

Testimony of Douglas N. Jewett, Seattle City Attorney before the U. S. Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians. Wednesday, September 9, 1981.

Honorable Members of the Commission:

I do not stand before you today seeking redress for the Japanese Americans who were interned during World War II. No amount of money can compensate them for their losses. I testify today seeking redress for our system of government, redress for all citizens of this land who want to know whether in time of crises, the Constitution of the United States is worth more than the paper it is written on.

All agree that the internments were a dark page in America's history. So dark, in fact, that I never really found the internment in my history books. I attended public schools in Chicago and graduated from college majoring in the study of government. Not once in 16 years of formal education did I ever come in contact with the internment.

Only upon attending Yale Law School, and undertaking the study of constitutional law, was I exposed to the cases of Hirabayashi, Korematsu and Ex Parte Endo. For the first time, I began to recognize the proportions of what was done in the name of national security to nearly a quarter of a million American citizens and residents. The cases represented a disturbing chronicle of the failure of the American political system and the Supreme Court.

After moving to Seattle in 1971, and living for the last ten years in the midst of a community that was impacted as harshly as any by Executive Order 9066, I have learned first hand of the tragedy perpetrated upon Seattle's Japanese American community. Many racial and economic groups have suffered inequities in the evolution of American history. Many people suffer today

in the midst of a land of plenty. But never before had the United States government, with its uniformed troops, imprisoned an entire people in direct violation of the simple words of the United States Constitution.

Neither the passage of time nor the rationalization of circumstances can erase the facts of personal tragedy. One cannot ignore the reality that racism and greed, as well as fear, stampeded public officials and judges into disregard for the most sacred rights purportedly offered American citizens. Never in the pages of American history can one find so many elected officials posturing to advance themselves at the expense of the hopes, life-savings and pride of thousands of their fellow Americans.

Even though the action we speak of occurred more than 40 years ago - before I was born - my children and I - all of us - have a great interest in seeing that the wrongs of our government are admitted and redressed. While our country is not a perfect country, and our constitution is not a perfect document, I would trade them for no other. But unless we take action to show that the wrongs of 1942 have been acknowledged, and an attempt is made to compensate for those wrongs, none of us can ever fully trust the completeness of our commitment to the rights accorded by our system of government.

Critics focus on the expense of redress and say that it is impossible in this time of government cutbacks and budget shortfalls. Even some of those who were interned disavow redress because they are either embarrassed by what happened or find reliving the incident too painful. The embarrassment of some who were interned was at first a puzzle to me. I have learned that it is rooted in their love for this country, and the shame they feel that its constitution was dishonored. But it is our shame. It is the shame of all the citizens who constitute this nation, and it will continue to be our shame until we pay a price that states we know and recognize this type of violation



can never happen again. Unless we are prepared to do so now, none of us, not the rich anymore than the poor, not the educated anymore than the uneducated, not the whites anymore than the Blacks, Hispanics, Asians or Native Americans, can be assured that our constitution is more than a fair weather document subject to public pressure and political expediency.

The people of this Commission have an opportunity to educate the people of America to the tragedy and the wrong of the incarceration. As you do so, however, you should be mindful that by creating an awareness of what happened, you also make it imperative that the wrong be righted. You can help make the internment become an example underlining the strengths rather than the weaknesses of America today.

I hope that in your recommendation to Congress, you have the spirit and integrity to speak your convictions rather than respond to the current political pressures that may suggest a different result. As a citizen of the United States, I submit to you that I and my family, as well as those who were interned, have a right to see that our Constitution is honored and protected. The only way that we can rely upon that belief is if Congress and the President recognize the wrong that was perpetrated and pay a price for that wrong that creates a deterrent to it ever happening again.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to share these thoughts with you, and I wish you good luck in your hearings and deliberations.