



# America, Empire of Liberty: A New History

*David Reynolds*

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This striking boxed set includes the 90-part Radio series in full. It tells the story of America through the voices of those who have lived through its history, from presidents to slaves. It celebrates American achievement and evokes the sound and color of daily life; it also explores the paradoxes of American history through three themes: empire, liberty, and faith.

## America, Empire of Liberty: A New History Details

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# From Reader Review **America, Empire of Liberty: A New History** for online ebook

## **Dimitri says**

Does a British author a better American history book make?

Not necessarily, but even if it is not the best, this is one of the better one-volume histories.

The focus per era is rather traditional. The different patterns of the early colonies such as Massachusetts & Pennsylvania, the Revolution as a consequence (!) of the French and Indian war, the (anti) Jeffersonian elements of political culture, the early drive West, the development of railroads and industry, Civil War and reconstruction, yet more railroads and industry, three more wars, the Civil Rights movements...

The Cold War era tends to play by the rhythm of the U.S. Presidencies, for some reason. Between Grant & Teddy Roosevelt, the Oval Office was written off as 'populated by non-entities'.

In other words, nothing much I hadn't heard previously- personally - but there is some rehabilitation for 'bad' presidents such as Carter & Reagan.

As befits the 21st century, blacks & Indians are not delegated to mere footnotes. They are integral to the tone of the book, as are women's rights : America is an Empire of Liberty. The question is : Liberty TO [the pursuit of happiness, 1776) or Liberty FROM (Fear, F.D.R., 1941) , Liberty for WHOM? This definition has shifted back & forth, not seldom as a justification of inconvenient truths.

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## **James says**

In drawing through major themes of Empire, Liberty, and Faith, Reynolds' narrative develops a surprisingly cohesive line, illuminating aspects underlying relationships between Americans themselves and with the rest of the world. Indeed, Reynolds' identity as a non-American provides a refreshing angle, often providing a less emotional directive and a enlightens aspects of many European's perspective on the country's changing identity. Correspondingly however, direct criticisms of the US are often limited, perhaps reflecting such anxieties.

Inevitably, the relative brevity and high pace of the volume necessitates a surface description of many events, occasionally skimming or leaving unresolved major issues, such as the 'Sexual Revolution' or the continued issue of Native American rights. Likewise, more cultural references beyond the occasional paragraph on Gone With the Wind would have enriched the often politically-heavy structure - though of course, this is undoubtedly Reynolds' focus.

Undeniably, however, this is a personal history that would no doubt initiate debate. Overall, a wonderfully paced and easily readable overview of the major issues spanning across the history of such an ubiquitous and often controversial country.

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## **Ben Trigg says**

With nothing more than an outsider's curiosity, I began to familiarise myself with American history with this book. Having known very little before, and never having read history in any serious sense, I finished this book with a profound sense of gratitude to the author for both the depth of his research and the arrangement of the material. I've started dipping into it for a second time to go through slowly as I read other accounts of the history. Some of those other accounts highlight the place this particular book has: I next read Simon Schama's *The American Future*, again a great book but addressing the subject wholly thematically, not chronologically. I'm now ploughing through the older Penguin History of the United States of America by Hugh Brogan - on similar lines to Reynolds but perhaps even more dogmatically chronological. Reynolds takes a beautifully balanced approach that, like a museum guide, takes you through step by step while highlighting recurrent themes in particular detail. He is to be applauded for this work.

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### **Jed says**

Reynolds has written a fascinating comprehensive view of American politics and history. More than anything else, it's helped me stop worrying about the state of politics and governance in America today. Apparently, the obstructionism and name-calling we see today is really nothing new.

One silly detail I learned was that Woodrow Wilson was from the South. I'd always thought he was from New Jersey, not Virginia.

And, as a trainspotter, I need to point out that the border of Iowa and Missouri is marked incorrectly and another map showing the Northwest Territory has it extending all the way down to the Florida panhandle. I'm quite sure its southern boundary was marked by the Ohio River. (i.e. Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi were never part of it.)

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### **Caroline says**

This is one of the best single-volume histories of America I've ever read. Whilst it does have to sometimes skim over certain topics or eras in the interests of brevity, it doesn't leave out anything important, and the relative shortness of the text gives the benefit of a broad overview, particularly in terms of the persistent characteristic of having an enemy to fight and draw the country together - first it was the British, then the Native Americans, then the Spanish in Mexico, Nazi Germany, the Cold War and now Islamic fundamentalists.

Reynolds draws on three major themes that have defined America over the years - empire, liberty and faith - and shows how these have intertwined over the years to make America the country it is. These themes highlight more than any other the contradictions at the heart of America - "the empire forged by anti-imperialists, the land of liberty than rested on slavery, the secular state energized by godly ambition".

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### **Bev Cheetham says**

A really well written book. You don't feel as though you are reading non-fiction as it really is written so well. It also makes you think, hard about incidents which you thought you knew so well.

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## Tim Pendry says

This is a first rate readable single volume of the history of the United States, fully annotated with references, which takes account of recent revisionism without polemic. The author is English, although a specialist in American history.

The book may be a tad more useful for non-Americans seeking some sense of the broad sweep of the US story than it might be for Americans who know its stories from school.

His theme (because some theme is necessary to cover over 400 years of history in under 600 pages) is that the United States can be defined by the three-way tension of its religious faith in a secular political framework, its expansionism and its particular and fraught ideology of liberty.

Understanding this complex interplay of aspirations is required if non-Europeans are to get any understanding of why Americans appear so sure in their moral rectitude when the bulk of humanity sees nothing (at least in recent years) but inconsistent blundering and hypocrisy.

The truth is that the Americans and the rest of the world are talking different languages and this history helps to tell us why. Although Reynolds does not make it specific, US history, after the colonial age, seems to fall into three very broad phases.

Reynolds deals with the first and the third well but he somewhat skips over the second of which more in a moment. There is an argument that we are now just entering a fourth phase – of which more, also, in a moment.

The first phase is about the lengthy resolution of an accident. When the British withdrew, they left behind two very different and competing cultures that should perhaps have been allowed to go their separate ways if a clash within the new State was not to be averted.

There was, first, a slave-owning plantation culture in the South and, second, a more sophisticated proto-industrial liberal culture in the North, both competing for the fruits of expansion westwards.

The whole business was held together on a wing and a prayer by Northern acceptance of the domination of the Southern aristocracy in politics and the lack of interest of Southerners in extending rather than retaining their very peculiar institution of slavery.

Reynolds is very good on this era in which those who wanted a free aristocratic republic competed with more radical democrats from the North and then faced evangelical religious pressure (the same impetus that has gone sour in recent American politics) to contain and even abolish the basis for their wealth.

The tensions built up reaching a critical cultural point in the 1850s. A liberal intellectual renaissance on the East Coast fuelled constant challenges to the status quo.

It ended inevitably in the South seeking secession and the North engaging in what amounts to an imperial determination to keep the South bound to a piece of paper, the American Constitution. But the rise of the US

as major global power was not inevitable.

The South was doomed only because the British Empire failed to come to its aid, thus giving the superior industrial strength of the North a chance to overwhelm it in campaigns of unparalleled ferocity (and atrocity).

Such campaigns must have brutalised the soldiery for its campaigns against the indigenous peoples in subsequent decades. The American mythos demands that the Civil War be cast as a 'good war', like the war against fascism, and the ending of slavery is the oft-quoted justification.

But nothing is so simple – Sherman's total war in Georgia destroyed an economy so that it could feed neither white nor black alike for a short while and the black population, after a period of liberation, were crushed, arguably in little better state, without federal help for another hundred years.

Southern resentment, although pragmatists might accept the inevitable, was turned against the blacks rather than the victors and it was forgotten that war exigencies had even begun to free the slaves so that they could defend a common homeland in the very last stages of the war.

Serious racism as opposed to labour exploitation grew after a victory that could not be followed through by the Northern liberals who seem, quite simply, to have lost interest.

More to the point, the smashing of the constraint on central government policy of the states' rights ideology of the South, though it has remained a force in American politics to this day, finally turned a loose confederation into the potential to become a centralised war machine.

This development was delayed but the rise of a superpower was almost inevitable once America has absorbed the full economic potential of its vast internal market and its never-ending supply of cheap labour.

Reynolds rather skates over the next phase, from reconstruction to the First World War. Yet this is the phase that enables empire and which created the ideology of liberty that would be market-tested by Woodrow Wilson and then imposed by FDR.

At one end of the story, the tale is simply one of expanding to natural limits and of adding a couple of colonies in the European manner with the usual lies and brutalities involved in such enterprises.

At the other end, which is where Reynolds is weakest in analysis, there is the struggle to create a polity that can have values at all. The core values were set by the Constitution and the victory sealed at Appomattox.

However, there were many issues left hanging, of whom those of the blacks, women, indigenous tribes and 'sexually different' (the last weakly handled by Reynolds) were simply inconvenient and required resolution in the Sixties in a way that soon created a conservative reaction.

The central issue was how to bind the useful cheap migrant labour required by the capitalist machine into an earlier society of small farmers and tradesman, especially when the migrant labour might not hold to Protestant small town values.

This was not a new problem but an intensification of early nineteenth century problems.

Equally important and growing in salience with time was the clash (and sometimes co-operation) between the owners of capital, some now of immense wealth with significant power in and over Washington, with the

aspirations of the wider population.

People in general wanted improved social conditions and, as consumers, unadulterated and low priced food and consumables. These struggles created the ideology of progressivism and the practice of American capitalism.

Progressivism sought to use executive authority, whether State or Federal, to make major changes in the structure of power to benefit the general population.

Unfortunately, it had the unfortunate effect of binding an appreciation of strong central Government to the capture by progressives of that strong central Government for the extension of progressive values overseas.

This is a continuous story of a development that has no formal ending date (indeed, it continues today) but the key transitional point is when America becomes a net exporter of capital and uses that leverage to control in stages the global conduct of its old rival, the British Empire.

Even as late as 1942 in the North African campaign, the British had the whip hand, but, by 1944, the export of US resources effectively broke any remaining pretensions to global leadership of the British Empire, a position already weak but from which it never recovered.

The story of the Atlantic Alliance is really little more than the de facto acquisition of the old British Empire by Washington without a fight and on the cheap.

The third phase starts not with Woodrow Wilson's aspirations but with FDR, a remarkable politician, who faced a major economic meltdown, sustained the polity (without initially solving the underlying problems of economic weakness) and then discovered war as a means to economic growth.

Pearl Harbour was a tragedy but it was also a lucky break because it enabled an aspiration – the assertion of American Power globally on the back of the re-allocation of American resources into an expanded version of the same model that had won the American Civil War and had opened up the West.

This model was a strategic alliance between the private sector and the executive on terms of equality.

This is the essence of the objection to Sovietism – not only its tyranny (which was sincerely held as a concern across America) but also its threat as an economic model in which the State replaced what would later be called 'public/private partnership'.

The US Government did not expropriate. It developed a system that might rightly be called 'socialism for corporations' that maintained a massive war effort in the 1940s and enabled the basis for the later information revolution. The model was not foolish. It opened up the West after the Civil War.

But it also did two things fraught with danger. It created the famous 'military-industrial complex', an interest in high government spending directed at perpetual warfare (even if frequently 'cold'), and it encouraged politicians to sustain similar projects designed to build middle class support.

The expenditures were accordingly lopsided – from the GI Bill through to Eisenhower's major investment in the road system (allowing rail in effect to collapse) and onwards, the US Federal Government extended the undoubted triumphs of the New Deal.

However, it also shifted them to benefit middle class voters and allies rather than the community as a whole. The road investment created the national dependence on Saudi Arabia. Cheap housing was not built but encouraged through unsustainable securitised debt.

Government bought off sections of the community successively by fiddling the legislative and budgetary books which encouraged identity politics, pork barrel-ism amongst legislators and policies whose consequences were never thought through.

This third phase is essentially the surprisingly short period in which the US was a major superpower, first in competition with communism and then alone.

The status was established by 1944 and probably reached its apogee (despite the problems of the 1970s) with the Coalition of the Willing that mounted the rescue of Kuwait in 1991, the last major assertion of UN values before Bush II introduced the concept of pre-emption.

This is a phase that continues. The seeds of being a superpower lay in the ability of a successful economy to become a net exporter of capital and act as arbiter to an increasing degree during the Great European Civil War of 1914-1945.

The seeds of a fourth phase were set when the US became a net importer of capital as its deficits grew. 9/11 is a neat marker but probably the failures of neo-con fantasists in Iraq will prove more significant in the long run.

FDR planted the seeds of crisis by building an unwieldy and often irrational system of social provision that locked in so many voters that even Reagan could not unravel it but this was married to the cost of fruitless wars (as in Vietnam).

It also became linked to a global system of bases that was simply a massive containment operation that eventually proved unable to deal decisively with global insurgency when it emerged in force a decade ago. In fact, welfarism is probably more of an economic problem than imperialism.

The 'theory' would have America dealing with its debt through constant economic growth – debt and the dependence on foreign investors would not matter so long as America remained a super power and its economy remained the most innovative (as evidenced by the information revolution).

The Chinese support America because they are now embedded in the system but America is no longer master of its own destiny in quite the same way. Instead of getting side-tracked into 'opinion', we should return to Reynolds and ask what his themes suggest about the future of the US.

No one can predict the future and America has the capacity to surprise – both FDR and Reagan were transformative to the fortunes of their country and there is no reason why a similar figure could not perform similar miracles but there are disturbing fundamentals to consider.

First, the crash of 2008 has still not worked its way through the system. Obama may be symbolically significant in historical terms but his Administration shows no sign of being in control of events.

He does not appear to have any strategy beyond accepting the need to bolster the private part of the private/public partnership system with massive thefts from the general population to sustain it. Perhaps there is no alternative now ...

Second, culture wars tend to be less important in times of economic hardship but if there is no leadership then culture wars can become proxies for economic demands.

The assumption that internal violence can be entirely crushed by what amounts to a growing 'secret police' capability within the country is to be doubted.

Reynolds rather passes over the extent of Western violence from Reconstruction to the 1890s but it was a strain of growth and violence could be a strain of decline.

As the US ceases to be able to direct global politics through the use of capital and arms, then it has to start sharing power, cutting deals and avoiding further entanglements until it has recovered at home.

The massive military presence worldwide has done little to stabilise key centres of insurgency just as we are about (March 2011) to go into what is expected to be another surge in global food prices

And at home, the oft-forgotten criminal insurgency in Northern Mexico is in serious danger of spilling into South-Western states already highly sensitised about immigration.

The demands of Christian fundamentalism do not only require 'change' in the broadly liberal cultural infrastructure of the US but also expect Congressional and Presidential support for its massive surge in missions overseas. Neither of these two pressures are well reported.

Despite the determined rhetoric of the neo-conservatives under Bush II, there is no scheming Hitler out there worthy of a 'crusade' that would kick-start the American economy and create national cohesion with total mobilisation.

America as nation-state was created (War of Independence), centralised as a corporate-executive power (American Civil War) and created as a superpower (the Second World War and the Cold War that followed) out of war.

Small wars are just not cutting the mustard. Teddy Roosevelt's Spanish-American War might have helped create a culture ready to go overseas in 1917 but Vietnam smashed any taste for conscription.

Iraq has created a profound distrust between liberal America and the nationalist-patriotic and imperialist other half of it. To go to war in full patriotic mode today might even be a trigger for low key civil war, especially if the evidence is not clear and America has not been attacked.

So, this worthwhile history (the views above are mine, not Reynolds) provides a back-drop to these general thoughts.

It will help understand how America not merely moved from a colonial outpost to troubled empire but will help non-Europeans understand why Americans often believe in their moral destiny despite their own crimes, how they hold to their ideals and why they are very, very different from the rest of us.

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**Bookthesp1 says**

David Reynolds has neither the glamorous wordplay of a Simon Schama or the allusions to modernity of the tetchy academic David Starkey. Yet he is fast becoming a shrewd and thoughtful TV historian and a writer of impressive clarity. *Empire of Liberty* is an outstanding book in that on such a broad historical canvas he can pinpoint specific examples to tell the story of the growth of the USA as a superpower and its inherent contradictions as the country that was in part built on slavery and a racism that exists right up to today. For Reynolds there are three key themes (would Niall Ferguson call them "apps"?) - Empire, Liberty and Faith. It is true that such a general survey cannot cover everything and Reynolds says little about the American West; gunfighters or other more obvious topics. It is also true that the chapters covering most recent history seem rushed and lacking in real detail. However, his narrative is still compelling looking at debunking the Columbus story and forensically examining the growth of the founding states of the later union. There are effective pen portraits of chief protagonists and some well selected stories covering less well known characters. His use of documentary evidence is careful and thoughtful and there are a range of literary as well as political voices. The choice of photos could have been more varied but there is a detailed and extensive bibliography. One wonders whether Reynolds publishers should have been tempted to commission a two or maybe three volume History. Reynolds seems a little overwhelmed by the complexity of the later story- I wanted more on Kennedy, Johnson and Carter as well as a greater depth on Tricky Dicky. the Clinton presidency is also fascinating and some aspects of his campaigning methods could have influenced Obama- Reynolds missed the opportunity to compare.

If one accepts that a one volume history is needed then Reynolds would be hard to beat- not only because it will lead you to more detailed academic volumes but also because he writes with confidence and crystal clear prose- highly recommended.

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### **Alicia says**

Although dense at times this is a good overview of US history using the themes of liberty and empire as a guiding line. Reynolds uses many quotes from literature, and important figures, which make for an interesting read. He writes clearly and objectively, and seems to cover all the important events, and people, without slogging in too much detail (mostly). Each president gets some description, some more than others. If you're looking to get your US history up to scratch, as I was, this will do the job. From here I feel I have a more all-round knowledge of that nations history, into which I can now take my pick of topics to delve in deeper. Useful for anyone who reads a lot of literary works from and set in the US, it has given me a better understanding of the historical demographics such novels work with.

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### **Simon Wood says**

#### **A BOOK OF TWO HALVES**

Despite being billed as the best one-volume history of the United States in recent times, "America: Empire of Liberty" is a remarkably uneven book. Reynolds starts off well with a reminder of pre-1492 Native Americans achievements and a caustic look at the Columbus myth. The standard remains pretty high right on through his coverage of the colonial period, the war of liberation, the contradictions and correspondences between slavery and liberty, and on right up until the civil war. Up till that point it is a readable, succinct account of the United States history.

Then things start to level off, Reconstruction isn't dealt with particularly well in my opinion, but perhaps I was spoiled by recently reading Eric Foner's masterpiece "Reconstruction". On to the Spanish-American War; Reynolds rightly acknowledges it was a war with the Spanish then the Cubans and Filipinos, though he seems to portray the conflict in the Philippines as one between equivalents ("atrocities mounted on both sides") despite acknowledging in the text that while 4,000 US troops died the death toll for Filipinos was around a quarter of a million.

On to the twentieth century: Reynolds exhibits satisfaction that the United States was never sullied by a large socialist party, but plays down the level of repression focused on the generality of leftists in America that peaked during the Red Scare after WW1 and reached a crescendo post WW2 with McCarthyism (so-called: in reality it went far deeper than Joseph McCarthy, see Ellen Schrecker's "The Age of McCarthyism"). Neither of these periods is explored to any great depth.

The really great failure in the book is how Reynolds deals with issues of foreign policy during the twentieth century. There are no mentions of the bombing and invasions of Cambodia under Nixon, no mention of Lyndon Johnson's invasion of the Dominican Republic. Despite covering at relative length the Carter era treaty to return the Panama Canal to Panama there is zero coverage of the Bush I's invasion of Panama though ample, and not particularly erudite, coverage of the subsequent years invasion of Kuwait by Iraq and the American led response. On the US depredations in Central America during the Regan era - nothing more than a brief mention in the paragraph that inadequately covers the Iran-Contra affair. The coverage of the Vietnam War is fairly nugatory, other events such as the slaughter in Indonesia of 1965 or the invasion and occupation of East Timor, both of which the US were involved in to varying degrees, are not covered at all. Chile and Allende ("whose reforms had wrecked the [Chilean] economy" - US efforts in that direction obviously don't exist for Reynolds) receive one paragraph. The US's relationship with Israel is barely acknowledged. American support for Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan is entirely ignored. There is no attempt on Reynolds part to look into the systematic factors that drove the United States post-WW2 foreign policy with regard to third world countries that make up all of those mentioned above. For someone who is a professional international historian writing a book with the word "Empire" in the title this is beyond a joke.

The book begins as a succinct and reasonable synthesis of US history (pre-"discovery", colonial, independence, civil war) to one that is safe, comfortable and entirely within the cosy consensus of apologetic writing about the United States in the post WW2 world. Those chapters that deal with the twentieth century (with a few exceptions such as Reynolds account of the Civil Rights Movement) are often disingenuous, larded with chatty quotes and asinine details regarding the "great and the good", and totally distort the reality of US foreign policy. For that reason "America: Empire of Liberty" is a book that I heartily recommend avoiding.

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## Daniel says

A straightforward, highly-readable survey of the history of the United States. Reynold's uses the ideas of Liberty, Faith, and Freedom to steer the course of his work with much success. As a result, the book does not attempt to cover all aspects of the nation's history. Likewise, the work attempts to use personal stories and narratives, more so than overarching political debates (although he does address these some) or large group movements.

Personally, I really enjoyed this. Penguin had put out an earlier History of the United States that I had to read for an undergraduate class that - in a similar vein - was highly readable and enjoyable. This is another

success. Reynold's use of personal stories and narratives makes this a most enjoyable academic read.

By far one of the top books I've read this year.

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### **Matthew says**

I'm addicted to this wonderful survey of American history from an outsider's point of view. I've been listening to the BBC radio version as presented by the author. I might pick up the book someday, but more likely I'll just listen to the 60-part radio series over and over again.

!!! I just discovered that there are going to be another 30 15-minute radio chapters, making the grand total 90. That's more than 22 wonderful hours! Hooray!

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### **Joel Whitney says**

A great read of the period from 1776 to 2008. Brings the story of the USA to life with countless anecdotes and primary sources. David Reynolds writes a thoroughly enjoying read and giving an increased interest in American history.

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### **Raheel says**

What would make someone take up a book on American History ? A compelling narrative that challenges old accepted notions . Something which David Reynolds brilliantly does, in his retelling of the American story.

The handle of the whole book is how the author the inherent contradictions of Oppression and Liberty that have laid at the heart of American political and public life and has defined America ever since then. The author highlights the inherent conflict of the American role in world politics as an imperialist or a liberator ever since its inception.

From America's founding fathers' proclamations of life , liberty and pursuit of Happiness to Obama's championing of human values all lie under the dark shadow of slavery in the South and the ensuing civil war, the invasions of Afghanistan, Vietnam and Iraq .

Despite being 500 pages , the book is quite the page turner. A must read for anyone who seeks to understand America beyond the accepted clichés and facts of history.

Guaranteed to make you contented and smarter after finishing

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### **Kati says**

Regardless of whether you know anything about American history or not, this is a must read for everyone interested in knowing about the historical, cultural and political reasons why America is in the position it is in now, and also in understanding those strange American quirks that bemuse many Europeans (e.g. that fact

that religion plays a central role in American life and politics despite the fact that the Constitution decrees the separation of church and state).

Overall, a very interesting read on the basis that the author does a very good job balancing the 'orthodox' history of America with its perhaps not as well known cultural and social history. Furthermore, the author identifies several events and trends that have had a marked influence on the development of America as a whole, such as consumerism, a market-based economy and the importance of democracy and charts their inception and development over the years.

This is an excellent first book to read about American history, though I think it also offers new and interesting insights for those who are already well-versed in the subject.

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### **Kristi Richardson says**

“Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could.” Abigail Adams

This was another interesting book on American History from the Natives to President Obama told by a British historian. What makes this special is the different quotations from various people involved in the building of the nation at the time it happened. As I got the audible version from the local library this becomes even more special as the different voices read the quotes and it actually makes the history come alive for me.

Another plus about this book is that it comes from an outsider and his views and inputs are interesting. We like to tout that we are the Land of Liberty but throughout our history, we took away the liberty of Native Americans, blacks and women. We fall short in many things, whether that is because we are a capitalistic country, a Christian country or a Patriarchal country I do not know for sure.

I found this a very fun listen and I always learn something new. I highly recommend it.

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### **Paul says**

This is a book with massive scope, essentially the biography of a country. All told, it's an excellent one: engagingly written, fast paced enough to be readable but thorough enough to do the history justice. For me, having read many things on certain individual periods of American history (Founding Fathers, Gilded Age, Cold War etc.), it was really refreshing to have the whole history linearly laid out, and thereby gain a good sense of chronological perspective.

Of course, given the broad-stroke approach taken, the book was never going to be perfect. I got the impression that at certain points Reynolds privileged brevity where a more thorough examination of the events would have been preferred. This sometimes unfortunately resulted in an apparent lack of willingness to criticise the US.

For example, he mentions the (horrifying) massacre of all members of the population aged over 10 on the Filipino island of Samar during the Spanish-American War, and in the same breath goes on to describe

improvements to the island's road and sanitation infrastructure as a result of the occupation (p. 298). At best this is unbalanced history; at worst this is apologism.

Likewise, Reynolds spends barely any time discussing the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, surely a key moment in 20th century US history, if not world history. This is a shame, as he avoided the interesting ethical arguments concerning this historical episode. If anybody cares, check out the popular historian Dan Carlin for a great discussion of this - I heard it in one of his excellent history podcasts.

Finally, I took issue with Reynolds' scanty coverage of Iran-Contra, taking up barely a paragraph. This wouldn't be so bad if it weren't followed by about ten particularly dull pages on personal computing and stock market reform in the 1980s.

Despite these flaws, the book is generally well written and Reynolds interweaves his themes beautifully. There are some truly excellent sections - standing out for me was the exhilarating coverage of the Civil War, and his analysis of socio-political dissatisfaction in the 1990s. Four thumbs up.

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### **Michael Skaggs says**

It could use a bit more nuance, but this is an excellent general reader. The chapters make great sense and even those without a deep knowledge of American history will appreciate his balance of narrative and analysis.

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### **Kotinka says**

"'We're not an imperial power,' insisted George W. Bush in 2004. 'We are a liberating power'."

Reynolds has managed to create a coherent and highly readable book covering 500 years of history in about as many pages.

If you are looking for an original take on US history you'd better look elsewhere. However, given it's vast scope, I found it's regularity and reliability reassuring; it has a simple chronological order, uses everyday language, is not too dense but is full of information, and doesn't try to make sweeping conclusions, with the facts being there more to reveal the history of the US than to support an argument (a la Niall Ferguson).

Trying to cover so much history in so little time can quickly revert into an unsatisfactory skim - but his book is packed with enough detail to allow the reader to understand which areas of US history would be of further interest to delve into.

What Reynolds' book is not, is a "classic", but what it is - is damn readable.

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### **Laura says**

I've read the chapters relating to what I will be teaching this September. Really good, clear narrative which

connects the social, political and economic factors really well and made a very complex period of history easy to comprehend and exciting. The book is peppered with the stories of individuals, extracts of personal letters and accounts, and biographies of key figures. A must read for those, like me, who want or need to learn about the creation of modern America in a hurry!

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