

The Unfinished Nation Preface

The history of the United States is a relatively short one by the standards of much of the world. But the history of what we now call the Americas is a very long one, extending back thousands of years before Amerigo Vespucci gave his name to the continents that became the “New World.” The United States is the product of the toil and talent and luck of its people in the roughly 230 years since it became a nation. But it is also the result of centuries of human history that preceded the American Revolution. It is the product of much older European civilizations – Britain, Spain, Portugal, France, the Netherlands, and ultimately every country in Europe – whose peoples crossed the Atlantic over several centuries to escape problems in the Old World and to seek opportunities in the New. But it has been shaped as well by the many Indian civilizations that grew up in the American continents over a period of perhaps 15,000 years; by African civilizations of similar age, whose people helped populate much of the New World, even if mostly against their will; by people from every part of Asia, from the Pacific Islands, the Caribbean Islands, the Middle East, and, indeed, every part of the world. Diversity, adaptation, conflict, and rapid change have been characteristics of America since well before the United States became a nation, and they have remained among its characteristics in the centuries since.

This book attempts to tell the story of the United States in a way that does justice to the many ways in which different histories have shaped the development of the American people and their nation. Historical narratives once recounted very little beyond the experiences of great men and great public events. Today, most historians tell a more complicated story – one that includes not just our national history, but our more distant pasts; one that includes private as well

as public lives, differences as well as unity, international phenomena as well as national ones, and ordinary people as well as celebrated ones. This newer history can seem fragmented at times, because it embraces more areas of human experience than older narratives. It can be 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, and has always been, a society of many cultures and many creeds. But it is also a powerful nation, drawn together by a stable political system, an immense and highly productive economy, and a mass popular culture that reaches not only virtually all of the American people, but also much of the rest of the world. I hope that this book will introduce readers to enough different aspects of American history to make them aware of its extraordinary richness and complexity. I hope, too, that those who read it will come away with an understanding of the shared experiences of Americans and of the forces that have sustained the United States as a nation.

This fifth edition of *The Unfinished Nation* has been carefully and thoroughly edited to keep the book as concise and readable and possible. I have, in addition, added new material on the relationship of America to the rest of the globe (including new essays on “America and the World”), new essays on popular culture, and new material on the immediate past. Maps have been revised and redrawn to make them more readable, and new images appear throughout the book.

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And as always, I want to thank the students, teachers, and other readers of this book who have offered unsolicited comments, criticisms, and corrections. I hope they will continue to do so. Suggestions can be sent to me at 205 Low Library, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, or by e-mail to ab65@columbia.edu.

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