

Nakano Assesses CWRIC Hearings

Editor

The CWRIC (Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians) hearings have come and gone in L.A., S.F., Seattle, Alaska and Chicago. The Commission, as everyone knows, was set up to investigate and determine "whether or not a wrong was committed" by the U.S. government in incarcerating over 120,000 Japanese and over 1,000 Aleuts during World War II. It will also consider forms of redress.

Thus, this historical event drew JAs of all generations as witnesses and participants throughout the cities where hearings were held (1,500 in L.A., 2,000 in S.F./Bay Area, 1,800 in Seattle/Portland, 1,000+ in Chicago, and hundreds in Alaska).

As a former internee, I heard and relived the anger and pain with each testimony. Every sansei and yonsei alike, vicariously suffered each and every hardship and loss of their grandparents, parents and relatives. Niseis were to shatter the "quiet, American" myth as they boldly spoke out against racism and moved to act on principles when angered.

And a surge of pride permeated the hearing halls from L.A. to Seattle. Yuji Ichioka of L.A. so aptly stated, "We've shown too much respect (to the white man), too much deference, for too long . . . no more gaman."

The burden of guilt has finally shifted onto the government, where it rightly belongs. There was the realization that finally our children, the sansei and yonsei, could hear the full story for themselves, begin to gain an insight into their history and to regain pride in a heritage denied them.

Unfortunately, the L.A. proceedings were characterized by some critic as "a circus of freaks" with a surfeit of "sob stories" and "critically lacking in expert testimonies." Moreover, it was cited that the audience's emotions, though justified, did not warrant cheers and applause for such behavior (and was deemed "improper" in court hearings).

Would these people have preferred a controlled and passive audience? That we should have bowed our heads when Commissioner Lundgren said that Congress is in no mood for reparations; or remained silent when Hayakawa called the camps a 3-year vacation for the issei? Should we have turned the other cheek when Lillian Baker physically assaulted a nisei testifier?

Yes, the audience cheered in support and approval and angrily booed when appropriate because our very pride and dignity were on the line! We Japanese righteously

directed our longstanding grievances directly to the Commission, which was set up by the very government that created the camps.

The hearings were a searing indictment of the U.S. government and various racist interests by the Japanese people themselves. And when the dam broke, there was no stopping it—for the outpouring encompassed a span of 40 years of suppressed anger and bitterness.

Importantly, the hearings were not an act of "purging" for its own sake. Bitter tears intermingled with pride and determination as we reaffirmed our resolve to continue our fight for justice. At every hearing city the united demand for monetary reparations was virtually unanimous, and irresistible.

Another facet of the hearings, particularly in S.F. and L.A., and currently in New York, is the day-to-day work which the NCR (National Coalition for Redress/Reparations) shouldered from the very beginning. Our basis starting point was and is that the Commission, though limited in its power and purpose, should be responsible and accountable to the Japanese community.

Well before the hearings, the NCR communicated to the Commission and its staff numerous demands: for additional hearing sites, Japanese translation, and evening/community sessions, etc. The NCR organized the community to push for these things through countless phone calls, telegrams, letters and petitions to Washington.

Last minute deadlines, changes and overall lack of information and coordination by the Commission resulted in grave confusion at

different points. An NCR person had to work with the executive staff person up to the very day of the hearings to ensure that all the testifiers were confirmed. Translation for issei was coordinated entirely by the NCR in L.A. and S.F. and otherwise would not have happened.

During the hearings themselves the NCR stood firm to oppose any attempts on the Commissioners' part to cut the testifiers short of their allocated time. In L.A., Commissioner Lundgren once told a Japanese speaking panel to simply summarize their testimonies in English!

To this, an NCR person strongly objected, saying, "the Isseis have been told to shut up for 40 years . . . they deserve and have the right to give their testimonies in full and in their own language as prepared . . ."

Though the Commission has come and gone, the tremendous impact of the hearings on the Japanese people—both on a personal level and for our entire community's sense of common bond and destiny, will be with us for a long time to come. We reaffirmed an important lesson—that it was only through pressure from the grassroots level that any concessions can be won.

Only with the continued organizing and unity of all groups and individuals can we hope to make the Commission come out with a favorable recommendation that is acted upon. Only with the support from the entire community plus backing from the broader American public, can we win reparations, and moreover equality and justice as Japanese Americans.

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