

S. T A T E M E N T

of

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

on

H.R. 4110

To accept the findings and to implement the recommendations of the  
Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians

to the

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ADMINISTRATIVE LAW AND GOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS

COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

June 14, 1984

American Jewish Committee  
165 East 56 Street  
New York, New York 10022

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Last June, the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians recommended that the government pay \$20,000 to each of the 60,000 surviving Japanese Americans who were forced out of their homes on the West Coast and held in detention camps during World War II. The nine-member national Commission, which included former United States Supreme Court Justice Arthur J. Goldberg, Father Robert F. Drinan, and former United States Senator Edward W. Brooke of Massachusetts, also proposed that Congress pass a joint resolution, to be signed by the President, recognizing that a grave injustice was done to the Japanese Americans and offer the nation's apologies for removing and incarcerating them. Further, the Commission urged the President to pardon those who were convicted of violating the evacuation and curfew laws, and that Congress establish a special fund to encourage research and



education concerning the wartime treatment of Japanese Americans.

The American Jewish Committee wholeheartedly endorses these recommendations. In particular, we accept in principle the central recommendation of the Commission that Japanese Americans interned during World War II should receive monetary reparations. We believe that financial redress in some form is certainly warranted, in addition to the other recommendations.

In retrospect, the virtual imprisonment of West Coast Japanese Americans was indeed a tragic and shameful episode. The American Civil Liberties Union, which at first equivocated in 1942, subsequently marked it "the worst single wholesale violation of civil rights of American citizens in our history." But few Americans questioned it at the time. Almost everyone either endorsed or acquiesced in the internment of the 120,000 Japanese Americans, two thirds of whom were American citizens and supposedly entitled to all of the civil liberties protections guaranteed by the United States Constitution. How could this have happened?

It is comprehensible only in the light of the fierce and ugly temper of the time: the rage over the "sneak" attack on Pearl Harbor which crippled our Pacific Fleet, coupled with the deep-rooted hostility of so many Americans toward the Japanese, particularly in California. Nobody even dreamed of interning the millions of American citizens of German and Italian descent, with whose home countries we were also at war. As groups they were subjected to no restrictions whatsoever.

The fact is that the singular treatment of the Japanese Americans could never have occurred without the long history of pervasive racial prejudice and actual discrimination by law against them. The Asian Exclusion Act of 1924, for example, had barred all future Japanese immigration for permanent residence

in this country. And even before Pearl Harbor, the myth of the "yellow peril" was very much alive on the West Coast, reinforced by profound envy and resentment due to the highly visible success of the Japanese, both in agriculture and in business. Even former Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren, as Attorney General of California in 1942, wholeheartedly supported relocation and internment of Japanese Americans, whom he viewed as dangerous.

Ironically, there was no massive confinement of the 160,000 Hawaiians of Japanese descent, who constituted one-third of the Islands' population. Hawaii, of course, was far more vulnerable to Japanese invasion than the West Coast, yet only about one percent of the Hawaiian Japanese were arrested as possible security risks and sent to the mainland for internment. The Hawaiian Japanese were left alone because they played such a major role in the economy of the islands and thus were vital to the maintenance of the huge American military buildup centered there. Despite widespread suspicion of Japanese American disloyalty, not a single person of Japanese ancestry, either in Hawaii or on the United States mainland, was accused of either espionage or sabotage on behalf of Japan.

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 (supplemented by Congressional action the following month), which in effect authorized the military commander of the Western Defense Command to relocate and confine civilians of Japanese ancestry living in California, Oregon, and Washington for an indefinite period, without either charges or trials. This vast removal and detention took place over a period of five months. Families had to leave their homes on a few days notice, taking with them only what they could carry. Homes, farms, and businesses had to be sold



hurriedly, often at a loss (with other Americans profiting heavily.) Crops were left unharvested, and those who were unable to dispose of their property by sale lost it because they could no longer pay taxes or mortgage payments.

The government built ten mass detention camps in isolated areas of the western states, each of which held some 12,000 Japanese Americans. The camps were surrounded by barbed wire fences, with guard towers at strategic intervals. Living conditions were crowded, and there was little privacy. The Japanese language was banned at public meetings, and all incoming and outgoing communications were censored by the camp administrators.

Most of the Japanese Americans courageously tried to make the best of their wretched situation. They used scrap materials to make furniture and room partitions, planted crops, and started schools for their children. Some of those who volunteered to relieve labor shortages on farms and in factories were released, and college students were granted educational leaves. But all persons who were allowed out had to report periodically to government officials. Approximately two-thirds of the people remained in the camps for most of the duration of the war.

It should be stressed that several thousand of them volunteered to serve in the U.S. armed forces, either in combat units in the European theater (where their heroism was outstanding) or as Japanese language specialists in the Pacific area. During the period in which the internment camps were in operation, eight detainees were killed by guards and dozens of others were wounded while attempting to escape from the camps.

Although the actual property losses of the Japanese Americans who were relocated were estimated by the Federal Reserve Bank at about \$400,000,000,

under the Evacuation Claims Act passed by Congress in 1948, only about \$38,000,000 eventually was paid to those persons who were able to prove their claims for loss. These settlements were deemed to be final. No inmate of any of the detention camps was ever paid a penny for hardship, humiliation, or for income that might have been earned during the years of confinement.

The treatment of Japanese Americans during World War II was a national disgrace. Recompense of sufficient magnitude to create public awareness of the blatant violations of their constitutional rights is necessary to prevent similar outrages in the future. The damage to those who were confined -- physical, psychological, financial -- was so enormous that the survivors still bear the scars of their experience. Moreover, there is historical precedent for individual reparations to the Japanese Americans, i.e., West Germany has paid and continues to pay billions of dollars of reparation to Jewish victims of Nazi oppression. Even in this country, American Indian tribes have been making legal claims for land that was taken from them and are winning monetary settlements.

On May 17, in the case of Hohri v. United States, a suit in U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., which sought compensation for the internment of the Japanese Americans, was dismissed on the ground that the statute of limitations precluded the filing of such a suit. This ruling makes action by the Congress all the more vital.

In the perspective of all that has happened, we urge the Congress to examine this matter carefully and to enact legislation which would do justice to all those who suffered so much. There is no other way to redeem the conscience of America.