

# Perspectives on the American Past

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READINGS AND COMMENTARY ON ISSUES  
IN AMERICAN HISTORY



 VOLUME TWO 1865 TO THE PRESENT

■ MICHAEL PERMAN

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# *Perspectives on the American Past*

VOLUME II ■ 1865 TO THE PRESENT

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READINGS AND COMMENTARY  
ON ISSUES IN AMERICAN HISTORY

MICHAEL PERMAN

*University of Illinois at Chicago*

Scott, Foresman and Company

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*London*

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# Preface

*Perspectives on the American Past* is intended to introduce students to some of the central problems in American history as well as to the different, and often divergent, ways in which historians have recently approached and interpreted them. Although the anthology is most suitable for undergraduate survey courses, it also provides a valuable compilation of influential articles for American history majors. It is also appropriate for advanced placement courses in high schools.

The need for a reader of this kind has become apparent over the past decade because textbooks in American history have become so comprehensive that they have assumed a position of dominance and authority in the teaching of United States survey courses. To offset the definitiveness of the text, students need to be aware that the meaning of history and the explanation of events and developments in the past are still matters of controversy and conjecture. This anthology enables students to join in and discuss the problems that confront historians as they try to understand the past. In this sense, the anthology *engages* the text, and not simply supplements it with additional information, as so many have done in recent years.

## *The Topics*

The major issues and episodes in American history are the focus of *Perspectives on the American Past*. Twenty-four topics have been chosen (twelve in each volume), divided evenly between the Colonial and Revolutionary eras, the nineteenth century, and the twentieth century. Among other things, this means that the subject of Early America, where much exciting work is now being done, is not slighted, as too often happens in anthologies.

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## ***The Selections***

Two or three articles, or extracts from books, have been selected for each topic. Sometimes, these pieces present sharply contrasting opinions on the topic in question; but usually they simply represent differing perspectives by approaching the subject from a different angle or with a different emphasis.

The exact nature of the difference between the selections in each set varies. There is no predetermined set of categories throughout the book that differentiates all the contributions. For instance, there is no overarching dualism separating them as elitist or democratic, conservative or liberal, or consensus- or conflict-oriented. Because no such sharp alternatives are presented, students are not forced to go to one or the other extreme or to settle for a compromise between diametrically opposite positions; both of these options are pedagogically unsatisfactory. Equally, because there is no set pattern or predictability about how and why these selections differ, students have to approach each topic on its own terms, critically and without prior conceptions.

There are three more criteria used in the choice of each reading. First, the piece had to be a significant contribution to the particular topic or problem. Hence, the historian who wrote it is likely to be a leading figure in the field. Second, the quality of the writing had to be superior. And third, it had to have a recent publication date. Although one or two selections appeared before 1970, most were written within the last decade.

## ***The Format***

Each topic or chapter consists of the readings and a brief introduction that sets the scene, recounts something about the topic, and indicates the ways in which historians have approached and understood it. The introduction also identifies the historians and their contributions.

Following the introduction are three questions to help focus a student's thoughts before embarking on the readings. These questions are intended to get the student to think about the argument or viewpoint of each selection and the way the piece is constructed. Comprehension and analysis are therefore the objectives. The third question generally requires the student to compare and relate the readings for each topic.

At the end of the text, there is a short reading list, sufficient to prepare a term paper or to satisfy an inquiring student's urge to go a little further into the subject. It is purposely limited to about a dozen items so that it will not overwhelm students, which is often the effect of exhaustive, and therefore exhausting, bibliographies.

## ***Acknowledgments***

Many of my colleagues at the University of Illinois at Chicago were helpful in appraising this anthology and offering valuable suggestions about the selection

of articles. I am very grateful to Gerald Danzer, Richard Fried, George Huppert, Richard Jensen, Gregg Roeber, Leo Schelbart, and Daniel Scott Smith. Especially valuable were Stephen Wiberly's editorial comments.

I also want to thank the academic reviewers to whom the proposal and its table of contents were sent for evaluation. A number of them took the assignment very seriously and submitted perceptive reports that led to constructive changes. I appreciate the comments of the following: Philip J. Avilo, York College of Pennsylvania; Christopher Collier, University of Connecticut; Jerald Combs, San Francisco State University; Thomas Dublin, State University of New York at Binghamton; Barbara J. Fields, Columbia University; George Forgie, University of Texas at Austin; David Katzman, University of Kansas; Paul R. Lucas, Indiana University; Fred Olsen, Northern Virginia Community College; Leonard Richards, University of Massachusetts.

The staff of my publisher, Scott, Foresman and Company, provided significant support; I am particularly indebted to Bob Johnson, whose interest in my ideas about American history readers initiated the project, and Charlotte Iglarsh, whose editorial experience and her knowledge and understanding made it a delight to work with her.

Finally, I want to thank my seventeen-year-old son, Benjamin, for his comments on the Introduction and my daughter of twelve, Sarah, for helping me by just being herself.

Michael Perman

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## *Introduction*

# The Past in Perspective

he purpose of this anthology is to let students of American history in on a secret. It is not exactly a closely guarded one but, all the same, it seems not to be widely known. Or, if known, its implications are rarely understood. The secret is that historians seldom, if ever, agree over the main problems and features of the American past. In fact, differences of opinion and viewpoint are the norm among American historians, rather than the exception.

Many readers may find this revelation startling and perhaps unsettling. Some might already be muttering to themselves, "If they haven't yet decided why there was a civil war, then what have historians been doing all these years?" Others might be wondering, "If it's all up for grabs, then what's the point of studying American history? All we learn may turn out to be wrong." A third reaction might be: "If there's so much disagreement, how do we know what to believe?" Expressing a mixture of annoyance and anxiety, these reactions are quite understandable. They spring from a sense of betrayal because the authoritative certainty that the study of history is expected to provide has been questioned. But, in fact, the student might more appropriately look forward with anticipation to the prospect of a lively course in American history. Let me explain why.

The idea that historians should agree rests on the assumption that the purpose of studying history is to find out exactly what happened in the past. Since past events presumably took place at a specific time and place and in a precise and singular way, it seems reasonable that the task of the historian is to find out what exactly these events were. So there is only one past to reconstruct—the one that actually happened. Any other version of the past is simply inaccurate. The historian who suggests that a particular event occurred in a way that it did not, or for reasons that turn out to be erroneous, needs to get

his facts straight. Once this error is corrected, the account will be accurate and all disagreement will end. In other words, disagreement occurs only because a particular historian is inaccurate or is careless with the facts.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the leading historians in Europe and America held a similar view about history. They were convinced that if all the available evidence about a particular event or episode were collected together, the historical actuality of it could be discovered. In the words of the great German historian, Leopold von Ranke, this was history *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, that is, as it really happened. The mass of data that had been assembled would simply tell the story by itself. The historian functioned merely as archivist and editor, whose task was to allow the accumulated facts to speak for themselves—to tell it like it was. This kind of historical literalism, usually referred to as *historicism*, sounds convincing. It seems to be reasonably scientific in its method and likely to produce results that are objective and as accurate as it is possible to be. Furthermore, disagreement will be cut to a minimum because the evidence itself, rather than historians' personal views, will be the ultimate arbiter, determining what did or did not happen.

Many people, if not most, assume that this is how historians go about studying the past. But the fact is that they do not proceed in this fashion—nor should they. In the first place, this kind of history would soon become quite dreary. Historians would be little more than antiquarians rummaging around for as many details from the past as they could find. They would then write histories narrating the lives of people in earlier times and describing what life was like, keeping strictly to the data and rarely, if ever, speculating beyond what was contained within the evidence. Essentially the history that resulted would be descriptive, detailed, detached and, to continue the alliteration, deadlly dull.

Historians do not function like this for a second reason. Quite frankly, it is because they cannot. To assume that once all the evidence is collected, the past can be reconstructed with accuracy is simply fallacious. The past cannot be retrieved in anything like its actuality, as any lawyer or judge can attest. Every day in courts of law, witnesses to crimes are called to testify under oath about what happened. Even though a crime may have been committed just a few weeks or months earlier, each witness remembers the incident differently. Yet they were all actually present and saw, or even participated in, the event itself. If people who were at the scene cannot agree on what happened, how realistic is it to expect historians to be accurate about something in the distant past of which they can have no first-hand knowledge? Indeed, the historian may not even have been alive when it occurred.

A third, and last, observation concerns the evidence that historians use. The accuracy with which the past can be reconstructed depends on how complete the record is. From the confidence with which those late nineteenth-century historians approached the data, one might imagine that the evidence was so massive and so comprehensive that everything that was needed to be known was available. In truth, however, the documentary record that is at hand

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is simply whatever has survived. As time passes, more and more of the historical record gets lost or destroyed. The disappearance of the evidence actually begins even earlier when the participants in the events decide themselves to discard records not thought to be of historical value or interest. So the historical record that a particular era leaves is what it selects and chooses to bequeath. In this sense, each generation—as well as the groups and individuals that compose it—writes its own historical ticket. Confronted by this selectivity, historians' hands are tied. All they have to go on is the surviving evidence, and this limits the content and scope of their knowledge of the past. Anything that is not in the record either did not take place, or else historians do not *know* that it happened even if it did.

So it turns out that the definitive, factual history that historians have been presumed to write is not feasible. What then do historians do? For a start, they might simply concede that all they can hope to offer is a vague approximation of the past. This would be an admission of the limitations of both the evidence and historians' claims to recreate the past with any accuracy. But this is not the way they react. Instead, in a remarkable display of perversity and self-confidence, they take the evidentiary record, acknowledge its shortcomings, and then proceed to impose even greater demands on it than those of their historicist forebears. They are not content to restrict themselves to the question of what happened and answer it with a tentative description of the event or episode involved. Rather, they consider the question "what?" to be merely basic and preliminary, neither very interesting nor very challenging. Two other questions that historians want to move on to and deal with are more intriguing.

### **The *Why?* Question**

The first of these is the query *why*. Why did things in the past happen? How and why did they occur when they did? This is a far more complex question than *what* and requires historians to delve into the tricky problem of causation. Because causation is so problematic, many people, including teachers of history, often try to get around it by citing a list of items called causes that brought about the event in question. Just exactly how they do this is often left unexplained. For this reason, their baffled students may respond to a typical question such as "What were the causes of the American Civil War?" by asking in return, in a state of puzzlement, "How many causes are enough? Five, six, a dozen?" A playful student ostensibly asking about a point of information, might inquire, "How many causes does it take to start a civil war?" But the point is that a list of causes, which are in reality only contributing factors somehow related to the outcome, does not account for or explain what finally occurred. What is needed instead is a formulation that relates all causal factors to each other as well as to the ultimate event, in this case the outbreak of a civil war. The causal relationship that emerges is called an explanation.

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This explanation, not an assortment of undifferentiated causes, constitutes the *why* of the Civil War.

Constructing an explanation is a complicated procedure. Actually, it involves several steps. First, causal factors that operated in the short run have to be distinguished from those that were long-term. Factors that were "proximate" and were simply incidents that tipped the scale then have to be differentiated from the "necessary" causes that created the situation where a spark or "proximate" cause could ignite the conflagration and produce an outcome, such as the Civil War. In the case of the Civil War, Lincoln's election in 1860 was a "proximate" cause—and even then, not the only one—whereas the institution of slavery was, in some way or other, a "necessary" cause. Lastly, causal factors come in different forms—some are economic, some political, some cultural—and the historian has to categorize them. So causal factors have to be defined, weighed, assessed, and finally related to each other before an explanation can be derived. Because each explanation contains so many constituent parts and interrelationships, it is highly unlikely that any two of them will be the same in all, or even most, respects. That leaves much room for disagreement over the composition and construction of the explanation; and consequently, much to debate concerning why and how the Civil War, or any other event, occurred.

### **The *So What?* Question**

After *what* and *why* there arises a question that is even more intriguing and more difficult to respond to; it occasions even more discussion and difference of opinion. This is the query *so what*. In a sense, this is the reverse of the question of causation because it deals with results and consequences, the repercussions of an event rather than its antecedents. The question therefore pushes historical inquiry forward in time from the origins of the incident to its aftereffects. What happened as a result? What did the event achieve? What impact did it have? What was its significance? This is what is involved in the question *so what*. As with the problem of causation, one can measure consequences over the short term or within a longer time-frame. Consequences are of different kinds—political, social, or economic. But what mainly differentiates the two phenomena are the contrasting ways in which they operate. The causes of an event flow toward an objective—the event itself—whereas the impact and consequences scatter—away from the event in different directions.

Like a stone that is thrown into a pond creating ever-widening ripples, an event's consequences can be assessed in many ways, depending on the context or level at which their impact is to be measured. For example, the impact of the American Revolution could be estimated in terms of how it shaped and influenced the later development of the United States. Alternatively, the inquiry could be given a narrower focus by asking how it affected the lives and prospects of one group in the American population, such as black slaves.

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Did they, in fact, gain from the Revolution, or was it a setback for them? At the same level, one might inquire whether the break with Britain resulted in damage or improvement to the economy of its former colonies. Of course, the question could become parochial in scope if a historian pondered what the effect of the Revolution was on Boston or on a particular county in Virginia. Needless to say, in each of these examples, a cutoff date beyond which the investigation will not be pursued also has to be determined by the historian. For example, it would be sensible to terminate the study of the Revolution's impact on the slaves around 1800 rather than to go on until slavery is ended altogether in 1865. These hypothetical questions simply indicate the numerous contexts and time-frames for assessing an event's impact. Indeed, there are countless possibilities of this type, and the limits are set only by the historian's sense of what is worthwhile and reasonable. Although an assessment of the Revolution's effect on early American manufacturing is conceivable, a study of the impact of the American Revolution on the twentieth-century automobile industry would, it may safely be assumed, fail to pass the historical feasibility test.

Besides its almost limitless possibilities, estimating the impact of a historical phenomenon also involves an extremely complicated and rather inexact procedure. This requires historians to go beyond the existing documentary evidence about the event itself, both in the use of sources and in the delineation of the problem. In the first place, the participants in the episode who created the evidence about it do not, indeed cannot, know what the consequences will be. Only later will the outcome be evident; by that time those who were present may not be alive to see the results. A helpful analogy might be the comparison of the record of a historical event with the record of a baseball game, as described in a newspaper the following day. The story by the sports reporter states that the game was lost by the home team. That is what happened. But there is nothing in the report about the game's consequences and significance. As it turned out, this loss was to be the first in a disastrous losing streak that denied the team the league pennant. The game may have triggered this consequence, but the account of the game could not have referred to it. In the same way, the significance or the consequences of a historical event will not be included in the contemporary record, that is, in the evidence. Instead, it will have to be supplied by the historians who will have to go to other historical sources that they themselves will have to select and locate, in order to find out what happened later. So the historians will, in a real sense, know more about the totality of the episode than the participants who were there at the time.

The second reason why historians trespass beyond the record of the event itself is that they, not the people in the past, determine the significance of what was experienced as well as the criteria by which it is to be measured. That is to say, historians choose the time-frame, the context, and the standard or yardstick for assessing the impact and consequences of past events. They decide the rules by which the past is appraised. To demonstrate what is involved, let us take a question often asked of historians: how a particular president will "go

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down in history." If Harry S. Truman is the President in question, the historian will first try to determine what Truman did and said while in office. After that is more or less established, the method for evaluating President Truman's reputation in history is entirely a matter for the historian as an individual to decide. Perhaps those features will be selected from Truman's total record that are considered central to, and typical of, Truman's presidency and the question will be asked, "What happened to them years later after he left office?" The investigator will also bring to this assessment some ideas about what successful and effective Presidents have done. After all this is assembled and evaluated, it will be time to draw conclusions about President Truman's legacy. With the exception of the first phase in which the details of Truman's presidency were established, this entire procedure was conceptualized and carried out at the discretion of each individual historian. Thus, sources and criteria outside, actually beyond, the record of Truman's term in office were the basis for determining its lasting consequences. Inevitably, therefore, the method one historian chooses for deciding the significance of the Truman presidency will differ fundamentally from those of others, and so too, most likely, will the conclusions.

The question *so what* allows the historian a good deal of latitude in framing and defining an inquiry and also gives the authority to decide what effect people and events in the past have had on their own and later generations and eras. This authority has sometimes been called historical judgment. And it is true that historians can assign blame or confer approval. They can say, for instance, that this war was justified because it had beneficial consequences or that king was unjust because his subjects rose up against him. Handing down such judgments on the past has not been unknown among historians, but besides being moralistic and rather arrogant, it is usually not helpful. Although historians should avoid crude judgments in assessing people and events in history, they are, nonetheless, inescapably involved in some kind of judging whenever they attempt to answer the *so what* question. For, in doing so, they have to measure impact and attribute significance. Perhaps *evaluation* might be more appropriate than judgment to describe what historians do in this context. But, however described, the entire procedure is, quite evidently, subjective and far from exact. Indeed, this facet of the historian's analysis is the least precise and the most discretionary, even speculative, of them all. Compared to description and explanation, where exactitude and certainty are, as we have already seen, difficult to obtain, the process of evaluation is even more open to speculation. This leaves more room than ever before for differences of opinion and disagreement to emerge.

### **The Historian's Selection of a Topic**

No matter what questions historians ask or what analytical procedures they employ, dispute and debate will always permeate the study of history. By