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A History of the United States

Philip Jenkins

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Preface

The present history is not a lengthy book, and it would be easy to imagine a book of this size seeking only to offer either an introductory sketch of the political history of the United States, or of economic history, or cultural, or demographic, or religious. Attempting to integrate all these elements into one volume might well appear an ambitious and even a foolhardy undertaking, and presumably I have omitted topics that some readers would have thought essential. While admitting that the choice of emphasis must tend towards the subjective, I think the book justifies itself in terms of its overall goal, which is to present a short and readable overview of the major themes and patterns of American history, and thus to provide a framework for more detailed reading or research.

I might also explain what may appear to be an overemphasis on groups easily categorized as the outsiders of American history: racial minorities most obviously, but also political and religious dissenters. While writing history 'from the bottom up' is a fashion that has rather fallen out of favour, it is still justified in the American context because of the peculiar nature of that nation's traditions. Briefly, to describe someone as 'marginal' assumes a norm or mainstream, and for much of American history it is rarely clear exactly who or what can be termed either mainstream or marginal. In religious terms especially, much thought and behaviour that would appear quite bizarre in other nations has been perfectly 'normal' in America, and has to be treated thus. I would request the reader's tolerance of the degree to which the book does indeed stray towards the 'margins' – wherever these are actually located.

Introduction

Historians have often argued over the issue of ‘American exceptionalism’, the idea that the United States is somehow subject to rules and trends distinct from those prevailing in other advanced countries. At its worst, this tendency can lead scholars to a rosy consensus theory, which argues that Americans are somehow immune from the passions or problems that affect other comparable societies, so that symptoms of grave political or social tension are ignored. However the enormous size of the nation and the difficulties of internal communication genuinely did create circumstances quite different from those in Europe, and ensured that American history would indeed develop in some fundamentally different ways. These structural differences provide many of the themes that shaped American history from the earliest years of settlement to the present.

The terrain that eventually became the continental United States covers some three million square miles, or almost eight million square kilometers. Excluding Hawaii and Alaska, the greatest distance from north to south is about 1600 miles (2572 km); from east to west, 2800 miles (4517 km). Alaska and Hawaii added another 600 000 square miles (1545 square km). To put this in perspective, modern-day France has a surface area of about 220 000 square miles; Great Britain and Ireland combined cover 120 000 square miles; the reunited Germany covers almost 140 000 square miles. In other words, continental United States alone, excluding Canada, is about the same size as the whole of Europe: one nation covers an area as large as the forty or so jurisdictions that make up greater Europe. Throughout American history the remarkable size of the New World created both problems and opportunities to which Europeans were generally quite unaccustomed and unprepared.

The sheer scale of America posed unique problems for governments, and the interior of the country is marked by natural features that could easily have become political frontiers, especially the Appalachians and the Rocky Mountains. This situation offered rare opportunities for those who feared official control. Throughout its history there have been groups who have escaped an impossible political situation by internal emigration, usually to the fringes of settled land. This was the course taken for instance by dissident Puritans in the 1630s, by North Carolina vigilantes in the 1770s, by Mormons in the 1840s. Others have created utopian colonies in the wilderness, where governments have had neither the power nor, usually, the will to reach them. What is remarkable is not that corners of the country have occasionally contemplated secession, but that any core remained for them to secede from.

Threats of separatism or schism had to be counteracted by political flexibility and technological innovation. It can be argued that American history has been shaped at least as much by its modes of transportation as by its political parties, and the successive worlds created by the sailing ship, the Conestoga wagon, the steamboat, the train and the automobile differed from each other quite as much as the eras so often described by merely political labels. This is especially true of urban development. As Thoreau wrote in the 1850s, 'Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Charleston, New Orleans and the rest are the names of wharves projecting into the sea (surrounded by the shops and dwellings of the merchants), good places to take in and to discharge a cargo'.¹ Forty years later another observer might well have described the cities of that era as chiefly rail depots. Transportation has also shaped American politics. In the late nineteenth century, political control or even regulation of the railroads was one of the key issues dividing radicals from conservatives. More recently, racial conflicts have often pitted the predominantly white suburbs against the mainly minority populations of the inner

cities: a geographical schism initially made possible by commuter railroads, and later by cars and superhighways.

The tendency of populations to race ahead of the structures of government explains in large part the frequent resort to violence and vigilantism in frontier communities, though the American history of violence requires a far more substantial explanation than just the influence of the frontier. As we will see, in the nineteenth century both eastern cities and the southern countryside were at least as subject to the rule of the gun as the cattletowns and mining camps of the far west.

The fact that the United States became and remained a nation means that we tend to speak of 'regions' and regionalism, when those component units were often larger than the most substantial nations elsewhere in the world. Today the one state of California possesses an economy that would make it the sixth power in the world, were it to gain political independence. American federalism necessarily differed widely from any European parallel, if only because the individual states were generally larger than, say, the small kingdoms that eventually made up Germany or Italy. There was also the assumption that the union of the states need not be an eternal bond, at least until the relationship with the national government was transformed by the circumstances of the Civil War. Extreme diversity between and within regions has always been one of the major features of American life.

Related questions of scale and regionalism have often had political implications. From at least the mid-eighteenth century, some visionary Americans recognized that their destiny lay in expanding across the whole country, though few ever realized just how swiftly this goal would be achieved, and how rapidly the nation's demographic centre of gravity would wing towards the Mississippi. Political plans had therefore to be conceived with this expansion in mind for decades to come, a consideration that seldom troubled European leaders. In the early nineteenth century the course of

the crucial debate over slavery was entirely based on the potential of westwards expansion, and the political implications for this in terms of the balance of slave and free states.

The larger the country became, the greater the danger that distinct regions might perceive their fate in very different terms. In foreign policy, New England and the north-east often had a European orientation that seemed bizarre or even disloyal to westerners, who saw little reason to intervene in Europe's political entanglements, while viewing Great Britain more as a bitter rival than a fond parent. In different forms, this division affected American attitudes to the War of 1812 no less than the First and the Second World Wars. In the 1990s it continues to shape American views of the nation's commercial and industrial future, with the powerful attractions of the Pacific Rim steadily counterbalancing the European orientation of the east coast.

The other perennial regional division was that between north and south, an inevitable distinction based on the radically different climates and economies of the two sections. In fact, from colonial times onwards the two societies looked so different and perhaps so irreconcilable that we should scarcely wonder at the near breakdown of national unity in the 1860s. The question should perhaps not be why civil war came in 1861, but how unity was achieved in the first place, and maintained unbroken for decades afterwards?

Different regions produced their own distinct cultures, the exact nature of which has given rise to much debate. The question of 'Southern-ness' has been a popular topic for such works, though the very term betrays the prejudice that it is the south that is untypical from an American or even world norm. In fact one could equally well argue that it was rather the north of the early nineteenth century that produced a set of cultural and intellectual assumptions that were bizarre by the standards of the contemporary Western world, while the aristocratic, rural and deferential south was a much more 'normal' entity than its egalitarian, urban and evangelical neighbours. For anyone acquainted with the astonishing

social turbulence of the northern cities before the Civil War, it is a curious conceit to speak of a uniquely southern tendency to violence.

However it is certain that the cultures of north and south diverged from the end of the seventeenth century over the question of African slavery: not (initially) its legality, but over the degree to which that institution would be fundamental to the American economic order. From 1700 to the 1950s the south was characterized by a simple racial division, in which whites possessed vastly greater status and economic privilege than blacks. Though similar distinctions prevailed at times in the north, not until the 1920s did enough blacks live in this region to pose the 'American dilemma', the 'Negro problem', in an acute form. Regionalism was thus integrally connected with the race conflict that has been so intractable a part of American life, and has shaped cultural and social history, no less than political.

The fact that black Americans have so often been consigned to the role of an inferior labouring caste means that American history has frequently diverged from that of Europe in terms of class formation and class attitudes. While America does have a thriving tradition of working-class organization and solidarity, this has often been sabotaged by racial hostilities and the implementation of 'divide and rule' strategies, that have successfully set blacks and whites against each other. The presence of a substantial racial minority thus means that the fundamental concepts of race and class have been confounded in the United States in a way that appeared utterly alien to European observers – at least until they began to encounter the same problem with the diversification of their own ethnic populations from the 1950s onwards. It was in the 1970s that the leaders of Britain, France, Germany and other nations began to realize, however ruefully, that the racial experiences of the United States provided valuable lessons that might be taken to heart in their own societies. In Europe too, racial agendas now pervade debates on topics such as social welfare and criminal justice, in ways

that have been familiar in the United States since the time of slavery.

Racial polarization in the south was paralleled by the growing ethnic complexity of the north and later of the remaining regions of the country. While the south could rely for decades on a profitable plantation agriculture, it was inevitable that the north would move towards industrial expansion, and probably the associated urbanization. The availability of jobs and free land made the United States an immensely tempting destination for migrants, initially from northern European groups whose links with the American continent dated to colonial times, but eventually to other groups, whose voyages were made possible by advances in ocean transportation. While the ethnic division in the south was literally written in black and white, the rest of the United States became steadily more polyglot, and diverse in both ethnic and religious terms. And though other countries have experienced vast population movements, no nation has known such prolonged, near-continuous immigration as the United States, with all that implies in terms of economic growth, social mobility and intercommunal relations.

The size and diversity of the United States mean that American national unity has had to be preserved by political means quite distinct from those of Europe, and the creation of national ideologies sufficiently flexible to be adapted to a rapidly changing population. The symbolism of England and its monarchy sufficed for much of colonial history, and did not need to be transformed too massively to accommodate the needs of a new nation, with the elevation of a hero president to near-kingly status. This was equally true in religious matters, where an established church was succeeded by a number of independent but none the less militantly Protestant denominations. The coming of new ethnic and religious groups complicated this matter. As a consequence the United States has tended to emphasize notions of over-arching patriotism and national destiny that appear excessive to European eyes, most strikingly devotion to the flag as a

much displayed national symbol. All ethnic newcomers have to some extent accepted a constructed national mythology, the features of which include the 'Pilgrim Fathers' and their first Thanksgiving, hero figures such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, and mythical readings of the Civil War and the Old West. In turn they are allowed and even encouraged to add their own particular bricks to the wall, so that Columbus Day became the festival of Italian-American pride, while several nations find cultural heroes in the multi-national friends and advisers of George Washington. In recent years African-Americans have added their own figure to the national pantheon: Martin Luther King Jr, the only hero to be commemorated with a holiday of equal weight to those of Washington and Lincoln.

Remarkably, perhaps, for a country that emerged with a militantly anti-aristocratic ethos, American patriotism has often been expressed in military and even militaristic terms. No less than seven presidents owed their election chiefly to their military careers, even when, as in the case of William Henry Harrison and Theodore Roosevelt, the engagements in question were far from impressive; and countless other candidates at both federal and state level have made a great deal of their war records (the seven obvious cases are Washington, Jackson, Harrison, Taylor, Grant, Theodore Roosevelt and Eisenhower; Kennedy and Bush might perhaps be added to the list). In domestic politics, military veterans' groups have often played a major political role, usually on the most conservative and 'patriotic' side of affairs.

National unity and patriotism gain strength from military values, but are other qualities sacrificed? As the defence functions of government grew in the middle of the twentieth century, the militarization of American society raised critical questions about the possibility of reconciling republican and democratic goals with a national security state and an imperial presidency. What, for example, becomes of values like the openness of government, above all in an area such as foreign policy? These questions have been at the heart of

American political debate since before the Second World War, and became acute during crises such as the Vietnam War, Watergate and the Iran–Contra crisis. ‘National Security’ has also had the effect of increasing the size and intrusiveness of government to levels that may ultimately prove incompatible with the democratic forms outlined in the US constitution.

Americans often exaggerate the uniqueness of their ethnic complexity, this in itself reflecting the basic national myth of the ‘melting pot’. In reality most European nations have to some extent drawn on multiple ethnic groups, most obviously in the case of entities such as the Austro-Hungarian state. Even the British Empire was formed and ruled by the several nations of the British Isles, in addition to Huguenots, Jews and others. On the other hand, migration to America from 1820 onwards made it a far more complicated ethnic quilt than any other advanced state, while diversity existed in a democratic framework: from the 1830s, in fact, in a world of radical mass democracy. In contrast to the Habsburg or Romanov Empires, therefore, the complex interests of America’s constituent groups had to be resolved through interest-group politics and coalition building. The consequences of this will often be discussed in the following pages, but certain themes can readily be identified.

One is the American tradition of stigmatizing ‘dangerous outsiders’, conspiratorial plotters whose clandestine deeds threaten both the security of the republic and the American way of life. Identifying such groups serves to unite the mainstream or ‘normal’ national community, while excluding some other groups, usually of a religious or ethnic character, though this agenda is often left unspoken. The democratic nature of American politics and the open press leaves public discourse vulnerable to such manifestations of hysterical denunciation, what Richard Hofstadter called the ‘Paranoid Style’ of American politics.² American history can be written in terms of the successive ‘outsider’ groups who have allegedly challenged the national polity, from Illuminati and

Masons to Catholics and Jews, Communists and Satanists. Linked to the paranoid style is the theme of symbolic politics, the tactic of attacking a rival group not directly but through some characteristic of that group, which might be condemned or even prohibited. The history of American moral purity campaigns and drug prohibitions is in large measure a story of ethnic self-assertion against outsiders, defined in terms of race or religion. Though all too easily dismissed as mere 'moral panics' or 'witch-hunts', irritating digressions from the central issues of party debate or class conflict, these moral struggles are in fact at the heart of American social evolution.

Ethnic diversity contributes to understanding the religiosity that has always been such a notable feature of American life. In colonial days the amazing novelty was the coexistence of numerous religious bodies without state establishment; today it is the continuing force of radical and evangelical religion in an age of advanced technology and social organization. Moreover new ideas and social trends in the United States tend to express themselves in religious forms rather than political, in the formation of new churches rather than political parties. This can be partly explained in terms of the role of the churches in providing a portable ethnic identity and solidarity for different groups, whose abandonment of religious forms is thus associated with the betrayal of a whole culture. The link is all the stronger because American churches are not generally identified either with the state or with a ruling caste. Moreover, social and geographical mobility have always added to the attractions of churches as ready means of providing social networks and assistance in otherwise unfamiliar new territories. Though true of most communities, these points are amply illustrated by the triumph of the black churches in maintaining a preeminence in African-American life over the last two centuries. Whatever the reasons, the continued strength of religious ideas has constantly shaped American political discourse, both in utopian and apocalyptic directions.

In 1842 Charles Dickens visited the United States, and he subsequently published accounts of his visit in the books *American Notes* and *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Both works were understood by Americans as deeply hostile in their ruthless denunciation of slavery, of the pervasive violence and hypocrisy of American life, and of the shallow and sensational media, among much else. To understand Dickens' critique, it is important to recognize him as merely one of countless European observers who travelled to America expecting to find a larger and improved version of Great Britain, and was shocked to find instead a radically different society with its own characteristic flaws and virtues. It is exactly that mix of familiarity and alien strangeness that Europeans have so often found confusing, and occasionally horrifying, but the flaws lay as much in their expectations as in the reality they have encountered.

For various reasons – size, ethnic and racial diversity, religiosity – the United States has from its earliest days evolved a culture radically different from that of its European roots, and any attempt to fit American society into a European mold ultimately results in distortion. Though not immune to wider economic and political trends, the history of the United States has to be viewed in the context of a separate continent no less than merely another nation.

Notes

1. Henry David Thoreau, *Cape Cod* (New York: Apollo, 1966) pp. 312–13.
2. Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1965).

Map 1. The United States