

Speech, Obligations of Our Heritage, by Dillon S. Myer to the Rotary Club of Lawrence, Kansas, October 18, 1943. Papers of Dillon S. Myer.

OK'd by Irving, 10/16/43 - 1943.

OBLIGATIONS OF OUR HERITAGE

A talk by Dillon S. Myer, Director of the War Relocation Authority, to be given before the Rotary Club of Lawrence, Kansas, and broadcast over Station WREN, Lawrence, Kansas, Monday, October 18, 1943.

An important part of the history of a nation is made up of the things that happen to its people in time of war. This is particularly true of a democratic nation—which assumes the leadership among the states of the world in espousing the cause of freedom, of justice, and tolerance—a nation which takes up arms against the aggressors who have prated of racial superiority—and who have oppressed minority groups because of color or ancestry.

As a nation which has drawn its people from almost every country in the world—we are being watched by our mother countries, to see how we conduct ourselves in time of war. Not alone how we deal with our enemies in battle—but how we deal with our own people at home.

It was a matter of no small significance when the military situation in March, 1942, led Army officials to order that all persons of Japanese ancestry be excluded from the strategic military area of the Pacific Coast. Such a move might have meant that the government of the United States was turning its back on its fundamental principles. The exclusion order meant that some 115,000 people had to leave their homes and their ways of making a living. A few thousand moved quickly—and of their own accord—but most of those remaining had no place to go. So they were removed in an orderly manner, under protection of

the Army,---about 110,000 of them---and for more than a year---most of them have been living in relocation centers, under the supervision of the War Relocation Authority, an agency of the government which was created to relieve the Army of the task of caring for these dislocated civilians---of feeding and housing them---seeing that the children received proper education---that their health was protected.

Two thirds of the evacuated people were American citizens---by reason of their birth in the United States. At the outbreak of war, intelligence agencies had apprehended the aliens who were suspected of being dangerous in any way---and those remaining were and are free of any charge. They were not prisoners---they were not internees.

They were housed in new communities called relocation centers. Ten new communities---surrounded with wire fencing---and guarded by military police. At the time, these military guards were necessary, not to confine the evacuees so much as to protect them, because they were suspected by almost everyone and their status was understood by only a few. The fact that they had been removed from their homes in the coastal areas automatically branded them; the fact that they were housed in cantonments which were regimented in their appearance added further to the stigma; and above all---their Japanese ancestry made the average person regard the evacuated people as objects of suspicion. I describe these attitudes in the past tense---but they still exist.

There were many reasons why the responsible military authorities decided on wholesale evacuation of people of Japanese ancestry. Yet---



the fact remained that here was one group of people singled out because of their ancestry, and because they lived in an important strategic zone---to have their personal rights severely restricted--- while German and Italian people in the same area were untouched--- and while other people of Japanese ancestry in other parts of the country were not interfered with in any way.

Let us admit that in carrying on a war effort, it is not possible for the sacrifices to be shared with perfect equality. The gold stars which are appearing on service flags in homes over the land bear mute testimony to that fact. The evacuees---aliens and citizens alike---recognized that they might be asked to make a greater sacrifice than some other groups, and they accepted evacuation as one way in which they could help their government win the war.



But once the evacuation was accomplished, the situation changed. There was---and there is---no ethical or legal justification for detaining loyal American citizens and law abiding aliens any longer than is required to move them back into the productive life of the nation--- and with the same rights, privileges, and responsibilities which are accorded to other residents of the nation. On the basis of this concept, a little more than a year ago, the War Relocation Authority established procedures which would permit evacuees who are American in their loyalties to leave the relocation centers.

We recognized from the start that there were some of the evacuees who should not be accorded the privilege of leaving the centers. Each case had to be handled individually, in the light of

all the available information. Our own information concerning the evacuees had to be developed, and information available from the intelligence agencies was taken into account in considering the case of each person who applied for leave.

Recently a major move of residents of the relocation centers was undertaken---in fact it was completed just a week ago today. Persons who are not eligible to leave the relocation centers have been moved to one center, in northern California, where they will live for an indefinite period, ~~under close guard~~ without the privilege of leaving to live elsewhere in the United States. The residents of all the other relocation centers, except for a relatively small number of individuals whose cases are not yet decided, are now eligible to leave the relocation centers to live wherever they like outside the Pacific Coast zone of exclusion---if they can support themselves and if communities will accept them.

The completion of this segregation process is the culmination of plans laid many months ago---plans which were started almost immediately after we had gathered enough information to make it possible to make well founded decisions as to which of the evacuees should be granted permission to leave.

There were many reasons for carrying on such a program of segregation---not the least of which was that we believe it will do much to further the major objective of the War Relocation Authority---namely the relocation of the great majority of the 70,000 evacuees who are still in the relocation centers but are eligible to leave.



About 21,000 have left the relocation centers in the past year---most of them permanently. It is not possible to predict with accuracy how many of those remaining will find it feasible to leave during the war period. We are not going to resort to coercive measures to accomplish relocation---but we plan to spare no effort in encouraging the eligible evacuees to leave the relocation centers--and to resume life in normal communities.

There is no doubt in our minds that some persuading will be necessary---for the events of the past year and a half have caused many of the evacuees to be uncertain of their future outside the centers; many of them feel that they are too old to make the adjustment to new jobs and new communities. A great many were substantial business men or farmers---and the prospect of working for someone else does not have much appeal to them. In the past year, too, many of the families have become adjusted to living in the relocation centers---so they are fairly comfortable and a relocation center feels like home. It isn't possible to generalize with accuracy about the attitudes of the evacuees toward relocation, but the next big task to which the War Relocation Authority is addressing itself is to show the evacuees that the great majority of them can support themselves and their families---and that they will be better off outside the relocation centers.

There are many reasons why we have made this our major objective. For one thing, operating the relocation centers is an added burden to the taxpayers--which means all of us. Another



consideration, there is manpower in the relocation centers which can make a much greater contribution to the war effort if it is outside.

There are thousands of children in the relocation centers; all of them are American citizens; they will live here all their lives. It is important to them---their parents---and to the nation that they grow up as typically American children. Their Americanization can take place much more rapidly and positively outside a relocation center than inside.

But perhaps the most important reason for encouraging relocation---and gradually eliminating the relocation centers, is the fact that it is in no way consistent with American principles or the American constitution for a group of people to be required to live in isolation---simply because of their ancestry. The more speedily the relocation centers can be emptied---and the loyal American citizens and law abiding aliens in them can be returned to self support---and self respect---the quicker our nation will be living up to the objectives for which we are fighting.

Americans of Japanese ancestry are doing their part in the fighting, as has been reported recently. A unit of American soldiers of Japanese ancestry are in the front lines today as the Allied forces are driving the Germans up the Italian peninsula toward Rome. Not many months ago an American sergeant whose parents were born in Japan was one of an American bomber crew presented to the King and Queen of England. Recently an elderly Japanese couple in one of the relocation centers in Arizona received a letter from their son---an American

soldier in the South Pacific. He wrote the letter from a hospital bed---just after an American officer had pinned on him the Order of the Purple Heart---America's award of honor to her wounded soldiers.

Hundreds of Americans of Japanese ancestry have volunteered for service in the Army, because volunteering at present is the only form of induction open to them. I can't help expressing the hope that in the near future this group of American young men may be treated like all others, and made eligible ^{again} for induction into the armed forces through Selective Service.

Recognizing that evacuation was born of military necessity, the fact remains that unless its effect is overcome we shall have violated the obligations of our American heritage. It stands today as a challenge on the home front as real as any challenge on the battle front. If we fail to meet it---by restoring the full rights to American citizens and law abiding aliens among the evacuees---we shall leave a blot which cannot be covered by an infinite number of military victories. On the other hand---if before the war ends--- this element of our population can be freed from discriminations and restored to self support and self respect---~~then~~ the victory of our armed forces, fighting in the name of democracy, will have real meaning.

The responsible agencies of the government, including the War Relocation Authority, will do all within their power to bring about this restoration---but it also must have the support of the American public as a whole.