenly, we saw two soldiers marching up our driveway. They carried rifles with shiny bayonets on them.

I mean, that was pretty scary. They stomped up the front porch and with their fists began banging on the door. Henry and I were terrified. My father came rushing out and opened the door. And the soldiers said, “Get your family outta here.”

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And one of the two soldiers pointed his bayonet at my father. Right in front of us! Henry and I were standing there just frozen, petrified. And my father said, “I gotta have five minutes. I gotta help my wife packing.”

And the other guy said, “Okay, go ahead.” And my father went back, and the guy with the pointed bayonet followed my father into their bedroom. Henry and I just stood there petrified. My father came out carrying two heavy suitcases. He had small boxes tied in twine under his arms. Gave me one of them—Henry the other—to carry, and he hefted the suitcase, and said, “Follow me.”

And we followed him out onto the driveway, and we waited for our mother. Shortly after that, my mother came out. She had our baby sister in one arm, a huge duffle bag in the other, and tears were pouring down her cheeks. I remember that. Like, I mean, the memory of that morning is seared into that. I just—I don't remember the Pearl Harbor excitement. I mean, I knew things were happening, but we didn't understand it. But that morning is one that I will never, ever be able to forget.

**Jesse Thorn:** You initially went to Santa Anita Raceway.

**George Takei:** Right.

**Jesse Thorn:** Which was where people—it was sort of the way station for people to be assigned to the camps.

**George Takei:** We called it the assembly point.

**Jesse Thorn:** Yeah. As the camps were being hastily constructed and converted from other types of buildings, and so on and so forth, people—including you—lived in what had been the horse stables at the raceway.

**George Takei:** We did. And I remember the stench, the flies buzzing all the time. Insects skittering around. It was a filthy place. The smell was overwhelming.

**Jesse Thorn:** What was it like when you got to the camp in Northern California?

**George Takei:** Oh, that was—we were first taken two-thirds of the way across the country. This is when the camps had finished their construction. To the—

**Jesse Thorn:** To Arkansas, right?

**George Takei:** Swamps of Arkansas. Exotic land. Totally different from southern California. Right beyond the barbed wire fence: water, muck, and trees. Tall, majestic trees were growing out, and their roots came out twisted and turned; went back in and out and in like a snake. I mean, it was fascinating. Those trees were—it was a forest of those trees. And the muck, the water came onto the camp underneath the barbed wire fence. And there were little, tiny, black, wiggly fish swimming around, and they didn't move too fast. And I—with my hands, I was able to catch—I cupped my hands—and be able to catch them and put them in the jar, and watched them every morning. And saw them one morning develop bumps on their sides. And a few mornings later, legs popped out, and their tails fell off, and they escaped from my jar!

Miraculous! Arkansas was full of these miracles. Like magic. Fish that turned into frogs and escaped from your jar. So, Arkansas was an experience of discovery and learning. They told me—we saw—we heard strange sounds coming from swamps. You know, squawks and hoots, and (*makes various animal cries and chitters*). And the big boys told us, “You know what they are?” And I said no. They said, “They're dinosaurs.” And I hadn't heard of that.

I said, “What's that?”

And they said—well, this particular big boy, he was like—what?—11 or 12?

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He said, “They're great, big, weird monsters that lived millions of years ago. And then they died.”

I said, “They died? How come we hear them out there?”

And the boy looked a little nonplussed, and then he quickly said, “They died all over the world, except in Arkansas. They live out in the forest there.”

(*Jesse chuckles.*)

And I believed them. And I saw my first hog in Arkansas, and I thought they were baby dinosaurs. (*Laughs.*)

So, you know, my time in Arkansas— We were there about—a little less than two years. A wonderful adventure of discovery. But something else was happening to the adults. The government discovered that there was a wartime manpower shortage. And here are all these young men and women that they categorized as enemy alien. I mean, we were neither. We weren't the enemy, and we weren't aliens. We were Americans, and we were loyal Americans. Something that's very familiar to us today.

**Jesse Thorn:** We've got more still to come with George Takei. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye* from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

**Transition:** Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

**Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is George Takei. He played Commander Sulu on the original *Star Trek* series. He's also a writer and activist. He just published a graphic memoir called *It Rhymes With Takei*. It chronicles his childhood and career, as well as his journey coming to terms with his sexuality. George came over to the Maximum Fun studios to talk with me. We'll have full video of our interview up on our YouTube page. And as a bonus, we got a fun clip of George waxing poetic about the Los Angeles skyline and his time in the city growing up. Anyway, let's get back into our conversation: me and George Takei.

One of the things that's really... beautiful and difficult in your book is the depictions of intimacy in your life before you met your partner, Brad, in the mid-1980s. And when I say intimacy, I don't just mean sexual intimacy, but any kind of intimacy. Did you—before the '80s—ever have a community of people with whom you could be openly gay or a community of people who were, themselves, gay or queer with whom you could find fellowship?

**George Takei:** I avoided that. Because I'm an actor, and I was enjoying some success. *Star Trek* was enormously popular, and I couldn't afford to come out. It would be too punishing. And so, yeah. I was closeted. And my sense of guilt was building as well. I mean, it's both the guilt in not participating—when you're an activist in the peace movement in Vietnam or the nuclear testing that was going on at the same time, the civil rights movement—you feel like a hypocrite. Here I am on all these critical issues of the time, and silent—standing by the sidelines—on the most personal issue, not speaking out. It was a horrible feeling. The pressure of— You know, people who were closeted had pressure too. But for me, as an actor within that invisible barbed wire fence, was excruciating. And I just grit my teeth and said, “This is my life.”

**Jesse Thorn:** There's a really heartbreaking moment in the book where you go to a bathhouse. And you know, you're just there to meet somebody. You know, because you're a human being.

*(They chuckle.)*

And you meet this guy, and he's cute.

[00:15:00]

**George Takei:** I see him in the shower. He wasn't just cute. This was in Indianapolis. I was stunned. And I turned a corner, and there he was. And our eyes connected, and I said, "Hi!" In kind of a, you know, casual greeting.

And he initially said the usual "Hi." And then I saw his eyes glimmer with surprise, recognition. Then he said, "Oh, hi!" And I knew I was recognized, and I felt like I had ice-cold water poured on me all over my naked body.

I said, "Have a good time." And I went back to my room, got dried off and dressed, and I left. I was recognized. That is a terror that was haunting me all the time. And I knew it wouldn't end. He could talk about it to somebody, and somebody might have some connection to a media. Sort of like Tab Hunter. I mean, when it was in the *Scandal Sheet*, that's when his disappearance began. And I was haunted by the prospect of some article exposing me as gay for years after that fact. Thank god he never talked.

**Jesse Thorn:** I mean, it's this extraordinary extra burden that, not only did you have to keep your identity secret from the outside world, but that even within the gay community—because of your notability—you had to separate yourself. Or at least, felt you had to separate yourself, because—you know—it would only take one person.

**George Takei:** Who knew somebody with the media, radio, newspaper, television.

**Jesse Thorn:** And so, there were many people who were living double lives at the time who could have some measure of romantic and interpersonal intimacy within a gay community, even if it was separate from the rest of their lives. But because of your famous face, even that wasn't accessible to you.

**George Takei:** No, no. Because I kept remembering Tab Hunter disappeared after that newspaper article. And it was one of those *Scandal Sheets* in the newspaper boxes—you know, plastic boxes—that you get for free. Essentially, a scandalous exposé headline. But it's mostly ads for local newspapers—*(correcting himself)* I mean local businesses.

**Jesse Thorn:** You met your husband in a gay running club. Was that club the first time that you had—I don't know exactly how to put this—signed up for something gay?

*(They laugh.)*

Do you know what I mean?

**George Takei:** I think. I—oh, I certainly know what you mean. Yeah. I think that was it. I was a runner all my life, from my high school days on. Running is just a solitary activity. You know, you're running alone up in the Hollywood Hills or— It's very solitary, and I'm a gregarious guy. (*Chuckles.*) And again, in one of those community papers that I picked up off the—

**Jesse Thorn:** Newsstand, yeah.

**George Takei:** Right. I saw a story on this gay running club. I thought, “Gay running club? Running? I love running!” But how could they run?

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It's public. You're exposed. But I knew I wasn't the only gay that was closeted. These guys are closeted, and yet they're running in public. They can be seen! But I had to stop and think, “How are they to know?” I mean, runners—they're runners. That's a visible thing. And I thought, “Well, maybe I can get away with it.” And I showed up for the first one. And the president of the club— You know, before, when we're gathering, people are stretching and warming up.

And this good-looking guy came up to me and said, “I'm the president of the LA Front Runners, and we have a tradition of introducing new guys joining us. What's your name?”

And I said, “Oh, no, no. I'm just here to run with you guys anonymously.”

And he said, “No, we're all closeted. I'm a lawyer. And some are—you know, they all have professions, so don't worry.”

And so, I said, “Okay, just call me George.” And he introduced me, and I kind of liked him.

And he called and said, “Would you like to have dinner?” And I said yes. And so, he became my first Front Runner that I had a relationship with. Then another new runner showed up. This was a few months later. And he introduced him as Brad, and I thought I'd like to get to know him better. But he was a really good runner! We ran around Silver Lake. And immediately, this new guy—Brad—went to the front of the line. He was really a front runner! And I'm a middle runner. That's where I usually run.

But I said, “I'm gonna try to have a conversation with him.” And so, I started running faster, and I tried to catch up to him. And by the time I was only an arm's length away from him, I was— I just couldn't do it and talk at the same time. I fell back. But (*chuckles*) I talked with him afterwards and got to chatting with him. And I discovered he's a nice guy.

(*Jesse chuckles.*)

And a few things led, one after the other. And we started dating, and the rest is history.

**Jesse Thorn:** We're recording this during Pride; it's June as we talk. And as I was reading this story, it struck me as such a testament to the meaning and purpose of pride. That here you are gathered with these guys doing the most quotidian thing in the world—which is like being in a running club, right? You know, it's just a really regular thing. *(Chuckles.)* And it is the fact that you can engage with these guys in such a regular, quotidian way together, joined by this piece of your identities, that essentially gave you the courage to fall in love.

**George Takei:** And also, they were closeted as well. They had careers. Brad was a journalist. There were others who worked for the city or the county, and they all had lives. And they were gay, but they wanted to protect that fact. And so, here they were running with other gays while closeted, and they were like anybody else. Quotidian. *(Chuckles delightedly.)* I love that word.

**Jesse Thorn:** One of the things that stands out about this period in your life is that as you are—you know, albeit secretly—joining the gay community for the first time in a meaningful way and falling in love, it's the mid-1980s. Which was one of the most difficult times to be a gay man in America, because of the AIDS crisis.

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**George Takei:** It was the beginning of the AIDS crisis. People were chatting about it. But you know, no one—there wasn't much information. The newspapers, TV news didn't have much information other than what was common knowledge. It was really victimizing us. And the ignoring of this issue that was so literally life and death was another form of expressing society's attitude toward gays.

**Jesse Thorn:** Can I tell you what really got to me? Is, there's a sequence in the book that's so specifically visual where you visit a friend in the hospital. The sequence is about you trying to get the caretakers there to give him blankets. But I have to say that when I saw the sores depicted on his body, it was such a vivid reminder of that time for me. I remembered when I was a child, the sores on family and friends' faces and bodies when they were very sick. It was very powerfully transporting for me. How did it feel for you to revisit such a painful time?

**George Takei:** Writing this book, there were many, many moments where I teared up. When I wrote that part, the AIDS part, I literally sobbed. Because it was so visceral and so close still to me. And those guys that passed in such an ugly, cruel, grotesque way were nice guys. They were great athletes. And the punishment was so nonsensical, so cruel. And it wasn't just the disease itself, but society's attitude to these guys who were suffering. I mean, it was a painful, painful thing. And society's attitude and the government's attitude just compounded that. Human beings can be very savage-like. I mean, to know that people are suffering and still pile on as they did?

Reagan, who was a conservative— And you know, conservatives have their values and all, but they are so cruelly, valueless. Inhuman. And I see Reagan as human, because when we were campaigning for apology and redress for our unjust imprisonment, he initially was

opposed to it. But he signed the bill and had the guts to apologize publicly that this government is a human government. Although our ideals are great, we are fallible human beings who make mistakes. And Roosevelt, who was a great president, made an incredible lasting mistake categorizing us as enemy aliens with no evidence and reason. Things go in cycles. Here we are again, that enemy alien phrase just being applied to innocent people now, again, today.

[00:30:00]

And then like—just this weekend, sending in the National Guard to round up innocent people who are so vulnerable and subjecting them to such incredible punishment. And I, as a Japanese American, know that cruelty. I was a child, and it was my parents that were subjected to the incredible anguish. Our democracy is a great system, but the capacity for human frailty to be expressed in such a grotesque way— And the AIDS crisis was one of them.

**Jesse Thorn:** We'll dive into even more with George Takei after the break. In just a minute: he was one of 120,000 Japanese Americans incarcerated during World War II. He'll talk about the parallels he sees between that time and today. It's *Bullseye* for [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

#### **Promo:**

**Music:** Paramore inspired pop punk music.

**Sequoia Holmes:** Are you a five-star baddy? If you answered yes, then *Black People Love Paramore* is the podcast for you. Contrary to the title, we are not a podcast about the band. *Paramore Black People Love Paramore* is a pop culture show about the common and uncommon interests of Black people in order to help us feel a little bit more seen.

**Jewel Wicker:** We are your co-hosts.

**Sequoia:** Sequoia Holmes.

**Jewel Wicker:** Jewel Wicker.

**Ryan Gilyard:** And Ryan Gilyard.

**Sequoia:** And in each episode, we dissect one pop culture topic that mainstream media doesn't associate with Black people, but we know that we like.

**Jewel:** We get into topics like ginger ale, *The Golden Girls*, Black romance, UNO, and so much more.



**Ryan:** Tune in every other Thursday to the podcast that's dedicated to helping Black people feel more seen. Find *Black People Love Paramore* On [MaximumFun.org](https://MaximumFun.org) or wherever you get your podcasts.

*(Music fades out.)*

**Transition:** Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

**Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with George Takei. The activist and actor from *Star Trek* has just published his first ever graphic memoir, *It Rhymes With Takei*.

Where we're sitting right now is in Westlake, in Los Angeles. It's not far from two of the neighborhoods that you grew up in. You grew up partly in Skid Row and partly in East LA. It's also very close to one of the sites of ICE's first round of major workplace raids: a Home Depot that's on Wilshire Boulevard, probably not even a mile from here in our neighborhood.

You're someone who has experienced firsthand having been abducted by the government without charge. What is it like for you right now, as an 88-year-old, to see that playing out in your hometown, in places that you've known your whole life?

**George Takei:** I love my hometown. But at the same time, I'm aware of the human fallibility of this hometown. I love this city, but I'm constantly reminded that it's a human town with human fallibilities.

**Jesse Thorn:** Do you think that having seen the suspension and erasure of legal and human rights in the internment of Japanese Americans and the mass deportations of the 1950s in Southern California makes you more optimistic or pessimistic about what's happening in the United States right now?

**George Takei:** Americans don't know our history. It's so important. We have a great system called democracy. We the people. We the people. And that was chanted just a few days ago when the No Kings movement happened. We're ultimately the boss, but if we don't know our system— And when I was a teenager and I had after-dinner conversations with my father, he used to quote to me Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg address. “Our democracy is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

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He said, “Those are noble ideals. That's what makes our democracy great. But the weakness of American democracy is also in those words: of the people, by the people, for the people. Because the people have a responsibility. They have a job; they have a citizen's responsibility if it's our government. And they mess up on that. We have elections. We have decisions to make. But we have to cast informed votes. And we don't bother to find out. We just listen to slogans and television ads. We are not really responsible citizens of a democracy.” And so, he said, “You know, we have to actively participate.” And he said, “I want all my children to be

active at school. Volunteer for charitable causes, volunteer when there's somebody that needs to have funds raised. Join clubs and participate in student government.”

And so, he encouraged us to really know American democracy. And the trouble is we don't have Americans who know that. And that's why I wrote *They Called Us Enemy*, and I talk about my conversations with my father as a teenager. We have a responsibility. And if we don't exercise that, then there is a penalty to be paid for it. And it was so heartening to see Trump lord it over that military demonstration in Washington DC, and you saw 2,000 demonstrations of we the people, no kings, all over America. This is democracy. And people need to know that. Know that we have a responsibility as Americans. Trouble is most people don't.

**Jesse Thorn:** Well, George, I'm very grateful for your time. It's really nice to get to see you again. Thank you for coming and talking to me.

**George Takei:** And I really appreciate your—first of all—having read my book. And the message that my book has, you truly understand it. We are Americans who have a grave responsibility. So, thank you for allowing me to talk to you about it.

**Jesse Thorn:** George Takei, everyone. His graphic memoir is called *It Rhymes With Takei*. Get it at your local bookstore or at [Bookshop.org](https://www.bookshop.org).

**Transition:** Bright, playful synth.

**Jesse Thorn:** That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* was created in the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun—as well as at Maximum Fun HQ, overlooking beautiful MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, California. Of course, the view from our window is one that our guest on this week's program, George Takei, knows a lot about. So, George has been an Angeleno for almost all of his 88 years. So, we asked him to look out the window and tell us what he saw. Recorded it on video. You can find it on our Instagram page. Just search for *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn*.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers, Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Hannah Moroz. Our video producer is Daniel Speer. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music comes from our friend Dan Wally, also known as DJW. You can find his music at [DJWsounds.bandcamp.com](https://www.djwsounds.bandcamp.com).

Our theme music was written and recorded by The Go! Team. The song is called “Huddle Formation”. Thanks to The Go! Team. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries, for letting us use that.

You can follow *Bullseye* on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube—where you'll find full video from just about all our interviews, including the ones you heard this week. And (*laughing*) can I recommend: go to our YouTube channel and check out the comments about our interview with Mark Hamill? It turns out that *Star Wars* fans are very passionate about Luke Skywalker.

Okay. I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

**Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

*(Music fades out.)*