

Eric Fusfield: Eric Fusfield – Director of Legislative Affairs – B'nai B'rith International.

Why does Senate Resolution 111 not include an apology to the survivors of the Saint Louis?

Eric Fusfield: There was one significant hurdle to achieving unanimous consensus on this and that had to do with the wording of the legislation. Ideally, the survivors of the Saint Louis would have liked to have an apology from the US government. The problem with issuing an apology is that some members of Congress will not sign on to anything – any initiative – that apologizes for the United States and its policies. So, if there were a way to find a wording that addressed the US role – the failure of the United States to rescue the passengers of this ship, we needed to find that wording. And so we settled on language that acknowledged the failure of the United States to act that admitted its wrongdoing in this case, falling short of using the word “apology.” Another problem with the word “apology” is that there's a backdrop to this kind of discussion and that is the ongoing question in the United States of whether African Americans should be compensated for the centuries of slavery that their ancestors endured in this country. Any use of the word “apology” raises the specter of restitution and compensation. And in fact, in the case of Japanese Americans who were interned in camps in World War II, they were able to receive compensation from the United States government after a decades' long struggle. But we felt like we didn't have decades to work with. We were dealing with Holocaust survivors, some of whom were still alive, all of whom are elderly. We didn't have – we didn't want to delay the issue of the US acknowledgment of its role in the Saint Louis tragedy over the matter of symbolic monetary compensation. So, by using the phrase “acknowledgment of failure” instead of “apology” we were able to ensure a swifter passage of this legislation.

Was the US naive in 1939 when they failed to take in the Saint Louis Passengers?

Eric Fusfield: Well, the US missed the point all along the way. The US officials used as an excuse of some sort this idea that they didn't want to interfere in Cuban affairs because Cuba had also refused to take in the passengers of the ship and – but it wasn't enough for them to deny entrance of the ship's passengers to Florida. The Coast Guard trailed the ship along the way to make sure that none of the passengers jumped ship and tried to swim to shore. And they fired warning shots at the ship – really a pretty hostile act. And so, the ship's captain decided that he had no choice but to turn the ship around and head back to Europe. And ultimately, three countries in Europe, I believe, agreed to take the passengers in but – four countries in Europe – but it wasn't in time to save the 254 former ship's passengers who ultimately perished.

Was the refusal to take in the passengers solely responsibility of the US government?

Eric Fusfield: Well, it's a joint – as the senate resolution indicates, it's the joint responsibility of the United States, Cuba, and Canada. All three of them refused to take in these passengers. But it's – sadly, for the United States, many of us whose ancestors came here and felt like this country welcomed them with open arms when they had suffered from persecution and discrimination elsewhere, this was a huge disappointment. It was betrayal of our highest ideals. And this was a case where, given the political climate in 1939, where you had nativists and anti-immigrant influences very active in society. This was a moment where the United States government gave in to those negative impulses instead of acting on their own high ideals. And that really was the failure of the United States government at that time.

Could a situation analogue to the Saint Louis being turned away happen in today's America?

Eric Fusfield: Well, it's a little dangerous to make historical analogies because the Nazi threat was what it was. It was unique. And at the time, if we – I think the reality is the world did see the warning signs. They knew what was happening in Europe. Clearly, you had people fleeing the continent in great desperation. But countries wouldn't open their doors for them. Today, we have refugees in need of sanctuary as well and there needs to be a way to take them in to deal with that problem. Yeah, refugee problems continue to confront us all around the world.

Eric Fusfield: Could it happen again? Well, one of the great lessons of the Saint Louis tragedy is it underscores the importance of the existence of the state of Israel. The fact that we have a Jewish state today that is prepared to take in Jewish refugees from anywhere around the world in unlimited number is essential. We didn't have that during the Holocaust. We have it now and we have to continue to have that. It's essential for the survival of the Jewish people.

What is the historical importance of Senate Resolution 111?

Eric Fusfield: The symbolism of the Saint Louis saga's very important. It's a historical episode that has great resonance in today's world for the Jewish community and for the wider world. First of all, it underscores the importance of a sanctuary for Jewish refugees – what we have today in the state of Israel, what we did not have during the Holocaust. It's essential that we have that today and that we continue to have that. The survival of the Jewish people depends on it. Number two – the Saint Louis saga illustrates what can happen when people of conscience fail to act. Evil exists in our world. It existed then, it exists today. It has to be confronted or tragic consequences can follow. Number three the Saint Louis example serves as a sort of challenge for us in our own time.

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There are tragedies around the world. There are examples of genocide around the world.

For example – in Sudan, mass killings in Syria today. Other tremendous challenges facing the Jewish community and the wider world – Iran's effort to acquire nuclear weapons and their sponsorship of terror, the anti-Semitism that is deeply embedded in the international system today – all of these challenges need to be confronted. And we need to understand that future generations will look back on us and they will ask, “What did we do in our time to address these challenges?” And we need to be mindful of that and we need to act accordingly. The Saint Louis, the Senate Resolution S.Res. 111, is a demonstration that we're mindful of what the Saint Louis passengers' experienced. And it's a measure of our determination, our commitment that future generations will learn about what happened to the Saint Louis passengers, they will remember what happened to them, and they will learn from that example. And that is the best message – that we can send.