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The Vote on Detention Camps

The House of Representatives is scheduled today to take up Rep. Spark Matsunaga's bill to repeal the Emergency Detention Act. That act, which is Title II of the Internal Security Act of 1950 adopted by Congress over President Truman's veto in a period of national frenzy, authorizes the President, under certain circumstances, to declare an "internal security emergency"; and once he has done that, it authorizes the President, acting through his Attorney General, to put American citizens into detention centers—concentration camps, if you don't mind calling a spade a spade—whenever he has "reasonable ground to believe" that such citizens "probably will engage in, or probably will conspire with others to engage in, acts of espionage or sabotage. No trial, no proof of guilt, no presumption of innocence, no old-fashioned formalities of that sort. Just an Attorney General's supposition that someone would "probably" do something dangerous. We think it is past time to erase this measure from the statute books. One hundred and sixty members of the House of Representatives have joined with Mr. Matsunaga in sponsoring his clear, simple, straightforward repealer; and the administration has given it unequivocal support.

Unfortunately, the House Internal Security Committee has come along with a substitute bill—it might be more accurate to call it a subterfuge bill—which would modify certain features of the existing law but would, at the same time, make the danger of concentration camps even greater than it is now. It would expand the present law to include purely domestic groups. That change can have no effect but to aggravate the fears of black militants and other dissident groups that the concentration camps are designed to imprison them.

When President Truman vetoed the Internal Security Act of 1950, he said of Title II that "the basic error of these sections is that they move in the direction of suppressing opinion and belief." That remains true today; and it is no less applicable to the Internal Security Committee version of the measure. As Representative Matsunaga says, the law authorizes the detention of citizens "not on the basis of an overt act committed in violation of law, but on the basis of mere *suspicion* that they *may* commit a crime." The basis of such suspicion would, of course, have to be the expression of opinion or belief considered subversive. That is a basis for imprisonment wholly at variance with the American idea of freedom.