

## JAPANESE AMERICANS AND THE CONSTITUTION

Brain-washed by the intense anti-Japanese propaganda lies of the first half of this century, most white Americans above the age of 55 still seem to feel that the World War II wholesale exile and imprisonment of Japanese Americans solely for reasons of race were both appropriate and proper. Any proposal, therefore, suggesting that redress payments be made to former inmates of those concentration camps usually arouses an angry deluge of protests.

Polls taken among Japanese Americans have repeatedly shown that meaningful individual monetary redress for that arbitrary uprooting and incarceration is felt by around 90% to be long overdue. Support by Japanese American politicians, however, for the campaign for redress, which was started by the Seattle Chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League seven years ago, has been conspicuous by its absence. Moreover, the response of the national leaders of the J.A.C.L. to the efforts of the Seattle Chapter has consisted mostly of inaction, foot-dragging, ill-concealed opposition, equivocation, and quiet abandonment of positions in support of redress taken earlier at the organization's national conventions.

In November 1979, Congressman Mike Lowry introduced in Congress a bill which recognized the violations of the human rights of Japanese Americans during World War II and provided for monetary redress to each individual of \$15,000 plus \$15 a day for each day of confinement. Although the Lowry bill was eagerly welcomed by most Japanese Americans, it was coldly ignored by all three Japanese American senators, by both Japanese American congressmen, and by most national leaders of the J.A.C.L. As a result, it failed to gain the approval of the House Subcommittee in June 1980 and never reached the floor of the House.

In its place, there was signed into law in July 1980, the "Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians Act" to create a Commission to study the wartime treatment of Japanese Americans living in Pacific Coast areas. This Act was the brainchild of the five Japanese American

legislators in Congress and represented their reluctant and evasive response to the growing demands for redress among fellow Americans of Japanese descent. Most other Japanese American politicians and the national officials of the J.A.C.L. gave the Act their approval.

The resulting Commission, represented by four of its members, is scheduled to hold one of its official hearings in Seattle on September 9th, 10th, and 11th. Many Japanese Americans are expecting to testify before it.

People who are still deluded by the anti-Japanese lies which were spread by the American communications media and government officials during the first half of the 20th century, persons who think like the editors of The Wall Street Journal, and plain racists would be well advised not to become too worked up over the possible outcome of the hearings. They should keep in mind that all the Commission is empowered to do is to hold hearings and to come up with a report to Congress containing the Commission's conclusions and recommendations. Real redress proposals, if any, will have to be written into a new bill and introduced in Congress at some future date.

Of particular comfort to such individuals should be the fact that the lone Japanese American member of the Commission, who will be one of the four Commissioners present at the Seattle hearings, has been a vociferous opponent of the Seattle Chapter's redress efforts through his weekly column in the official organ of the national J.A.C.L. His position on redress, as I understand it from some of his writings, is first, to deny the victims of the wartime exile and imprisonment any direct monetary compensation on an individual basis and second, to make sure that any possible redress funds which might be granted be handed over to some organization or groups who will see to it that such money would be put to what he feels would be cooler and better use.

If any person finds the position on redress taken by Japanese American politicians somewhat unexpected and strange, he should first understand

that the senators and congressmen of Japanese descent do not represent the Japanese Americans in any sense other than the mere similarity of the color of their skin. In order to be elected to public office, such persons must depend almost entirely on Caucasian votes. Their political lives would be endangered if they were to espouse or do anything which would antagonize the deep-seated prejudices and misconceptions of the white majority. If any substantial group of voter constituents are strongly against providing redress for Japanese Americans, the average politician of any race can be expected, for the sake of political survival, to turn his back on justice.

In practically all areas, the Japanese Americans are too limited in numbers and influence to really count in deciding the outcome of most elections. Except for the rare politician of integrity and principle such as Congressman Lowry, injustices perpetrated against extremely small minorities are coolly ignored by most public office holders.

The Commission hearings are apparently being promoted by the Commission's staff and by the J.A.C.L. as a great favor granted to the Japanese Americans which will enable them to get the stories of their wartime experience to the American public. I regard the hearings as demeaning to all Americans of Japanese ancestry and an insult to their dignity.

Actually the wartime violation of the Constitutional rights of Japanese Americans is an American problem and not merely a Japanese American matter. The Commissioners really need only to read the many books on the subject already written by reputable scholars. The hearings, if any, should include primarily the testimony of prominent scholars and experts on Constitutional law.

According to newspaper accounts of the Commission hearings already held, the heavy concentration on recitals of stories of humiliation, suffering, and property losses is diverting attention away from the serious Constitutional issues involved. Instead of redress being considered as a redress of the violations of the Constitutional rights of innocent persons,

redress is being perverted into a welfare issue. If such proves to be the tone and substance of the Commission's final report, the victims of the exile and imprisonment may ultimately be denied the justice they seek and an opportunity for this nation to begin the repairing of a badly twisted and torn Constitution will have been wasted.

*Shosuke Sasaki*

Shosuke Sasaki

August 29, 1981