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**Jean-Christophe Agnew, Roy Rosenzweig, eds.** *A Companion to Post-1945 America.* Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002. xvii + 584 pp. $131.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-631-22325-2.

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## Describing the Recent Past

Describing the Recent Past

*A Companion to Post-1945 America* is one of a series of works that "provides essential and authoritative overviews of the scholarship" that has shaped how we understand our past as Americans. As described in the introduction, the title "Post-1945" captures the "compound sense of ... a series of aftermaths." Written before September 11, 2001, their discussion of the period does not have the sense of completeness that that date would have provided; this book as a reflection of this post-war period also reflects this sense of incompleteness. The book, however, does give deep insight into the writing on a particular historical field. While it is probably beyond the scope of a survey course in United States history, teachers of survey courses will find that it contains a welcome refresher on the writings about a variety of topics. Most survey students would probably find *A Companion to Post-1945 America* confusing and unsettling.

Editor Jean-Christophe Agnew is Professor of American Studies and History and chair of the American Studies Program at Yale. His co-editor, Roy Rosenzweig, is Distinguished Professor of History at George Mason University, where he also heads the Center on History and New Media. Both editors are acknowledged experts in the period and practicing educators. The authors of the twenty-six essays are all notable historians and are widely published.

This *Companion* gathers together twenty-six essays by important scholars of the history of the United States since 1945. The work covers the historiography of the period rather than its history. Each essay analyzes the historical literature of a specific topic or historical field during this period and describes the history of the family, the media, labor, politics, culture, and intellectual and diplomatic history. The essays are grouped under four major headings: "Society and Culture," "People and Movements," "Politics and Foreign Policy," and "Essential Reading."

Part 1 examines society and culture and includes chapters on family and demography, cities, religion, leisure and tourism, mass media, popular music, the visual arts, and social thought. "American Intellectual History and Social Thought Since 1945" was an interesting examination of a topic usually submerged by the press of events, information, and speech making.

Part 2 develops historical writing on social change and social movements; chapters include political culture, immigrants, race and ethnicity, unions, workers, civil rights, sexuality, conservatism, the New Left, and environmentalism. Women, the labor movement, and the rise of the conservative are a few of the topics brought together in this second part of the book.

Part 3 looks at the historiography of politics, foreign policy and foreign relations, U.S. relations with Latin America and Asia, and the Cold War. As a teacher of survey courses in U.S. history, I was most interested in the article on periodization. "Beyond the Presidential Synthesis: Reordering Political Time" offers another way to order the events of this period. As described by Julian E. Zelizer, this new re-ordering would "decenter the presidency" and instead use a variety of approaches to place greater emphasis on the process of making policy, on the institutional context of policy making, and on the cultural boundaries of policy making.

As a diplomatic and military historian, I was particu-

larly drawn to part 3, "Politics and Foreign Policy." This section contains nine articles that describe the historiography of presidential eras, McCarthyism, the politics of the Supreme Court, the Cold War in Europe, Vietnam, the end of the Cold War, and the politics of the nuclear age. The chapters on the Cold War by Carolyn Eisenberg, Greg Grandin, David Hunt, and David S. Painter and Thomas S. Blanton especially impressed me. While I am not as quick to discount the "Reagan victory school" as other historians, "The End of the Cold War" by Painter and Blanton was encyclopedic in its treatment of the historiography of this topic and the entire Cold War era. Needless to say, I was disappointed to see no treatment of military topics during any period of the Cold War. There was also no discussion of terrorism, but that may be understandable since it was in this period that terrorism was something always "over there."

These three major parts of *A Companion to Post-1945 America* are capped off by a fourth and final section titled "Essential Reading." The authors asked eight historians to reflect on a book that shaped their thinking about recent American history. These authors include Alan Brinkley, Linda Gordon, Nelson Lichenstein, Elaine Tyler May, Robert E. Weems, Jr., Robert Westbrook, Jon Wiener, and Melani McAlister. The books selected include *The Way We Never Were*, *Common Ground*, *The Myth of Black Progress*, *Nixon Agonistes*, *Naming Names*, and *Orientalism*.[1] Curiously enough, only Melani McAlister in her essay on Edward Said's *Orientalism* makes a connection with the events of September 11, 2001.

*A Companion to Post-1945 America* is a valuable collection of essays on the historiography of the period. This collection would be too much for most students of a survey course. Most survey students want clear, distinct answers to questions, not exposure to the varied views of historians investigating an academic field. Students in advanced courses may find this collection to be a valuable adjunct to the more specialized readings in an upper-level course. These students may be able to accommodate the different views of these academic experts.

Instructors of the survey course in U.S. history will find *A Companion to Post-1945 America* to be a valuable reference work. The essays themselves provide an easy-to-use review of the thought behind a specific area of specialization in a specific period of American history. Instructors of the survey course could use the *Companion* to expose their students to the interpretations that historians develop from their study of the past. The average survey student does not have the background to be able to experience the value of this collection of essays. *A Companion to Post-1945 America* might be a good overview for the student in an upper-level history course. The expense of the book ($131.95), however, might place it beyond the resources of the average student, but it would grace nicely the reference area of any college library.

Note

[1]. The books discussed in this section are: J. Anthony Lukas, *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985); Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Samuel Lubell, *The Future of American Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1952, 1956, 1965); Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Alphonso Pinkney, *The Myth of Black Progress* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Gary Wills, *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-Made Man* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970); Victor Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York: Viking Press, 1980); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

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