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Larry Madaras, James M. SoRelle, eds. *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in American History, vol. 2, Reconstruction to the Present.* Guilford: McGraw-Hill, 2003. xvi + 410 pp. $22.75 (paper), ISBN 978-0-07-285027-7.

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History as Interpretation

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Anyone who has taught the U.S. history survey course to entering university freshmen knows that many of these young men and women hold simplistic assumptions about the study of the past. To them, the past is merely a story, with a clear beginning, a satisfying conclusion, and a plot to carry the storyline forward. For these students, the trick to understanding the past (and to doing well in the survey course) is simply to memorize the principal events, developments, and actors in the story.

Instructors confronting this misconception on the part of their students will take comfort in the opening pages of *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in American History*, volume 2, for the work's editors could not be clearer about their intention to dispel students' simplistic views of the past. "Our aim has been to create an effective instrument to enhance classroom learning and to foster critical thinking," they write in the work's opening page. "The understanding that the reader arrives at based on the evidence that emerges from the clash of views encourages the reader to view history as an *interpretive* discipline," the editors continue, "not one of rote memorization" (p. i, emphasis in original).

Taking Sides attempts to achieve this by conceptualizing post-Civil War American history in the form of seventeen "issues," each of which poses a historical question. For each of the issues, the editors provide a short introductory summary and a conclusion. The real substance of each section comes in the form of two competing essays written by various historians, each of which offers a different answer to the historical question. These seventeen issues are divided into three large divisions: "Reconstruction and the Industrial Revolution," "The Response to Industrialism: Reform and War," and "The Cold War and Beyond."

There is much to be said for this format. After grappling with competing interpretations on these seventeen questions, no serious student, no matter how primitive his or her presumptions about the past at the outset of the course, can escape concluding that studying history is an interpretive process which requires the exercise of significant critical skills. On that level, then, *Taking Sides* can be a useful supplement to history textbooks in U.S. history survey courses. Unfortunately, however, the editors of the volume fail to match this conceptual strength with an appropriate level of interpretive sophistication. Based on the interpretive choices the editors make, in fact, it would seem that they have internalized assumptions about the discipline that the mainstream in the profession has long since rejected. To be specific, the content of the tenth edition of *Taking Sides* leads one to conclude that its editors accept two assumptions about the past that most historians would consider to be flawed and dated: that the study of the past can be effectively conducted from the top down (the "great man" theory of history), and that the United States enjoys a tradition that is remarkably free of conflict (consensus history).

I realize I am treading on dangerous ground here, and before going any further a cautionary comment is in order. I hope to make clear, in what remains of this review, that my objections go beyond ideology. That is to say, I object to this aspect of *Taking Sides*, not because its core interpretive assumptions stray from my own, but because these assumptions have the effect of limiting the interpretive breadth–and, as a result, the effectiveness–of the book as a supplementary text. This is a particularly damning criticism for a work whose primary purpose is to inspire students to think critically about the past. As a result, I would be hesitant to assign the tenth edition of *Taking Sides* in my own survey courses, and I cannot provide an enthusiastic endorsement of the work in this review.

The first of these criticisms, that the editors of *Taking Sides* accept without question the idea that it is ap-

propriate to study American history from the perspective of elites, becomes clear from a cursory examination of the table of contents. Nine of the seventeen issues addressed in the volume center around white, male political or business leaders, with seven of these ("Was It Wrong to Impeach Andrew Johnson?" "Was Information About the Attack on Pearl Harbor Deliberately Withheld From the American Commanders?" "Should President Truman Have Fired General MacArthur?" "Was Dwight Eisenhower a Great President?" "Did President Kennedy Effectively Manage the Cuban Missile Crisis?" "Did President Reagan Win the Cold War?" and "Will History Consider William Jefferson Clinton a Reasonably Good Chief Executive?") focused on presidents. The other "great men" who pique the editors' interest are business leaders John D. Rockefeller ("Was John D. Rockefeller a 'Robber Baron'?") and William Randolph Hearst ("Did Yellow Journalism Cause the Spanish-American War?").

Because the editors of *Taking Sides* have limited themselves to seventeen issues or developments in post-Civil War American history, the fact that almost 70 percent of the questions addressed in the work deal primarily with elites can have the effect of causing undergraduates to subscribe to a dangerously distorted version of American history. To be specific, the editors' decision to present a top-down view of the past carries with it the presumption that "great men" are more important and therefore more worthy of our attention than non-elites, an idea many of us do not want our students to internalize.

But even more significant is the fact that concentrating on elites has the effect of artificially limiting the scope of the book's analysis. As a result, the nine questions in *Taking Sides* that center on elites tend to be less profound than broader, more inclusive questions that might have been posed. The book's editors spend four of their seventeen opportunities, for example, on the relatively simplistic question of whether certain presidents performed well in office ("Was Dwight Eisenhower a Great President?" "Did President Kennedy Effectively Manage the Cuban Missile Crisis?" "Did President Reagan Win the Cold War?" and "Will History Consider William Jefferson Clinton a Reasonably Good Chief Executive?"). While such queries are not without merit, surely the editors could have posed more profound questions about the presidencies of these four men.

Perhaps the chapter on Reconstruction, which takes the form of exploring the legitimacy of Andrew Johnson's impeachment, provides a more persuasive case that the editors' fixation on elites takes an interpretive toll. The Johnson impeachment was, of course, an important part of the controversy swirling around the nation in the aftermath of the Civil War, but focusing on it ignores the even more dramatic developments taking place in the South at the time. The fascinating Republican coalitions that united freedmen and poor whites in the South during Congressional Reconstruction and the subsequent "Redemption" of the South at the hands of the Democratic party (with the assistance of the Ku Klux Klan) are, to me, more profound developments. Posing historical questions related to these developments seems to be a more appropriate way of exposing students to Reconstruction than the more narrow constitutional and political issues surrounding Johnson's impeachment.

One could make a similar point regarding the book's treatment of World War II. Given the crucial impact this conflict has had on American institutions, the editors of *Taking Sides* have a rich set of topics from which to choose. Fascinating chapters could be built around the reasons for America's neutrality in the face of the fall of much of Western Europe, for example, or the internment of Japanese-Americans following the declaration of war, the postponed D-Day invasion, the impact of the war on women and African Americans, and the decision to use the atomic bomb. Instead, *Taking Sides* chooses to organize this section around the question, "Was Information About the Attack on Pearl Harbor Deliberately Withheld From the American Commanders?" While this may have been a viable question in the 1950s, when allegations about Roosevelt's duplicity in the Pearl Harbor bombing were made by some, few historians continue to take the allegations seriously. Thus, it is telling that the essay representing the affirmative on the question dates from 1954 and was written by Robert A. Theobald, a supporter of Admiral Kimmel (who bore much of the blame for failing to adequately prepare for the attack).

There are other examples of how the editors' decision to frame questions around "great men" has the effect of narrowing the debate, ignoring more profound questions in favor of less important and, I would argue, less interesting issues. The selection on the Spanish-American War poses the question of whether William Randolph Hearst's "yellow journalism" was responsible for America's involvement. Undergraduates in a survey course should really be grappling with a more basic question: why did the U.S. begin pursuing a more activist foreign policy in the late-nineteenth century, not just in Cuba, but in the Philippines, Hawaii, and Central and South America? Surely this is a better question around which to frame the debate, one on which there is a lively and diverse historiography. Similarly, rather than using the

Korean War as a way of exploring the implications of the Cold War policy of containment, the editors choose to limit their discussion to whether President Truman was right to have fired General Douglas MacArthur.

Thus, the editors' seemingly tacit acceptance of the "great man" theory of history has the unfortunate effect of limiting the interpretive scope of *Taking Sides*. But their embracement of history from the perspectives of elites is not the only troubling aspect of their interpretive assumptions. Just as significant is what is *not* present in the work; volume 2 of *Taking Sides* fails to deal with such important developments as progressivism, the Great Depression and New Deal, the Vietnam War, and the Watergate scandal. Surely these are topics worthy of inclusion. Even more significantly, the editors scrupulously avoid any mention of social movements in the book. With the exception of the early-twentieth-century women's movement and the 1920s Ku Klux Klan, readers will find no evidence here that internal divisions occurred in the United States. Nowhere in the book is the labor movement mentioned, nor the Populist movement, the civil rights movement, the post-World War II women's movement, or the student anti-war movement of the 1960s.

One sees in these editorial decisions the legacy of consensus history, which we now know was a product of the Cold War. Historians who bore witness to the absence of conflict in the United States were helping to promote the central presumption of American Cold War foreign policy: that the United States was inherently different from and superior to the rest of the world–especially its rival superpower, the Soviet Union. Even though the Cold War has ended, minimizing the presence of conflict in the past continues to have an impact on the present. Students who internalize such a view may well see present-day protesters as misguided and illegitimate, hardly the message many of us want to impart.

On a deeper level, ignoring the existence of division and conflict in the American past has the effect of weakening our understanding of that past. A history that acknowledges the reality of conflict and the social movements it spawned is inherently deeper and more valuable than one which ignores this reality. Observing how American political institutions responded to the pressure brought to bear by social movements, after all, promises to reveal much about how democracy works. *Taking Sides* is weakened by neglecting this part of the story of post-Civil War America.

For these reasons, I have reservations about recommending the tenth edition of *Taking Sides* as a supplemental text in U.S. survey courses. Even so, the book's format provides an important antidote to many students' simplistic notions about history. If used carefully, *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in American History*, volume 2, is a useful tool for convincing students in survey classes that history is far more complex, and far more interesting, than their high school courses may have led them to believe.

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