

Ex-Rep. Michel: WWII vets were compensated

To the Editor:

This letter refers to your July 25 article on the subject of legislation to create a new right for former U.S. POWs to sue Japanese companies. The Hill should be complimented on recognizing that this is an important issue and worthy of public attention. Because the matter is not well understood, and because there were some specific references to my own role, I thought it would be useful to clarify a few facts:

A key point that seems rarely to be made or well enough understood is that our veterans did receive compensation at the end of World War II. The War Claims Commission approved nearly 180,000 claims, including many brought by former POWs who fought against Japan. The compensation amounts varied, but those who suffered the most usually received over \$3,000, which approximates a little over \$21,000 in current dollars.

While no one could ever say that this amount - or any amount, for that matter - is "enough," it is far more in present dollar terms than the amounts recently awarded to Holocaust survivors, for whom payments range from approximately \$2,100 to \$6,500.

And speaking of the Holocaust settlements, while the victims themselves may have recovered \$2,100 to \$6,500, the lawyers averaged about \$1 million each. And this is another of the concerns I have with the approach of some of these bills.

The U.S. government is "strongly opposed" to the legislation because it would have the effect of abrogating our 1951 peace treaty with Japan. This treaty was clear in that it settled all claims between the United States and Japan and their respective citizens (including companies). Abrogating the treaty would send a dangerous signal about the regard the United States has for its treaty obligations, and it would encourage other countries to pick and choose which treaties they might want to consider abandoning.

Perhaps even more important, the San Francisco treaty is the cornerstone of the United States' security arrangements in the Asia-Pacific region and is the basis for which the U.S. troops have been stationed in Japan since the end of World War II. The Bush administration's opposition to this legislation is completely consistent with the strong opposition of every U.S. administration since President Truman's to thwart any attempt to abrogate the treaty by allowing such claims.

LETTERS to the EDITOR



All of this brings me to the point that is certainly appropriate for the U.S. Congress to consider ways to recognize and perhaps even make awards to World War II-era veterans. As one such veteran, and a former congressman, I know that Congress will want to weigh carefully what it does for the vets of my generation against what is being done for those of our wars and conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf. Whatever the United States does will have to be fair to all our veterans.

A fundamental misconception in your story's headline suggested that I and others are in some way lobbying against U.S. veterans. Neither I nor any of my colleagues see our action as against U.S. veterans. On the contrary, as a veteran, I think what we fought for, and what we got in the 1951 treaty, was a safe and secure world. Moreover, all of our efforts are completely consistent with U.S. government policy.

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Editor's note: Bob Michel (R-Ill.) is the former minority leader of the House