

Friday, June 8, 2007

Ansel Adams decried WWII Japanese-American internment; then there was Dr. Seuss.

Tom Kobayashi, Manzanar Relocation Center, California 1943. Photographed by Ansel Adams. From Library of Congress website. The United States has a shameful history of racism and sexism, including official racism and sexism. The list is long, and includes gross violence and racism against Native Americans, Africans and African-Americans (including slavery), ethnic Japanese (including forced relocation to concentration camps during World War II), and the list goes on; denial of voting rights to women and African-Americans; the maintenance of lily white all-male juries in many jurisdictions; and the list goes on. Voting six to three, the Supreme Court allowed president Roosevelt to continue with the World War II concentration camps for Japanese-Americans. *Korematsu v. U.S.*, 323 U.S. 214 (1944). Defendant Fred Korematsu was convicted to five years of probation for avoiding president Roosevelt's executive order sending Japanese-Americans to concentration camps. Curiously, a PBS report suggests that his actions were less for any political convictions than to avoid being separated from his girlfriend. Forty years after his conviction, Fred Korematsu got his conviction overturned by a federal trial court through a writ of *coram nobis*. The trial court determined that the Supreme Court's 1944 decision against him likely would have been different had the Court known that the Army had altered evidence to exaggerate claims of the threat of spying and disloyalty by Japanese-Americans. Fortunately, people beyond the legal community (the American Civil Liberties Union represented Mr. Korematsu before the Supreme Court) cried out against the Japanese-American concentration camps. One of them was renowned photographer Ansel Adams. In 1943, Mr. Adams took extensive striking photos at Manzanar Relocation Center in California; some of the photos are shown here, here, here, and here. He said: "The purpose of my work was to show how these people, suffering under a great injustice, and loss of property, businesses and professions, had overcome the sense of defeat and despair [sic] by building for themselves a vital community in an arid (but magnificent) environment. All in all, I think this Manzanar Collection is an important historical document, and I trust it can be put to good use." Forty-six years later, in 1988, the United States apologized for the concentration camps through the Civil Liberties Act. In a 1993 apology letter, President Clinton acknowledged that the concentration camp internment took place involved "racial prejudice, wartime hysteria, and a lack of political leadership." Eight years later, the Bush II administration, with Congressional complicity and participation, unleashed a massive post-September 11 assault on civil liberties (including the PATRIOT Act, violations of basic rights of Guantanamo inmates and other terror suspects, unconstitutional spying, suspected passenger lists, and the list goes on), with Moslems being rampantly and unconstitutionally profiled for investigation. On the flip side, I am trying to learn Theodor Geisel's/Dr. Seuss's views on Japanese-American internment and on Japanese people in general during World War II. A start for my ongoing efforts to answer this question include the following: this Volokh discussion thread; this view on Japan Probe; this Dr. Seuss illustration of Japanese-Americans; and this discussion of his expressions against prejudice. Beyond Dr. Seuss and Ansel Adams, worthwhile to this whole issue is the website of the National Japanese American Memorial Foundation. The memorial itself is just about two blocks north of the Capitol building, on a triangular plot bounded by Louisiana Avenue, New Jersey Avenue and D Street NW. I have visited the memorial, and recommend that visitors to Washington include it on their agendas. Jon Katz.

Posted by Jon Katz in Jon's news & views at 06:10