

SALA BURTON
5TH DISTRICT, CALIFORNIA

HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20515

PHONE: (202) 225-4965

DISTRICT OFFICE
450 GOLDEN GATE AVENUE
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA 94102

PHONE: (415) 556-4862

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

COMMITTEES **JCLA** Asian American
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June 20, 1984

STATEMENT OF CONGRESSWOMAN SALA BURTON
Subcommittee on Administrative Law and
Governmental Relations
H.R. 4110, Civil Liberties Act of 1983

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Consideration of this issue by Congress is long overdue and the Committee is to be commended for holding this hearing.

The experience of Japanese Americans during World War II has been ignored by this nation for decades. The work of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians was a major step forward and this legislation, by implementing the Commission recommendations, will finally bring a just and fair end to this dark chapter in American history.

My home state of California bears a special responsibility for this sad episode. Anti-Japanese sentiment and activities flourished in the state for decades before World War II. No major public official in the state objected to the federal government's actions -- in fact, many actively encouraged and assisted the policy. The congressional delegation strongly supported the plan.

Now, decades later, Congress can correct this injustice. It is important to enact this legislation soon for several reasons. Many of the internees have died in the last 40 years and many others are, of course, quite old. We must act while those who were the victims of this injustice are still with us.

But we must also act now because the same racism that led to this grave injustice still rears its ugly head today. My good friend Norman Mineta recently pointed out in a newspaper column that many in this country now blame Japan for our economic woes; a view whose insidious side effect is racism against Americans of Japanese descent. Debating and passing this bill will remind us that we must always remain vigilant against the rise of racist sentiments in this nation.

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I fully support this bill. This legislation would be less controversial if it was merely a national apology -- if it did not contain the compensation provisions. But we must remember that thousands of internees lost property and jobs and were never able to regain those material and financial resources. Without the compensation -- which is a minimal amount -- the apology will seem hollow indeed. I urge the subcommittee to approve the bill with these important provisions.