

Fletcher Bowron

Fletcher Bowron, mayor of Los Angeles from 1938 to 1953, succumbed to mass hysteria and lobbied to get Japanese Americans removed from Southern California for fear that a Pearl Harbor type attack would occur in Los Angeles.

A confidential memo indicates that Bowron's office discussed the idea of incarcerating Japanese Americans as early as January 1942. While logistics were hashed out, Bowron's office embarked on a propaganda campaign to convince the Japanese Americans in Los Angeles that 1) Japan was overtaken by the Nazis; 2) even a single act of sabotage would have dire consequences for all Japanese Americans; and 3) loyalty could only be measured by informing on alleged disloyals.

At the same time, all Los Angeles City employees of Japanese descent were forced to take a leave of absence.

Bowron knew there would be constitutional problems with any mass detention of Americans of Japanese descent. Before becoming mayor, Bowron had practiced law and served as a judge on the Superior Court of Los Angeles County for six years.

Bowron wrote to the Los Angeles Bar Association, requesting them to form a committee comprised of bar members and constitutional law professors to study a congressional action he wanted to submit.

Bowron's plan proposed that anyone, who held dual citizenship with a country that was at war with the United States and are descendants of immigrants not entitled to U.S. citizenship, was governed by the laws of that foreign nation and had no rights as U.S. citizens; but that the U.S. government had the power to circumvent the Selective Service Act and call these people into non-combat military service, regardless of physical qualification, age or sex. Bowron wanted this ratified as a constitutional amendment.

During this time, Bowron met with various representatives from the Department of Justice, Navy and Army, including with Lt. Gen. John DeWitt, who played a huge role in getting Japanese Americans incarcerated.

By February 1942, Bowron made several public radio announcements on station KECA, urging the mass removal of Japanese Americans.

On a February 19, 1942 – the same day that President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which gave the military the authority to exclude anyone from anywhere – Bowron made a radio broadcast suggesting the Parker Indian Reservation on the Arizona side of the Colorado River as a possible detention site for Japanese Americans.

Bowron mailed a formal Parker Indian Reservation site proposal on Feb. 20, 1942, to Congressman Costello and Tom C. Clark, special assistant to the Attorney General. It is not clear how much weight Bowron's proposal had in the government's final decision to open the Colorado River Relocation Center, more commonly known as the Poston War Relocation Authority (WRA) camp, where at its peak population, the camp held more than 17,800 Japanese Americans.

It is obvious, however, that Bowron's recommendation to close the Manzanar WRA site due to competing water supplies with Los Angeles residents fell on deaf ears.

Bowron's correspondences and KECA radio announcements disregard historical racism that shaped every facet of Japanese American life – from immigration to birthing patterns to the inability to secure professional jobs. Instead, everything the Japanese American did came under suspicion. Å

In a Feb. 20, 1940 letter to Tom C. Clark special assistant to the Attorney General, Bowron writes in part:

“Incidentally, I have also been advised that the Japanese on Terminal Island in addition to owning and operating 300 or more passenger automobiles have approximately 40 trucks, some as large as three ton capacity. These trucks have ostensibly been used to carry produce and other articles from the Los Angeles market. All of this automotive equipment could, of course, be put to good advantage in connection with the carrying out of any hostile plan of attack.”

“I have also been getting information as to the extensive automotive equipment owned by Japanese in this and other sections of the state. I am told that many of the farmers along the coast who have for years been doing all work by hand, bending over rows of vegetables and berries, have within the last few years purchased large numbers of tractors. Tractors, of course, could be readily utilized in pulling heavy war equipment from the beaches in the event of a troop landing.”

“Bowron to Clark, Feb. 20, 1942
(Huntington Library, Bowron Papers, Box 52)

In 1943, a year after the mass eviction and incarceration of Japanese Americans, the government began releasing the Japanese Americans after concluding that the vast majority posed no problems.

However, Bowron, in a June 2, 1943, KECA radio broadcast vehemently opposed the return of Japanese Americans to Southern California and alluded that there could be an outbreak of violence. Bowron felt that the very fact that there had been no Japanese American sabotage meant, they should still be under scrutiny.

"This is evidenced by the statement of Dillon S. Myer, head of the relocation authority, who is quoted as saying, in justification for the release of Japanese, that there have been no acts of sabotage, and not one single instance of disloyal activity has been reported among those that have thus far been released. Of course, there has not. The Japanese are too smart for that."

â€” Bowron broadcast on KECA, Wednesday, June 2, 1943, 7:45 p.m.
(Huntington Library, Bowron papers, Box 52)

Earlier, on May 26, 1943, Bowron made a KECA statement where he publicly said that Japanese Americans should have their United States citizenship revoked.

"Now I am going to endeavor to demonstrate that the suggestion of depriving native-born Japanese of citizenship will not affect other minority groups and is not based on race prejudice, but solidly on legal principles and in accordance with fundamental American rights. I feel that there are not and never can be such a thing as Japanese-Americans. They are all Japanese, wherever born, and they can never be Americansâ€”as we want to know and feel the term "American." The claim of Japanese born in this country to be regarded as American citizens under the United States Constitution hangs by a very narrow legal thread, one of legal interpretations, upon which the best legal minds differ, an interpretation which could be changed, in my opinion, by an act of Congress, without a constitutional amendment.â€”

"My answer to the question, â€”Do you feel that the Japanese born in this country should be deprived of â€”citizenship' is â€”Yes. I repeat â€”Yes,' even though there are apparently some well meaning American citizens who would like to embrace the Japanese as brothers."

â€” Bowron broadcast on KECA, Wednesday, May 26, 1943, 7:45 p.m.
(Huntington Library, Bowron papers, Box 52)

Years after the war, Bowron admitted his regrets and downplayed his actions in advocating the mass detention of Japanese Americans.