

Commission on Wartime Relocation and
Internment of Civilians

Hearing - New York City, November 23, 1981
(Roosevelt Hotel)

Testimony by Dr. John Coventry Smith

I am John Coventry Smith, a former President of the World Council of Churches, a former Vice President of the National Council of Churches and a career missionary who served in Japan from 1929 and who was interned in Japan for six months and two days following the outbreak of the Pacific War. After being exchanged in the summer of 1942 I worked with interned Americans of Japanese ancestry both in the camps and in the areas where they were being relocated in the U.S.A. Today I represent before you the National Council of Churches as well as The United Presbyterian Church.

In 1980 the National Council of Churches expressed support for the passage of the Senate's and House of Representatives' bills which created this Commission and urged that its member churches and constituencies support the hearings. We welcome these hearings as a part of the process by which the U. S. government may recognize that it acted without due process of law to deprive a large segment of Americans of their rights to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. Executive Order 9066 was

implemented without regard for the civil and constitutional rights of more than 120,000 civilians, of whom 70,000 were Americans, who were uprooted from their homes, their businesses, their farms and their schools, are for the first time given the opportunity by the government to press their claims in open hearings. We participate in these hearings because we believe that the American citizens of Japanese ancestry were incarcerated and later released without any U. S. government recognition of the enormity of its action or of its irresponsibility in failing to recognize openly the loyalty and the role of these Americans in our national life. A secret report by Curtis B. Munson in 1942 when he worked for the State Department acknowledged that there was no question of the loyalty of Americans of Japanese ancestry. Yet they were treated as aliens in their own land.

We believe much of the reason for the U. S. government's action was rooted in prejudice. Prejudice is not a new issue for the Christian church. It was one of the earliest temptations for human beings to limit their care for one another within a small group or tribe. It is still a problem for human beings because we are tempted to separate, to isolate and to ostracize those who differ from us in color of skin, in language or in custom. Prejudice is a means of denying persons the right to have, the right to being and the right

to be. Thus, it is a means of taking their property, denying their ability to be part of the social order and ultimately a denial of their identity. This prejudice is counter to the best affirmation, the values and the goals of our republic. We witness also that it is counter to the best understanding we have as Christians about the relations of persons within a society. Prejudice limited the role of the first Japanese immigrants and of Americans of Japanese ancestry in the United States and contributed to their mistreatment in 1942.

On December 9, 1941, just two days after the beginning of the war, the Federal Council of Churches, the Foreign Missions Conference and the Home Missions Conference of North America joined through their presidents in warning against responding in the crisis of that time "by recriminations against the Japanese people" and it affirmed; "Let us remember many of these people are loyal, patriotic American citizens and that others, though Japanese subjects, have been utterly opposed to their nation's acts against our nation. It is incumbent upon us to demonstrate a discipline which while observing national safety has no place for vindictiveness". A cooperative effort of church people urge that before relocation was begun selective screening of all persons should

be initiated. The government's spokesperson refused to meet with the church delegation.

On April 29, 1942, after the uprooting began, church representatives sent a letter to the President of the United States which included the following:

"Many leaders of the protestant churches are expressing their concern over our national policy with respect to U. S. citizens of Japanese parentage which jeopardizes our democracy and has a bearing on religious liberty.

"One feature of the present regulations gives us especially grave concern. American citizens of Japanese parentage born and raised in this country are being uprooted from their homes and normal occupations without hearings or any other process of classification whereby the loyal are distinguished.... Such abrogations of the rights as citizens is especially unfortunate in view of the fact that, since the measures are not being applied in the same way to citizens of German and Italian lineage, the Japanese conclude that we are practicing race discrimination. This policy savors of totalitarianism."

In the months that followed the evacuation of the Japanese and Americans of Japanese ancestry, many denominations through the Federal Council and other church agencies expressed concern about this action.

Although the church and church leaders throughout these years opposed many of the injustices and sought to minister to those in need it must still acknowledge its failure to witness more courageously and to oppose injustice in all its forms.

This now is the time of repentance, forgiveness, reconcillation, and recommitment."

The ten war relocation centers which were built by the War Relocation Authority (WRA) were built on public land which was held under the Department of the Interior of which Harold L. Ickes was Secretary. Mr. Ickes wrote to the President and expressed himself about the matter:

"I am unwilling to believe that a better job in general could not have been done than has been done. Neither do I believe that we can't do a better job from here out."

His letter continued:

"Information has come to me from several sources to the effect that the situation in at least some of the Japanese internment camps is bad and becoming worse. Native born Japanese who first accepted with philosophical understanding the decision of their government to round up and take far inland all the Japanese along the Pacific coast regardless of their degree of loyalty have pretty generally been disappointed with the treatment they have been accorded. Even the minimum plans that had been formulated and denounced with respect to them have been disregarded in large major, and, at least, have not been carried out. The result has been the gradual turning of thousands of well meaning and loyal Japanese into angry prisoners. I do not think that we can disregard as of no official concern the unnecessary creating of a hostile group right in our own territory consisting of people who are engendering a bitterness and hostility that bodes no good for the future."

Milton Eisenhower, General Eisenhower's younger brother, had been the first head of the War Relocation Authority and now commented to President Roosevelt on the Ickes letter:

"My friends in the War Relocation Authority, like Secretary Ickes, are deeply distressed over the effects of the entire evacuation and relocation program upon the Japanese Americans especially upon the young citizens' group. Persons in this group find themselves

living in an atmosphere for which their public school and democratic teachings have not prepared them. It is hard for them to escape the conviction that their plight is due more to racial discrimination, economic motivations and wartime prejudices than to any real necessity from the military point of view for evacuation from the West Coast.

"Life in a relocation camp cannot possibly be pleasant. The evacuees are surrounded by barbed wire fences under the eyes of military police. They have suffered heavily in property losses; they have lost their businesses and their means of support. The state legislatures, members of Congress, and local groups by their actions and statements bring home to them almost constantly that as a people they are not really welcome anywhere. States in which they are now located have enacted restrictive legislation forbidding permanent resettlement. The American Legion, many local groups, and city councils have approved discriminatory resolutions, going so far in some instances as to advocate confiscation of their property. Bills have been introduced that would deprive them of their citizenship.

"Under such circumstances it would be amazing if extreme bitterness did not develop."

The Federal Reserve Bank in California, which in some instances was assigned care of property, estimated in 1942 that the evacuees had lost a total of \$400,000,000.

And remember that after all this, 25,000 of these

American citizens of Japanese ancestry volunteered for service in the U. S. armed forces. Half of these were from Hawaii and half from the mainland. They served with great military distinction in many places, including Italy.

We urge that what is at stake here is both the particular issues of justice for the time and place in which Americans

of Japanese ancestry were denied their constitutional right and also the basic and continuing issue of justice for all citizens of the United States. These two are inseparable.

Because that particular injustice included illegal deprivation of civil rights by relocation people without a hearing and because it caused incomparable material and psychic loss it is the responsibility of the U. S. government to act in response to the claims for justice which are being made in these hearings.

This Commission, which has made possible for the first time a means for the government to hear the real suffering and distress of the Americans of Japanese ancestry, should now recognize what their legitimate claim is. We witness from the ethical and moral standpoint of those who best understood and opposed the implications of the Executive Order 9066 and its implementation that the record of what the U. S. government did to the lives of citizens of Japanese ancestry is too overpowering to ignore and too unjust to simply acknowledge as an ill-conceived wartime measure. Its pressure on their lives and on their future is too painful to be condoned in any manner. The U. S. government looks to this Commission to give direction in its legal and moral response to these claims. We urge that this Commission report and witness to the U. S. government the need to:

1. Express its failure to uphold the constitutional rights of the American citizens of Japanese ancestry when the government set out and acted on Executive Order 9066 and forcibly relocated Americans of Japanese ancestry without due process of law.
2. Recognize the violations of the Geneva Convention concerning treatment of citizens of enemy countries especially in their loss of property. (I was interned in Yokohama under the Geneva Convention which both countries recognized. I had the same food, shelter and heat as the Japanese police had and these were scarce in Japan, but I knew of no American^{in camp}/who lost property. Indeed, I was permitted during my internment to sell through our family cook the furniture of our home in Tokyo to a second-hand dealer for three times the amount I expected to receive. I paid our cook her salary, loaned money to other interned Americans and brought some of the money home in American dollars.)
3. Provide a means whereby the United States government will acknowledge those interned American citizens of Japanese ancestry as loyal citizens who both earlier and since that time have contributed to the growth and well being of the United States.

4. Prepare a clear and immediate plan to compensate for all losses suffered through relocation and internment.
5. Create a community trust to assist Japanese-American communities in memory of those Americans of Japanese ancestry who have died through age, infirmity or in service to their country -- and who cannot be compensated directly.

We urge further that time is of the essence rather than acceding to the argument of some persons that the time has passed for consideration of such action. We witness to the fact that it is morally reprehensible to wait longer to act in acknowledging and in upholding the rights of these citizens. It is necessary to right where possible the psychic wrongs which older as well as younger ones are suffering. A just compensation should be made because it is legally due these persons who were deprived of or who were caused to lose the fruits of their labor.

Respectfully submitted,

John Coventry Smith