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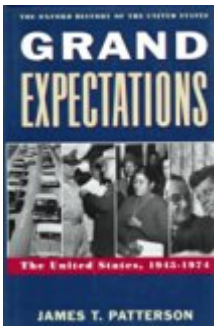
James T. Patterson. *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. xviii + 829 pp. $40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-507680-6.



Reviewed by Mark S. Byrnes

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This volume of the Oxford History of the United States, the tenth in the series but only the third to appear in print (the others are Robert Middlekauf's *The Glorious Cause* on the American Revolution and James McPherson's masterful treatment of the Civil War era, *Battle Cry of Freedom*), tackles the difficult task of writing the history of what some might still consider current events. The author, James T. Patterson of Brown University, has given us a thorough, interesting, well-written, and useful chronicle of these eventful and important years.

James Patterson's title immediately alerts the reader to his simple yet effective organizing theme: that the unusually high expectations of Americans shaped the history of the United States in the postwar era. "More than ever before--or since," Patterson writes in his preface, "Americans came to believe that they could shape the international scene in their own image as well as fashion a more classless, equal opportunity society" (p. vii).

Patterson is certainly correct that the American people and their leaders possessed great confidence, even arrogance, after World War II. This optimistic confidence is only part of the story, however. By focusing on American optimism, Patterson minimizes the impact of the fear which often coexisted (albeit uncomfortably) with the "grand expectations." Much of Patterson's story also reveals the complementary anxiety of these years, but he does not make it explicitly part of his thesis.

The book begins with vignettes of the joyous V-J Day celebrations. Having established a buoyant mood, Patterson acknowledges the fears that the depression would return and that nuclear weapons threatened global destruction, but brushes them aside to conclude that Americans were, on the whole, in an "optimistic mood" (p. 9). No doubt they were. But millions who had seen the deprivation of the Great Depression and the vulnerability which Pearl Harbor so shockingly demonstrated were also quite anxious about the future. Can the largely status quo domestic politics of the Truman and Eisenhower years be understood without recognizing the dread many Americans felt that change could undermine their

still relatively recent prosperity? How can one understand U.S. cold war foreign policy unless one acknowledges that Americans feared that the Soviets threatened the political, economic, and military position of the United States? Perhaps most obviously, how can one explain the Red Scare without noting that many Americans were so insecure that they believed that Soviet agents in the United States could destroy the American way of life? Patterson is of course aware of the role played by these fears, but his approach tends to downplay their importance.

In short, the focus on optimism is only part of the picture. American attitudes in the postwar era were a contradictory combination of an arrogant confidence and nearly paranoid insecurity. Patterson's theme would have been more effective had he dealt with these dual themes rather than the single-minded focus on expectations.

The problem with using the idea of expectations as a single, unifying theme is that it obscures the significant divisions in American society during this period. Let us assume that most, even all, Americans were indeed overcome by optimistic expectancy of what the future would bring. Does that mean that those visions were all the same? Clearly not. To use one major example, Patterson focuses much attention on what he calls the "rights revolution" which began with the Civil Rights movement. African-Americans expected that the postwar era would bring a more equitable society in which they might exercise freely the rights due them under the Constitution yet effectively denied them by segregation and racism. For those expectations to be met, the previously privileged position of whites in American society would have to end. As the often violent reaction to the Civil Rights movement dramatically demonstrated, the fear that this change aroused was deep, and resistance was stiff.

As Patterson notes, the hope that all Americans shared after the war was that the economy would continue the incredible growth of the war years. For quite some time it did, and that helped to perpetuate the illusion of American consensus and unity. When that growth failed to meet the expectations of all, and particularly when it ran up against the changing realities of the world economy in the late 1960s and early 1970s, existing divisions became increasingly apparent and contentious. Patterson recognizes this fact, of course. He notes that it was the souring economy that finally dampened the optimism of the 1960s (p. 789). But in portraying the 1945-1974 era as one of optimistic expectations and the years since as a time of "rancorous disillusion," he tends to exaggerate the differences and minimize the continuities between the two periods (p. ix).

The rancor and division existed then as now, sometimes just beneath the surface, often in full public view. For a brief time, the period covered by Patterson's work, the divisions were somewhat alleviated by the belief that limitless growth would overwhelm them and make them all moot. Growth would eliminate poverty, it would enrich all races, it would provide both guns and butter, it would allow the United States to defend marginal as well as vital interests around the world.

Much to their chagrin, by the mid-1970s Americans came to see that the so-called "American Century" was more like a quarter-century, and that what they hoped was the new status quo was in fact an historical aberration, brought on by the unique circumstances that left the United States in 1945 the only nation strengthened by a war which destroyed much of the rest of the world. Patterson is quite right that Americans were embittered by that revelation. Nonetheless, it is also true that the bitterness was also due to the realization that the new age of limits brought with it the necessity of making hard choices the United States had avoided during the age of grand expectations: when and where (and even if) to intervene militarily, between economic growth and a healthy environment, between rectifying racial injustice and insuring the equal opportunity of all

individuals, between helping the poor and taxing the middle and upper classes.

Most of Patterson's specific judgments are balanced and judicious, such as his post-revisionist conclusion that the cold war was primarily the product of circumstances rather than the fault of either side. The cold war was, Patterson concludes, "as close to inevitable as anything can be in history" (p. 136). He occasionally challenges the conventional wisdom, though not always convincingly. For example, Patterson minimizes the role of Lyndon Johnson's legislative skill in his successes in 1965. He argues that, given the liberal Congress which LBJ had to work with, "any reasonably competent liberal President would have done well" (p. 564). This conclusion underestimates Johnson's effectiveness and does not take into account the significant gains he made in 1964, when LBJ worked legislative magic with the same Congress which had frustrated Kennedy for his brief presidency.

Similarly, his treatment of Richard Nixon's diplomacy provides a needed corrective to the popular notion that, whatever Nixon's domestic faults, he had a great foreign policy. Patterson rightly scores Nixon for dragging out the Vietnam War (p. 768). Yet even harsh Nixon critics might resist Patterson's assertion that "[m]any of his efforts in foreign affairs ... were designed to win personal political objectives, not to break decisively with policies of the past" (p. 743). Certainly Nixon, like all presidents, looked to use foreign policy to his advantage. Nonetheless, Nixon did recognize that changing international realities required new strategies. Detente and the "Nixon Doctrine" were serious attempts to adapt American foreign policy to new situations.

None of the above is meant to detract from Patterson's great accomplishment with this volume. His prose is clear and engaging, his arguments balanced and well-reasoned, his learning and mastery of his material always evident. ***Grand Expectations*** is an excellent synthesis of post-World War II American history, and is a worthy addition to the Oxford History series.

Grand Expectations clearly is far too lengthy to assign as a text in an American history survey course, and would likely encounter great resistance even in an upper-level course on the United States since 1945. Briefer works such as William Chafe's ***The Unfinished Journey*** and Paul Boyer's ***Promises to Keep*** both remain preferable for class reading assignments.

Patterson's work is, however, a wonderful resource for teachers of recent American history. He has an excellent eye for the telling and entertaining quotation, such as President Eisenhower's observation about Senator William Knowland of California, whose reactionary conservatism was often in conflict with Ike's Modern Republicanism: "In his case, there seems to be no final answer to the question, 'How stupid can you get?'" (p. 273) ***Grand Expectations*** is also a treasure trove of useful and meaningful statistics which Patterson uses to drive home his points. For example, Patterson supports his conclusion that the War on Poverty was "at best a skirmish, not a war" by noting that the initial appropriation for the Office of Economic Opportunity in 1964 was $800 million, or about $200 per poor person (p. 540). Patterson's notes and bibliographic essay reveal a wide reading in the literature, and provide an excellent guide for further reading by students and teachers alike.

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