

**USING CASE STUDIES TO TEACH
ETHNIC AND IMMIGRATION HISTORY:
A GUIDE FOR TEACHERS**

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Case studies are frequently used as a teaching method in business school, law school, and medical school. In these classrooms, graduate students are asked to review realistic cases, often based on real examples, to evaluate the best course of action to strengthen a business strategy, resolve a legal issue, or treat a patient. Such case studies help students apply the knowledge that they have learned to new situations, developing their critical thinking skills.

However, although the case study model is more commonly used in graduate school, it can be useful in undergraduate, high school, and middle school classrooms. And case studies can be used to teach history. Case studies are useful in history classrooms for at least a couple of key reasons: they allow students to apply the historical knowledge that they have learned to new situations, and they help students to develop their historical imaginations, seeing events from the perspective of the people who lived through them.

In my conversations with students and teachers, one of the reasons that many students seem to find history boring is that it has already happened. History is a story of things that are already over. We know all the answers. However, as Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore notes in *Gender and Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), the people who lived through the experiences that we study did not know how things would turn out. Case studies can help students step into a moment in the past and try to work out what they would have done if they would have found themselves in the same situation. This approach allows students to use the knowledge that they have learned about a particular historical time period to evaluate what realistic options might they have had and how successful they might have been with different choices.

Although many history textbooks work hard to incorporate ordinary people's experiences, they also often speak in an overarching, authoritative voice that seeks

to explain historical events in generalized terms. This is a particular problem when exploring the experiences of ethnic minorities and immigrants. For example, textbook treatments of Japanese American internment often seek to explain the reasons why the U.S. government decided to incarcerate people of Japanese descent rather than focusing on the experience of the internees themselves. Case studies can help students to look at large historical forces from the perspective of the people who lived these experiences. In this way, students can strengthen their historical imagination and sense of the past.

In my classes, I use various types of case studies. In some classes, I develop “typical” case studies more similar to those used in business schools. When my students read George Sánchez’s *Becoming Mexican American* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), for example, they learn about the history of Mexican repatriation during which 500,000 Mexicans and Mexican Americans were encouraged and coerced to “return” to Mexico during the Great Depression. As part of class discussion, I give a different individual archetype based on the course reading to each small group: one group might explore the viewpoint of a 19-year-old Mexican American employed dressmaker who has always lived in California with her family; another might consider repatriation from the perspective of a single, unemployed musician who arrived in Los Angeles in 1929. I ask each group to evaluate whether to travel to Mexico, to outline the factors that influenced their decision, and to determine whether they were happy with what they decided. Students then explain their decision to other groups and sometimes engage in debates about their decisions. This exercise requires students to rely on various chapters in this book and to apply their reading to the question of repatriation.

In other cases, I use personal histories drawn from detailed secondary sources. I have included three samples of these short case studies below. In their

particularity, such case studies may also surprise students with the way that history doesn't always turn out exactly as expected. These histories may be over, but we don't know all the answers.

Each of the following samples is divided into three parts. I show each part on an overhead screen, allowing time for students to work in small groups to discuss the questions and then share their responses with the class. Throughout our discussion, I push students to relate their responses to the readings. After the third section, we typically discuss the outcome as a whole group. Although some case studies require an entire class session or longer, these can generally be discussed in depth in about 30 minutes. Some of these case studies may not be appropriate for middle or high school students or may not relate to topics that you teach in your classes; however, I hope that they will provide models for your own course topics.

The Ida B. Wells-Barnett case study is based on "To Sell My Life as Dearly as Possible," a chapter about Wells-Barnett in Paula Gidding's *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Morrow, 1996). My students discuss this case study in a class on the end of Reconstruction and the introduction of Jim Crow. After the conclusion of our discussion, I describe aspects of Ida B. Wells-Barnett's life with students.

The Pahkar Singh case study is adapted from Karen Leonard's article, "The Pahkar Singh Murders: A Punjabi Response to California's Alien Land Law," *Amerasia* 11, no. 1 (1984): 75-87. This case study is particularly relevant to classes on anti-Asian laws, including alien land laws and citizenship restrictions.

The Fred Korematsu case study is based on the documentary film, *Of Civil Wrongs and Rights: The Fred Korematsu Story*, directed by Eric Paul Fournier (2000). Originally screened on PBS's Point of View program, the film runs 60

minutes and has a useful website at

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/ofcivilwrongsandrights/>. I teach this case study in a class on Japanese American internment.

If possible, it would probably be helpful to review these sources before teaching the case studies. This would also allow you to adapt the case studies to your classroom.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett Case Study (1)

Adapted from Paula Gidding's *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Morrow, 1996).

It is 1884. Ida B. Wells, a young black school teacher, is riding on the Chesapeake and Ohio railroad from Memphis to Woodstock, Tennessee. She takes her seat in the first-class ladies' coach, as she has done on previous train rides. However, Jim Crow is being instituted across the South, and the conductor tells her to give up her seat for a white male passenger and to ride instead in the "smoking car" immediately behind the engine.

What are Wells' options?

What are her chances of success with each option?

What do you think she decides to do?

Ida B. Wells-Barnett Case Study (2)

Wells refuses to travel in the Jim Crow car because it is a "smoker" and already crowded with passengers. However, the conductor grabs her and attempts to forcibly remove her. As he takes hold of her arm, Wells braces her feet against the seat in front, holds onto the seatback and bites the conductor of the back of the

hand. Nursing his hand, the conductor is unable to remove Wells from her seat and leaves the carriage. However, he returns with the baggageman and another man, and together the three men eject Wells from the ladies' car. As they do so, the white passengers stand and cheer them on.

Are Wells' actions justified?

What are Wells' options at the time that she is forcibly removed?

Does she have any options to fight the railroad company?

Ida B. Wells-Barnett Case Study (3)

Immediately upon her return to Memphis, Wells retains the only black lawyer in town to bring a case against the railroad. He does not move forward quickly with the suit and Wells is suspicious that the attorney has been paid not to pursue her claims vigorously. She therefore dismisses him, hires a white lawyer, and is able to present her case in court. The judge, an ex-Union officer, rules in favor of Wells, agreeing that she should not have been removed from the ladies' coach.

On Christmas Day, 1884, one of Memphis' white newspapers runs the headline: "A Darky Damsel Obtains Verdict for Damages Against the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad." Wells also inaugurates her journalism career writing an article about the case for a black Baptist weekly, the *Living Way*. She argues that if blacks stand up for the rights granted them under Reconstruction legislation, they will be able to maintain these rights.

However, the railroad company appeals the case to a higher court, offering Wells more money than she received in damages if she agrees not to fight the appeal.

She refuses. The Tennessee Supreme Court reverses the lower court's decision, leaving Wells "utterly discouraged."

Is this outcome what you expected? Why or why not?

In what ways is Wells representative of African Americans living through the establishment of Jim Crow? In what ways are her experiences and her actions distinctive?

Pahkar Singh Case Study (1)

Adapted from Karen Leonard, "The Pahkar Singh Murders: A Punjabi Response to California's Alien Land Law," *Amerasia* 11, no. 1 (1984): 75-87.

It is 1925. Pahkar Singh is an unmarried, Punjabi farmer, leasing land from two Anglo shipping agents, Victor Sterling and John Hager, in California's Imperial Valley. Because Singh is not legally allowed to own land under the Alien Land Laws, he is leasing this land on a verbal agreement. Singh is educated and well-respected among both Indians and whites in the Valley, who recognize him as a good man and a good farmer. He has some debts, although these are lower than most of his fellow Indian farmers. He is also hopeful that his lettuce harvest, which is worth as much as \$50,000, will offset these debts. However, when he arrives at his fields one morning, he discovers his harvest being hauled away by the Anglos from whom he leases the land.

What are Singh's options?

What are his chances of success with each of these options?

What do you think he decides to do?

Pahkar Singh Case Study (2)

When Singh sees his harvest being stolen, he confronts the agents and demands that they give him the crops or pay for them. When they do not back down and insult him, he shoots them and splits their heads open with an axe. He then travels into town to kill the third man involved in the scheme, William Thornburg, telling him that “They can’t hang me any higher for killing you too.” However, when Thornburg’s pregnant wife shields her husband, Singh drops his gun and surrenders to the sheriff explaining that he killed the men “because they robbed me.”

Are Singh’s actions justified?

What do you think is likely to happen to Singh at this point?

Does he have any options?

Pahkar Singh Case Study (3)

Although the immediate public reaction is outraged, as the details of the case emerge, local newspaper accounts begin to show more sympathy for Singh and his situation. Singh is jailed and brought to trial for the first murder. The prosecution faces many difficulties as Singh's Mexican agricultural employees (the main witnesses) have moved to new farms and have to be brought back to the Imperial Valley. Their testimony is sometimes unclear and generally sympathetic to Singh, describing the farm as Singh's and stating that "the lettuce belongs to Pahkar." The only Anglo witness, the shipping company driver, also acknowledges that the farm belongs to Singh. The prosecution attempts to claim that the murder was premeditated. However, Singh's lawyers claim a hereditary insanity defense, noting that his brother also allegedly committed a murder in India. This defense loses him support in the Anglo community, although the Indian community remains firmly behind Singh. He is convicted of second-degree murder and ten years to life in prison. The second trial is moved, after Singh's attorneys claim that he cannot get a fair trial in the Imperial Valley. The second trial results in a first-degree murder conviction and a life sentence. However, Singh's attorneys successfully appeal this conviction on the grounds that the judge is prejudiced. Singh is released from prison in 1940 and receives the remaining \$600 from the defense fund raised for him by Indian supporters. He returns to the Imperial Valley and is not especially successful as a farmer, although he marries twice and has four children by his second wife, a young Mexican woman. Singh dies in 1973, by all accounts a reclusive and bitter man. He is still remembered by the Indian community in the Imperial Valley as a man who fought against racism and oppression.

Is this outcome what you expected? Why or why not?

Ultimately, under the circumstances, was Singh's course of action the best course that he could have taken?

Fred Korematsu Case Study (1)

Adapted from *Of Civil Wrongs and Rights: The Fred Korematsu Story* (Eric Paul Fournier, dir., 2000).

It is a beautiful sunny Sunday morning, December 7, 1941. During the week, Fred Korematsu, a young Japanese American (Nisei) man, works as a welder in a shipyard. He is successful and is being promoted to foreman. However, this Sunday, he and his white girlfriend have driven to Skyline Drive in San Francisco. They have spread out a blanket and are reading the Sunday papers with the car radio playing. Suddenly, over the car radio comes the announcement that the Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor. Korematsu can't believe it.

When he punches in on Monday morning, Korematsu is told by his immediate supervisor that he can't work in the shipyard. He goes to the superintendent who says that, although he likes Fred very much and knows that he is a good worker, he can't help him. Korematsu finds new work, on a short-term contract, until the announcement that the Japanese will be interned. Korematsu considers going along with the internment orders, but he and his girlfriend want to stay together and she is not allowed to enter the assembly or internment camps because she is white.

What are Korematsu's options?

What are his chances of success with each of these options?

What do you think he decides to do?

Fred Korematsu Case Study (2)

Korematsu tells his parents that he is planning to leave San Francisco and does not join them when they are evacuated to the Tanforan assembly camp on April 29, 1942. Fred and his girlfriend are thinking about leaving the west coast evacuation area. However, his girlfriend sees an advertisement for a plastic surgeon in the Sunday paper. Korematsu visits the doctor and explains that he wants plastic surgery to look white because he is being harassed for looking Japanese. The doctor conducts the surgery. Korematsu changes his name and tries to pass as a person of mixed Mexican and Hawaiian ancestry. However, in May 1942, as he is waiting for his girlfriend at the corner while she goes to get a pack of cigarettes, the military police approach him and ask him whether he has seen any short Japanese men. Although Korematsu denies that he is Japanese, the police arrest him.

What are Korematsu's options now?

What are his chances of success with each of these options?

What do you think he decides to do?

Fred Korematsu Case Study (3)

The police arrest Korematsu and take him into custody. He never sees his girlfriend again. A Judge rules that Korematsu has violated a military order and should be imprisoned. However, Korematsu fights the charges and, with the support of various civil liberties groups, takes his appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1944. Korematsu's lawyers charge that the military order to evacuate and intern all Japanese and Japanese Americans in the United States is unconstitutional and exceeds the president's war powers. They lose the case in 6-3 decision. The Justices rule that internment is constitutionally suspect but justified during times of "emergency and peril." Korematsu is imprisoned. In 1998, President Clinton awards Korematsu the Presidential medal of Freedom. However, the ruling in *Korematsu v. the United States* still stands.

Is this outcome that you expected? Why or why not?

Under the circumstances, was Korematsu's course of action the best course that he could have taken?

Anna Pegler-Gordon teaches ethnic and immigration history at James Madison College, an undergraduate residential college within Michigan State University. She is also interested in K-12 education and has coordinated MSU workshops on Asian American Studies for K-12 classroom teachers, as well as worked as a consultant on MSU's "Teaching American History" program. Her research focuses on Asian American Studies and she is currently writing a book about Asians at Ellis Island. Anna Pegler-Gordon is a member of the Immigration and Ethnic History Society's Executive Board.