

DRAFT STATEMENT OF SETSUKO MATSUNAGA NISHI, Ph.D.

To be presented to The Commission on Wartime Relation and Internment
of Civilians

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My name is Setsuko Matsunaga Nishi. I am Professor of Sociology at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. I am also Senior Consulting Associate with Clark, Phipps, Clark & Harris, Inc. I am presenting testimony today in my professional capacity as a sociologist with specialties in social psychology and American race relations. However, it is appropriate to inform you that I was affected deeply, personally, by the events you are investigating.

First, my parents. My late father, Tahei Matsunaga, was known as the "Gila Ghandi," a leader in community government and the cooperative movement in the War Relocation Authority Centers and, in the period of postwar resettlement, sometimes was referred to informally as the Mayor of Chicago's Japanese Americans. In all his devoted service he seemed to be driven by a heroic conviction in America's essential democracy. My mother, Hatsu Matsunaga, who was my father's partner in everything, is now in her mid-eighty's and has had an unusually early and long widowhood. For her it is still not too late for an official action that would be an affirmation of my father's faith.

Second, the degradation of evacuation. I moved "zombie-like" through Evacuation day, but I have in my hand the order for evacuation, which I tore down from the telephone pole in front of our home in Los Angeles. I also have the #2 Mess Hall button, where my family was assigned to have our meals Army style after long waits in line in the Santa Anita Assembly Center. They are artifacts of the grim reality of the mass degradation from American society of 112,000 persons solely on the basis of race/ethnicity.

Thus, the sharp discrepancy between our deeply embedded faith and our stunning (that is, numbing blow) experience, became like a low flame that fired the direction of my scholarly development:

--In camp, for the Wartime Civilian Control Administration in San Ta Anita, I studied the emergence of informal educational activities.

--At Washington University in Saint Louis, I investigated possible parallels between the evacuation of Japanese Americans and the United States government's program of moving American Indian tribes from the South Eastern States to Oklahoma--the "Trail of Tears." I also conducted research on the adjustment of Japanese Americans resettled in Saint Louis, partly in collaboration with the University of California Evacuation and Resettlement Study under Dr. Dorothy Swaine Thomas.

--At the University of Chicago, with initial funding from the Julius Rosenwald Fund, I was a member of the interdisciplinary team research project on Japanese American Personality and Acculturation, which sought to explain the psychological, cultural and social circumstances of their efforts for recovery from degradation. The contributions of my distinguished colleagues in that research have become well known. They included Drs. Charlotte G. Babcock, the late William A. Caudill, George DeVos, and Lee Rainwater. The life-histories, psychological projective tests, social service records, and psychoanalytic interviews, and community participant observations we gathered give both broadly representative as well as in-depth documentation of the severity of the evacuation and relocation stress for both personality and social systems. The processes of adaptive survival are also an integral part of the analyses. If I can be helpful to the Commission in providing information from any of the above studies, I shall be glad to do so.

In more recent years, my research has been in the areas of sex and race variations in achievement and creativity and American historical and contemporary structural patterns and processes of discrimination. It is in connection with the last-mentioned area that I wish to develop my testimony for the consideration of the Commission.

I believe that there are a number of major issues confronting the Commission. Foremost, in my view, is the Constitutional question of the violation of rights, including due-process and equal protection, of citizens and other law abiding persons in the mass evacuation based solely on race/ethnicity. I understand the Commission has gathered much expert testimony in this regard and here would only urge that, despite the statute of limitations, that a way be established for a court test of the legal basis of mass evacuation and incarceration of Japanese Americans based solely on race/ethnicity and the differential treatment of German and Italian aliens in World War II.

Second is the need for understanding the social conditions under which a population can be categorically removed from society--regardless of the compassion and humanness of its leadership and regardless of the highly developed level of laws protecting the rights of individuals in that society. The ouster of Japanese Americans from the West Coast during the war provides the basis for the analysis that follows. The persistent and haunting question is: Under what conditions could it happen again? For us who were the victims, the question has special significance and, understandably, we are eager that whatever lessons for the future can be learned from that historical episode be shared broadly.

Before proceeding with the analysis, let me just state a third major concern. For many, the Commission hearings have ^{been} the occasion to open up and examine old wounds--as if it were necessary and expected that old and still ugly and painful scars be displayed personally in public as proof of damage. I hope very much that the Commission will consult experts and the accumulated research findings about the effects of stigmatizing and degrading a person's racial/ethnic identity and take this into account along with more tangible losses in its consideration of appropriate redress.

Now, I shall move to the analysis of the conditions which led to the mass evacuation and confinement of Japanese Americans on a racial basis. I argue here that, given these conditions, categorical removal and confinement could happen to any individual solely on the basis of race/ethnicity.

1. The availability of stereotypic beliefs regarding the racial/ethnic group. These might be latent or dormant, not necessarily currently active, and could be a vestigial residue of the past. In the case of Japanese Americans, there was a large reservoir of racial beliefs that had been fomented in West Coast campaigns against the "Yellow Peril."
2. The existence of interest groups who view the population in question as a competitive economic (or political) threat. Organized labor from an earlier period and agricultural interests were among the most vociferous advocates of mass removal of Japanese Americans.
3. A social crisis that disrupts society's normal functioning. For our case, it was Pearl Harbor, the beginning of World War II.
4. The spread of rumors (consistent with group stereotypes) that the racial/ethnic group is to blame for the crisis-- i.e., identification of the "enemy within." Rumors regarding Japanese American espionage, signalling and fifth column activity in Hawaii were not dealt with forthrightly and authoritatively, though their falsity was known almost immediately.

5. Mobilization of public opinion through the press by
interest groups and their political representatives
for the removal of the population ^{believed to be} endangering the
the national security or response to the crisis.

At the end of January, 1942, a West Coast press campaign
for mass evacuation was launched.

6. Transfer of authority to the military for dealing
with the "dangerous" population. President
Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 authorized the War
Department to designate military areas and to exclude
any or all persons from these areas. General
DeWitt's subsequent proclamations designated West
Coast states as military areas and ordered the
evacuation of all persons of Japanese ancestry.

Given these conditions and processes it is not at all difficult to
conceive of the possibility that what happened to West Coast Japanese Americans
during World War II could happen to other groups.

In my much too brief testimony, I have tried to examine the conditions
and processes by which members of an identifiable group can be selected out
for removal and incarceration. I hope very much that the analysis will
contribute to an understanding of the temporary significance of this historical event
and that the full judicial, legislative, and executive procedural resources
for remedy be instituted promptly.

Thank you very much.