



American Friends Service Committee

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TESTIMONY SUBMITTED TO

THE COMMISSION ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS

BY

AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE

WASHINGTON, D.C.
July 16, 1981

I am Louis W. Schneider, former Executive Secretary of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). I am here to speak on behalf of AFSC, an organization with national headquarters in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; 10 regional offices in the United States and programs throughout the world. I am accompanied by Ed Nakawatase, national program staff for the Community Relations Division in Philadelphia.

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) was established in 1917 as a way of implementing Quaker beliefs in human equality, social justice and peace. Our perspectives presented here before the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians represent both our experience in assisting the victims of war and economic and social upheavals and our efforts in pursuit of social and economic justice.

In 1942, after the American government interned people of Japanese ancestry (most of whom were citizens) AFSC was asked by the War Relocation Authority (WRA) to assist internees. We agreed to do so but stated in a letter, with words we would still endorse, our position on the evacuation and internment:

"It seems appropriate, however, that in undertaking this service, a statement should be made to our constituency making it perfectly clear that we do not accept this evacuation as a matter of course nor approve it in principle. The events of the past few months have caused us deep humiliation and profound concern."

Our specific activities during that period included assisting in the formation of the National Japanese American Student Relocation Council. The Council played a major role in helping continue the college educations of those who had been interned. By the end of the war, there had been over 4,000 students enrolled in over 600 colleges in 47 states. Throughout the internment period, AFSC volunteers assisted in a number of camps with health care, education and other needs.

And as the evacuation camps became depopulated toward the end of the war, AFSC operated relocation hostels where former internees could live while they looked for longer-term housing and job opportunities. AFSC hostels were set up in Cincinnati, Ohio; Des Moines, Iowa; and Los Angeles and Pasadena, California. There were some 3,550 evacuees assisted through these hostels. These were some of our relief activities. (We will submit a full written report on this to the Commission later this year).

We would like to devote the bulk of our remarks to the implications of the evacuation and internment for us today, including the issue of redress. We do so based on our work in the struggle for racial and sexual equality and social justice.

Among the many disturbing aspects of the government's action was that it happened at all. The action was racist on its face, subjecting Japanese to internment, an act not done to people of Italian and German ancestry.

There was no evidence that Japanese on the West Coast posed a military threat to the United States. Indeed, there was considerable evidence to the contrary. The government report issued by State Department investigator Curtis Munson shortly before Pearl Harbor made clear that there was no security threat by the Japanese community, no military necessity for evacuation. That point was later corroborated by the FBI and Navy Intelligence.

Economic advantage combined with racist hysteria. Homes, farms, stores, real estate and other property were seized with no compensation in violation of Constitutional protections. Numerous non-Japanese profited because of the evacuation and internment. All of these points have been made before and will be made again to this body. These truths must be emphasized for they remain a blot on the history of this country.

We would also wish to focus on another point, quoting from the previously cited 1942 letter to our constituency: "....If one minority of our citizens, without trial and without prove guilt can be forcibly moved under pressure, any minority under different circumstance of inflamed public opinion runs the danger of losing its democratic rights."

The intervening years have given that point even more force and urgency. Our experience since the evacuation in this country would underscore that perception. We have witnessed the hysteria of the McCarthy years with the attempted destruction of unpopular political minorities. We see in our work in Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American communities the continuing vulnerability of people of color in this country. We know through our activity with women activists as well as with lesbians and gay men that forces of intolerance appealing to fear are very much alive in this land. And our current program work along the U.S.-Mexico border alerts us to the current economic and social uncertainties that make it easier to use undocumented workers from Mexico and Central and South America as scapegoats.

In the wake of these past and current activities, it is most discomfoting to know that there is no body of legal opinion (given the narrowly-based decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court in the internment cases) and no statute which would prevent the repetition, with another group at another time, of that disgraceful past action.

We have discussed what we see as the contemporary implications of the evacuation and the internment. In that vein last month, the Board of Directors of the American Friends Service Committee strongly endorsed redress to those who suffered as a result of the evacuation and the internment. AFSC is on record for formal acknowledgement of wrong doing by the American government and on record in support of monetary compensation to the victims. We believe that the enormity of the government's action as well as the necessity to curb the threat posed by the example of the internment warrant support for redress. Our past experience impels us to support redress on its merits and as a deterrent. We believe that the past official act of racism is unacceptable as a precedent for present or future policy. Such government action should also be formally impermissible in the future.

And one final comment. We applaud both the mandate of the Commission and the means used by Commission staff in implementing that mandate. We feel it crucially important that those who were victimized during the war now articulate their experiences. We feel it very important that the American public be privy to the hurt, the anger and the resilience of the human spirit that is part of those experiences. Perhaps the most painful aspect of the government internment has been the psychic effect. For nearly 40 years there has been a collective silence about the evacuation and the internment. All of us have been diminished by that silence. All of us have much to gain from public discussion of the issues that surround the mandate of the Commission. We feel now as we did 39 years ago that fundamental questions about the reality of a democratic society with racial equality and social justice are intertwined with what happened then to 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry.