

Walt Woodward. Seattle Community College. September 9, 1981. 8 p.m.

Honorable Members of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians:

My name is Walt Woodward. I am grateful to the Commission for this opportunity, after almost four long decades, to express to an official body of the United States government my outrage at the blatant violation of citizenship rights that was inherent in the 1942 internment of Japanese-American citizens. In this, I am speaking also for my wife, Milly, who is present here tonight.

For 23 years, she and I were publishers of The Review, the weekly newspaper on Bainbridge Island. When the internment order was issued, Bainbridge Island was the very first area in the state where it was invoked. Bainbridge won this dubious distinction not only because of its geographic closeness to the Bremerton Naval Shipyard, but also because the Navy was installing important radio facilities on the island.

As you know, in March, 1942, an order of the Western Defense Command required "all persons of Japanese ancestry" to be excluded from specified military areas, including Bainbridge Island. The wording of that order is the very reason for the formation of this distinguished Commission and why you are here in Seattle tonight. The order was not limited to alien Japanese. The order obviously included persons born in this country and who, therefore, were United States citizens.

On Bainbridge Island, the Army moved swiftly. One day, late in March, 1942, an Army contingent, rifles at the ready, marched off a ferry from Seattle. The military was met at the pier by a group of Japanese-American young men. Here was a classic confrontation if there ever was one, but the only thing that happened was that a spokesman for the Nisei said they would help soldiers post evacuation notices in key places.

The order not only was an outright violation of citizenship rights; it also was brutal. It gave those Japanese-American citizens only a very few days to arrange their businesses, their homes, their animals, and their strawberry farms, then only three months away from a potential profitable harvest. They could take with them only those possessions they could carry. The financial losses suffered because of that order I only can imagine; they must have been monstrous.

The Army fanned out through the island. Outposts, in places where telephones were available 24 hours a day, were established. One of them was the office of The Bainbridge Review. It was a cozy arrangement. Within five feet of uniformed Army personnel, Milly and I wrote and published editorials heartily condemning what we said was a frightening violation of citizenship rights.

In this, The Review became the only weekly or daily newspaper in western Washington that I know of to speak out in opposition to the internⁿment of United States citizens. A few islanders called us "Jap lovers", we lost some circulation and advertising, and a mass meeting was called to run us off the island. It failed for lack of attendance.

Eventually, most of the Nisei--but not all--did return. We think it is a fine testimony to the compassion and understanding of most of the residents of Bainbridge Island that they returned without incident. No crosses were burned, and no violent incidents took place on Bainbridge Island. Japanese-American citizens today are integrated and respected members of the community.

All that is well and good, and I would bet that our nation never again will violate the citizenship rights of those of Japanese ancestry. But it does not stay with the facts to say that it is all over. The same thing easily could happen again to others for, in the 39 years since the internment, nothing basic has been changed either in the law or in court interpretation of the law. God Willing, there never will be a "next time". But there might be. Whose rights, then, will be violated? The rights of Black-Americans? Cuban-Americans? Russian-Americans? Chinese-Americans?

This, then, is the additional and awesome challenge facing this Commission. Primarily, you are being asked to do something about redress. But Mrs. Woodward and I ask you to go beyond that very important issue. In your report to the nation, you also must find some way to guarantee that the personal rights of United States citizens never again are violated in time of war. Thank you.