

Testimony before the
Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians

Tuesday, July 13, 1981

Congressman Mike Lowry (D) Washington

As a cosponsor of HR 5499, legislation that established the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, I am pleased and honored to be testifying before you today.

The series of hearings that have been planned by the Commission to be held in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Alaska, and Chicago, are extremely important. These hearings will provide invaluable information about the internment of Japanese-Americans and permanent resident aliens during World War II and the tremendous effect internment has had on the Japanese-American community and our entire nation.

If nothing else, I hope the Commission hearings will underscore the fact that the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II is not just an issue for the Japanese-American community. It is a national issue that affects all Americans.

In 1942, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, he set off chain of events that violated the Constitution of the United States in a way that must never be allowed again. This Executive Order and other related administrative, congressional, and judicial orders, forced more than 110,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry residing on the Pacific coast to submit to forcible relocation and confinement in concentration camps. All of the constitutional protections that make our nation a beacon of liberty and

justice throughout the world were casually set aside. There were never any charges filed against a single Japanese-American or permanent resident alien, there were no formal arrests, no trials, and no convictions. By decree, under the phoney excuse of protective custody, thousand of Japanese-Americans were subjected to years of illegal imprisonment in cramped barracks-like compounds, surrounded by barbed-wire fences, machine gun-equipped towers, and armed guards. The bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japan, the hysteria of war, and latent racism, allowed Japanese-Americans to be singled out and persecuted.

Individuals and families were given about five days to report to resettlement sites. During this time arrangements had to be made for the safekeeping or sale of businesses, farms, homes, furniture, household goods, pets, and other property. Japanese-Americans were forced to sell property and belongings for far less than their market value, often for pennies on the dollar. And many internees who felt they were leaving property and other valuables in the hands of trusted friends and neighbors, came home to find otherwise.

In addition, personal relationships were severed, educations disrupted, careers destroyed, self-esteem diminished, and pride lost. The personal, emotional, and financial cost of internment for Japanese-Americans is inestimable. And the cost has not only been paid by those Japanese-Americans who were actually interned, but all subsequent generations. The cloud of internment has hung over the Japanese-American community for far too long.

The establishment of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians is the first step taken by the federal government in thirty-nine years to remove this cloud. For this reason, the work of the Commission is extremely important.

As all of you here undoubtedly know, the purpose of the Commission is to determine whether any wrong was committed against Japanese-Americans or permanent resident aliens as a result of Executive Order 9066 and related government actions, and to recommend any appropriate remedies. I am personally convinced that a wrong was, indeed, committed against these individuals during World War II and I am confident that the facts gathered by the Commission will affirm my position.

Because Japanese-American citizens and permanent resident aliens had their Constitutionally-guaranteed rights denied during World War II, and thereby suffered a grievous injustice, in the last session of Congress I introduced a bill that would provide direct financial payment to those interned or their heirs.

This direct-payment bill directed the Attorney General to locate all individuals of Japanese ancestry who were interned or detained or forcibly relocated by the U.S. government during World War II and to determine how long each individual was held. The bill required that these individuals be paid \$15,000 plus \$15 per day of internment. Although it was never considered by

the full House, I think it stimulated discussion and focused attention on the issue of internment and the need for monetary redress. I believed then as I believe now, that the serious abuse of governmental power that caused the unfair imprisonment of 110,000 Americans must be condemned in the strongest possible manner.

In closing, I want to emphasize my support for the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians. The hearings that have been scheduled throughout the country are sure to stimulate public discussion of this national tragedy. They will also provide an opportunity for those who were interned to finally tell their stories. It is important that we listen.

I look forward to the report of the Commission and I am confident that your efforts will be successful.