H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William Dudley, ed. *Opposing Viewpoints in American History.* San Diego, Calif.: Greenhaven Press, 1996. xi + 308 pp. $29.95 (board), ISBN 978-1-56510-347-4; $31.96 (library), ISBN 978-1-56510-348-1.

Reviewed by David B. Parker (Kennesaw State University)
Published on H-Survey (September, 1996)

Review with Publisher/Reviewer Responses

Contents: 1. Review of *Opposing Viewpoints in American History* by David Parker 2. Response to the Review by the Editorial Deparment of Greenhaven Press 3. David Parker's Rejoinder to Greenhaven Press

A quarter of a century and two hundred titles ago, Greenhaven Press began its *Opposing Viewpoints* series: collections of original sources and commentary on such issues as homosexuality, censorship, race relations, and criminal justice, designed to develop students' critical thinking skills through the use of primary documents. Greenhaven introduced several specialized *Opposing Viewpoints* series in the 1980s. *Opposing Viewpoints Juniors* stressed critical thinking skills for elementary school students with *Acid Rain: Locating the Author's Main Idea*, *Hunger: Examining Cause and Effect Relationships*, *Television: Examining Propaganda Techniques*, and other volumes. *Great Mysteries: Opposing Viewpoints*, a series for junior high school students, featured such topics as astrology, Atlantis, UFOs, and unicorns.

H-Survey subscribers are probably most familiar with the American history series, designed for students in college courses. The fifteen or so volumes ranged from *Puritanism* and *The American Revolution* to *The Cold War* and *The Civil Rights Movement*. The volume on Reconstruction is fairly typical: thirty-two primary documents, either excerpted or reprinted in whole, arranged to show the opposing sides on sixteen specific issues relating to Reconstruction (each issue has two documents, one per side): "Reconstruction Is an Executive Function," "Reconstruction Is a Legislative Function"; "The South Is a Separate, Conquered Nation," "The South Is Not a Separate, Conquered Nation"; "The Fourteenth Amendment Violates States' Rights," "The Fourteenth Amendment Does Not Violate States' Rights"; "Blacks Are Capable of Holding Public Office," "Blacks Are Not Capable of Holding Public Office"; and so on, through a dozen more pairs of "opposing viewpoints."

The newest addition to Greenhaven Press's list, *Opposing Viewpoints in American History*, is a compilation of selected pairs of documents previously published in the American history series mentioned above. The two-volume set (colonial to Reconstruction, Reconstruction to the present) contains a number of good and useful documents. Some are common to U.S. History anthologies: from Powhatan's address to Captain John Smith ("I am now grown old, and must soon die"), Gottlieb Mittelberger's *Journey to Pennsylania*, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, and James Madison's Federalist No. 10, to Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal speech to the Democratic National Convention, George Kennan's "Sources of Soviet Conduct," the *Brown* decision, and Lyndon Johnson's April 1965 Johns Hopkins speech on Vietnam. Some are pleasant surprises, documents that do not show up in every other reader: a letter from George Washington to James Madison on Shays's Rebellion, Jefferson Davis speaking to the Confederate Congress on the Emancipation Proclamation, John Keats's *The Crack in the Picture Window*, and several articles from the popular press (Julia Ward Howe on woman suffrage, A. Piatt Andrew on the new immigrants, A. Mitchell Palmer on the Red Scare, and Henry Ford on self-help and unemployment).

According to the book's foreword, *Opposing Viewpoints in American History* is the only anthology of primary documents to organize its selections into a "running debate format." The purpose of this organization (quoting at some length, again from the foreword) is "to help sustain student interest and stimulate critical thinking.... The guiding philosophy behind this compilation is that by comparing and contrasting opposing viewpoints on an issue, students will be challenged to think critically about what they read. Thus, for example, readers can evaluate Thomas Paine's stirring call for American independence in *Common Sense* by comparing it to the tightly reasoned arguments of Loyalist Charles Inglis. Within these two volumes a white minister and an

escaped slave differ on the evils of slavery; Chief Joseph and Theodore Roosevelt provide contrasting perspectives on the takeover of Indian land by whites; Franklin D. Roosevelt's call for a New Deal is complemented by Herbert Hoover's dire warnings about the harms of government meddling; and a nuclear physicist and a secretary of war differ on the merits of dropping the atomic bomb on Japan" (I, v).

The development of students' critical thinking skills has been a goal of the *Opposing Viewpoints* series from the start. How successful is the book under review at meeting that goal? To use the examples offered in the foreword, will students be better able to evaluate Paine's *Common Sense* after reading its Loyalist counterpart?- They perhaps could say that Paine was the better rhetorician, but what about Paine's and Inglis's use (or misuse) of the facts? Will reading both documents help students evaluate the accuracy of either? The white minister– Nehemiah Adams, a New England Congregationalist– said slavery can be good. We know slavery was bad, so Adams must have been wrong, but can we prove that by comparing and contrasting his essay with a piece written by an escaped slave? In fact, the student might read the two documents and come up with the following: the escaped slave had an axe to grind (here the student is detecting possible bias, an important part of critical thinking), so his writings might be suspect; on the other hand, the white minister overcame his bias against slavery when he actually saw the institution in practice, so his statements are probably closer to the truth.

Teddy Roosevelt: white violence against Indians was understandable. Chief Joseph: "The white man has no right to come here and take our country." Franklin Roosevelt said the federal government needed to take on more responsibilities to solve the problems of the Depression; Herbert Hoover said such government activism was dangerous. The Holocaust was a terrible thing; the Holocaust never happened. That last one's not in the book, but I mention it for a reason. To someone unfamiliar with the issues, the "revisionist" work on the Holocaust sounds, if not convincing, at least plausible. We all know it's utter nonsense, but the reason we know this is not because we evaluated two statements side by side. Without a knowledge of context and accuracy (and the brief introductions to the documents, informative as they are, simply cannot give enough information to support a meaningful evaluation), students can do little besides say, "This author's main point is ...." Understanding the main point of a document is a valuable part of critical thinking, but this is far short of the goal of teaching students "how to effectively analyze and evaluate the material that they read" (I, v).

The book's organization is a good example of what David Hackett Fischer termed "the fallacy of false dichotomous questions," the framing of a question in such a way "that it demands a choice between two answers which are in fact not exclusive or not exhaustive." The fallacy is perhaps most obvious in the various "Problems" readers issued by several publishers: *The Causes of the War of 1812: National Honor or National Interest?*; *Jacksonian Democracy: Myth or Reality?*; *Huey P. Long: Southern Demogogue or American Democrat?*; and so on. Huey Long might have been both a southern demogogue and an American Democrat, or he might have been something else all together; the choices offered in the question are neither exclusive nor exhaustive. The fallacy of false dichotomous questions is also evident in *Opposing Viewpoints in American History*. "American history itself has been a story of conflict and controversy" (v), the book's foreword correctly states, but those conflicts have seldom been as simple and straightforward as the "opposing viewpoints" suggest. Fischer closed his discussion of this fallacy with an observation from the philosopher Reuben Abel: "The continuum in which we live is not the kind of place in which middles can be unambiguously excluded."(1) We do our students a great disservice when we teach them otherwise.

I am also bothered by how the book's organization limits the ways in which students can read a document. The anthology I use has a selection from Jane Addams's *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (p. 2). My students and I can discuss that particular document in the context of Progressive reforms, immigration, industrialization, urbanization, women, American youth, etc. We are not limited to reading it only in contrast to an "opposing viewpoint."

In short, while the selection of documents in *Opposing Viewpoints in American History* is good, the organization of those documents is flawed because it fails to achieve the book's stated goal of fostering meaningful critical thinking skills, it distorts the nature of American history through its oversimplification, and it limits the ways in which the documents can be used. Instructors who adopt the book will have to work harder than usual to overcome these problems.

A couple of minor points. First, instructors, especially those with large classes, might find the available test bank useful; it supplies three multiple choice questions, three true/false statements ("exact correlates" of the multiple choice), two or three terms to identify, and one or two essay questions for each document. Second, I wish publishers would stop the intentionally misleading

practice of quoting "net" prices for textbooks. When we call to inquire about the price of a book, we want to know the cost to students, not to the bookstore. Greenhaven is not the only publisher to do this, of course.

NOTES 1. David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 9-12. 2. Paul F. Boyer, Jr., and Ronald Story, eds., *A More Perfect Union: Documents in U.S. History*, Fourth Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996). _

Date: September 11, 1996 From: Editorial Department Greenhaven Press <ushistory@greenhaven.com>

The following is a response to David B. Parker's review of our two-volume survey *Opposing Viewpoints in American History*.... Thank you for giving us this opportunity to respond. -GP

David B. Parker has presented an insightful discussion of our two-volume survey *Opposing Viewpoints in American History*. We appreciate the opportunity to respond to his comments.

Before responding to Professor Parker's specific criticisms, we would like to clarify one point. Professor Parker states that our two volumes consist of "selected pairs of documents previously published in [Greenhaven's] American history series." In fact, only about 40 percent of the pairs were selected from previous Greenhaven volumes. The remaining 60 percent are new pairs compiled specifically for the two-volume set.

We would also like to report that we have been pleased with the early success of *Opposing Viewpoints in American History*. Within the first 12 months of publication, we have already received a large number of adoptions from a variety of colleges and universities. This positive response has bolstered our confidence in the merits of our product.

We will now address Professor Parker's three main criticisms of *Opposing Viewpoints in American History*.

First, Professor Parker states that our approach of placing opposing viewpoints side-by-side will not succeed in our stated goal of developing students' critical thinking skills. Professor Parker contends that in order to enable students to think critically about the issues being discussed in the documents, more factual and contextual information is needed than we provide in our introductory materials.

Although we present a great deal of background information by means of timelines, prefaces, and introductions to the readings, Professor Parker is correct to point out that some students will need additional information to effectively evaluate the arguments being made in the documents. However, we do not assume that our texts will be used in a vacuum but in conjunction with instructors' presentations and/or additional written materials. Moreover, we would not presume to argue, for example, that placing the arguments of Thomas Paine side-by-side with those of Charles Inglis will automatically foster critical thinking. However, by including both views, we offer instructors more tools for teaching such skills than if we presented Paine's viewpoint by itself.

Professor Parker's second main criticism of *Opposing Viewpoints in American History* also involoves the structure of the books. Professor Parker argues that the pro/con organization of our volumes creates false dichotomies, framing issues in a way that requires students to choose between two views that are "in fact not exclusive or not exhaustive." According to Professor Parker, presenting the issues in this way leads to an oversimplification of history.

We believe that the structure of our books does not result in the establishment of false dichotomies. Rather, it results in the presentation of multiple perspectives and diverse opinions. When confronted with opposing documents, students are not necessarily forced to choose "between two answers that are in fact not exclusive or not exhaustive." In fact, they are encouraged to entertain the possibility that the question at issue has no absolute answer or two equally valid but contradictory answers. They are encouraged to perceive the complexity and ambiguity of the issues they are studying.

In addition, by examining opposing documents from the past, students are more likley to gain an understanding of the attitudes and assumptions that were prevalent in an earlier era. They may discover that the truths that are self-evident in retrospect–slavery is immoral, America must be independent, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II was not justified–were less obviously true to the people of the time. This discovery, in turn, may help students to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the causes behind historical events.

Finally, Professor Parker criticizes the pro/con organization of our volumes on the grounds that it limits students to reading each document only in contrast to an opposing viewpoint rather than in isolation. To this we can only respond that we have taken great care to ensure that each reading is provided with enough contextual material to be read and understood without reference to its opposite. We see no reason why instructors cannot as-

sign and students cannot read individual documents in isolation or in conjunction with additional materials.

In summing up his evaluation, Professor Parker states that our volumes will require instructors to "work harder than usual." We have never assumed that teaching American history and critical thinking–with or without primary sources–is easy work. However, we are confident that by challenging students and sparking their interest in history, the format of our books can make these tasks a little easier.

In closing, Greenhaven Press would like to invite instructors and other interested individuals to send comments on *Opposing Viewpoints in American History* and our other books via e-mail to <ushistory@greenhaven.com>. _ (3) Date: 09/27/96 12:45pm From: David Parker <dparker@KsuMail.Kennesaw.EDU>

I appreciate H-Survey's invitation to review *Opposing Viewpoints in American History* and the opportunity to submit a rejoinder to Greenhaven Press's prompt and courteous response.

I must first apologize for my statement that the selections in the book under review had all been previously published in Greenhaven's American History series. It was an honest mistake, one based on my comparison of the book's documents with the two series volumes I own (*The American Revolution* and *Slavery*) and my careless assumption that the repetition I noted there held true for other series volumes.

But on to the review. The introductory remarks for each document in the book conclude with a few brief questions for the student–questions designed, one presumes, to develop the student's critical thinking skills. Since my original review and Greenhaven's response both referred to the Thomas Paine/Charles Inglis pair of documents, let's look at those two sets of questions. For the Paine excerpt from *Common Sense*: "What economic arguments for American independence does Paine make? Why is independence inevitable, in his opinion? Which of Paine's arguments do you find most convincing? Which do you find least convincing? Why?" (I, 98). For the Inglis document (an excerpt from a pamphlet written in response to Paine): "What are the advantages America would gain by remaining under British colonial rule, according to Inglis? What problems does he predict would befall an independent America? How would you summarize the main differences between the beliefs of Inglis and Thomas Paine, author of the opposing viewpoint?" (I, 104). These questions are all variations on the standard "Summarize the author's main points," which is not the same thing as what the editors promise in the book's foreword–"to teach [students] how to effectively analyze and evaluate the material that they read" (I, v). But the editors provide little to help students move beyond simple document summaries. Students will search in vain through the book's timelines, prefaces, and introductions for anything to help them effectively analyze and evaluate Inglis's argument (for example) that "The protection of our trade, while connected with Britain, will not cost us a fiftieth part of what it must cost us ourselves to raise a naval force sufficient for the purpose" (I, 105).

Concerning the "false dichotomies" issue, the Paine/Inglis documents are titled "America Must Be Independent of Great Britain" and "America Must Seek Reconciliation with Great Britain." (Other document pairs have similar titles.) Greenhaven calls this "the presentation of multiple perspectives and diverse opinions"; I call it a dichotomy, an oversimplification of American history into a series of either/or ("pro/con") propositions. And this is the whole point of the book's organization. Documents are reduced to "the following viewpoint" (a phrase that appears in the almost all the document introductions), each paired with an "opposing viewpoint." There is nothing to discourage students from assuming that the book provides the two possible positions on eight-two important issues.

Finally, Greenhaven notes that "we have taken great care to ensure that each reading … [can be] read and understood without reference to its opposite." This gets to the major strength of the book: the individual documents, many of which I would gladly use in my survey courses (and several of which I have not seen in other anthologies). I like the documents. I dislike what Greenhaven has done with them. -DP

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
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Citation: David B. Parker. Review of Dudley, William, ed., *Opposing Viewpoints in American History*. H-Survey, H-Net Reviews. September, 1996.
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