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Dewey W. Grantham. *Recent America: The United States Since 1945.* Wheeling, Ill.: Harlan Davidson, 1998. v + 502 pp. $27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-88295-941-2.

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Recent America Reviewed

Emeritus Professor Dewey W. Grantham of Vanderbilt University has produced a sweeping revision of his 1987 edition of *Recent America*. The new edition provides college and university professors with yet another choice for their United States since 1945 courses. With so many textbooks on the market even a revised edition of a classic must have a clear purpose if it is to stand out from the rest. Grantham makes plain in the preface that his "emphasis is on national politics, federal policy, and the role of the United States in international affairs" (p. vii). Grantham's training and scholarly publications make this decision a wise one for the author has written numerous books about modern American politics. Furthermore, despite the excellent recent outpouring of specialized literature analyzing social and cultural topics, our students still need a grounding in the political context. Grantham's text, alone or in combination with other sources, can help provide that structure. This text then will satisfy instructors who want to make national and international political issues the focus of their course. It will also provide a nice contrast for instructors who devote class and/or supplemental readings to social and cultural themes but still recognize the need for political coverage.

The organization of the text is such that it will facilitate either strategy. There are a total of nineteen chapters divided into five parts. The first part examines the impact of World War II and the Harry S. Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower years in six chapters. Part two, consisting of three chapters, looks at economic, social, and cultural trends from the mid-1940s onward. The text then returns to its chronological and political focus in the third part, which explores the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson years in four chapters. Part four has three chapters on 1970s politics. The last part has one chapter on Ronald Reagan, one chapter on George Bush, Bill Clinton, and 1990s politics, and one chapter which summarizes the trajectory of demographics, society, and culture from the perspective of the recent past.

The chapters in part two and the very last chapter of the text, while well-written and demonstrative of the theme of change over time, will probably be the most difficult sections to teach. The very thing that makes them strong–their sweeping coverage of social, cultural, economic, and demographic forces–will not necessarily translate well to the classroom. In subsequent revisions it might work better to revise and combine these themes into each of the various parts of the book. In that way students will be able to make the connections between political and social changes. In the more recent sections Professor Grantham has already done some of this integrative analysis. A good example is his treatment of feminism in the 1970s. After explaining the movement's goals and accomplishments, Grantham argues: "Beyond the opening of doors and the creation of more equitable opportunities in the economic, legal, and institutional spheres, the movement brought to millions of American women a new feminist consciousness, an understanding of the social context of being female, an appreciation of the personal nature of political action, and a commitment to the redefinition of gender roles in the United States" (p. 357). Instructors who want to emphasize politics but also teach social movements will applaud similar revisions to the remaining chapters.

In several different and important ways Professor Grantham brings the political history of recent America alive for new generations of students. At the outset of his treatment of each presidential administration, he

provides a helpful biography of the new officeholder. In that way Grantham conveys to the students that politics is ultimately about people, for it is individuals who make decisions about how to wield power. These profiles foreshadow policy decisions and explain the life history of the men who have held the office of president. The result is a new perspective on their accomplishments and failures.

Grantham is also excellent at providing the telling quote. For example, in his discussion of Richard Nixon's 1972 trip to China, Grantham includes the observation that he "was the 'first president since the end of World War II who did not have to guard his flanks against attack by Richard Nixon' " (p. 327). The use of this quote, like so many others in the text, works on several different levels. It is attention grabbing. It conveys the evolution of Nixon's own personal history against the backdrop of Cold War attitudes. And it demonstrates the sea change that occurred with Nixon's historic visit. Grantham does not limit his use of quotes to those of historical actors and contemporary observers but also punctuates his narrative with the insights of leading historians. In this way Grantham's text provides professors with the tools they need to introduce the rich historiography of recent America without overburdening their undergraduates with long reading lists. Indeed, Grantham himself is balanced in his treatment of U.S. history since 1945, but he offers perspective on the numerous different and competing interpretations available. By virtue of the academic process, however, the historiographical offerings are much richer for the period from the 1940s through the mid 1970s than for the period from the mid 1970s to the present.

That point raises what is perhaps a most interesting dilemma for those who teach U.S. since 1945: where does history start and journalism stop? The answer to this dilemma will never be one of consensus but the very question is one that can animate recent American history classes. Grantham takes his own narrative into the middle of Clinton's second term in such a way as to suggest the very real connections between present and past politics. However, Grantham has not presented students with one single linear track for understanding U.S. history since 1945. He has instead provided manageable sub-themes. The instructors who use this text will have much freedom to debate and discuss with their students not only the topic at hand but also the connections (or lack thereof) with our own times.

Grantham suggests that the period of the late 1960s and early 1970s provides a sharp demarcation in attitude toward foreign policy, the government, the economy, society, and culture. He is strongest when he describes the events of the first half of the period. His overall analytical take on the end of the Cold War is compelling–especially when he notes that "ironically, the end of the Cold War seemed to encourage internal friction in the United States, while making it harder to reach agreement on questions of social equality and welfare at home" (p. 485). However, at the most basic level of presenting examples and evidence for the history of the last two decades, Grantham too often falls into the trap of presenting event after event without offering the detailed analysis and interpretation. The problem is not unique to Grantham, but is a much larger one that results when trying to make sense of the very recent past.

This text will surely please political historians and those who want a strong political component for their classes. It will also please students who want to learn about politics and the attitude shifts associated with each generation. Grantham begins by exploring what FDR did and did not accomplish so as to make clear why many Americans craved an interventionist, liberal state in the immediate postwar years. As he takes his readers on a journey through the last half of the twentieth century, he analyzes why for more and more Americans in the last years of the century a liberal, interventionist state no longer seemed attractive when offered the alternative of a right of center government. The many photographs, maps, and charts provide a visual accompaniment to the tightly-written text. Each chapter has a useful bibliography which will no doubt be the launching point for numerous term papers. Additionally, Grantham provides explanatory notes at the end of each chapter to carry forward points in need of more development than the chapter proper would permit. The margins provide ample space for student note-taking. Instructors who understand and appreciate the intent and execution of this book and who structure their courses accordingly will not be disappointed.

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