

TESTIMONY BY SANSEI PANEL

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We would like to welcome the Commission to New York City. My name is Michael Nakai and I am one of the third generation of Japanese Americans. I speak today on behalf of some of the many sansei whose combined efforts with other nikkei made these hearings a reality. It may seem that, because the majority of us were not incarcerated, we lack the essential basis to speak. What losses can we attest to...and what can we hope to achieve from this Commission's hearings?

We are the most intimate witnesses of the camps' impact upon our parents and grandparents, and we are reflections of that impact as well. As a generation brought to life by the nisei we have inherited more than our ethnic mask. We have inherited a silence-- which has left many of us alienated and struggling for an identity.

In the movement of the 60s and 70s, sansei from all ages and backgrounds were driven with a deep motivation to uncover and to understand a very fundamental part of our history. This effort

was part of a drive to define ourselves -- to understand our roots, and to regain a sense of pride in our identity as Japanese Americans. The movement was in response to more than 30 years of silence in our community about an episode which affected our people like no other single event, but which has remained untold in our history books and until recently, unspoken in our families. For Japanese Americans, our experience has been defined in post-war terms. Our contributions, our struggles and our heritage in this country prior to and through the war have been buried; we have been deprived of an understanding of a historical experience which defines us and lends context for our lives today. I should mention that it was through Asian Studies programs which were hard fought for and established just a decade ago that we began to develop an awareness of this history. Tragically, these same programs are being constantly cut back, many to the point of extinction. There appears to be some reluctance to acknowledge the violence and exploitation which has been an integral part of Third World people's history in this country.

The impact of the camp experience on the sansei and for future generations is indisputable. Our parents suffered a humiliation which resulted in a denial of their very sense of identity, a denial which was passed onto their offspring. It was conscious

U.S. government policy which equated all things Japanese -- i.e. anything basic to our identity -- as subversive and inferior. It was government racism and chauvinism which forced upon us a policy of assimilation for survival, and with that, a degradation of everything essential to our make-up as Japanese. As a result, the sansei generation has little knowledge of our culture, and the loss of our language has cut us off from a basic part of our heritage as well as our ability to communicate with our forebears.

Japanese Americans are perceived as affluent and well-educated, in effect, a "model minority" having overcome the obstacles of poverty and prejudice. But behind the facade, we find contradictions to this stereotypical label. One cannot refute sansei involvement with psychotherapy, with drug abuse and suicide. Statistics are nonexistent when considering the loss of human potential and drive. What doubts go through a sansei's mind when he sees a gifted nisei's struggle for success repeatedly discouraged? We can no longer ignore the incarceration in its effects on the Japanese American psyche.

For sansei on the East Coast, the impact is most visible. The subsequent release of our families from the concentration camps forced the splintering of the Japanese American community,

causing many to travel east in hopes of encountering less racial harassment. Hardly anywhere on the East Coast can you find a "Japantown" or even a small neighborhood of Japanese Americans. For sansei growing up so isolated from any sense of Japanese American community, the resulting alienation has had insidious effects. The majority of us were raised in neighborhoods where we were the only Japanese American family, attended schools where the teachers would expect you to have a natural affinity for art or haiku, and had friends who thought being Japanese American meant you knew karate and ate raw fish. In our attempts to be accepted, to deny and reject that which made us different, many of us grew up avoiding other Asians, or fostered an outright hatred of them -- a reflection of our own self-loathing. This deep psychological damage may be intangible but nevertheless, is quite real.

On what basis do we appear today? The crime of the WWII incarceration was a crime perpetrated against a people -- our people -- and as a part of that people we have a right and a responsibility to voice our anger and demands. For the sake of present and future generations, we demand that all of the facts concerning the evacuation and the results of this Commission's

hearings be made an integral part of history for all Americans. History courses must include not only the dates and facts of the incarceration, but also the psychology of wartime hysteria that allowed the forcible relocation of Americans away from areas where they were not wanted, "for their own good". The present-day equation of Japanese Americans with Japanese from Japan is a blatant example of this ignorance, and shows no attitude or educational change in 40 years. We hope that with the establishment of a community fund money will be made available which would support history gathering projects, such as oral testimonies from the rapidly diminishing ranks of the issei. Issei have never received an acknowledgment from the American government or people of their contributions to the evolution of American society. And they are now dying, strangers to the children and grandchildren who were taught to ignore the existence of their grandparents' culture. And so with each issei passing, a piece of our history dies too.

The legal machinery which made the tragedy of evacuation possible, along with the ignorant mass fanaticism which supported this outrage, must be destroyed. We need assurance that such abuses of constitutional, civil and human rights will never again be perpetrated. An official apology is not enough. Our government must make clear and visible to all Americans the extent of racist

exploitation exercised on a select group of its own people.

We demand significant and expedient individual monetary compensation for every person interned. Significant, because while we realize that no monetary sum can ever compensate our people for the immeasurable suffering, real justice can only be achieved in terms understood and acknowledged by this system. Expedient, because those most in need and most deserving have every right to see and enjoy this restitution in what remains of their lifetime.

In addition we demand the right to know of the many struggles and contributions made by all Americans of color, for it is only when the complete story is told that the context of our own will have value.

We would like to conclude our testimony by expressing our deep concern over the process that we have witnessed in building for this hearing. Many sansei, along with nisei, worked countless hours and expended an immeasurable amount of energy to secure a site, gather testimonies, and broadly publicize for today's hearing. We organized numerous meetings with the testifiers and with the community to maximize input from everyone. Our efforts were aimed at ensuring that the New York hearing would reflect broadly and accurately the experience of

the New York Japanese American community. We worked in the spirit of cooperation with the Commission staff, and with the explicit understanding that our efforts and input would be given the full consideration that they deserved. The Commission staff, however, was to instead demonstrate a total lack of sensitivity to our efforts, and what amount to a lack of respect for our right to have input in determining the character of this hearing. Because we understood the different time and financial constraints of the Commission, we made every attempt to stay within the specifications and restrictions placed upon us, in terms of the length of testimony, the type of testimony which the Commission sought and ultimately, the limited number of people which would be allowed to speak. We do not feel that these efforts were given due consideration.

Many people who had extremely valuable testimony to offer to today's hearing were unable to speak today. The commission staff dismissed many of these testimonies as being not interesting, worthwhile or unique enough. The final program was determined without any explanation, input or feedback from us. When we raised our objections about this process we were told to back off or risk cancellation of these hearings.

We are insulted by this disrespect, and feel that it reflects in essence, an attitude of racism and chauvinism towards our

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community. We offer this criticism to alert the Commission to some of the pitfalls that we perceive in terms of its functioning here in New York. We hope that it is accepted in the same spirit of cooperation that has been demonstrated by this Commission in previous hearings.