

TEXTBOOKS AND THE CRISIS OF CLASSROOM TEACHING
A REVIEW ESSAY

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Herman L. Crow and William L. Turnbull. American History: A Problems Approach. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972. Vol. 1, pp. xi, 463; vol. 2, pp. xi, 500. Paper, \$6.95 per volume. David H. Fowler, Eugene D. Levy, John W. Blasingame, and Jacqueline S. Haywood. In Search of America: Community, National Identity, Democracy. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972. Vol. 1, pp. xi, 620; vol. 2, pp. xiii, 646. Paper, \$4.95 per volume. Norman A. Graebner, Gilbert C. Fite, and Philip L. White. A History of the American People. Second Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975. Vol. 1, pp. ix, 426; vol. 2, ix, 492. Paper, \$8.50 per volume; \$14.95 combined. Leonard Pitt. We Americans: A Topical History of the United States. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1976. Pp. xi, 850. \$12.95.

Writing American history textbooks always is a hazardous business, but the past few years seem to have been a particularly trying time for practitioners of the art. If declining college history enrollments had not already provided ample evidence of hard times in the profession, the results of a recent New York Times American history examination surely do so. This multiple-choice test, put together by four of our most distinguished historians and administered to a sample of 1,856 freshmen at 194 colleges throughout the country, tested recall of fact and awareness of recent interpretations regarding our past. Not one of the students answered all 42 questions correctly, and the average score was only 50%, leading the Times to conclude that students "lack the kind of detailed information that historians say they must have to understand either the past or the present."¹ These dismal results confirm a widespread impression that we now face a genuine crisis in classroom history teaching. Since textbooks remain standard fare in most high school and many college survey courses, it is tempting to blame them for the predicament, and to look to new textbooks for a solution to the teaching crisis. The authors of the texts under review indulge hopes for some panacea by promising, in their prefaces, innovative and stimulating approaches that will inspire in students a new respect for our history. Performance, however, is another matter, and a close look at the four textbooks leaves little room for optimism.

Of the four texts under review, Graebner, Fite, and White, A History of the American People, is the most traditional in format and content. In this new edition of a popular textbook first published in 1970, the authors supply a fairly straight chronological narrative, with the heaviest emphasis on political developments. To their credit, the authors sustain a smooth style and a lively pace throughout their narrative. Beginning students can find in this text all the facts concerning political history that they are likely to need, without being forced to endure the minutia and insufferable prose that burden many history texts. The authors' use of graphics is another asset. Sprinkled throughout the narrative are helpful illustrations, and the picture essays that punctuate various sections of both volumes are colorful and often instructive, though hardly "unprecedented," as the authors claim in the preface.

It is odd that A History of the American People should succeed best as political narrative, for the authors claim that analysis, not narrative, is their primary intent. Promising to take judicious account of recent scholarship, Graebner and associates assure the reader that they will "do justice to each side" on questions that are still debated by historians. This, as every historian knows, is a rather tall order, particularly since the authors also promise to make clear their own interpretive "preferences" whenever the evidence "warrants such selection." Graebner, Fite, and White deserve commendation for their forthright admission that their text contains interpretive

judgments with which some scholars might disagree: not all textbooks authors are so candid. But such honesty, however commendable, does not exempt their interpretations from critical scrutiny. We must, therefore, turn our attention to the broad perspective that informs the entire book, and to the particular interpretations which the authors favor on selected historiographical issues.

A trained scholar familiar with recent trends in American historiography will quickly spot the traditional, consensus viewpoint that pervades this textbook. Although the authors do not ignore evidence of racism, economic hardship, and foreign policy adventurism in America's past, the overall picture that emerges in section after section is of a benign history which has been relatively unmarred by serious exploitation or internal conflict. Progress and noble ideals are recurrent themes in A History of the American People, and the fact that the United States has not always lived up to its ideals does not seem particularly to trouble the authors. America's exploitation of blacks and its annihilation of Indians, for instance, receive due mention, but generally in a tone and context which suggest that they were unfortunate exceptions to an otherwise enlightened history. Graebner, Fite, and White, recognizing that in the 1970's it is impossible to ignore such matters as racism and poverty, accept some of the specific findings of recent, radical historians, but totally defuse the implications of their scholarship by incorporating these findings into an old-fashioned, consensus framework.

A few specific cases must suffice to illustrate the authors' reliance upon this viewpoint. In this era of the Bicentennial, it is fitting to begin with the Revolution, which the authors interpret solely as a fight for home rule, not, to use Carl Becker's felicitous phrase, as a struggle to determine "who should rule at home."² They mention such examples of domestic conflict as the "regulator" movement in the Carolinas and tenant rebellions in New York, but only as illustrations of divisive tendencies that had to be overcome before independence could be won, not as evidence of serious social conflict. It is indicative that the authors devote five paragraphs to the development of religious freedom during the Revolution, but give only one paragraph to the decline of deference; the former is easily compatible with a consensus interpretation, while the latter is not. Likewise, in discussing slavery, the authors not only ignore the recent work of Eugene Genovese, John Blasingame, Sterling Stuckey, and others on slave culture, but, incredibly, they also fail to mention patterns of day-to-day resistance to slavery, with which historians have long been familiar.³ Slavery's divisive effect on American politics gets far more attention than the institution's impact on the four million people who were suffering under it in 1860. Moving to a later period, the authors portray Progressivism as a noble effort to curb the excesses of industry, thus ignoring the contention of a number of recent scholars that Progressive reforms can best be understood as the result of big business' attempt to rationalize the marketplace.⁴ Finally, they treat twentieth-century American foreign policy in equally uncritical terms. Magnifying the dispute over methods between Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson into a major conflict between realism and idealism, the authors never suggest that both men, like other American policy-makers in this century, may have shared imperialistic goals.⁵ The point of reciting these examples is not to suggest that the authors are wrong on every point, but to indicate that, despite their avowed intention of doing justice to all viewpoints, Graebner, Fite, and White consistently choose those interpretations that fit most neatly into the traditional, consensus framework. The major task confronting the instructor who adopts this textbook, therefore, will be to acquaint the students with alternative interpretations and with the arguments and evidence that support them. In light of the tendency of many beginning students to accept on faith anything they read in a textbook, this will be a formidable task.

If A History of the American People is somewhat disappointing due to the authors' failure to make good their promise of interpretive balance, Crow and Turnbull, American History: A Problems Approach, is absolutely maddening on matters of interpretation. The authors, who should know better, promise "to minimize judgmental remarks on controversial issues" so as not "to rob the student of the freedom to doubt and to inquire." They attempt to accomplish this by dividing each "Part" of the text into two distinct sections. The first section of each "Part" consists of three or four mini-chapters by Crow and Turnbull that aim to provide the student with the basic facts needed to understand our past. Following these introductory mini-chapters are several selections, from primary and secondary sources, that illustrate different interpretations of the period under discussion. Students presumably will be free to pick and choose among the conflicting interpretations, or to form their own original ones on the basis of the facts in the authors' introductory chapters. At first glance, this seems like a wise approach; certainly Crow and Turnbull deserve praise for trying to allow students leeway to be creative. On closer inspection, however, serious problems become apparent.

First, there is the obvious difficulty of selecting the important facts, a problem that has plagued all serious historians. Since no historian can possibly know all the facts, and since no one could catalog all of them even if he did, it is clear that each scholar must apply some principle of selection to the arsenal of facts at his disposal. But the principle of selection the scholar uses to eliminate certain facts clearly rests upon some prior conceptual, or interpretive, framework. There is, in short, simply no way to avoid "judgmental remarks" in writing history. This difficulty is exacerbated by the brevity of the chapters in this textbook, for only by using the most Draconian standards for eliminating certain facts could the authors limit their chapter on, for instance, the New Deal to less than eight pages (this still is one of the longest chapters in either volume).

The authors' treatment of the American Revolution--to continue our practice of observing the Bicentennial--can serve to illustrate this difficulty. In three chapters on the Revolutionary Era, which together encompass less than twenty pages of text, there is absolutely no suggestion of internal conflict. Instead, the authors present only a cursory summary of the events surrounding the Seven Years' War, of the series of imperial crises between 1764 and 1776, and of the Revolutionary War itself, failing even to mention disruptive groups like regulators and rebellious tenants. It is true that the four interpretive readings on the Revolution explicitly debate the question of economic and social antagonisms. The problem is that students, by the time they get to these readings, may already have been influenced to interpret the Revolution as nothing more than an imperial struggle. By including in their mini-chapters certain facts that pertain to the imperial revolt, while excluding those that pertain to internal conflict, Crow and Turnbull at best deprive students of precisely the facts they need to judge the readings that follow, and at worst they subtly bias whatever judgments the students subsequently may make.

Their futile attempt "to avoid judgmental remarks" repeatedly leads the authors to equivocate on difficult but important questions of fact as well as interpretation. As a result, their textbook abounds in such phrases as "it has been reported," "some believed," and "allegedly." In the chapter on the War of 1812, for instance, Crow and Turnbull outline the major demands of the Hartford Convention, but shirk the most crucial issue regarding that notorious gathering. "It has been reported," the authors inform us, "that some of the more radical elements of the convention even advocated secession and a separate peace with England." While it is true that the evidence on the extent of secessionist sentiments at Hartford is ambiguous and that historians have sharply disagreed on the matter, it is also true that the scholar has a professional obligation to make a reasoned, plausible judgment on such troublesome

issues.⁶ Why else do we have professional historians? This particular issue bears directly upon many historiographical problems, including the nature of Federalism, party divisions in the early republic, and the conflict between regionalism and nationalism in our history. Students will be able to understand none of these problems unless they know whether reports of secessionism at Hartford were true. But more important than this particular issue is the effect that such equivocation may have on students. One can only wonder how many students will be willing to risk any interpretations of their own, when the authors, who are trained historians, refuse to do so. It is likely that the major result of the authors' equivocations will not be to encourage students to form their own opinions, but to make them despair of ever being able to make educated, plausible judgments, whether on historical or contemporary issues. For a textbook thus to reinforce the cynicism that currently seems to pervade our campuses would be regrettable indeed.

Crow and Turnbull, of course, fear no such results. In a truly remarkable preface, they outline lofty goals that far transcend what we normally think of as the purposes of history. "The method of history," the authors inform us, "is metaphysical as well as empirical." Just what this means is spelled out in a passage that, for its unexcelled pomposity, merits quoting at length: "As coherence is the test of truth, teaching coherence through the study of history and its structure, as well as its many limitations, can lead to logical truth, and, thus, to rational man. The ultimate synthesis [sic] is a person who can use historical logic for the purpose of controlling and using ideas, rather than having ideas control and use him." (My friends down the hall in philosophy writhed in agony when I showed them this passage.) Such goals are probably impossible to attain in history, and thus are best left to those who specialize in metaphysical pursuits. But impossible or not, it is difficult to see how this textbook, in which the authors time and again refuse to make difficult judgments, and thereby implicitly deny the possibility of attaining "logical truth," contributes to the goal.

Equivocation and pomposity aside, American History: A Problems Approach is not totally without merit. The secondary readings in the text are, for the most part, selected from important works by some of our most distinguished historians, and the primary source materials clearly illustrate the conflicting viewpoints that divided those who lived our history, just as they continue to divide those of us who write it. As an anthology of selected readings on certain key problems in American history, this book succeeds tolerably well. As an introductory text, and as an exercise in metaphysics, it fails.

Crow and Turnbull salvage at least something by their judicious selection of readings, but Fowler, Levy, Blassingame, and Haywood, by attempting to provide something for everyone, accomplish little of value. In Search of America contains interpretive essays on certain historiographical issues, a "Reader's Digest" compendium of brief primary sources, and a rudimentary narrative of American history, all within the context of a problem-centered approach and a largely chronological scheme of organization. The result is a text whose 393 separate readings, covering 72 different topics, meander so randomly that even describing the format is difficult.

The first volume of In Search of America opens in promising fashion with a lengthy chapter on "The American Community: A Key to the Past," which consists of four readings on contemporary American communities, two on Vandalia, Illinois, and two on upper west side Manhattan. The point apparently is to suggest that history can be exciting and relevant because of the persistence of certain themes and problems--in this case, community--and because similar methodologies are useful for understanding problems common to both past and present. This is a novel approach to the sticky issue of relevancy in the classroom, and it might have worked if the editors had taken more care in

selecting readings for the next chapter, "Colonial Americans and Their Communities." The chapter includes some readings that relate to colonial communities, but also many others that deal with practically every aspect of colonial history, from European overseas expansion to political institutions. Such topics are important, but they divert attention from the major theme of community. The authors' desire for comprehensive coverage thus undermines their attempt at thematic coherence. The same also can be said of the other themes covered in this volume: nationalism, which is presented in a most innovative way through selections by Hans Kohn and Boyd Shafer defining the concept, and through a lengthy essay by Immanuel Wallerstein on modern African nationalism; American character, which is treated in brief essays by Jean-Paul Sartre and David Potter; and democracy in crisis, which is raised in four interpretive essays on the causes of the Civil War. In each case, the central theme tends to be obscured by a welter of material on tangential or irrelevant topics.

Thematic coherence is less of a problem in the second volume, which opens with a selection by Robert Heilbroner on "The Impact of Industrial Technology" in modern America, followed by a number of chapters on various aspects of the American economy since Reconstruction. Other sections also cover foreign policy and domestic politics, but the organization is such that these sections do not grossly detract from the opening theme. The problem with the second volume lies in the number and brevity of the selected readings (this problem also compounds the thematic disorganization that mars volume one). The primary source readings, which comprise the bulk of the second volume, are so numerous and brief that even a trained historian might have difficulty keeping them straight. One can only imagine the chaos they will create in the minds of introductory level students. Surely the teacher who adopts this text will face a monumental chore in trying to bring some order to the material.

Many historians also will question some of the specific readings selected for this text. The problem here is not the primary sources, which generally are useful despite their brevity, but rather the secondary readings, which account for 90 of the 393 selections. No less than 33 of these secondary readings come from other textbooks, mainly older, traditional ones. If the editors wanted to include conventional textbook narrative, one wonders why they did not write these sections themselves; this might at least have brought the narratives more nearly up-to-date in interpretation. Even the secondary readings from monographs and scholarly syntheses, however, also are dated. Many of these selections are good, but the older interpretations they reflect should be balanced by more recent material. Thus, not only does the inventive format turn out to be confusing, but the interpretations in this text often prove to be no less traditional than those in Graebner, Fite, and White, A History of the American People.

Far more successfully innovative is Pitt, We Americans. Unlike the other texts under review, We Americans adheres consistently to a thematic approach. Pitt divides his text into five "Parts," according to a fairly conventional chronology: Part I covers the colonial and Revolutionary periods, Part II the early national period to 1865, Part III the period from Reconstruction to World War I, Part IV the years from the beginning of the first to the end of the second World War, and Part V recent America. Each of these larger sections, in turn, consists of an introductory "overview" covering the major dates and events of the period, and of eight chapters on the major themes: wealth, power, war, race, nationality and religion, women and the family, community, and environment. As Pitt explains in the preface, the instructor who adopts this text may structure his course chronologically by dealing with all the chapters in Part I, then all in Part II, and so on, or he may pursue one theme at a time, from beginning to end. Either way, the text succeeds in

organizing America's past around certain key concepts that can be traced throughout the country's history.

We Americans likewise succeeds far better than the other texts in synthesizing the findings of recent scholarship. Many of the major themes, especially family and community, probably would not even have occurred to a textbook author a decade ago. Certainly the chapters on these themes reflect some of the most innovative work of young, radical historians. On smaller points, too, Pitt incorporates recent scholarship. His section on colonial mob violence, for instance, is based on the very recent work of Pauline Maier,⁷ and his discussion of the Cold War neatly balances the conflicting interpretations of traditional apologists and New Left critics of recent American foreign policy. Although Pitt's interpretive judgments, for the most part, are reasonable and balanced, his reliance upon recent scholarship produces a slight New Left bias that some instructors will wish to counteract through lectures or supplementary readings. Whether one agrees or not with Pitt's interpretations, it is nevertheless refreshing to find a textbook that takes a generally dissenting view of American history.

For all its merits, however, We Americans is not without faults. Most annoying is the book's repetitiveness, which results directly from its format. While the eight major themes can legitimately be separated for analytic and pedagogical purposes, the distinctions among these are often artificial, so different chapters sometimes cover much of the same material. Wealth obviously intersects with power and community, power with war and nationality, community with family and so on. To cite just one glaring example of repetitiveness, Pitt discusses Hamilton's economic policies in three separate places: briefly, in the introductory "Overview" to Part II; again, in more detail, in Chapter 9 on "Wealth;" and still again in Chapter 10 on "Power." Along with the repetition comes an occasionally confusing chronological arrangement. For instance, Chapter 10 opens with a discussion of pre-Civil War sectionalism and of the political crisis of the 1850's, then leaps backwards into a survey of party politics from the 1790's through the Jacksonian era. Organizing the chapter in such a manner is justifiable in the sense that it enables the student to perceive how the break-down of parties prior to 1860 had its roots in previous political development. The organization is unsatisfactory in the sense that it obscures those aspects of the first two party systems that were not directly related to the later sectional crisis. Finally, the repetitiveness, along with the fact that Pitt deals with many themes not usually covered in introductory texts, lends a superficial quality to portions of the book. To cover all the topics even in the depth one normally expects from a textbook would have required Pitt to write a much longer work that probably would have been too ponderous for survey courses.

The shortcomings of We Americans do not totally undermine its utility, but they do serve to remind us of the limitations inherent in all textbooks. Innovative, topical approaches apparently can succeed only at the expense of chronological precision and of comprehensive, in-depth treatment of standard political history. Adequate political narrative, as in Graebner and associates, History of the American People, likewise seems incompatible with thematic inventiveness. Textbooks that try to accomplish everything, like Fowler, et al., In Search of America, and those which seek relevancy by attempting to transcend history, like Crow and Turnbull, American History, are likely to fall far short of their aims. These four works thus indicate that the solution to the crisis in classroom teaching is not to be found solely in introductory textbooks, no matter how inventive they may be. The solution, if it is to be found at all, must lie with individual instructors. The classroom, after all, is a more flexible medium than the textbook, and it is in the classroom that methods must be developed for making history

topically relevant and sufficiently comprehensive. Textbooks may prove useful, but only if their authors cease encouraging false hopes and begin to recognize that their function is a limited one. Otherwise, grand ambitions and illusory promises in our textbooks will continue to raise expectations falsely, while both history enrollments and students' performance on sample exams remain distressingly low.

NOTES

¹New York Times, May 2, 1976, section 1, 1.

²Carl Becker, History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1776 (Madison, Wisconsin, 1909), 22.

³Eugene Genovese, "American Slaves and Their History," New York Review of Books, December 3, 1970, 34-43; John Blassingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (New York, 1972); and Sterling Stuckey, "Through the Prism of Folklore: The Black Ethos in Slavery," Massachusetts Review, IX (1968), 417-437. For an old study of subtle resistance, see Raymond and Alice Bauer, "Day to Day Resistance to Slavery," Journal of Negro History, XXVII (1942), 338-419.

⁴E.g., Gabriel Kolko, The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900-1916 (New York, 1963); and James Weinstein, The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State, 1900-1918 (Boston, 1968).

⁵E.g., William Appleman Williams, The Tragedy of American Diplomacy (New York, 1962).

⁶Actually, this issue has been satisfactorily resolved by James Banner, To the Hartford Convention: Chapters in the History of Massachusetts Federalism, 1800-1815 (New York, 1968). Crow and Turnbull fail even to mention this important study in their select bibliography.

⁷Pauline Maier, From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776 (New York, 1972), 3-26.