

Statement of Father Paul Merculief
Chairman
Aleutian Housing Authority
Before the Subcommittee on Administrative Law
and Governmental Relations
Committee on the Judiciary
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C.
June 21, 1984

Statement in Support of H.R. 4322

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, my name is Paul Merculief. I am a Russian Orthodox priest in the village of Nikolski, and I also serve as Chairman of the Aleutian Housing Authority, the Regional Native Housing Authority for the Aleut region established pursuant to the laws of the State of Alaska.

I should like to address a number of the Commission's recommendations as contained in H.R. 4322, the bill offered by the bipartisan Senate sponsors and Congressman Don Young of Alaska. The bill differs from the Commission's proposals in only two material ways. First, H.R. 4322 provides that each surviving Aleut shall receive an individual payment of \$12,000, rather than the \$5,000 payment recommended by the Commission. The sponsors have adopted this per capita payment to recognize more fully the Aleuts' terrible suffering in the camps, and the deaths sustained by nearly every family as a result of the conditions there.

There are other reasons for increasing individual payments. The Aleuts unquestionably have the right to compensation for

the use of their homes by military personnel during the war. As early as 1913 the Court of Claims recognized this right, but the Aleut people have never received any payment for the use of their homes to billet troops. Additionally, the bill more nearly compensates families for lost property that was not replaced or paid for in the haphazard restitution program following the war.

Second, the bill differs from the Commission's recommendations because it provides per capita payments to each of the five surviving Attuans who suffered as prisoners of the Japanese. The Aleut community strongly recommends that these few people, who really endured the most, be granted this relief in recognition of their sacrifices as slave laborers in the bentonite mines of Hokkaido Island, Japan. They persevered through it all, and then returned to find that their government would not return them to their home Island.

Mr. Chairman, the Commission recognized the losses sustained by the Aleut communities when their churches were damaged or destroyed. The people maintained in their churches and homes religious articles of the highest value to them. A number of these church utensils and icons were originally brought from Tzarist Russia. They were taken for souvenirs or destroyed by fire or weather damage. Under the terms of the

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pending bill, a careful inventory would be taken of these losses. There would be efforts made to restore or replace the church utensils, the icons, and the structures themselves to their condition before the war.

The proposals for church reconstruction and restoration would be subject to review by an independent panel of Federal officials. The plans would be developed in the first instance by APIA, and the construction work itself would be under the direction of the Aleutian Housing Authority. The Aleutian Housing Authority, of course, has the most extensive experience in construction work throughout the region. Mr. Chairman, I submit for the hearing record an organizational description and the most recent annual report and independent audits of the Aleutian Housing Authority. This report demonstrates the competence and in-depth experience of AHA in major construction activities.

The problem of World War II debris in the Aleutian area has long been recognized as a serious problem. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has recommended a cleanup program, and the Corps has completed an Environmental Impact Statement on the project. But it has never been authorized or funded by Congress.

Mr. Chairman, the World War II debris is more than unsightly. It can be very dangerous. I submit for the subcommittee's hearing record an article from the Anchorage

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Times of August 14, 1979, which reports that a young boy suffered serious injuries to both hands when he found an anti-tank mine detonator from World War II in the Cold Bay area. The Commission has recommended that Congress authorize at least a minimal cleanup of this debris in populated areas of the Aleutian Island Chain, and the bill we support would give the Aleutian Housing Authority preference as prime contractor for this work. To say the least it is long overdue. Of course, the work would be done only in consultation with the affected villages.

Mr. Chairman, over the years I have attempted to evaluate the cultural impact of the World War II relocation experience on my people, the Aleuts. It was more severe than the impact an army or air force base had on nearby communities in the lower-48. The Aleuts were relocated to camps where most of their traditional leaders perished before they could be returned to their homes. The loss of the elders, in many communities, also resulted in the loss of skills that had been passed down from generation to generation. Let there be no mistake, the Aleut people are survivors, but the impact of this experience was profound and lasting.

If it is established as the Commission has suggested, I believe the trust fund can be used effectively to finance projects

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that will enhance traditional Aleut crafts and other important cultural values. The impoverished young can be educated, the elderly can be better cared for in their last years. The preservation of the language can be undertaken. There are many initiatives that will help reverse the destructive trends that originated in the World War II camps.

Mr. Chairman, our panel includes two village representatives. I should like to introduce at this time Mr. Vincent Tutiakoff, representing Unalaska village.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.