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COMMISSION ON THE WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS

726 JACKSON PLACE, NW
WASHINGTON, D. C. 20506

Testimony by:

Ron Wakabayashi
[REDACTED]

San Francisco, California 94115
[REDACTED]

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Hearing Site:

Seattle Central Community College
1701 Broadway
Seattle, Washington

My name is Ron Wakabayashi. I am 36 years old, born in Reno, Nevada in November of 1944, shortly after my parents were united after their release from concentration camps in Topaz, Utah and Rohwer, Arkansas. Members of my family were confined in Manazanaar and Tule Lake in California, in Poston, Arizona, and in Topaz and Rohwer. My Issei father was catagorized as an enemy alien; while my mother, a Nisei, was catagorized as a non-alien, meaning American citizen.

While I did not directly experience the ordeal of the incarceration, except for being carried into Manzanaar and Topaz to visit family members as an infant, I am certainly a product of those times and events.

Like many people of my generation, my understanding of the concentration camp experience was a gradual one. Initially, the obscure references to camp that was contained in daily conversation among the adults in my community, I understood to mean some sort of summer camp that everyone had attended. I wondered why we didn't have camps to attend like our parents did. With limited information and the intellectual capacity of pre-adolescence, I, too, understood the camp experience to be a vacation, as has been pontificated by a prior witness at the Los Angeles hearing. Had this witness remained to listen to the testimony of the Issei and Nisei, he would have heard a clearer picture of what life behind barbed wires was like.

Gradually, through research and having the benefit of conversations with survivors of the camp ordeal, people of my generation began to get a grasp of what had occured. In our minds, the camps were simply a terrible wrong. Our parents were and are, simply incapable of the kind of wrongdoing that could warrant their wholesale incarceration as a people. Blaming the victim, we deprecated the Nisei on the basis of this understanding. Why didn't they resist this obvious wrong? Why did they cooperate? Our understanding of our roles as citizens, in today's context would be to challange such things. Having the benefit of hindsight, we made ironclad arguments to belittle what in our perception, was the quiet acquiescence

to a clear and monumental injustice. More blaming the victim.

The assumption that the Nisei did not make a principled stand for their rights as American citizens, has haunted a whole generation for four decades. Like a rape victim, questions are raised about whether they resisted enough, did they bring it upon themselves, and, even, did they enjoy it?

In the course of these hearings, the Issei and Nisei have set their side of the record straight. In painful recollection, they have shared some of the most tragic and traumatic insights of the camp experience. The portion of the story from within the barbed wires is being set straight by the victims of the incarceration. Nisei concern for their parents, enemy aliens during wartime; concern for their children; men volunteering from the camps to serve in the United States armed forces; women holding families together in a traumatic time under the most insecure situation, have been themes running throughout the hearings to date. I join the voices of other Sansei, who have characterized these testimonies as heroic and courageous. I thank the Issei and Nisei for what they have done both in the past and present. They have brought me great pride.

This Commission has the benefit of hindsight. It can review the events of the Second World War with objectivity. There is no wartime hysteria now. The opportunity to answer many questions and to raise further questions is an essential role. What went on before the barbed wire went up? What were the political and economic interests that acted upon the national leadership to result in Executive Order 9066? How early did the government study the feasibility of the incarceration? Why did the evacuation continue after the Battle of Midway, when the very last vestige of any potential invasion ceased to exist? How did it happen that the servicemen recruited from the concentration camps suffered 300% casualties, when 15% was considered high? As National Director of the Japanese American Citizens League, I would like to request that the records taken from JACL during the Second World War be returned by the Federal Government.

The Commission needs to recommend appropriate safeguards on our civil liberties,

to insure that this kind of thing never takes place again. It needs to recommend compensation to communities, whose institutions for protection and services were destroyed by the uprooting that took place. It needs to recommend methods through which the real story of the concentration camps reaches the vast majority of Americans, to set the record straight and to educate the populous that their vigilance is required to maintain the human rights of all our citizenry.

Individual compensation is basic and essential to the resolution of this episode in American history. The Commission's role is to recommend appropriate remedies, and I would hope that these recommendations are based upon the testimony of the victims of the experience. The most common figure that has been put forth on individual compensation has been \$25,000. This figure is not compensation. The economic impact was far greater than what this figure represents. The figure does not, I believe, represent damages, loss of potential earnings or anything like that. It represents good faith. The elders of my community have been asking for a good faith demonstration on the part of the United States government that it is serious in its apology and that it demonstrates a real commitment to insure that this kind of event should never happen again.

The people of my community have demonstrated their citizenship. It is their wish to have a strong and just nation that justifies their loyalty. These good citizens supported this nation, when this nation was failing them. Provide the good faith and commitment which all citizens deserve. Our job is to make this nation worthy of citizens like these.