

Submitted to:  
English Section  
Rafu Shimpo  
259 So. Los Angeles St.  
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Contribution from:  
Raymond Okamura  
1150 Park Hills Road  
Berkeley, CA 94708  
(415) 540-2195

AN OPEN LETTER TO FRANK CHIN

Dear Frank:

Was that really you who wrote "A Circus of Freaks" in the August 21 issue? The same man who wrote so knowledgeably about Japanese Americans in years past? The same man who lambasted Sam Hayakawa in that Washington Post ad? And the same man who never hesitated to loudly proclaim his feelings in public? I can't believe it. The piece sounded like something written by a Bill Hosokawa devotee. What happened, Frank? Did that devil's advocate role in Seattle scramble your brain?

I wasn't at the Los Angeles hearings, but I did attend all three days in San Francisco. From your description, the two California hearings were very similar in tone. We, too, cheered our folk heroes and booed the villains. And we cried. We cried a lot. We even had our own white woman disrupt the proceedings and get thrown out. About the only difference was that Bill Marutani chaired most of the sessions. Marutani is a judge, but he had no reservations about letting the emotions flow freely.

These hearings are the most important event in the history of Japanese America since the incarceration itself, and you failed to grasp its significance. You didn't recognize the Nisei Americans rising from the sands of Manzanar to shake their fists in righteous

MORE



Chin  
2-2-2

fury. Jim Matsuoka was wrong: the Nisei have not yet turned to dust. The hurt, the anger, and the bitterness, all came bursting out in uncontrolled waves. The tears were pent-up too long; the raw display of passion was long overdue. What's the matter, Frank? Did you expect us to keep our heads bowed forever?

Of all people, I thought you would be more understanding, more simpatico. Instead, you ridiculed us; you scorned us. You stabbed us with a rusty blade and twisted it in contempt. Perhaps all those Asian American writers conferences left you calloused, uncaring, and heartless.

I've been to much the same slide-shows, panels, forums, seminars, and pilgrimages you've attended, plus a whole lot more. But I wasn't bored by the commission hearings. On the contrary, I was fascinated, moved, and inspired. It was a new experience because the usual speakers and habitual agitators (myself included), who you've heard so often on the professional lecture circuit, were shunted to one side and the ordinary people took center stage. I didn't realize it at the time, but those previous meetings were just preliminaries to the main event, roadshows for the final production. When the people took the spotlight, their testimony was awesome; it was powerful; and I was deeply humbled.

Look over those witness lists again, Frank. You won't find many names you recognize. The so-called "community leaders" and officers of the JACL were conspicuous by their absence. Most of the witnesses were very private persons who were speaking in public

MORE

MORE



Chin  
3-3-3

for the first time in their lives. They were common folks who finally got the chance to tell the government face to face how they felt. They didn't need a spokesperson. They didn't need someone more learned, or more verbose to speak for them. They didn't need a James Houston, or a Mike Masaoka to tell their stories for them. They told their own stories, in their own fashion, as no one else could tell it. They poured out their hearts and souls. Each story was different, unique, and important.

Witnesses spent months agonizing over whether or not to testify. They spent many more months painstakingly writing and rehearsing a speech. But once they got before the microphone, their emotions took over. They couldn't read their notes because of the tears. Prepared texts were abandoned, and witness after witness suddenly revealed their innermost feelings. They said things they never thought they would say to a white person. Emotions they never knew existed came surging to the surface. They've waited nearly 40 years to say these things, and once they started, they couldn't stop. The most militant statements came from the older Nisei. For the first time in my life, I am proud to be a Nisei.

The chair was right in allowing a degree of audience reaction. Most congressional hearings are political in nature, and this one was no different. Remember those House Un-American Activities Committee hearings? Redress is a political campaign, and we need all the participation and media attention we can get. Why do you think Hayakawa chose to testify in Los Angeles rather than Washington?

MORE



Chin  
4-4-4

Los Angeles provided better theater: Hayakawa knew it, and the audience knew it. Your idea to remain politely quiet would have led to a disastrous misinterpretation by the press. You were terribly naive to expect these hearings to resemble stately court proceedings.

We strongly identified with the victims. We wept with them; we shared their rage; we understood their frustration. And when they finished speaking, we spontaneously applauded, shouted our approval, and rushed to shake their hands or hug them. They said all the things we've always wanted to say but couldn't because of the oppressive "success story" garbage dumped on us by the white people. We were wronged; we didn't like it one bit; and we wanted the world to know we didn't like it. It was an emotional high for the community. Sorry you couldn't share in our euphoria, Frank. You were the loser.

As for the experts, who needs them? You've read Peter Suzuki's paper. You know what the experts did to us. The scholars were part of the problem; and they've studied us to death. We don't need experts to tell us what we experienced. Now is the time to demand redress--directly and by the people themselves. I am not denigrating researchers like Suzuki and Michi Weglyn because I have the highest regard for their work. But expert testimony properly should be presented in writing--not at an oral hearing where each witness is limited to a few minutes.

Aside from inviting Roger Daniels and Frank Chuman to give a private briefing, the commission did not go out of its way to

MORE

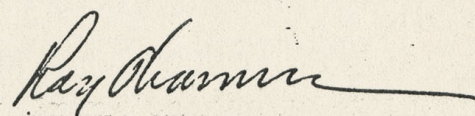


Chin  
5-5-5

solicit expert testimony. In a hearing to determine the extent of damages caused to individuals, expert testimony should not carry any more weight than personal eyewitness testimony. In this regard, I think that the Daniels-Chuman briefing was highly objectionable. They were accorded a disproportionate amount of exposure time before the commission, and they didn't represent anyone but themselves. Each type of testimony has its place, and one cannot be considered more important than the other.

Witnesses had to apply, reapply, and fight to get on the agenda. Scholars had the same opportunity to apply, but if they waited like prima donnas to be asked, they were indeed left out. Some scholars were philosophically opposed to the commission hearings and declined to participate; others were geographically isolated from the hearing sites. Also, as you should well know, professional writers are generally reluctant to give their materials to a public body, and thereby lose their copyright.

Yes, we indulged ourselves at the hearings. We revelled in our indulgence. I'm glad we did it. Every Japanese American I've talked to is glad. It was mass catharsis, and it felt great. It was about time we took command of a situation, and ultimately our destiny, and to hell with what others may think. I only regret you were so freaked out that you couldn't see the resurrection of Nisei America happening before your very eyes. Sleepy Sam has nothing over you. minutes.



-- Ray Okamura

#####