

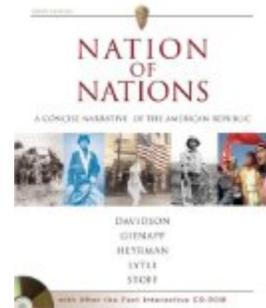
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James West Davidson, William F. Gienapp, Christine Leigh Heyrman, Mark Lytle, Michael B. Stoff. *Nation of Nations: A Concise Narrative of the American Republic*. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1999. xxxii + 955 pp. \$40.91 (paper), ISBN 978-0-07-250279-4.

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What Do You Want in a Survey Textbook?

One of the most difficult tasks I faced when I began teaching the United States survey course years ago was selecting a textbook. It is a decision with which I still struggle: Will the students read this particular text? Will they find it interesting? Will it complement my lectures, discussion topics, and the themes that I emphasize in the course? Do I need one at all? In reviewing *Nation of Nations: A Concise Narrative of the American Republic* I asked myself these questions again. The answers were yes, yes, yes, and I'm not sure.

Nation of Nations is a coherent, well-written, and traditionally organized narrative, one which I believe most first-year students would be able to follow. The text's narrative is driven by a central theme, "how the fledgling, often tumultuous confederation of 'these United States' managed to transform itself into an enduring republic," which the authors note, "is not only political but necessarily social" (p. xxxii). Indeed, one of the strengths of *Nation of Nations* is the balance it strikes between social and political history (although it tends to the political side), reflecting a broader trend in historical scholarship. As the authors suggest in their preface, "It is counterproductive to treat political and social history as distinct spheres. There is no simple way to separate the world of ordinary Americans or the marketplace of boom and bust from the corridors of political maneuvering or the ceremonial pomp of an inauguration" (p. xxxii).

The text's thirty-three chapters are divided into six

units. Each unit begins with a short "Global Essay" that introduces the section and seeks to place United States history within the larger context of world events. The titles are mostly self-explanatory. "The Creation of a New America" examines the diversity of America, Europe, and Africa on the brink of contact, and how that diversity came to create a new nation. "The Creation of a New Republic" suggests how unlikely a revolution in America seemed, particularly given conditions elsewhere in the world. "The Republic Transformed and Tested" explores the strains placed on a democratic republic by industrialization and the contradictions of slavery. "The United States in an Industrial Age" discusses the world-wide network of people, markets, communication, and transportation, while the advance of democracy and prosperity are considered in "The Perils of Democracy" and "The United States in a Nuclear Age."

Nation of Nations succeeds in integrating political and social history into a coherent narrative because of thoughtful chapter organization and broad chapter divisions. The effects of political change on women, African Americans, and other racial and ethnic minorities are fully integrated into the larger narrative within each chapter. The section on American military strategy in Europe and the Pacific during World War II, for example, also includes an informative two-and-one-half pages on "those who fought," including African Americans, homosexuals, and women. The same section also succinctly describes the G.I.'s life during the war. This balance is

demonstrated later in the same chapter. “War Production” includes sections on mobilization for war, the impact of industry in the West, science and the war, organized labor, and women workers. The next sub-heading, “A Question of Rights,” addresses the peculiar situation of Italian and African Americans during the war, as well as the war economy’s impact on African and Hispanic Americans. This chapter is typical of all of the chapters in *Nation of Nations*.

The narrative unfolds chronologically, as do most textbooks, and flows fluidly from seemingly disparate topics, keeping under control a number of complex issues. A good illustration of this is the text’s treatment of the coming of the Civil War. “The Union Broken” opens with a two-page vignette on the drama of “Bleeding Kansas,” the Sack of Lawrence, and John Brown’s massacre of pro-slavery settlers at Pottawatomie Creek, events crucial in the prelude to war but which are often cast aside or less discussed by other texts. The chapter then explores the impact of a railroad economy and industrialization on the sectional crisis, the political realignment of the 1850s, and the *Dred Scot* decision, but it also brings the issues back to the human level, in surprising detail, with the caning of Charles Sumner and controversy over the Lecompton Constitution.

Each chapter also has a feature called “Counterpoint,” which is a brief summary of the historiographical issues over which historians debate. They range from “The Role of Human Sacrifice” among the Aztecs, “Radicalism and the American Revolution,” “How Democratic Was Jacksonian Democracy?” and “Who Freed the Slaves?” to “What Was Progressivism?” and “What Triggered the Upheavals of the 1960s?” These short (one to two paragraphs) pieces are integrated into the chapter narrative and provide an opportunity for the instructor to introduce students to historiography. I would not use several of the authors’ choices in my own classes (assessing the Eisenhower Presidency would not capture students’ attention, I believe, as would the impact of the *Brown* decision or the McCarthy hearings), but, on balance, “Counterpoint” covers many of the contentious issues with which historians struggle.

Additionally, each chapter includes “Eyewitness to History,” a single primary document. The documents provide a first-person account of the past and range from the famous to the anonymous: “Benjamin Franklin Attends the Preaching of George Whitefield”; “A Nebraska Farmer Laments his Plight”; and “Growing Up with the Threat of Atomic War.” These, the authors declare, are

“designed to reinforce the centrality of narrative” and to help students “recognize the hidden complexities of narrative.” (pp. xxviii) While the documents do serve this purpose, it perhaps would have been more useful to offer more than one and present conflicting evidence to help students understand the past’s complexity. When only a single document is included, I often find them to be perfunctory and with limited pedagogical value.

I was also impressed with the number of diverse topics covered in *Nation of Nations* and the simplicity (without being simple-minded) with which the authors’ make their point. “California Dip,” a “new appetizer” (sour cream mixed with Lipton’s soup powder) served at “trendy” suburban dinner parties after World War II, neatly illustrates the ways in which consumerism and suburbanization tended to remove ethnic associations and homogenize American culture. “The Culture of Suburbia” also talks at length about religious divisions, and how television and the Cold War helped to create a broad consensus about generalized religious values, creating an American civil religion.

In reviewing this textbook, I kept coming back to the same questions: What purpose does the textbook serve in the survey? Is this a textbook I would adopt for my own course? For me, the principal criteria in selecting a text are that it emphasizes social history and allows me to fill in the gaps not covered in the textbook. I am most drawn to a text that provides a solid background and foundation for students, on which I can build and add more information. Some instructors might be attracted to *Nation of Nations* because it is listed as a “concise” text. Although it carries the “concise” designation, Volume I (first contact through Reconstruction) comes in at 440 pages and Volume II (Reconstruction to the present) at 513. Compare this, for example, to the full text of Volume II of *A People and a Nation*, which comes in at 565 pages and Volume II of *The Enduring Vision*, which has 596 pages (although it is difficult to compare, page sizes, maps, charts, and photos). Forty to eighty pages over fifteen weeks are not much additional reading. If you are looking for a text with fewer pages to lighten your students’ reading load, then this concise edition probably will not fit the bill. Additionally, if full-color photographs, maps, and charts are important criterion in your textbook selection, then *Nation of Nations* does not make the grade. It includes these materials, to be sure, and they are quite good; they are not, however, full color.

Appendices can enhance both the text and its application in the classroom, and informs my textbook selec-

tion. *Nation of Nations*' appendices include the usual: The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States of America, presidential election results, and Supreme Court justices. But it also has a "Social Profile of the American Republic," which includes population data, vital statistics, immigration origins and trends in immigration, basic labor statistics, federal spending, and war casualties, which easily could be incorporated into classroom assignments. There also is a large bibliography (with a number of typographical errors) and an extensive and useful index.

Another consideration in textbook selection is teaching supplements and supporting material. There are a number of supplements available with *Nation of Nations*, none of which, unfortunately, were available for this review. According to McGraw-Hill's website, the ancillaries include an audioguide, an Interactive Study Guide CD-Rom, a computerized test bank, an instructor's manual and study guide, a set of overhead transparencies, and something called the Presentation Manager CD-ROM. McGraw-Hill also provides on-line service, including help with creating a web page for your course.

What struck me as I reviewed *Nation of Nations* is how remarkably similar it is compared to the three that I have used in the past. There is little variation in organization, topics covered, or conclusions reached. Each has thirty-two or thirty-three chapters, a chapter a week for fifteen- or sixteen-week course. Each chapter opens with a short story that illustrates the main problem or question that the chapter addresses. They follow a similar, chronological (rather than topical or problem-based) organization: first contact, colonial American, the Revolution and the New Republic, the Market Revolution, Slavery and Civil War, and Reconstruction, Industrialization, Progressivism and Reform, World War I, the Depression, World War II, the Cold War, the 1960s, and the 1970s and

beyond. Almost all include a primary document(s), as well as a brief discussion of historiography.

There typically is no central thesis or argument with which to take exception, certainly not any controversial conclusions. Additionally, there are no footnotes, methodology, or use of evidence to critique. It is difficult, then to find fault with *Nation of Nations*, other than a few cranky complaints. Careful editing would have caught a number of errors scattered throughout the text, including at least five misspelled authors' names in the bibliography.

Overall, I found *Nation of Nations* to be a very good survey-course textbook. It would meet most of my needs in teaching a U.S. survey course. The authors have organized the text chronologically, which allows first-year students to easily grasp the succession of events. The big events and common themes the text covers are illustrated by appropriate, often unfamiliar, examples, which I find (and I think most students would as well) refreshing. The narrative is coherent and the authors' interpretation of the American past expresses the consensus of existing historical scholarship, which gives me the chance to offer alternative explanations to my students. Ultimately, each instructor applies his or her own criteria to selecting a text for use in their survey course. I still have not resolved the question of using a textbook or not. For the moment, I am not ready to drop a textbook from my survey course, nor I am not ready to switch from the text I use currently. When I do consider changing textbooks, *Nation of Nations* will be at the top of my list of new choices.

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