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John Garraty. *The American Nation: A History of the United States Since 1865.* New York: HarperCollins, 1995. xviii + 911 pp. $29.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-673-99198-0.

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If textbooks, like fine wines, improved with age, John Garraty's *The American Nation* would be served in America's finest restaurants. First published in the 1960s, *The American Nation* is now in an eighth edition (1995), and has taken a place among the most commonly used textbooks in the country. In spite of my colleagues' many wishes, however, textbooks are not wines, and thus Garraty's work must be evaluated against standards more appropriate than age. Against such measures, *The American Nation* comes up sorely lacking.

As one would expect from a text with such longevity, Garraty's work has some strong points. Chapters on the Progressive period are unusually detailed and informative, perhaps not surprising since this is Garraty's field of expertise. Thorough and up-to-date lists of recommended readings accompany each chapter. Scattered throughout the text are small biographical segments, called "American Lives," which articulate the challenges typical Americans faced as their country evolved. Illustrations are as frequent as they are well chosen, providing a visual stimulus that can attract even the most jaded student (photos of the Depression are particularly effective). Yet, in spite of these positive features, a number of flaws render *The American Nation* less than ideal for use in a history survey class.

The most obvious problem with the text is its heavy and ponderous prose. Although Garraty promises to "deal with the subject in narrative fashion" (p. xvi), the thread of the narrative sometimes breaks down among a somewhat encyclopedic presentation. A lengthy discussion of Supreme Court cases in the 1950s, for example, mentions seven cases in two paragraphs, and none of them receive more than one sentence of explanation (p. 816). The language can also be intimidating to a first-year student. Here, for example, is Garraty's description of philosopher William James: "He rejected the deterministic interpretation of Darwinism and all other one-idea explanations of existence. Belief in free will was one of his axioms; environment might influence survival, but so did the desire to survive, which existed independent of surrounding circumstances. Even truth was relative; it did not exist in the abstract but happened under particular circumstances" (p.565). Not a bad description of James, perhaps, but certainly not something designed to hold the attention of the average college freshman.

This poor writing style is only exacerbated by problems of structure and organization. Discussions of African Americans seem forced, not flowing with the narrative but standing as quasi-independent sections that are often poorly integrated into the chapter's larger themes. The same can be said for Mexican Americans, when they appear at all (I count nine paragraphs after the Gilded Age). This weakness reflects Garraty's conscious emphasis on politics, since, as he explains, "the political history of the nation [is] the frame or skeleton on which social, economic, and cultural developments depend" (p. xvi). Thus, in *The American Nation*, politics is invariably at center stage, while social and cultural events sometimes seem an afterthought.

Even chapters on politics sometimes suffer from structural problems. Chapter 30 is especially poorly organized, attempting to cover in twenty-seven pages all political and foreign policy developments from the election of John F. Kennedy to the resignation of Richard Nixon. A teacher (like me) who spends a significant amount of time on the 1960s will find the background information on this period skimpy, if not totally inadequate. Try as he might, Garraty simply cannot to do justice to the Cuban Missile Crisis, Bay of Pigs, JFK's tax policies, the Kennedy assassination, the Great Society, the Vietnam War, the election of Richard Nixon, detente, Nixon's domestic policies, the oil crisis, and Watergate in twenty-seven pages. Kennedy's domestic program merits three paragraphs (pp. 823-24), two less than

were given to Mark Twain in an earlier chapter (pp. 558-59). Superior texts usually divide this period into three chapters, with Vietnam often standing alone. *Nation of Nations* (Davidson, Gienapp, Heyrman, Lytle, Stoff), for example, offers one chapter on domestic trends, one on political currents, and one on Vietnam. Garraty would be wise to reorganize along similar lines.

The brevity of this chapter also leads to problems of content. In discussing the Bay of Pigs, Garraty comments that the Cuban exiles were not given American planes, but fails to mention that air support was promised, and then canceled, by JFK after the operation had already been launched (p. 821). The Cuban Missile Crisis, the reader learns, was concluded when "Khrushchev backed down" (p. 823). No mention is made of secret deals to swap missiles in Cuba for missiles in Turkey. Coverage of the Vietnam War is especially inadequate, never fully addressing the crucial questions of how and why the United States got involved. Except for a few sentences, the story of this critical episode in American history starts with the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964, a full fourteen years after American involvement really began. The brevity also leads to a somewhat unbalanced picture of America's role; the one sentence devoted to the assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem, for example, ignores American complicity in this crucial event. Similarly, the Gulf of Tonkin incident is mentioned, but without reference to the historical consensus that the alleged second attack never took place.

Content problems exist outside this very troubled chapter. Studies of labor tend to focus only on formal structures like unions, ignoring the "new" labor history that calls for a focus on informal examples of labor solidarity. A Herbert Gutman-like foray into the working-class solidarity of communities would be greatly beneficial. Central tensions of the 1920s such as prohibition, nativism, and religious fundamentalism are presented as simple urban-rural conflicts, ignoring evidence that indicates more complex sources. Chicago, for example, voluntarily outlawed saloons in most of the city before 1920; similarly, over 30 percent of Klansmen of the 1920s lived in cities of over 100,000 people. Other texts usually discuss these tensions in terms of a struggle between modernists and traditionalists, but Garraty remains wedded to an outdated urban-rural dichotomy. In one sense, these problems are unsurprising. The task of keeping updated with the entire historiography of America is a near-impossible task for any single historian, even one of Garraty's skill. Recognizing this, most recent works tend to have multiple authors, a technique *The American Nation* would be wise to adopt.

Errors in details are also apparent. SALT is defined as Strategic Arms Limitations Treaty, not correctly as Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (p.839). Fewer than 1,500 Cuban exiles were part of the Bay of Pigs operation, not the 2,000 that Garraty suggests (p.821). Andrew Carnegie, we are told, made his fortune by "shrewd investments," with no mention of the fact that many of these investments were the result of insider trading (p.502). We are told that 7.5 million Russians died in battle in World War II, but not that another 12-15 million died overall (p. 785). The 1950 North Korean invasion of the South goes unexplained, nor does Garraty display any awareness of Bruce Cumings' vital revisions of this conflict (pp. 802-803). Vietnam, Garraty asserts, first came to American attention after Dienbienphu in 1954, ignoring the over $2 billion in aid Truman and Eisenhower spent trying to keep Vietnam under French control before 1954 (p. 831). Although such lapses are perhaps not greatly significant, they do reflect the mediocre quality of the text as a whole. Poorly written, ineffectively organized, and inadequate in many places, *The American Nation* stands as a worse-than-average choice for use in a college classroom.

The accompanying materials are more solid, but still unspectacular. The overhead transparency packet includes thirty slides, only thirteen of which are post-1877. The transparencies themselves are adequate, although sometimes not very detailed. Good examinations are readily available through the Test Bank and Quizmaster computer programs. The Instructor's Resource Manual provides good chapter overviews, as well as a useful collection of documents and lecture supplements that can help spice up a class. The Student Study Guide is simply a very watered down version of the chapters, complete with some very basic study exercises. Each section includes a set of critical thinking exercises that do not require much critical thinking, such as having to label ten statements like, "The trade of the world must and shall be ours," as either isolationist or expansionist. On the whole, such resources (and to be fair, there are many others that I have not used), do an adequate job of assisting a teacher, but hardly compensate for weaknesses in the text itself.

Overall, *The American Nation* is a disappointment. Before undertaking this review, I polled my students to get their opinions, and found them to share my misgivings. Fourteen students out of 33 in one class pointed to its poor inclusion of African Americans; 10 out of 29 in another class decried its brevity on Vietnam and other recent events. Overall, my students gave it a low "C," a grade with which I sadly concur. On the bright side, as I

frequently tell my students, a "C" is not a terrible grade, and often can be improved with some time and effort. On the other hand, it certainly indicates much room for improvement.

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