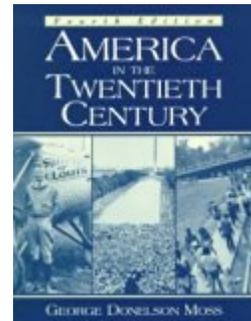


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

George Donelson Moss. *America in the Twentieth Century*. Fourth Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2000. xiv + 657 pp. \$50.10 (paper), ISBN 978-0-13-083370-9.

Reviewed by Mark Davis (History Department, Century College, White Bear Lake)
Published on H-Survey (July, 2001)



Another Acceptable Textbook

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Like most of my colleagues, I receive a steady flow of textbooks to consider, all promising new features and broader coverage. After a quick perusal, they usually end up on my bookcase's bottom shelf. This new edition of George Donelson Moss's *America in the Twentieth Century*, the third since 1989, is another addition to the pile. One hundred and seventy-seven pages longer than the first, the fourth edition has a fuller treatment of cultural history and is more inclusive of women and minority groups. Moss also brings his story up to the moment, including, for example, a reference to last April's shooting at Columbine High School. Yet for all his worthwhile additions, the story Moss tells in both the old and new editions is essentially the same. It is good old-fashioned consensus history that, according to Moss, "focuses on the public life of the American people who have come together to create the most successful multicultural society in the history of the planet" (p. xiii). Developing themes that emphasize government, diplomacy, consumption, diversity, and commitment to democratic values, Moss wants to help high school and college students "learn to think about modern American history" and to provide them "with a vocabulary for engaging in conversations" about it (p. xiv). The results are mixed. Moss skillfully gives students a competent, although uneven, foundation in twentieth-century American history, but he does not provide them with new ways to think or talk about it.

Moss divides the book into 16 semester-friendly

chapters beginning with an overview of the Gilded Age and ending with a summary of the 1990s. Each chapter is broken into 15-20 encyclopedic sections. The segmentation interrupts the narrative flow, but makes it more accessible to busy students with little knowledge of history. Moss is neither patronizing nor too abstruse, although he uses terms such as progressive and liberal without adequately defining them. His prose varies: in some sections he is absorbing; in others, especially in his newer sections, simply dull. Thankfully, the text is printed across a full page instead of in columns. Each chapter opens with an introduction, includes a relevant timeline, and closes with a bibliographical essay. Appendices at the end of the book summarize constitutional amendments, government officials, and demographic statistics. The book's design drawbacks begin with its drab and somber appearance. Maps showing Dewey's path into Manila or the states won by presidential candidates do not seem to be very useful. The book's editing is occasionally sloppy, and the chart of public officials in Appendix C, which identifies Robert Kennedy as a postmaster general, is misprinted.

The biggest change between Moss's first and fourth editions is his additional coverage of culture and of women and minorities. With few exceptions, he smoothly integrates sections on popular culture into almost all of his chapters. In a lengthy analysis, Moss shows that in the 1920s, music, movies, and literature were major components of America's unsettling modernity. The popular culture of the 1950s, on the other hand, reflected the population's quest for national reassurance.

Moss effectively argues that the long-term effects of the 1960's counterculture far outweigh those of the political New Left. Although Moss deftly slides sections on popular culture into his individual chapters, he does not present students with a clear history of cultural change. In Moss's telling, culture is emblematic of different time periods, but it rarely emerges as an important historical element in itself.

Moss is even less able to involve women and minorities into his story in an essential way. Their contributions remain limited to civil rights or feminism. A good example is in his analysis of the New Deal Moss has added separate sections on women, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans to the chapter. Yet, except for a fuller discussion of Franklin Roosevelt, his concluding assessment of the New Deal is no different in the fourth edition than in the first. This unchanging sameness is evident throughout the book. Despite Moss's added emphasis on culture and inclusion, the story that he tells is unaffected. Great white men, political conventions, and presidential elections still occupy center stage. Even the "boring and one-sided" 1972 election gets four-page coverage, two pages more than the decade's women, Native Americans, consumers, and environmentalists combined.

Nevertheless, when dealing with traditional historical topics, Moss is an excellent synthesizer of current scholarship. He gives students superb introductions to the multitudinous aspects of Progressivism, the economic causes of the Great Depression, and diplomatic reasons for American involvement in both World Wars. Moss deftly leads students through the morass of the Cold War and includes a concise summary of American policy in Vietnam. He clearly explains what happened in the Watergate and Iran-Contra scandals and summarizes current thinking on their causes and results. Moss also challenges popular conspiracy theories surrounding the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the Kennedy assassination. Moss even makes excellent use of statistics. Instead of simply including numbers, he is careful to put them in perspective and tell students what they mean.

Moss adopts a politically even-handed approach to American history, and he consistently provides students with opposite sides of historical questions. To explain American involvement in World War I, Moss emphasizes Wilson's Progressivism, but he also puts profiteering and the objections of the anti-war faction into perspective. Moss writes a sympathetic profile of Herbert Hoover and gives a balanced assessment of Franklin Roosevelt and

his many detractors. Although generally favorable to the New Deal, he fully evaluates the program's strengths and weaknesses. Moss covers both American and Soviet perspectives on the Cold War and, referring to new material from Russian archives, offers alternative explanations for the Cuban Missile Crisis. He details, without sensationalism, the latest criticisms of the Kennedy administration and provides a balanced assessment of 1960s, pointing not only to the decade's political and social unrest, but also to its nascent conservative resurgence. Moss is critical of Nixon's character, but praises his political and diplomatic skills. He thinks that Reagan kept his promise to revitalize America, but did so at enormous cost to the nation.

Moss's even-handedness results in a book with a centrist to moderately liberal perspective. To Moss, America's story in the twentieth century is one of progress in which well-meaning liberal reformers run out of steam and are replaced by their more dynamic conservative opponents. Both political factions, however, contribute to the steady build up of America's wealth and power. Meanwhile, a Daniel Boorstin-like combination of consumption, culture, and communications has forged the nation's diverse population into a community of consumers. Moss's moderately liberal stance is also evident in his praise for the Warren Court, his acclamation of Robert Kennedy as a cold-warrior who "appears to have been searching for a new political vision" (p. 457), and at one point, his oddly familiar reference to John Kennedy as simply "Jack" (p. 386). To Moss, critics of the atomic bomb and of the Great Society were radicals. While he agrees that Joseph McCarthy went too far, he cites recent studies that confirm the guilt of Alger Hiss and Julius Rosenberg, suggesting that the pursuit of Communists was justified. In his preface, Moss promises not to let his personal politics interfere with his book. To a degree, he succeeds. His moderate liberalism does not detract from the book, but it does seem to determine the story he tells and the way he chooses to present it. Moss would better serve his young readers if he told them that.

To sum up, *America in the Twentieth Century* is an effective if unimaginative textbook. Moss includes all the necessary elements, but has not solved the riddle of tying them all together. Nor does he achieve his stated goals of improving students' thinking and adding to their vocabulary. After reading this book carefully, I am still uncertain what Moss intends students to think, other than to subjoin a few more elements to the traditional story of American progress. The students I teach are all in Moss's target audience. It would be extraordinary if any one of

them could get from this book alone a new way to look at history. But this may be a minor quibble. Moss's goals are too lofty in any case. It is the teacher's job to provide students with new ways of historical thinking and conversing. I'll take this responsibility; what I want from Moss and his fellow textbook writers is a tool to help me. To that extent Moss succeeds as well anyone else.

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Citation: Mark Davis. Review of Moss, George Donelson, *America in the Twentieth Century*. H-Survey, H-Net Reviews. July, 2001.

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