

STATEMENT OF U. S. SENATOR SPARK MATSUNAGA  
BEFORE THE  
COMMISSION ON THE WARTIME RELOCATION AND INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS  
UNITED STATES SENATE CAUCUS ROOM  
TUESDAY, JULY 14, 1981

Madam Chairman, distinguished members of the Commission: As one of the principal cosponsors of the companion Senate bill to the House bill which became Public Law 96-317 and which established this commission, I am very pleased to appear before you today, as you launch your historic investigation of the relocation and internment of innocent civilians during World War II.

No branch of the federal government has ever undertaken a comprehensive study of the actions taken under Executive Order 9066, which was issued in February 1942 by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and, in the opinion of members of the Japanese American community, such a study is long overdue.

No doubt, many members of this commission and those in the audience today will recall vividly the atmosphere which prevailed in this country immediately following the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Rumors were rampant that Japanese war planes had been spotted off the West Coast and erroneous reports of followup attacks on the U. S. mainland abounded. A great wave of fear and hysteria swept the United States, particularly along the West Coast.

Some two months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066. The Executive Order gave to the Secretary of War the authority to designate "military areas" and to exclude "any or all" persons from such areas. Penalties for the violation of the military restrictions were subsequently established by Congress in Public Law 77-503, enacted in March 1942.

Also in March, the military commander of the Western District issued four public proclamations establishing restricted zones in eight western states, instituting a curfew applicable to enemy aliens and "persons of Japanese ancestry," and restricting the travel of Americans of Japanese ancestry and alien residents. The first "Civilian Exclusion Order" was issued by the Western District Commander on March 24, 1942 and marked the beginning of the relocation and internment of some 120,000 Japanese Americans and their parents from the West Coast.

It is significant to note that the Military Commander of the then Territory of Hawaii, which had actually suffered an enemy attack, did not believe that it was necessary to evacuate all Japanese Americans from Hawaii -- although it is true that a number of leaders of the Japanese American Community in Hawaii were sent to detention camps in the continental United States.

Moreover, no military commander felt that it was necessary to evacuate from any area of the country all Americans of German or Italian ancestry, although the United States was also at war with Germany and Italy.

FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, who could hardly be accused of being soft on suspected seditionists, opposed the evacuation of Japanese Americans from the West Coast, pointing out that the FBI and other law enforcement agencies were capable of apprehending any suspected saboteurs or enemy agents.

Unlike Hawaii, martial law was never declared in the western states, and the courts and civilian law enforcement agencies remained in full operation. However, the Americans of Japanese ancestry were denied their day in court. In fact, of the approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans and their parents who were relocated, not a single one was even charged with a crime, tried or convicted. Never-the-less, they were evacuated and incarcerated, and as a consequence they lost their homes, jobs, businesses and farms. To be sure, their faith in the American system was severely shaken.

In retrospect, the evacuation of Japanese Americans from the West Coast and their incarceration in what can only be described as American-style concentration camps is regarded by contemporary historians as one of the darkest pages in American history. It remains to this day the single most traumatic and disturbing event in the lives of many Nisei.

National attention was focused on the wartime relocation of Japanese Americans in 1969, when I introduced in the U. S. House of Representatives a bill to repeal the Emergency Detention Act, a repugnant law which authorized the detention of Americans suspected of espionage or sabotage without due process of law during a national emergency. The Emergency Detention Act provided for the establishment of camps similar to those in which Japanese Americans were incarcerated during World War II, and funds for this purpose were actually appropriated by Congress during the 1950's and 1960's. In the late 1960's during an era of profound social change, it was repeatedly rumored that detention camps were once again being prepared to house anti-war and civil rights protestors.

Before introducing that bill, I made a concerted effort to get my colleagues in the House to co-sponsor the measure, but succeeded in securing only twenty-four co-sponsors, the bill was referred to the House Internal Security Committee, formerly known as the un-American Activities Committee. That Committee so emasculated the bill -- practically beyond recognition -- that I myself moved in the House Rules Committee to kill the bill which bore my name as its principal introducer.

After intensive and extensive campaigning, with the strong support of the Japanese-American Citizens League, I reintroduced the bill in 1970, this time with 149 co-sponsors. Through parliamentary maneuvering and with the help of the Speaker of the House, the second bill was referred to the Judiciary Committee which reported it out favorably and the House gave its overwhelming approval. The bill encountered much less difficulty in the Senate, and as passed by the Congress it was signed into law on September 25, 1971; thus the specter of American-style concentration camps -- a grim reminder of a nightmarish experience to the Japanese Americans -- was eliminated by legislation.

Executive Order 9066, Public Law 77-503, and a host of other outmoded emergency war powers granted to the Chief Executive since the Civil War were repealed in 1975.

The publicity surrounding the repeal of the Emergency Detention Act and the emergency war powers of the President generated a lot of questions about the relocation and internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Most importantly, the children of the former internees started to ask questions about the internment camps. Why didn't their parents and grandparents protest? Did they commit some crime that they were ashamed of? Why have they not been compensated for their losses? These and many other unanswered questions about the detention of Japanese Americans in World War II remain, and there remains an unfinished chapter in our nation's history.

The study which you are undertaking today will hopefully shed light on the "darkest pages" of our history and make all the facts known. Your findings and recommendations will help the Congress to determine whether or not legislation should be enacted to compensate the victims of our government's wartime relocation policy.

I personally am unable to entertain any doubts in my mind that the Commission will conclude after its study is completed that the internees were subjected to grave injustices by governmental action, motivated by wartime hysteria and prejudice, and that the internees, as a consequence, suffered compensable property damages and personal injuries. Such damages and injuries can never be fully compensated at this late date, for many of the internees are dead and gone, while others continue to bear irreparable psychological scars. However, a formal recognition of the wrong committed against the internees and an offer of token compensation to every former internee, or, if deceased, to his or her legal heir or heirs, would once again prove that this great Nation of ours is so strong and so steeped in righteousness that it is unafraid to admit its mistakes of the past and to make whole those whom it may have wronged.

What is perhaps most important is that by your full, thorough and unbiased investigation of the actions taken under Executive Order 9066, you will help to ensure that no group of Americans will ever again be incarcerated in American-style concentration camps solely on account of their race or ancestry.

Thank you very much.

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