

18

# AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE

PACIFIC NORTHWEST REGIONAL OFFICE

814 N.E. 40TH STREET, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON 98105 • TELEPHONE: (206) 632-0500

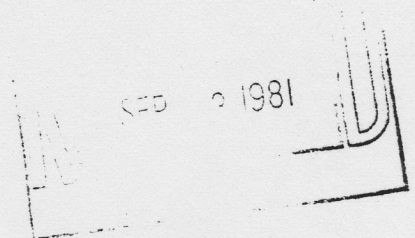


JIM HAUSER  
CHAIRPERSON  
WARREN A. WITTE  
EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

TESTIMONY SUBMITTED TO  
THE COMMISSION ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS

BY

AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE  
PACIFIC NORTHWEST REGION



SEATTLE, WA.  
AUGUST 28, 1981

I am Warren A. Witte, Executive Secretary of the Pacific Northwest Region of the American Friends Service Committee. The Pacific Northwest Regional Office was born in 1942 out of the efforts of local Quakers to assist Japanese Americans and resident aliens during the evacuation and internment.

AFSC spoke out in 1942 against these government actions because we considered them to be groundless, inhumane, and wholesale violations of Constitutional rights and protections. We said then, as we say today, that the forcible removal and incarceration of 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry was motivated not by military necessity nor simply by war-time hysteria, but by a long history of racial prejudice and for economic and political reasons.

It is now clear from formerly secret intelligence reports that such as the case. No persons of Japanese ancestry were ever charged with or convicted of spying, sabotage, or other disloyal acts. Clinton DeWitt, Commanding General of Western Defense was openly racist in his 1943 statement to the House Naval Affairs Subcommittee on the Relocation of Japanese Americans, as he declared: "A Jap's a Jap. They are a dangerous element, whether loyal or not. There is no way to determine their loyalty...It makes no difference whether he is an American...you can't change him by giving him a piece of paper. The Japanese race is an enemy race and while many second and third generation Japanese born on United States soil, possessed of U.S. citizenship have become 'Americanized', the racial strains are undiluted."<sup>1</sup>

Senator (then Congressman) Henry Jackson argued in 1942 that Japanese Americans ought to be interned because they were Americans, and therefore spoke English, were familiar with American customs, and would be especially dangerous as spies or saboteurs. The lack of evidence or even probable cause did not deter these officials from their support for the incarceration of 120,000 innocent persons of Japanese ancestry. Bills introduced into Congress that would have stripped Japanese Americans of their citizenship and deported them to Japan, or worse yet, sterilize them, were further evidence of the open racism of the time.

It was and is equally clear that many non-Japanese gained from the Japanese American community's tremendous losses. One Yakima Valley witness of English descent testified at the Seattle Tolson Commission hearings in 1942: "But there now develops on the part of some white people the desire to get rid of these Japanese who have worked so diligently, educated their children well, and achieved some measure of financial security. The great cry of 'Kick the Japanese out of the Yakima Valley' is not due to fear of sabotage, it is due to economic reasons. As one person naively explained to me: 'the white farmer would have more land and water if he could get rid of the Japanese, and he could demand a higher price for his farm produce.'"<sup>2</sup>

In 1980 the local AFSC and the Japanese American Citizens League co-sponsored a series of forums held throughout Washington State which examined the internment experience from a variety of perspectives. In 1981 our Executive Committee unanimously endorsed redress as a step which our government should take. It is interesting to note that this committee includes members who were staff in the camps in the 1940's, an individual who was interned, descendants of internees, and members of other racial and minority groups.

AFSC continues to work with members of the Japanese American community on issues relating to the internment nearly 40 years later because we do not see the removal and incarceration of 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry as an isolated and peculiar, even if extreme, event in American history.

The internment is unfortunately but one chapter in the long history of discrimination against people of color in general and Japanese Americans in particular. It is a history characterized by exclusionary immigration laws, laws denying Japanese immigrants the right to own property, and anti-miscegenation laws.

It is a history of discrimination which continues to this day, contrary to popular belief. Although Japanese Americans as a group are among the most highly educated citizens in our country, they continue to earn less than their white counterparts for the same work. Though some Japanese Americans have achieved

economic success, many, especially the elderly who lost everything during the evacuation and internment, still experience poverty. As recently as 1970 the U.S. Census Bureau projected that 27.2 percent of unrelated Japanese have incomes below the poverty level.<sup>3</sup> And though Japanese Americans are often portrayed as assimilated "all-Americans", they are just as often, in 1981 as in 1942, presumed to be foreigners in this country by virtue of their race. They are still pigeon-holed into racial stereotypes which are directly related to the evacuation and internment experience.

For example, today Japanese Americans are often portrayed as a quiet, meek, and passive lot. Much of this stereotype is rooted in the image of that community going quietly and passively to the camps. While the majority of them did so, there is usually little, if any, connection made between the duress under which they were placed and their response to it. There is little mention of fathers being whisked away in the middle of the night at gun-point (as was the father of an AFSC Board member), of armed soldiers at depots, of racist attacks by neighbors, members of the press, and by government officials. There is little said about the silence of other Americans at these outrages.

There is almost nothing said about those who might have, or who did, resist. It is little known that the Japanese American community was bereft of its traditional leadership at the time of the evacuation because community leaders and elders, including some priests, ministers, and journalists were swept away first, and subsequently moved from camp to camp to prevent their gaining a following. One rarely hears of persons like Gordon Hirabayashi, who legally challenged the evacuation orders, lost, and served a prison term as a result. One is even less likely to hear of the persons who committed suicide out of despair, of the dozens who were shot by guards for trying to leave the barbed wire concentration camps, or those who were imprisoned for other acts of resistance.

We believe in the importance of getting the truth out about the evacuation and internment. The truth about Japanese Americans and their real history will be revealed in the process. It is a history which belies the racist stereotypes

4  
that Japanese Americans find themselves combating to this day.

We believe that the campaign for redress is a part of that history of resistance to discrimination, a part of that community's continuing struggle for justice, and thus an important part of our nation's heritage. We strongly support redress on its own merits while recognizing that former internees can never be adequately compensated. We believe that redress is a positive and necessary step toward the government's acknowledgement of its wrong doing. Redress falls within the American legal tradition of awarding damages to those defamed or unjustly incarcerated. We believe that redress is in the interests of all Americans; monetary redress and the process of achieving it will be one deterrent to any repetition of this grievous injustice. It is timely since even now legislation pending in Congress provides for preventive detention. We believe that redress will remind Americans that violation of the Constitutional protections of any group, regardless of color or background, endangers us all.

Warren A. Witte  
Warren A. Witte  
August 28, 1981

(original signature)

FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Smith, "Americans from Japan", J.B. Lippincott, 1948, p. 202.
- <sup>2</sup> Testimony of Mrs. Esther S. Boyd, House Hearings Before the Select Committee Investigating National Defense Migration, Part 30, Portland and Seattle Hearings, February 26 and 28, and March 2, 1942.
- <sup>3</sup> Presentation of Dr. Tuan D. Nguyen, "Asian Immigrants: Civil Rights Issues, Service Needs, and Some Suggested Solutions", at the U.S. Civil Rights Commission's May 8-9, 1979 Consultation on Civil Rights Issues of Asian and Pacific Americans: Myths and Realities, p. 275.