

## U.S. Concentration Camps: Wrong Then and Wrong Today

By: John Ota

In his March column, "\$1.2 Billion Worth of Hindsight," James Kilpatrick attempts to defend the U.S. government's wholesale roundup and incarceration of 120,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry in 1942. That episode in our history raised serious and fundamental Constitutional issues.

Kilpatrick contends that because of the perceived threat of invasion by Japan in 1942, "due process had to yield to the exigencies of the day." Historians and the official Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians have thoroughly documented the fact that there was no military necessity for the mass incarceration and the government knew this in 1942.

Reports from the FBI, Office of Naval Intelligence and State Department were covered up and concealed from the Supreme Court when it considered the landmark cases on the camps. This deliberate suppression of evidence is a large part of why the Supreme Court reached the decisions it did, and also why an apology and reparations for the mass incarceration are in order.

### A Dangerous Excuse

However, Kilpatrick's argument should still be addressed since it may seem persuasive to those who are not familiar with the historical facts. More importantly, I believe this line of argument is at best mistaken, and at worst, a dangerous excuse for one of the worst mass violations of Constitutional and human rights in U.S. history. It should be recognized as such and rejected, lest it lead, in a new national crisis, to a repetition of Concentration Camps, USA.

In the first place, even if an invasion was feared in 1942, how did that justify a wholesale roundup of 70-80,000 citizens of this country, the country that feared invasion? Two-thirds of the 120,000 incarcerated were U.S. citizens by birth.

After they were put behind barbed wire and under armed guard by their own

government, some 5,000 were labeled "disloyal" because they refused to serve in the military unless they and their families were set free. These were among the 5,000 "disloyals" that Kilpatrick refers to. But even if you grant the "disloyalty" of these 5,000 -- which I certainly do not -- that still does not legitimize the blanket denial of due process to the entire group. Among these so-called "disloyals" was at least one person, Joe Kurihara, who had proven his loyalty to the U.S. by serving in combat during the First World War.

Gen. John DeWitt and others at the time were unabashed about their reasoning. DeWitt stated, "A Jap's a Jap. It makes no difference whether he is an American citizen or not." To DeWitt and others, U.S. citizens of Japanese ancestry were inherently untrustworthy, and therefore not fully entitled to the rights of citizenship. Individuals "tainted" with as little as one-sixteenth Japanese blood were incarcerated without a hearing or charges. Kilpatrick does not go as far as DeWitt, but his defense of mass incarceration on a racial basis inevitably rests upon assumption similar to DeWitt's.

Kilpatrick says, "it's all very well to say today that these citizens should have received fair hearings, but in the spring of 1942 we were involved in a desperate war for national survival." He seems to selectively forget that we were at war not only with Japan, but with Germany and Italy as well. Some pro-Nazi and pro-Mussolini forces were active in German-American and Italian-American communities, yet even German and Italian aliens in restricted areas received individual hearings to determine whether there was cause for them to be detained.

#### Can It Happen Again?

Like some other opponents of the reparations bill, like Rep. Dan Lungren of California, Kilpatrick concludes that the mass incarceration seems wrong to us today, but it was justified in 1942. But if it was justified then, why can't it be justified today? The same reasoning could be used to round up Americans of Nicaraguan or Iranian descent if the U.S. were to declare war on Nicaragua or



Iran, and that is precisely its danger.

In my view, the arguments for the mass incarceration were unjust, bigoted and unconstitutional in 1942 and they have not improved since then. What has changed since that time is that overt bigotry and contempt for Constitutional rights are less acceptable today.

#### Wartime Sacrifices

Kilpatrick talks about wartime sacrifices. The sacrifices and suffering of the American people and Allies during World War II should never be forgotten. But neither should those sacrifices made in the course of defending democratic principles be equated with sacrifices caused by the blatant violation of those very same principles here at home. To single out one groups solely on a racial basis, punish and stigmatize them as potential spies and saboteurs, was more akin to the system we were fighting in World War II.

The camps did not shield those incarcerated from the hardships of war. Some 33,000 Japanese Americans served in the U.S. military during the war, many of them volunteering or drafted out of the camps. Often called upon for the most dangerous missions, Japanese American soldiers sustained a 28.5% casualty rate, over 5 times the overall U.S. casualty rate of 5.8%. The segregated, all-Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Team/100th Battalion became one of the most highly decorated units in U.S. history.

The lives lost and the wounds and disabilities sustained in the war were tragic but necessary. The collective trauma and humiliation of the incarceration were all the more bitter because the government knew it was unnecessary. On average, those incarcerated spent over three years behind barbed wire, under armed guard, stripped of their basic rights. They left behind homes, farms, businesses and careers on as little as 48 hours notice, and most had to start from scratch after the war. Several people were shot to death by the guards and a number of others died or had their health ruined because of the harsh conditions.

Hopefully, members of the U.S. Senate will not be misled by half-truths or sophistry in regards to the mass incarceration. I believe the majority of them understand the need for an apology and symbolic compensation to those incarcerated as a means of establishing beyond all doubt that this government acknowledges the seriousness of the wrongs of 1942 and commits itself to never let it happen again to any other group.

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