

# 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 bitter controversies.

In one sense, American history is thriving as almost never before as a part of American popular culture. Historical museums and exhibitions have multiplied and have attracted large audiences. Popular writing on history—both nonfiction and novels—has grown in popularity. History is a continuing presence on television, in films, and increasingly on the Internet. The popular appetite for American history seems to be almost boundless. At the same time, however, historical scholarship has become the source of increasing debate—among historians themselves, among the various publics historians try to reach, and among politicians, some of whom attack the historical profession for what they claim is an excessively critical view of the past.

Both the growing popularity of history and the growing controversies surrounding it reflect the character of our time. Ours is an era of rapid and bewildering change, which encourages people—particularly in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001—to look to the past for guidance and reassurance, and for reminders of what many believe were simpler, stabler times. But the turbulence of our age has also 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. As the population of the United States has become more diverse and as groups that once stood outside the view of scholarship have thrust themselves into its center, 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 narratives 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 have tried in this book to consider both the diversity and the unity that have characterized the American experience. The United States is,

## PREFACE

and has always been, a nation of many cultures. To understand its history, we must understand the experiences of the many groups who have shaped American society—the many worlds that have developed within it based on region, religion, class, ideology, race, gender, and ethnicity.

But the United States is not simply a collection of different cultures. It is also a great nation. And as important as understanding its diversity is understanding the forces that have drawn it together and allowed it to survive and flourish despite division. The United States has constructed a remarkably stable and enduring political system, which touches the lives of all Americans. It has developed an immense and highly productive national economy that affects the working and consuming lives of virtually everyone and reaches all across the globe. It has created a mass popular culture that colors the experiences and assumptions of almost all Americans, and of the people of much of the rest of the world as well. One can admire these unifying forces for their contributions to America's considerable success as a nation, or condemn them for creating—or failing to address—injustices. But no one proposing to understand the history of the United States can afford to ignore them.

In this fourth edition of *The Unfinished Nation*, I have tried to tell the complicated and fascinating story of America for students of history and for general readers. Those familiar with earlier editions will find a thorough editing and updating of all chapters, reflecting recent scholarship. Beyond that, there are three areas of special emphasis in this revision:

1. Greater attention to the global context of United States history, including a new feature called “America in the World.”
2. Expanded coverage of science and technology.
3. Extensive new material on environmental history.

In addition, new chapter introductions and marginal notes throughout the text should make it more accessible to readers. And the most visible change is the introduction of full color maps, images, and other graphics to the book—and an expanded map and illustration program to take advantage of this change.

I trust that this edition 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 edition. 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, Jim Strandberg, Susan Trentacosti, Gino Cieslik, Kim McGrath, Carol Bielski, Holly Rudelitsch, Natalia Peschiera, and Cristin Yancey. I am also grateful to the teachers and scholars who reviewed the manuscript and offered suggestions for revision: S. Charles Bolton, *University of Arkansas*,

## PREFACE

*Little Rock*; Steven Boyd, *University of Texas, San Antonio*; Mike Haridopolos, *Brevard Community College*; Mark D. Van Ells, *Queensborough Community College*; B. R. Burg, *Arizona State University*; Yolanda Chávaz Leyva, *University of Texas, El Paso*; Gregory Wilson, *University of Akron*; Beverly Garrison, *Oral Roberts University*; Kenneth W. Townsend, *Coastal Carolina University*; Joanne Kropp, *University of Texas, El Paso*; Anita Ashendel, *Texas A & M University*; Donald Rakestraw, *Georgia Southern University*; Josh Rothman, *University of Alabama*; David Freligh, *Phillips Community College*; Victor Triary, *Middlesex Community College*; Alex Wellek, *Quinnipiac University*; Margaret Orelup, *Keene State College*; Dr. Robert Tracy McKenzie, *University of Washington*; Jeffrey A. Kaufmann, *Muscatine Community College*; Jack Hammersmith, *West Virginia University*; Wendy Gunderson, *Collin County Community College*; Elizabeth Osborn, *Indiana University*; Alexander Knott, *University of Northern Colorado*; William Virden, *University of Northern Colorado*; and David Cullin, *Collin County Community College*.

I am grateful, finally, to those readers of the book who have offered me unsolicited comments, criticisms, and corrections. I hope they will continue to do so. 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](mailto:ab65@columbia.edu).

**Alan Brinkley**