

Preface

The story of the American past, which is the subject of this book, has undergone many transformations in recent decades. The past itself has not changed, of course, but the way Americans understand it has changed dramatically. And in the wake of those changes have come both new forms of presentation and new controversies.

The changes include both new ways of approaching historical scholarship and new approaches to teaching. It is the latter that inspired this book. Over the past decade there have been growing concerns on the part of historians over the rapidly growing amount of information that needs to be covered in an American history course. This has led instructors to reevaluate how they convey the story of America's past and what tools they employ in doing so. Many instructors have changed the type of texts that they require for their students, opting for briefer volumes instead of the more traditional and comprehensive book that dominated this marketplace for years. Often, they employ a book that provides basic information, which they then supplement with other readings. *This* book is designed to provide students with the basic information they need and then allow instructors to fill in the rest of the story as they see fit.

Hand in hand with the movement toward briefer texts is a concern over the price that students have to pay for their books. This book is priced so that students can afford to purchase the text and so that instructors can supplement it with other materials. This affordable, briefer, more basic text answers the needs of both instructors and students and provides more flexibility for the teaching of American history.

The Unfinished Nation: A Brief, Interactive History of the American People also addresses another important issue that has become a considerable problem for instructors. Today's students have grown up in a visual world of computers, movies, television, and video games. How does an instructor relate the story of America's past to this generation of students? One answer is through increased use of visual material—photos, interactive maps, documentaries—that can both demonstrate an era's culture and inspire

P R E F A C E

xxviii

critical thinking about the past. We believe that the use of such visual material in conjunction with more traditional text-based materials actually enriches students' understanding of the past. Accompanying this text is our dynamic and versatile *Primary Source Investigator* CD-ROM which contains a wealth of images, original documents, interactive maps, and documentaries. This CD provides the visual images that will make history more vivid for students and will also give instructors new ways of employing these images in their teaching.

These changes in the tools of presentation reflect not just the market, but the changing character of historical understanding itself. The turbulence of our era has encouraged historians to ask new questions of the past—and thus to reinterpret it—in an effort to understand the tensions and contests that preoccupy us today. The popularity of history is growing even while the controversies surrounding it continue. Ours is an era of rapid and bewildering change which encourages people—particularly in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—to look to the past as way to deepen our understanding of the present. And as the population of the United States has become more diverse and as groups that once stood outside the view of scholarship have moved into its center, many historians have labored to reveal the immense complexity of their country's past. As America's economy and culture and power become more deeply involved in the life of the rest of the world, historians struggle to see the ways in which global forces have shaped the nation's development.

Historical narrative once recounted little beyond the experiences of great men and the unfolding of great public events. Today they attempt to tell a

more complicated story, one that includes private as well as public lives, ordinary people as well as celebrated ones, differences as well as unity, international phenomena as well as national ones. This newer history seems fragmented at times, because it attempts to embrace so many more areas of human experience than the older narratives. It is often disturbing, because it reveals failures and injustices as well as triumphs. But it is also richer, fuller, and better suited to helping us understand our own diverse and contentious world.

I trust that this book will introduce readers to enough different aspects of American history to make them aware of its extraordinary richness and complexity. But I hope, too, that it will provide readers some sense of the shared experiences of Americans and of the forces that have sustained the United States as a nation.

My thanks to Kevin Murphy for his assistance on this book. I am, as always, grateful to the many people at McGraw-Hill who have helped with the editing and production of this book: Lyn Uhl, Steve Drummond, Kim McGrath, Jim Strandberg, Angela Kao, Katherine Bates, Susan Trentacosti, Gino Cieslik, Carol Bielski, and Natalia Peschiera.

I am also grateful to those readers of the original version of *The Unfinished Nation* who have offered me unsolicited comments, criticisms, and corrections. I hope they will continue to do so with this new venture. Suggestions can be sent to me at the Department of History, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, or by e-mail at ab65@columbia.edu.

Alan Brinkley
Columbia University
New York, NY