H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Philip Jenkins. *A History of the United States.* Palgrave Essential Histories Series. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. xii + 330 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4039-0030-2.

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Teachers of U.S. survey classes are bombarded with new textbooks (and new editions of old textbooks) sent by publishers every semester. The trend for the past twenty years has been to provide texts that are increasingly diverse in their presentation formats. Traditional text now weaves its way through maps, illustrations, and side-bars, and is sometimes interrupted by the inclusion of a primary source exercise of some kind. While the products of this new style are obvious improvements on the dry presentation of textbooks past, these books now seem to be reaching a degree of sameness that plagued text-only books in the old days. In addition to the page layouts just described, they all seem to come with CD-ROMs and are linked to websites, both of which are intended to give modern college students more opportunities to explore the depth of American history, or to test themselves on the competence of their reading of each chapter.

It is almost with a sense of relief, therefore, that one is asked to review a text that does not belong to this new tradition. Philip Jenkins's *History of the United States* is such a book. To cover U.S. history from European settlement until September 11, 2001, he needs only 33 tables and 8 maps to go along with his 308 pages of text. The immediate impression one gets of this approach is that it confidently assumes a certain level of intelligence from the reader. This is also a refreshing change from the multi-media trend.

But it is important to note that this book is not strictly intended for the American college textbook market. As part of Palgrave Macmillan's series of short histories of various nations, it is mainly aimed at Europeans, the British in particular. This does not count it out of the running for use in U.S. survey classes. As one can see from his introduction, Jenkins's work is full of ideas and the presentation of concepts. From the beginning, he addresses the idea of "American exceptionalism," which, of course, is of great interest to European readers, but should also be an issue raised and debated in our own country more often, particularly in the classroom. Throughout the book, he stresses the (often quirky) development of institutions (political, social, and religious) and the difficulties and hangovers created by the process of institutionalization. The constant flow of complexities and contingencies make this exactly the type of book that should be used to wake American students from their confidence and complacency.

The coverage of the different periods of U.S. history seems complete and satisfactory, and Jenkins pays enough attention to diversity and different types of history (although within a mainly political framework). The rapid fire of ideas and analysis has its problems, however. Many people will be uneasy (to say the least) with his characterizing George W. Bush's 2000 election victory as "genuine" (p. 304), and even more unhappy with the idea that the Clinton administration's attempts to clean up the C.I.A. created intelligence failings that led to the attacks of September 11. Jenkins argues that "sometimes, nations need to play dirty tricks" (p. 306).

Although I disagree with him on these counts (and a few others), the value of this book should not be underestimated. The relentless scouring of concepts and American myths is very useful, and there is no doubt that using this book in a survey class would prompt much discussion, even from reticent students.

I will think much more carefully when filling out my book orders next time.

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