

## An Historiography of Racism: Japanese American Internment, 1942-1945

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The Japanese Empire's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, triggered America's entrance into the Second World War. Following what President Franklin Roosevelt described as that "unprovoked and dastardly attack," the United States entered the war and pursued its "Europe First" policy. For the next several years, the United States fought to free Europe from the clutches and terror of Nazi Germany. All the while, the United States was also violating the rights of many of its own citizens. From 1942 until 1946, the United States of America interned over 100,000 Japanese Immigrants (Issei) and Japanese Americans (Nisei) with no trial or hearing. When the last relocation center closed in 1946, historians immediately began researching why this grievous violation of human rights had occurred. This paper will analyze works by various scholars of the internment, as well as matters of ethnicity and culture in a time frame that brackets the evacuation, and argue that the internment was a complex and rapid undertaking that affected those both behind and beyond the camps themselves. Although each school of history has its own inherent strengths and weaknesses, the best approach to addressing the internment seems to be that of social *and* cultural history.

Ronald Takaki attempts to present a broad, comparative study of every major Asian group in his book *Strangers From a Different Shore*. Takaki chooses to deal with each group (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino) individually, while laying the book out in chronological order, thus providing his audience with a sequential narrative of nearly 150 years of Asian American history. The main focus of *Strangers From a Different Shore* is the issue of race. Takaki argues that since their introduction into American society, Asians have been seen as "strangers," primarily

as a result of racism.<sup>1</sup> Support for Takaki's work comes from a wide variety of sources that suggest a combination of social and cultural methodology. The author seeks to explore similarities and differences between individual immigrant groups, but relies heavily on journals, oral history, and work songs while doing so. Takaki does, however, depend on a good deal of recent academic work to round out his research. Takaki begins his book by describing the initial, hopeful aspirations of the various ethnic groups, and their subsequent disappointment upon reaching America. The following chapters of the book compare the experiences of these various ethnic groups from the time of their arrival until a time period shortly after the Second World War.

In dealing specifically with Japanese Americans, Takaki begins by stating that unlike Chinese immigrants, the Issei were often encouraged to have wives in America, thus promoting a sense of family; this was in sharp contrast to Chinese bachelorhood.<sup>2</sup> Also addressed in his opening chapters are the individual thoughts of many of the Japanese women en route to America. These thoughts, expressed in both diary entries and haiku, show that there was a great amount of variation in these women's experiences, which ranged from sadness of leaving one's homeland, to a recollection of being forced into prostitution.<sup>3</sup>

Concerning matters of identity, Takaki asserts that self-employment and service trades, such as farming and shopkeeping, were not trades natural to Asians, but a result of American racism and its effect on Japanese employability.<sup>4</sup> Because racist policies prevented Issei and Nisei from gaining employment in areas such as production and management, they necessarily turned to farming and other similar trades available to them. Nisei in particular were in a peculiar situation. Born and educated in America, many Nisei were almost fully "acculturated" and often times held college diplomas. The main problem, Takaki states, is that the barrier of racial prejudice barred the Nisei from using their degrees.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it seems that much of white America simply refused to

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1989), 11-12.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-52.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

accept the Nisei as truly American. In response, many attempts were made by Japanese Americans to display their patriotism. One of the most notable ways in which the Nisei attempted to prove their “Americanism” was by joining the Japanese American Citizens’ League (JACL). The JACL, founded in 1930, largely held an accommodationist, pro-American view that preferred to use “Japanese” as an adjective to modify “American.”<sup>6</sup> Despite their best efforts to appear more American, Takaki claims the Nisei did not prevail in their quest to gain equality.

Takaki’s account of the aftermath of the Pearl Harbor attack is impressive. Unlike some historians who delight in focusing on the military or political response to the attack, Takaki begins his coverage of the bombing with the opinions of the Issei and Nisei who witnessed the attack. Many of these responses displayed the same shock and fear that white Americans exhibited.<sup>7</sup> The U.S. military backlash after the attack on Pearl Harbor is a sad yet unavoidable matter in Japanese American historiography. Takaki supports the widely accepted truth that racist speculation, false information and media induced hysteria all contributed to the War Department and military’s demands for internment.<sup>8</sup> It should be noted, however, that in his discussion of the actual process of internment, Takaki goes to great lengths to give a detailed description of the internment camps and the conditions therein. Relying once again on primary sources such as diaries and poetry, Takaki brings to light the size, smell, and even temperature of the facilities. Thanks to this additional information, an audience not only has the ability to become familiar with the internment process, but also with its effects on the internees. In essence, Takaki attempts to place his readers in the camps themselves.

A major drawback of Takaki’s work is that he does not sufficiently explain or discuss the closing of the internment camps. Especially after presenting so much detail in regards to camp conditions, it is both odd and unfortunate that the author does not expound on the Niseis’ and Isseis’ release. By not discussing the reasons for release, Takaki avoids a great deal of political

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<sup>6</sup> Takahashi, “Changing Responses,” in Takaki, *Strangers From a Different Shore*, 222.

<sup>7</sup> Takaki, 379.

<sup>8</sup> Takaki cites various examples of unsubstantiated and racist claims by the media, military, and government officials. *Ibid.*, 380, 387-390.

discourse that could be used to illustrate just how unwise the internment was to begin with.

Takaki’s coverage of Japanese American history is impressive overall. Through his use of primary sources, he is able to present a passionate, but well documented account of Asian American and Japanese American history. In doing so, however, he tends to sacrifice a certain amount of political discussion, which, when dealing with a matter such as the internment, one can ill afford to do. This lack of political explanation can be largely attributed to his use of social and cultural methodologies, which are both bottom-up approaches.

Roger Daniels’ *Prisoners Without Trial* takes a narrative political approach when addressing the evacuation and internment; this is clearly a divergence from Takaki’s cultural turn on the issue.<sup>9</sup> Daniels’ main thesis is that the imprisonment of the Nisei and Issei was based primarily on race, rather than military necessity, as claimed by the government.<sup>10</sup> The sources employed by Daniels are unknown, due to his book’s absence of footnotes and bibliography. He does however present a clear and concise narrative of the political origins of the internment.

Daniels claims that a major participant in the development of the evacuation was Major General Allen W. Gullison. Gullison, he argues, constantly and successfully petitioned the Justice Department for an act of evacuation, despite assertions made by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Attorney General Francis Biddle that there was no potential for sabotage from either the Nisei or Issei. General Gullison, along with Secretary of War Harry Stimson and Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy, resorted to the use of false information to convince President Roosevelt to institute Executive Order 9066.

Daniels is much better at depicting the causes of the internment rather than its consequences. In fact, the title of his work does not accurately represent its content. In actuality, Daniels’ book has little to do with the prisoners themselves, and

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<sup>9</sup> Daniels has written several books and over one hundred articles, most dealing with the internment. Many historians regard him as an authority on the issue. [On-line]: <http://asweb.artsci.uc.edu/history/people/facultypages/daniels.html> [3 December 2003].

<sup>10</sup> Roger Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 1.

more to do with the political decisions leading to the internment. For example, in the chapter of *Prisoners Without Trial* entitled "Life Behind Barbed Wire," the lives of the Nisei and Issei are not covered in great detail. In fact, the twenty-three-page chapter does not even discuss the experiences of the Nisei and Issei at the internment camps until the sixteenth page. Instead, Daniels focuses a great deal of attention on the political and military matters of arranging the internment.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike Takaki, Daniels gives a greater amount of attention to administrative problems that arose in the camps. For example, he makes it a point to describe the now infamous "questions 27 and 28" on loyalty tests administered by the War Relocation Authority (WRA).<sup>12</sup> On February 8, 1943, the WRA administered loyalty tests as a means of determining if the thousands of internees could be released from the camps without posing a danger to the United States. These hastily constructed tests contained two questions, which asked if (a) the internee would be willing to serve in the United States military, and (b) if they would forswear allegiance to Japan and swear unqualified allegiance to America. Daniels points out that over 2,000 Nisei and Issei had difficulty answering these questions. Issei would be forced to denounce the only citizenship they could legally possess, while the Nisei struggled with the fact that many of them were never loyal to Japan in the first place. In addition, many Nisei were opposed to the idea of volunteering to fight for a country that denied their rights as citizens. Those who failed these loyalty tests were segregated in the Tule Lake internment center.

Daniels goes further than Takaki when addressing the release and resettlement of the Nisei and Issei. Initial resettlement consisted of the release of college students and farm workers, followed eventually by those determined to be "loyal." Daniels goes on to describe problems with resettlement encountered by the Nisei and Issei. One serious difficulty was the depletion of financial resources caused by the rushed evacuation of the Japanese Americans from the west coast. Daniels stresses that the Claims Act of 1948 was grossly insufficient in its attempt to

<sup>11</sup> An excellent example is Daniel's detailed explanation of the establishment of Military Areas #1 and #2 by Attorney General Francis Biddle, and the Civilian Exclusion Orders issued by General John DeWitt. *Ibid.*, 51-54.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

reimburse the Nisei and Issei for lost funds.<sup>13</sup> *Prisoners Without Trial* goes on to discuss the increasing liberties and rights gained by persons of Japanese ancestry during the end of the twentieth century; Takaki is relatively lacking in this respect.

Daniels' portrayal of the evacuation and internment covers the political and military aspects of the internment much more thoroughly than Takaki's. For any person seeking to gain a firm understanding of the events leading up to and following the internment, *Prisoners Without Trial* is an excellent source. The book's main weakness is its lack of perspectives from the internees themselves.

Of nearly all the current literature concerning the internment, *Only What we Could Carry* is certainly unique. An anthology of photography, poems, personal stories, legal documents, and memoirs, *Only What we Could Carry* takes a decidedly social approach to the internment as it seeks to uncover the lives of ordinary people.<sup>14</sup> The stated goal of the book is to explore the various thoughts, emotions, and personal histories of those who participated in the internment, and to use that exploration to prevent racial prejudice by better understanding its effects.<sup>15</sup>

*Only What we Could Carry* accomplishes its goals through the depth and range of the sources it employs. The resources used in the anthology discuss many issues, and are divided into five chapters, which address initial reactions to Pearl Harbor, arrivals to the internment camps, problems associated with the camps, the loyalty questionnaires, and the Nisei 442<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Battalion. This framework provides a somewhat chronological order of events, and also groups like events and ideas into individual chapters.

The great significance of *Only What we Could Carry* is that it can be viewed as a missing link in Japanese American historiography. Although several historians have improved our understanding of the causes and consequences of the internment, few have given us a close look at the feelings and thoughts of

<sup>13</sup> The Claims Act was created specifically to deal with redress, but reimbursed many Nisei and Issei for only pennies on the dollar. *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>14</sup> Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (London: W.W. Norton & Company Ltd., 1994), 84.

<sup>15</sup> Lawson Fusao Inada, ed., *Only What we Could Carry* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2000), xii.

those most intimately involved in the process; *Only What we Could Carry* fulfills that role. This collection offers an insightful, albeit somewhat disturbing look at the internment, which effectively accomplishes its stated purpose.

The greatest weakness of *Only What we Could Carry* is its apparent lack of examination. A more impressive alternative to an anthology would have been an analysis of these works, rather than merely a presentation. The lack of explanation of the internment's causes and effects also greatly weakens the book's range of usefulness. For this reason, *Only What we Could Carry* could be recommended as a source book, but should not be considered a defining piece of internment history.

Lon Kurashige and Charlotte Brooks present a new turn in internment historiography: the study of identity and culture prior to, and following internment. Participating in a roundtable discussion, both authors take a postmodern approach in their study, focusing on the evolution of Japanese American identity.<sup>16</sup> Kurashige uses a great deal of primary sources such as the Japanese American newspaper, *Rafu Shimpo*. He also employs current books, many of which focus on culture and ethnicity. Brooks' argument is built on primary sources as well, although she utilizes letters and transcribed interviews as opposed to newspapers. Her use of secondary sources is nominal.

Lon Kurashige's "The Problem of Biculturalism: Japanese American Identity and Festival Before World War II" describes the creation of Nisei Week in Los Angeles and the agency the Nisei, specifically the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) hoped to gain from the festival. Kurashige argues that members of the JACL used biculturalism to relay the idea that they were Japanese enough to support Little Tokyo, but American enough to love and support their home country.<sup>17</sup> This action was taken in order to find a comfortable midpoint between being considered outsiders by white Americans or fully assimilated by their peers.

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<sup>16</sup> As described in *Telling the Truth About History*, postmodernism makes a concerted effort to incorporate subaltern groups into existing historiography. Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth*, 217.

<sup>17</sup> Lon Kurashige, "The Problem of Biculturalism: Japanese American Identity and Festival Before World War II," *Journal of American History*, 86 (March 2000): 1634.

Nisei Week began as a way for businessmen in Little Tokyo to bring patrons into the declining business district of the city. It was decided that in order to increase its dwindling amount of customers, whites should be encouraged to shop in Little Tokyo.<sup>18</sup> As Kurashige states, "Nisei Week proved the optimal occasion to dress up Little Tokyo for white consumption."<sup>19</sup>

In the mid- to late-1930s, Nisei in Little Tokyo profited from white Americans' curiosity of the Orient. Nisei week included fashion shows of various forms of Japanese apparel, dancing, and customs. The effect of this was twofold; not only did it bring customers to Little Tokyo, it also promoted a development of a community consciousness. Along with this developing idea of self-image, the JACL also tried to construct an image of Japanese Americans for the white world to see; this is best illustrated by floats in a Nisei Week parade held in 1936. In 1936, the parade was focused on the agricultural contributions of the Japanese and Japanese Americans, but did not mention the low-level laborers who grew the produce. Rather, the wholesalers and large-landed farmers were recognized and appreciated. Here, we can see that the JACL was trying to cast persons of Japanese descent in a positive, albeit skewed light.<sup>20</sup>

The problem of establishing a successful bicultural identity reached a new level of intensity as relations between the United States and Japan became increasingly strained. Skepticism and prejudice directed toward the Nisei and Issei were beginning to escalate, as illustrated by Lail Kane's remarks about Japanese Americans.<sup>21</sup> The Japanese American Citizens League's solution to this problem was to discard its fondness for Japan and focus strictly on proving the loyalty of Japanese Americans to the United States. Nisei Week therefore ceased to serve as a catalyst for biculturalism, and instead sought to display intense love for the United States.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 1639.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 1642.

<sup>21</sup> Kane was fervently anti-Japanese, and at one point accused the JACL of being an instrument of Japan. He also asserted that the fishing boats of the Issei and Nisei could be converted to lay mines in the Pacific Ocean. *Ibid.*, 1652.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 1653.

After 1940, Nisei Week ceased its displays of kimonos, ceremonies and “rising sun” flags. Introduced to fill this void were American symbols, such as the American flag and replicas of the statue of liberty. It is clear that the JACL was willing to restructure its notion of the Japanese American self-image in order to appease white society. In the wake of Pearl Harbor, however, Kurashige poignantly states that nothing could save the Nisei and Issei from the paranoia of white America. In closing, Kurashige emphasizes the ambiguity of Japanese American identity during and after the Second World War. The JACL, he claims, became informants for the government while in the camps in order to further prove their loyalty. The end result was the Nisei and Issei’s unwillingness to follow a traitorous organization urging conformity, and an inability to return to being “Japanese.”<sup>23</sup> In the World War Two era, Japanese American identity was in turmoil.

Kurashige’s, “The Problem of Biculturalism,” does an excellent job of looking at race, identity and even gender values. The article’s major drawback is that by utilizing a postmodern approach, the mainstream political discourse that led up to the internment is almost entirely ignored. Although this article would compliment an already existing knowledge of the internment, its especially narrow focus limits its overall usefulness.

Kurashige is joined in the roundtable discussion by Charlotte Brooks. Brooks also deals with issues of ethnicity and identity in her piece, “In the Twilight Zone Between Black and White: Japanese American Resettlement and Community in Chicago, 1942-1945.” This too is a postmodern approach, dealing with race and class. The main argument presented by Brooks is that the resettling Nisei found it relatively easy to put down roots in Chicago for the simple reason that they were not black. In this respect, Roger Daniels and Brooks share a common idea: Chicago’s existing black/white racial divide let the Nisei settle as an “in-between” race, avoiding the overt discrimination suffered by blacks, while not receiving the full privileges of whites.<sup>24</sup> As Brooks puts it, “Not being white did not mean being black.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 1654.

<sup>24</sup> Roger Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial*, 82.

<sup>25</sup> Charlotte Brooks, “In the Twilight Zone Between Black and White: Japanese American Resettlement and Community in Chicago, 1942-1945,” *Journal of American History*, 86 (March 2000): 1656.

Internment and resettlement, argues Brooks, effectively destroyed Issei-controlled enclaves such as Little Tokyo. When resettlement began, the WRA had a large hand in finding jobs for the Nisei. Viewing them as an undesirable ethnic group, the WRA sought to place the Nisei in subordinate positions, such as housekeeping and other service jobs. The Nisei, however, were able to use their in-between status and Chicago’s binary racial stratification to secure industrial jobs left open by white servicemen.<sup>26</sup>

Once employed in industry, the in-betweenness of the Nisei became very obvious. Although managers were more apt to hire Nisei over African Americans, this did not mean they were willing to look at Nisei as equals.<sup>27</sup> The Nisei were rarely promoted to management positions, but at the same time, were treated better than African Americans. In order to promote their in-between status, Nisei would at times accept the existing hierarchy of Chicago; this meant accepting that African Americans were inferior or lazy.<sup>28</sup> By accepting these views, the Nisei and whites grew closer together through their disdain for African Americans.

In-betweenness could also be seen in Chicago housing. Nisei typically were not welcome in white neighborhoods, but did not wish to live in black areas. Therefore, Japanese Americans resided on the constantly shifting racial borderlands of Chicago, often taking up residence where “white flight” was occurring. Eventually, when African Americans encroached too closely to their homes, the Nisei would also move. Japanese Americans therefore followed the Caucasian, rather than African American way of life. From their viewpoint, being in-between was better than being at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Brooks argument is well presented, and her use of primary sources effectively supports her concept. Like Kurashige, her narrow focus impedes discussion of the wider, national factors that influenced the release of the Nisei from the internment camps in the first place. Although this essay is well researched, its lack of background information limits its use as a truly effective piece of internment historiography.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 1666.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 1699.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 1673.

A book using a very different historiographical method is Greg Robinson's *By Order of the President*. Robinson claims that Franklin Delano Roosevelt's decision to intern the Nisei and Issei was racially motivated. He is also quick to point out that many historians have all but absolved Roosevelt for his role in the internment; Robinson sets out to correct this error.<sup>29</sup> To prove his point, Robinson relies on what could be called a psychobiographical and political approach. The book chronicles the development of Franklin Roosevelt's attitude about the Japanese from his early days until the end of his life. To do so, Robinson relies on newspaper accounts, autobiographies, letters, diary entries, and dated secondary sources. This is very much a top-down approach to history, focusing primarily on Franklin Roosevelt and his immediate contacts, both governmental and military.

Robinson begins by setting up the growing animosity between the United States and Japan prior to the time of Franklin Roosevelt's election to the Presidency. In the very early twentieth century, Japan was becoming a formidable naval power, and was causing a great deal of suspicion on the west coast of America. Although this military matter was temporarily re-solved, Japan's massive military buildup and invasion of China in the 1930s rekindled these fears. Robinson states that Roosevelt was influenced by many of these factors early in life, which led to a distrust of many Japanese. He even adopted a "nativist" outlook that viewed the Japanese as racially different and opposed "race mixing."<sup>30</sup>

As stated earlier by Roger Daniels and Robert Takaki, the Justice Department and the FBI were both adamant in their belief that despite Japan's military buildup, the United States had nothing to fear from the Nisei and Issei. Following Pearl Harbor however, Roosevelt's existing distrust of the Japanese resulted in a greater willingness to believe false or exaggerated claims made by the War Department and military. Thus the true and accurate knowledge passed down from Francis Biddle and J. Edgar Hoover was ignored in favor of myths of fifth column activity and a

<sup>29</sup> Greg Robinson, *By Order of the President* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 6.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-44.

potential for sabotage. In Robinson's words, "Roosevelt's actions show how overprepared he was to believe the worst about the entire Japanese American community, notwithstanding the lack of any firm evidence of disloyalty and in the face of tangible evidence of community loyalty."<sup>31</sup>

Robinson attributes Roosevelt's decision to sign Executive Order 9066 to three main reasons. Roosevelt held to the belief that the Nisei and Issei were both "inassimilable," and had a general apathy toward the Japanese and Japanese Americans as a whole.<sup>32</sup> This view can best be illustrated by Roosevelt's delegation of powers to his subordinates when dealing with matters of internment. Also, Roosevelt was unwilling to make any type of positive statement in regards to the obvious loyalty of the interned Nisei and Issei. Secondly, Roosevelt's actions seem to have been dictated by political forces. He was willing to intern the Nisei and Issei in order to quell fear on the west coast and maintain war production. Also, Roosevelt delayed the release of the internees from the camps until after the Presidential election of 1944.<sup>33</sup> These events illustrate Roosevelt's willingness to ignore the Nisei and Issei's civil rights in order to make political gains. Finally, the misinformation Roosevelt allowed himself to believe was a vital factor in his decision to sign Executive Order 9066. Because he grew up in an age of skepticism against the Japanese, the president was more willing to believe the false claims of Secretary Stimson and John McCloy, rather than the logic of the FBI and the Justice Department.<sup>34</sup>

Greg Robinson makes a valuable contribution to Japanese American historiography with *By Order of the President*. A top-down approach focused on Roosevelt is an approach that few, if any, historians have taken, and Robinson does his part by objectively examining Roosevelt's role in the internment in a dispassionate manner. One surprising weakness of Robinson's piece is that it barely utilizes any current scholarship on the internment, relying instead on dated books. The main drawback to *By Order of the President* is that it is solely top-down. This approach ignores the camps almost completely, and gives only lip

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

service to the animosity toward the Japanese felt by everyday Americans.

The internment of the Nisei and Issei from 1942 until 1946 was clearly a violation of the rights guaranteed to all persons residing in the United States. To fully appreciate the severity of this event, one must have a broad understanding of its many different aspects. The causes of the internment, whether they be out of military necessity or racially triggered, must be understood. Equally as important are the conditions of the camps, and the lives that were lived behind their barbed wire. Finally, the after effects of the internment on not only the Nisei and Issei, but on America as a whole should also be addressed.

The internment was a complex and rapid undertaking, affecting those both behind and beyond the barbed wire perimeters of the hastily constructed camps. Ideally, as with any topic worth examining, one would hope to find a book or monograph that sufficiently addressed every aspect of the internment; unfortunately, such a compilation is not to be found. In one way or another, each school of history has its own inherent weaknesses when dealing with our past. Political history, for example, although adept at addressing the causes and administration of the internment, does not pay adequate attention to its victims.

The best approach to addressing the internment as a whole is through the use of social and cultural history, employed by Ronald Takaki in *Strangers From a Different Shore*. By incorporating both schools, Takaki addresses, though not in perfect detail, the causes and effects of the internment, while paying considerable attention to the camps and the lives of the internees. Though this approach may not completely satisfy all scholars, it is arguably the best way to present readers with a comprehensive view of the internment.