Bibliography for the American Political Experience

The European Context


This controversial book sees eastern North America in the year before Columbus as relatively densely-populated by a wide variety of well-organized native tribes.

1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created, Charles C. Mann. Vintage Press, 2011

Mann covers the effects of the “Columbian Exchange,” the exchange of plants, animals and diseases that followed the arrival of Europeans in North America. Among the more interesting parts deals with the arrival of malaria in North America from Africa and how this affected political, economic and social patterns.


This pot-boiler of an historical novel seems to give a reasonably accurate image of what life was like both for serfs and vassals under feudalism as well as some of the factors that led to feudalism’s downfall.

Colonial America


A history of the Puritans and the settlement of the Plymouth Colony.

The Founding

The American Creation, Joseph J. Ellis. Alfred Knopf: 2007

Another great book by one of my favourite authors, this is a series of chapters about salient events and periods between 1775 and 1803, including the Declaration of Independence, Valley Forge, the Constitutional Convention, the fate of the eastern Indians, the creation of the two-party system and the Louisiana Purchase.


This book is not intended to be a complete life of Thomas Jefferson, but rather a study of how he thought. It attempts to make sense of the various contradictions in Jefferson’s writings and concludes that he was simply able to compartmentalize different issues. Ellis is particularly good at discussing the correspondence between
Adams and Jefferson during the last 16 years of their lives. This book won the National Book Award.


This nuts and bolts book gives a fairly clear review of what is in our constitution. There is also a good deal of background information which is useful in understanding the meaning of the document.


A wonderfully touching story of the romance between John and Abigail Adams, as recorded in their letters. It is also discusses the major events in John’s political career.


A wonderful and vivid description of six chapters in the history of our founding, from the Hamilton-Burr duel to the Adams-Jefferson correspondence. This book won the Pulitzer Prize.


This Pulitzer Prize-winning book has been called “by far the best biography of Adams ever written.” A joy to read for those interested in the man and the period.


The entertaining biography of America’s first full-time politician and the only man other than George Washington to be elected unanimously in the Electoral College.


Tuchman is one of my favorite historians and this juicy discussion of the idiocies of British government policy toward the American colonies during the 1760’s and 1770’s makes delightful reading.


An entertaining review of a number of lesser-known events in early American history, from Aaron Burr’s trial for treason to the massacre at Fort Mims.

You would not think that 400 pages on the debates over the new constitution that took place in the summer of 1787 would make fascinating reading. They do. Not only that, but the reader gets a solid idea of what the drafters were thinking and what they intended to do (and not do). Winner of the George Washington Book Prize.


This book tells two stories, the first about the Continental Congress and the Declaration of Independence and the second about the Continental Army and its misadventures at the beginning of the revolution in the summer of 1776. It is a short book and a great read.


This biography of Jefferson is perhaps the most balanced I have read. It won the Pulitzer Prize.


A wonderful new biography of the father of our country.


This is a great book. It covers the beginning of the Revolutionary War, from the Battle of New York, where Washington was rather ignominiously defeated, to the victories at Trenton and Princeton, where the Continental Army stood up to the British and the Hessians and came out on top. Washington’s New Jersey campaign has been called one of the most brilliant in military history. The book won the Pulitzer Prize for History.

Early 19th Century


This Pulitzer Prize-winner is a marvellous biography of this flawed but charismatic president. A complete treatment and a great read.


Coming at the end of the Jacksonian era (Polk was a protégé of Jackson), Polk’s presidency is bracketed by the entrance of Texas into the Union at its beginning and
the acquisition of what became of all of the southwestern part of the United States at the end. Sadly, these achievements did much to make the Civil War inevitable.


This classic gives an outsider’s perceptive observations about American government and society in the 1830’s.


It is a long book (850 pages) but the author knows how to apportion his attention so that each subject is dealt with adequately but not to exhaustion. The underlying theme is the transportation and communication revolution that occurred during the period between the end of the War of 1812 and the end of the Mexican War in 1848, and how this produced many consequences, including the Civil War. The book won the Pulitzer Prize.

**The Civil War**


This recent biography includes all of the latest documentation to come to light about our 16th President. Complete, very readable and a New York Times Best Seller.


At 65 pages, you can have the essential Lincoln in an hour or two. By its nature sketchy and lacking the interesting but non-essential tidbits that one finds in longer biographies, it covers the main points very well.


The best one-volume history of the Civil War period that I am aware of. Far more than just a history of the battles, this book provides a deep understanding of the salient issues of the day. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize.


The thesis of the book is that economic differences between the North and South, rather than slavery, caused the Civil War. I don’t find the argument convincing, but the author does shed light on how the sections moved apart in a number of ways in the decades before the war, with plenty of back-up data.

This short book offers a glimpse into the inner workings of the Confederate government. While the Confederacy possessed only 12 percent of the industrial capacity as the North at the beginning of the war, the fact that Davis was able to organize the Confederate armed forces that held the US Army at bay for over four years is testament to his abilities.


A wonderful history of the conflict over slavery in the United States in the years leading up to the Civil War. Lincoln’s place in the story is documented through his speeches and letters. Yes, he was a racist by modern standards, believing that blacks are not the equal of whites and should not be given social or political rights equivalent to those of whites. He was, on the other hand, a consistent opponent of slavery from the beginning and an advocate of the equality of economic rights. A Pulitzer Prize winner.


While detailed, this book describes what life was really like on the plantation. The lash was the principle means of keeping order and making the male slaves do the desired work, and sexual abuse of the female slaves was common, if not nearly universal.


This Pulitzer Prize-winning novel is described by James McPherson as “a superb recreation of Gettysburg.”


Lincoln as seen through what he read and what he wrote. While not a complete biography of the man, it offers many valuable insights and summaries of the issues dealt with by our 16th President.


You wouldn’t think that much could happen between Lincoln’s election in early November 1860, and his inauguration in March, 1861. But it did. Without any real power, Lincoln was called upon to oppose efforts by the lame duck Buchanan to bargain with the seceded states. Lincoln stood steadfast that “this nation shall not perish from the earth.”

An engaging biography of the man who, along with Abraham Lincoln, made the Union victory possible. While he resigned from the Army rather than be court martialed for drinking, Brands contends that he was not a drunk.


This dual biography serves to enlighten the period and meaning of the Emancipation Proclamation.


This highly original biography of Lincoln sees history from the point of view of three of Lincoln’s most important political rivals, Seward, Chase and Blair, all of whom he named to his cabinet. A great book and winner of the Lincoln Prize, it is the basis of the recent movie about Lincoln, starring Daniel Day-Lewis.


A short and highly readable autobiography by a man who was born free and kidnapped to Louisiana, where he served as a slave for twelve years. It contains graphic descriptions of what life was like for the slaves, mainly those held by violent masters with no compassion for their human property.

The Frontier


A galloping anecdotal narrative of the West from the Oregon Trail to the closing of the frontier in the 1890’s.

Custer, Larry McMurtry. Simon and Schuster: 2012

A person who knows something about Custer will find this disjointed text mystifying; someone who knows little will find it virtually useless. I was shocked to find the author refer to the Indians as savages. It does have a great collection of paintings, photos and engravings.

This is mainly a history of the Apaches in the Southwest from Juan Jose in the 1820’s to Geronimo in the 1880’s. The publication date may explain the author’s view of the Apache as little more than savages.


A compelling history of the tragic experience of Native Americans at the hands of European settlers, from the first contact to the 20th century.


An engaging story of the long conflict between the Comanches and the European settlers on the Southern Plains, generally north-western Texas. The book is much more than a biography of Quanah Parker, the last great Comanche chief. It gives a valuable perspective of the Indians’ way of life, as well as a clear review of the inevitable white conquest.


A classic about the frontier by the recognized expert of the 19th century. The unfamiliar language and writing style makes a difficult read.


A thorough and thoroughly documented history of the ten handcart parties to make the trek to Utah between 1856 and 1860.

Journal of the Trail, Stewart Glazier and Robert S. Clark, eds. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints: no date.

A selection of diary entries, letters and journals give a thorough description of the experience of the Mormon Trail, with special emphasis on the Willie and Martin handcart parties.


This book presents a condensation of the journals of the leaders of the Corps of Discovery. Even so, it is over 500 pages long.

A wonderful biography that does justice to the Indian side as well as the American Army. The book concentrates on the battle and savages Custer’s second in command, Major Marcus Reno, who is characterized as a drunken coward.


This is a detailed military history of the Mexican War, with frustratingly little about the broader picture.


Eighteen biographical sketches of some of the first Europeans to visit the West, beginning with the French in the early 18th century.


A history of the building of the transcontinental railroad, this book covers not only the physical challenges of the project, but also the social and economic elements of the saga.


A useful history of the westward migration of the mid-nineteenth century, with a good review of the early pioneers who proved that a wagon could travel from the east all the way to the Pacific.


This is a conventional biography of Custer, with relatively less emphasis on the battle. While not as entertaining as The Last Stand, it provides a more complete view of Custer’s life.


The story of Teddy Roosevelt’s romance with the West, between 1883 and 1898.

This is the Place: Brigham Young and the New Zion, Ernest H. Taves. Prometheus Books: 1991.

This book relates some interesting aspects of Mormon history during the period from the assassination of Joseph Smith to the completion of the transcontinental railroad.

The definitive account of the Lewis and Clark expedition. The book presents a vivid image of the American west before it was settled by Europeans and reminds us of the incredible achievement of the expedition.


The history of Westward expansion from the earliest French mountain men to the California gold rush of 1849.


Provides more detail than most people want, but delivers a realistic account of the life during the great westward migration of 1840 to 1869.

**The Year of Decision: 1846**, Bernard DeVoto, St. Martin’s Press, 1942

This book covers the Mexican War as it was fought north of the Rio Grande, and particularly in California. It also details the fate of the Donner Party as well as the migration of the Mormons to the Great Salt Lake.

**Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century**


James Garfield, the second American President to succumb to an assassin, lived in the great age on inventions, including those of Alexander Graham Bell and Joseph Lister, the inventor of antisepsis, each of whom might have saved his life. This story parallels the lives of Garfield and his attacker, the deranged Charles Guiteau. The last third of the book is devoted to the incompetent medical care the President received after he was shot, which led directly to his death.


A good review of how the collectivist philosophy of the progressives conflicted with the individualist philosophy of business in America between 1870 and 1920. It provides a fascinating discussion of the rise of leisure and the problems this caused for American society. Curiously, it scarcely mentions prohibition or women’s suffrage, but devotes much attention to the labor movement’s struggles with big capital.

This short book gives a good overview of the life and times of Grover Cleveland, our only President elected to non-consecutive terms. Although a Democrat, his guiding philosophy more closely resembles contemporary Republican thought. He believed in low taxes, small government, and the idea that government aid to individuals “debauched its recipients.”


This is really a book for specialists, but it does give a good idea of the reasons why miners in the West rose up against their employers at the turn of the 20th century.


A rollicking history of the adoption and failure of prohibition, this New York Times bestseller discusses the WCTU, the Anti-Saloon League (called the most successful lobby of all time) and women’s suffrage, as well as all of the other interests that combined to pass the 18th Amendment. Surprisingly little is said about organized crime.


Winner of the Pulitzer Prize and based on thorough research on county records in Alabama, Mississippi and Florida, this book relates the shocking and virtually unknown story of how black Americans were held in peonage to work the plantations, mines, quarries and steel mills of the post-Civil War South.


A cornucopia of stories and snippets from the 1920’s, from the length of women’s skirts and the Scopes trial to prohibition and land scams in Florida. Enjoy the ride.


A highly readable, if somewhat long, biography of Woodrow Wilson and his times. This book provides excellent context for understanding the Progressive Period.
Civil Rights

**Bound for Canaan: The Epic Story of the Underground Railroad, America’s First Civil Rights Movement**, Fergus M. Bordewich. Amistad, a division of HarperCollins, 2005

More detail than most people will want, this history does give a good idea of the place of slavery and of the Underground Railroad in the hardening of attitudes on both sides in the years leading up to the Civil War.


This is not a book about civil rights, but it gives the point of view of a southern aristocrat, born in Mississippi in 1885. Percy discusses the Klan, sharecropping, white people, black people, and the complex relationship between the races, among other topics. Percy bemoans above all the triumph of dishonor and corruption. He is a poet and the book is beautifully written.


This book is more a history of the civil rights movement than it is a biography of Martin Luther King, Jr. The book is thorough and highly detailed. It leaves no doubt about the reasons that black people in the South embraced the movement. It also sheds a great deal of light on the forces that led to the fracturing of the movement, originally united behind King and his philosophy of “direct non-violence”. This book won the Pulitzer Prize.


This book reviews the highlights (lowlights, really) of the struggle to achieve racial justice in America from colonial times to the late 20th century.

**Let the Trumpet Sound: A Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.**, Stephen B. Oates. Harper Perennial: 1982

One reviewer calls this book “the most comprehensive, the most thoroughly researched and documented, the most scholarly of the biographies of Martin Luther King, Jr.” The chapters covering the time from the Montgomery bus boycott to the march on Selma are absolutely riveting.
The Depression and the New Deal


This book would be a film critic or novel critic’s dream. Many of the works of the period are reviewed and discussed in depth. However, I did not find adequate linking back from the individual critiques to the bigger picture.


Alter first reviews FDR’s early life and the steps that led him to the Presidency after he contracted polio. He pays special attention to FDR’s ability to inspire the population in the depths of the Depression, an act that may well have saved our constitutional system. The legislative achievements of the first 100 days, as well as Social Security, are briefly discussed.


This is a compact and very readable book about what happened in the stock market crash, but it is frustratingly short on the reasons that this crash led to the Great Depression. Remember that it is written by a Keynesian.


A comprehensive work that does an excellent job of discussing the main elements of the Depression and the people who were important to the period. A great discussion of the causes of the Depression lays the major blame on the skewed distribution of income in the pre-19290 period.


Hiltzik gives us a very readable account of the major pieces of legislation that we know now as the New Deal, as well as interesting biographical sketches of the main actors involved. He closes with the court-packing scheme. This is a very readable book that does not belabor any aspect of the history.


Here are personal stories about both FDR and Charles Lindbergh, who took opposite sides on the debate about US entry into the Second World War. The contrast could not be greater; Lindbergh was totally deaf to the political ramifications of his speeches and articles, while Roosevelt rarely revealed his hand as he manoeuvred the Congress through Lend Lease and rearmament.

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**Bibliography**
Women


From founding mothers to feminists; how women shaped the life and culture of America.

**Contemporary Politics and Society and General History**


An ambitious and mostly successful book. I applaud that it is written at a basic level, for example, informing the reader what is meant by a “veto-proof Congress.” On the other hand, Bennett’s conservatism detracts from his narrative in numerous ways. For example, in his discussion of Watergate and Nixon’s resignation, he fails to mention the reasons for Nixon’s impeachment, but emphasizes repeatedly that the liberal press “hated” Nixon.


The Economist called this book, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, a “crisp and balanced account” of America. Once you read the opening chapter about the first a-bomb test at Alamogordo, you know you are in for a treat. Brands hits the necessary high spots (the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, etc.) and he also finds space to discourse about such things as Michael Jordan and his Nike shoe contract. Highly entertaining.


A text on political behaviour, covering political socialization, public opinion and political participation. Now dated, it uses election polls carried out by the University of Michigan to illustrate the relationship between party identification and various kinds of political behavior.


This book explains that the razor-thin margins of recent presidential elections disguise increasing divergence in the partisanship of the various regions of the country.

The author discusses the differences and similarities between Americans at the founding and those alive today. It finds that we are not, for example, more mobile or less religious. I found this a rather daunting book, chock full of detail and not easy to read.


American history from the underdog’s point of view: slaves, women, workers, Indians, immigrants, the poor. If you don’t mind the leftist cant that everything in American history should be understood as a more-or-less successful effort by capitalists to co-opt government and subjugate labor, this book provides a useful and rarely-discussed perspective.

Ten Days that Unexpectedly Changed America, Steven M. Gillon. Three Rivers Press: 2006

This little book not only identifies ten dates in US history (i.e. July 6, 1892, the Homestead Strike, September 6, 1901, McKinley’s assassination, September 9, 1956, Elvis’ appearance on Ed Sullivan), but discusses why each one had an impact on how our nation evolved. Example: McKinley’s death made Teddy Roosevelt President, which might not have happened otherwise.


I suspect that Ambrose knew he was dying when he wrote this book. As the title indicates, it is a personal story, covering the high points since the founding as they appeared to this master historian. Highly entertaining, but not much continuity.


Poll data are used to describe the importance of the South in American Presidential elections. Written at the end of the Reagan-Bush years, it is by now somewhat dated, although we can now see with great clarity the political impact of that period.


An historian bemoans the recent tendency to take the constitution as sacred writ. Short and very readable, but with a distinctly liberal point of view.