

8/5/88

Internee Payment Bill Gets Final OK

House Sends President Plan to Offer Japanese-Americans Money, Apology

By WILLIAM J. EATON, *Times Staff Writer*

WASHINGTON—The House, acting to redress a wrong committed against Japanese-Americans interned during World War II, gave final congressional approval Thursday to legislation expressing a national apology and authorizing tax-free payments of \$20,000 each to individuals who suffered wartime imprisonment.

For Rep. Norman Y. Mineta (D-San Jose), who cannot receive the money because he voted for the bill, it was an especially joyful moment because he presided over the chamber during the 257-156 roll call that sent the measure to President Reagan for his signature.

Reagan indicated recently that he was eager to approve the bill and end "a sad chapter in American history in a way that reaffirms America's commitment to the preservation of liberty and justice for all."

Wartime Mistake

Opponents argued that the action against an estimated 120,000 Japanese-Americans on the West Coast was an unfortunate wartime mistake but did not justify \$1.25 billion in payments to redress a wholesale violation of civil liberties.

"In time of war, when a country is threatened for its very survival, many lives are disrupted for no logical reason," Rep. Howard Coble (R-N.C.) said.

Rep. Helen Delich Bentley (R-Md.) said her husband, a Korean War veteran, threatened to divorce her if she voted for the bill. She voted against it.

A majority of the House members who spoke, however, agreed with Rep. Leon E. Panetta (D-Monterey) that the evacuation and imprisonment of Americans of Japanese ancestry from 1942 to 1945 was a "national shame."

Mineta, who spoke last, delivered a moving speech on the legislation, which has taken almost a decade to

move from introduction to passage.

"This is a deeply personal issue for a small number of us," he began. "But this legislation touches all of us because it goes to the very core of our nation.

"Does our Constitution protect all of us—regardless of race or culture? Do our rights remain inalienable even in times of stress—and especially in times of stress?"

"Passage of this legislation answers these questions—a resounding 'yes.'

"I am deeply honored to serve in this body as it takes the great step of admitting and redressing a monumental injustice," Mineta concluded in a hushed chamber. Spontaneous applause—a rarity in the House—greeted his remarks.

Mineta was 10 years old when he and his family were taken from their home in San Jose and placed in an internment camp at the Santa Anita race track in May, 1942, about five months after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor.

Moved to Wyoming

Later that year, Mineta's family was moved to another camp at Heart Mountain, Wyo., where they remained until November, 1943, when they were released and allowed to join Mineta's father, who was teaching Japanese in an Army school at the University of Chicago.

"People said this was done to protect us," Mineta recalled in an interview. "If that was so, why were the machine guns pointing at us?"

Ben Blaz, the delegate from Guam, noted that he, Mineta and Rep. Robert T. Matsui (D-Sacramento) had a common experience:

"We were all incarcerated in our youths, but there was one difference," Blaz said. "There was one difference—my guards were enemy soldiers. Theirs were American soldiers."

Please see APOLOGY, Page 21

APOLOGY: An Emotional Vote in House

Continued from Page 1

The Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians was established in 1980 to investigate the facts and make recommendations. It concluded that the evacuation of Japanese-Americans was not justified by military needs but occurred as a result of racial prejudice, wartime hysteria and a failure of political leadership.

Under the bill soon to become law, an estimated 60,000 persons who were interned almost half a century ago will be eligible for the \$20,000 payments, which will be made over a 10-year period, starting with the oldest claimants first.

Initial payments are not likely to begin until January, 1990. Any Americans of Japanese ancestry who spent time in the camps and are living at the time the bill is signed into law will be eligible. In case of their death later, only members of their immediate family would be allowed to accept the payment instead.

The same legislation also will provide tax-free payments of \$12,000 each to indigenous residents of the Aleutian Island chain who were relocated by the federal government during World War II and forced to live in abandoned fish canneries.

It also will allocate \$5 million to the Aleuts as reimbursement for destruction of village and community property, as well as \$1.4 million for destruction of church property. In addition, the bill provides a \$15-million payment for Attu island, which has become a national wildlife refuge.

The major thrust of the legislation, however, was an effort to heal the wounds created when President Franklin D. Roosevelt on Feb. 19, 1941, signed Executive Order No. 9066, which allowed the War Department to designate military areas and exclude residents from them.

Later, military orders led to the removal of all those of Japanese ancestry from California, Washington state and Oregon, as well as some from Hawaii.

Rep. Bill Frenzel (R-Minn.) said he had been against the bill but would vote for it now. "It's time for apology, reunification and healing, and I intend to be a part of it," he said.

Matsui, jubilant over the outcome, recalled how he was taken as a child in April, 1942, to Tule Lake, Calif., with his family and spent 3½ years under guard.

"The stigma of disloyalty that attached to Japanese Americans in World War II is about to be removed," Matsui told the House. "We now look upon ourselves as proud Americans."