



# House of Representatives

STATE OF WASHINGTON  
OLYMPIA

## TESTIMONY BEFORE U.S. COMMISSION ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS

September 9, 1981

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today. I also want to extend my appreciation to you as Commissioners for taking the time to participate in these hearings. You are all busy individuals and your willingness to serve on this important Commission is to be commended.

My name is Art Wang and I am a State Representative in the Washington State Legislature, representing the 27th District in Tacoma, Fife and Milton. I am here today to speak on behalf of redress.

I will not go into the specifics of the World War II situation. There are others here who can testify to the bitter facts from their own first-hand experiences. Others will also discuss the reasons for the internment and the historical justification -- or lack thereof.

What I wish to address today is the public response to this Commission's activities and to the whole issue of internment, concentration camps and the possibility of economic redress.

I am alarmed at the continuing stereotypes and hysteria over this issue. This is still a very emotional issue not only to the Japanese-American families who suffered through the internment and its psychological and economic aftermath, but also to those who supported and continue to support the internment as justified. The extent of this has astounded me. In the last two months there has been an outpouring of vitriolic letters to the editors in local newspapers which perpetuate the same stereotypes which led to the internment almost forty years ago. The predominant stereotype is that "they" were foreigners -- either active or potential enemy agents; "they" bombed Pearl Harbor; "they" killed our boys in a thousand different battles throughout the Pacific theater. Disregarding the repressive restrictions on U.S. citizenship at that time, the proof of "their" loyalty to Japan was that many were not U.S. citizens. Yet even if "they" were U.S. citizens, deep down "they" were still foreigners. Therefore it was justified to throw them in concentration camps or take almost any other action against them. It was their own fault -- after all, "they" bombed Pearl Harbor.

These attitudes still exist. These attitudes are still far too common.

How often do you hear Joe DiMaggio blamed for the excesses of Mussolini? Nobody assumes that "Mr. Coffee" was an agent of the wartime Italian government, yet Japanese-Americans are still blamed for Pearl Harbor.

There are several reasons why people distinguish between an American DiMaggio as opposed to a foreign Hirabayashi or Korematsu, but the most important one is probably sheer, simple racism.

As a country we have tried to respond to racism in several ways under the broad category of the civil rights movement. There are two basic responses: one is an economic remedy for past harms; the other is a legal/political/social remedy to mitigate or prevent future harm.

The economic remedy would be to provide compensation or redress for past wrongs. Ideally this would mean restoring the injured party to the position he would be in if the past wrong had never occurred. The measure of damages in this case could be extremely high. Some form of economic remedy is appropriate, but it is being sought only to a limited extent. No one is asking the full measure of lost earnings and lost property, let alone lost human opportunities from a de-humanizing experience compounded with forty years of inflation and interest. Nevertheless, some measure of economic damages is appropriate, if only to reinforce the second remedy.

The second remedy is more nebulous but in many ways more important. Its function in the legal, political and social realm would be to correct a wrong done to an entire people. The first step is to address the problem by acknowledging the internment experience and confronting the issue instead of repressing it. This is a tremendous psychological factor both for individuals and for our country. To a great extent this is already happening because of the hearings process you have undertaken.

The second step needed is to correct the record by acknowledging a past wrong. The internment procedures at the concentration camps based on the presumption of guilt by reason of race and national origin were wrong. They cannot be justified now, nor could they then.

The third step is to prevent harm by acknowledging the wrong, holding the government accountable and building a political climate in which this tragedy could never happen again. I am terrified by the ease with which we, as a country, seemed to hate Japanese-Americans of forty years ago or Iranians of two years ago.

Redress will not bind all the past wounds, nor will it ever compensate for past hurts, nor will it eliminate hateful stereotypes. But it will be an important step in the right direction. Redress will help reasonable people to learn that we did make a mistake which cannot be justified. Let us acknowledge and be accountable for past wrongs so that they may never happen again.

Thank you.