

An American Bhagavadgita

by James Hill

*"The United States of America—the greatest potential force,
material, moral, and spiritual, in the world."*

—G. Lowes Dickinson

A History of the American People

by Paul Johnson

New York: HarperCollins;
1088 pp., \$35.00



For Paul Johnson, American history was a non-subject in his days at Oxford and its School of Modern History in the 1940's. "Nothing was said of America, except insofar as it lay on the margins of English history," Johnson writes. "I do not recall any course of lectures on American history, as such." This, as it turned out, was actually to his advantage. "As a result of this lacuna in my education, I eventually came to American history completely fresh, with no schoolboy or student prejudices or antipathies."

His critics will say he has picked up quite a few in the ensuing years, but let that ride. The question one must ask is: Has this highly opinionated Englishman contributed to Americans' understanding of their history? The answer is yes, with a few reservations. A greater question might be whether Americans will appreciate his judgments, and here I think the odds are only so-so since we, as a people, are plainly in the process of de-Americanizing ourselves and our institutions. Johnson, while viewing this phenomenon with concern, nevertheless concludes his book on an optimistic note: he is betting that the American people, ultimately, will arrest their long free fall. I am not so sure.

What, really, makes someone an American? For most of the country's recent history, at least, citizenship was the

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defining element: you take the oath, you become an American. (An interesting curiosity, however, is that native-born Americans, as opposed to Native Americans, continue to identify themselves as Californians, Virginians, Kansans, New Englanders, Westerners, or Southerners first, and as Americans second—proof that the country remains less a "nation" than a federation of states and regions, each with its own cultural, geographic, and economic peculiarities.) Today, however, one can be a "hyphenated American" without, in fact, being an American at all. The test is in getting over the border by whatever means possible, and the U.S. Constitution, as it has been interpreted of late, takes over from there, conferring on you almost unlimited protections and benefits, including the right to vote. We are in danger of hy-

phenating away our nationhood, while the political pandering to the hyphenates themselves risks undoing the 400 years of nation-building and nationhood Johnson celebrates.

Worse, it risks destroying our ability to develop a coherent foreign policy in the country's interest at a time when we find ourselves the world's only superpower, and too often the world's policeman. In the post-World War II era, this liability has manifested itself primarily in Washington's unquestioned support of Israel—a policy that is currently being modified by the power of the growing Arab- and Islamic-American lobby. The national interest is additionally compromised by the Irish-American lobby, by Cuban-American enemies of Fidel Castro, by Chinese-Americans fighting a diplomatic war of liberation from American soil, and by aggressive Mexican-Americans seeking to replace Anglo-American culture with their own, "Hispanic" one. Assimilation, on the other hand, is usually a no-win proposition. Take the Serbs, a people who have been in America in large numbers for more than a century and who, despite their continued adherence to Orthodox Christianity, have gladly thrown themselves into the melting pot. Marginalized in the debate concerning American policy in the Balkans, they must endure daily the depiction of their people as racist murderers and rapists. Palestinian-Americans, having spent years assimilating before challenging finally America's reflexive support of Israel, know the feeling. So do German-Americans, Japanese-Americans, and others who, having committed themselves to the assimilationist ideal, found themselves at one time or another on the wrong side of

American foreign policy or national security aims. Yet the assimilation of diverse populations, to the extent that it really occurred, made America and its people what they are today, as Johnson points out. "I do not acknowledge the existence of hyphenated Americans, or Native Americans or any other qualified kind," he writes. "They are all Americans to me: black, white, red, brown, yellow, thrown together by fate in that swirling maelstrom of history which has produced the most remarkable people the world has ever seen." The problem here is that Johnson's spirit of tolerant acceptance is completely at odds with the American political and cultural elite's determination to impose policies exacerbating racial, ethnic, and religious tensions in the name of cultural diversity, as well as, increasingly, with the attitude of the new Americans themselves.

Johnson is ruthless in his condemnation of political correctness and its allied sins. And he gives no quarter in condemning organized religion's surrender, in the face of a frontal assault on the part of government and the courts, of its moral authority. Still, a recurring (touchingly naive) theme throughout his long narrative is that, our present difficulties of nationhood notwithstanding, American history has been always thus: an epic battle in which the forces of good overcome the forces of evil, which not by coincidence arise—usually—from within. In Johnson's view, the United States achieved its remarkable accomplishments not because it was the country's destiny to do so but because it was a work in progress by a people who were left to solve their own, often brutally difficult problems in a way that would benefit the greatest number of them in the end.

Johnson describes effectively America's long collision course in respect of chattel slavery, and how the subject still tugs at the nation's conscience today. He is even better on the mistreatment of the indigenous Indian tribes which, contrary to myth, belongs not to the period of the country's western expansion, but its southeastern push in the early days of independence. Here, an entire region was opened to European settlement—and the expansion of the Peculiar Institution—by means of what we now call "ethnic cleansing": the forced resettlement of entire Indian nations to the sparse and untamed West. After this, the Indian question did not need to be dealt

with again until decades later when, the issue of slavery having been settled in blood and the Union preserved, a restless population and new European immigrants sought greener pastures. By then—as now—the Trail of Tears was largely forgotten. The Western tribes, by contrast, even though many had also to endure relocation or sign treaties forcing them onto reservations, eventually won recognition of their sovereignty.

Readers of Johnson's previous works, including *Modern Times: The World From the Twenties to the Nineties* and *The Birth of the Modern: World Society, 1815-1830*, will easily recognize variations on themes first raised in those books. In spite of this elaboration, however, and the use of material first researched for the author's histories of Christianity and the Jews, there remains much to harvest. Even at more than 1,000 pages, *A History of the American People* takes too many shortcuts, particularly when Johnson gets to those definitive points in the development of America's nationhood: the Civil War, and World War I and II. Concerning the Civil War especially I find that a shame. A tremendous body of literature exists on the complexities leading up to that horrific conflict, and regarding it: to rush through it all seems a waste of this author's considerable talents and energies. The same can be said of Johnson's treatment of World War II and its aftermath, which also seems incomplete and unful-

filled.

The richness of the book, however, is to be found in the interpretation of everyday events that shaped the nation's character and destiny. Johnson defends some of the Robber Barons (most of whom ended up donating a good deal of their fortunes to the American people in the form of foundations, libraries, and art galleries, and their estates preserved as part of the nation's historic trust), but what he really celebrates is the scope America once gave its citizens for titanic endeavor and achievement. He raises the need to reinterpret the administrations of "failed" presidencies, such as those of Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge, not because the assessments of them have been so bleak but because they were made so wrongly, with deliberate intent. (The debunking of the Camelot myth surrounding the administration of John F. Kennedy is a case of Johnson applying his formula in reverse, to even more convincing effect.) For Johnson, America really has been a land of opportunity—for exploiters, con artists, and other assorted hucksters and evildoers of the type Mark Twain captured so perfectly, as well as for honest hardworking men, the two groups combining to create not just a country but a history of truly epic proportions. As for Johnson's belief that a problem-solving people will keep moving onward and ever upward—well, we will just have to see. ©

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An Honorable Defeat

by Clyde Wilson

The Confederate War
by Gary W. Gallagher
Cambridge: Harvard University Press;
218 pp., \$24.95



Imagine America invaded by a foreign power, one that has quadruple the population and industrial base. Imagine that this enemy has free access to the world's goods as well as an inexhaustible supply of cannon fodder from the proletariat of other countries, while America itself is tightly blockaded from the outside world. New York and Cincinnati have been taken. For months, Boston and Chicago have been under constant siege, the civilian population driven from their homes. Enemy forces roam over large parts of the country burning the homes, tools, and food of the non-combatants in a campaign of deliberate terrorism. Nearly 85 percent of the nation's able-bodied men (up to 50 years of age) have been called to arms. Battlefield casualties have run to 39 percent and deaths amount to nearly half of that, far exceeding those from any other war. On the other hand, the enemy, though its acts and domestic propaganda indicate otherwise, is telling the American population that it wants only peace and the restoration of the status quo antebellum. Lay down your arms and all will be as before.

What would be our state of morale in such conditions? Americans have never suffered such misfortune, have they? Alas, they have. This was the experience of the Southern people from 1861-1865 in their lost War for Independence.

Gary Gallagher has established himself of late as one of the leading historians of the period, a somewhat surprising and consoling occurrence since he is an old-fashioned historian who relies on evidence and is not afraid to challenge fashionable interpretation by following where the evidence leads. *The Confederate War* examines with skill and careful

research the forgotten Southern experience, which was marked by greater suffering and sacrifice than that ever made or endured by any other large group of Americans. Gallagher presents an important and ignored perspective for those who wish to grasp the sweep of American history in the cold light of reality rather than through the rose-colored glasses of democratic globalism.

War, in the experience of the American people, has typically brought suffering and death to only a small part of the inarticulate youthful population, mostly from the poorer classes; dislocation and discomfort to a larger segment; high wages and profits in general; and a great glow of patriotism and righteousness to the many. This was war as the North knew it (except that dissent was a great deal more widespread than has been admitted), setting the pattern for subsequent American conflicts. (We only have to think of the delight with which so many celebrated, from the comfort of their recliners, the incineration of Iraqi women and children.) It was not so, however, for the Southern people in that period. (Our author says nothing, of course, about Reconstruction.)

How hard the Southerners struggled for independence from the American Empire has been, and continues to be, suppressed by a nationalist culture that can only wonder: How could any group possibly have dissented from the greatest government on earth? But a very large number of Americans did *not* consent to that government (the regime, after all, was supposedly founded on the consent of the governed). They were willing to put their dissent on the line in a greater sacrifice than any large group of Americans has ever been called upon to make. Until finally, as a disappointed Union officer quoted by Gallagher remarked: "the rebellion [was] worn out rather than suppressed."

The burden of *The Confederate War* is that military defeat—not lack of faith in the cause, internal class struggle, want of sufficient nationalist theory, or any other such thing offered by recent historians as explanations—ended the War for Independence. Historiographically, Gallagher's work is juxtaposed, with evidence and close reasoning, with a raft of

literature speculating upon the weaknesses of the South. One learns very early in academic historical training that a sure road to success lies in finding a new twist on South-hating, supported by quotations selected out of context and references to currently fashionable abstractions that pass for reasoning, such as that the South was not only evil but weak and stupid, its War for Independence having been waged ineffectively, inadequately, and incompetently. I can cite several cases where books along these lines have catapulted their authors into professional celebrity and endowed chairs. Writing history is easy if you only need theory and not evidence.

Gallagher, by contrast, has documented the obvious: the South was militarily defeated only after an extraordinary effort unmatched before or since by Americans. Given the sad state of American scholarship, to accomplish that much is cause for celebration.

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Waugh After Waugh

by Andrei Navrozov

Will This Do? The First Fifty Years of Auberon Waugh: An Autobiography
by Auberon Waugh
New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers;
288 pp., \$24.00



When, after a stint in the British Army which left him crippled for life, Auberon Waugh went up to Oxford in 1959, by his own admission he knew nothing of the place apart from what he had read in his father's novel, *Brideshead Revisited*, describing the Oxford of 35 years earlier—and in *Sinister Street*, portraying Oxford 25 years before that, and *Zuleika Dobson*, ten years earlier still. He was appalled, he recalls, "by how few