

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



James Roark, Michael Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, eds. *The American Promise: A History of the United States*. Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1998. xxxii + 1270 pp. (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-09525-3; \$56.10 (paper), ISBN 978-0-312-11196-0.



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Published on H-Survey (March, 1998)

Editor's note: H-Survey is proud to post another "double" review of a new textbook—this time, James Roark et al., *The American Promise*. (This is a brand new textbook, rather than simply a new edition, so we asked two scholars with different backgrounds to review it.)

At the outset of *The American Promise*, the authors boldly state that this text is "born of two convictions: (1) faced with an overwhelming amount of information, students need help determining what's important and (2) students won't get anything out of a textbook unless it's interesting and enjoyable" (p. xix).

The American Promise fulfills the second conviction much better than the first; this text is interesting and enjoyable, to be sure. It is complete with dozens upon dozens of beautiful photographs, images, maps, and graphs. It brings American history up to *and past* the 1996 presidential election. It even covers the recent American involvement in Bosnia, welfare reform, and Madeleine Albright's appointment and confirmation as Secretary of State (topics about which we pushed-to-the-wall modern survey instructors can feel guilty for slighting in the last frantic week of the semester). It blends social and cultural history with economics and politics and even has the most comprehensive treatment of environmental history that has yet appeared in a college-survey text.

But considering it weighs in at a lengthy 1,270 pages,

plus three appendices at seventy-four pages and two historical documents volumes at 511 pages, *The American Promise*, despite its authors' best intentions, does little to assist students in determining what is the most important historical information; that's a task still left to the instructor. From a purely idealistic standpoint, of course, all 1,270 pages are important. But more is not always better. More text (even with more images, photos, and graphs interspersed), more people, more events, more alternative interpretations, and more documents do little to help students learn the essence of history, the connections in history, and the changes that occur over time, nor do they provide the tools to sift through to the most salient events, movements, and personalities. Given the range and comprehensive treatment of topics provided by this text, it has to be an unbelievably difficult challenge for even the best and brightest student to keep all of the *really* important material separated from the *really* interesting and enjoyable parts that this text provides.

It is also surprising that Bedford does not have an extensive interactive web site for the text, such as that provided by Prentice Hall to support and assist students (and instructors) with its *Out of Many* American survey text.

Given the Internet literacy more and more students (and their instructors) have acquired recently, this is a significant oversight. An efficient, interactive web site could, in fact, distill chapter information into more manageable chunks for students and help the authors implement their goal of helping students learn what is truly important in the American past. As it now stands, the text provides, at the conclusion of each packed chapter, a narrative summation of perhaps five to seven paragraphs and a chronological time-line—hardly the stuff students can use to separate, critically, historical wheat from chaff.

The text's treatment of the modern American West is also disappointing, despite recent admonishments coming from those of us teaching in the West for text authors to begin rethinking, conceptually, the place of the West in twentieth century (see, for example, Patricia Nelson Limerick's "The Case of the Premature Departure: The Trans-Mississippi West and American History Textbooks," *Journal of American History* 78 [March 1992]: 1380-94). Nineteenth-century western history is crucial to understanding much of the nation's history, as the authors indicate through their generous coverage of the ante- and post-bellum western movements, resource extraction, and collision of cultures in the West. But the West pretty much ceases to exist as a discrete section in *The American Promise* and has little influence on national politics after about 1890 (Chapter Seven). That is, after the census director in 1890 declared the frontier to be no more, after Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his famous essay on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893). Texts should include chapters entitled "The Rise of the Modern West" or "The Significance of the West in Twentieth Century America." *The American Promise*, unfortunately, follows the lead of earlier textbooks by abandoning the West as a distinct region that exerts influence on and is influenced by the American nation as a whole throughout the entire span of American history.

Perhaps the most important section of the main text is one that may be most overlooked, Appendix II. This appendix contains a distillation of the most important Supreme Court cases, pie charts showing the changing nature of the American economy over the last 150 years, federal spending growth, demographics, vital statistics

over time, immigration historically, the increase in the number of women in the work force, computer usage, and the growth in higher education (among other things). One could learn (and teach) a lot about American history just from these thirty-odd pages.

The accompanying ancillaries are solid and comprehensive (though unspectacular). There are two volumes of documents, "To 1865" and "From 1865." Each volume contains a good smattering of ethnic viewpoints (though nothing by or about Indians since 1879, while the main text devotes some coverage to modern Indian affairs). A short exegesis accompanies each document and a series of questions—either for discussion or for out of class writing—accompanies and concludes each document.

The *de rigueur* "Hands-on Guide for Instructors" is also a part of the package as is an efficient handbook to assist harried teaching assistants organize discussions ("A Survival Guide for First-Time Teaching Assistants"). The Hands-On Guide thematically outlines each chapter and provides lecture strategies (useful for those same harried teaching assistants who need to crib something in a hurry), multiple choice questions, and a section on anticipating student responses.

For the geographically-minded, there is a two-volume "Mapping the American Promise" workbook. Assignments are keyed to each of the main text chapters and involve some map interpretation (the election of 1824, 1932, 1960, etc.) and some general questions from the chapter that can be written on detachable pages. For instructors who want to keep students as closely connected to the chapter as possible (and who have teaching assistants or the personal motivation to grade the assignments weekly!) this may be a very sound option.

The American Promise sets out a very ambitious agenda; it is a handsome text, it is an up-to-date text (almost up-to-the-minute); it is comprehensive in its treatment of several heretofore neglected areas. But given its limitations, *The American Promise* faces stiff competition in the currently crowded survey marketplace.

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Citation: Keith Edgerton. Review of Roark, James; Johnson, Michael; Cohen, Patricia Cline, eds., *The American Promise: A History of the United States*. H-Survey, H-Net Reviews. March, 1998.

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