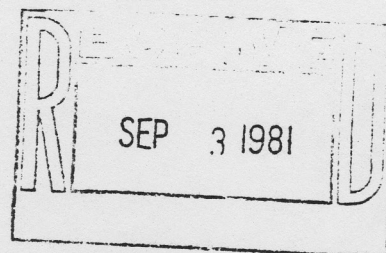


A SANSEI PERSPECTIVE ON THE EVACUATION, INTERNMENT, AND REDRESS

Testimony submitted by

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In July 1981, John Miller of Seattle's KING-TV reported that he was flooded with responses after his commentary on the World War II internment of Japanese Americans. He said the emotions expressed were so strong that there were times he thought that World War II had not ended. He said that typical of the more restrained responses was the man who indignantly asked whether Japanese Americans thought that "true Americans" had forgotten Pearl Harbor.

I do not know about others, but Japanese Americans have not forgotten that "day of infamy." Neither have we forgotten the years of infamy that followed Pearl Harbor; the years when our government drove our families from their homes to concentration camps for an average term of 3 1/2 years. Nor have we forgotten the racism that generated the camps. It greeted our pioneer forebears when they immigrated to this country, and it continues, as Miller's responses indicate, to be an ugly reality for us today.

Perhaps a few examples from my life will illustrate the kind of racism that sansei's and other Japanese Americans experience. For me, to grow up a sansei was to grow up in limbo. I was caught in the double-bind of 2 contradictory stereotypes: 1. foreign by virtue of race, and 2. a member of the "assimilated successful minority."

My memories are replete with examples of the first stereotype. I remember being made to feel that I did not belong in my own country. I remember being called a "Jap," and told that we "Japs" lost the war, or were locked up as spies and saboteurs. I remember being told about "our" pilgrim forefathers from England, but hearing nothing in school about my forebears in America. I remember a great silence about the internment; that silence was broken rarely, and then usually with justifications for the camps by white Americans. I remember, on the other hand, hearing much about how my ancestors from Japan bombed Pearl Harbor.

I remember thinking about what I would be when I grew up, and instinctively ruling out most things, because I was, after all, of Japanese descent. I remember seeing people who looked like me depicted in films as treacherous enemy Japs, or scheming and alluring sex objects, or docile housemaids and gardeners, or subservient



assistants to white main characters. I remember feeling that to be of Japanese ancestry was to be associated with traitors or cowards and doomed to become one of the stereotypes just mentioned. I remember, as a young child, not unsurprisingly rejecting this Japanese American identity.

A graphic example of this rejection was my dream of becoming a writer, complete with male Anglo-Saxon pen name. As a child, I did not need to be told that as a writer, I could be heard without being seen, and even then, heard only as a white male.

This rejection left me in limbo, because I never accepted the other side of the double-bind; the stereotype of the successfully assimilated minority. How could I believe that we had been fully accepted as bono fide Americans when my fellow Americans constantly asked me where I came from and why I spoke such good English?

How could I believe that we "made it," and should be an example to other minorities, when I found census data that reflected: that with more education, we generally earn less than our white counterparts for the same work, have higher family incomes than other minorities because we have more working wives than any ethnic group, and that poverty, especially among the many elderly who lost everything during the internment, still exists in our community? How could I believe the white Americans who said that the internment was good for us because it dispersed our community and gave us the incentive to "succeed," to assimilate into white America?

I lived in limbo until I recognized and rejected the racist double-bind and claimed my authentic identity as a Japanese American. I claimed my full citizenship and the long suppressed history of my forebears. It is as proud a history of resistance to discrimination through labor strikes, challenges to the evacuation and internment, sacrifices on the battlefield, and sheer survival through it all; as it is a sad history of victimization by exclusionary immigration laws, denial of property rights, anti-miscegenation laws, and the incarceration of 120,000 innocent people.

Redress is the very least the government can do in partial compensation to, and in recognition of its wrongs against, those incarcerated. I believe the struggle for redress falls within the tradition of our long struggle for justice in this country.

The struggle for redress is a rejection of racial prejudice and racist stereotypes which are integral not only to the internment, but to our living history. I stand with many of my Issei and Nisei forebears, as well as Americans of other colors and backgrounds, in this struggle. As with any struggle for civil rights and the ideals embodied in our Constitution, it is a struggle for the rights of all Americans.