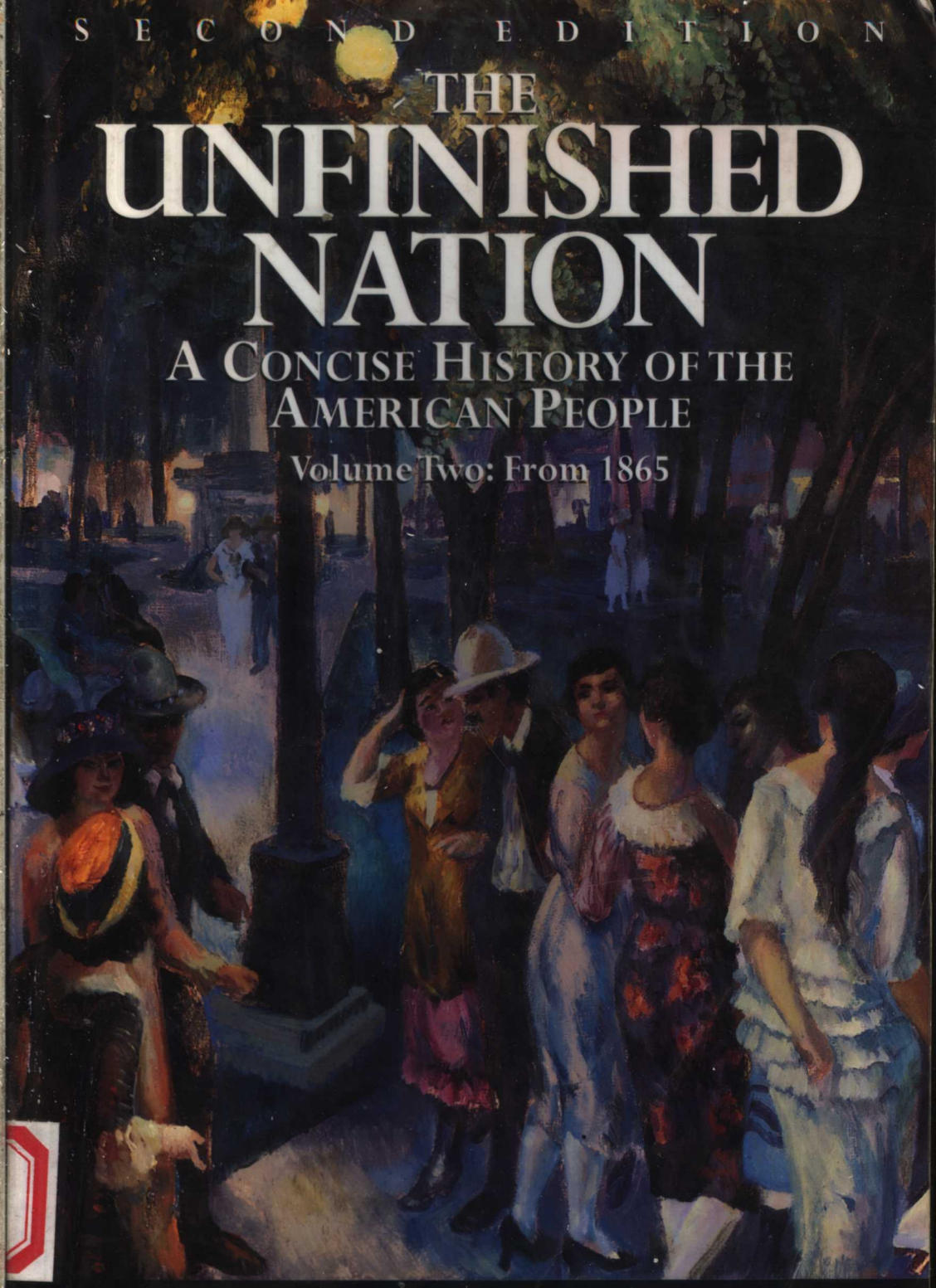
SECOND EDITION

THE UNFINISHED NATION

A Concise History of the American People

Volume Two: From 1865



ALAN BRINKLEY

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A CONCISE HISTORY
OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

Volume Two: From 1865

Second Edition

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Preface

he story of the American past, which is the subject of this book, has undergone a remarkable transformation in recent decades. The past itself has not changed, of course; but the way Americans understand it has changed dramatically. And in the wake of those changes have come both new forms of presentation and bitter controversies.

On the one hand, history is becoming more visible to more people than ever before as a part of American popular culture. Historical museums and exhibitions have multiplied; popular writing on history—both in novels and in nonfiction—has grown in popularity; history is a constant presence on television, in films, and, increasingly, on the Internet; it is a major element in theme parks and even shopping malls. At the same time, historical scholarship has become the source of increasing debate—both among historians themselves and among national politicians, some of whom have attacked the historical profession for what they claim is an excessively critical view of the American past.

The growing prominence of American history in popular culture and the increasing controversy over its meaning are to a large degree a result of the same things. In turbulent and confusing times, people have naturally looked to their past for guidance and reassurance—and for a reminder of what they believe was a better era. But those same times have encouraged historians to look to the past to understand the tensions and contests that preoccupy us today. In the process, they have reinterpreted much of it. As the population of the United States has become ever more diverse and as groups that once stood outside the view of scholarship thrust themselves into its center, historians have set out to reveal the immense and, until relatively recently, inadequately understood complexity of their country's past. The result has been the slow emergence of a richer and fuller history of the United States, but also a more fragmented, contentious, and controversial one. That history offers a picture of a highly diverse people. It also provides a picture of a great nation.

Threading one's way through the many, conflicting demands of contemporary scholars and contemporary readers is no easy task. But I have tried in this book to find an acceptable middle ground between the claims of

diversity and the claims of unity. The United States is, indeed, a nation of many cultures. We cannot understand its history without understanding the experiences of all the different groups that have shaped American society, without understanding the particular worlds that have developed within it based on region, religion, class, ideology, race, gender, and ethnicity.

But the United States is more than just a collection of different cultures. It is also a nation. And as important as understanding its diversity is understanding the forces that have drawn it together and allowed it to survive and flourish despite division. The United States has constructed a remarkably stable and enduring political system that touches the lives of all Americans. It has developed an immense, highly productive national economy that affects the working and consuming lives of virtually everyone. It has created a mass popular culture that colors the experiences and assumptions of almost all the American people, and the people of much of the rest of the world as well. One can admire these unifying forces for their contributions to America's considerable success as a nation, or condemn them for the ways they have contributed to inequality, injustice, and failure. But no one proposing to understand the history of the United States can afford to ignore them.

In the great historical narratives of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the story of America moved smoothly and triumphantly from one clearly defined era to another, focusing on great events and great men and tracing the rise of national institutions. The late twentieth century has produced a different narrative, with frequent, sometimes jarring, changes of focus and direction. It devotes attention to private as well as public events, to failure as well as success, to difference as well as to unity. And yet it remains, in the end, a narrative, a story—newly complicated, perhaps, by our understanding of the many worlds of historical experience that once eluded us—but even more remarkable and compelling for those complications.

This second edition of *The Unfinished Nation* continues the effort to tell this newer story of America for students of history and for general readers in a single, reasonably concise volume. Those familiar with the first edition will notice a number of important changes: Chapters 7 through 11 have been thoroughly reorganized to allow for a more extended and coherent discussion of antebellum American society and culture and to permit a considerable expansion of the treatment of the Old South and slavery. Chapter 15 has been restructured to link an extended description of the New South to the account of the Reconstruction process, which did much to shape it. Chapter 16 is now devoted entirely to the history of the trans-Mississippi West in the late nineteenth century and offers a considerably expanded treatment of the history of that region. And there is a new final chapter (34)

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which contains an account of events since the publication of the first edition and a major reorganization and expansion of the discussion of contemporary society and culture.

There are other important changes as well. Throughout the book, I have given considerably expanded attention to the American West (beginning with an extended discussion of early Spanish settlement in what is now the American Southwest and continuing to the rise of the modern "Sunbelt"). I have substantially increased the coverage of Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans. There is much new material from recent scholarship in women's history. There is a greatly expanded discussion of the complicated social and cultural history of the 1950s, a new section on the origins of the Vietnam War and a much-expanded discussion of the conflict itself, and a new section on the rise of the right in the 1960s and 1970s. There are also new illustrations and maps, two new essays on "Debating the Past," and illustrated time lines covering significant events in each chapter.

The result, I hope, is a book that will serve to introduce readers to enough different approaches to and areas of American history to make them aware of its extraordinary richness and diversity. I hope it will also give readers some sense of the shared experiences of Americans.

The title of this book, *The Unfinished Nation*, is meant to suggest several things. It is a reminder of America's exceptional diversity: of the degree to which, despite all the many efforts to build a single, uniform definition of the meaning of American nationhood, that meaning remains contested and diverse. It is a reference to the centrality of change in American history: to the way in which the nation has continually transformed itself and to how it continues to do so in our own time. And it is a description of the writing of American history itself, of the way historians are engaged in a continuing, ever unfinished, process of asking new questions of the past.

Many people contributed to this book: Lyn Uhl, Larry Goldberg, Elizabeth Strange, Kathy Bendo, Elyse Rieder, Irving Tullar, Wanda Kossak, and Wanda Lubelska at McGraw-Hill; my research assistants Thad Russell, Charlie Forcey, and Dave Ekbladh; Yanek Mieczkowski, who prepared the time lines; and several anonymous scholars who commented on the first edition and alerted me to various errors and omissions. The reviewers of the second edition made helpful suggestions and comments: Stacy Cole, Ohlone College; Randy Kelly, Community College of Allegheny; Chana Lee, Indiana University; and Ronald Petrin, Oklahoma State University. The reviewers of the text's supplements also made useful contributions: Gisela Ables, Houston Community College; Carla Joy, Red Rocks Community College; Susan Hult, Houston Community College; and Joseph Stout,

Oklahoma State University. I am grateful to them all. I will also be grateful to any readers who wish to offer comments, criticisms, and corrections as I prepare future editions. Suggestions can be sent to me in care of the Department of History, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027; I will respond to them as fully and constructively as I can.

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DEBATING THE PAST

APPENDICES

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