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PERSONAL JUSTICE DENIED: PUBLIC HEARINGS OF THE COMMISSION ON WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT, 1981



The Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC) was established by act of Congress in 1980. Between July and December 1981, the CWRIC held 20 days of public hearings in Seattle, WA; Alaska; Washington, D.C; New York, New York; Chicago, Ill Cambridge, MA; and, San Francisco and Los Angeles, CA. This publication consists of the testimony and documents from more than 750 witnesses: Japanese Americans and Aleuts who had lived through the events of WWII, former government officials who ran the internment program, public figures, internees, organizations such as the Japanese American Citizens League, interested citizens, historians, and other professionals who had studied the subjects of the Commission's inquiry. Many of the transcripts are personal stories of experiences of evacuees. Documents include publications, reports, press releases, photographs, newspaper clippings, etc. related to the hearings.

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Detailed Description:

On February 19, 1942, ten weeks after the Pearl Harbor attack, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which gave to the Secretary of War and the military commanders to whom he delegated authority, the power to exclude any and all persons, citizens and aliens, from designated areas in order to provide security against sabotage, espionage and fifth column activity. Shortly thereafter, all American citizens of Japanese descent were prohibited from living, working or traveling on the West Coast of the United States. The same prohibition applied to the generation of Japanese immigrants who, pursuant to federal law and despite long residence in the United States, were not permitted to become American citizens. Initially, this exclusion was to be carried out by "voluntary" relocation. That policy inevitably failed, and these American citizens and their alien parents were removed by the Army, first to "assembly centers"-temporary quarters at racetracks and

fairgrounds-and then to "relocation centers"-bleak barrack camps mostly in desolate areas of the West. The camps were surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by military police. Departure was permitted only after a loyalty review on terms set, in consultation with the military, by the War Relocation Authority, the civilian agency that ran the camps. Many of those removed from the West Coast were eventually allowed to leave the camps to join the Army, go to college outside the West Coast or to whatever private employment was available. For a larger number, however, the war years were spent behind barbed wire; and for those who were released, the prohibition against returning to their homes and occupations on the West Coast was not lifted until December 1944.

This policy of exclusion, removal and detention was executed against 120,000 people without individual review, and exclusion was continued virtually without regard for their demonstrated loyalty to the United States. Congress was fully aware of and supported the policy of removal and detention; it sanctioned the exclusion by enacting a statute which made criminal the violation of orders issued pursuant to Executive Order 9066. The United States Supreme Court held the exclusion constitutionally permissible in the context of war, but struck down the incarceration of admittedly loyal American citizens on the ground that it was not based on statutory authority.

All this was done despite the fact that not a single documented act of espionage, sabotage or fifth column activity was committed by an American citizen of Japanese ancestry or by a resident Japanese alien on the West Coast.

No mass exclusion or detention, in any part of the country, was ordered against American citizens of German or Italian descent. Official actions against enemy aliens of other nationalities were much more individualized and selective than those imposed on the ethnic Japanese.

The exclusion, removal and detention inflicted tremendous human cost. There was the obvious cost of homes and businesses sold or abandoned under circumstances of great distress, as well as injury to careers and professional advancement. But, most important, there was the loss of liberty and the personal stigma of suspected disloyalty for thousands of people who knew themselves to be devoted to their country's cause and to its ideals but whose repeated protestations of loyalty were discounted-only to be demonstrated beyond any doubt by the record of Nisei soldiers, who returned from the battlefields of Europe as the most decorated and distinguished combat unit of World War II, and by the thousands of other Nisei who served against the enemy in the Pacific, mostly in military intelligence. The wounds of the exclusion and detention have healed in some respects, but the scars of that experience remain, painfully real in the minds of those who lived through the suffering and deprivation of the camps.

In 1980, the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians was established by act of Congress and directed to:

1. review the facts and circumstances surrounding Executive Order Numbered 9066, issued February 19, 1942, and the impact of such Executive Order on American citizens and permanent resident aliens;
2. review directives of United States military forces requiring the relocation and, in some cases, detention in internment camps of American citizens, including Aleut civilians, and permanent resident aliens of the Aleutian and Pribilof Islands; and
3. recommend appropriate remedies.

In fulfilling its mandate, the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians held twenty days of hearings and testimonies from more than 750 witnesses between July and December 1981, in cities across the country, particularly on the West Coast. These witnesses included Japanese Americans and Aleuts who had lived through the events of WWII, former government officials who ran the internment program, public figures, internees, organizations such as the Japanese American Citizens League, interested citizens, historians, and other professionals who have studied the subjects of the Commission's inquiry. Included also are publications, reports, press releases, photographs, newspaper clippings, and transcripts that relate to the hearings. Many of the transcripts are personal stories of experiences of evacuees.

An extensive effort was made to locate and to review the records of government action and to analyze other sources of information including contemporary writings, personal accounts and historical analyses during the hearings. Hearings were held in Seattle, Washington on September 9-12, 1981; Alaska on September 15, 17, and 19, 1981; Washington, D.C. on July 14 and 16, 1981 and November 2 and 3, 1981; New York, New York on November 23, 1981; Chicago, Illinois on September 22 and 23, 1981; Cambridge, Massachusetts on December 9, 1981; San Francisco, California on August 11-13, 1981; and Los Angeles, California.