

Concentration Camps U.S.A.

Charles R. Allen Jr.

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The Arizona road dipped suddenly out of a high serpentine ridge and fell straight out like a great javelin dropping ever faster and deeper down, down until it was lost from sight in the blinding rays of a white-hot sun.

To all points stretched the desert. Off in the dim, shimmering distance were the brooding, purple peaks of the incongruously snowcapped Vulture Mountains.

Like mute towers that seemed to hang suspended above and beyond the endless track were the jagged escarpments of Black Butte, Eagle Eye and Fore Paw—names of a bygone frontier—that marked the outermost rim of

this remote world, dead and baking in 105 degree heat. A relentless glare blinded the eyes, set fire to the throat and numbed the brain.

The silence was consuming. Even the occasional truck or car that whined along the highway scarcely broke the deathly still of the place.

At noon, the vast desert stood utterly mute, unfeeling, removed, beaten down with insufferable heat. Here and there, off against the distant horizons a sudden grey swirl—a ‘desert devil’—would spin noiselessly, like some aboriginal shade condemned to wander aimlessly forever across the ancient desert floor.

Several hundred yards off the only road to go through the desert—a road which seemed to have tenuous life of its own, hurrying, anxiously, to get out as quickly as it could—there stood a cluster of single-story buildings, white in the sun, surrounded by a high barbed wire fence. A broken empty shack marked the entrance to the site of the Wickenburg Federal Prison Camp, one of six locations scattered across the United States which had been set aside under the terms of the 1950 McCarran Act to serve as so-called detention camps if an “internal security emergency” were declared by a single person, the President of the United States. American citizens could be imprisoned in such a camp solely on “suspicion” that they would “probably conspire to commit espionage or sabotage.” Since 1952 this grim site—along with five others—had been prepared to hold several thousand citizens. The evidence is clear that during the Korean War there had been every intention to use it. No less than on 24 occasions U. S. Congressmen and Senators have tried to have an “internal security emergency” declared on the strength of “evidence” that “Communists” were on the verge of overthrowing the country through their asserted “subversion” of the civil rights and peace movements and key trade unions. “For better or worse, we seem to be moving toward a deeper involvement and a wider war in Vietnam,” said Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. in the August 12, 1966 issue of *Saturday Evening Post*.

“This, I believe, is the condition which we must anticipate and for which we must prepare. As the war increasingly dominates and obsesses our national life, we can look for the appearance of associated symptoms: the oversimplification of issues, the exchange of invective, the questioning of motives and loyalties and the degradation of debate.

“Before we know it, we may be developing an atmosphere which only requires a new McCarthy to become a new McCarthyism,” he commented pointedly in considering the rising tide of paranoid politics in America that equates peace and civil rights movements with a “Communist” take-over of the country.

The war in Vietnam could easily generate such an atmosphere; it could easily and quickly escalate to the brink of war with China, plunge the nation into all-out mobilization and set the stage for the immediate declaration of an “internal security emergency” by the President that would fill the detention camps with thousands of American citizens—“potential spies and saboteurs”—virtually overnight.

It was of course difficult to imagine such a terrible thing as I looked out over the vast desert. But there was one of the detention camps, Wickenburg, sitting before me—silent, empty of prisoners at the moment—but waiting and ready, like some internal bomb that the slightest political accident or wholly unexpected stupidity could blow sky high.

I could not help but recall the anguish of the late United States Senator, William Langer, the wonderfully non-conforming Republican from North Dakota, one of a handful in Congress who fought a truly principled struggle against the McCarran Act during those stormy days of 1950 when the country was fighting a war 10,000 miles away in Korea and wracked by the hysteria of McCarthyism at home.

“So now it is proposed to have concentration camps in America!” he cried at the end of his long, one-man filibuster against final passage of the McCarran Act.

“We can be absolutely certain that the concentration camps are for only one purpose. Namely, to put in them the kind of people those in authority do not like. So we have come to this!”

He had no sooner uttered the last words when he suddenly crashed forward to the Senate floor.

In the ensuing clamor, as the stretcher bearing “Wild Bill” Langer’s prostrate form was carried out of the Senate chamber, a reporter covering the tumultuous uproar was heard to remark: “They’ve just carried out the Bill of Rights—and don’t you forget it!”

How did the detention camps come into being? The Internal Security Act of 1950 (popularly known as the McCarran Act) has a section called Title II which specifically provides for the establishment of so-called detention centers. Title II authorizes the Attorney General of the United States to apprehend and detain “in such places of de-

tention as may be provided by him... all persons as to whom there is reasonable ground to believe that such person *probably* will conspire with others to engage in acts of espionage and sabotage.”

Such procedure is contingent upon the declaration of an “internal security emergency” by the President alone under certain conditions—namely, an invasion of the United States or its possessions; a declaration of war by Congress; or an “insurrection” within the United States in aid of a “foreign enemy.”

During August and September of 1950, the United States Senate witnessed the turbulent passage of the McCarran Act, whose primary provision required that organizations, periodicals and individuals, accused of being “agents of a totalitarian power” by the Attorney General, register themselves as such with the Justice Department.

The detention camp provision was, interestingly enough, *not* an original part of the McCarran Act. In point of fact, the original proponents of the McCarran Act fought *against* inclusion of the Title II detention camp proposal, scoring it as “a concentration camp measure.”

Sixteen years after the passage of the McCarran Act, its Title II—the Emergency Detention section—was still in full force as the law of the land. Now a new war—in Vietnam—undeclared, unpopular and the growing source of bitter frustrations and irrationalities which could well spawn a crisis even worse than the paroxysm known as McCarthyism, which throttled the nation with fear during the 1950s—threatened to make a grim reality of “emergency detention” for America.

The detention camp proposal as presented by a group of Democrats in the Senate was readily crushed by the McCarran forces—who then turned around and added the measure (in even more severe form!) to their own bill, calling it Title II of the McCarran Act.

A mere seven United States Senators voted against the McCarran Act on September 12, 1950, and they were swamped by the 70 who passed the measure

Later—on September 22nd—three more joined the original seven in a courageous but foredoomed attempt to sustain President Harry S. Truman’s vigorous, yet futile veto of the McCarran Act.

With typical candor, President Truman had warned in his historic veto message that the McCarran Act “put the government of the United States into the thought-control business.” What the President did not say was that the McCarran Act also put the government into the construction business—the construction of concentration camps. They are now up and ready—and have been for more than fourteen years—waiting to be filled, according to a law of the United States which today is still in full force.

Who would be picked up in the event Title II were ever invoked? How many people would be put into the detention camps which have been ready and waiting since 1952? What agency is entrusted with the pick-ups?

While the precise answers to these and related questions have never been official, throughout the 1950 Senate debate (colloquy is a more descriptive word) on Title II, both Hoover and the FBI were unquestioningly referred to as *the* supreme arbiters as to who and how many would be picked up.

My own estimates, based upon actual figures and potential capacities given to me by U.S. Bureau of Prisons officials, indicate that the detention camps today could take from 8,500 to 11,500 citizens if necessary at the four sites which now are fully prepared to handle the problem. By adding other sites available to the Bureau of Prisons, The Times assertion that “thousands more could be put in detention camps as fast as they were rounded up” is no exaggeration.

My own attempts to seek interviews with relevant officials of the Justice Department were unavailing. (The FBI not only refused comment but predictably sent agents to telephone and visit my neighbors in a characteristic display of intimidation.)

J. Walter Yeagley, an Assistant Attorney General of the Justice Department and the bureaucrat heading its Internal Security Division, is the person whose primary responsibility is the administration of the McCarran Act. His office develops the cases put before the so-called Subversive Activities Control Board (SACB) and of course is concerned with the detention camps.

When I requested an interview with him, Yeagley replied in a letter dated May 26, 1966: “It strikes me that any official view I might have on the subject of your inquiry (Title II and the detention camps) should be for my superiors only and not a subject for public discussions.” (!)

The attitudes of the FBI and the Justice Department stand in significant contrast to the straightforward honesty and deep disquiet of the Bureau of Prisons. And it is perfectly clear why: the FBI and the Justice Department’s

Internal Security Division have a powerful vested interest in Title II. Their purpose in hiding the facts about the detention camps—which, according to bureaucrat Yeagley are “not a subject for public discussion”—is obviously a deliberate, calculated effort to maintain a high level of intimidation by keeping the public ignorant of the camps. This stratagem of course has its exact parallel in the use of the concentration camps in Nazi Germany.

It is to belabor the obvious to point out that the present Vietnam conflict could easily lead to a formal declaration of war, which, very likely, would immediately result in the invoking of Title II *by President Lyndon B. Johnson solely on his own authority as provided under the law*. In that case, it is obvious, the leadership of the growing peace movement which dissents so militantly from the Johnson policy in Vietnam—those “nervous nellys,” in the words of the President, who panic “under the strain” and turn “on their leaders and on their country and on their own fighting men”—would be among the first “Communists” and “potential spies and saboteurs” picked up in “Operation Dragnet.”

The ghetto uprisings in Watts, Cleveland, Philadelphia, New York and Chicago suggest another area in which Title II could be invoked. The rapidly mounting and increasingly organized resistance of the Negro people and those bearing arms in self-defense against the force and violence of the bigot mobs, the police and national guard—could well provide the pretext for the White House to declare that such resistance was in actuality an “insurrection from within,” and of course that, in turn, under the McCarran Act, would fill the detention centers with the militants of the civil rights movement.

Nor is this idle conjecture. On a small scale, it already has happened. In the summer of 1965, several thousand inter-racial civil rights demonstrators—mostly youngsters—were seized by Alabama state police and forcibly put behind hastily erected barbed-wire ‘pens’ for more than 72 hours on the state fair grounds at Birmingham in what was nothing less than a made-do concentration camp of historically classic proportions. Already a familiar voice is being heard with increasing frequency in the land—in the Congress, in the Internal Security Division of the Justice Department, in the FBI and in the countless local witch-hunting agencies—alleging “evidence” that the ghetto upheavals are the work of “outside” (Communist of course) forces bent upon “overthrowing” the United States government.

At this point there certainly is no room for easy and false optimism about the present opposition to Title II in the United States today. While there have been general expressions of opposition to the McCarran Act by noteworthy organizations and individuals, there has been no specific move to repeal Title II and dispose of the detention camps. The reason for this lamentable state is quite easily understood: the people clearly do not know about the existence of these camps. It is as simple—and complex—as that.

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