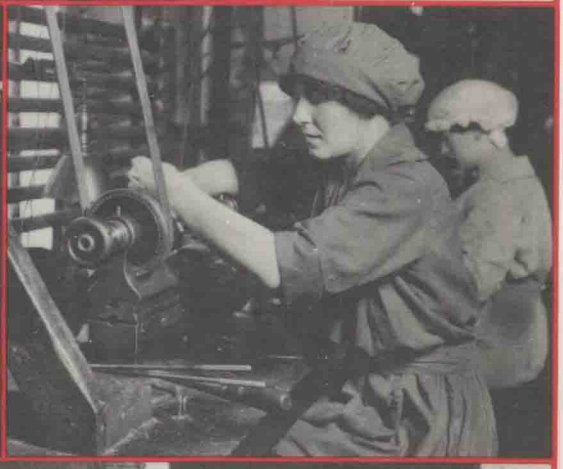
GEORGE MOSS

AMERICA IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY



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To Linda who knows why and to Morris who doesn't.

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Preface

For the past quarter century, I have been explaining the mysteries of modern American history to my students and to anyone else who manifested an interest in the subject. This textbook derives naturally and inevitably from that vocation as tribal historian, the keeper of the country's collective memory of itself. It represents my best efforts over the past several years to write a comprehensive narrative synthesis spanning the years of the twentieth century to date.

The book focuses on the public life of the American people—on political history and the history of public policy. Americans have come together historically in the public sphere to compete and to cooperate with one another; it is where the action has been. It has been within the public sphere where the great decisions for war and peace, for reform and reaction—which have shaped the democratic life of the American people—have been determined. It has been within the public arena that powerful contending ideologies and interests have sought mass allegiance, where economic and cultural forces have shaped the destiny of America and forged the character of its people.

To supplement the focus on the public arena, the narrative incorporates demographic, economic, social, and cultural history in order to bring the experiences of most Americans into the historical mainstream. Special attention has been paid to the history of women, black people, Hispanics, Asians, and other Americans who have helped create the most diverse and pluralistic society in the modern world.

I have also devoted a lot of attention to describing and defining the

major role that the United States has played in world affairs in the twentieth century. Such a focus is particularly appropriate for the period after World War II when the United States has been the preeminent national power in the world and has forged a network of global interests.

The book has been written for use in survey courses in twentieth century U. S. history taught in high schools, community colleges, and the lower division of four-year colleges. It can also be used in upper division courses at four-year colleges and universities in classes for students who are not history majors nor have extensive backgrounds in U. S. history.

It is written in a clear, concise style that avoids social scientific jargon and esoteric terms. It is accessible to anyone concerned to understand the major contours of modern U. S. history. It is a good place to begin the study of modern America. If I have done my job well, it will be the first book, not the last book, on the subject that you read.

Acknowledgments

Mark Twain once said that he could remember anything, whether it happened or not. But professional historians are not permitted the luxury of mythic invention, nor even of inadvertent error. Fortunately, I have had a tremendous amount of help in creating my book; help that has eliminated many errors and brought forth a far better work than I could have created on my own.

One of the great pleasures of scholarship is that it is so much a collective enterprise. Dozens of friends, students, colleagues, and other scholars have shared in the difficult task of producing a comprehensive narrative history of twentieth-century America. I want them all to know that I am exceedingly grateful and beholden to them. I am also grateful for their encouragement and support while writing the book.

I particularly want to express my gratitude to my many students who have read and critiqued all the chapters. They had unerring talents for spotting vague writing, unexplained concepts, esoteric vocabulary, and incomplete exposition. They continually reminded me that I am writing mainly for undergraduates who bring particular backgrounds and levels of interest to the study of modern U. S. history, and that the book must plug into their backgrounds and levels of interest in order to have the possibility of success. Thanks in large part to the extensive feedback I received from students while doing this book, I can truly say that it is written for them to read.

Among my colleagues at City College of San Francisco, I want especially to thank my friend and Department Chairman, Austin White, who shares my

passion for teaching modern U. S. history. Although he has always been preternaturally busy with administrative matters and his own teaching responsibilities, he nevertheless has willingly and generously shared his extensive knowledge and has served as a sounding board for my ideas throughout the writing of this book. Richard Oxsen, Stephen Moorhouse, Valerie Mathes, Laurene Woo McClain, and David Lubkert have read and critiqued various chapters. Glenn Nance, a specialist in Afro-American history, has helped me understand the historic forces that have shaped black experience and culture in America. Eloy Avalos has helped me understand the important historic roles of Hispanic-Americans. Richard Bloomer, a man of many talents, has helped me to understand modern economic history and has also revealed to me some of the mysteries of U. S. fiscal and financial policy.

Other scholars have read many of the chapters and have strengthened the book in numerous ways. Stephen Ambrose, University of New Orleans, has read carefully my chapter on the Nixon era and made several improvements. Ronald G. Walters, Johns Hopkins University, has read several chapters, strengthening my grasp of the social history of the Progressive Era and the 1920s. David Hollinger, University of Michigan, helped me with the history of that vast enterprise called World War II. Kevin O'Keefe, Stetson University, corrected some of my erroneous notions about World War I. Paul Hoag, an econometrician with the Institute for Peace and War, helped me understand the economic dynamics of modern U. S. foreign policy and the Vietnam War. Michael Schudson, a sociologist and media analyst at the University of California, San Diego, helped refine my understanding of the social history of mass media in America. Bruce Dierenfield, Canisius University, helped me to understand the profound role that religion plays in modern American culture. Cita Cook has helped me bring the history of working class women into my narrative. Mary Ann Mason, Director of the St. Mary's College Paralegal Program, has helped me understand the modern history of women, particularly their difficulties within a male-dominated economy. Arnold A. Offner, Boston University, has strengthened my understanding of President Truman's fateful decision to use atomic weapons on Japan and the origins of the Cold War.

Three dear old friends, Eric Holtsmark, Mark Bramlette, and Gordon Gilliam, have given their love and support, read and corrected my manuscripts, argued about various analyses and interpretations, and have indicated in various ways that they are impressed that I got the book done.

I want to acknowledge my deep gratitude to many outstanding people affiliated with my publisher, Prentice Hall, who turned a manuscript into a book. For their helpful suggestions, thanks go to Roger Biles of Oklahoma State University and Thomas Hartshorne of Cleveland State University. Kris Kleinsmith, an enterprising field representative, encouraged me to send my manuscript to Prentice Hall. Stephen Dalphin, Executive Editor, made the decision to publish the book and answered many questions. Sandra Johnson, Assistant to Mr. Dalphin, kept lines of communication open with unusual courtesy and efficiency.

Marianne Peters guided the work through the various stages of production and kept me informed of its progress. Elena Picinic enthusiastically handled the marketing, and Lori Drazien prepared advertising copy. I am honored to join the Prentice Hall galaxy of textbook writers.

Saving the best for last, special thanks go to my wife, Linda Moss, helpmate, best friend, and lover, without whom there would be little point to work or life.

Although many helped, only one wrote the book. Its remaining errors, shortcomings, and failures are my responsibilities.

Contents

I

Prologue: The Gilded Age, 1876–1900

Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner's novel *The Gilded Age*, published in 1873, poked fun at the post-civil war era. They told a story of a notorious burglar who had supposedly served one term in prison and one term in the U. S. Senate. He readily acknowledged the prison term, but heatedly denied the charge that he had ever served in the Senate, an accusation he claimed did him a grave injustice. Twain and his coauthor satirized an age characterized by a frantic scramble for possessions and power, and by corruption at all levels of business and government. The novel's title symbolized an era: dazzling on the surface, base metal below. Later, historian Vernon Parrington called the period the Great Barbecue, a time when businessmen rushed to gobble up the national inheritance as if they were hungry picnickers crowding around a savory roast at one of the big political outings common in the Gilded Age.

SOCIAL DARWINISM

While American enterprise was expanding and consolidating, fashionable intellectual currents encouraged the exploitative drives of the people. Charles Darwin's *Origins of Species*, first published in England in 1859, had begun to influence public opinion in this country during the Gilded Age. The idea appealed to most Americans that nature had ordained inevitable progress governed by the natural selection of individuals best adapted to survive in a competitive environment. "Let the buyer beware," asserted sugar magnate Henry O. Havemeyer. "You

cannot wet-nurse people from the time they are born until the time they die. They have to wade in and get stuck, and that is the way men are educated."

The key tenets of Social Darwinism were derived from classical economics and were old as Adam Smith. Men would compete fiercely within a laissez-faire economy. A few would succeed and grow rich. Most would fail and remain poor. Government played only the minimal role of protector of basic rights and property; it had no regulatory or welfare functions. The poor were responsible for their fate. Government interference in economic affairs would be futile and impede progress, which was inevitable, but incremental.

The foremost American Social Darwinist, Yale sociologist William Graham Sumner, told his students "its root, hog, or die." It was each against all, struggling to survive in an economic jungle. Money and power were the measures of success; increasing productivity the clearest sign of progress.

ECONOMIC GROWTH

During the Gilded Age powerful economic and technological forces swept the country and created a new nation. Spawned by the Civil War, this industrial revolution transformed a predominantly rural nation of farms, small towns, and local businesses into an urban, industrial nation. America became a land of belching smokestacks and crowded cities. A new industrial economy emerged that required an army of clerks, mechanics, and laborers to make it work. As business expanded, large corporations made their appearance.

Economic growth characterized all regions of America during the years 1876–1901. Within a generation America had developed the world's largest industrial economy. Economic growth influenced the lives of nearly all Americans. Geographic and social mobility were enhanced. Millions left the American countryside for the rapidly growing cities of industrial America. A parallel migration of eastern and southern European peasants also poured into these cities. The magnet attracting both population groups was economic opportunity.

American manufacturing flourished during the decades of the late nineteenth century for many reasons. New natural resources were being discovered and exploited. The American population reached 50 million in 1875 and was growing rapidly, both from a high birthrate and from extensive immigration. Family size averaged five or six children, and most Americans were healthy, energetic, and hardworking. The nation also expanded geographically as the West was wrested from the Plains Indians. Western expansion added to the size of national markets, which were also protected from foreign competitors by tariff walls erected by Congressional legislation.

Additional ingredients composed the recipe for economic growth. America raised a class of bold, skillful entrepreneurs, many from poor backgrounds, who organized and built large industrial corporations. Also the dominant values of the age promoted and celebrated economic growth and material acquisition. Manufacturing also flourished because it was a time of rapid advance in basic

science and technology. New machines that increased productivity appeared, and engineers harnessed new power sources.

THE RAILROAD NETWORK

Railroads formed the most important element in American economic development for several reasons. They constituted an important industry in themselves, the nation's first big business. Railroad construction greatly increased following the Civil War. The first transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869, aided by generous land grant subsidies from the federal government. During the 1880s, 7,000 miles of track were laid annually. By 1890, feeder lines, regional roads branching off the main east-west trunk lines, linked most cities and towns in the country together. As the century ended, the nation's railroads owned 193,000 miles of tracks, more than half of the world's total trackage.

As the nation's railroad industry expanded, it also became concentrated. By 1900, seven giant inter-regional railroad combines (including the New York Central, the Baltimore and Ohio, the Pennsylvania, the Santa Fe, and the Southern Pacific) controlled 90 percent of the nation's railroad mileage.

Railroads also stimulated the growth of a large-scale manufacturing economy. Before the national system of railroads was in place, manufacturing was largely confined to small businesses that sold to local markets. The railroads created national markets. Industrialists borrowed money, bought new machines, purchased raw materials in large quantities, hired more workers, and employed salesmen. Branch offices and new factories were opened. Those manufacturers who most successfully tapped the national markets created by railroads became the nation's largest businesses. Railroads made big business possible. Industrial expansion was most pronounced in the northeastern regions of the nation, but it was genuinely a national phenomenon. Even the south, beset by many problems after the Civil War, managed a modest economic expansion in the Gilded Age.

OTHER PRIMARY INDUSTRIES

Inventors discovered a means of mass-producing steel cheaply that transformed iron manufacturing during the Gilded Age. Steel is an alloy of iron to which carbon and other metals are added to make it stronger, more durable, and rust resistant. America, which had no domestic steel industry in 1860, became the world's largest steel manufacturer in 1880. The steel industry was centered at Pittsburgh because of its nearness to iron and coal deposits and its easy access to both railroad and maritime transportation.

Andrew Carnegie, who came to America as a penniless immigrant boy, became the steel master of America. When he retired from business in 1901, his Carnegie Steel Company was the world's largest. His personal fortune was estimated at $500 million. He devoted the rest of his life to giving away most of his

vast fortune to support various philanthropic enterprises, including more than 2,500 projects such as libraries, public buildings, and foundations.

The petroleum industry grew even more rapidly than steel. The first producing oil well was drilled in western Pennsylvania in 1859. As the oil industry mushroomed during the 1860s, its most important product was kerosene, used mainly to light people's homes at night. One giant firm emerged to monopolize the oil refining industry in America; this was the Standard Oil Company, headed by John D. Rockefeller. Rockefeller had entered the oil business in 1863 when it was competitive and chaotic. Within a few years, Standard Oil's efficient operation made it the largest refiner. Standard Oil forced railroads to grant it rebates, giving it a tremendous competitive advantage over rival refineries. It then proceeded to buy up its competition. Competitors who initially refused to sell were driven to the verge of bankruptcy and forced to sell. By 1882, the Standard Oil Trust controlled 85 percent of America's oil refining capacity, and Rockefeller had become the nation's first billionaire. He too retired from business and gave away huge sums of his money to various philanthropic enterprises.

Two other important industries evolved during the Gilded Age: the telephone industry and the electric utility industry. Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone in 1876. Two years later the first commercial telephone exchange was installed in New Haven, Connecticut. During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, telephone use spread rapidly. By 1900, Americans were using over 800,000 telephones, mostly for commercial purposes. In that same year, the American Telephone and Telegraph Company acquired a monopoly of the phone business.

The greatest inventor in American history, Thomas A. Edison, played a key role in the emergence of both the telephone and electric utility industries. He vastly improved telephonic transmission, but his most significant achievement was his perfection, in 1879, of the incandescent lamp (what we now call the electric light bulb) at his Menlo Park, New Jersey laboratory. At Christmastime, he decorated his lab with a few dozen of the new lights. People came long distances to see this miraculous invention of the "Wizard of Menlo Park." Here was an invention which promised to obliterate the dark, to transform the way people lived and worked.

In 1882, Edison's company built the first power station in New York, which supplied the city with electric current for lighting for eighty-five customers. By 1898, there were 3,000 operating power stations in the country. The Edison system employed direct current at low voltage; this limited the distance electric power could be transmitted to about two miles. George Westinghouse, another versatile inventor of the era, understood that alternating current, stepped up to high voltages by transformers, could be transmitted cheaply over long distances and then reduced to lower voltages for safe use by consumers. He formed the Westinghouse Electric Company in 1886 to compete with Edison's company. Westinghouse soon surpassed Edison as a supplier of electricity.