Facing History and Ourselves

There has been renewed reflection, recently, about the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Was it necessary? Was it ethical? What ongoing damage did it cause to our Japanese American community?

The Commonwealth Club has a story to tell about the relocation and internment of U.S. citizens of Japanese ancestry during the second world war. Sharing the Club's history may help in the continued examination of this important topic.

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, on the recommendation of the officer in charge of the Western Defense Command, General John DeWitt, on February 19, 1942 the Roosevelt administration issued Executive Order 9066. It authorized the secretary of war to set up areas of exclusion within the United States for anyone deemed to be a national security threat. Concern was a possible fifth column or spying for the Axis powers during the war.

On March 21, 1942, Congress passed Public Law 503, allowing the military to enforce Executive Order 9066. The West Coast of the United States was deemed to be an exclusion area for Japanese-Americans, and to a lesser degree, for Italian-Americans and German-Americans. First voluntary, then forced, relocation and internment followed, moving 120,000 American citizens and residents of Japanese ancestry to 10 inland camps in Arizona, Utah, California, Wyoming, Colorado and Arkansas.

In the months following Pearl Harbor, the Roosevelt administration took steps to obtain public support for the relocation and internment policy. General DeWitt and other officials spoke to chambers of commerce, labor unions, veteran’s groups, service clubs and public forums, particularly on the West Coast.

One of the groups they addressed was The Commonwealth Club. The Club was located in San Francisco, where the Presidio, headquarters of the Western Defense Command, was based. Since the WDC was responsible for many of the relocation orders, a number of those responsible for the internment stepped onto the Club’s platform.

In 1942 and 1943, the Club heard speeches supporting wartime relocation from Lt. Colonel Wallace Moore; Dillon S. Myer, director of the war relocation agency; Army Col. Karl Bendetson, Captain George Grandstaff, and others.

By 1944 and 1945, we know that the Club was hearing from those who questioned the internment policy. One of the most famous speeches at the Club during World War II was by Ben Kuroki, a Japanese-American war hero, in 1944. He received a standing ovation at the Club after talking about intolerance and saying that Japanese Americans were entitled to the same rights that Jefferson propounded and for which Washington fought.

A Hollywood entertainer, Joe E. Brown, gave a speech to the Club in 1945 after he returned from entertaining the troops in Europe, in which he criticized the internment.

But by 1944 and 1945, the decisions about relocation had been made and the policy had been implemented. The question arises, did the Club make an effort, early in the war, to amplify voices questioning the relocation and internment policy?

Over the past several decades, the Club has devoted considerable attention to the internment and its aftermath. This has included holding forums on the civil rights, ethics, legal and justice implications of the relocation. There have been several presentations at the Club about the Korematsu case. Fred Korematsu was a Japanese American who defied the internment order. Represented by the ACLU, he filed a suit over the evacuation and incarceration that went to the U.S. Supreme Court. Lillian Nakagawa, the volunteer chair of the Club’s Asia-Pacific Member-Led Forum, has organized a number of these forums over the years, including presentations by Fred’s daughter, Dr. Karen Korematsu.

We have hosted personal reflections about being interned, including by actor George Takei, former Transportation and Commerce Secretary Norm Mineta, poet and playwright Hiroshi Kashiwagi, and former congressman Mike Honda.

The Club has presented several of its California Book Awards to works about the internment, including The Great Betrayal by Audrie Girdner and Anne Loftis and a children’s book about the internment, A Jar of Dreams, by Yoshiko Uchida.

On our YouTube channel, there is a playlist on “The Japanese-American Experience During World War II.”

In thinking about what more we can do to help us as an organization and our nation to assess the internment, the first step is to share what we know about our history, and to explore it further through documentary records. For example, we know that Ernest Besig, head of the ACLU of Northern California, who sued on behalf of Fred Korematsu, was a Commonwealth Club member.

We have not yet found any evidence that his voice, or the voices of others opposed to the internment, were heard at the Club early in the war. If they weren’t, why not?

Beyond that, the questions surrounding public debate about the internment policy early in the war underline another critical point. As we move forward, it is so important to ensure that we foster a wide range of views and voices, even if they are unpopular at the time.