



Ghost of Manzanar Hangs Over US Congressional Hearing on Muslim "Radicalization"

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By John McGlynn -- Worried by a US political climate that in some respects bears an uncomfortable resemblance to the fear mongering that 70 years ago led to the forced relocation of more than 100,000 Japanese American citizens from the west coast and southwest to internment camps located in the American interior, some Japanese Americans are speaking out against the US Congressional hearing planned for March 10 by New York Representative Peter King to examine the alleged "radicalization of the American Muslim community."

In a December 2010 [op-ed](#), King cited as evidence of this radicalization a failure by Muslim leaders to cooperate with US law enforcement officials investigating terrorist threats, which he claims provides an opening for al-Qaida to recruit "homegrown terrorists", and a [May 2007 Pew Poll](#) that showed 15% of Muslim Americans age 18-29 say suicide bombing is justified. As chairman of the Homeland Security Committee, which will host the hearing, King intends to "drive the public debate on Islamic radicalization."

However, a [letter](#) signed by 40 human rights and civil liberties organizations sent to King calls the characterization of US Muslim leaders as uncooperative with counterterrorism efforts "demonstrably false." Instead, "numerous law enforcement officials have gone on the record to dispute this allegation, academic studies have catalogued the assistance Muslims have provided to anti-terrorism efforts, and the [40 organizations that signed the letter] work closely with many Muslim civil rights and advocacy groups that are deeply involved in efforts to improve security policies."

The 40 organizations warn that the real issue is King's intention to treat "an entire community as suspect because of the bad acts or intolerant statements of a few." This they argue "is imprudent and unfair, and in the past has only led to greater misunderstanding, injustice and discrimination."

Their letter makes reference to the World War II internment of Japanese American and other ugly acts of government-sanctioned prejudice:

Erroneous theories of eugenics supported racist immigration policies and Jim Crow anti-miscegenation laws for decades. Misguided 'red' scares and racism drove abominable policies like blacklists, McCarthyism and Japanese internment, betrayed American values and did not improve security. To avoid the same mistakes, the Committee should rely on facts and scientifically rigorous analysis, not biased opinions or unsupported theories positing a discernable 'radicalization' process that are belied by available evidence. 'Radicalization' is simply a euphemism for religious and ideological profiling, which can only lead to further discrimination.

The letter ends by advising King and his Committee to avoid government policies based on "fear and misunderstanding." Instead, the focus should be on "actual terrorist acts and those who commit them rather than on the adoption of beliefs or the expression of dissent" and on taking a "fact-based approach enhanced with scientifically rigorous analysis [that] will likely be more successful at providing a clear picture of the threats [Americans] face" that employs "appropriate methods" of counterterrorism that do not violate "the constitutional rights of innocent persons."

The Pew Poll finding on suicide bombing, while seemingly provocative, explains little without context. The poll failed to ask young Muslims what kind of suicide bombing is justified (defense of religion, defense against external attack or other reasons?) and provides no comparison with the attitudes of non-Muslim American youth toward mass destruction suicide missions.

Moreover, the poll, even if it raises justifiable concern about Muslim youth, has to be considered against the repression the Muslim community in America has suffered before and in intensified form since 9-11 and decades of massive US-led wars against Muslims in the Middle East.

Then there's the ironic twist that "long before he became an outspoken voice in Congress about the threat from terrorism, [King] was a fervent supporter of a terrorist group, the Irish Republican Army." As [reported](#) in the New York Times, the New York Congressman "does not regret his past pro-I.R.A. statements." In an apparent attempt at self-justification, King told the Times that the IRA's battle of resistance against British rule "was a dirty war on both sides."

A [different letter](#) was sent by 51 groups concerned with civil and human rights and national security, including the Japanese American Citizens League, which [describes itself](#) as the "largest Asian American civil rights organization" in the US. This second letter condemns King for suggesting that Muslim Americans "are somehow less American simply by virtue of their faith" when he made this [comment](#) during a radio broadcast in January: "When a war begins, we're all Americans. But in this case, this is not the situation. And whether it's pressure, whether it's cultural tradition, whatever, the fact is the Muslim community does not cooperate anywhere near to the extent that it should. The irony is that we're living in two different worlds."

According to the [March 8 Washington Post](#), in Sacramento the Japanese American Citizens League and the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a civil rights group for the US Muslim community, hosted an annual 350-mile bus trip to the Manzanar internment camp, located near the Sierra Nevada mountains in California. Manzanar, now a historic site managed by the US National Park Service, was one of 10 camps created to imprison 110,000 Japanese Americans. As the *Post* explains, "more than 10,000 Japanese were interned there, an ordeal recounted in 'Farewell to Manzanar,' the well-known 1983 memoir by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston."

Also objecting is California Representative Mike Honda, who as a child was confined to an internment camp in Colorado because of his Japanese ancestry. In February Honda [wrote](#) that "hundreds of thousands of innocent Japanese Americans were unjustly placed under scrutiny and suspicion because few in Washington were brave enough to say 'no.' The decision to incarcerate, according to a report by the congressionally mandated Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, was based on 'race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership.'"

Honda continues: "Now, decades later, something similarly sinister is returning to our country." King's apparent intention, he writes, "seems clear: To cast suspicion upon all Muslim Americans and to stoke the fires of anti-Muslim prejudice and Islamophobia."

While readily granting that "protecting our homeland from acts of violence should be a top priority for policymakers," Honda wants Americans to "remember that no entire community can be held responsible for the acts of a few people. A 'presumption of guilt' should never be applied collectively."

Lastly, US Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, together with allies in the House, are [promoting](#) legislation that would grant the US military the "right to detain, hold and interrogate detainees at its discretion" without review by the Department of Justice, the US Attorney General or any other civilian authority. Already there are presidential orders and precedents for indefinite detention and even assassination of Americans on the basis of a non-reviewable government allegation of involvement in terrorist activity. Placing the full extent of these powers in the hands of the US military not only has frightening implications for Muslim Americans, but also conjures up an image of military dictatorship.

Note: YouTube has a number of online videos on Japanese American internment. Three of interest:

1. A jauntily presented US government propaganda film that contradicts itself by portraying imprisoned Japanese Americans as both dangerous and loyal to America ([here](#)).
2. An interview with George Takei ("Mr. Sulu" in the 1960s Star Trek television series), who became a child prisoner in a Japanese American camp at age 4. Takei talks about a young life lived behind barbed wire in a "concentration camp" (the euphemism, as he notes, was "relocation center") guarded by soldiers in towers with machine guns ([here](#)).
3. A mini documentary on the hysteria surrounding creation of the Japanese American internment camps ([here](#)).