



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ATTORNEYS GENERAL

in

The Great Hall

September 10, 1998

10:30 A.M.

A CELEBRATION RECOGNIZING THE ACHIEVEMENTS
OF THE CIVIL LIBERTIES ACT OF 1988

HON. JANET RENO, UNITED STATES ATTORNEY GENERAL

P R O C E E D I N G S

(Introduction.)

(Applause.)

ATTORNEY GENERAL RENO: Thank you very much, but we are here to celebrate some very wonderful people who have done so much and made such a difference. We are here to celebrate a great and wonderful achievement, the ten-year reparations program established by the Civil Liberties Act of 1988.

But today I feel both regret and great pride, regret, deep regret, that in 1942 the United States government wronged over 120,000 Japanese- Americans, and pride that as a nation we have acknowledged and, to the extent that it is possible, redressed that wrong.

On December the 7th, 1941, not one but two shocking events occurred. Japan bombed Pearl Harbor killing 3,700 sailors and soldiers, many of whom were asleep in their bunks on that peaceful Sunday morning.

Americans reacted with shock and with anger. That night the FBI began to round up Japanese- Americans, the first act in what has been rightly called one of the most sweeping and complete deprivations of constitutional rights in the history of this nation.

On February the 19th, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066. That order caused over 100,000 Japanese-Americans to be uprooted from their homes by their own government.

Some were forced off the West Coast and relocated to the Interior to strange new places with no jobs waiting for them and no friends to greet them. Others were rounded up and placed in desolate camps with armed guards.

The words that were given to these actions, relocation and evacuation, seem harmless, even defensible, reactions to the national emergency, but in reality evacuation meant banishment and in internment meant imprisonment.

Of the more than 120,000 who were evacuated or interned, seventy percent were United States citizens and many were women and children. Some would spend long, wasted years in the internment camps such as Manzanar and Tule Lake in California, Hoston and Gila River in Arizona, and Rohwer and Jerome in Arkansas.

No charges were filed against them. There were no trials, no due process, no justice. The ugly truth was that the sole criteria was their Japanese race and race alone.

While 33,000 Japanese-Americans demonstrated their loyalty to the United States by serving in the United States Army, many of their families lived behind barbed wire.

Several courageous young people became test cases for the constitutionality of the Executive Order. Gordon Hirabayashi, an American citizen, a college student and a Quaker, was convicted of violating a curfew order. Fred Korematsu was a young man born in Oakland. He first lost his job as a welder when his union canceled his membership because of his race. When he tried to avoid the military evacuation and exclusion orders. he was arrested, tried, and convicted. A divided Supreme Court upheld those convictions and the Executive Order.

In his dissent in the Korematsu decision, Justice Robert H. Jackson summed up the tragic result. "The court has validated the principle of racial discrimination. The principle then lies about like a loaded weapon ready for the hand of any authority that can bring forward a plausible claim of urgent need."

As the war neared its end, Japanese-American families slowly began rebuilding their lives. The chapter had ended, but the memory of the injustices they endured did not fade. It took 46

years of persistent effort to make our system of government work. The redress movement, like so many civil rights movements, began as a grassroots effort. Three national organizations, the Japanese-American Citizens League, the National Coalition for Redress and Reparations, and the National Council for Japanese-American Redress were joined by numerous community groups and many individuals. They all worked so tirelessly and persistently toward the common goal of making this country acknowledge and atone for the grave injustice done.

The road was not an easy one. In 1980 the first step toward a legislative solution was achieved when Congress established the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians. Its chairperson, Joan Bernstein, is with us today.

The Commission's report, "Personal Justice Denied," was a milestone. For the first time a United States government body acknowledged that the evacuation and internment of Japanese-American civilians was not justified by the claims of military necessity; rather, it was based on racial prejudice or hysteria and a breakdown in political leadership.

Finally, the Civil Liberties Act was passed. Signed by President Reagan, it became law ten years ago on August 10th, 1988. Several of the bill's key sponsors are with us today.

On October the 9th, 1990, many of you were here in the Great Hall to see the first redress payments presented. The six recipients who sat on this stage ranged in age from 101 to 107.

I am proud of the work done by the Office of Redress Administration. I am proud because redress was delivered, delivered promptly, efficiently, and fairly. ORA has fulfilled the promise of the Act by identifying, locating and paying more than 81,000 Japanese-Americans. As hard as ORA staff worked, they could not have succeeded without the tremendous support and cooperation of numerous organizations and many members of the community who offered their services.

Those of you within the Japanese-American community were true to your vision. It was a long, long road from 1942 to 1998, but redress has now been achieved. Many of your fellow internees did not live to complete the journey, but their spirit lives through you. You have honored their memory by seeing this great cause to a just end. You have convinced our government to acknowledge a serious injustice.

Your actions prevented us from erasing this shameful incident from the pages of our history, from averting our eyes from this national disgrace. Through your persistent battle you staked a claim for the rights of every minority group in this country.

I applaud your effort, but I do more than that. I take great strength, I draw great energy from what you have done.

There are two murals on the great arched ceiling of the Attorney General's conference room. One is a scene of people coming towards the upland, industry functions behind, art is prevalent and the Justice Harlan Fisk Stone, being the model, is leading the people upward to a better life.

On the other wall, the wall that the Attorney General looks at in staff meetings is justice denied. A barren landscape with trees gone, violins broken, papers grabbed, and people being taken off to bondage by brown-shirted troops.

That mural is dated 1937 and was on the wall of the Attorney General's Office not long thereafter. It took us four years to understand that justice was being denied in this world and that we could not stand by and watch that happen.

It took much longer for the heroes and heroines in this room and others who are not with us to see that justice was done, but all of us were concerned about justice, all of us who love justice should draw strength from you who have given justice, and let us make sure that never, ever again do we wait so long to see that justice be done and never that we let it happen in the first place.

You all are my heroes and heroines. Thank you so very much.

(Applause.)

(Whereupon, at 10:50 o'clock, a.m., Attorney General Reno's speech was concluded.)