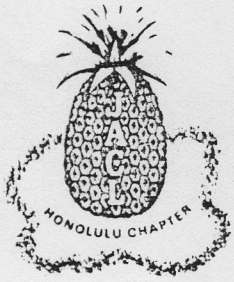

Japanese American Citizens League

TESTIMONY OF FRANKLIN ODO

To the Commission on Wartime Relocations and Internment of Civilians

Seattle, Washington
September 9, 1981

Honorable Chairperson and Members of the Commission,

My name is Franklin Odo. I am Associate Professor and Director of the Ethnic Studies Program at the University of Hawaii at Manoa and teach a course on the Japanese experience in Hawaii.

There are two areas I wish to discuss. The first involves the relative ties to Japan, Hawaii and the rest of the United States on the part of Hawaii's pre-WWII Japanese community. The second covers the sequence of events following Pearl Harbor.

Most of the immigrants were imported as cheap labor for the sugar plantations. Most intended to return to Japan with enough saved to secure a livelihood. Perhaps one half of the approximately 200,000 immigrants did return or sought better opportunities on the mainland. Those pioneers who remained in Hawaii maintained their cultural heritage and celebrated important events and festivals such as the emperor's birthday, boys' day and girls' day.

At some point in time, with individual variations, Hawaii and the United States became more than an economic way station. The Japanese began organizing to improve conditions for themselves and their American-born children. This process was clearly visible in the very early 1900s and marked the transition from sojourner to permanent resident. Among the concrete indications were the following: formation of business, social and cultural groups; widespread use of the "picture bride" institution to begin families and stabilize communities; increased investment in real and personal property; labor organizing for better wages and working conditions; and legal battles to overcome institutionalized racism. One notable example was the prolonged court case of Takao Ozawa who took his struggle to become an American citizen to the U.S. Supreme Court--a struggle both he and America lost in 1922.

By 1940, the Japanese in Hawaii had become critical contributors in fishing, farming and retail outlets. More important, they constituted 40% of the civilian work force. Discrimination restricted their participation in many fields but they comprised 53% of restaurant and bar workers, 51% of the craftsmen, 59% of food and dairy workers and 75% of domestic servants. They expected the "American Dream" to provide increasing equality although there was considerable and bitter

disagreement over appropriate strategy. Was it more "American," they debated, to follow the advice of white leaders who counseled deference or to organize militant struggles to secure better treatment in the schools, fields, media and courts? Many rejected the notion that becoming a good American necessitated the negation of their individual and collective identities.

Pearl Harbor ended, for an entire generation, any real possibility that Japanese Americans could draw from the cultural reservoir so carefully constructed in the previous half century. The pattern of arrests and detention on and after December 7th, strongly suggested that the common denominator was not evidence of potential danger but close association with things Japanese. Prior to that day, the F.B.I. had listed 400 suspects and designated only 50 or 60 as "sinister." As early as December 19, 1941, however, President Roosevelt and his cabinet had agreed to remove all Japanese aliens to some Island other than Oahu--probably Molokai. But pressure to include the nisei continued to mount and, in March, 1942, the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended that 100,000 of the total 157,000 Japanese be forcibly removed to mainland concentration camps. The President approved and an initial target number of 15-20,000 was to be selected.

Legal and logistical problems intervened, however, and the President subsequently agreed to a maximum of 15,000. Eventually, the figure dwindled to 1,500, close to the number actually detained in Hawaii and the mainland.

Military, intelligence and civilian leaders in Hawaii almost unanimously opposed wholesale removal of the Japanese. Martial law, imposed within hours of the Pearl Harbor attack, made it possible to freeze wages, restrict travel, prohibit occupational mobility and suspend habeas corpus. These measures not only provided for the stability of the critical Japanese labor force but encouraged Hawaii's business leaders to exploit and control its workers.

The full story of Hawaii's Japanese population during WWII remains to be told and this Commission can render invaluable aid in uncovering the truth. We do know, however, that the injustices perpetrated against internees and their families demand full and immediate indemnification.

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Business