

**An Open Letter to
Representative Jeff Van Drew**

**South Jersey Board of Rabbis and Cantors and
Jewish Community Relations Council of Atlantic and Cape May Counties
NAACP of Atlantic City**

December 30, 2022

We write this letter, as Jewish clergy, and religious and civil rights leaders in our community, in response to an opinion piece by Representative Jeff Van Drew in *The Press of Atlantic City* on December 21, 2022, titled “Filmmaker disparages Holocaust-ending America.”

Representative Van Drew writes about the positive role played by the United States in the world, now and in the past. About this, we strongly agree with his words.

But the main thrust of his article was a rebuke of those who criticize our country - focusing on the recent documentary by Ken Burns "America and the Holocaust." He makes this attack on a series which he apparently has not seen. “It’s been reported” he wrote, indicating that he was not personally familiar with the program. And he reacts strongly to the implication that there is now, and was in the 1930's and 1940's, deep racism and antisemitism in the United States. He accuses the filmmakers of “disgustingly” painting a negative portrait of the American people.

The events depicted in the series are well documented. While it is certainly true that the majority of the American people were and are honorable, to deny history changes its veracity. Yes, our history is filled with noble people who labored to make this nation a force for justice. Yet it is also true that there were some who embraced the vilest racist sentiments.

Representative Van Drew implies that a patriot focuses exclusively on what we do right. Holding an idyllic fantasy of our past does not make us great. We believe this weakens us instead. Embracing the truth of our past mistakes enables us to enhance our present and build a better American tomorrow. Rep. Van Drew also implies that discrimination in this country was not rampant. This is simply false.

We believe there is much to cheer about our country. The United States has, and continues to be, a model of justice and righteousness in the world. The dedication of our troops and the devotion of our patriots have been a gift to all who treasure freedom. This is a source of pride.

Nevertheless, *part* of what is so positive about America is our ability to face faults, admit mistakes, and ever grow towards that more perfect Union.

So the key question is what we do with our flaws. And here, we believe -- and our tradition teaches -- that honest self-assessment demands not turning away from what we do wrong. We must shine light into the darkness, and work to do better.

In this regard, issues of racism and antisemitism alike have been and sadly remain stains on our history, and impediments to our aspirations. They clip the wings of our “better angels.”

Our unique and “exceptional” role in the world is real – but part of what makes us strong is our ability to unite in ways which embrace difference. What has held us back is the shadow of hate. We must be healthy enough – and mature enough – to admit this. It has been part of our story. And it is still here.

In the 1920’s and 1930’s, anti-immigrant sentiment did, in fact, restrict entry and cost the lives of many who might otherwise have been saved. Turning away the *St Louis*, a ship of almost a thousand refugees from Nazi Germany, is but one example. The vicious voice of antisemitic Father Coughlin on the radio, and Henry Ford’s *Dearborn Independent* which spread antisemitic hatred, came close to drowning out the clarion call of our most noble and more welcoming American ideals. The unconscionable internment of Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor is another dark stain on the honor of America. Downplaying these events is a danger to our highest aspirations.

In our own time, antisemitic attacks are on the rise again. Racism, despite real progress, remains deeply embedded.

In conclusion: there is much to celebrate. But working hard to fix our flaws and right our wrongs is not an attack on our nation. It is part of what makes us great.

As we approach a new year, may we find the right balance between pride and celebration, embracing truth, loving critique, candor and growth.

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