

Preface

Getting Right with the Past

Since Donald Trump’s election in 2016 the battles over American history have grown more intense. Legislatures have ordered schools not to teach aspects of the past that might distress (White) students. Some observers suggest slavery was not all bad. The Florida middle school curriculum declares that “slaves developed skills which, in some instances, could be applied for their personal benefit.” Discussions of the Civil War are okay, but references to systemic racism, often referred to as “critical race theory,” are taboo. Both sides in this debate recognize the importance of history. How we understand earlier events shapes our view of the present—and the actions we take.¹

Lost in this noisy dissensus are the broad areas of agreement that most textbooks and courses share. Students in California and Texas, Massachusetts and Florida, learn a narrative marked by high ideals and steady progress toward “a more perfect union.” Virtually all texts concur that a desire for “liberty” explains the American Revolution, and that the drive for “freedom”—the determination to end slavery—caused the Civil War. Every textbook condemns slavery (even if some note redeeming features), explores Black resilience in bondage, praises Harriet Tubman, and notes the

accomplishments of Black Reconstruction. Civil rights leaders, like Martin Luther King Jr., guide the nation's progress toward racial equality. Most accounts acknowledge foreign policy stumbles, but on balance see America as a positive force in the world.

The seven essays in this book challenge those myths. They question the comforting narrative that shapes Americans' view of the past. This work contends that at the heart of the American story are the demands of affluent citizens for economic growth and territorial expansion. Lofty concerns cannot be ignored. No explanation can be monolithic. But idealism was subordinate, and its secondary role helps explain the nation the US is today.

The relentless drive for expansion, both economic and territorial, underlay the two events—the Revolution and the Civil War—that profoundly shaped the United States. In the Revolution the opposing camps (which would eventually be labeled patriots and Tories) formed by the 1740s. At midcentury colonists divided over fighting the French and their Native allies, just as in the 1760s they quarreled about opposing Britain. The constant for the expansionists, the future patriots, was the promotion of a New World “empire.” Significantly, the Revolution also birthed a slaveholding republic. The price Southerners demanded for their allegiance was the protection of bondage. Northerners acquiesced, and the Constitution confirmed that bargain. Racism was a fundamental aspect of the new nation.²

The Civil War similarly emerged from calls for expansion, with the lead taken by planters in the southern reaches of the cotton states and by farmers, merchants, and manufacturers around the Great Lakes and in New England. The victorious Northerners' principal concern was the creation of a dynamic industrial state with federal backing—a goal they achieved. The fact that

for Northerners emancipation and improving the lives of African Americans were far less important has profound implications for US history. This outlook led to the absence of land reform, the short-lived, troubled era of Reconstruction, the rise of repressive regimes in the South, and pervasive discrimination in the North.

Challenging the Myths of US History explores the nation that the Revolution and Civil War created, a country shaped by expansion, with racism as its noxious corollary. The relentless drive for growth coupled with condescension toward non-Whites was evident in the wars against Native Americans and in the nation's aggressive foreign policy, including the lengthy involvement in Vietnam. Racism has also contributed to the plague of homicides within the Black community, left its imprint on the women's movement, and steered the evolution of American politics, including the broad and sustained support for Donald Trump.

Noble goals are part of the American fabric, but they serve as a counterpoint to expansion and racism, never as the dominant theme. Thomas Jefferson's ringing endorsement of equality, even if uttered by a slaveholder, inspired generations of Americans.³ With their appeal to lofty principles, abolitionists stirred a national debate in the mid-nineteenth century. As the country industrialized, labor leaders and farmers battled factory owners, while critics of foreign policy denounced imperial ventures. Generations of activists demanded justice for African Americans. The essays note these campaigns and closely examine one: the struggle for women's rights.

This book questions long-held assumptions. It is not a comprehensive survey or a historiographical essay (although the endnotes point to relevant works). The first chapter provides an overview that is both philosophical and broad based. It asks how we can

decide which interpretation is better than another. It looks at the changes in the study of history since the 1960s and examines conflicting overviews of the past.

Challenging the Myths of US History draws from a variety of sources, including primary documents and my five books, particularly my studies of the Revolution, the Civil War, and American culture as reflected in novels and art. In addition, a series of remarkable works, most published during the past ten years and referenced in the text and notes, have shaped my outlook. Nor can anyone writing in the early 2020s fail to be affected by recent events. Clashes over race, foreign policy, inequality, and democracy must give any observer pause and force a reexamination of assumptions. Discussions with other historians, family, and friends, whose names are listed in the acknowledgments, have also been important.

These essays are about the past, but they are also about the present. What American is not touched, in some way, by Donald Trump's ascent, rampant violence, foreign wars, and the women's movement? Each of our worlds has been profoundly affected by two foundational events—the American Revolution and the Civil War—as well as by the way history is taught and imagined. In several places I've brought in my own experience. But readers might readily substitute their own involvement with the issues discussed.

I'd be delighted if readers who differ with the book's thesis or any of its contentions carefully consider the material presented and provide their own explanations. This book is about "challenging the myths," a phrase that suggests a dialogue, not a sermon. This modest book will not end disagreements about the past or the present, but I hope it will help elevate the discourse about America's history.