



ELIOT ELISOFON—LIFE

Dust swirls through Owens Valley, Calif., in March of 1942 as the first internees move into dormitories where they will live until the end of the war

An Apology to Japanese Americans

The Senate says they were wrongly interned during World War II

Like many historic mistakes, Executive Order 9066 won approval almost offhandedly. On Feb. 11, 1942, preoccupied by a two-front war, President Franklin D. Roosevelt decided not to bother with a meeting on the subject and simply said yes in a phone call to his Secretary of War, adding the bland advice, "Be as reasonable as you can." Signed a week later, the order led to the roundup and internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans for the duration of World War II, an action that Hawaii Senator Spark Matsunaga calls the "one great blot on the Constitution." Last week the nation moved a step closer to expunging that stain. The Senate voted to give an apology and a tax-free payment of \$20,000 to each of the 60,000 surviving internees. The bill must now go to the House, which has already passed a similar measure.

Most Americans feel obvious satisfaction at the expression of sorrow and the payment of what amounts to reparations for a woeful chapter in national history. Still, a number of ethical questions swirl around the issue. Chief among them: Was the internment justified in the context of its time? Is it necessary or right to apologize for a difficult decision made under unprecedented wartime pressure?

Certainly the hysteria that swept the West Coast after Pearl Harbor set the stage for some kind of drastic action. No rumor about Japanese Americans was too wild to be believed. Treasonous farmers were said to be growing tomatoes in arrow-shaped patches that pointed the way for enemy pilots to California defense plants. Nisei students were reported to be pouring into German-language classes at

UCLA, presumably to help the Nazis. One story said wily Japanese saboteurs had quietly bought up land around West Coast military installations.

Government officials and opinion leaders played a large role in fanning the flames. For some reason, Navy Secretary Frank Knox said secret agents in Hawaii had effectively helped Japan, though he knew the statement was untrue. A Treasury Department official announced that 20,000 members of the Japanese-American community were "ready for organized action" to cripple the war effort. Earl Warren, then California attorney general, and Columnist Walter Lippmann echoed that theme with some remarkably paranoid reasoning: the lack of sabotage was an eerie sign, indicating that tightly disciplined Japanese Americans must be quietly planning some sort of massive, coordinated strike.

One reason apologies are due is that the U.S. acted against its own best information. The FBI had been watching the Japanese-American community for five years without noticing anything alarming. There is also evidence that the Justice Department did not tell the Supreme Court all it knew about the loyalty of Japanese Americans.

Columnist James J. Kilpatrick argues that fears of a Japanese invasion were not absurd at the time. But the Japanese military turned its attention far to the east immediately after Pearl Harbor. By the end of December 1941, Lieut. General John L. DeWitt, who commanded West Coast defenses, concluded that no invasion was likely. By the time F.D.R. signed the Executive Order, top Army and Navy com-

manders agreed that an invasion was almost impossible. Nonetheless the evacuation policy proceeded, partly to show that the Government was busy doing something. There simply was no military need to uproot Japanese-American families. U.S. Attorney General Francis Biddle's later assessment should have been made at the time: "The program was ill advised, unnecessary and unnecessarily cruel."

"Hindsight has proven us wrong," said one of the naysayers, Nevada Senator Chic Hecht, as if the nation were punishing itself today simply for guessing wrong long ago. Bad guesses are not moral failings, but the sweeping suspension of rights for one racial group certainly is. People were interned if they were only one-eighth Japanese by blood. There were no camps for German Americans, despite real support for Germany and Hitler in the German-American Bund. And no camps were set up for Japanese Americans in Hawaii, where there were plenty of ethnic Japanese but no strong tradition of anti-Japanese resentments.

If the wrong is obvious, the ways to right it are not. Senator Malcolm Wallop of Wyoming, among others, strongly objected to the \$20,000 payments: "Honor doesn't come with a dollar sign on it, and you don't buy it back." The objection is disingenuous, since Wallop thinks there is nothing to apologize for. It is also wrong-headed. Under the American system of tort law, wrongful harm is routinely acknowledged with cash payments. But to those interned, the formal apology and the removal of the stigma of disloyalty may count for far more than the cash. The country is also apologizing to itself for trampling its own core values. As the Senate bill says unflinchingly, the internment policy "was caused by racial prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership."

—By John Leo