

## **Governor Ralph Carr: A Study in the Protection of Civil Liberties**

The most devastating threat facing American democracy today is indifference. In an era when only half of eligible voters go to the polls, we needn't look far to see the difference apathy can make. That is why it is our responsibility as citizens to understand our civil liberties and know where they have come from. As we seek to protect the Bill of Rights in the future, we must turn to the actions of the past for guidance.

60 years ago this year, America celebrated the defeat of Hitler and fascism. Ironically, however, as American soldiers won democracy abroad, an egregious abuse of civil liberties unfolded on the home front.

With Japan's 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, old resentment towards west coast Japanese-Americans broke loose. Between February 19<sup>th</sup> and March 27<sup>th</sup>, 1942, FDR's administration asked over 100,000 Japanese-Americans to voluntarily leave their homes and move inland. With discrimination and war hysteria building on the pacific coast, many were desperate to get out. However, there were few places to go.

As soon as the call for relocation went out, Governors across the Midwest began to bar Japanese-Americans from entering their states. Idaho Governor Chase Clark said they would be welcome in his state only in "concentration camps under military guard." Nevada leaders threatened any entering Japanese-Americans with immediate arrest, and New Mexico's governor John Miles vowed to do "whatever it takes" to keep them out.

Yet, as panic mounted, one leader remained calm. On February 28<sup>th</sup>, Colorado Governor Ralph Carr delivered a stunning address to the people of his state. "We cannot test...a man's...devotion to his country by the birthplace of his grandfathers," he said.

Carr vowed that Colorado would gladly welcome any Japanese-Americans who wished to settle here.

Backlash against Carr was swift and devastating. Only days later, the Denver City Council issued a resolution opposing relocation, and the Colorado branch of the American War Mothers voted unanimously to support the creation of “concentration camps” for all peoples of Japanese descent. Across the state, anger stirred over the governor’s actions.

However, nearly 2000 Japanese-Americans heeded Carr’s promise of protection and moved to Colorado. “To Americans born citizen of Japanese parentage, we look for example and guidance,” he told the new Coloradans, “To those who have not been so fortunate as to have been born in this country, we offer the hand of friendship, secure in the knowledge that they will be as truly American as the rest of us.”

However, Carr’s “hand of friendship” would not be enough. His single voice of reason could not carry over the tide of hate sweeping the country. On March 27<sup>th</sup>, 1942, the federal government ended voluntary relocation and began a comprehensive program of total evacuation. Within a few months, approximately 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry were forcibly removed from their west coast homes without due process and placed in internment camps in the most desolate areas of the Midwest.

Only eight months after his courageous stand, Ralph Carr too would be exiled. For him, it was from a future in politics. In the November 1942 election, he ran to replace Democrat Ed Johnson in the United States Senate. In a year when Colorado republicans won the vast majority of offices they ran for, the extremely popular Carr was defeated. Internment was almost certainly the deciding issue.

It has now been more than half a century since the Japanese-American internment and Carr's stand for civil liberties. Yet, the importance of his action lives on. In the face of overwhelming opposition, he chose to speak for the Bill of Rights. Although he could not stop the tide of hate against Japanese-Americans, Ralph Carr refused to keep silent in the face of constitutional discrimination. We too must examine our country, and the freedoms we are afforded. Should ever we feel they are in danger, we must not be afraid stand up and speak out, for indifference is sometimes as deadly as opposition. Even when the tide of opposition seems overwhelming, we must not be deterred. As Holocaust survivor and writer Eli Weisel once wrote, "there may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest."