

WRITTEN STATEMENT OF KARL R. BENDETSSEN
FOR THE COMMISSION ON WARTIME RELOCATION
AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS

Responsive to the request of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians contained in a letter to Karl R. Bendetsen dated June 22, 1981 (copy attached) and in consonance with his acknowledgement dated June 26, 1981 (copy attached) the following written statement is provided:

I will first comment on the reference found in the attached letters concerning the Aliens Division of the War Department.

During the year 1941, while serving in a staff capacity in the War Department, I was assigned to the newly established office of The Provost Marshal General. I am now unable to recall the date but I believe it was in late summer. There had been no such office since the end of World War I.

My duties were varied although they did include attention to the provisions of the Geneva Convention applicable to prisoners of war and to the need to establish a Prisoner of War Information Bureau in the event war came. These duties also applied to the provision of facilities by the War Department for housing of such aliens of hostile nations who were regarded by other authorities as dangerous if war came.

The War Department had no jurisdiction or authority over any enemy aliens in the United States excepting only that provided in Executive Order 9066 from and after February 19, 1942 with respect to enemy aliens residing within the Western Defense

Command. Such individuals then came under the aegis of the Commanding General of the Western Defense Command and Fourth Army by delegation from The President of the United States.

The office of the Provost-Marshal General was then very small and I simply do not recall that it had an Aliens Division or for that matter any sections which were extensive enough to be designated as "Divisions." It is not a matter of any consequence or import. I refer to this only because of the exchange of letters.

I believe that from the title of the Commission, it will concern itself among others with the subject of the Aleuts who were evacuated from the Pribilof Islands off the coast of Alaska in the Bering Sea. I had no duties, no assignments nor any authority by delegation or otherwise relating to the Aleuts. I am not familiar with any aspect of that action. I was informed by others that the Aleuts were not self-sustaining and could not become so. They therefore required frequent support and supplies by sea. Because hostilities and the then command of the seas by the Japanese naval forces rendered such support problematical, they were removed to assure their own survival, presumably by the Department of Interior.

I am inclined to believe that the interest of the Commission in asking me for a statement accordingly relates to the evacuation in 1942 of persons of Japanese ancestry from the Western Sea Frontier of the United States under the authority of Executive Order 9066 dated February 19, 1942. In order to be as helpful

as I can to the Commission, I will therefore refer in this statement primarily to that subject.

Starting at the beginning, and viewed in the perspective of the months following December 7, 1941, and particularly the winter and spring of 1942, it will be recalled from your general knowledge that the tides of war in the Pacific were running most adversely to the United States. The nation had suffered many reverses. The Japanese in its superbly coordinated and devastating surprise attacks on Pearl Harbor, the Philippines and Singapore had achieved unprecedented successes.

Japanese naval units had also shelled the West Coast with submarine mounted cannon and had bombed military bases in the Aleutian Islands as far east as the military bases of Cold Harbor and Kodiak. Japanese military forces had assaulted and occupied the Aleutian Islands of Attu and Kiska. The U.S. Pacific fleet had been crippled. Japanese naval forces dominated the entire Pacific. The situation of the United States was grim and uncertain.

It will also be recalled that the preponderance of all persons of Japanese ancestry residing on the West Coast of the United States had for the most part largely concentrated themselves into readily identifiable clusters.

The legal restrictions of the applicable laws of the United States and California, Oregon and Washington states then in force, combined in influence to further a tendency toward a separate way of life. The Alien Exclusion Acts (which I had always felt

embodied very bad policy with which I was never in sympathy) nevertheless were in force over many decades. The fact was that under these Acts, Japanese (who migrated to the United States from Japan) were not permitted to intermarry with U.S. citizens, were not permitted to own land or to take legal title to land and could not become citizens. Over the years, assimilation of the migrants and their families was retarded. These laws did not promote assimilation to a desirable extent.

Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, as Commanding General of the Western Defense Command and Fourth Army, was responsible for the defense of the Western Sea Frontier, including Alaska. The War Department reflected the expressed concerns of General DeWitt and the FBI, and the Justice Department conveyed their great unease and anxiety to The President himself.

An Assistant Attorney General, Mr. James Henry Rowe, Jr., was the principal Justice Department action officer responsible in this field. Mr. Tom Clark (later the Attorney General of the United States and Justice of the Supreme Court) was the Special Representative of the Department of Justice on the West Coast in Los Angeles. His duties then concerned only this subject.

It is widely known and appreciated that Justice Clark himself was a man of compassion and understanding, not given to rash judgments. He knew firsthand that the situation had become a powder keg and he saw no alternative to the decision in the national interest and security and indeed of all concerned in these tense, explosive and trying times, other than to bring

about the evacuation of persons of Japanese ancestry then resident along the Sea Frontier to the interior.

Unscrupulous persons imposed on the Japanese residents in southern California. This led to reports that all had lost all their properties. This was not so. A few of them were exploited. During the evacuation, extraordinary measures were taken to preserve their properties.

It will also be remembered by some that during 1940 and early 1941, units of U.S. Marine Reserves and of the National Guard from Arizona, California, Oregon and Washington had been deployed and stationed in the Philippines. These units had been decimated by the Japanese military forces during their conquest of the Philippines. As prisoners of war, U.S. military and civilian personnel, as well as Filipinos were treated with brutality. Many died in captivity as a result. All this had become widely known in the United States. Anti-Japanese feeling was intense, particularly in the West Coast states. The situation which arose from these reports created a powder keg. Violence was near at hand.

General DeWitt, after conferring with various advisors, communicated with General Marshall, the Chief of Staff of the Army, that he felt he could not provide for the security of the Sea Frontier, its sensitive installations, the vital manufacturing establishments, and the harbor facilities; train military personnel and units newly organized; and at the same time deal with inchoate civil violence unless effective means of bringing the deteriorating situation under control could be found.

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The Western Defense Command had been designated as a military Theatre of Operations. The Pacific battlefront was ominously near and U.S. defenses were then meager. The Pacific Ocean sealanes were dominated by the Japanese Naval forces.

I was ordered by my superiors in the War Department to proceed to the headquarters of General DeWitt to confer with him and his staff. I made many such trips in December, January and February. I became a "commuter." My capacity was to act as a liaison officer.

My assignment was to gather facts and convey General DeWitt's analyses to his superiors in Washington. Each time I returned from the Presidio I would brief General Gullion, the Provost Marshal General, the Chief of Staff, The Assistant Secretary of War (Mr. McCloy), Mr. James Rowe of Justice and others.

It had not occurred to me that there would be an evacuation or that I would be assigned to General DeWitt's command with duties related to an evacuation of persons of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast. I did not recommend such action. I was not asked my opinion except once during a conference with then Senator Truman. I did not express it, as will shortly be related. Certainly, I did not seek such an assignment and would not have desired it.

I did my best as a staff officer, accurately to reflect the concerns of General DeWitt and his staff, of the FBI, of

Mr. Clark, of the Naval Commander (Admiral Greenslade) and accurately to convey these concerns to the authorities in the War Department, Justice Department and the White House staff. On request, I also went to Capitol Hill and reported to certain members of the House and Senate. Among those to whom I made such reports was then Senator Truman.

Senator Truman concluded that there had arisen a grave and serious situation. As he was preparing a "signal" that our conference was over, Senator Truman asked me to tell him in confidence whether I would be inclined to recommend that Japanese residents be evacuated from the West Coast. I told him that I had thus far studiously avoided reaching my own conclusion and hoped I could continue to refrain. I explained that I considered it my duty to report the findings and conclusions of the civil and military authorities on the West Coast and to present their views with respect to what they considered to be the alternatives and options available for dealing with the major wartime problems posed. I added that if I had reached a conclusion I could not remain objective. He congratulated me.

President Truman, then a Senator, who chaired the Senate Committee on the Conduct of War, was himself a man of great compassion. In all of my meetings with him subsequent to that referred to above, he made clear that he fully grasped the untenable situation which had been generated along the Western

Sea Frontier and that he had concluded after deep thought that the action which President Roosevelt ultimately took was a regrettable but absolute necessity.

—Ultimately, an Executive Order was prepared in the Justice Department, not in the War Department. No such order could have been presented to The President of the United States without the full approval of the Attorney General of the United States, Mr. Francis Biddle. The Executive Order thus prepared became Executive Order No. 9066, dated February 19, 1942.

Shortly after Executive Order 9066 was issued, I was again sent to the headquarters of the Western Defense Command at the Presidio of San Francisco. While I was there, The Honorable John J. McCloy, The Assistant Secretary of War, and the Chief of Staff of the Army (General Marshall) were conferring with General DeWitt.

I completed the special assignment which I had been sent to do. I had paid my departure respects to General DeWitt's Chief of Staff, General (Allison J.) Barnett, and left without

seeing General DeWitt or his conferees, for the San Francisco airport, to board a United Airlines flight for Washington, D.C. And as I was about to board the aircraft, an aide of General DeWitt drove out on the airfield in a military car. He came to me and said, "Bendetsen, you're wanted at the Presidio." I asked, "What has happened?" He replied, "I don't know what has happened, but General DeWitt, General Marshall and Mr. McCloy are together and they are waiting for you. My orders were to come out and get you. I told the airline that General DeWitt had asked that the flight be held, if necessary." We drove immediately to the Presidio. I was ushered into the august presence of The Assistant Secretary of War, Mr. McCloy, Generals Marshall and DeWitt.

To my great surprise, General DeWitt then said, "Bendetsen, as you know, The President has signed Executive Order 9066, providing for the evacuation from the Sea Frontier of all persons of Japanese ancestry. Mr. McCloy, General Marshall and I feel that you are the best choice to be in charge of this difficult assignment."

General DeWitt then added: "There is no time to lose. You are designated as an Assistant Chief of Staff of the Fourth Army and Western Defense Command. I will create the Wartime Civil Control Administration (WCCA). You will be the commanding officer of the WCCA. You will also be appointed as an Assistant Chief of Staff of my general staff. In this capacity you will be empowered to issue orders in my name to yourself as commanding

