

Statement submitted to the "Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians" established by Public Law 96-317 on August 13, 1981 at the hearing in San Francisco, California .

THE ISSUE OF IMPRISONING CHILDREN

A Statement By

Raymond Y. Okamura
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ABSTRACT: The ostensible purpose for incarcerating all persons of Japanese ancestry on the West Coast was to protect the war effort against espionage and sabotage. But there were certain classes of individuals for whom the commission of espionage or sabotage was a physical impossibility. Namely, infants, young children, bedridden invalids, blind or other seriously handicapped persons could not possibly have been a threat to the security of the United States. This statement will focus on the issue of imprisoning children without their, or their parents' consent. The author was imprisoned as a child in an American concentration camp at Gila River, Arizona.

I am a native-born American. I was born on [REDACTED] [REDACTED] in Fresno, California, and was raised on a farm nine miles southeast of Fresno near the rural community of Fowler (additional biographical information attached at the end). I was seven years old when the United States government decided to lock me up. I later learned that there was a war between the United States and Japan, and that I was somehow considered a threat to national security. But at the time, I did not even understand what a war was all about, much less

espionage or sabotage. There was no television in those days; and since I led a sheltered life on a farm, I had no conception of such worldly matters. There was no way I could have endangered the war effort of the United States. But I was imprisoned nonetheless, along with some 42,000 other children under 14 years of age.

In the summer of 1942, I had just finished the second grade at Fowler Elementary School and was happily spending the vacation playing with my younger brother and sister on the family farm. If there was a war going on, I was not conscious of it. My whole universe consisted of the farm, the nearby rural towns, and very little else. About the only unusual occurrence was the strange disappearance of my maternal grandfather. Since I had not seen him for many months, I thought that he may have died. So I was relieved to see him again briefly that summer before he mysteriously disappeared once more. My parents probably told me what happened to him, but I could not comprehend it.

(NOTE: My maternal grandfather was arrested by the Federal Bureau of Investigation on December 8, 1941, and was taken to an internment camp in Missoula, Montana. He was released in May 1942 and returned home, only to be imprisoned again one month later along with all other persons of Japanese ancestry living in the southwest Fresno area. Although his experiences at the hands of the Justice Department are worth recording, his story is not directly related to the main point of this statement, so I have attached an interview with him as an appendix.)

Suddenly, toward the end of that fateful summer, I remember a great deal of commotion in our home. The next thing I know, I am being forced aboard a train by huge, mean-looking white

men armed with deadly rifles. I did not understand what was happening to me, and I was frightened. I became even more apprehensive when I saw that my parents looked worried too. Everyone in our immediate family--consisting of my parents, paternal grandparents, brother, sister, and myself--had to get on that train on August 5, 1942. As it turned out, our area was one of the last to be included in the roundup.

From the moment I stepped aboard that train, I was miserable. I will never forget that terrifying ride to an unknown fate. The window shades were kept tightly closed, and the dark compartment was like a dungeon. Our train intermittently stopped for hours at a time for inexplicable reasons; and I could not eat or sleep with the nerve-shattering roar of unseen locomotives passing by. The engines sounded like they were coming right at me. It was unrelenting torture. On the next day, we got off the train at an incredibly hot place. The Fresno area is hot during the summer, but this place was an inferno. We were then put on an rickety old bus and were taken to a cluster of identical barracks, surrounded by an ominous fence, in the middle of a barren and dusty desert. Our destination was the Gila River Concentration Camp in Arizona.

When my paternal grandfather first saw the desolate camp, he remarked that he will never be able to leave such a place alive. And sure enough, he died eighteen days later of heat prostration and pneumonia. He was 71 years old but in excellent health prior to his incarceration. I am sure that he would have lived much

longer if he had not been forced into such a harsh environment, and if he had the benefit of the better medical facilities available back in Fresno. As far as I am concerned, the United States government killed my grandfather.

The one thing I remember most about life in the concentration camp is the constant beatings I took at the hands of youth gangs. Street-wise city children had formed vicious gangs; and I, as a relative newcomer to the camp, and a naive country boy at that, was set upon as easy prey. I suppose the situation was similar to any prison setting. After the first few beatings, I was so scared I did not dare go to the latrine or messhall by myself. I tried to spend most of my time hiding in our barrack cell; but it was so unbearably hot and crowded inside that I eventually had to venture out and face the consequences. With so many beds, boxes, and relatives in that one room, there was no space to even move around.

Most of the children my age or older ran wild within the confines of the camp. They did as they pleased because their parents could not control their behavior. Both parents and children were wards of the government, and as such, parents had no authority or decision making power--everything was decided by and provided by the government. It must have been a nice emancipation from parental domination for the older children, but for us younger children, it created havoc.

Several months after our arrival, camp schools were built

and some semblance of order was established among the youthful inmates. At least the children seemed to behave themselves in front of white authority figures. But I must not have learned very much in that camp school because the only thing I can remember from it is an incident one day when our teacher, who was a tall white woman, announced the death of President Franklin Roosevelt. She came into our barrack classroom in tears and said that the nation had lost its greatest president, and that we, the Japanese American people, had lost the best friend we ever had. That last statement was so preposterous, I can vividly picture her saying it to this day. I was then ten years old and in the fifth grade, but I knew that Roosevelt was no friend.

Another reason I clearly recall hearing of Roosevelt's death is because we were released from confinement shortly thereafter on April 18, 1945. It was just like a fairy tale: the evil king dies, and the people are set free. Of course, I now realize that it was only a coincidence, but at the time, I had this fantasy about being freed as a direct result of Roosevelt's demise. I was glad it was over and was happy to be going home. The train ride back to Fowler was much more pleasant. The open window shades made all the difference in the world: I could see the beautiful countryside, and by keeping track of the towns we passed, I could see that we were getting closer and closer to home.

Looking back on those years in confinement, I can say without hesitation that those were the most difficult years of my life. It seemed I was perpetually sick with one disease or another,

and those beatings left a deep emotional scar. I left the Gila River Concentration Camp terribly maladjusted, fearful and distrustful of others, and unable to make friends easily. I remember a lot more about the incarceration, and the hostile reception upon returning to Fowler, but I will conclude my personal narrative at this point. My individual story is just one example of the anguish and turmoil sustained by thousands of innocent children. I know that other children suffered losses and deprivations far more excruciating and tragic. Many children died in captivity; many succumbed to crippling diseases; many were orphaned; many were torn by broken families; many went out of their minds. I cannot speak for the other children; but I can speak for myself and use my experiences to lay the foundation for a general discussion on the issue of imprisoned children.

Years later, as a high school student, I learned about the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, fair trial by jury, due process of law, equal protection of the law, et cetera ad infinitum. I concluded that what happened to me never should have happened under the Constitution and laws of our nation. My interest aroused, I independently read nearly every book on the Japanese American incarceration then published. I thereby learned that I was locked up in a concentration camp as a war measure to protect the West Coast against espionage and sabotage. A powerful anger grew in me because I knew such a justification was a blatant lie. No matter what the government may have thought of the adults, there was no way we children could have threatened national

security. My anger has not abated with the passage of time. In fact, it has increased as I have learned more and more about the outrage through research in the ensuing years.

In one sense, I was fortunate in not being older and aware of the Constitution. If I were, I probably would not have survived. I am always reminded of one youth at Gila River who did not survive whole. He was a third generation American teenager who could not reconcile the contradiction between what he had been taught about the judicial system and the reality of his imprisonment. He became extremely bitter, disillusioned, and reclusive. On December 1, 1943, he finally could not take it any more, tried to walk out the main gate without permission, and was shot by a guard. He did not die from the gunshot wound, but his mind was gone and he had to be committed to a mental institution. A report by the attending physician stated that similar cases can be expected in the future, especially among young people, as feelings of injury, injustice, and martyrdom continue to build up.

The official justification for our incarceration was delineated in Executive Order 9066:

Whereas, the successful prosecution of the war requires every possible protection against espionage and against sabotage to national-defense material, national-defense premises, and national-defense utilities...

And, the same rationale was used in Public Proclamation Number 1 of the Western Defense Command:

Whereas...the entire Pacific Coast of the United States, which by its geographical location is particularly subject to attack, to attempted invasion by the armed forces of nations with which the United States is now at war, and in

connection therewith, is subject to espionage and acts of sabotage, thereby requiring the adoption of military measures necessary to establish safeguards against said enemy operations...

Furthermore, the United States Supreme Court in the Mitsuye

Endo case declared:

The purpose and objective of the Act and of these orders are plain. Their single aim was the protection of the war effort against espionage and sabotage...When the power to detain is derived from the power to protect the war effort against espionage and sabotage, detention which has no relationship to that objective is unauthorized... If we assume, as we do, that the original evacuation (sic) was justified, its lawful character was derived from the fact that it was an espionage and sabotage measure, not that there was community hostility to this group of American citizens.

Hogwash! If those reasons were true, what were we children doing behind barbed wire fences? It was physically impossible for infants, young children, and adults who were invalid or seriously handicapped to engage in acts of espionage or sabotage. Obviously, the imprisonment of babies and children could not have had any relationship to the alleged objective. The mere inclusion of babies and children should have invalidated the detention program on its face. But the Supreme Court conveniently ignored the reality of imprisoned babies and children. In the Fred Korematsu case, for example, the Court proclaimed that our detention for three years was necessary because the government needed time to determine who was potentially dangerous. The Court's logic is ludicrous when applied to babies and children: it should not have taken more than a split second to decide that a baby or child was not dangerous.

Naturally, government apologists will argue that children had to accompany parents because it was more humanitarian to keep families together. Such an argument might sound reasonable if one accepts the Big Lie that only an innocuous "evacuation" was involved. But we were not just "evacuated"; in truth, we were locked up in concentration camps, with all the horrors intrinsic to forced confinement. Judged against the actual events which took place, there is nothing humanitarian about incarcerating children.

Another crucial flaw in the humanitarian argument is the fact that neither the parents nor the children were given a choice in the matter. Children were imprisoned whether they or their parents liked it or not. The detention orders applied to "all persons" of Japanese ancestry, regardless of age, or anything else. If given an option, a good proportion of the parents probably would have taken their children anyway because most people then were gullible to government propaganda. But for those parents who feared the worst, or had uneasy feelings about the real nature of the so-called "relocation," they undoubtedly would have preferred to insure the safety of their children by leaving them with friends, the church, the Red Cross, a welfare agency, or even an orphanage. Yet, the right of parents to protect the well-being of their children was totally denied. Not since the Native American extermination wars and Black slavery had such a massive imprisonment of children taken place in the United States. There was, however, one disquieting contemporaneous parallel: the incarceration of Jewish children by Nazi Germany.

Luckily, we were not systematically killed like in Europe; but once we were confined under armed guard, we were at the complete mercy of our captors. The United States government could have done worse things to us, and the vast majority of the American public would not have cared in the least. Based on the record of no protest by white Americans when we were first placed in the concentration camps, it is reasonable to assume that there would not have been much subsequent protests either. To be sure, there were some kind white people who tried to ease the pain by serving coffee and sandwiches at the departure points; but no white person actually went out on a limb and tried to stop the incarceration process. Public opinion heavily favored our imprisonment, and there were calls for harsher measures. One member of Congress even proposed a mandatory sterilization program for all persons of child-bearing age in the concentration camps. The proposal was not adopted; but on the other hand, it did not receive the sound condemnation it deserved. I attribute our survival to the sheer happenstance of a winning war--not the inherent goodness of the United States government or the white American people. The average American did not react any differently from the average German when it came to the persecution of an unpopular minority. I shudder to think what could have happened if the United States started to lose the war.

The Fifth Amendment to the Constitution provides that "no person" shall be deprived of liberty without due process of law. There is no requirement to be an adult--only a person, and

children are persons. Children certainly were considered persons under the orders of the Western Defense Command; and there is no reason to believe that basic constitutional rights can be denied on the basis of age. Therefore, those of us who were children were deprived of our fundamental right to freedom. No charge of espionage, sabotage, or any other crime was ever brought against us children; we were not given a hearing or trial before a juvenile or family court; but we were locked up anyway, just as though we were convicted of some serious crime. We children were sentenced to three years of imprisonment for no cause other than our ancestry.

Imprisonment is clearly a form of punishment; and punishment based on ancestry is completely contrary to the basic tenets of American jurisprudence. Article III, Section 3 of the Constitution prohibits punishment which would "work corruption of blood." Since espionage or sabotage during wartime amounts to treason, in effect, we were punished for treason without the required trial by jury and "two witnesses to the same overt act." Even if a parent was properly convicted of treason, his or her children cannot be punished by imprisonment. Justice Robert H. Jackson stated in dissent in the Korematsu case:

Now if any fundamental assumption underlies our system, it is that guilt is personal and not inheritable. Even if all of one's antecedents had been convicted of treason, the Constitution forbids its penalties to be visited upon him, for it provides that 'no attainder of treason shall work corruption of blood.'

Also, Article I, Section 9 of the Constitution prohibits any "bill of attainder." Yet, Public Law 77-503 amounted to a

bill of attainder based on ancestry. Although the law did not mention ancestry, in actual practice, it was applied solely on the basis of ancestry. Thus, Congress attainted or penalized American children by legislative fiat merely because one or more of their forebears came from Japan.

There is no doubt that the constitutional and legal rights of children were violated along with those of the adults. Moreover, the denial of numerous human rights produced long-lasting emotional damages which crippled a whole generation of Americans. Do not be deceived into thinking that children were too young to be affected. We were definitely affected. We were not affected in the same way as adults because we had few material things to lose, but our losses were just as important and traumatic. We lost our childhood, our happiness, our innocence, our trust in people, our self-esteem. We lost our right to a normal nurturing from our parents; we lost their guidance; we lost their protection. We lost the opportunity to grow up and go to school in a free society. We lost our ability to think and act as free men and women. Most importantly, we lost our faith in the Constitution and the American system of justice.

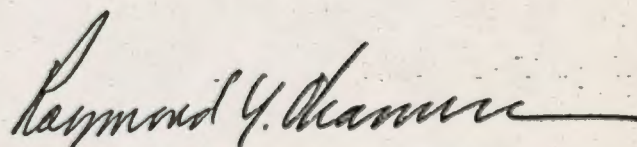
Those of us who were children face the life-long stigma and embarrassment of educational records showing we once attended a concentration camp school, or birth certificates showing we were born in captivity. Whenever we have to fill out an application which probes too far into our past--whether it be for a job, passport, or higher education--anxiety and confusion envelops us.

There is always the subconscious fear that our birth is somehow flawed, or that our incarceration will be held against us. We cannot escape the assumption which exists in our society that if a person has been imprisoned, he or she must have done something wrong. Even an offhand inquiry from an acquaintance about one's birthplace can cause consternation: such a question is never easy to answer without a lot of explanation. In most cases, the names of our birthplaces simply do not appear on any map.

In conclusion, I firmly believe that those of us who were children were wrongfully imprisoned by the United States government in violation of our constitutional and legal rights. There was no possible way we children could have posed a threat to the security of the United States; yet, we were forcibly expelled from our homes and locked up in concentration camps. In fact, the senseless inclusion of children in the detention orders made a mockery out of the government's rationale for the mass incarceration. Not only did we suffer the loss of our precious freedom, we also suffered the consequences of sub-standard education, inadequate health care, poor nutrition, insanitary and harsh environment, disintegrated family structure, broken community traditions, and suppression of Japanese culture, including religion, language, and sports. Our sense of identity, self-respect, and ability to function as free citizens were left in shambles.

Children, as well as adults, are entitled to redress for the injuries caused by the United States government. In the case of children, the United States government is fully liable for false

arrest and imprisonment, wrongful eviction and expulsion, racial discrimination and unequal protection of the law, defamation of character, plus damages to family life, mental and physical health, education, culture, and religion. No child in the future should ever be subjected to the kind of oppressive and totalitarian treatment perpetrated by the United States government against American children of Japanese ancestry. Proper compensation to the victims of this injustice will at least be a token of official regret. More significantly, a forthright admission of error and liability by the government will go a long way toward preventing a recurrence of the nightmare of imprisoned children.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Raymond Y. Okamura". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name and date.

Raymond Y. Okamura

August 11, 1981

APPENDIX

Excerpts from tape recorded interview with YOSHISABURO OKUDA.

Born September 2, 1878 in Nakayama, Hiroshima Prefecture, Japan.
Immigrated to the United States in 1899.
Died February 12, 1976 in Fresno, California.

Recording made in July 1974 in Fresno, California.
Interview conducted in Japanese by Taeko Okamura.
Translated into English by Ayako Okamura.
Excerpted and edited by Raymond Okamura.

(In December 1941, Yoshisaburo Okuda lived with his wife and daughter on a farm seven miles south of Fresno in the Oleander area.)

The day after the war started, the FBI came to get me at 8 o'clock Monday morning. I had just harnessed the horses and was ready to start working. There were three FBI men. They told me they had some business to discuss with me and asked me to go with them to the post office in Fresno. I asked them if it will take a long time. They said no, but then again it might. So they said perhaps I should take the harnesses off the horses just in case it does take long. The FBI men helped me unhitch the horses. As soon as the horses were in the barn, they put me in their car. I had to go just as I was--in my working clothes. One FBI man drove, while the other two placed me between them in the back seat.

I thought I was being taken to the post office, but I was taken to jail instead! I asked to see my family, or someone I knew, but I was not allowed to see anyone. I was not even allowed

to see my children. I asked for a lawyer, but I was not allowed to see a lawyer either.

(In the meanwhile, his wife and daughter had waited in vain for him to return home that night, thinking that he had only been taken to the post office for questioning. After a frantic search the next day, they learned he was in a Fresno jail and tried to visit him, but were denied all visitation rights.)

I was upset and could not eat for three days. Even in America, jail is a wretched place to be. After three days, I was very hungry. I drank a little coffee, and tried to eat some cooked cereal, but I still could not eat much, so I started to throw the rest away. Then a Mexican man in the same jail said, "Don't throw it away; I want to eat it." I gave it to him, and he thanked me by washing all the dishes for me. I remember the Mexican man telling me, "You were brought here because they think you're a spy. They'll release you in three days." But I was already in jail for three days. "You didn't do anything wrong, did you?" he asked. No, I had not done anything wrong; but due to this war between Japan and America, I was looked upon as a spy. I thought to myself: I cannot do much now, but after the war, I must use all my money to clear myself.

Then it occurred to me that my nephew in Japan was a high ranking officer in the navy. He went to London and studied for three years. On his way back to Japan, he stopped by to visit me. He stayed overnight at my house, went to Yosemite, went to San Francisco, and then left for Japan. Just because my nephew came to see me, I was considered a spy. Because of him, I was sent to jail.

After a while, I started to eat and drink coffee. In about a week, one of my (Japanese) friends was placed in the same jail. In a few more days, another (Japanese) friend was jailed; then another a little later. Then I was suddenly placed on a train with all the window shades closed. At that time, I thought that I was being taken deep into the mountains to be killed. In the China war, they used to take the war prisoners to a cliff and push them over. I read about those incidents in the newspapers and thought the same thing was about to happen to me.

But when I got off the train, I was in San Francisco. My life was saved! I will never forget how good it was to breathe the outside air. Three of us were transferred from Fresno to San Francisco. There were many people being held in San Francisco, mostly Japanese. When I arrived there, I had a long beard because I was not permitted to have a razor. I had a trying time in jail. No matter how good it is in America, jail is no place to be. There are many stories connected with the Japan-America war; but if I tell it all, you'll be crying too. My story is quite long isn't it? I think I will stop here.

(Upon hearing of his transfer, his daughter hurriedly drove to San Francisco in an effort to see him. But he had already been moved further to a Department of Justice internment camp in Missoula, Montana. He evidently was taken to San Francisco on or about December 17, and was sent on to Missoula on December 18. While jailed in California, he was not allowed to communicate with his family in any way. Once in Montana, he was allowed to send and receive letters, but only in English, and subject to heavy censorship. He was finally cleared of suspicion and returned to Fresno in May 1942--just in time to be included in the mass incarceration of all persons of Japanese ancestry in his home area.)

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Raymond Y. Okamura
[REDACTED]

Born [REDACTED] in Fresno, California
Citizen of the United States of America
Home before and after incarceration: farm near Fowler, California

Incarcerated at the Gila River Concentration Camp in Arizona
August 5, 1942 to April 18, 1945
Sent directly to Gila River under Detention Order Number 106
Family Number 40327; Individual Prisoner Number 10122
Canal Camp, Block 26, Barrack 8, Cell A .
7 to 10 years of age during imprisonment

Education:

Canal Elementary School, Gila River Concentration Camp, Arizona
Fowler Union Elementary School, Fowler, California
Fowler Union High School, Fowler, California
University of California, Berkeley, California

Present occupation:

Chemist, State of California Department of Health Services

Japanese American Citizens League activities:

National Committee to Repeal the Emergency Detention Act, 1968-71
National Committee for Iva Toguri, 1975-77
National Committee for Redress, 1978-79

Other recent activities:

Wendy Yoshimura Fair Trial Committee, 1975-79
California State Historical Landmarks Registration Project, 1980
Tanforan Pilgrimage Committee, 1979-81

Articles and reviews on the Japanese American concentration camp
experience published in: Amerasia Journal, Bridge, Counterpoint,
Hokubei Mainichi, Journal of Ethnic Studies, New Dawn, New York
Nichibei, Nichi Bei Times, Pacific Citizen, Rafu Shimpo, Rikka,
San Francisco Examiner, San Francisco Journal

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