

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas C. Reeves. *Twentieth-Century America: A Brief History*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. vi + 314 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-504484-3.

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Not too long ago, U.S. history survey courses inevitably broke at 1865 or 1877. The first “half” covered the nation from pre-Columbian Native American cultures to the Civil War and its aftermath, the second from Reconstruction to the present. With each passing year, however, the second part of the course grew longer, while the first remained the same (at least chronologically). At the same time, there was a growing understanding that the Civil War, while certainly important, need not be seen as the only possible dividing point in American history. Colleges began backing off from the traditional division, thus allowing a publishing innovation: the survey-level twentieth-century American History textbook.

Thomas C. Reeves’s *Twentieth-Century America* looks like most other books of this type. An introductory chapter (“By 1900”) sets the stage with an overview of the nation at the beginning of the century: industrialization, urbanization, immigration; farmers, African-Americans, workers; politics, economic growth, intellectual trends; all in all, a nice introduction, solid and thorough, preparing the reader for what’s to come. The remaining fourteen chapters are brief (averaging about 20 pages) and about what one would expect in organization. How then might we distinguish Reeves’s from other twentieth-century American history textbooks?

“It has become fashionable since the 1960s to infuse textbooks with an abundance of polemics,” Reeves states in his Preface, “especially after the story reaches the post World War II period.” Historical interpretation is present in all history books, including this one, he says; still, polemical textbooks are “a disservice to the historical calling.” In his textbook, “every effort is made to be responsible and accurate, avoiding any sort of ‘line’ that guides the narrative” (v-vi).

But there is a line in this book. Reeves has advanced in other works. In *The Empty Church* (1996), Reeves noted that mainline Protestant denominations have lost a quarter of their members since the 1960s (the same time as the rise of the polemical textbook). The reason, he said, is that the churches have too easily accommodated to modern culture. Preachers and denominational leaders no longer preach miracles; they no longer consider adultery, homosexuality, or abortion a sin; they emphasize liberal social and political causes rather than traditional values; in short, they no longer seem to care about the difference between right and wrong.

Reeves broadens his thesis in the textbook. The decline of American religion becomes the decline of twentieth-century America. In one brief section, he blames the decline of modern religion not just on the churches (as in his previous monograph), but on “the very secular leadership of the media, education, and the legal profession” (284), implicitly expressing a desire to return to the good old days when the media, education, and the legal profession were non-secular. “Religion and morality” are now treated “as two separate topics” (285), he complains, and he notes the role of the courts “in restricting the impact of the Christian faith” (285). Reeves wants to put the “X” back in “textbook.”

This idea becomes the organizing principle of the book. Women in the 1920s “began to take jobs outside the home”; they “shortened their skirts, wore rouge and lipstick, smoked cigarettes, drank cocktails, read racy novels, and danced the fox trot and Charleston.” The result? This “new freedom led to a sharp rise in the divorce rate” (86). Apparently women didn’t learn from this; the divorce rate rose again in the 1970s, even though, as

Reeves notes, “the connection between women at work outside the home and divorces was well established” (213). Women get most of the blame for “the breakdown of the traditional family,” one of the most-used phrases in the book. (Reeves also notes that “many radical feminists were proudly lesbian or bisexual” [190]).

The real decline of America came in the 1960s. “The ‘Best Years’” (Reeves’s title for the Fifties chapter) were followed by the “Era of Upheaval,” when hippies, anti-war demonstrators, social critics, and of course women upset the applecart of good feelings. Not surprisingly, John Kennedy fares badly in Reeves’s hands (one of Reeves’s prior books was *A Question of Character*, a JFK biography). Bill Clinton fares even worse. Early in his term, President Clinton kept his promise to integrate the sexes in the military, resulting in “a string of sex scandals, U.S. troops in their gender-mixed tents in Bosnia producing roughly one pregnancy every three days.” The military leadership was forced to issue guidelines “designed to curb adultery” (269), a rather value-laden word.

In some of Reeves’s text, his social conservatism leads to a tone of political partisanship. “The general consensus” in Clinton’s White House was “that many of the attitudes and practices of the sixties were to be expected. A Secret Service agent told the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee in 1996 that he had seen references to cocaine and crack usage in the FBI files of more than forty White House aides” (269). Students reading this might imagine wild parties in the West Wing, with Clinton aides in their tie-dye shirts and sandals, snorting and smoking and doing God only knows what else; Reeves neglected to mention that the reports were of previous (as opposed to current) drug usage, and that all aides so described were subjected to strict drug tests.

He uses Clinton’s “Arkansas nickname, Slick Willie” (270) as if Clinton himself chose and took pride in that name; instead, it was a derogatory term coined by an Arkansas journalist who developed a national reputation from his attacks on Clinton. “On the primary trail [in

1992], Clinton tended to avoid direct answers to questions and tell audiences what they wanted to hear” (267), unlike other politicians, who were always open and honest.

This conservative outlook colors much of the book. Reeves mentions “the will of Ho Chi Minh to rule the whole of Vietnam” (184). Ho’s goal was less to rule than to achieve the union and independence of his homeland, but that might make the communist Ho look almost commendable. Reeves describes how “tax freedom day,” the day in the year on which the average American will have made enough to pay the year’s taxes, has moved from Feb. 1 in 1913 to May 23 in 1997. At this rate, he says, an American in the year 2226 will have to work until Dec. 31 to pay taxes (289). Using that same logic, Americans in that year will have a life expectancy of 256.

“Twenty-five-year-old parolee Rodney King had been drunk when police finally stopped him after a high-speed, eight-mile chase.” The acquittal of the police who beat and kicked him (based on “King’s wild and dangerous driving and his ‘menacing’ resistance when arrested”) led to a huge riot. Rodney King sued the City of Los Angeles and won (Reeves says “came away with”) almost four million dollars. “Before and after his sudden wealth, he had further run-ins with the law, being convicted of drunk driving and hit-and-run driving” (265). Instead of defending the cops and attacking King—Rodney King is a pathetic figure who doesn’t need Thomas Reeves to look bad—why not use this space to explain why the black community reacted as it did?

The problem with Reeves’s book is not that it has a “line”; as he says, all books have a historical interpretation. Other textbooks have just as strong a line as Reeves’s and use evidence and examples just as selectively to make their point. The problem is that the publisher allowed Reeves to say at the beginning that his book was going to rise above all that. Unsuspecting students, reading his book in one of our twentieth-century America courses, might believe that he has.

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