WASHINGTON – Japanese Americans herded into federal detention camps during World War II were victims of racial prejudice and war hysteria, a “grave injustice” that President Franklin Roosevelt prolonged for political reasons, a special panel concluded today.

The 467-page report contains no recommendations for compensating those who suffered. Proposed remedies will be submitted to Congress, probably in late June, a spokeswoman for the government committee said.

The Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, a nine-member panel created in 1980, has been examining Executive Order 9066, signed by Roosevelt 10 weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Citing “military necessity” as the justification, the order was used to prevent all individuals of Japanese descent from living, working, or traveling on the West Coast. It was used against at least 120,000 people, including 800 Aleutian and Pribilof islanders. Most of them were sent to bleak detention centers in isolated areas.

“A grave injustice was done to American citizens and resident aliens of Japanese ancestry, who without individual review or any probative evidence against them, were excluded, removed and detained by the United States,” the commission concluded.

It criticized “unfounded justifications” for the move, such as the belief that “ethnicity ultimately determines loyalty,” and found that “the record does not permit the conclusion that military necessity warranted the exclusion of ethnic Japanese from the West Coast.”

“The history of the relocation camps and the assembly centers that preceded them is one of suffering and deprivation visited on people against whom no charges were, or could have been, brought,” the commissioners found.

The commission examined more than 30,000 pages of documents and held 19 days of public hearings nationwide, at which more than 750 witnesses testified. It spent approximately $1.3 million.

The government removed the Japanese American population from the West Coast in 1942. Government and military officials feared that residents of Japanese ancestry would act as spies and saboteurs aiding the Axis Japan in the event of a West Coast invasion.

The FBI, Naval Intelligence, and Army General Staff reported that the allegations of espionage and sabotage were unfounded, and found no need for mass roundup, but these intelligence reports were ignored, the commission said.

“In sum, the record does not permit the conclusion that military necessity warranted the exclusion of ethnic Japanese from the West Coast,” the commission reported.

No Japanese American was ever found guilty of espionage or sabotage.

The report also notes that incarceration followed “a long and ugly history of West Coast anti-Japanese agitation and legislation” and that “antipathy and hostility toward the ethnic Japanese was a major factor of the public life of West Coast states for more than 40 years before Pearl Harbor.”

At the time of the internment in 1942, Japanese immigrants were prohibited by law to own land or lease land in California, and could not become naturalized citizens until 1932. The vast majority emigrated between 1900 and 1920. Japanese immigration to the United States was halted in 1924. Japanese Americans were considered then to be an unassimilable, inferior, “enemy race,” as Lt. Gen. John DeWitt had called them. DeWitt, a key advocate of the internment, was head of the Western Defense Command and Fourth Army at the time.

Roosevelt was singled out for criticism in several areas, including the fact that he signed Executive Order 9066 on Feb. 19, 1942 “without raising the question to the level of Cabinet discussion or requiring any careful or thorough review of the situation.” The order led to the mass internment.
The commission also found that by the spring of 1943, two major proponents of the incarceration – Secretary of War Henry Stimson and Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy – plus Gen. George Marshall, the chief of staff, all felt internment should end.

Orders excluding Japanese Americans from returning to their West Coast homes, however, remained in effect until December 1944.

The panel found that Stimson discussed the matter of closing the camps at a Cabinet meeting at least as early as May 1944.

“The President was unwilling to act to end the exclusion until the first Cabinet meeting following the presidential election of November 1944,” the panel found.

“There is no rational explanation for maintaining the exclusion of loyal ethnic Japanese from the West Coast for 18 months after May 1943 – except political pressure and fear. Certainly there was no justification arising out of military necessity,” the report states.

Although several internees and scholars on the camps were pleased with the report’s major findings, none was surprised.

“There are some new details, but I don’t think there’s anything in there that surprises any serious student of the relocation,” said Roger Daniels, history professor at the University of Cincinnati, who is a recognized expert on the internment.

“It’s a good report,” said John Tateishi, 43, a Los Angeles native interned at the Manzanar camp in the Sierra foothills.

Said Tateishi, redress coordinator for the San Francisco-based Japanese American Citizens League: “It (the report) substantiates very thoroughly information about what happened and why it happened. Personally, I’m pleased that the commission report shows clearly that the exclusion and internment was not only wrong, but unjustified and totally unwarranted.”

Although pleased with the general findings, the JACL criticized the report for not containing “to the fullest extent possible the many tremendous economic and other grievous losses suffered by the evacuees…”

Ray Okamura, 48, of Berkeley, who was interned at the Gila River camp south of Phoenix, praised the commission for “absolving Japanese Americans of any taint of disloyalty or espionage or sabotage. That was a complete falsehood, and this is one of the first official government declarations of this fact.”

Okamura, however, said it was a “major disappointment” that the commission report refers to the camps as “relocation centers” and “assembly centers” – as they were called by government officials during World War II – instead of as “concentration camps” or “detention centers.”

Said Jere Takahashi, assistant professor of Asian American Studies at UC-Berkeley: “Here we have a government commission with a report that is pointing out the historical background of racism that impacted on Japanese Americans, which culminated with the camps in 1942.”

Takahashi, 39, who lives in Berkeley, was born in the Topaz internment camp in central Utah.

The commission will now examine the economic loss suffered by internees and the psychological effects of the camps, with that information to be used in reaching recommendations.

By finding fault with the government’s handling of the affair, the panel sets the stage for some form of compensation.

Members of the commission include: Joan Bernstein, the chairwoman, former general counsel for the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Health and Human Services; Rep. Daniel Lungren, R-Long Beach, vice chairman; former Massachusetts Sen. Edward Brooke; and the Rev. Robert Drinan, former congressman and president of Americans for Democratic Action.

Also on the panel are Arthur Goldberg, former associate justice of the Supreme Court; Arthur Flemming, past head of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission; the Rev. J.V. Gromoff, a Russian Orthodox priest who was relocated from the Aleutian Islands; Philadelphia Judge William Marutani, who was confined in an internment camp; and former U.S. Sen. Hugh Mitchell of Seattle.
Directions: Please respond to the questions on this sheet of paper after reading the article.

1. What was the justification cited in the panel's report on internment?

2. The US Government claimed that there was a concern over sabotage and espionage, and yet what did agencies at the time say about these concerns?

3. Prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, how were Japanese Americans treated? Please provide at least 3 examples of the reading.

4. Who was Lt. Gen. John DeWitt? What was his view on internment?

5. What criticisms of FDR did the panel report? Include at least 2.


7. What was the next step for the commission?