

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Goldfield; et al. *The American Journey: A History of the United States*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1998. xxxi + 1037 pp. \$57.33 (paper), ISBN 978-0-13-031766-7.

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The authors of *The American Journey* say in their preface that this book is for their students. It is gratifying to see authors recognize this important audience perspective first off. From my examination, they have succeeded in creating a very student-friendly book. Its broad-based approach provides many of the tools instructors like to see for their students' use: strong chronologies, extensive clarifying maps, tables summarizing complex issues, primary sources, coherent graphs, and a comprehensive glossary. A particularly nice feature is the "Where to Learn More" section ending each chapter. Here, the authors list several historic sites or museums readers can visit that relate to events in the chapter. All these are coupled with a clear, concise, direct, easy-to-read text making the goal of these authors largely a reality.

At first glance, the visual appeal of the text is obvious. Thumbing through it highlights the large number of maps (often 3 or more per chapter), the many graphs, figures and tables, and the colorful illustrations, paintings, and photographs. Few open-page spreads lack the visual relief of some imagery. This should help keep students' attention. The large (almost 8 1/2 x 11 inch) format borders on unwieldy, but it lays flat when open, which is a welcome feature. Available supplemental materials include an instructor's manual, test bank, computerized test program for customizing exams, transparencies, student study guide, document reader or available customized reader, and several multimedia supplements. None of these materials was made available to this reviewer, but the single volume "Brief" edition on short glance did appear to contain the best features of the 2-volume regular edition, without sacrificing its clarity, at a total length of 621 pages.

The text is divided into both chronological and topical

chapters. In volume 1, chapters 1-10 follow the chronological development of the nation from pre-discovery through the Jacksonian Era. Then chapters 11-14 cover the issues of industrial change and urbanization, westward expansion, slavery and the Old South, and antebellum reform with overlapping time frames from 1800 to 1860. Chapters 15-18 finish the volume with sequential chronological presentation of sectionalism, the Civil War, and Reconstruction.

Volume 2 includes a similar mixture of topical and chronologically-focused chapters. While I am not sure I agree with the choice to discuss the Progressive Era (1900-1917, in Chapter 23) prior to that of American Imperialism (1865-1917, in Chapter 24), overall I think the mixture allows for easier understanding of events. When the causal sequence leading to events such as the Revolution, Civil War, the Great Depression, or student unrest in the 1960s is particularly important to its understanding, the text presents the material just that way. More overarching themes like slavery, industrialization, immigration, social reform, or cultural shifts after 1965 are best treated over longer time periods against the backdrop of various contextual backgrounds. *The American Journey* combines the best of both techniques.

As a diplomatic historian, I chose to focus my attention on the chapters dealing with those subjects. In them I found generally sound explanations based on recent scholarship and grounded in the domestic context surrounding the events. For example, the discussion of the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine (p. 742-3) includes descriptions of the American concerns about trade and investment as well as European intervention in the hemisphere. And while the Open Door Notes are reduced to a limited summary (p. 737) that I would like to see ex-

panded, the most important features of the motivations behind them and their effect is clearly explained within that brief treatment. The complex nature of pre-World War I neutrality (p. 751-2) is illustrated by inclusion of the problems caused by loyalties of American citizens—most of whom were tied by ethnic heritage to one side or the other in the European conflict. Their economic or cultural sympathies made “impartial...thought” almost impossible. This national tension added to the problems of the allied-leaning Wilson administration and ultimately frustrated American efforts at neutrality. The grounding of diplomatic events in the domestic affairs of the nation clarifies how these two facets of American activity are inextricably tied.

One important benchmark for comparison of American history texts is the Vietnam War. *The American Journey* treats the war within two chapters, “The Confident Years, 1953-1964” and “Shaken to the Roots, 1965-1980.” The conflicting nature of these time periods domestically and with respect to the war is made obvious within this framework. Just like the slow and largely unseen evolution of America’s involvement in Vietnam, the book includes early U.S. actions within the context of the other Cold War issues facing the Eisenhower and then Kennedy administrations. Just as the war seemed to explode on the domestic scene with the Johnson administration’s Rolling Thunder bombing, the coverage of the war dominates the beginning of chapter 31. The descriptions well illustrate the ambiguities associated with the war: the problems of a “controlled military escalation,” the lack of American understanding of the problems on the ground in Vietnam that could not be affected by U.S. fighting ability, and the problems caused by growing American domestic dissatisfaction with the war. The

student movement is showcased here, where it should be, side-by-side with the major event that escalated it. The primary source in this chapter is a description of his own college antiwar activities by Craig McNamara, the son Johnson’s Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. The contradictions illustrated by this selection help the text convey the whole sense of disillusion that accompanied these years and our Vietnam experience.

While describing the end of the Cold War, the authors resist the temptation to accept the Bush administration’s assessment that the U.S. had “won.” Instead, they say “the historical assessment of the last half-century of U.S. foreign policy (is) open to debate” (p. 1024). Was the U.S. economy somehow damaged by its massive arms build-up? Did the Soviet Union’s collapse just mean it hadn’t been much of a threat in the first place? These are the things that make diplomatic history, in particular, the often shady gray area it is. *The American Journey* goes a long way toward illuminating those dark corners of diplomacy, tying them to their domestic underpinnings, and showing off the difficult nature of the historian’s task. In the process, it might just make some of its student readers historians of a sort.

In the final analysis, this text is a good addition to the body of survey texts on the market. Its clear descriptions made one of my students wish I had assigned *The American Journey* instead of the text she used. After examining this book, I am seriously considering making that change.

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