

Committee on Resources

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Ben Blaz

Former Member of Congress (1985-93)

Testimony

Before the Committee on Resources
United States House of Representatives

Oversight Hearing

on the Guam War Claims Commission Report
July 21, 2004

Chairman Pombo and members of the Committee, I thank you heartily for inviting me to testify in today's oversight hearing on the Guam War Claims Review Commission Report. There is a dose of synchronicity at play in your holding this meeting today, July 21, an auspicious date in the history of Guam. I am deeply honored and profoundly proud to appear before you here in the U.S. Congress on behalf of my people. I hope to help sharpen the focus on an important piece of unfinished business that has been languishing in the manana file for many decades.

A question in the Disclosure Requirement form that witnesses are required to complete caught my attention and brought a smile to my aging face: what training or educational experience qualifies you to testify on the subject of the hearing? My answer: "on-the-job training under duress at a forced labor camp and involuntary attendance at a school of hard knocks run by hostile guards in enemy occupied territory." I am here as Defense Exhibit A for those Chamorro sons and daughters of Guam caught in the crossfire of World War II.

My compliments to my successors, Congressman Robert Underwood and Congresswoman Madeleine Bordallo, and you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee for your efforts in getting us to this juncture in our long odyssey to resolve an issue which has torn the hearts of American citizens on Guam who survived the occupation. To Chairman Tamargo and fellow commissioners on the Guam War Claims Review Commission, I tip my hat and extend to you a hearty Naval compliment, Bravo Zulu, for a report well researched, well documented, well written, and exceedingly well done.

Your report captured the shining loyalty of the Chamorros of World War II to America which sustained them during the difficult years of occupation. Their appreciation for their liberation made many of them hesitant to seek compensation for death, injuries, and damages in the years immediately following liberation. As one of our elders put it, when someone saves you from drowning, you do not turn around and demand payment for broken bones sustained during your rescue. In its generosity, however, the United States immediately set in motion the process for seeking compensation which, though well intentioned, was not well publicized, understood, and was poorly executed.

In its thorough review of past efforts to resolve this issue, the Commission succeeded in recalling where we have been and recommending where we could go. I fully support the conclusions and recommendations in the report. As in the past, there will be those who would disagree with some of the findings. Some would want additional hearings and discussions, ad infinitum.

In 1990, we came breathtakingly close to resolving the issue in both the House and the Senate. In preparation for a final hearing, I obtained the signatures of all 21 members of the Guam Legislature indicating their concurrence on a proposed final change to the bill before launching it for consideration by the House and the Senate. Several of the legislators from Guam who had initially indicated their concurrence later changed their positions when they came to Washington for a hearing. The bill died instantly. That was fourteen years ago. If this issue is not resolved this year or next, it is likely that there would be no survivors left to testify when the next cycle of revisiting this issue comes around again in the next decade or so.

I urge the Administration and the Congress to support legislation to resolve this matter and bring closure to

an issue that has lingered and aggravated many of our people for decades. While monetary compensation is the centerpiece of formal hearings, those of my generation have long felt that three little words would have meant a lot to us.

A few years ago, I accompanied the Secretary of Defense to Guam. During the long journey, several drafts were shown him on what he should say on arrival. At one point, he asked me which draft I thought would be the right one. I told him that none of them stated the right message. I said that three little words would mean much more than 300. When he got to Guam, his opening words were those three little words: Thank you, Guam.

The shining love and devotion for America is so pronounced in the fabric of Guam's culture. Seeing the former Japanese mandated islands around Guam receive more attention from the United States than it gave to Guam was a jarring blow to the pride of our people. While so much attention was focused on the former mandated islands to develop a political relationship with the United States, Guam was left languishing and struggling for attention and acceptance in its quest for a new political status with the U.S. Two little words capture the essence of this sentiment: Unrequited love.

For many years following World War II, a group of eight friends and I would have a reunion and thank the Good Lord for the good fortune that came our way that helped us reach our goals in life. As we got older, we became more dismayed that the war reparations matter had not been resolved. My friends included Guam's first PhD recipient, first dentist, first monsignor, first post WWII lawyer, first physician, educators, and governors. At our get-togethers, we would hail our good fortune but lament the lingering problem of war reparations and related issues. My friends have all passed away and I have a confirmed reservation at the National Cemetery in Arlington.

In the language of my people, Si Yu'os Maase. It is our way of saying thank you. Its literal translation is, May God have mercy on you.