2nd Place Senior Essay

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***Lone Upstander in a Time of War***

On December 27, 2016 two solemn world leaders visited the USS Arizona Memorial to remember the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Among their messages of peace and reconciliation seven decades after the war were these words: “Even when hatred burns hottest, even when the tug of tribalism is at its most primal, we must resist the urge to turn inward…to demonize those who are different” (The White House).

In a moment when this phrase uttered by then-President Barack Obama seems especially meaningful against the backdrop of immigration bans and so-called “shithole countries,” I am reminded of one “upstander” who, like Elie Wiesel, embodied the spirit of Obama’s words. Ralph Carr was the governor of Colorado from 1939 to 1943, and in the prime of his career, was considered a potential vice-presidential running mate to Wendell Wilkie for the Republican Party.

But in 1942, Governor Carr showed the political courage to stand up for a profoundly American principle at the expense of his personal ambition. Carr opposed Presidential Executive Order 9066 (EO9066), which mandated the internment of 120,000 Japanese-Americans on the West Coast two weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The order dispossessed resident Japanese of their homes, jobs, and livelihood without due process and interned them in camps in the Midwest and Southwest, including Carr’s home state. The Colorado governor was no less patriotic than any other politician; he supported President Roosevelt’s declaration of war against Japan. But Carr could not, in good conscience, support EO 9066, even amidst the frenzied patriotic atmosphere that called for avenging an attack on the homeland.

I believe Carr’s conviction not to be a bystander and to fight for social justice and equality stemmed from his humble roots, as well as his deep and abiding respect for the values of the Constitution. As the son of poor miners, Carr had to work his way through college and law school (Paul). Recruited by the Republican Party to run for governor because of his acclaimed legal work on water rights for the state, Carr won the 1938 election and immediately hired and African-American railway worker to staff his office in a demonstration of racial equality (Schrager).

The same spirit drove the governor to speak out against the Presidential Executive Order. Carr declared that even in times of war, our country should not stray from its constitutional principles by judging American citizens based on their race or ethnicity, “if we deny them the protection of the Bill of Rights, if we say that they must be denied the privilege of living in any of the 48 states without hearing or charge of misconduct, then we are tearing down the whole American systems” (Lurie58). Carr opposed the internment of Japanese-Americans in Camp Amache, despite the fact that it brought needed federal funds to his state; he fought for Japanese-Americans to retain their status as American citizens, and for their recovery of personal possessions, which were forfeited as a result of EO 9066.

The principal upon which Carr stood was profoundly egalitarian, yet the bystanders were many. California Governor Earl Warren, who would later become the fourteenth Supreme Court Chief Justice and one of America’s civil rights champions, referred to Japanese-Americans as a “menace” (Schrager). Fellow governors in Kansas and Wyoming publicly stated that “Japs” would be “hanging from every pine tree” if they entered their state (Schrager). As a result of his position, Carr transition from the profile of a promising politician to the target of hate mail that demeaned him as anti-American and treasonous. Carr lost his 1942 bid for Senate badly in what was otherwise a Republican sweep for that year, and passed away eight years later during a second bid for the governorship.

Carr would never live to see the validation of his political courage. In 1988 President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act which provided a presidential apology and a payment of $20,000 to those Japanese-Americans who suffered internment. Building, highways, and a statue in Denver’s Japantown are among the tributes to Carr’s fight for civil liberties. Cory Gardner was a state legislator when Denver’s judicial complex was named after Carr. Now a U.S. Senator, Gerdner reflected on Carr’s actions: “It took incredible courage to do what was right when others were going to shout you down. The naming of the judicial complex was a befitting tribute – a place where justice is blind and equality defended.”

When friend wonder why I spend countless service hours raising money for victims of the Flint water crisis or advocate for rights of LGBTQ trafficked youth, I know I am inspired by historical figures like Elie Wiesel, Mary Barraco, and Ralph Carr who would never remain silent when the vulnerable were oppressed, and who we would never allow the inherit respect for human dignity to succumb to the primal “tug of tribalism.” The war against ISIS today, the border wall, and DACA, as it did after Pearl Harbor 76 years ago, have raised new calls for the targeting of certain people for immigration bans. I suspect that Governor Carr would disagree strongly with such policy, based on the same principles that compelled him to be an “upstander” in 1942.