

April 10, 1998

Letter to the Editor
The Washington Post
1150 15th St., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20071

Dear Editor:

During World War II, the government of the United States took part in a monstrous human rights violation. The Roosevelt administration "legalized" the kidnapping of community leaders and affluent persons of Japanese ancestry throughout much of Latin America in order to fill the U.S. need for a "barter reserve," for use in prisoner exchanges with Japan. Over 2,200 people from 13 Latin American countries, largely from Peru, were forcibly brought as "barter baits" to U.S. concentration camps.

After the war, the internees were astounded to learn that all had been stigmatized as "illegal aliens" and were an unwanted, pariah group. When Peru denied them re-entry, more than 900 were dumped by the United States on a bombed out, starving Japan. Their status of being "illegals" was rationalized as being "prejudicial to the future security...of the Americas" (Presidential Proclamation of September 9, 1945). Such callous action, in total disregard of the health, welfare and safety of men, women and children, is nowadays considered a crime against humanity.

The Civil Liberties Act of 1988, signed into law by President Reagan, finally offered a government apology and token restitution to all who had been placed in camp. But survivors among the Japanese Latin Americans were denied this right. The counterfeit immigration status foisted upon them at the time of their entry on American soil, was again used against them.

On April 15, a decision will be issued by Judge Loren Smith of the U.S. Court of Federal Claims on a lawsuit which challenges the government's right to deny the Latin American groups' exclusion from seeking redress through the Civil Liberties

Act of 1988. Clearly, Judge Smith had been taken aback by this little known tale of injustice. Before the postponement of the suit (Mochizuki et al v U.S.) by the government on March 19, Judge Smith stated that "the court believes that this case is particularly suited to settlement because of the moral issue involved." He added that "while the parties (the government) have the power to do the right and moral thing, courts have the solemn duty to take the court action the law requires (meaning that Latin Americans would remain excluded). And the judge gave notice that "this falls far short of the right or moral resolution," stressing "that is why this case should be settled (by the administration). Our leaders have indeed lost sight of the significance of our constitution when it allows victims of gunpoint relocation to U.S. concentration camps to remain fraudulently stigmatized as "illegals".

If Doris Meissner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service could see through the inhumanity, as Judge Smith has, she is in a position to right this half-century wrong. She could quickly straighten out the bureaucratic quagmire.

President Clinton is also in a position to act decisively on the side of decency. His call for equal justice for minorities who remain powerless could be translated into concrete action. If President Franklin Roosevelt could issue an executive order to exclude and detain 120,000 people on the basis of ancestry alone, why cannot our President in 1988 fearlessly right an egregious wrong by issuing an executive order making mandatory the inclusion of once-interned Japanese Latin Americans into the Civil Liberties Act of 1988?

Only then will this blot upon our nation's honor be erased. Only then will America have the right to continue to assert its moral leadership within the world community.

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