

Weekly Column of November 19, 2000

"WITH LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL"

The Role of Crystal City, Texas in World War II

By Congressman Ciro D. Rodriguez

(WASHINGTON, DC) During World War II, America's brave sons and daughters were called upon to defend the world from the emerging threat of the Axis powers in Europe and the Pacific. Fascist dictators, and the military machines they led, threatened freedom and liberty -- values which define the heart of our Constitution.

On the global battlefield, the United States entered the war to defend freedom and justice, yet at home, our government took action that denied those very rights to some groups of people. Two days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the FBI, in cooperation with the governments of several Latin American countries - most notably Peru, Panama, and Nicaragua - began a campaign of abduction and deportation of more than 3,000 residents of Latin America. The majority of those deported, 2,264, were Latin Americans of Japanese descent. Latin Americans of German and Italian descent were equally mistreated.

These innocent victims were targeted for their ethnicity, betrayed by their governments, abducted from their homes, and deported to the United States far away from their family, friends, and culture. Arrested in their homes, at work, or at school, Japanese, German, and Italian Latin Americans were deported to the United States. Their assets were confiscated by their governments. Stripped naked and doused with insecticide, they were imprisoned in South Texas internment camps.

Labeled "enemy aliens" by the War Department, their ordeal did not end in Crystal City. Almost 900 of the Japanese Latin American internees were traded to Japan for American prisoners of war. Many of them had never been to Japan, and some only spoke Spanish.

When this story was first brought to my attention, I could not believe that the United States could have treated anyone so callously. Yet State Department diplomatic files, interdepartmental correspondence of the departments of Justice, War, and Navy, FBI reports, Immigration and Naturalization Service records, passenger lists, internment camp records, and personal recollections of former internees and officials, all confirm the sad truth.

Following the final days of WWII, the Latin American governments refused to accept the return of the internees. Similarly, Japan had no interest in the

Latin Americans. The US Immigration and Naturalization Service recognized the internees, who had their documents confiscated, as illegal aliens and refused to grant them citizenship. In August 1946, they were paroled. While most remained stateless, Public Law 414 made them eligible for US citizenship nearly a decade after their deportation to the United States. They and their children remain in the United States.

Last week I visited the site of the Crystal City internment camp, where a majority of the Latin Americans were held. Art Shibayama accompanied me - marking his first visit to Crystal City since his internment there over 50 years ago. His plight, and the plight of nearly 3000 other internees, is memorialized by a small monument that stands over the crumbled camp's foundation.

Japanese Latin Americans were not the only victims of American internment policy. Besides the Italian and German Latin Americans, more than 100,000 Americans of Japanese descent lost their freedom in the United States and were confined until the end of World War II. In 1988, President Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 and offered redress of \$20,000 to more than 81,000 Japanese Americans for their forced relocation. However, this Act did not provide relief for Japanese Latin Americans who likewise were unjustly interned in the United States.

I have joined Congressman Xavier Becerra in sponsoring legislation, the Wartime Parity and Justice Act (HR 4735), which would recognize the disparity in reparations. In addition, the legislation would re-authorize educational funding mandated by the 1988 Act but never rendered. The funds were designated to ensure that this important part of history is never forgotten. These former internees have waited half a century for justice to be served. It's about justice for the Japanese Latin Americans and about responsibility for the United States government.

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