

Rep. Matsui Introduces Resolution Honoring the 20th Anniversary of the Civil Liberties Act

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"On Aug. 10, 2008, this nation will acknowledge the 20th Anniversary of the signing of the Civil Liberties Act. This anniversary is an opportunity for all Americans to appreciate our nation's willingness to admit and remedy its past mistakes and for Americans to learn from those past mistakes.

"We must never forget that from past injustice can come great awakening. And today we remember the past to preserve our future freedoms. On Feb. 19, 1942 President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which led to the internment of over 120,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry like my mother and father. During that moment, our government at all levels was blinded by war and made decisions that were contrary to our Constitution.

"The failure of each branch of government to uphold the rights of individuals must be taught so that future generations resist succumbing to the politics of fear. It took nearly three decades before the government began to acknowledge this failure. President Gerald Ford formally rescinded Executive Order 9066 on Feb. 19, 1976. And shortly after, Congress passed legislation which was signed by President Jimmy Carter on July 31, 1980.

"The bill established the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians. Its charge was to investigate the internment of Japanese Americans and legal resident aliens during World War II. After hearing from over 750 witnesses over 20 days of hearings, the Commission published a report entitled: Personal Justice Denied.

"They concluded that Executive Order 9066 was not justified by military necessity. It went on to find that the decision to issue the order was shaped by race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership. Because of these compelling findings, Congress passed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 with bipartisan support.

"The bill granted reparations for interned Japanese Americans. It also formally acknowledged the fundamental injustices resulting from the Executive Order, apologized on behalf of the people of the United States for those injustices, and vowed to discourage similar injustices and violations of civil liberties in the future.

"And today, 20 years later we can reaffirm this commitment. Because of one of the darkest periods of our nation's history, we learned of the damage that can be done when we let the politics of fear cloud our judgment. Our efforts to preserve this painful period of our country's history continue to this day. Many of my colleagues are working to support internment site preservation as the physical reminder of past inequality.

"It is important that future generations will be able to visit the internment camps to gain an understanding of the burdens of past generations...that have allowed us to live in a free and just society today.

"But, there is still work to be done. During its interviews, the Commission discovered efforts of the United States Government during World War II to relocate and intern approximately 2,300 Latin Americans of Japanese descent. These individuals were not only taken from their country to be interned in another country, but they were also exchanged for United States citizens held by Axis nations.

"Additionally, the Government classified German-born and Italian-born immigrants as enemy aliens and required them to carry identification. They restricted their property rights and travel rights during this time period, and arrested, interned, and detained thousands of European Americans.

"All of those who suffered from misguided government policies during World War II deserve to have their stories come to light. Their experience should be fully recognized and preserved for future generations to learn from.

"I hope every American will take this anniversary to reaffirm their commitment to our Constitution and the rights and protections it guarantees for all of us. This commitment is a way to prevent such injustice from ever becoming a reality again.

"As we look back on a time in our nation's history and how our country has responded since, we should have hope for the future."