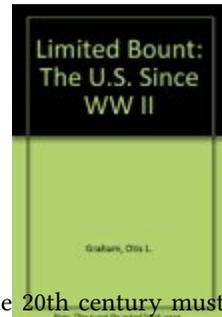


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Otis L. Graham, Jr. *A Limited Bounty: The United States Since World War II*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996. 324 pp. \$25.90 (paper), ISBN 978-0-07-023979-1.

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What is the purpose of teaching American history? There are those who believe that American history must celebrate the nation and present a positive view of the United States to impressionable students. According to this viewpoint, the official story of America is one of infinite progress. The nation is one that has charged ever steadily forward, becoming better with each passing year. What of slavery, the mistreatment of the Native Americans, or the use of the atomic bomb? These events should be either ignored or presented as somehow vital to the overall progress of the nation.

Since World War II, however, historians increasingly have been willing to challenge celebratory history, preferring instead to offer an interpretation of the American past that, while less pretty, is a truer history of the nation. This history includes the nation's missteps and mistakes, its hypocrisies and its flaws. This is the type of history offered by Otis L. Graham, Jr. with *A Limited Bounty: The United States Since World War II*.

In his introduction, Professor Graham states that his purpose in writing this book is to help students "understand the public life and dilemmas of contemporary America." This is not a book that emphasizes or glorifies individual American experiences and achievements. Instead, Graham focuses on the national experience and the nation's problems. His goal was to write relevant history so that Americans might better understand the challenges facing them in the future, and in this task he has succeeded.

A Limited Bounty is a well-organized and very readable survey of United States history since 1945, ending with the mid-term elections of 1994. Organizing chronologically, Graham discusses aspects of American political, social, and cultural history. Of course, any book pur-

porting to cover the last half of the 20th century must include the entire scope of the cold war, as well as the civil rights movement and the other social "liberation" movements of the 1960s and 1970s. My own requirements for such a text would also include a full discussion of the events that have lead to the atmosphere of cynicism toward government and politicians that characterizes the 1990s. Graham effectively and thoroughly discusses these issues. This text, however, offers a twist not generally found in the typical survey.

That twist is ecology. The problems associated with "population, resources, and environment" are, according to Graham, "the most important element[s] and central focus of this book." Throughout the book, Graham tells the story of America's infatuation with cheap energy. After the war, most Americans blithely took for granted the nation's easy access to what appeared to be unlimited resources. However, as Graham relates, Americans slowly came to the unavoidable realization that the resources fueling the good life were not going to last forever. Clearly a defining feature of the last half of the 20th century has been the process by which citizens of the "land of plenty" have had to come to grips with the problems of overpopulation, pollution, and the loss of inexpensive fuel sources.

In writing this book, Graham seems to be on a mission of sorts. He wants to insure that students are aware of the pressing ecological problems that await them in the twenty-first century. The author's biases and opinions regarding this issue are quite evident, but do not detract from the effectiveness of his message. The message is an important one, and I, for one, do not believe that all opinion should be omitted from all histories. *A Limited Bounty* should serve as an excellent book to stimulate good class discussion—and perhaps a few spirited

arguments as well. However, I would recommend it for upper-level classes rather than for the traditional survey, unless the instructor has the freedom to assign several shorter, more focused books instead of the typical multi-purpose survey text.

A Limited Bounty will not meet with the approval of those who still believe that American history class should be an occasion to instill patriotism and pride in their students. Still, there is much to be said for educating American students to think rationally rather than emotionally

about their nation. Discussion of mistakes made in the past and problems that lay ahead should be a goal of all college history instructors, and *A Limited Bounty* is one text that should be considered by any instructor who agrees with this goal.

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