

America in Our Time

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Book Reviews

America In Our Time, by Godfrey Hodgson. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1976. pp. xii, 564. \$12.95. (paperback) \$4.95.

Godfrey Hodgson possesses the background, research, insight, and skill to craft a compact and penetrating work about the crises that lashed the United States during the sixties and early seventies. Instead, his book is a rambling mixture of narrative and analysis which reviews American political, economic, and social history from the conclusion of World War II to Watergate.

The author, an experienced British journalist, is no stranger to this country. Since 1962 he covered America for English newspaper and television. A reporter's firsthand knowledge gives the work an immediacy and vitality wanting in much academic history.

What went wrong with America? The question reflects the volume's premise. Something fundamentally failed in contemporary society which can only be explained by an understanding of the late forties and fifties. Hodgson argues that certain assumptions Americans made about themselves and the world in the post-war period caused recent turmoil. Separately these assumptions were not dangerous, but when fused into a "liberal consensus" that guided policy, tragedy resulted. Americans, according to this thesis, were "Confident to the verge of complacency about the perfectibility of American society, anxious to the point of paranoia about the threat of communism. . . ." They were confident because they had discovered the secret of economic growth, this growth would eradicate social problems without a redistribution of wealth, the blessings of this wealth would transfigure all Americans into a placid middle class state, and finally the genius of American capitalism would perform the same miracle for the entire world. Yet the liberal consensus was anxious because an alien ideology threatened the promise at home and abroad. As the consensus, formed in the forties, confronted the realities of the Black Revolution and the Vietnam War, it crumbled along with the nation's self-confidence.

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The thesis is provocative as is the book; its many strengths result in profitable and enjoyable reading. Numerous chapters such as the ones on the genesis of the Berkeley riots, the structure of the foreign policy establishment, and the problems of voter registration in the South, resemble good feature articles which bring a topic to life by a skillful blending of personalities and events. The author displays acute insight into events that he personally reported. For instance, he aptly diagnoses the fatal disease of the New Left and Counter Culture. The "Movement's" ambivalence whether to accept and change society or renounce and withdraw from it led to dissolution. Moreover, the media is properly identified as an active and very important participant of the era subject to corruptive influences from within and without the networks.

A good book is not without its flaws, and this one is no exception. It lacks clear organization both in the body and its notes on sources. Hodgson's historical analysis fails to recognize much in United States history before World War II. To dramatize the republic's fate, the work overemphasizes the inevitability of its failure.

America In Our Time contains too many flaws to qualify as the authoritative statement on a troubled age. Nonetheless it invites thoughtful reading.

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Progressive Cities: The Commission Government Movement in America, 1901-1920, by Bradley Robert Rice. Austin & London: University of Texas Press, 1977. pp. xix, 160. Charts, appendix, bibliography, index. \$10.95.

Iowans will find much of interest in Bradley Robert Rice's *Progressive Cities*, specifically an entire chapter on municipal charter reform in Des Moines at the turn of the century. At that time Hawkeye political reformers, led by Albert Baird Cummins, were in the fore of what became known as the Progressive

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