



Who is an American?

A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America

by Ronald Takaki

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Review by Jerry Winzig (Summer 1998 issue)

Ronald Takaki has written a fascinating history of the non-European peoples of the United States. For this reviewer, the son and grandson of German immigrants, husband of a woman adopted into a family with French, Irish, Polish, and German roots, and father of two Korean adoptees, it poses a powerful question: Who is an American?

Strictly speaking, the focus of *A Different Mirror* is not just America's non-European peoples. The immigration stories of two European groups — the Irish and the Jews from Russia and eastern Europe — also figure prominently in Takaki's history. By describing the Irish and the Jews as well as native Americans and people from Africa, China, Japan, and Mexico, Takaki seeks to correct glaring omissions in earlier histories of America's origins.

Takaki points out that Oscar Handlin's prize-winning 1951 study, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People*, excludes Americans who came from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. And in his 1945 book, *The Age of Jackson*, liberal historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., left out blacks and Indians. About Schlesinger's book, Takaki remarks: "There is not even a mention of two marker events — the Nat Turner insurrection and Indian removal, which Andrew Jackson himself would have been surprised to find omitted from a history of his era."

A Different Mirror includes a number of "marker events" that are crucial to the history of the United States. In the process, it thoroughly dismantles the myth that to be truly American one must be white. That's an important understanding, because America in 1998 is a multiracial society that can no longer be described in binary terms of black and white. And it is becoming increasingly diverse; a *Time* magazine cover story in 1990 predicted that by 2056 most Americans will trace their descent to "Africa, Asia, the Hispanic world, the Pacific Islands, Arabia — almost anywhere but white Europe." Three impressions emerge from Takaki's book. The first is the astounding way in which each of the racial and ethnic groups it describes were mistreated and continue to be mistreated by white Americans. The second is the amazing extent to which each of these groups have nonetheless adopted America as its own. The third is the essential concept of what America is, a place where "all men are created equal." While Takaki does not deny the hypocrisy of Thomas Jefferson, who penned the Declaration of Independence but never ceased to own slaves; he also quotes these amazing words of Jefferson: "The

whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other.” Takaki points out that, in spite of America’s failure to live up to its declaration that “all men are created equal”, its many peoples have adopted that dream as their own and at different times and in many ways have demanded that America live up to its promise.

The story of national origin in America is necessarily personal and Takaki opens his book by recounting a twenty-minute taxicab ride from Norfolk, Virginia to Virginia Beach:

The rearview mirror reflected a white man in his forties. “How long have you been in this country?” he asked. “All my life,” I replied, wincing. “I was born in the United States.” With a strong southern drawl, he remarked: “I was wondering because your English is excellent!” Then, as I had many times before, I explained: “My grandfather came here from Japan in the 1880s. My family has been here, in America, for over a hundred years.” He glanced at me in the mirror. Somehow I did not look “American” to him; my eyes and complexion looked foreign.

Takaki starts his stories with a description of an encounter around the year 1000 between a band of Vikings — led by Thorvold Eriksson, son of Erik the Red and brother of Leif Eriksson — and a group of native Americans. The encounter ends in a battle and the Vikings return to Greenland

From this first European encounter with the New World, Takaki goes on to an interesting discussion of William Shakespeare’s 1611 play, *The Tempest*. He believes that “what was happening onstage was a metaphor for English expansion into America” and makes a convincing case that Shakespeare’s imagery and language was lifted from contemporary documents about the New World, and Virginia in particular. He says: “To the theatergoers, Caliban represented what Europeans had been when they were lower on the scale of development.”

Takaki tells us how the Virginia colonists treated the fourteen thousand Powhatans for whom Virginia was home. In 1608, a Powhatan declared: “We hear you are come from under the World to take our World from us.” A year later, Governor Thomas Gates arrived in Virginia with instructions that the Indians should be forced to labor for the colonists and make annual payments of corn and skins. In Takaki’s words, “The orders were brutally carried out. During one of the raids, the English soldiers attacked an Indian town, killing

fifteen people and forcing many others to flee. Then they burned the houses and destroyed the cornfields. According to a report by commander George Percy, they marched the captured queen and her children to the river where they ‘put the Children to death...by throwing them overboard and shooting out their brains in the water.’”

From these early beginnings, the American colonies developed a racist philosophy, first to justify taking the land they wanted, and then to justify the use of slave labor. In 1790, the newly-formed United States Congress passed the Naturalization Act, restricting

citizenship to “whites” only. This restriction was to remain in effect for 162 years until it was nullified by the passage of the McCarran-Walter Act in 1952.

Takaki’s stories are not pretty. In vivid terms, he describes how black, Chicano, Irish, Jewish, Chinese, and Japanese people have been mistreated in the United States. He tells us how the United States took away fully one-half of Mexico’s territory and then systematically defrauded the Mexican landowners of 33 million acres. He tells us how, in 1922, Harvard University president Abbot Lawrence Lowell announced that the college had a “Jewish problem” and set out to deliberately limit Jewish enrollment.

But Takaki’s stories also reveal just how long the United States has been racially and ethnically diverse, and how much each of these groups have contributed, often in spite of their cruel treatment. He tells us about Martin Delany, a black man who was admitted to Harvard Medical School in 1850 but was not allowed to attend lectures after some of the students complained. He became a black nationalist. But when the Civil War broke out he abandoned his dreams of emigrating to Africa, volunteered for the Union Army, and served as a major in the 104th Regiment of United States Colored Troops.

Takaki reminds us of how essential African-Americans were to the Southern economy: “In the South, four million blacks were slaves, representing 35 percent of the total population in 1860. They constituted the essential labor force in southern agriculture for tobacco, hemp, rice, sugar, and especially cotton cultivation.”

About the Chinese in California, Takaki writes: “In 1880, the Chinese represented 86 percent of the agricultural labor force in Sacramento County, 85 percent in Yuba, and 67 percent in Solano.” In describing the waves of Japanese immigration, he says: “As early as 1910, Japanese farmers produced 70 percent of California’s strawberries, and by 1940 they grew 95 percent of the fresh snap beans, 67 percent of the fresh tomatoes, 95 percent of the celery, 44 percent of the onions, and 40 percent of the fresh green peas.”

One of the more fascinating parts of the book are Takaki’s descriptions of how some of America’s peoples came together even when the power structure tried to play them off against each other. In 1903, 200 Mexican farm workers joined hundreds of fellow Japanese laborers in a strike at Oxnard, California, and formed the Japanese-Mexican Labor Association (JMLA). When the JMLA petitioned to join the American Federation of Labor, AFL president Samuel Gompers specified an impossible condition: “Your union will under no circumstances accept membership of any Chinese or Japanese.” The Mexican branch of the union replied: “We will refuse any other kind of charter, except one which will wipe out race prejudice and recognize our fellow workers as being as good as ourselves.”

While Korean-Americans are not one of the peoples highlighted in Takaki’s book, he notes how planters in Hawaii played them off against their Japanese workers because the planters wanted to divide the work force, in their words, “about equally between two Oriental nationalities.” To accomplish this, in 1903 the planters asked a labor supplier to send a shipment of Korean laborers to Hawaii. But the Korean government cut off

emigration to Hawaii in 1905 after they heard about the abuses suffered by the Koreans on the plantations. After that, planters began bringing in laborers from the Phillipines.

Many of Takaki's stories involve early efforts to unionize. He recounts the moving words of a frail-looking teenager named Clara Lemlich, who addressed a 1909 mass meeting of women shirtwaist workers in New York City in Yiddish:

I am a working girl, one of those striking against intolerable conditions....[The bosses] yell at the girls and 'call them down' even worse than I imagine the Negro slaves were in the South....I am tired of listening to speakers who call in generalities. What we are here for is to decide whether or not to strike. I offer a resolution that a general strike be declared — now.”

The next morning, fifteen thousand shirtwaist workers were on strike.

One of the most moving parts of the book is the account of the contributions made by America's people in World War II while they were simultaneously being denied equal rights at home. By 1944, 700,000 black Americans were serving in the Army, 165,000 in the Navy, 5,000 in the Coast Guard, and 17,000 in the Marines. “On the European front alone, twenty-two black combat units fought in ground operations.”

Thousands of Japanese-Americans who were imprisoned in American internment camps nonetheless enlisted in the U.S armed forces. The Japanese-American 442nd Regiment, according to most military observers, was “probably the most decorated unit in United States military history.” They suffered 9,486 casualties, including 600 killed. They earned 18,143 individual decorations, including a Congressional Medal of Honor, 47 Distinguished Service Crosses, 350 Silver Stars, 810 Bronze Stars, and more than 3,600 Purple Hearts. According to General Joseph Stilwell, “They bought an awful hunk of America with their blood. You're damn right those Nisei boys [second generation Japanese-Americans] have a place in the American heart, now and forever.”

Chinese-Americans also contributed: “Altogether, 13,499 Chinese were drafted or enlisted in the United States armed forces — 22 percent of Chinese adult males.” Native Americans served as well, with 25,000 in the armed forces, including 800 women. According to Takaki, “Indians such as the Oneidas, Chippewas, and Comanches were able to block the Japanese decoding of American military information by dispatching messages in their tribal languages.” Native Americans constituted 20 percent of the 45th Army Infantry Division, known as the “Thunderbird,” which fought in North Africa, Italy, and France and suffered extremely high casualties: “3,747 dead, 4,403 missing, and 19,403 wounded.”

Takaki also recounts the role of Mexican-Americans in the war: “The Congreso del Pueblo de Habla Espanola (the Spanish-Speaking Congress) urged Mexican Americans to join their Anglo compatriots in arms. ‘We are also children of the United States. We will defend her.’” A half million Mexican-Americans served in the U.S. armed forces.

A Different Mirror teaches us, and has us discover some things we wish we didn't know, as well as many things we should have known. Takaki's quotations from Herman Melville about America over a hundred years ago reverberate with affirmation about that diversity which is America, despite the tragic injustice which has characterized its history. "All nations may claim her for their own. You cannot spill a drop of American blood, without spilling the blood of the whole world.' Americans are not 'a narrow tribe'; they are not a nation, 'so much as a world.'"