

Preface

It is a daunting task to attempt to convey the remarkable history of the United States in a single book, but that is what this volume attempts to do. Like any history, it is a product of its time and reflects the views of the past that historians of recent generations have developed. A comparable book published decades from now will likely seem as different from this one as this book appears different from histories written a generation or more ago. The writing of history changes constantly—not, of course, because the past changes, but because of shifts in the way historians, and the publics they serve, ask and answer questions about the past.

There are now, as there have always been, critics of changes in historical understanding. Many people argue that history is a collection of facts and should not be subject to “interpretation” or “revision.” But historians insist that history is not and cannot be simply a collection of facts. They are only the beginning of historical understanding. It is up to the writers and readers of history to try to interpret the evidence before them; and in doing so, they will inevitably bring to the task their own questions, concerns, and experiences.

This book, now in its thirteenth edition, has itself been an example of the changing character of historical understanding. Published first in the late 1950s by three distinguished historians—Richard Current, Frank Freidel, and T. Harry Williams—it began as a traditional political and diplomatic narrative with relatively little attention given to the people and the cultures that lay outside the public world. Over the last several decades, I have attempted to broaden the focus of this book to incorporate the many kinds of history that scholars have more recently created; to combine the traditional histories of politics, diplomacy, and great public events with the newer histories of society and culture, to present the American past in all its great diversity and complexity. Our history requires us to examine the experience of the many different peoples and ideas that have shaped American society. But it also requires us to understand that the United States is a nation, whose people share many things: a common political system, a connection to an integrated national (and now international) economy, and a familiarity with a shared and enormously powerful mass culture. To understand the American past, it is necessary to understand both the forces that divide Americans and the forces that draw them together.

Among the changes in the thirteenth edition of *American History: A Survey* is an effort to broaden still further our understanding of our national past. That includes expanding the chronological boundaries of our history. In this edition, there is both an expanded treatment of the history of the Americas before Columbus and a presentation of the history of the several years since the publication of the last edition. This edition also continues the effort of recent years to place American history more clearly in the context of the history of the rest of the world—as exemplified by the essays in the “America in the World” series. This edition also continues to expand the treatment of science, technology, and the environment. And it represents as well a significant reorganization of some parts of the book—particularly Chapters 19–22, which have been combined and revised to become two chapters. Throughout the book, I have worked to reduce the length of the narrative. Textbooks tend to grow longer as the span of time they cover grows. But the time students and teachers have to devote to American history stays the same. So I have attempted to keep the size of this book relatively constant even as we add new material.

I am grateful to many people for their help on this book. I was particularly fortunate to have the help once again of Kevin Murphy as I worked on this most recent edition. I also appreciate the many suggestions and corrections I have received from students over the last several years, as well as the reviews provided by a group of talented scholars and teachers.

Alan Brinkley
Columbia University
New York, NY