

6/30/81

Snowjob Coming?

With many having already questioned how effective a politicized presidential congressional commission can be in remedying a travesty such as the World War II imprisonment of Japanese America, the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians is sputtering on toward a feeble beginning to its historic mission back in Washington, D.C.

Talk around Washington is that we should expect a shockingly superficial and unsatisfying experience from the CWRIC. Sources attribute this conclusion to the fact that the commission is underfunded, has serious shortcomings in the quality of its staff, lacks credibility both inside and out of the Japanese American community and is crippled by some commissioners who are, frankly, indifferent to the role of the panel.

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The fear that the Commission will try to pull a snowjob on us was further confirmed over the weekend during a JAACL-sponsored hearing testimony preparation session in Little Tokyo.

None other than former 'CL national president, Nisei attorney Frank "Bamboo People" Chuman told those gathered that he was "surprised to see the lack of understanding and awareness of what actually happened" displayed by the commissioners during a background briefing he was called on to present to them earlier this month.

World War II-era U.S. Senator Hugh Mitchell of the state of Washington was identified as the commission member who seemed aloof and indifferent to the role of the body on which he sits. Ironically, the only Japanese American commissioner, Philadelphia Judge William Marutani has, since early 1979, cavalierly campaigned against individual reparations for Japanese Americans imprisoned in America's concentration camps.

Further adding to the lack of credibility the commission suffers from in the Nikkei community is the JAACL role in every aspect of the commission process. I hate to harp on the ol' 'CL so frequently. On a chapter level, the grass-roots of the organization does a fine job in providing scholarships for the community's youth and in other philanthropic efforts. However, on a national policy level, the role of high-ranking 'CLers as wartime government informants and short-sighted manipulators of the Japanese American community is not, and must not, be forgotten.

How can the commission say it is impartial and open to testimony from all Japanese Americans and others when members of the JAACL are members of it, hold key staff positions with it and, most importantly, called loudest for its creation. Many, many, perhaps the majority of Nikkei feel that the "League" betrayed Japanese America, or at least feel that it compounded the indignity of the camps with its lips-to-derriere relationship with the U.S. government.

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Rose Matsui Ochi, a legislative and criminal justice planning aide to Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley and a courageous Japanese American who sat on the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy through more than a year of heated testimony, debate and political posturing by her cohorts, says the relocation and internment commission is in an "impossible situation" in face of its February 1982 deadline for filing its findings and recommendations.

It is Ochi's view that the community should push now for an extension of time for the commission's fact-finding and hearing phase and that they should make known today their demands for an adequate and thorough investigation of the circumstances surrounding the camps and for the recommendation of a fitting remedy.

The Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy had two full years to operate, she points out.

Ochi further suggests that the community should approach the commission not to prove they were wronged but should force the commission and its staff to make an affirmative effort of their own to define the width and breadth of the wrongs inflicted upon Nikkei during World War II.

Attorney Ochi, like most reasonable Japanese Americans, agrees that it is ludicrous to ask if a wrong was committed. Grievous wrongs were inflicted.

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From where I view this whole thing, a groundswell of Nikkei public opinion must begin—No more kidglove treatment for the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians:

- If certain commissioners have shown or are showing an unwillingness to be impartial, fair and open-minded during this momentous process, we must challenge their right to serve on the commission, whether they be White, Black, Jew, clergyman, former senator or Japanese American from Philadelphia.

- If certain key commission staff members are rushing the commission process to a quick and tidy conclusion looking ahead to a promised presidential appointment, we have no use for them, either. Demand the rascal's termination.

- Let the commission know that Japanese America is tired of malarkey from the power-brokering Nikkei elite and the government.

Write the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, 726 Jackson Place, N.W. Suite 2020, Washington, D.C. 20506.

—DWIGHT CHUMAN