

SIXTH EDITION

CONFLICT and CONSENSUS

in Modern American History



Edited by Allen F. Davis and Harold D. Woodman

***Conflict and
Consensus
in
Modern American History***

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*For Gregory and Paul
and
Allan and David*

Preface

We are pleased that the continued success of *Conflict and Consensus in Modern American History* has warranted the publication of this sixth edition. We have retained the basic organization of the earlier editions, as well as the emphasis on the themes of conflict and consensus. We remain convinced that the presentation of conflicting views of particular periods and problems, shown within the context of general interpretations, allows students to deepen their understanding of the historical details and provides them with the means for interpreting the broad sweep of the country's history.

To make the book more useful in the introductory course, we have added new selections that incorporate recent approaches to the theme of conflict and consensus, and we have increased the emphasis on social history and on the history of women and minorities. While retaining a traditional periodization that is compatible with the popular survey texts, we have attempted to integrate, rather than merely add, the new material. Our goal has been to suggest, for example, how events that have been traditionally viewed from the white male perspective take on new meaning when women and blacks are included in the story.

In the third edition we added an introduction that was designed to help the beginning student to understand why historians disagree. We found that readers were often confused rather than enlightened when presented with conflicting interpretations of the same events. Too often they lacked the skills needed to discern the bases of historical disagreements. Because of the favorable response, we have retained (with revisions) this brief introduction to historical methods and philosophy. As a further aid to students we have expanded the chapter introductions, in which we discuss the selections to follow. We have added to these discussions a number of questions and suggestions designed to help the readers understand the arguments and methods the authors use.

In this edition, as in the previous ones, we have avoided presenting only two extreme positions on each problem raised. Such an either/or approach is artificial, and forces students to choose between extremes or to conclude, with-

out adequate evidence, that the truth must be midway between the two extremes. We have, therefore, included at least three selections dealing with the same problem in order to illustrate the subtleties of interpretation.

Our main concern has not been with historiography, although we do direct interested students to relevant historiographical discussions. Beginning students are not especially interested in tracing shifting interpretations, nor should they be at this stage. They should be stimulated to learn *what* happened and *why* it happened by seeing how different historians, viewing the same event, have attempted to answer these questions. We have therefore concentrated not on the evolution of historical writing but on the historical problems themselves. We hope to leave students with a heightened understanding of how various issues in American history are interpreted and at the same time to provide the ammunition for thoughtful and spirited discussions. The brief, annotated bibliographies provided at the end of each chapter are not designed to be exhaustive, but they will help those who might wish to do further reading on a particular interpretation.

Allen F. Davis

Harold D. Woodman

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We wish to thank the various publishers and authors for permission to reprint copyrighted material. This book had its origin in our introductory course in American history at the University of Missouri; our former teaching assistants and students will recognize many of the ideas, as will those with whom we have worked at Temple University and Purdue University. We are grateful for their aid and recognize that in a real sense they have been collaborators. In the preparation of this edition we have received invaluable aid from our students, Robert B. Beeson and Merrill D. Smith of Temple University and Earl J. Hess of Purdue University.

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Introduction: History and Historians

Most students are usually introduced to the study of history by way of a fat textbook and become quickly immersed in a vast sea of names, dates, events, and statistics. The students' skills are then tested by examinations that require them to show how much of the data they remember; the more they remember, the higher their grades. From this experience a number of conclusions seem obvious: the study of history is the study of "facts" about the past; the more "facts" you know, the better you are as a student of history. The professional historian, whether teacher or textbook writer, is simply one who brings together a very large number of "facts."

Of course, only the most naive of students fail to see that the data of history, the "facts," are presented in an organized manner. Textbooks describe not only what happened, but also why it happened. For example, students learn that Puritans began coming from England to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the New World in 1630, but they also learn why the Puritans came when they read about the religious persecutions in seventeenth-century England. Similarly, they read of the steady trek of people westward during the nineteenth century; however, at the same time they learn details that explain this movement of people—the availability of fertile lands in the West, the discovery of gold in California, the improvement of roads and other transportation facilities.

But beginning students, even as they come to recognize that their teacher and their textbook are explaining as well as describing events in the past, still have no reason to alter their notion as to what history is all about. They are still working in the realm of "fact." The "fact" of the movement of people into Ohio is explained by the "fact" that fertile land was available there. They may learn more details about the event—how many people went to Ohio,

when they arrived, where they settled—and about the explanation—the cost of land in Ohio, the availability of credit, the exhaustion of soils in the eastern states. Or they may be introduced to a fuller explanation when they read that some people came to Ohio to escape their creditors or to seek adventure or to speculate in land. In either case, they are simply learning more “facts.” An advanced course in American history in high school differs from the sixth-grade course in American history in that it gives more detail; the older student must remember more “facts.”

Students who have been introduced to history in this way may become confused upon discovering in a book like this one that historians often disagree sharply. To be sure, historians present their material in familiar ways; they tell us what happened and why it happened by presenting a mass of historical data. But students soon discover that two or three or more historians dealing with the same event may come to quite different conclusions about it. Sometimes two historians will use two very different sets of “facts” in describing an event, and this leads them to different conclusions. At other times, however, the same “facts” are given different meanings by different historians, and their conclusions therefore differ.

The common-sense reaction to this state of affairs is to conclude that one historian is right while the other is wrong. But common sense will take students no further than this. Presumably, historians who are wrong will have their “facts” wrong. This is seldom the case, however. Students find that all historians argue reasonably—and persuasively. And the “facts”—the names, dates, events, figures—usually turn out to be correct. Moreover, to complicate matters, they often find that contending historians more or less agree on the facts; that is, they use much the same data to come to different conclusions. To state that all are right when they say different things seems irrational; in any case, such an approach is often unacceptable to teachers who expect their students to take a position. The only way out for the baffled students is to choose one point of view for reasons they cannot fully explain. History, which had seemed to be a cut-and-dried matter of memorizing “facts,” now becomes a matter of choosing one good interpretation from among many. Historical truth becomes a matter of personal preference, like the choice of one brand-named item over another in a supermarket.

This position is hardly satisfying. And when their teachers inform them that the controversy over historical interpretations is what lends excitement to the study of history, students can only respond that they feel more confusion than excitement. They cannot help but feel that two diametrically opposed points of view about an event cannot both be right; yet they lack the ability to decide between them.

Obviously, there is no easy solution to this problem. Historians do not disagree in order to provide the raw material for “problems” books such as this one; they disagree because each historian views the past from a particular perspective. Once students grasp this, they have taken the first step toward being able to evaluate the work of various historians. But before they can take this

first step, students must consider a problem they have more or less taken for granted. They must ask themselves what history really is.

The word *history* has several meanings. In its broadest sense, it denotes the whole of the human past. More restricted is the notion that history is the recorded past, that is, that part of human life which has left some sort of record such as folk tales, artifacts, or written documents. Finally, history may be defined as that which historians write about the past.

Of course, the three meanings are related. Historians writing about the past base their accounts on the remains of the past, on the artifacts and documents left by people. Obviously they cannot know everything for the simple reason that not every event, every happening, was fully and completely recorded. And the further back one goes in time, the fewer are the records that remain. In this sense, then, the historian can only approximate history in the first meaning above, that is, history as the entire human past.

But this does not say enough. If historians cannot know everything because not everything was recorded, neither do they use all the records that are available to them. Rather, historians *select* from the total those records they deem most significant. Moreover, to complicate matters a bit more, they also re-create parts of the past for which they have no recorded evidence. Like detectives, they piece together evidence to fill in the gaps in the available records.

Historians are able to select evidence and to create evidence by using some theory or idea of human motivation and behavior. Sometimes this appears to be easy, requiring very little sophistication and subtlety. Thus, for example, historians investigating America's entry into World War I would probably find that the sinking of American merchant ships on the high seas by German submarines was relevant to their discussion. At the same time, they would most likely not use evidence that President Woodrow Wilson was dissatisfied with a new hat he bought during the first months of 1917. The choice as to which fact to use is based on a theory—admittedly, in this case a rather crude theory, but a theory nonetheless. It would go something like this: National leaders contemplating war are more likely to be influenced by belligerent acts against their countries than by their unhappiness with their haberdashiers.

The choice, of course, is not always so obvious. But, before pursuing the problem further, it is important to note that a choice must be made. Historians do not just present facts; they present *some* facts and not others. They choose those facts that seem significant and reject others. This is one of the reasons why historians disagree. They have *different* views or *different* theories concerning human behavior and therefore find different kinds of information significant.

Perhaps it might appear that it is the subject matter being investigated rather than any theory held by the historian that dictates which facts are significant. But this is not really so. With a little imagination—and poetic license—one could conceive of a psychological explanation for Wilson's ac-

tions that would include mounting frustration and anger fed in part, at least, by his strong disappointment with his new hat. In this case the purchase of a new hat would be a relevant fact in explaining Wilson's decision to ask Congress for a declaration of war. If the reader finds this outlandish, it is only because his notion of presidential motivation does not include this kind of personal reaction as an influence in determining matters of state.

If the choices were always as simple as choosing between German submarines and President Wilson's new hat, the problem would be easily resolved. But usually the choices are not so easy to make. Historians investigating United States' entry into World War I will find in addition to German submarine warfare a whole series of other facts that could be relevant to the event under study. For instance, they will find that the British government had a propaganda machine at work in the United States that did its best to win public support for the British cause. They will discover that American bankers had made large loans to the British, loans that would not be repaid in the event of a British defeat. They will read of the interception of the "Zimmerman Note," in which the German foreign secretary ordered the German minister in Mexico, in the event of war, to suggest an alliance between Germany and Mexico whereby Mexico, with German support, could win back territory taken from Mexico by the United States in the Mexican War. They will also find among many American political leaders a deep concern over the balance of power in Europe, a balance that would be destroyed—to America's disadvantage—if the Germans were able to defeat the French and the British and thereby emerge as the sole major power in Europe.

What then are the historians investigating America's entry into World War I to make of these facts? One group could simply conclude that America entered the war for several reasons and then list the facts they have discovered. By doing so, they would be making two important assumptions: (1) those facts they put on their list—in this case, German submarine warfare, British propaganda, American loans, the Zimmerman Note, and concern over the balance of power—are the main reasons, while those they do not list are not important; and (2) those things they put on their list are of equal importance in explaining the U.S. role. But another group of historians might argue that the list is incomplete in that it does not take into account the generally pro-British views of Woodrow Wilson, views that stemmed from the President's background and education. The result will be a disagreement among the historians. Moreover, because the second group raise the question of Wilson's views, they will find a number of relevant facts that the first group would ignore. They will concern themselves with Wilson's education, the influence of his teachers, the books he read, and the books he wrote. In short, although both groups of historians are dealing with the same subject—America's entry into World War I—they will come to different conclusions and use different facts to support their points of view. The facts selected, and those ignored, will depend not on the problem studied but on the points of view of the historians.

Similarly, a third group of historians might maintain that the various items on the list should not be given equal weight, that one of the reasons listed, say bankers' loans, was most important and that the others seemed to be significant only because of the overwhelming power of the bankers to influence American policy. The theory here would be that economic matters are the key to human motivation and that a small number of wealthy bankers have a disproportionate ability to influence government. Again, these historians will disagree with the first two groups, and they will find relevant certain facts that the others overlook—for example, bankers' opinions, the lobbying activities of bankers, financial and political connections between bankers and politicians, and the like.

In the examples given, historians disagree and use different facts or give different emphasis to the same facts because they begin from different premises; in other words, they have different theories of human motivation. But to put the matter in this way is somewhat misleading. It makes it appear that historical scholarship is merely a matter of deduction, as in Euclidean geometry, where conclusions are deduced from a set of given premises termed axioms and postulates. If this were so, historians would have it very easy. They would begin with a premise—for example, human beings are primarily motivated by selfish economic interests—and then they would seek whatever evidence they could find that showed people acting in that manner. They would ignore contrary evidence as unimportant or explain it away as being mere rhetoric designed to hide real motivations. The results of such efforts would be foreordained; the actors and the details might be different, but in the end the explanations would always be the same.

Historians term this approach or method "determinism," and most modern historians reject it. They argue that the premises cannot be merely assumed but must be proved or at least supported by concrete historical information. Nevertheless, historians cannot even begin their investigations without adopting some theory, even if it is expressed vaguely and held tentatively. In the course of their investigations they might alter or refine the original theory or replace it with another. But their final product will always rest upon some kind of theoretical base. Thus, if two historians become convinced by their evidence that different factors motivated the behavior of the people involved in a particular event, they will disagree, presenting different facts and giving different meanings to the same facts.

But there is still another realm of disagreement which, although it often appears similar to that just discussed, in fact stems from something rather different. Historians sometimes disagree because they are not really discussing the same thing. Often they are merely considering different levels of cause and effect. A few examples will illustrate this point.

The simplest level of analysis of cause and effect is to recognize what may be called proximate cause. "I was late for class," you explain, "because I overslept." Or, to use a historical example, "The Civil War began because South Carolina shore batteries under the command of General Beauregard

opened fire on the federal garrison at Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861." Neither statement can be faulted on the grounds that it is inaccurate; at the same time, however, neither is sufficient as an explanation of the event being considered. The next question is obvious: Why did you oversleep, or why did relations between one state and the federal government reach the point where differences had to be settled by war? To this you may answer that you were out very late last night at a party, and the historian may respond that the authorities in South Carolina concluded that the election of Abraham Lincoln and his subsequent actions in threatening to supply the federal garrison at Fort Sumter were a clear menace to the well-being of South Carolina.

We have now dug more deeply into the problems, but the answers may still not be sufficient to satisfy us. Again we ask the question why and the answer takes us more deeply into the causes of the events under consideration. As we probe further, of course, the answers become more difficult and more complex. The problems discussed earlier—a theory of motivation and the selection of facts—begin to become increasingly important, and disagreements among historians will begin to emerge. But the potential for another kind of disagreement also arises. The further back or the deeper the historian goes, the more factors there are to be considered and the more tenuous the connection between cause and effect becomes. Historians may disagree about the point at which to begin their analysis, that is, about the location of a point beyond which the causal connection becomes so tenuous as to be meaningless. You might argue that the ultimate cause of your being late to class was the fact that you were born, but obviously this goes back too far to be meaningful. That you were born is, of course, a *necessary* factor—unless that had happened, you could not have been late—but is not a *sufficient* factor; it does not really tell enough to explain your behavior today. Similarly, we could trace the cause of the Civil War back to the discovery of America, but again, this is a necessary but not a sufficient cause.

The point at which causes are both necessary and sufficient is not self-evident. In part, the point is determined by the theoretical stance of historians. If they decide that slavery is the key to understanding the coming of the Civil War, the point will be located somewhere along the continuum of the history of slavery in the United States. But even those historians who agree that slavery is the key to the war will not necessarily agree at what point slavery becomes both necessary and sufficient. The historians who believe that slavery was a constant irritant driving the North and South apart might begin their discussion with the introduction of blacks into Virginia in 1619. They would find relevant the antislavery attitudes of Northerners during the colonial period, the conflict over slavery in the Constitutional Convention, the Missouri Compromise, the militant abolitionist movement of the 1830s, and the Compromise of 1850. But other historians might argue that the slavery issue did not become really significant until it was associated with the settlement of the western lands. They would probably begin their discussion with the Missouri Compromise, and the facts they would find most relevant would

be those that illustrated the fear many people had of the expansion of slavery into the new western lands.

Ostensibly, both groups of historians would be discussing the role of slavery in the coming of the Civil War, but actually they would be discussing two different things. For the first group, the expansion of slavery to the West would be only part of a longer and more complex story; for the second group, slavery and the West would be the whole story. Sometimes the same facts would be used by both, with each giving them different weight and significance; at other times one group would find some facts relevant that the other would not.

An important variant of this kind of disagreement among historians may be illustrated by returning to our earlier example of the causes of American entry into World War I. Some historians might set out to discover the effects of British propaganda efforts in molding public and official views toward the war. German submarine warfare, the Zimmerman Note, bankers' loans, and other matters would enter the discussion, but they would all be seen from the perspective of the ways in which the British propaganda machine used them to win American support for the British side.

Historians emphasizing the role of British propaganda would disagree with those emphasizing the influential role of bankers, although both groups of historians would be using many of the same facts to support their points of view. In reality, of course, the disagreement arises at least in part from the fact that the two groups of historians are not really discussing the same things.

The reader should now be in a position to understand something of the sources of disagreement among historians. Historians arrive at different conclusions because they have different notions about human motivation and different ideas about what constitutes necessary and sufficient cause, and because they seek to investigate different aspects of the same problems. All supply their readers with data and information—that is, with “facts”—to support their arguments. And, with rare exceptions, all of the facts presented are accurate.

Clearly, then, historical facts as such have no intrinsic meaning; they take on meaning and significance only when they are organized and presented by historians with a particular point of view. The well-used phrase “let the facts speak for themselves” therefore has no real meaning. The facts do *not* speak for themselves; historians use the facts in a particular way and therefore they, and not the facts, are doing the speaking. In other words, historians give meaning to facts by assessing their significance and by presenting them in a particular manner. In short, they interpret. Because different historians use different facts or use the same facts in different ways, their interpretations differ.

Once we understand the sources of differences among historians we are in a better position to evaluate their work. To be sure, our ability to understand why historians disagree will not make it possible to eliminate all disagreement. Only if we could devise a model of unquestioned validity that

completely explained human behavior would it be possible for us to end disagreement. Any analysis that began by assuming a different model or explanation would be wrong.*

But we do not have such a complete and foolproof explanatory model. Nor can we expect to find one. Human life is too complicated to be so completely modeled; different problems require different explanatory models or theories. And because historians cannot agree as to which is the best model to employ for any given problem and because they are constantly devising new models, disagreements are destined to remain.

For the readers who have been patient enough to follow the argument to this point, the conclusions stated here may appear somewhat dismal and unrewarding. In convincing them that evaluating a historical interpretation is not like picking an item off a supermarket shelf, have we done more than move them to another store with a different stock on its shelves? If there are many explanatory models to choose from, and if no one of them is complete, foolproof, and guaranteed true, then it would appear that we are simply in another store with different merchandise on display.

Such a conclusion is unwarranted. In the first place, students who are able to understand the premises from which historians begin will be able to comprehend the way historians work and the process by which they fashion interpretation. Moreover, this understanding will enable them to evaluate the work of the historians. For at this stage students are no longer simply memorizing details; nor are they attempting to evaluate a historical essay by trying to discover whether each of the facts presented is true. They can now ask more important questions of the material before them. Are the premises from which historians begin adequate explanations of human behavior? Do the facts they present really flow from their premises and support their conclusions? Are there other data that would tend to undermine their arguments and throw doubt on the adequacy of their premises?

As students attempt to answer these questions, they begin to learn history by thinking and acting like historians. And, as they do, they begin to accumulate knowledge, understanding, and insight in much the same ways that historians do. Historians constantly discover new information: diaries, letters, business records, and family Bibles are always being found in attics, basements, and even in remote corners of large research libraries. Historians also gain new insights from the research of social scientists such as economists, political scientists, sociologists, and psychologists. Investigations by these scholars into such problems as family relationships, the influence of propaganda on behavior, the effects of the money supply on economic change, the relationship

* It should be noted in passing that even if we had such a theory, there would be much room for disagreement because we would often lack the required data. Some essential information would be lost through deliberate or accidental destruction. Other information might leave no record. Records of births, deaths, income, and so forth are now required by law, but in earlier days these records were not kept or were kept only sporadically. And telephone and personal conversations might leave no concrete record even though they could have a profound influence on behavior.

between voting patterns and racial and ethnic origin, and the psychological effects of racism all provide insights that may be of value to historians investigating the past. Historians also master and use new techniques. For example, the computer now permits the historian to handle huge masses of data quickly and accurately.

Historians also learn from one another. For example, when one historian discovers the existence of certain political, social, and economic relationships in a given city at a certain time, he or she provides other historians studying other cities, either at the same or different times, with what may be important and enlightening insights. International comparisons of similar events and institutions can also reveal important features that will be invisible or obscure when these events and institutions are viewed from the perspective of a single nation's history. Finally, and perhaps most important, historians are influenced by their own experiences and by the events of their own time. Scholars cannot be entirely objective (nor should they be); they interpret the past through a frame of reference that is influenced by the world in which they live. During World War II, for instance, historians reexamined the causes and consequences of World War I, just as the war in Vietnam provided a new perspective on the Cold War years. The civil rights movement and black radicalism in the 1960s inspired a number of historians to reinterpret the role of abolitionists in the events leading up to the Civil War and to give more attention to race, prejudice, and class conflict in American life. In a similar way the feminist movement is causing a reexamination of the role of women and the family in the American past, while urban violence, the black revolution, and increasing ethnic identity are causing a reassessment of the importance of violence, slavery, and ethnic groups in American history. Their own experiences often help historians to relate the past to the present, but the exact nature of that relationship remains controversial.

At first it may seem frustrating to realize that there is no one easy answer to the problems historians raise and that "truth" is but an elusive yet intriguing goal in a never-ending quest. But when students realize this, they have begun their education. At that point, they will find the study of history to be a significant, exhilarating, and useful part of their education. For coming to grips with conflicting interpretations of the past is more than an interesting classroom game; it is part of a larger process of coming to terms with the world around us. Every day we are asked to evaluate articles in newspapers and magazines or reports of events provided by friends or radio commentators. A knowledge of history provides a background for interpreting these accounts; but more than that, the past and the present are so interconnected that one's interpretation of the American Revolution, slavery, the progressive movement, or American foreign policy after World War II are intimately related to one's views toward civil rights and domestic and foreign policy today.

The discussion thus far has emphasized the element of disagreement among historians and has attempted to show beginning students how these