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Inside America's Concentration Camps: Two Centuries of Internment and Torture

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Reviewer:

Rachel Pistol

James Dickerson should be commended for tracing the theme of American concentration camps through from the 17th to the 21st century. It is all too easy to slip into the comfortable approach of examining events in isolation, when they are in fact but one more example of how a nation has failed to learn from the mistakes of its past. Dickerson reminds us of the fact that people have been locked up without trial for centuries, drawing comparisons between the treatment of Native Americans in the 18th and 19th centuries, those of Japanese ancestry (including American citizens born to one or more Japanese parent) during the Second World War, and concludes his tour of American history with modern-day Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) detention centres and the infamous camp at Guantanamo Bay.

Dickerson has written a range of non-fiction books and has worked as writer and journalist since leaving his first profession of social work. *Inside America's Concentration Camps* follows 'hot on the heels' of his last foray into American history, where he examined the dark world of Mississippi hate crimes.⁽¹⁾ While some of Dickerson's work has been of a lighter nature, such as biographies of the film stars including Nicole Kidman and Russell Crowe, some have been more serious works such as those on adoption, or cirrhosis of the liver. There seems to be nothing that the author will not turn his hand to, and in terms of historical works he has undertaken, he appears to favour the 'exposé' approach with his stories of Southern hate,

Mississippian resistance to racial integration, and now, American concentration camps. Of course, concentration camps did exist at other times, and Dickerson has done well to draw the corresponding ties of history together between the periods he discusses in his latest offering. There can be no doubt to the seriousness with which Dickerson has applied himself to the subject, as the extensive bibliography demonstrates. Dickerson has tackled a subject that is relevant to modern society and highlights the dangers that threaten the innocent civilian by the government's failure to learn from history. Unless the common man or woman is aware of the threats, there is little that can be done to change the pattern which America appears to have fallen into.

However, where Dickerson fails is when he embarks upon a journalistic flow and fails to truly make his points clear. To take an example from the middle section of the book, where he is focussing on the internment of those of Japanese ancestry living in the United States, Dickerson discusses the benevolent attitude of Governor Carr of Colorado towards the internees. Governor Carr was indeed one of the few westerners in public office who could "look back with pride and satisfaction on the posture [he] had assumed with regard to Evacuation."⁽²⁾ However, it is misleading to suggest, as Dickerson does on pages 171 and 172 of his book, that the reason those of Japanese American ancestry were able to undertake agricultural work outside the camp or leave permanently to embark upon college courses was due to Carr's influence. In fact, internees from all of the ten internment camps were able to undertake paid agricultural work outside camps subject to vetting procedures and demand from local farmers, and students from all camps were able to obtain permanent leave from internment if they could secure a place at an American college outside of the West Coast exclusion zone. The only camp where there was no such mobility was Tule Lake, in northern California, but only after it became a segregation camp in the aftermath of the disastrous "loyalty questionnaire" debacle. While some camps were run more effectively and inspired a more positive experience of internment, all camps had their various difficulties and problems. However, the treatment of those of Japanese ancestry in Colorado was certainly more positive than in some other states.

Inside America's Concentration Camps begins with the premise that concentration camps and torture are not indigenous to America but that:

"Both were imported by white immigrants who either had a predisposition to torture and detention, based on cultural experiences in their homelands where torture and detention were an accepted means for governments to control those of different races and religions, or who, in a darker psychological twist, had been tortured and detained in their homelands and then exiled to America, only to succumb, during times of crisis, to their baser instincts to do unto others as others have done unto them. When you look at U.S. history, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that for Americans whose families were desensitized by generations of abuse, government advocacy of torture and detention was a culturally acceptable means of imposing their will on people of different races, religions, and political beliefs" (p ix).

This is a bold statement, to say the least. Dickerson begins his story with the graphic recounting of torture tactics during the "Killing Time" in Scotland and how it led to the emigration of many from Scotland to America. The emphasis on different methods of torture is supposed to set the scene for Americans' willingness to torture and confine various ethnic groups over the past two centuries.⁽³⁾ Dickerson does also point out (p. x) that those who were persecuted in their native lands before arriving in America perhaps had an aversion to torture, but that they would consider using it as a means to protect economic assets. Essentially, that is Dickerson's argument: that torture has been used as a method of protecting American economic gains. An argument that is perhaps somewhat justified by the desire for Native American land that led to the banishment of Native Americans westwards, the desire for Japanese farming land that contributed to their exclusion from the West Coast during the Second World War, and perhaps even in the treatment of immigrants held in INS centres who Americans fear might flood the employment market.

Dickerson does well to compare the stockades into which Indians were forced, prior to relocation, to internment camps. However, arguing that reservations were also in reality internment camps is perhaps a stretch too far (p. 20). Internment camps specifically relate to the detention of enemy aliens during times of war or to the detention of terrorist suspects. Internees are held within confined areas and threatened with the

prospect of death if they try to escape. Reservations, while of a limiting nature, are not guarded in the same way as an internment camp, and any comparison of this nature should be undertaken with great care and reference to the existing historiography surrounding internment. While the basic point the author makes regarding the internment of Native Americans is sound, his exaggerated use of terminology does not serve to strengthen his argument.

In the middle section of Dickerson's book he focuses on Second World War internment. Much has been written regarding the treatment of those of Japanese ancestry in America, but Dickerson manages to cover not only this topic but also the internment of Germans and Italians, an often overlooked story. Those of Japanese ancestry were rounded up indiscriminately, unlike the Germans and Italians whose cases were individually considered. This is not to say, however, that hardships were not also suffered by members of the German or Italian communities. Dickerson tells the moving story of two young girls whose German parents were taken away by the FBI without any regard for what might happen to the children. This is but one heart-rending example included in the book. Dickerson also does not forget the plight of South American Japanese, who were deported to the United States and held in custody for the duration of the war, and in many cases, for several years after. *Inside America's Concentration Camp* therefore does well to include such a diversity of first and second hand accounts of internment from all enemy alien groups during the Second World War.

There is also a distinct focus on the way that children were affected, either by their own internment, or by the internment of close family members. This approach provides a fascinating insight into the emotional effects of internment and is an effective slant to take in order to drill home the true consequences of the West Coast's move to intern an entire ethnic group. As Dickerson points out, the inclusion of an orphanage at Manzanar in California (euphemistically called the "Children's Village"), is a "sobering indictment of society as a whole at that troubled time in American history" (p. 96). Dickerson also notes the difference between the treatment of German prisoners of war in the South and the treatment of those of Japanese ancestry. Ironically, the POWs were often better treated than the Japanese Americans, despite the fact the Japanese Americans were citizens of the United States and had never embarked upon sabotage or fought against America. After the war it was discovered that not one single person of Japanese ancestry was found guilty of espionage, making a mockery of the entire internment fiasco.

Significantly, Dickerson also mentions Camp Ontario, where 1,000 Jewish refugees were sent and lived under various restrictions on their freedom until the end of the war. After the war there was some debate as to whether the refugees should be allowed to remain in the United States or whether they should be deported. Eventually the refugees were granted asylum provided they exited the camp, travelled to Canada, and then re-entered the country. America, once again, demonstrated an unnecessarily bureaucratic approach to human suffering.

The final section of Dickerson's book focuses on modern day INS detention centres and Guantanamo Bay. The book therefore comes full circle from its starting point of torture. The author uses several firsthand accounts of detention in an INS centre that are highly emotive. Dickerson argues that individuals are being subjected to degrading and abusive behaviour upon entry into America, and ultimately America is failing in its duties to protect the vulnerable that come to its shores, for the most part, he argues, because they are not Caucasian. The majority of those held within INS facilities have not been charged with any crime, often they are merely awaiting an immigration hearing. This does not stop them from being treated like prisoners, however, sometimes held in solitary confinement for no obvious reason. Dickerson cites several examples of modern-day "internees" being denied access to basic rights such as adequate healthcare and argues convincingly that more attention needs to be paid to the running of these centres. America cannot stand as a beacon of democracy if it allows breaches of human rights on its own shores.

Overall, *Inside America's Concentration Camps* is a thoroughly researched, well-written book. There are numerous occasions where the author's journalistic tendencies overtake the historical tone of the book and at these points it is easy for the non-expert reader in the field to suffer confusion. Dickerson has thoroughly researched the three topics concentrated upon in this book and has gone out of his way to find personal

recollections of 20th- and 21st-century internment to really bring the topic alive for the reader. There can be no doubt that the audience *Inside America's Concentration Camps* is aimed at is the general public, and the book should provoke the sort of debate regarding civil liberties that its author desires. It is important for the subject of internment to remain in the national consciousness, as one would hope action might be taken to prevent such unhealthy patterns repeating themselves. The occasional careless usage of terminology and slight misconstruction of certain ideas means the historian should be careful when referring to this text. However, as a complement to the established field of American internment history it sheds light into new areas for scholars of this subject.

Notes

1. James L. Dickerson and Alex. A. Alston Jr., *Devil's Sanctuary: An Eyewitness History of Mississippi Hate Crimes* (Chicago, IL, 2009).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Bill Hosokawa and Robert A. Wilson, *East to America: A History of the Japanese in the United States* (New York, NY, 1980), p. 211.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For more on modern American torture see Philippe Sands, *Torture Team: Rumsfeld's Memo and the Betrayal of American Values* (London, 2008).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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