

Commento a *A History of the American Republic* di George B. DeHuszar

di Murray N. Rothbard

This is, to put it bluntly, a poor book. Any work on American history, even an “overview” (to use a favorite and perhaps overused term of DeHuszar’s), has certain tasks that it must perform and standards to which it must cleave. In the first place, the factual material must be rich and not skimpy; the reader must get an idea of the lavish tapestry of American history, and he must get a full and comprehensive picture.

Most of the detailed critique below is devoted to protestations about the great amount of important material that the author has left out of the narrative. Just to pick an isolated instance, I do not think much of a text on American history that does not so much as mention Senator Thomas Hart (“Old Bullion”) Benton.

This is an almost extraordinarily skimpy work, a skimpiness that pervades the book but that reaches embarrassing proportions in the treatment of the colonial period and of the late-19th-century period. Sometimes we find almost the only people mentioned in an era are the presidential candidates. Furthermore, a critical defect is the almost complete absence of any quantitative or numerical data. It is often difficult to find the *dates* at which happenings occur, so vague and imprecise is the narrative. Apart from a few references to population figures, there are virtually no statistics of any kind in the work.

Now, I am an open and long-time condemner of the overuse of statistics, and I deplore as much as anyone the new trend in “scientific” economic history to hurl vast quantities of processed statistics at the reader, and conclude that one has captured the “feel” and essence of the past. But *some* statistics, surely, are necessary; and it becomes annoying to read constant references to “increases” in steel production, or living standards, or whatnot, when not the foggiest quantitative notion is presented the reader of *how large* these increases and movements are. There is also an almost desperate need to present governmental budget statistics, so that the reader will know how large government in relation to the private economy has been in any given era; but neither in this nor in any other area does the author give a shred of quantitative data.

The first test of a historical work then, and one that the author fails, is a richness of factual material. But the historian is more than a chronicler; he must also have a command of the significance of events, he must be able to convey to the reader the meaning and interpretation of the past. If we would be grandiloquent, we might even use Schumpeter’s term of “vision”; the historian must have a “vision” of the meaning, of the significance, of the material he is presenting. Lamentable as is the skimpiness of the author’s factual material, it is in this area of *meaning* in which he fails the most; for the largest bulk of the narrative, there is no meaning, no interpretation, no vision presented of the American past: there is just dull, uninspired, unimaginative chronicle.

What good is it to have the provisions listed of the Compromise of 1850, or of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, if there is not the slightest attempt to explain the causes of the Civil War? There is no need to revert to the “Paul Revere Ride” school of historical writing to realize that the American past is filled with high drama, and it is tragic if this drama is not conveyed to the reader and student. But to convey it, one must realize it is there, and the author shows no sign of doing so: there is, for example, the high drama of the Republican movement, of the great ideological war between the Jeffersonian Republicans and the Republican idea, and the Federalist-Whig idea.

Not understanding the connections, the author never presents the meaningful conflict. From his narrative one would never know, for example, that Van Buren reconstructed the Republican Party into the Democratic Party because he was inspired by the Principles of ‘98 (the Jeffersonian movement, the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions) and wanted to cast out the Federalist taint; one would never realize the continuity of Jeffersonian and Jacksonian principles, or of Federalism and Whiggery (Federalism’s mass-based variant).

Never do we get any insight into the political-philosophic meaning of the Jackson war against the Bank: a drive for the separation of banking and the State, as part of a general libertarian drive for separation of government and the economy, for highly limited government, etc.

Never do we see the high hopes brought in by the Revolution of 1800, only to find Federalism returning because of the drive for war in the War of 1812. Never do we get a sense of the tragic consequences of the Civil War, or of its permanent fastening of Federalist-Whig étatism on American life and the tragic wreck of the Democratic Party. The reader will not realize that it was the Civil War and its Republican aftermath that fastened upon America excise taxation, high tariffs, heavy public debt, federal governmental banking, the draft, the income tax, government intervention in railroads, etc. Many of these facts are mentioned very briefly, but the meaning of the change is never brought to the fore.

Note what I am *not* asking for here: I am not asking simply that the author present American history from a libertarian point of view, that he favor liberty and oppose its restriction. I am asking that he present a meaningful picture of the American past, and not simply a World Almanac chronicle of events, which is what most of the book boils down to.

Not understanding the import or meaning of *political* events in the American past is joined, in this work, with an almost absolute failure to point out the *consequences* of various government actions. This is particularly true and particularly unfortunate in the book's *economic* history. The pitfall that the author falls into is this: if a history of economic events is simply *chronicled*, as is done here, it is inevitable that an inner bias is given *in favor* of the event, whatever that event may be — and this is the reason why so much of American historiography simply celebrates the events that happened. In economics, this is particularly true; thus, if the historian records that government subsidized railroads, if just left as is, it seems like a fine thing that more railroads were built. But a historian with sound economic knowledge must point out that such railroads represented “overinvestment” and malinvestment in railroads, which they did. But the author does not do this, and as a result, his economic narrative, in addition to being chronicle rather than meaningful history, is often unwittingly biased in favor of the government action he records.

This failure in the economic realm is not chance; for throughout the volume, the author conveys a lamentable failure to understand even elementary economic principles; almost all the economics is garbled, even when well meant, and is generally valueless.

For the great bulk of his narrative, the author hacks out his report of dull, uninspired chronicle, bereft of significance or of sound economics, and with the chronicle extremely skimpy at that. (A *World Almanac* that fails even as an almanac!)

We can only conclude from this “overview” that a good textbook on American history was almost desperately needed; and, after reading this manuscript, we can only say that it is still needed, perhaps even all the more.