

The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age.
By Richard White (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) Pp. 941. Hardcover, \$35.00

Renowned historian Richard White delivers an exhilarating narrative in a period of American history that undergraduates typically label “boring” in *The Republic for Which It Stands*, the newest edition to the *Oxford History of the United States* series. In this towering tome of nearly one thousand pages White expertly captures the breadth of the United States in the decades following the Civil War. Mercifully, the author chose to include footnotes, rather than endnotes. This period has long been considered “historical flyover country” by scholars. (2) Scholars left the Civil War and Reconstruction to fly straight into the twentieth century and Progressivism. The author notes in his introduction that this trend has changed recently, and with the publication of this book, it should be apparent to anyone that this Age is worth investigation. White’s exhaustive and encyclopedic synthesis of Reconstruction and the Gilded Age is a monumental achievement.

The Republic for Which It Stands is divided chronologically into three parts. “Part I: Reconstructing the Nation” contains nine chapters, including a prologue, that begin with the nation-wide mourning of President Lincoln and chronologically follow the nation through Reconstruction. “Part II: The Quest for Prosperity” comprises ten chapters covering events from the American centennial of 1876 to the next decade. “Part III: The Crisis Arrives” covers the final years to 1896. There are an additional thirty-two high gloss pages of images in the middle of the book illustrating representative topics. And there is a smattering of maps, images, and charts throughout the volume.

The topics that White elucidates in this book are nearly exhaustive. Through every chapter the author details history through the lens of labor, immigration, politics, and society, among many more. Given White’s scholarly background as an historian of the American West, he spends significant time reminding the reader about the activities west of the Mississippi River, something undergraduates and popular audiences might often forget about in this tumultuous time in American history.

The greatest strength of this book is in the great amounts of detail contained in every chapter. The author covers not just the major events, but also movements, culture, and economics, among other topics. This book, like the previous additions to the Oxford series, reads as a play-by-play of nearly every event in American history in the time period. While the total number of pages may seem overwhelming to some, there is no doubt that this should now be the standard that any historian working on a topic in this timeframe needs to consult at the start of his or her project. Another, less obvious strength of this book is its readability. In today’s historical monographs rife with academic jargon, *The Republic for Which It Stands* is a breath of fresh air.

There is no shortage of historical actors or events throughout the book to keep the interest of anyone with even a fleeting interest in late nineteenth century history. The obvious actor that stands at the beginning and end of this whole period is Abraham Lincoln, who appears on no fewer than fifty pages. Jane Addams, Samuel Gompers, and Philip Sheridan are other consistent players in this book whom any student of history should immediately recognize. Alongside these actors are events, memories, and movements such as the memory of

the Civil War, labor problems, and social issues that form the backdrop of this half century.

Admittedly, even a tome of almost one thousand pages cannot be completely exhaustive for a period as large as almost fifty years of American history. White responds to this issue by suggesting further sources to consult for a full account of some events which he does, for example, for the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case on page 741, note 30. These further sources in the notes are in addition to the twenty-eight page bibliographic essay at the end of the book.

The author's conclusions about Reconstruction and the Gilded Age are a little cynical, generally. In one example, White notes that for all of the great ideas that the Republican Party held at the time Lincoln was assassinated, they seemed to have failed and the United States was less democratic at the end of the nineteenth century than it had been when the Fifteenth Amendment was initially ratified. One of the backdrops to the entire period under review is the American collective memory of the Civil War, which the author notes was another disappointment of the Age. The Lost Cause mythos that developed in the southern states discounted the actual reasons for the war, while the memory of Lincoln himself was distorted from the Commander-in-chief of "avenging Union armies" to "Lincoln the pioneer" as the country looked westward to find a new meaning.¹

These cynical qualms aside, *The Republic for Which It Stands* will undoubtedly remain the standard for Reconstruction and the Gilded Age for the foreseeable future. Professor White delivers a delightful account of the final decades of the 1800s accessible to both academic and popular audiences. Graduate students will marvel at the bibliographic essay while history buffs will get caught up in the narrative prose. This book is a welcome addition to the historiography of Reconstruction and the Gilded Age.

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¹ Richard White, *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-1896* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2017), 861.