H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James Roark, Michael Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, eds. *The American Promise: A History of the United States. Vol. 2: From 1865.* Boston: St. Martin's Press, 2000. xxix + 461 pp. $42.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-312-19207-5.

Reviewed by Kevin Sheets (Department of History, State University of New York, College at Cortland)
Published on H-Survey (August, 2001)

A History In the Arena

A History In the Arena

The authors of this new textbook subscribe to the belief that the American promise is realized in the political arena. Their narrative is predominantly a political one. Indeed, the text's architecture is essentially modern: a sleek steel and glass reflection on the "public arena–the place were politics intersects social and cultural developments" (p. xv). While other textbooks corral social and cultural themes into separate chapters independent of the political narrative, a design Victorian in its arrangement, *The American Promise* integrates them within a tightly controlled chronology. The advantage, they suggest, is to diminish the chances that a student will become lost in the rococo digressions on sundry topics not illustrative of the "big picture" they want to emphasize (pp. xix-xx).

As such, at first blush, their presentation seems remarkably conservative. They follow a fairly traditional chronology. Beginning with a conventional discussion of Reconstruction, they shift to an illustration of American mobility. The authors pair the westward migration with the rise of the city to describe the kinetic energy of the post-war period. The two subsequent chapters might be seen by more sophisticated freshmen as methodological examples of, respectively, "history from the top down" and "history from the bottom up." Chapter Eighteen narrates the efforts by men such as Carnegie, Morgan, and Rockefeller to create the political and corporate institutions that employed and sometimes exploited the people in Chapter Nineteen: industrial workers, immigrants, and the new managerial class. Having thus peopled both sides of the capitalist coin, Chapter Twenty sets them in conflict, beginning with the "militant women" who battled the bottle, fought for the vote, and campaigned against the crude justice of southern lynch law. Next they move onto the farmers' revolt and the emergence of populism, then to the labor wars and the strikes. The effect is to link these reform movements together and to suggest a comprehensive critique of the emergent modern and industrial nation. Students reading these chapters will come away appreciating the high drama of late nineteenth-century industrialism.

While the chronological frame of these and other chapters breaks no new ground, their integration of the political narrative with social and cultural themes will satisfy those of us who like to emphasize such topics in the survey course. Critics might well note that *The American Promise*'s commitment to the "big picture" represented by the "public arena" minimizes the space devoted to topics such as the domestic life of workers, the intellectual, religious, and philosophical challenge presented by Darwin's *On the Origins of Species*, and the mental testing movement as a progressive-era legacy, among others. It is true that this text is more apt to emphasize Frances Willard's WCTU political crusade against saloon keepers than it is to describe the challenges wives of pickled laborers faced when their husbands came home. Because the authors focus on the big picture and the interaction in the public arena, they skip lightly over the private aspects of life. Instructors can criticize their emphasis as weighted too heavily in one direction but it might also be said that the text provides cultural, social, and intellectual historians with a book that lets them off the hook. By structuring their narrative around the political and public events since the Civil War, these authors free teachers to indulge in lectures on the emergence of the Scholastic Aptitude Test and the Ash Can School of realist painters. That is to say, this text is a nice complement to social, cultural, and intellectual history lectures because it provides the political narrative necessary to their full understanding.

Like other textbooks, this one includes a number of features designed to hook students' interest. Each chapter opens with a "vignette" that adumbrates key themes to be developed. The authors selected wonderfully rich moments: the 1892 political convention that gave birth to

the Populist Party, the Bonus Army's march on Washington during the Depression's depths, and Barbara Jordan's speech outlining the case for Richard Nixon's impeachment. Each of these vignettes links themes to the era's big picture. It is a common feature of textbooks, and it works well here.

Each chapter also includes one of two features designed to illustrate historical methods and historiography. "Texts in Historical Context" reproduces one or more texts–testimony before congressional committees, letters from former slaves, oral histories of interned Japanese Americans during World War II–that help students "hear" the voices of the past. These sections are wonderful pedagogical instruments. Like supplementary readers, these two-page primary source offerings can be used to provoke class discussion. Like "Texts in Historical Context," each "Historical Question" feature addresses some issue historians themselves continue to debate. "What did the War Mean to African Americans?" looks at African-American participation in World War I and the promise their sacrifice held for post-war racial relations. Other Questions seek to draw students into a discussion about pivotal events and personalities: the demagoguery of Huey Long, the post-war fate of Rosie the Riveter, the efficacy of the bombing campaign in Vietnam. Instructors can make use of these features in various ways: as the basis of in-class discussion and debate or as the source for students' response essays.

Many of us have become convinced that students are better "readers" of images and material artifacts than they are of traditional texts. While not abandoning our traditional emphasis on the documents of the past, the authors acknowledge the importance of visual evidence. *The American Promise* incorporates more than 300 illustrations, each with a substantive and meaty caption. Each in itself is a valuable teaching tool. This past year I illustrated my class lectures with all types of visual evidence including paintings, photographs, and print advertisements. This textbook is especially rich in this sort of evidence. Because there are so many graphics, this compact edition is longer than most others, but the tradeoff is a fair one for instructors who are committed to using its resources. (Excluding appendices, *The American Promise* Compact Edition includes 60 pages more than *The Enduring Vision*; 121 pages more than *The Essential America*; 151 pages more than *Out of Many*; and 174 pages more than *The American Journey*.)

The three appendices extend the usefulness of this text. The first includes the holy trinity of American documents: the Declaration of the Independence, the Constitution, and the Amendments. The second provides information on the U.S. government, including its officers and elections. Unlike other texts, however, this one provides a list of significant Supreme Court decisions from Marbury v. Madison (1803) to Romer v. Evans (1996). The third appendix is especially helpful to those students who want to pursue history on their own. In addition to chapter-ending bibliographies, this section supplies general and specialized resources. Of particular interest is the list of primary resources and internet resources. Among the latter are the Smithsonian's American Memory collection, the Historical Text Archive, the Internet Resource for Students of Afro- American History, NativeWeb, map collections, and women's history links. Again, enterprising students will find this resource collection to be a useful beginning for whatever project an instructor might assign. Faculty too will find their links helpful in identifying visual and textual materials for class lectures.

The American Promise is what it purports to be: a convincing, straightforward narrative of American public life. More than that, it peoples the past by shining a light on the conflicts and debates that have shaped the American experience. Despite its length, students and instructors who choose to exploit its many features will find themselves well-rewarded for their effort.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Kevin Sheets. Review of Roark, James; Johnson, Michael; Cohen, Patricia Cline, eds., *The American Promise: A History of the United States. Vol. 2: From 1865.* H-Survey, H-Net Reviews. August, 2001.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5448

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.