

Introduction

When one steps back to take the long and broad view of American history, a paradox immediately jumps out. On the one hand, the political system of the United States has been remarkably stable. American politics continue to operate under the world's oldest written constitution, whose 250th birthday is within reach. The durability of the U.S. constitutional system is unrivalled. The average lifespan for a written constitution in world history is just seventeen years; the median is a mere eight.¹ But if the U.S. constitutional framework and national project has had unparalleled stamina, American history has been marked by great volatility and change – the kinds of changes that merit an historical R-rating for “revolutionary.” America's is a history defined by revolution, civil war, assassination, economic crisis, and world war.

It is a curious feature of today's popular conceptions of U.S. history that the themes of stability and continuity have tended to overshadow those of dislocation, crisis, and revolutionary change. We often speak of abiding national characteristics, of enduring national ideas and truths, of unending struggles to live up to the principles of the 1776 Declaration of Independence. When Americans invoke the “Founding Fathers” today, it is most often to link them to the trials of today, not to illustrate how they were the products of a distinctive historical moment. Today's political landscape is populated by symbols and references to the national past: the tea party, the cult of past presidents, the “greatest generation,” the civil rights movement. The nation's history is constructed in linear terms, particularly by our political leaders. “Each American generation,” President Trump declared in his first address to a joint

¹ Comparative Constitutions Project directed by Zachary Elkins, Tom Ginsburg, and James Melton at <http://comparativeconstitutionsproject.org>. For constitutional lifespans, see Elkins, Ginsburg, and Melton, “The Lifespan of Written Constitutions,” http://jenni.uchicago.edu/WJP/Vienna_2008/Ginsburg-Lifespans-California.pdf.

session of congress, “passes the torch of truth, liberty and justice in an unbroken chain all the way down to the present.”

The idea that history is a continuous line to the present encourages the projection back in time of current political fault-lines. Like the Whig historians of Victorian Britain, many Americans today conceive of history as the site of an ongoing battle between the ancestors of today’s political combatants, between the good guys and the bad guys. Those on the left draw inspiration from Howard Zinn’s relentlessly iconoclastic *A People’s History of the United States*; the right takes its cues from the equally one-dimensional *A Patriot’s History of the United States* by Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen. Though popular histories take many forms, a common denominator is the assumption that the American past is an unbroken one, for better or worse. When I have asked the students I teach at the beginning of each semester “what is the defining characteristic of American history,” rare has been the one who answers with “revolutionary change.” The most common responses have pertained to timeless ideas like “liberty” or continuous and incrementally advancing projects such as “the quest for equality.”

These popular understandings of the past tell us more about the era in which they took root than the fragmented history of the United States, a pluralistic polity whose complex and multidimensional historical experience defies simple categorization. It is not hard to see in these historical conceptions the imprint not only of recent political divisions, but also the lingering remains of “peak America,” the era in which the United States reached the apogee of its power. Our popular conceptions of U.S. history that emphasize continuity, incremental progress (even if in the face of resistance), and the centrality of free markets and democracy reflect what now appears to be an unusual period in the nation’s history, that half-century or so span in the years following the Second World War when the United States ruled the roost and enjoyed an era of relative economic security, social stability, and political predictability. This era of “peak America” was distinctive in comparative terms, as well: late twentieth century America was likely the most powerful polity the world has ever

seen, as well as one with a relatively liberal – though of course not unblemished – record of social, racial, and religious toleration. The victory in the Second World War and the subsequent Cold War stands as testaments to the awesome power amassed by the United States, as well as the appeal of certain ideals around the globe.

But the era of “peak America” was an unusual one in U.S. history – and as a result is a distorting prism through which to view the nation’s overall history. For most of its existence, the United States has not been the dominant power on the world stage. The relative political stability and commitment to global free markets during the second half of the twentieth century contrasts to the politically fractious and economically protectionist nineteenth century. The second half of the twentieth century was unusual era in a number of other ways: the percentage of the population that was foreign-born was at an historic low around 1970; the United States was an exporter of capital, rather than the debtor that it was throughout its first 150 years and is once again today; standards of living increased at an unsustainable rate; labor unions flourished (at least in the early Cold War era); the revolutionary civil rights movement demolished *de jure* segregation, but did so in a distinctive manner: incrementally, non-violently, and with deliberate appeal to national principles and traditions; American officials and voters turned away from a long diplomatic tradition of non-entanglement and unilateralism when they embraced a range of international alliances and institutions such as NATO and the UN. Viewed from the nineteenth century forward – or for that matter, backward from what appears to be our new era of the present – “peak America” looks less like the inevitable outcome of America’s development than it does a curious interregnum, a “great exception” from a national history characterized by social tension, economic nationalism, geopolitical anxiety, and – above all – transformative moments of dislocation and crisis.²

² For a variation of this point, see Jefferson Cowie, *The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

I

As we find ourselves in what appears to be a new such era of volatility and crisis, historical narratives that emphasize continuity, recurring struggles, and incremental progress sound out of key. Even the grandest of pianos loses its tune. We live in an era of shock and dislocation; ours is an historical epoch defined by unanticipated events that have yielded unexpected outcomes: 9/11, the 2008 financial collapse, the election of Donald Trump. As a result, many observers have begun to question familiar and reassuring narratives of the nation's past. President Obama hit upon this theme when he pointed out at the end of his tenure that "the path this country has taken has never been a straight line. We zig and zag." The recent iconoclasm targeting Confederate statues testifies to the rising consciousness that history is a creation of the present as much as it is a record of the past – and therefore what we emphasize from it can be changed. Indeed, the most recent time I asked my students what they consider to be the defining characteristic of American history, for the first time the most common answers bore the imprint of the dislocation of our new era: "crisis," "trial and error," "experimentation."

This book revisits the long story of American history by focusing on pivotal moments of disruption, crisis, and transformation. It highlights critical turning points, rather than timeless characteristics or recurring struggles. The history that follows is structured around the three greatest crises in U.S. history: the era of the Revolution and founding, in which Americans broke from the British Empire and created their own political system; the age of the Civil War – America's "second revolution" – which witnessed the abolition of slavery and accelerated the newly consolidated nation's international rise; and, what I call the crisis of the mid-twentieth century, dated from the Wall Street crash of 1929 through World War II and the institutionalization of the Cold War some two decades later, in which the United States transformed its internal politics and global presence. These periods of American history

might be likened to violent and transformative earthquakes that forever altered the nation's political landscape.

How should we understand these moments of crisis and transformation? This is not the first book to attempt to make sense of them. Traditional interpretations of U.S. political change give primacy to internal factors – moments of party realignment, new political practices and institutions, internal social movements, specific leaders (“the age of King”). It might even be that there are peculiar rhythms or “cycles” within American political history which culminate in flurries of reform and innovation. Wars undeniably have been powerful drivers of transformative change – it is no coincidence that all of the periods under discussion in the pages that follow occurred in the midst of intense conflicts that accelerated changes, compressing historical processes that otherwise would have gradually unfolded over decades into the span of a few transformative years.

There is merit to all of these lines of thought, which inform the pages that follow. The point here is not to demolish them, but rather to pursue a different argument, one premised less on the search for a recurring driver of change than on a method of approaching the past. This book views the transformative crises of American history from a birds-eye vantage. Rather than look in ever more detail at the domestic plot-lines of these compressed periods of change, this book approaches them from the outside-in, emphasizing how pressures, processes, and contexts from beyond the nation's borders shaped what happened within them. The Revolution, Civil War, and crisis of the mid-twentieth century witnessed shifts in the position of the United States within the wider international system, as well as alterations in its domestic political landscape. To return to the metaphor of an earthquake: the pages that follow focus less on the domestic fault-lines that opened up during these crises than it does on the distant, yet powerful, forces that shifted the underlying tectonic plates of historical change.

Bear with me as I shift to a sports metaphor. If the study of history can be likened to watching a baseball game, this book asks readers to change their seats in the stadium, to move from the familiar

section behind home plate to new seats far from the action in the upper deck of the outfield. The game is the same, but some of what had been observable before can no longer be seen from such a distance. The outfield seats are not the place from which to describe specific pitches or umpire decisions. But the view from the cheap seats brings with it certain advantages. From the outfield bleachers, one can more readily see how structural and external factors shape the course of a ballgame: the configuration of the outfield walls, the wind patterns that might turn a fly ball into a home-run, and the pitchers warming up in the outfield bullpen who will determine the linescore of later innings.

When viewed from this vantage, it is evident that the defining crises of U.S. history were not only *internal* in nature, but were also broader *crises of integration* in which markets, peoples, ideas, and structures of power rubbed against one another in new and often unexpected ways. The resulting frictions produced periods of destabilization and flux that ultimately transformed both the internal politics of the United States and its position in the broader geopolitical system. Given that the origin, process, and implication of these crises of integration transcended the borders of the United States, which themselves changed over time, this book examines critical turning points in relation to the broader geopolitical contexts in which they unfolded.

Back to our opening paradox of continuity and change. These crises of integration yielded varied results. They were in part destructive: those seismic shifts led some political formations and ideas to implode altogether. The Revolution ended America's loyalty to the British Empire; the Civil War destroyed slavery and Southern separatism; the mid-twentieth century toppled the old idea that the United States could insulate itself from the wider world. But though these crises had destructive dimensions, they also fostered creativity and innovation. New configurations of power and politics emerged from the rubble: the founding documents of 1787; the consolidated nation after 1865; the New Deal and national security state of the mid-twentieth century. Finally, many existing institutions and structures of power remained standing, albeit in altered forms, when the aftershocks subsided. The

United States remained within the economic orbit of Britain after the Revolution; racism and the exploitation of black labor persisted after 1865; American capitalism came out of the mid-twentieth century crisis stronger and more durable because of the stress test that it had endured. Indeed, the institutions and ideas that survived the tremors entered new eras a step ahead of the competition. Like the tallest tree left standing along a fault-line, these “survivors” took full advantage of their head start as they deepened their roots and extended their canopy.

II

The argument that national crises were entwined with broader processes of global integration goes against the grain of popular understandings of U.S. history, which still tend to shutter the American experience from the world. Our popular histories often treat the United States as if it were the Galapagos Islands – isolated from the wider world, a peculiar ecosystem unlike any other. This is the essence of that obsolete shibboleth “American exceptionalism,” which continues to exert a hold on our political discourse and popular historical consciousness.

When it comes to academic scholarship, however, the story has been different. Recent years have witnessed an explosion of scholarship that examines how U.S. history has related to that of other nations, peoples, and markets.³ This new scholarship has revolutionized our understanding of U.S.

³ A partial list of the works that have shaped my thinking include: Ian Tyrrell, “American Exceptionalism in an Age of International History,” *American Historical Review* 96 (October 1991), pp. 1031-55; Jeffrey G. Williamson and Kevin O’Rourke, *Globalization and History: The Evolution of a Nineteenth-Century Atlantic Economy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); A.G. Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History* (London: Pimlico, 2002); Thomas Bender (ed.), *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Bender, *A Nation among Nations: America’s Place in World History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006); Tyrrell, *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Eric Rauchway, *Blessed Among Nations: How the World Made America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007); Paul A. Kramer, “Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World,” *American Historical Review* 116 (2011), pp. 1348-91; Brooke L. Blower and Mark Philip Bradley (eds.), *The Familiar Made Strange: American Icons and Artifacts after the Transnational Turn* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); Andrew Preston and Douglas Charles Rossinow (eds.), *Outside In: The Transnational Circuitry of U.S. History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016);

history. The sheer volume of cross-border connections and processes that historians have uncovered have made it impossible to isolate the American past from the broader contexts in which it unfolded. One of the most significant findings to date has been the chronological expansion of what is often assumed to be the uniquely modern phenomenon of global integration. Though the term “globalization” is of relatively recent vintage, the cross-border phenomena that it describes are not. Indeed, it might well be that external forces shaped the development of North America more in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries than they have in more recent times, when powerful state structures moderate and attempt to control cross-border exchanges. This new scholarship has turned the notion of American exceptionalism on its head: the most distinctive feature of the United States might well be the extent to which its development has been conditioned by the diverse processes of global integration, which themselves have coincided with and been driven by the political development and economic exploitation of the bountiful continent of North America. Rather than an “exceptional” country, the United States might better be thought of as a “transnational nation,” to borrow the term of the great Australian historian Ian Tyrrell.

This outward looking approach to American history is fundamentally changing how we interpret the past. But like all interpretations, its early iterations have not been without their shortcomings and blind-spots. Much of the scholarship has assumed a celebratory tone, equating transnationalism with historical progress and liberation from the suppressive powers of the nation-state. There has been a tendency to focus on the cosmopolitan “good guys” of the past: we know far more about the transatlantic anti-slavery movement, for example, than we do about pro-slavery internationalism. Another criticism is that this recent scholarship has been prone to anachronism, projecting the global dynamics of our own era back in time. This tendency is particularly evident in the historical treatment of

James Belich, John Darwin, Margret Frenz, and Chris Wickham (eds.), *The Prospect of Global History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

U.S. foreign policy and imperialism. Our knowledge that the United States would become an unrivalled “superpower” in the late twentieth century has led us to inflate the extent of its power in earlier times, overstating the significance of the outward flows from the United States at the expense of the incoming traffic. One of the unintended results has been to obscure the agency of foreign powers and peoples. Most of all, critics have wondered if recent scholarship has overstated the extent and significance of transnational connections and global contexts, underemphasizing in the process the persistent hold of the nation-state on America’s political development. After all, isolationism has been a powerful cultural and political force in U.S. history; for most of its history, international communication and transportation has been limited to specific populations clustered in port cities; a persistently patriotic populous has celebrated the very national exceptionalism that historians have set out to debunk.

It is to be expected that the new scholarship on the global dimensions of American history has not instantly strutted out to center stage in a mature form that is impervious to criticism. But for all of its rough edges and growing pains, its central premise is irrefutable: U.S. history cannot be viewed in isolation from the wider world. As a result, the question before us has shifted from one whose answer has already been provided “is the history of the United States exceptional?” to a much more interesting and open-ended one: “how have the forces of global integration shaped the historical development of the United States?” This book seeks to provide an answer to this question in relation to those moments of crisis and reconfiguration.

But before that question can be tackled the concept of global integration needs to be unpacked and broken down into more manageable components. What we now call “globalization” is less a singular process than a swirl of integrative forces that unevenly unfold across space and time. No one controls the many processes of global integration – not even the powerful empires and economic conglomerates that have been so central to it. The drivers of global integration are multiple. Any list must include innovations in technology, communications, and transportation; the establishment of

systems of exchange across vast distances; the creation and integration of markets for labor, commodities, and finance; the forces of competition between rivals in business, politics, and religion; the emergence and perpetuation of asymmetric power relationships between groups of people with divergent political traditions and cultural practices; the mobility not only of people and things, but also of ideas and systems of belief; the formation of alliance systems that bring together diverse peoples on behalf of shared objectives and the mutual pursuit of profit. The list could go on. And on.

The pluralistic and protean nature of global integration makes it a tough nut to crack. The catch-all term of “globalization,” which seeks to group these diverse processes under a single umbrella, can obscure as much as it illuminates. A book of this nature therefore risks devolving into mono-causality, the equivalent of a schoolchild’s excuse to the effect of “globalization ate my homework!” Rather than talk of a general and all-powerful globalization, this book focuses on three international phenomena that have played underappreciated roles in shaping the course of America’s transformative moments of political crisis.

The first is what we today call *national security*. The historical development of the United States, particularly in the crisis moments under examination in this book, has been decisively conditioned by geopolitical pressures, foreign threats, and imperial rivalry. The imperative of mobilizing resources and political support to counter threats and rivals shaped the institutions, practices, and culture of the United States. National security thus has been more than merely a question of diplomacy and foreign relations; it also has been a driver of domestic politics, state formation, and nationalist culture. The old view that the United States took root in a context of “free security” no longer holds.⁴ Indeed, for as much as we today remember the creation of “a more perfect union” in the 1780s as the culmination of America’s political ideology, the establishment of the United States was also a geopolitically motivated

⁴ For the classic articulation, see C. Vann Woodward, “The Age of Reinterpretation,” *The American Historical Review*, LXVI (October 1960). Woodward, it should be pointed out, sought to contrast the new nuclear age of the early Cold War era with what preceded it.

act intended to enhance the security of the imperiled former British colonies. Security pressures were similarly significant to the emergence of Southern separatism in the mid-nineteenth century and – perhaps most of all – the development of modern America in the volatile era of the mid-twentieth century. Important, as well, were moments characterized by an abrupt change in the international system, including those instances when foreign threats receded. It was no coincidence that the Civil War unfolded at a moment of newfound security for the Union, nor that the destructive partisanship and domestic divisions of our own era occurred to the backdrop of America’s Cold War triumph that briefly left it standing head and shoulders above all foreign adversaries.

The position of the United States within the *international economic system* is a second topic under consideration in the pages that follow. Over the course of the last two and a half centuries, the United States has been one of the greatest beneficiaries of the economic processes that we now call “globalization”: it has consistently attracted foreign capital at relatively low rates of interest; it has been a magnet for laborers seeking work; it has accessed lucrative foreign markets and resources, as well as attracted competitively priced imports. But though the international economy helped give rise to the U.S. economic juggernaut, it also has been the source of internal discord and political conflict. The United States has never been a discrete economic unit; rather, like most nations, it is a conglomeration of different economic interests, many of whom pursue their own objectives in the wider international economic order. The result has been intense political conflict over political economy and international finance. In some periods, it is likely that the political effects of the international economy have been greater than their material ones. The international economic order, in other words, has deepened internal divisions and contributed to political crisis even as it has made the United States the wealthiest nation in world history.

Last – but certainly not least – moments of dislocation and change in American history were inextricably connected to *immigration*, one of the defining features of the nation’s history. The two

decades in American history that witnessed the most compressed increase in the percentage of the population that was foreign born often comes as a surprise even to those familiar with U.S. history: the greatest such demographic shift occurred just before the Civil War in the decade of 1845-54, followed closely by the decade or so preceding the Revolution in the 1760s. Immigration in these periods was an agent of cultural change and – particularly in the mid-nineteenth century – a jolt that destabilized existing political institutions. In our present age that has witnessed a protracted increase in the percentage of the population that is foreign born, it should come as no surprise that immigration has been an explosive one in other periods of American history. Immigration has been of greater importance than merely functioning as a wedge issue debated by “native” Americans. Immigrants have arrived not to a static and monolithic society, but rather to one with its own social and racial fault-lines, not least those related to the practice and legacy of racial slavery. Those who arrived upon America’s shores brought with them new ideas and political possibilities, which intersected in unforeseen ways with existing social formations and tensions. Immigrants and their children have been decisive players in U.S. history. Their impact can be seen at the level of high politics, as well as from the bottom up. They have shaped the culture and politics of their new home just as much as it has changed their cultural practices and political perspectives.

III

The pages that follow sketch out a new interpretation of American history, one which zooms in on how the varied processes of global integration were entwined with the transformative crises that forged the nation. The book unfolds chronologically. Chapter One revisits the late-eighteenth century imperial crisis in which the thirteen American colonies broke from Britain and created a federal union committed to republican government and westward expansion. Rather than the inevitable result of the maturation of

American political institutions and thought, the Revolution was the unanticipated product of the acceleration of Atlantic integration. The mid-eighteenth century witnessed not a drifting apart from the mother country, but the complete opposite: a surge in immigration, a boom in transatlantic trade and consumption, a nationalist burst of transatlantic Britishness, and an abrupt reconfiguration of the geopolitical chessboard after the defeat of France in the Seven Years' War in 1763. The Atlantic shrank.

The ensuing American Revolution was less an anticolonial rebellion than a crisis of integration, a civil war that erupted over attempts to centralize old imperial structures that required adaptation in light of the new contexts of Atlantic integration and British ascendance in North America. Though a civil war, the outcome of the "Revolution" was one whose result was determined by its internationalization in 1778. The subsequent federal union that Americans constructed in the 1780s was a continuation of the attempt to find a middle ground between the ideological power of political de-centralization, on the one hand, and the state power necessary to keep the ship of state afloat in the stormy geopolitical waters of the era, on the other. This tight-rope act was more or less achieved in the two founding documents of 1787, the Constitution and the Northwest Ordinance, which have structured U.S. politics ever since. But the legacy of the American founding goes beyond these domestic political innovations. The political stabilization of the United States facilitated its re-integration into an emerging international order conditioned by British geopolitical and economic power. For all the future power of the United States, for all the traction of its liberal ideology and republican institutions, its greatest significance to the international system in the century or so after its independence might well be how it augmented the economic power of its former colonial master. We are conditioned to think of the early republic as a "rising empire," as George Washington called it. It also should be regarded as an "honorary dominion" of the British Empire.⁵

⁵ Richard W. Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960); A.G. Hopkins, "The United States, 1783-1861: Britain's Honorary Dominion?" *Britain and the World*, 4:2 (2011), pp. 232-246.

The next two chapters tell the story of the nation's great internal crisis – the mid-nineteenth century collapse of the Union and ensuing Civil War – from the outside-in. Slavery was the root cause of the crisis of the Union, of that there is no question. But as Chapter Two argues, changes in the external environment destabilized the Union, exposing it to the destructive force of the slavery question. The key developments here were the sections' divergent paths of integration into the international economy, a sudden surge in immigration that unsettled political institutions, and the Union's newfound geopolitical security, which intensified internal political divisions in ways reminiscent of how political tensions increased within the British Empire after the establishment of its North American ascendancy in 1763.

The American Civil War, as Chapter Three points out, unfolded within a broader context of contested national formation in a world order characterized by accelerating economic integration and resurgent European imperialism. The outcome of the Civil War hinged not only upon the great battles, but also the policies of foreign powers, the diplomacy of the North and the South, and, perhaps most underappreciated of all, the foreign-born immigrants who, along with African Americans, gave the Union the muscle it needed to crush the South's powerful rebellion. When the dust settled, the newly consolidated and anti-slavery Union re-entered the international system having demonstrated its ability to mobilize its nascent power along national lines. The dominant international legacy of the Civil War, however, was not yet the outward projection of U.S. power, though there were portents of this in the late nineteenth century. The chief international legacy of the war was the acceleration of the processes that had long characterized America's position on global flow charts. The United States became the globe's black-hole in the decades after 1865, sucking in immigrants and investment capital, particularly to its rapidly developing West, expanding in the process the demographic and economic foundations of its future power.

Chapter Four turns to the protracted crisis of the mid-twentieth century, a tumultuous era of financial collapse, economic depression, and world war. The United States encountered this perilous

context having gone through a profound and underappreciated shift in its international position in the aftermath of the First World War. America suddenly lurched from being the world's greatest debtor nation to its most significant creditor; it slammed shut its "golden door," reducing immigration from the Old World to a mere trickle; it only partially engaged with – if not recoiled from altogether – the new international institutions and problems that dominated the great power politics of the interwar years. This inward turn conditioned the political and international transformations that unfolded in the ensuing decades: the inward focus and political realignments of the New Deal, the emergence of a new conception of national security that viewed foreign threats in relation to internal stability, and the creation of a fervently nationalist culture that established the political context for the assumption of new international commitments in the 1940s. The crisis of the mid-twentieth century generated a curious result: a socially diverse "superpower" with unprecedented economic might and a truly global footprint, but one whose culture and politics was nonetheless strikingly inward-looking, nationalistic, and self-referential. Thus began the "American century."

Or what now appears destined to be called the "American three-quarters of a century." It is now impossible to ignore the tremors beneath our feet, the foreshocks to what might well be the major quake that is to come. The concluding chapter follows the analytic trajectory of those that precede it by considering how our current political crisis is entangled within the international webs of modern global integration. History does not repeat itself, Mark Twain is said to have mused, but it does rhyme. The shocks of our era have distinctive backstories and implications, but they loosely resemble those of the past in their entwinement with national security (9/11 and geopolitical volatility), the international economic order (the 2008 financial collapse and the accelerating socioeconomic divide), and immigration (the primary driver of the nationalist populism of our time). For all of its self-referential nationalism, for all the talk of the "exceptionalism" of the "indispensable nation," the public life of the United States is one profoundly shaped by the wider world. We could see it in the post-9/11 color coded

threat advisory system (“can a brother get yellow, just for like two months?”), in our entanglement in the volatile markets of high finance, in the divisive debates over immigration, trade deals, and the legitimacy of international institutions that have arisen around the world; in the technological innovations that have brought us into instantaneous contact with people around the world – including hostile foreign powers intent on undermining our political institutions. Of all the sobering lessons of recent years, the most disturbing one is the realization that the diffusion of power in the global system has heightened, rather than decreased, risks. The concluding chapter does not attempt to predict what will happen next, but by bringing an historically informed perspective to the table it will provide those who are better at prediction making with the necessary perspective to understand how we have arrived at the crossroads of the present.

What follows makes no attempt to provide comprehensive coverage of U.S. history. Rather, it is argument-driven and explorative, even speculative in places; a long essay that is liberated from the shackles of coverage and that elusive quest of the historian to have the final word. The point here is not to develop an overarching theory that explains everything in U.S. history, but to see how America’s greatest moments of transformation related to external pressures and stimuli, to re-watch a familiar game from those new seats in the outfield.

Rather than attempt to place the artillery of history on one side of current political trench-lines, this book shows how a fresh look at the past can scramble and unsettle what appear to be unmovable lines of contemporary division. Seen from the vantage of transnational integration, the history of the United States is not the linear story of progress that it is often assumed to be today. Nor is it an ongoing

struggle between the ancestors of today's liberals and conservatives. Rather, it is the history of a nation forged by crises whose roots and implications extended far beyond its borders.