

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE HONORABLE S. I. HAYAKAWA,
UNITED STATES SENATOR FROM CALIFORNIA

DRAFT
NOT FOR MEDIA RELEASE

FROM JAPANESE AMERICA

Thirty-seven years ago, on February 19, 1942, forty years of race hatred exploded against "all persons of Japanese ancestry" in the form of a Presidential Executive Order. Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066 forced three generations of Nikkei out of our homes, birth-places, businesses; made us give up, curtail, or abandon our property and education; deprived us of all civil rights; stigmatized us as "enemy aliens;" legitimized the race hatred against us; and forced us into concentration camps, where most of us lived regimented lives behind barbed wire, under guard, for an average term of two and a half years.

You, Senator Hayakawa, were not there with us on the West Coast, where the Issei established the Nikkei as working, productive members of the American nation that denied us access to naturalized United States citizenship. You were not with us in the camps.

You have repeatedly, in the press, on radio and television, in the United States and Japan, called the move for redressing the wrongs done the Nikkei and American justice "ridiculous and absurd." You have said we "weren't in prison camps," that "they were relocation centers . . . nothing prison-like about them." You credit the mass removal of Japanese Americans to concentration camps for breaking up the Japanese American "ghettos" and for our higher education in "Antioch, Oberlin, the University of Chicago, Temple University, Mount Holyoke, and so on," and further credit the camps for giving the Nikkei the opportunities that led to our enjoying the highest per capita income of any group in the nation.

They were concentration camps. Barbed wire, electrified fences, dogs, armed soldiers, machine gun towers made them concentration camps.

The per capita income of the nation rose during WW II. The population increased. For us, our per capita income dropped to nothing; our suicide, madness, and death rates increased; our birth rate flattened out.

The colleges and universities you name are fine schools. We had been attending those schools years before WW II, and did not need the concentration camps to spark our academic achievement. Prior to camp we had been in other good schools: the University of California at Berkeley, UCLA, Stanford, the University of Washington.

It was not our removal to camps that opened up the ghettos, but the repeal of the anti-Oriental laws that barred the Issei from U.S. citizenship, owning property, and certain jobs. After camp, we had nothing. That nothing is what camp gave us, not opportunity. It was our hard work, combined with the help of a few good friends, that brought us our present success. Our success does not make the concentration camps of yesterday any less heinous a violation of American justice. Our success does not excuse the camps from American history.

(more)

Lawrence J. ...
Thank you

What you call the white hysteria of the time does not excuse or lessen the damage done to Japanese America or American justice. The Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco assessed the value of our property lost in 1942 at \$400 million. The Evacuation Claims Act of 1948 paid out a total of \$38 million--8½%. The redress we seek is not for property losses, but for the violation of civil rights, wrongful imprisonment, loss of income, and psychological, social, and cultural damages.

Japanese Americans were as outraged and shocked by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor as any other Americans, and as anxious to defend America. The need for revenge against the Japanese enemy in no way justified the willful mistaking of three generations of Japanese Americans for the foreign Japanese enemy.

Everything you say justifies the mob hysteria of 1942 and ignores the fact that--as Mayor Charles Royer of Seattle wrote this January:

The people of our nation never before and never after have turned so violently against a mass of their own citizens and violated the humanitarian spirit of equality that has always been the moral basis of American law, American pride, and American spirit.

In camp we maintained our faith in the justice of a nation that had broken faith with us. Our all Nisei 442nd Regimental Combat Team fought in WW II with a distinction marked with the highest death and casualty rates of any unit who fought in that awful war. In that same spirit of faith in American justice, we seek redress for the camps. What you have said about white backlash and forgetting the hardships we endured in camp convinces us that--unless the concentration camps become a recognized and essential part of American history--our ideals and system are vulnerable to the very tyranny Americans loathe. The concentration camps can happen again.

From an obscure Canadian immigrant to noted scholar, educator, and U.S. senator, you have become a prominent Japanese American in many ways. We regret that you choose now to make your reputation characterizing yourself as our "public enemy no. 1." You call yourself that as if the title brings you glory. In our eyes it does not. And on the concentration camps and our concern for redress, you do not speak for Japanese America.

The whites of today are different people. Today the mayors of the cities that once called for our elimination are welcoming us home. The owners and governors of the fairgrounds, livestock exhibition halls, and racetracks that once were hometown concentration camps, are giving us free use of the old assembly center sites to gather four generations of Nikkei together--Issei, Nisei, Sansei, and Yonsei--to remember the camps and stand for redress. In Seattle, Portland, and San Francisco, the white establishment, far from reviving their race hatred, are joining us to remember, to heal, and to encourage the triumph of law. We firmly believe American law can heal itself. We look to you as one of the physicians and are saddened by your mouthing of the cliches of an ancient mob.

(end of letter)

Thank You — Lawrence Ferlinghetti