

STATEMENT OF JOAN Z. BERNSTEIN, CHAIR
COMMISSION ON WARTIME RELOCATION
AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS

As Chair of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment, I want to welcome all of you to the Commission's first hearing. We begin today our inquiry into the causes and consequences of the evacuation and internment of thousands of U.S. civilians and resident aliens during World War II.

Pursuant to Executive Order 9066 issued by President Roosevelt on February 19, 1942, 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry were forced to leave their West Coast homes, jobs and properties. For several years, these American citizens and permanent resident aliens, including the aged, infirm and children, were confined in camps surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards. They were detained without trial, without hearings of any kind. Military necessity was said to require this unprecedented treatment of a national group.

The evacuation and internment of over a thousand Aleuts living in the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands had an equally devastating impact for those who endured the experience. Evidence submitted to Congress indicates that these native Americans were interned under difficult conditions.

There has never been official inquiry into this sad episode in American history. Many Americans have forgotten and many young Americans have never learned about the relocation and internment of U.S. citizens and residents.

In 1980, the 96th Congress, with broad bipartisan support, enacted and President Carter signed into law Public Law 96-317 establishing this Commission. Our legislative mandate is a broad one,

we are to: (1) review the facts and circumstances surrounding Executive Order No. 9066, and the impact of that Order on American citizens and permanent resident aliens; (2) review directives of United States military forces that required the relocation and internment of Aleut civilians; and (3) recommend appropriate remedies.

The 97th Congress, again with wide bipartisan support, passed legislation which increased the number of members of the Commission from seven to nine. President Reagan signed this measure into law on February 10 of this year.

As President Gerald Ford said when he rescinded Executive Order 9066 exactly 34 years after it was issued, "An honest reckoning, however, must include a recognition of our national mistakes, as well as our national achievements. Learning from our mistakes is not pleasant, but as a great philosopher once admonished, we must do so if we want to avoid repeating them."

① In my judgment, the Commission's inquiry is critically important for a number of reasons. First, it will serve a significant educational function. Democracy depends on a citizenry aware of its history, a citizenry informed of the actions its government has taken, no matter how mistaken or wrong those actions may have been. The Commission will give the American people the opportunity to learn what happened to the Japanese-Americans and Aleuts during World War II and why; who made the decisions to relocate and intern them; how that treatment was justified, and how those justifications withstand scrutiny today.

② Second, the Commission's inquiry is vitally important to the rule of law. We need to understand how it was that the nation's military and civilian leaders decided to evacuate and confine

120,000 people for no reason other than their ancestry. We need to examine what protections the law offered, and whether those protections need to be expanded. Only with this knowledge can we devise ways to strengthen protections for our citizens and to prevent similar events in the future.

3 Third, the Commission will provide a forum for discussion on the difficult but crucial issue of redress. Congress has specifically charged the Commission with making recommendations about what actions the government should now take, how it should redress the grievances of those mistreated years ago. There are no easy answers, but the Commission will explore all possible remedies for the wrongs done. This country's honor and commitment to civil liberties demand nothing less.

You are all aware, I am sure, of the strong support creation of this Commission has received from both Houses, the Carter and Reagan Administrations, and the public, including the Japanese-American and Aleut communities. In the recent past, commissions have played an important role in helping the nation confront major issues. The Kerner Commission on Urban Riots, the Scranton Commission on Campus Unrest, the Eisenhower Commission on Violence, for example, all contributed significantly to our understanding of difficult national problems. It is my hope and that of my fellow commissioners that we will be able to follow their example.

Public hearings held across the nation will constitute the heart of our effort. We will receive testimony from those who were ousted from their homes and interned, from their descendents, from government officials, from historians and lawyers, from all who can shed light on the events and their consequences,

and from those who would like to offer their views as to appropriate remedies. We will listen to those who have not been listened to before, and those who influenced the decisions taken.

By holding the hearings in many different locations, from here in the District of Columbia to Alaska, we hope to be able to meet with all who would like to speak with us.

I should emphasize that we do not intend to conduct an inquisition or a trial. What we do intend is to seek to understand what happened and why, to focus on ways to protect against such events in the future, and to address the issue of appropriate redress.

In conclusion, I would like to introduce my fellow commissioners very briefly. Pursuant to the authorizing legislation, each commissioner has been selected personally by the President of the United States, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, or the President pro tempore of the Senate. They are all individuals of great stature, persons who have earned solid reputations by their contributions to the public. I am honored to serve on the Commission with Congressman Daniel Lungren from California, who has been elected Vice Chairman of the Commission; Ambassador Arthur Goldberg, former Supreme Court Justice and U.N. Ambassador; Judge William Marutani, who sits on the Pennsylvania Court of Common Pleas; Dr. Arthur Flemming, the Chairman of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights; Senator Edward Brooke, former Senator from Massachusetts; Father Robert F. Drinan, former Congressman from Massachusetts; Senator Hugh Mitchell, former Senator from the State of Washington; and Father I.V. Gromoff, of Unalaska, Aleutian Islands. Their combined experience, skills and knowledge are unique. I am also particularly gratified that they have all expressed their willingness to put aside busy schedules and attend the far-flung hearings that we will hold in the coming months.