

US congressman defends WWII internment of Japanese-Americans

Republican heads domestic security committee

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The newly appointed head of the US House of Representatives subcommittee on terrorism and domestic security said last week that he agreed with the incarceration of more than 100,000 Japanese-Americans during World War II.

Speaking on a February 5 radio call-in show, Howard Coble, a Republican representative from North Carolina, said the internment was “appropriate at the time,” adding, “We were at war. We were under attack by a sovereign nation.”

Coble was replying to a caller who suggested that the Bush administration similarly round up all Arabs in the United States and send them to prison camps. While Coble said he disagreed with that proposal, he defended President Roosevelt’s decision to forcibly relocate Japanese-Americans into concentration camps.

Coble attempted to portray Roosevelt’s actions as an effort to protect Japanese-Americans from an angry American population. Roosevelt’s measures were “in no small way for their own protection,” he claimed. They “were an endangered species,” Coble said, adding that “for many of these Japanese-Americans, it wasn’t safe for them to be on the street.”

While saying he opposed a mass roundup of Arabs today, Coble said the internment of Japanese-Americans 60 years ago was justified by national security considerations, and added, “Some [Japanese-Americans] probably were intent on doing harm to us, just as some of these Arab-Americans are probably intent on doing harm to us.”

In February of 1942 President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which branded Japanese Americans “enemy aliens” and ordered them out of California, Arizona, Oregon and Washington.

Approximately 110,000 people of Japanese descent, mostly US citizens, were evacuated from their homes to internment camps scattered throughout the desert and rural areas in the interior of the US. They were first placed in temporary housing, including converted horse stables, until permanent camps were built, where they lived in barracks, surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards until the war ended three years later.

Coble expressed his support for these measures less than a week after being picked to chair the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security. The subcommittee, which is overseeing the formation of the new federal Department of Homeland Security and anti-terrorism legislation, also monitors the US Department of Justice, the FBI, the Bureau of Prisons and many operations of the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

The North Carolina Republican is typical of the right-wing politicians the Bush administration has picked to spearhead the assault on civil liberties and democratic rights. The 10-term Republican, first elected in 1984, received a 100 percent rating from the Christian Coalition, 91 percent from the National Tax Limitation Coalition and only 15 percent from the liberal Americans for Democratic Action in 2000. In addition to new anti-terrorism legislation, Coble’s subcommittee is considering the use of prison labor in the furniture and textile industries—both centered in North Carolina. His home district includes Highpoint, which is known as the furniture capital of the world.

Upon entering Congress, Coble was assigned to lead the Republican opposition to a bill to compensate Japanese Americans who were interned. After years of protests, President Reagan signed legislation in 1988,

which apologized for the “grave wrong” and created a \$1.25 billion trust fund for reparations. Coble voted against that bill.

Several Japanese-American, Arab-American and civil liberties organizations denounced Coble’s remarks. John Tateishi, the executive director of the Japanese American Citizen League, called for Coble to resign his chairmanship of the House subcommittee, saying, “We are flabbergasted that a man who supports racial profiling and ethnic scapegoating” chairs the subcommittee.

Those incarcerated in the prison camps also spoke out. Jimi Yamaichi told the *San Jose Mercury News* that such views are dangerous and could be used against Arabs and Muslims in the United States. “It’s really scary to hear these kinds of comments because he can twist people’s arms into treating Muslims unfairly,” said Yamaichi, 80, whose family of 11 lived in the Heart Mountain, Wyoming, relocation center and Tule Lake internment camp from 1942 to 1946.

Representative Mike Honda, a Democrat from California, spent time as a child in a Colorado internment camp. Calling Coble’s remarks “preposterous,” he said his father told him as a child that it was absurd to believe internment was for their own protection. “He said, ‘Mike, if it’s for your own protection, you have to wonder why you’re inside barbed wire with machine guns pointed at you,’” Honda told the *Los Angeles Times*.

Badi Ali, the head of Muslims for a Better North Carolina, also pointed to anti-Arab remarks made by US Representative Sue Myrick, a Republican from Charlotte, North Carolina. During a recent speech to the conservative Heritage Foundation she decried the supposed danger of terrorism from Arabs living in the US, saying, “[L]ook who runs all the convenience stores.... Every little town you go into, you know?”

Despite Coble’s assurances that the US government is too “tolerant” to consider setting up internment camps for Arab Americans, at least one Bush administration official has already floated the idea. Last July Peter Kirsanow, a Bush-appointed member of the US Civil Rights Commission, cited the mass detention of Japanese Americans during World War II during a Detroit hearing.

He declared that in the event of another terrorist attack on the US, “[N]ot too many people will be

crying in their beer if there are more detentions, more stops, more profiling.” He added that if another terrorist attack occurred and it “came from the same ethnic group that attacked the World Trade Center, you can forget about civil rights.”



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