

Jodie Bernstein: The Efficient Leader¹

By Genevieve Beske

Anyone who has ever been in charge of a project can tell you that a commanding presence is necessary to get work done. Jodie Bernstein, chair of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians that recommended reparations to Japanese Americans interned during World War II, is perhaps one of the best examples of efficiency and assertiveness under pressure. Elected as chair by her eight other colleagues on the Commission, she was chosen under the assumption that “the girl would get the work done.” Ms. Bernstein did not let them down.

In the immediate aftermath of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt signed an executive order forcibly relocating over 100,000 Japanese Americans to internment camps due to anti-Japanese sentiment. Relegated to shacks and enclosed by barbed wire, internees had to abandon homes, communities, and businesses.

Forty years later, Ms. Bernstein’s Commission, composed mainly of elected officials, conducted eleven hearings from July to September 1981 to investigate the necessity of the internment and to determine what remedy, if any, was appropriate under the circumstances.

Heading a committee full of politically entangled congressmen would be difficult enough on its own, but Ms. Bernstein also had to tackle an issue with many thorns. Right off the bat, the Commission’s main focus was on achieving unanimity “at least on the findings, never mind on the remedies, but both,” if possible. The process of gathering the findings involved hearing from more than 750 witnesses interned or affected by internment. Bernstein powered through them with a no-nonsense approach. She recalls her colleague Senator Matsunaga begging her to bring the Commission to Hawaii, but declined, as “it just looked bad to take nine people to Hawaii in the winter.” Besides, she had work to do.

Consensus on the findings was hardly the most difficult job for the Commission. The issue of reparations was riddled with disagreements, as many of the hardships faced by interned Japanese Americans were difficult to quantify, such as racial stigma and lack of job education. Bernstein looks back on it as the most challenging aspect of her job. She recalls: “It was the one area that I didn’t know if I was going to have any consensus whatsoever.” Something this divisive could have resulted in the whole Congress opposed, save the four Japanese-American congressmen, who would “be torn to smithereens by it.”

As the inquiry occurred forty years after the war, many were split on the best course of action: whether to pursue monetary funding, or whether that would be counterproductive and give rise to racism. Ms. Bernstein drew comparisons to Jewish people during and after World War II, who had a “horrible” time deciding “who was going to speak up, [while] others that took the position

¹ Based on the oral history of Jodie Bernstein taken by Professor Vicki C. Jackson for the Historical Society of the District of Columbia Circuit.

... don't rock the boat, don't make waves." The Japanese during the reparations debate divided along similar lines and worried that racists would take advantage of any perceived conflict.

Others were concerned that reparations offered preferential treatment to only a few abused minorities. The Commission faced concerns about consistency, considering the lack of reparations given to slaves. Many cited civil rights laws as sufficient compensation, although others took the stance that slaves had been made to suffer for 200 years in various ways, so "why would you do it here if you didn't do it there?"

Ms. Bernstein sped up the Commission's work to unprecedented levels, ultimately finishing after two years, to the shock of her Washington colleagues. Senator Inouye remarked on the intense pace of the project, to which Bernstein replied, "Senator, I believe this is already 40 years old, that if we don't finish it now, [we're] not really going to." This philosophy was not new to Ms. Bernstein. She placed the project on the fast track from the start. "It's one of the things that I just feel that when you undertake – I don't know, it's something inherent – get it done," she recalled.

In 1983, the Commission issued its 467-page report entitled "Personal Justice Denied," which concluded that the internment of Japanese Americans lacked any legitimate justification and amounted to a "grave injustice." All nine members of the Commission unanimously endorsed its findings. The report gave considerable momentum to the reparations question, and in 1988, President Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act, which gave a formal apology to the Japanese American community and paid out \$20,000 to every surviving victim. It was Jodie Bernstein's drive and determination in the face of a challenge that gave such a life-changing project the spark it needed to be successful.