

NATION of NATIONS

A CONCISE NARRATIVE
OF THE AMERICAN REPUBLIC



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Christine Leigh Heyrman • Mark H. Lytle • Michael B. Stoff

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Overture Books

McGraw-Hill, Inc.

New York St. Louis San Francisco Auckland Bogotá Caracas
Lisbon London Madrid Mexico City Milan Montreal
New Delhi San Juan Singapore Sydney Tokyo Toronto

Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations.

—Walt Whitman



Susan Merritt, *Picnic Scene*, c. 1853.
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The Art Institute of Chicago.

NATION OF NATIONS: A Concise Narrative of the American Republic

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 DOC DOC 9 0 9 8 7

ISBN 0-07-015738-3 (hard cover)

ISBN 0-07-015741-3 (soft cover)

This book was set in Janson by York Graphic Services, Inc.
R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company was printer and binder.

Sponsoring Editor: Peter Labella; *Editing Supervisor:* Linda Richmond; *Designer:* Wanda Siedlecka; *Production Supervisor:* Paula Keller; *Photo Editor:* Deborah Bull/Photosearch.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nations of nations: a concise narrative of the American Republic /
James West Davidson . . . [et al.].

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-07-015738-3 (hard). —ISBN 0-07-015741-3 (softcover)

1. United States—History. I. Davidson, James West.

E178.1.N345 1996

973—dc20

95-13161

Preface to the Brief 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 received.

This edition provides a briefer alternative to the full-length text: shorter by fully a third than the second edition. In the belief that (for better or worse) 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 brief, 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 barebones 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 brief 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 brief edition also includes a new feature, “Eyewitness to History,” designed to reinforce the centrality of narrative. Each Eyewitness feature is a primary source excerpt, some of them 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, with the help of teachers, 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.

In other ways, the approach of this brief edition parallels that of the original. We have kept an innovation from the second edition, the use of 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.

We are grateful to the many reviewers who were generous enough to offer comments and suggestions at various stages in the development of *Nation of Nations*. Our thanks go to Thomas Altherr, Metropolitan State College of Denver; Carol Berkin, Baruch College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York; Winifred E. A. Bernhard, University of Massachusetts, Amherst; Roger W. Biles, Oklahoma State University; Carol Brown, Houston Community College; Victor Chen, Chabot College; Vincent A. Clark, Johnson County Community College; Mario S. DePillis, University of Massachusetts, Amherst; Leonard Dinnerstein, University of Arizona; Lynn Dumenil, Claremont McKenna College; Robert Elam, Modesto Junior College; Robert G. Fricke, West Valley College; Richard Frucht, Northwest Missouri State University; James L. Gormly, Washington and Jefferson College; Peter Iverson, Arizona State University; George Juergens, Indiana University; Burton I. Kaufman, Virginia Polytech Institute and State University; John L. Larson, Purdue University; Mark H. Leff, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign; John McCardell, Middlebury College; C. K. McFarland, Arkansas State University; Gerald W. McFarland, University of Massachusetts, Amherst; William E. Mahan, Sacramento City College; Sonya Michel, Princeton University; William Howard Moore, University of Wyoming; Leo P. Ribuffo, George Washington University; Randolph Roth, Ohio State University; Dennis C. Rousey, Arkansas State University; James C. Schneider, University of Texas, San Antonio; Ronald Schultz, University of Wyoming; Lewright B. Sikes, Middle Tennessee State University; Gregory Holmes Singleton, Northeastern Illinois University; David Sloan, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville; Daniel B. Smith, University of Kentucky; Donna J. Spindel, Marshall University; Thomas E. Terrill, University of South Carolina; Emory M. Thomas, University of Georgia; Richard H. Thompson, Indiana University—Purdue University, Indianapolis; Stephen G. Weisner, Springfield Technical Community College; Frank J. Wetta, Galveston College; William Bruce Wheeler, University of Tennessee, Knoxville; and Phillip B. Winkler, Dyersburg State College. In addition, many friends and colleagues contributed their advice and constructive criticism in ways both small and large. These included Michael Bellesiles, Lawrence A. Cardoso, Dinah Chenven, James E. Crisp, R. David Edmunds, Erica Gienapp, Drew McCoy, James McPherson, Stephen E. Maizlish, Harold Silesky, David J. Weber, and Virginia Joyner.

In particular, we would like to thank those reviewers who provided advice on the strategies and tactics for retaining both breadth and narrative focus in this brief edition. They include 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 constantly 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, 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 had 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 embraced 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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