

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Ernie Gross; et al. *The American Years*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003. x + 902 pp. \$225.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-684-31254-5.

Reviewed by June Karweick (Social and Behavioral Science Division, Bay College)

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History instructors might find *The American Years* a useful reference source for their schools' libraries. Meeting its overall intent of providing a one-stop overview of major themes in U.S. history, this two-volume work provides general interest readers with a yearly, topical synopsis of important events. The chronology is accompanied by overview essays by field scholars, fifty-five primary sources, side bars highlighting items of interest, and bibliographic information for further study.

The strengths of *The American Years* are numerous. From its scholarly essays, readers learn that historical interpretation is fluid and often controversial. Those seeking to find the context of individual events can do so by year or by tracing chronological themes, such as cultural, business, or political history. Since most instructors demand students analyze events in their larger setting, students will find *The American Years* beneficial when determining the viability of a research project. The use of primary sources, including photos, illustrations, and political cartoons, enable students to capture the multidimensional flavor of an era. For example, the print of a Keating Bicycle advertisement can be examined to understand trends in late-nineteenth-century business, technological, middle-class, and urban history (p. 309). Overall, with its easy to use and consistently organized topical format, this chronology is a readable and user-friendly work.

Despite these strengths, there are several factors that undermine the intention of the chronology to serve a broad, general audience. The price of \$225.00 for the two volumes makes it quite doubtful that even one of the volumes would be assigned to accompany a course. Potentially the work could find a home in institutional libraries, but it is doubtful that students would consult it in large numbers, unless specifically assigned.

Methodologically, there are weaknesses. The work emphasizes far too many contemporary (late-twentieth-century) events at the expense of more comprehensive development to volume 1. In attempts of publishers to

appeal to popular culture audiences, historians often find themselves forced into the realm of political science or current events. *The American Years* falls prey to this tendency. Volume 1 is left nearly devoid of any significant focus on the sectional events and philosophies that led to the U.S. Civil War. Volume 1 is left weak without the inclusion of a sub-theme on sectionalism. After a thorough index search, John C. Calhoun's "South Carolina Exposition and Protest," which articulated the states' rights doctrine for the antebellum generation, does not appear to be included. By adding a topic on sectionalism to the earlier volume and eliminating later entries of questionable long-term significance, like that of *The Prayer of Jabez* being a 2001 best seller, *The American Years* would be strengthened scholastically.

Apart from these considerations, if the authors are seeking to reach a general audience of U.S. history students, they are utilizing the wrong medium. The chronology would be more beneficial in a digital or web-based format. The weaknesses mentioned above would not be as critical in electronic form, as volume 1 could be strengthened while maintaining the scope of volume 2. Digitalization would reduce space and perhaps even cost considerations. This would encourage instructors to assign the work as a supplement to traditional courses.

An even more exciting possibility is that in digital form *The American Years* could be assigned as the main text in distance education (e.g. online classes) where constructivist learning methods are implemented. In such learning environments, for example, students would be asked to trace the civil rights chronology and then to read the related essays and primary sources. From that background knowledge, learners would be required to do a more focused, scholarly, web-based research assignment and post it to a discussion forum for open dialog about the history of the civil rights movement. Students could become individual or group "experts" on a subject for the class. The information provided in *The American Years* would serve as the common starting point for such

a course activity, with the scholarly essays provoking analytical discussions on interpretation methods.

Overall, *The American Years* is a worthwhile publication, with numerous benefits to students. Unfortunately,

it seems unlikely that the work will reach large numbers of students. The price and format of the work may need rethinking in order to sell to and benefit the desired audience in the long term.

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