

History is about interpreting the past; it is a “spin” on the historical facts. As the scholar E.H. Carr noted, history has been called a “hard core of facts” surrounded by a “pulp of disputable interpretation.” Without interpretation—“the pulpy part of the fruit”—there is no meaning, only disconnected facts. Even if an historian is not explicit about his or her viewpoint, an interpretation is always lurking somewhere in what he or she writes. Through interpretation, historians say what they believe the past *means*. They attempt to explain why and how things happened as they did and why particular elements in the past are important.

To Carr, interpretation was the key to writing history. But according to his metaphor, the “fruit” cannot exist without the core—the facts. Any subject can become the source of argument and dispute. As one of our students speculated regarding one historical controversy—the atomic bombings of Japan—and Internet search would produce lots of different opinions about this event. But historical interpretation is more than opinion. It must be informed by a knowledge of the facts—procured from sources such as government documents, personal letters, diaries, and oral histories, to name a few—and an understanding of how they fit together to create a coherent story of the past.

This factually based story or interpretation is always subject to challenge. In almost all cases, sooner or later, an interpretation is questioned, found inadequate, refined, or sometimes completely overthrown by a new, more convincing explanation. At times, as in the case with the history of the origins of the cold war, one interpretation dominates and may go unchallenged for many years. In other cases, such as the scholarship on the end of the cold war, different and sharply conflicting interpretations emerge at the same time. And in some instances, such as the history of the civil rights movement, historians are not in sharp conflict over their interpretation of events; they share an overarching interpretation but focus on

telling different pieces of a larger story. The collection of different interpretations produced over time—historiography—may best be understood as a long-running discussion among historians about the meaning of past events.

This volume offers a Historiographic approach to the history of the United States since 1945, seeking to familiarize you with the major historical interpretations regarding particular events and developments since the end of the Second World War. The individual chapters include two or three readings—excerpts from essays or books by historians. Each reading presents an interpretation of the topic under consideration. At times, the interpretations in a given chapter conflict with each other, forming something that resembles an argument over how to view the facts. But some topic in post-1945 U.S. history, as already noted, have not spurred the formation of sharply opposed or conflicting interpretations, and we have not artificially imposed such a conflict on the chapters dealing with those topics. In those instances, the different readings are complementary rather than contradictory.

Each chapter begins with an introduction, in which we offer basic factual information about the topic under consideration and summarize the historiography on that particular subject. We analyze the major schools of interpretation in order to highlight salient points of dispute or difference. We then summarize the main points of the readings and indicate the ways in which the readings are similar or different. Finally, we offer a brief, annotated bibliography designed to help you locate additional material if you wish to read further on the subject, along with a list of websites that contain historical documents on the topic should you wish to examine primary sources.

Any book with as broad a subject as post-1945 U.S. history must be selective in what it covers. While we provide chapters on the topics that most historians would consider

significant, we have also had to make choices. To some extents, the historiography itself as made the choices for us. For example, there is an ample and growing literature on domestic life in the 1950s, a topic we include here. But the economic developments of that era have attracted less attention from historians in recent years and so, although we regard this as an important subject, we do not cover it in this volume. In the later part of this book, which covers more recent history, most topics are too new to have a well developed historiography, in some cases, there is not significant published work by historians. In these sections, we have chosen topics that we believe to be important and that we expect to become topics of concern to historians in the future. This volume has also been shaped by our interest in representing the various approaches to the study of history. Thus there are chapters that focus on foreign policy and diplomatic history, as well as chapters that present the work as social historians, cultural historians and political historians.

We have divided the book into three roughly chronological parts. The first section, “The Cold War system at Abroad and at Home” covers the years 1945 to 1960, during which the U.S. began to play a dominant role globally and when white middle-class American citizens began to enjoy a general level of material comfort previously unknown. It begins with a chapter on the atomic bombings of Japan, an event commonly understood as ending the Second World War but one that also ushered in the nuclear age and positioned the U.S. for a time as the technologically dominant world power. The second chapter addresses the origins of the cold war, the ideological and geopolitical conflict that developed between the U.S. and the USSR and whose potential to become “hot”—and possible to “go nuclear”—loomed over most of the second half of the 20th century. The third chapter deals with the political and cultural repercussions of the cold war on the home front—the events from the

mid-1940s through the early 1960s commonly known as the red scare. If the first fifteen years after World War II were a period of anxiety and repression at home, they are also commonly remembered with nostalgia, as a time when family life was celebrated, when stay-at-home mothers, suburban homes (with televisions), and backyard barbeques were, if not the norm, then the standards to which people aspired. Chapter 4 explores domestic life in the period known as the fifties, looking particularly at the roles of women and how they did, and did not, fit the stereotype of the decade promulgated in popular television shows from *Father Knows Best* to *Happy Days*.

The second section of the book, “The system under Stress” covers the years 1960 to 1965. These years may best be seen as a period of dramatic challenge to the structures of power and the values that they represented. Most of these challenges came from “below,” from citizens who organized to demand changes in American society. The first such challenge, the one that paved the way for the subsequent ones, was the black freedom struggle, often referred to as the civil rights movement. This is the subject of Chapter 5. The next chapter focuses on the “new left,” the term for the young radicals of this era. Many in the new left were inspired by or participated in the civil rights movement; in seeking to reform American society, they significantly influenced American culture and politics. Chapter 7 explores the reawakening of feminism in America in the 1960s and 1970s and its relationship to both the civil rights movement and the labor movement. Whereas chapters 5, 6 and 7 focus on demands for change “from below”—from people and groups within society who felt in some way disenfranchised—the next three chapters cover the same span of years but look at the actions of the “top,” specifically the initiatives, programs and foreign policy of the U.S. government. Chapter 8 focuses on one component—the War on Poverty—of

President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, the effort in the tradition of Franklin Roosevelt's new Deal to use the powers of the federal government to eliminate suffering. Chapter 9 addresses American foreign policy in the 1960s, looking specifically at U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, a conflict that had profound effect on American society, culture and politics, chapter 10, which concludes this section, looks at the culminating event in this period of "stress" to the "system"—the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon in response to his certain impeachment by the U.S. Congress.

The final section of the book covers the years from 1965 to the present and is titled "A new Domestic and World Order." Many historians view the political, cultural and economic developments in these years as a response to, or backlash against, the cultural permissiveness and political liberalism of "the Sixties." Some, particularly in the realm of foreign policy, disagree as to whether these post-1975 years are more reflective of change from, or continuity with, the previous decades. The first chapter in this section—Chapter 11—explores the rise of the political right, typically referred to as the conservative movement, to a position of power in American life; this development played a role in the presidential election of both Jimmy Carter in 1976 and Ronald Reagan four years later. Chapter 12 examines "Reaganomics"—the challenge from the political right to the economic ideas and policies identified with the American Welfare state, looking at the policies and their socioeconomic impact in both the Reagan and the Clinton years. If, in the 1980s and 1990s, there were significant political, cultural and economic challenges to the status quo, so there was also an apparent dramatic change in the foreign policy status quo—the end of the cold war in the late 1980s. Chapter 13 presents readings that analyze this unexpected event, seek to apportion credit, and to assess the longer-term foreign policy significance of the way in which the cold

car ended. Chapter 14 addresses the social realities of “globalization,” presenting view both praising and criticizing the economic integration of the world that has been a major trend in global affairs since at least the end of the cost war. The last chapter of the book addresses the issue of America’s relations with the world since the cost war, looking specifically at the traumatic events of September 11, 2001 and their significance. Implicitly, these readings ask whether 9/11 represents the beginning of a new era for the United States or whether this act of terrorism and the U.S. response to it is continuous with American policy since 1945. In studying each of the topics in this volume, you may wish to consider, similarly, just how much as changed since 1945, or whether continuity with the past is more striking.

You can learn many of the facts about post-1945 U.S. history from the readings in these chapters. We encourage you, however, to focus on each author’s presentation of the facts, on the way the author interprets them, and on the broader argument that each author makes. As you read, consider yourself to be in a conversation of sorts with each author. Although you obviously cannot ask questions directly of the author, you can interrogate what the author as written and seek answers to your questions through a careful reading of the text. It may be helpful to keep in mind the following questions as you read each excerpt:

- What events and developments does the author emphasize? Does he or she see some as more important than others?
- What is the author’s attitude toward these developments and the historical actors to whom he or she refers? Is the author impressed? Scornful? Neutral? Disappointed?
- Does the author explain how or why things happened as they did? If so, what does he or she say? Does he or she emphasize ideas? The actions of particular individuals? Large economic and social forces?

- How does the author build his or her argument? Is it convincing to you? Why or why not?

These are just some of the questions you may wish to consider in reading the selections in this book. Asking questions such as these will help you uncover the interpretive framework employed by each author, and we hope, to develop your own interpretation of the events under discussion.