

Incarceration, Redress, Reconsiderations

Reviewing the Story of the Japanese-Americans

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In the afterglow of the successful campaign for what the Japanese American community learned to call “Redress”—the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 which tendered a long-overdue apology to Japanese Americans for the war time incarceration of more than 120,000 men, women, and children between 1942 and 1946 and the payment of \$20,000 to each of some 80,000 survivors—many community leaders and concerned scholars believed that the resulting heightened public consciousness of the Japanese American wartime ordeal would surely wane. For a variety of reasons this did not occur. Seventeen years later, and sixty-three years after the community’s ordeal began, public consciousness about it seemed to be at an all time high. At a time when memory has become an almost obsessive concern among scholars through the world, it is instructive to examine how public consciousness of that complex of events has evolved.

During the war itself, what happened to Japanese Americans was only dimly perceived and little challenged. This was, at least in part, due to the euphemistic language which the government used to describe its actions; for example, the Army, which rounded up the affected population, habitually described United States citizens of Japanese ancestry as “nonalien.” Even more importantly, the nation’s press, as it almost always does in times of crisis, became cheerleaders for government policy. The *New York Times*, for example, which never challenged the incarceration editorially, printed on February 21, 1942 the text of the fateful Executive Order 9066 under the headline: “Text of Roosevelt’s Alien Order.”

I shall never forget my personal shock at discovering as a teenager in late 1944 or early 1945 that the young Japanese American whom I met in New York and who had been in a concentration camp was an American citizen. I had read something about what the press often called “Jap Camps,” but had assumed that they were for enemy aliens. There were a few flurries of post-war attention, most notably about the passage of a Japanese American Claims Act of 1948, which appropriated a palpably inadequate \$38 million to compensate for losses of real property.

After that the wartime events all but disappeared from public consciousness. By 1957, the most liberal college-level American history text in general use (*The United States: The History of a*

Republic, by Richard Hofstadter et al.) could only say, in a section headed “Civilian Mobilization” (p. 694): “Since almost no one doubted the necessity for the war, there was much less intolerance than there had been in World War I, although large numbers of Japanese-Americans were put into internment camps under circumstances that many Americans were later to judge unfair or worse.”

It should be noted that the inaccurate term “internment” was used and the standard phrase for the event would soon become, and remain, “the internment of the Japanese Americans.” I have commented on this phenomenon in “Words Do Matter: A Note on Inappropriate Terminology and the Incarceration of the Japanese Americans,” in Louis Fiset and Gail Nomura, eds. *Nikkei in the Pacific Northwest: Japanese Americans and Japanese Canadians in the Twentieth Century* (2005).

Many contemporary texts had nothing at all about Japanese Americans. The U.S. Army’s Chief of Military History, Stetson Conn, soon published two thorough accounts (“The Decision to Relocate the Japanese from the Pacific Coast,” in Kent R. Greenfield, ed., *Command Decisions*, 1959, and a revised version in Stetson Conn et al., *Guarding the United States and Its Outposts*, 1964), exploding the myth of “military necessity” which had been the official justification for the mass imprisonment. It took decades for that to appear in most history texts. I can remember lecturing at an eastern liberal arts college in the mid-1970s, and being confronted afterwards by a senior history major, who demanded to know if the incarceration had “really happened,” and, if it had, why he had never heard about it. By that time, however, as Alice Yang Murray has demonstrated, a kind of master narrative had evolved. That she did so in a commercially-published anthology (*What Did the Internment of Japanese Americans Mean?*, 2000) demonstrates that the subject of the wartime incarceration is now a set piece in many if not most college American history courses.

The tragedy that we have learned to call “9/11” both demonstrated the degree to which awareness of the Japanese American experience had become general knowledge and stimulated further interest among scholars and the general public as the federal government soon reaffirmed its right to incarcerate citizens without trial in the name of national security.

What follows is a select bibliography of books published since the issue of “redress” was resolved. What the sheer volume of work clearly indicates is that even today the wartime experience is still the central event of Japanese-American history.

Alice Yang Murray’s anthology, *What Did the Internment of Japanese Americans Mean?* (2000) is the best place to get a notion of what can be called the master narrative. Most of the listed works are, in one way or another, amplifications of that narrative with new data and/or new insights. The rest are “deniers”—authors who either deny that an injustice occurred and/or argue that it was a mistake to pay redress or assert that other ethnic groups, chiefly Germans and Italians who were interned under INS auspices, should have been included. One such author, Michelle Malkin (*In Defense of Internment: The Case for “Racial Profiling” in World War II and the War on Terror*, 2004), a Fox news regular, gained a brief notoriety by arguing that the wartime incarceration and the round-ups of Arab Americans in the wake of 9/11 were both proper governmental activities. The doyenne of deniers, Lillian Baker, claimed in a number of publications (e.g., *Dishonoring America: The Falsification of World War II History*, 1994) that Japanese Americans were free to leave the camps. Those insisting that the selective internment of German and Italian nationals was just as bad if not worse than the treatment meted out to Japanese Americans include Timothy Holian (*The German-Americans and World War II: An Ethnic Experience*, 1996), Arthur Jacobs (*The Prison Called Hohenasperg*, 1999), Stephen Fox (*America’s Invisible Gulag: A Biography of German American Internment & Exclusion in World War II*, 2000), and Lawrence DiStasi (*Una Storia Segreta: The Secret History of Italian American Evacuation during World War II*, 2001).

Three scholars who dissent from the master narrative include Page Smith (*Democracy on Trial: The Japanese-American Evacuation and Relocation in World War II*, 1995), who regrets what happened but cannot fault the government. Greg Robinson (*By Order of the President: FDR and the Internment of the Japanese Americans*, 2001) presents the most intense study of FDR’s views and actions that we have, and argues that there was a kind of pre-planning by him. Tetsuden Kashima (*Judgment without Trial: Japanese American Imprisonment during World War II*, 2003) also argues that there was pre-planning.

Valuable accounts that focus on the pre-war community are by Valerie Matsumoto (*Farming the Home Place: A Japanese American Community in California, 1919–1982*, 1993); Gordon Chang (*Morning Glory, Evening Shadow: Yamato Ichihashi and His Internment Writings, 1942–1945*, 1997); David Yoo (*Growing Up Nisei: Race, Generation, and Culture among Japanese Americans of California, 1924–49*, 2000); and Susan Smith (*Japanese American Midwives: Culture, Community and Health Politics, 1880–1950*, 2005).

Works focusing on internment in Immigration and Naturalization Service facilities include Carol Van Valkenburg’s *An Alien Place: The Fort Missoula, Montana Detention Camp, 1941–1944*, 1995; Louis Fiset’s *Imprisoned Apart: The World War II: Correspondence of an Issei Couple*, 1997; *Adios to Tears: The Memoirs of a Japanese Peruvian Internee in U.S. Concentration Camps*, 2nd ed., 2000, by Seiichi Higashide;

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Between Two Adversaries: Korean Interpreters at Japanese Alien Enemy Detention Centers during World War II, 2002, by Hyung-Ju Ahn; *Schools Behind Barbed Wire: The Untold Story of Wartime Internment and the Children of Arrested Enemy Aliens*, 2002, by Karen Riley; and Max Paul Friedman’s *Nazis and Good Neighbors: The United States Campaign against the Germans of Latin America in World War II*, 2003.

The largest number of works focus on incarceration in War Relocation Authority camps. Among these are Sandra Taylor, *Jewel of the Desert: Japanese American Internment at Topaz*, 1993; Lane Hirabayashi, *Inside an American Concentration Camp: Japanese American Resistance at Poston, Arizona*, 1995; Harold Jacoby, *Tule Lake: From Relocation to Segregation*, 1996; Mike Mackey, ed., *Heart Mountain: Life in Wyoming’s Concentration Camp*, 2000; and Jeremy Burton et al., *Confinement and Ethnicity: An Overview of World War II Japanese American Relocation Sites*, 2002. Other recent works on the Japanese American World War II experience include Gary Okihiro, *Storied Lives: Japanese American Students and World War II*, 1999; Lawson Inada, ed., *Only What We Could Carry: The Japanese American Internment Experience*, 2000; Mike Mackey, ed., *A Matter of Conscience. Essays on the World War II Heart Mountain Draft Resistance Movement*, 2002; Erica Harth, ed., *Last Witnesses: Reflections on the Wartime Internment of Japanese Americans*, 2001; Eric Muller, *Free to Die for Their Country: The Story of the Japanese American Draft Resisters in World War II*, 2001; Yoon Pak, *Wherever I Go I Will Always Be a Loyal American: Seattle’s Japanese American Schoolchildren during World War II*, 2001; Allan Austin, *From Concentration Camp to Campus: Japanese American Students in World War II*, 2004; Roger Daniels, *Prisoners without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II*, 2nd ed., 2004; Stephen Fugita and Marilyn Fernandez, *Altered Lives, Enduring Community: Japanese Americans Remember Their World War II Incarceration*, 2004; Brian Hayashi, *Democratizing the Enemy: The Japanese American Internment*, 2004; and David Niewert, *Strawberry Days: How Internment Destroyed a Japanese American Community*, 2005.

The wartime military service of Japanese American men and women is treated in Brenda Moore, *Serving Our Country: Japanese American Women in the Military during World War II*, 2003, and Franklin Odo, *No Sword To Bury: Japanese Americans in Hawai’i during World War II*, 2004.

And finally, the following focus on the aftermath of incarceration: Donna Nagata, *Legacy of Injustice: Exploring the Cross-generational Impact of the Japanese-American Internment*, 1993; Mitchell Maki, Harry Kitano and Megan Berthold, *Achieving the Impossible Dream: How Japanese Americans Obtained Redress*, 1999, and Robert Shimabukuro, *Born in Seattle: The Campaign for Japanese American Redress*, 2001.

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