

Statement delivered before:

Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians

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Thank you for your invitation to appear before you today and to discuss the question of reparations to those civilians interned and relocated within the United States during World War II.

I have approached this question from the point of view of a psychiatrist and historian who has a special interest in the effect of public memory on social issues such as you are deliberating.

The decision by the United States to confine and relocate over 110,000 civilians, chiefly of Japanese descent, for up to three years has been documented in your earlier hearings. I was one of those who benefited from the televising of your proceedings in Washington through the wisdom of the Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network (C-SPAN). Because of those recent hearings and the studies which have been published ever since the period of internment, we now know in some detail what were the public attitudes and the decision process within the government that led to Executive Order 9066.

In contrast to the mood of 1942 on the West Coast, most Americans I know who have thought about the incarceration of these civilians regret that it occurred and, in fact, find it difficult to understand how American citizens could have been forced to leave their homes, farms, and businesses, on short notice, and enter confinement along with their children. It is my impression that many Americans are still only

dimly aware - if at all - that the internment ever happened. It is not a pleasant memory, and the further reminder that the Supreme Court approved the action makes recollection even more difficult: the image is in painful conflict with our grand and confident public representation of a tolerant nation in which the rights of the individual citizen are rigorously defended by all three branches of the government. Should the other two branches of our government be pressured by public attitudes to transgress individual rights, we could expect the judiciary to come to the rescue. As an ideal, this faith in our national behavior has value: the problem is that our lapses from the ideal are rarely allowed to become lessons for our improvement or humility; the lapses are simply denied or actually, as in the case of Native Americans, celebrated.

Now, thanks to the decision to establish this Commission and your work, the nation is both recalling an unjust act and considering how best to respond to those who were unjustly interned. In weighing reparations, however, we should not confine ourselves to one group, the interned. We should also consider the larger group, the rest of the nation, that carried out the internment process.

I would recommend for those who were interned that the nation provide as a minimum, compensation equal to the money and services given after the War had ended to those who had served in the Army or Navy; that is, today's equivalent of the GI Bill. Specific additional losses should be adjudicated through the courts, but without the severe limitations on damages which I see laid down in the 1948 Evacuee Claims Law (P.L. 80-886). Of course, no amount of money can repay the full extent of the sufferings of those who have been unjustly confined, but an across-the-board payment in services or money would constitute at least a basic reparation.

In considering the general matter of reparations to internees, studies which have been and are being conducted on survivors of the Holocaust may be helpful in a number of ways: in distinguishing categories of personal and familial trauma which afflict those who have been victims of state discrimination, of enforced penury, and of confinement behind barbed wire fences. I do not, of course, mean to suggest that the enormity of internment of civilians during wartime was as terrible as was the Holocaust. Nevertheless, there are some similarities between the two events and to other hostile actions by governments against people of a particular ethnic, racial, or religious character.

This thought leads me to the second group affected by the internment: those who committed the internment, the American people acting through our government. In the spirit of Thomas Jefferson's observation that a great evil in slavery was its effect on the character of the slaveowner, we may ask ourselves: What can we do to counteract this weakness within ourselves? Is there some rehabilitation we can undertake for ourselves which would serve to ameliorate these less desirable traits - traits that we share with much of the rest of humanity? We ought to recognize this duty to ourselves as a part of the opportunity we now have through this Commission to redress the wrongs of the past, an opportunity and indeed an obligation to re-educate ourselves.

I would suggest a course should be taken which would help fill in the lacunae in our public memory. Ideally, such a reparation to ourselves would be the occasion to go beyond this one injustice and exert some long-term effect on similar crises which may well occur in the future, for there is no reason to assume that we have now overcome our weakness. This re-education ought to involve strengthening the public memory of what we have done: the unjust act of discrimination against men and women on the basis of group distinctiveness and then, worse still, penning them up because we regard them as "different."

I would like, therefore, to recommend for your consideration the establishment of an Institution of Human Rights funded by the United States government as reparation for that government's own actions during World War II, but it should not be limited to the study of the origins and effects of civilian internment. Such an Institution could serve as an archive for documents and oral memoirs as well as a center for support and dissemination of research on similar events. This Institution could memorialize and seek to understand the causes of other such great tragedies from the Armenian massacres early in this century to the Holocaust itself, and perhaps keep fresh a healthy public memory. Such a public memory, I believe, is one of the few protections we can look to as a preventative against future acts of injustice.

I am reminded of Walter Laqueur's recent work on the lack of awareness of the Holocaust among the Western powers during the Second World War. One of the major obstacles to alerting the Allied countries was the fact that their citizens and leaders remembered all too well that the gross and astounding atrocity stories about the German Army during the First World War had, after the Armistice, been admitted to be utterly false. The strength of that memory caused scepticism, for the West simply discounted reports of what was being done to the Jews in 1942 and 1943.

The power of public memory - the lessons we draw from accurate or false reports of what is going on - shapes our decisions. Here we have an opportunity to support a truthful public memory which would have the effect of tending to protect minorities in time of stress, If the Congress, as a result of the Commission's recommendation, did establish an independent Institution of Human Rights, we as a people could simultaneously accept responsibility for our past act of injustice while affirming our highest ideals of justice for all.