

THE title *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 the American nationhood, that meaning remains contested. It is a reference to the centrality of change in American history—to the ways in which the nation has continually transformed itself and to how it continues to do so in our own time. And it is also a description of the writing of American history itself—of the ways in which historians are engaged in a continuing, ever unfinished, process of asking new questions.

Like any history, *The Unfinished Nation* is a product of its time and reflects the views of the past that historians of recent generations have developed. The writing of our nation's history—like our nation itself—changes constantly. It is not, of course, the past that changes; rather, there are shifts in the way historians, and the publics they serve, ask and answer questions about the past. There are now, as there have always been, critics of changes in historical understanding who argue that history is a collection of facts and should not be subject to “interpretation” or “revision.” But historians insist that history is not and cannot be simply a collection of facts. Names and dates and a record of events are only the beginning of historical understanding. It is up to the writers and readers of history to try to interpret the evidence before them; and in doing so, they will inevitably bring to the task their own questions, concerns, and experiences.

Our history requires us to examine the many different peoples and ideas that have shaped American society. But it also requires us to understand that the United States is a nation whose people share many things: a common political system, a connection to an integrated national (and now international) economy, and a familiarity with a shared and enormously powerful mass culture. To understand the American past, it is necessary to understand both the forces that divide Americans and the forces that draw them together.

It is a daunting task to attempt to convey the remarkable history of the United States in a single book, and the seventh edition of *The Unfinished Nation* has, as have all previous editions, been carefully written and edited to keep the book as concise and readable as possible. In this edition, I have added significant additions throughout the book on the history of conservatism, which has become an important part of American life. I have also added new material on the U.S. Constitution; coverage of the early Africans in America before slavery; revised sections on the middle colonies; a description of the changing way Americans voted in the nineteenth century; and additional material on the emergence of “containment” as a core of American foreign policy and the conservative opposition to it. And I have provided new material on the recent past, including the 2012 election.

In addition to these changes, the seventh edition of *The Unfinished Nation* now contains a new set of primary source features titled “Consider the Source.” My hope is that these features will prompt students to not only consider the way that historians read historical documents but also to think carefully about the many sources of information they encounter daily. All content is now reinforced and supplemented by a rich set of online practice and assessment resources, housed within the Connect platform. It is not only the writing of history that changes with time—the tools and technologies through which information is delivered change as well.

As always, I want to thank the students, teachers, and other readers of this book who have offered comments, criticism, and corrections. Suggestions can be sent to me at Department of History, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027; or by email to ab65@columbia.edu.