

# NATION OF NATIONS

*A Concise Narrative  
of the  
American Republic*

James West Davidson / William F. Gienapp  
Christine Leigh Heyrman / Mark Lytle / Michael B. Stoff

S E C O N D E D I T I O N



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A CONCISE NARRATIVE  
OF THE AMERICAN REPUBLIC

VOLUME ONE: TO 1877

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# About the Authors

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# Preface to the Second Concise Edition

*Nation of Nations* was written in the belief that students would be drawn more readily to the study of history if their text emphasized a narrative approach. Clearly, many of our readers agree, and to them we owe thanks for the warm reception the text has been given.

This edition provides a briefer alternative to the full-length text. In the belief that the original authors could best preserve both the themes and the narrative approach of the longer work, we have done the abridgment ourselves. Indeed, the task forced us to think again about the core elements of narrative history, for the task of condensing a full-length survey presents devilish temptations. Most teachers rightly resist sacrificing breadth of coverage; yet if an edition is to be concise, the words, the sentences, the paragraphs must go. The temptation is to excise the apparently superfluous “details” of a full-dress narrative: trimming character portraits, cutting back on narrative color, lopping off concrete examples. Yet too draconian a campaign risks producing either a bare-bones compendium of facts or a bloodless thematic outline, dispossessed of the tales that engaged the reader in the first place.

The intent, then, is to provide a text that remains a *narrative*—a history with enough contextual detail for readers to grasp the story. The fuller introductions to each chapter, a distinctive feature of the original text, have been preserved, though streamlined where possible. Within each chapter, we have attempted to maintain a balance between narrative and thematic analysis. Paradoxically, this has occasionally meant *adding* material to the concise edition: replacing longer stories with shorter emblematic sketches or recasting sections to ensure that students are not overwhelmed by the compression of too many details into too few paragraphs.

Each chapter of the concise edition also includes two additional features. The first, “Eyewitness to History,” is designed to reinforce the centrality of narrative. Each Eyewitness is a primary source excerpt; some are written by eminent Americans, others by little-known folk who were intimately involved in the changes affecting their times. In either case, the vivid first-person accounts serve to draw readers further into the story. But we also hope that they will encourage students to recognize the hidden complexities of narrative. The diversity of materials and perspectives should make it clear that one of the historian’s primary tasks is to step back and place the welter of overlapping, often conflicting narratives in a larger context.

A second feature, entitled "Counterpoint," is new to this concise edition. In it, we explore contrasting ways historians have interpreted a central topic covered by the chapter. We were led to do this, paradoxically, by the very success of the narrative approach, for some professors have written suggesting that precisely because the tale flows so smoothly, students may be seduced into thinking that the writing of history is without controversy—that the past must have occurred precisely as we have sketched it and that any questions of interpretations must be minor matters. To combat this misimpression, our Counterpoint discussions in each chapter are *not* separated out as boxed features; instead, they are integrated into the narrative so that students come to understand such debates as an inevitable (and productive) part of writing history.

In other ways, the approach of this concise edition remains the same as in the first edition. We continue to use marginal headings to help readers focus on key terms and concepts. Each chapter also concludes with a timeline of significant events. And each of the book's six parts begins with an essay setting American events in a global perspective. We believe it important to show that the United States did not develop in a geographic or cultural vacuum and that the broad forces shaping it also influenced other nations.

Over the past decade during which we have worked on this book we have been immensely grateful to the many reviewers generous enough to offer constructive comments and suggestions. To name them all would require more space than this preface itself occupies. But we cannot omit specific mention of those readers who have provided advice on the shaping of the concise edition of *Nation of Nations*. They include Janet Allured, McNeese State University; Virginia Paganelli Caruso, Henry Ford Community College; Kathryn Dabelow, Pasadena City College; Alan C. Downs, Georgia Southern University; Linda Killen, Radford University; Kenneth L. Kitchen, Trident Technical College; Michael J. Gillis, California State University—Chico; Shane Maddock, U.S. Coast Guard Academy; Jay Mullen, Southern Oregon University; Sydney Nathans, Duke University; Gary L. Shumway, California State University—Fullerton; Albert J. Smith, Modesto Junior College. The first concise edition also benefited from the advice of Michael Bellesiles, Emory University; James Crisp, North Carolina State University; Ann Ellis, Kennesaw State College; Norman Enhorning, Adirondack Community College; Jerry Felt, University of Vermont; Mary Ferrari, Radford University; Renee Shively Leonard; Steven White, Lexington Community College; James Woods, Georgia Southern; and William Woodward, Seattle Pacific University.

The division of labor for this book was determined by our respective fields of scholarship: Christine Heyrman, the colonial era, in which Europeans, Africans, and Indians participated in the making of both a new America and a new republic; William Gienapp, the 90 years in which the young nation first flourished, then foundered on the issues of section and slavery; Michael Stoff, the post-Civil War era, in which industrialization and urbanization brought the

nation more centrally into an international system frequently disrupted by depression and war; and Mark Lytle, the modern era, in which Americans finally faced the reality that even the boldest dreams of national greatness are bounded by the finite nature of power and resources both natural and human. Finally, because the need to specialize inevitably imposes limits on any project as broad as this one, our fifth author, James Davidson, served as a general editor and writer, with the intent of fitting individual parts to the whole, as well as providing a measure of continuity, style, and overarching purpose. In producing this collaborative effort, all of us have shared the conviction that the best history speaks to a larger audience.

*James West Davidson*

*William E. Gienapp*

*Christine Leigh Heyrman*

*Mark H. Lytle*

*Michael B. Stoff*

# Introduction

History is both a discipline of rigor, bound by rules and scholarly methods, and something more: the unique, compelling, even strange way in which we humans define ourselves. We are all the sum of the tales of thousands of people, great and small, whose actions have etched their lines upon us. History supplies our very identity—a sense of the social groups to which we belong, whether family, ethnic group, race, class, or gender. It reveals to us the foundations of our deepest religious beliefs and traces the roots of our economic and political systems. It explores how we celebrate and grieve, sing the songs we sing, weather the illnesses to which time and chance subject us. It commands our attention for all these good reasons and for no good reason at all, other than a fascination with the way the myriad tales play out. Strange that we should come to care about a host of men and women so many centuries gone, some with names eminent and familiar, others unknown but for a chance scrap of information left behind in an obscure letter.

Yet we do care. We care about Sir Humphrey Gilbert, “devoured and swallowed up of the Sea” one black Atlantic night in 1583; about George Washington at Kips Bay, red with fury as he takes a riding crop to his retreating soldiers. We care about Octave Johnson, a slave fleeing through Louisiana swamps trying to decide whether to stand and fight the approaching hounds or take his chances with the bayou alligators; about Clara Barton, her nurse’s skirts so heavy with blood from the wounded that she must wring them out before tending to the next soldier. We are drawn to the fate of Chinese laborers, chipping away at the Sierras’ looming granite; a Georgian named Tom Watson seeking to forge a colorblind political alliance; and desperate immigrant mothers, kerosene in hand, storming Brooklyn butcher shops that have again raised prices. We follow, with a mix of awe and amusement, the fortunes of the quirky Henry Ford (“Everybody wants to be somewhere he ain’t”), turning out identical automobiles, insisting his factory workers wear identical expressions (“Fordization of the Face”). We trace the career of young Thurgood Marshall, crisscrossing the South in his own “little old beat-up ’29 Ford,” typing legal briefs in the back seat, trying to get black teachers to sue for equal pay, hoping to get his people somewhere they weren’t. The list could go on and on, spilling out as it did in Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*: “A southerner soon as a northerner, a planter nonchalant and hospitable, A Yankee bound my own way . . . a Hoosier, a Badger, a Buckeye, a Louisianian or Georgian . . .” Whitman em-



braced and celebrated them all, inseparable strands of what made him an American and what made him human:

In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barleycorn less,  
And the good or bad I say of myself I say of them.

To encompass so expansive an America Whitman turned to poetry; historians have traditionally chosen narrative as their means of giving life to the past. That mode of explanation permits them to interweave the strands of economic, political, and social history in a coherent chronological framework. By choosing narrative, they affirm the multicausal nature of historical explanation—the insistence that events be portrayed in context. By choosing narrative, they are also acknowledging that, while long-term economic and social trends shape societies in significant ways, events often take on a logic (or an illogic) of their own, jostling one another, being deflected by unpredictable personal decisions, sudden deaths, natural catastrophes, and chance. There are literary reasons, too, for preferring a narrative approach, since it supplies a dramatic force usually missing from more structural analyses of the past.

In some ways, surveys like this one are the natural antithesis of narrative history. They strive, by definition, to be comprehensive: to furnish a broad, orderly exposition of their chosen field. Yet to cover so much ground in so limited a space necessarily deprives readers of the context of more detailed accounts. Then, too, the resurgence of social history—with its concern for class and race, patterns of rural and urban life, the spread of market and industrial economies—lends itself to more analytic, less chronological treatments. The challenge facing historians is to incorporate these areas of research without losing the story's narrative drive or the chronological flow that orients readers to the more familiar events of our past.

In the end, it is counterproductive to treat political and social history as distinct spheres. There is no simple way to separate the world of ordinary Americans or the marketplace of boom and bust from the corridors of political maneuvering or the ceremonial pomp of an inauguration. The primary question of this narrative—how the fledgling, often tumultuous confederation of “these United States” managed to transform itself into an enduring republic—is not only political but necessarily social. In order to survive, a republic must resolve conflicts among citizens of different geographic regions and economic classes, of diverse racial and ethnic origins, of competing religions and ideologies. The resolution of these conflicts has produced tragic consequences, perhaps, as often as noble ones. But tragic or noble, the destiny of these states cannot be understood without comprehending both the social and the political dimensions of the story.

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