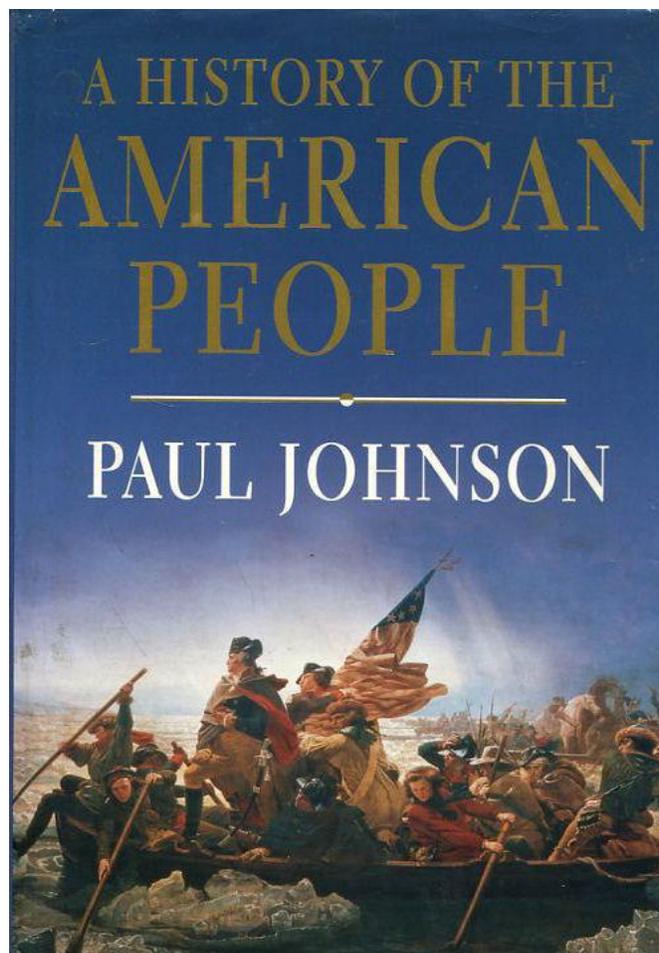


A History of the American People

By Paul Johnson



Review by Garry Victor Hill

A History of the American People. By Paul Johnson. London; Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997. 925 pages Illustrated

Book cover image: *Wikipedia*

The title suggests that this book will be shaped by what can only be a great if almost impossible idea to bring to full fruition, even in close to a thousand pages. Despite the difficulties of covering over four hundred years of America's history since the arrival of the whites at Roanoke in 1580 to the 1996 presidential elections, Johnson does achieve a good deal. On the positive side his account is

written in a clear, flowing style that makes his book compulsively readable. This does not mean that he becomes simplistic or coasts along with well-worn views and presents fallacies, far from it. This writer thinks for himself and he attacks America's sacred cows, such as the Kennedys. He also challenges popular misconceptions, good. This book is choc a bloc with fascinating little known facts, insights and important events that have often been overlooked by others in the field. Johnson has a way of giving succinct insights into complex and important characters such as Jefferson, Teddy Roosevelt and Jefferson Davis that are fair and fascinating, making us see them in new ways. When he challenges a fixed image he gives reasons, so for example we see that as President, Eisenhower was not the laid back, folksy, genial, political innocent with a mediocre mind, letting others manoeuvre American policy as circumstances dictated. This is what Eisenhower wanted people to think. Behind the scenes he was the exact opposite, working 15 or 18 hours a day for weeks, totally in control, using his sharp mind to gain fixed objectives. It would be the 1970s before material from the White House gave the real picture. Revelations like this make for good history and Johnson does this often.

He also deserves kudos for his attention to detail and to its opposite, his grasp of the ideologies that initially shaped America. He then traces how the massive flow of big events shaped and changed America's aims and its world view. Johnson also deserves credit for even attempting such a task. These are the positives - and now for the negatives.

As the first paragraphs in this review suggests Johnson has to a large extent strayed from the title and focused on the White House residents. What he writes of them interests, but they are not the American people. The 1960s and the 1970s were a time of immense turbulence and change. He spends nearly eighty pages on the era from Eisenhower's retirement in 1961 until Reagan's retirement in 1989 and most of these years concern Cold War politics, presidential personalities and behind the scenes White House manipulations. The Civil Rights movement, American involvement in the Vietnam War, and the subsequent student rebellion all get some slight coverage, but not much and what appears gets tied in with how it affected the presidents and their policies. The development of the contraceptive pill and its effects, the sexual revolution, the youth rebellion, hippies, the new Hollywood, increasing urbanisation demographics, the spreading drug culture and its effects, the effect of AIDS on the sexual revolution, the increasing pressures on

the nuclear family and the waning of religious belief, get at best brief summaries. Some of these important aspects of social change are not even mentioned.

Johnson seems to have missed the ordinary people inferred in his title. I was hoping that this book would be about them and show the flow of American history through their lives, but no. Wouldn't it be good to have a writer tell us what it feels like to be a seventeenth century Pilgrim farmer's wife in New England, or to be a hunter with a musket heading for North Carolina's Smokey Mountains in the days when it was wilderness, what a Nantucket whaler returning home after a long voyage might hope, the fears of a slave being auctioned in New Orleans, the relief of an Irish famine emigrant coming ashore with her starving children in Baltimore, the bitterness of a Cherokee trudging along the trail of tears, the weariness of a Civil War nurse in an overcrowded hospital trying to do her work without catching a disease, the future dreams of a cheerful sodbuster family arriving on the Kansas prairie to set up his farm given by the Homestead Act, a 1920s flapper in Chicago revelling in the hedonistic jazz atmosphere, a New York stockbroker trying to deal with the 1929 crisis, the choices a returning 1940s G.I. might make when deciding which is the best course for him in the G.I. Bill, the utopian hopes of a would be hippie arriving in 1967 San Francisco, the fears about AIDS in 1980s Los Angeles, the sudden realisation of a 1990s Boston peace activist that nuclear disarmament was becoming a reality.

Such are the individual histories of the American people. However nothing like this emerges. As another title suggests, William Manchester's *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America 1932-1972* (1975) does give an idea of what living in those decades was like for the American people, while his history covers much of the same political and military territory as Johnson does.

Presidents, generals and millionaires have the power: so they dominate history. Fortunately this domination is not total. A whole chapter on the changing role of women and other segments on suffragettes. art, architecture, literature and music, they all get welcome segments. However changes in health treatment and massive epidemics are barely touched on and some big omissions are obvious. Although it killed over half a million Americans, the Spanish Influenza plague of 1918-1922, and the nineteenth century yellow fever plagues that killed thousands in New Orleans, do not get proper attention. The same applies to the miraculous effects of penicillin in the 1940s and 1950s, Jonas Salk's successful 1950s battle to

eradicate polio and the resurgence of tuberculosis after Reagan cut the prevention program.

The second big problem with *A History of the American People* is the persistent factual errors.

Confederate General Albert Sidney Johnston who was killed at Shiloh in 1862 is confused with General Joseph Eggleston Johnston. Paul Johnson does not know of A.S. Johnston's death and so for three years after his death at Shiloh he credits J.E. Johnston's actions to him.

Stonewall Jackson was not shot in the back and the statement that after his death the Confederates lost every battle except Chickamauga is also untrue.

Leonard Wood was not "the conqueror of Geronimo." Nobody conquered him. He initiated a surrender deal with General Nelson Miles and negotiated this with Lieutenant Gatewood. Doctor Leonard Wood (as he then was) shared a night meal with Geronimo, his warriors and their guards on their return trip to the fort after the 1886 negotiations.

Winslow Homer died in 1910, so how could one of his listed paintings be dated to 1974?

Randolph Bourne died in 1919, not 1918.

Louis B. Mayer did not make *Birth of a Nation* or have anything to do with its making. He distributed the film throughout New England.

Frank Lloyd Wright was born in 1867, not 1869.

Teddy Roosevelt (1858-1919) did not live before Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) or John Wayne (1907-1979)

The Spanish American War was not "America's sole imperialist venture." There were the attempts to get Canadian territory in the war of 1812, two wars with Mexico that added territory, the successful pressures in the 1840s to get the Oregon Territory from Britain, the adventurous 1860 attempt to take over Nicaragua, the purchase of Alaska, the annexations of Hawaii and Samoa, China's Boxer Rebellion of 1900-1901, and the conquest of the Philippines, which went on long after 1898.

The 47,000 American dead in Vietnam mentioned in this work is 10,000 lower than in many other accounts.

These examples are not presented after laboriously combing through the text. They come from general knowledge and leave this reviewer wondering what other errors may be here.

A second problem must be the viewpoint that Paul Johnson comes from. While he is a wakeup to Joe McCarthy as a publicity hungry politician, his admiring defence of Nixon, Reagan and Thatcher, like his descriptions of Watergate as a witch hunt and his belief that America did not fight hard enough in Vietnam, show a very conservative frame of mind. His absolute certainty that Alger Hiss was a spy, his contemptuous comments about the well justified youth rebellion of the 1960s and his criticisms of the radical establishment media and government funded welfare reveal the same.

Even so, much remains in this book to appreciate.

*