

November 23, 1981

Commission on Wartime Relocation
and Internment of Civilians
726 Jackson Place, N.W. - Suite 2020
Washington, D.C. 20506

Commissioners:

Kazu Ikeda Iijima, my wife, and I, Takeru Iijima, thank this Commission for the opportunity to present our joint testimony today.

My wife opposed the incarceration then and now; unfortunately, she is unable to attend this hearing due to illness. She, her two sisters, my parents, three sisters and a brother were all incarcerated in Tanforan and Topaz.

My other brother and I were already serving in the U.S. Army at the time, but when the 442nd Infantry Regiment was activated, we were both assigned to it and my other brother volunteered from Topaz. As First Sergeant in L Company, I actively participated in combat in both Italy and France, including the rescue of the "Lost Battalion" in the Vosges Mountains.

At these hearings around the country, our Japanese/Japanese-American sisters and brothers movingly related their camp experience; we, thus, chose to testify jointly on the implications of this travesty of justice and the violations of democratic and human rights committed by the United States Government.

The forced removal of over 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry from their homes on the West Coast to concentration camps during World War II was enforced under the guise of "military necessity." Since history must be viewed in its total context and not as singular events, this incarceration must be related to similar occurrences in the history of this country where whole ethnic groups were imprisoned or forcibly relocated as an official government policy.

Early in its history, this government chained and force-marched the Choctaws, Cherokees, Chicasaws, and Creeks, who were native to this land long before the arrival of the Europeans, from their homes to lands foreign and hostile. So many perished from brutal mistreatment, malnutrition and extreme weather conditions that their numbers became decimated almost in their entirety. This genocide was inflicted as official government policy, also disguised as "military necessity," but which in actuality cloaked the economic need for new lands to support the growing population of European immigrants to this country.

During the last century, southern agriculture was the economic backbone of northern industrialization. To aid this country's development, the importation of African slaves for southern agriculture was not only tolerated but actively promoted with government sanction.

Prior to World War II, federal and state legislation directed against Asians amounted to legally sanctioned racism. Most western states passed anti-Asian legislation that rivaled the Black Codes of the southern states.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor triggered further public anti-Asian sentiment from all levels of government, climaxed by Executive Order 9066 that authorized the military to remove Japanese citizens and non-citizens from the West Coast.

This presidential order became, in effect, an official edict sanctioning racism.

In California and Washington, Japanese farmers were enormously successful in farming unarable land. The incarceration was a smokescreen to cover the intent of corporations to control the agricultural and fishing industries on the West Coast.

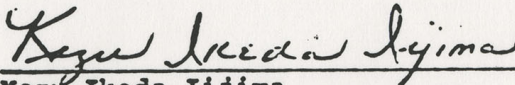
The economic losses suffered by Japanese Americans was astronomical, and the psychological scars, immeasurable. Furthermore, institutionalized racism has inflicted immense suffering upon Native Americans, Black people, Chicanos, Latinos, Chinese and Pilipino people; the Japanese American experience is simply one more link in the long chain of racist oppression that pervades the history of this country.

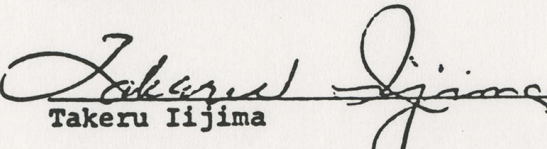
(The preceding statement is an excerpt of a position taken by Asian Americans for Action, a membership organization of which we were a part until its dissolution.)

Might we add that the reservations to which Native Americans are confined today, the inner cities such as Harlem, the Barrios, the Chinatowns, are continuing manifestations of institutionalized racism. But the key lesson that must be learned from the incarceration experience is that it can very well happen again -- to other ethnic groups, particularly of Third World origin, or to political groups of so-called "dissidents" which the government deems to be a "threat to national security." This danger is further aggravated by the current political climate which is geared toward nuclear war accompanied by legislation actively being promoted this minute in the halls of Congress. Thus, vigilance must be closely paid, with a determined resolve that no other groupings of people shall ever suffer a similar fate.

As for redress, no amount of money can repair the emotional and psychological trauma and scars, along with the material losses, but monetary redress is a long overdue concrete recognition that monumental wrong was committed. This government must be held morally and legally accountable for this infamy based on racism.

When the present administration allots billions of dollars for military purposes, we who shed blood, sweat and tears to build this country -- we working people, which include the elderly, the poor, and all victims of cruel oppressive deeds perpetrated by governmental decrees -- have every right to demand a reordering of priorities which include restitution for past wrongs and guarantees from the government that they will never again be repeated. Only thus can justice be served.


Kazu Ikeda Iijima


Takeru Iijima

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