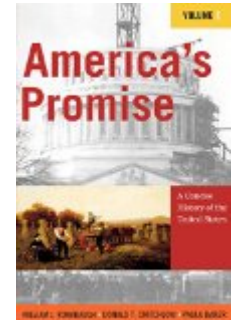


William J. Rorabaugh, Donald T. Critchlow, Paula Baker. *America's Promise: A Concise History of the United States, vol. 1.* New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004. xii + 432 pp. \$32.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7425-1189-7.



Reviewed by Kathryn Ostrofsky

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With *America's Promise: A Concise History of the United States*, William Rorabaugh, Donald Critchlow, and Paula Baker add their contribution to the wide variety of introductory college-level American history textbooks available. To distinguish their volume, they state, their purpose is to focus on major ideas to allow students to understand important concepts without getting bogged down with details (p. ix). Each chapter therefore begins with an overview of the content that follows and concludes with a few paragraphs of summary. Each chapter section also begins with a summary, which is often so closely worded to the text that redundancy is apparent. To encourage further study, a bibliography of recommended readings, including primary sources, follows each chapter.

When the authors adhere to the idea-focused approach, the text reads more like narrative than does the usual textbook style of densely packed names, dates, and bold keywords. This is the most innovative part of the book—an idea-centered approach better matches the teaching goals of many college professors who teach U.S. History surveys.

However, the authors are only partially successful at implementing this approach.

The balance between important ideas and minor details varies from chapter to chapter. Sometimes the textbook provides impressively clear explanations of complex issues. For example, it deftly ties the political and economic circumstances of the 1830s to the Jackson administration's policies on Native Americans and the Bank of the United States (chapter 10). Other times, however, the reader has difficulty discerning the major ideas. In an effort to present amusing anecdotes or to illustrate cultural history or minority influence, the authors include details, but often neglect to connect them to major ideas. This does more to obscure than to clarify important themes. For example, the authors relate that de Soto's escaped pigs became Florida's wild boars (p. 14) but fail to explore themes that this might illustrate, such as cultural differences in food production, or Europeans' environmental impact on America.

In a similar vein, the equal weight given to the American party's ideological platform and its secret handshakes (p. 260) may make a student re-

member that the American party was not mainstream, but may also distract the reader from the party's policies and historical significance. In other instances, lack of detail may hinder the reader's understanding of the concepts. For example, the repeated discussion of the Pope's attempt to divide the world between Spain and Portugal is never actually called by name, the Treaty of Tordesillas (pp. 9-11).

When major themes are addressed, the treatment and placement of various topics adheres to the traditional textbook format. The authors attempt to integrate social and cultural history, as well as to give "special attention" to women and minorities, but the text still falls into the classic narrative of the positive progress of political history with the occasional thematic chapter set in at an awkward moment (p. xi). After the first chapter, which begins with a generalized description of Native American life before European colonization, the book goes through the political history of the colonies and the American Revolution, and through a litany of presidential administrations, focusing on policy and barely mentioning women or minorities.

Chapters 8, 9, and 11 interrupt the list of presidents with treatments of "The Market Revolution," "Evangelical Religion and Reform, 1790-1850," and "The Problem of Slavery." This format severs the political history of the presidents' agendas from the larger political, social, cultural, and economic forces that they addressed. When the authors do discuss this important material, they present a traditional, overwhelmingly positive interpretation. For example, in the chapter on the market revolution, the authors' ratio of fifteen pages discussing progress to four pages discussing fears and consequences of turmoil is reflected in the overview, section summaries, and conclusion of the chapter (pp. 152-171). Plus, the authors miss important opportunities to integrate the market revolution with other themes such as reform or sectionalism.

Similarly disconnected in presentation, slavery is almost entirely absent until chapter 11, which, dedicated specifically to "The Problem of Slavery," encompasses the history of slavery and slave life, and the activities of white abolitionists and northern black activists, from colonial times through the 1850s. The description of life in colonial Virginia in chapter 2 focuses on planters and politics, while the slave experience is not discussed until chapter 11. Temperance, anti-prostitution, and transcendentalist utopias dominate the chapter on religion and reform, while abolitionism is only discussed in conjunction with slavery. Rather than weaving such a major theme throughout the book, the authors confine it to one chapter.

The separation in the textbook of the market revolution, of religion and reform, and of slavery, deemphasizes the centrality of such themes to United States history and leaves the accounts of presidential policies in a contextual vacuum. Integration of these themes throughout the whole book would yield a narrative closer in clarity and comprehensiveness to the chapter on Andrew Jackson.

The glossary included at the end of the book is somewhat difficult to use. It combines terms from both volumes, but does not reference the pages on which to find the terms. The decision not to put keywords in bold may make the text read more like a story, but it compromises the book's quality as a reference, since there is no indication in the text which words appear in the glossary. The appendices include the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, a table of presidential elections, and a chronology of events in American history divided by administration, which may be of use to students in linking presidents' actions with other events and conditions of the time.

While their stated approach of focusing on major ideas is certainly both novel and needed, the authors have only mixed success in achieving their goal, and their textbook does not distinguish

itself in content or presentation from others available.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-usa>

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