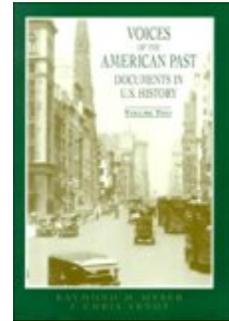


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Raymond M. Hyser, J. Chris Arndt. *Voices of the American Past: Documents in U.S. History*. Fort Worth, Tex.: Harcourt Brace, 1995. (vol. 1) xiv + 236 pp.p; (vol. 2) xv + 265 pp. \$37.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-15-501963-8; \$37.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-15-501964-5.

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Voices of the American Past

Voices of the American Past: Documents in U.S. History attempts to bring diverse perspectives to light in a way that is accessible for U.S. History survey courses. The selections are generally short, one- or two-page bits (none more than four, with the documents growing generally longer as they get closer to the present), that present various “voices” from the experience of the United States. Each selection contains, at the beginning, a series of questions that aim to bring the document into sharper focus plus a short passage that provides some context. This work lacks some well-known, “classic” documents of American history and is weaker in certain areas than others, but is worth evaluating for survey use.

The volumes contain a diverse mix of sources: immigrants, women, and other traditionally less-heard voices mingled with bills and treatises. The work includes good introductions to the sections and documents. A teacher might use *Voices of the American Past* in a class for discussion, or as source material for writing assignments. The work also presents many views that students do not commonly hear in survey courses. For example, it includes the Southern view of Reconstruction and a woman defending the “cult of domesticity.” If one is searching for a direct point-counterpoint book of readings, one will be sorely disappointed, as the volumes lean toward a much more broad-brush approach.

However, at points, the editors suggest good comparisons between some documents. For example, in the first volume, the student is instructed to contrast *Mar-*

bury v. Madison with the Virginia and Kentucky resolutions, and to compare Tecumseh’s views on white encroachment to Benjamin Banneker’s pleas for freedom. In the second, Senator George Hoar’s opposition to annexing the Philippines is directly juxtaposed with Senator Albert Beveridge’s speech claiming that the United States had a manifest destiny to claim the islands, and the book suggests that the student compare these views. The selections are definitely challenging, good vocabulary builders, and they touch on a variety of issues. However, while they cover most issues from a wide perspective, some areas are not well covered. For example, the Civil War is discussed mainly through writings by Abraham Lincoln (two selections—an address to the 1861 special session of Congress that proclaimed that the purpose of the war was to preserve the Union, and the Gettysburg Address), Jefferson Davis (his reaction to the Emancipation Proclamation), and General William T. Sherman (a message to the mayor and two council members of Atlanta stating what he will do to the city and why he must do it). The only other views are one on the attack on Fort Sumter and one on African American troops. No letters home to, or coming from, a sweetheart, no stories of starving in Vicksburg, no stories of brother fighting brother, etc., any of which would have given a wider perspective on the war. Thus, its coverage is generally broad, but still inconsistent.

Many concerns exist with this work. First, some of the “classic” documents in American history are not contained here, as *Dred Scott*, *Plessy, Brown*, and the U.S. Con-

stitution all do not merit inclusion, even though mentioned to some degree. In addition, many of these documents need more context. For example, the reader presents Andrew Johnson's veto message of the First Reconstruction Act, and then, in the next piece, describes the South under Reconstruction. A student might well wonder how—since the act was vetoed—Reconstruction started. Third, some minor errors in the text also exist, as the book places the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1965, when it occurred in 1964.

Each instructor should also consider if this reader is at the level of his or her individual class. Some introductory questions assume knowledge of future data, which many students, or most in some classes, would not know until later in the course. For example, a question on George Kennan's "Long Telegram" asks, "Can the United States take credit for the breakup of communism in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s?" Other questions ask students to compare the 1960s with the 1920s when the course is still in the 1920s. (It does not do the reverse when the course is in the 1960s). Second, some introductory "Questions to consider" may be too ambitious. For example, a question on the Erie Canal queries, "Was Charles Haines' optimistic vision of the canal accurate?" which may take much more knowledge of the canal than many survey

students have. Third, a number of the questions are very challenging and complex, and call for conclusions that may be beyond some students. For example, a question before a document on the atomic bomb asks, "Was dropping the bomb needed to end the war?"—a question historians are still debating. This is not to say that the editors should not ask such questions, and that teachers should not expect such knowledge at some point in their courses, but an instructor should be aware of such issues before assigning the readings.

Overall, though, one receives a good feeling for how life was in most periods. These documents must be carefully used; they all need to be placed in history and evaluated in that regard. More comparison, context, and consistency would have greatly helped this collection. The work is a good start, and would help some courses, but professors should be cautious in using it. If one wants to do comparison studies, other and better readers exist, but if one wishes to expose students to diverse insights into the past, this work is one generally worth considering.

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