

The New York Times

NONFICTION

Before the Civil War, America Was a 'House Divided' in More Ways Than One

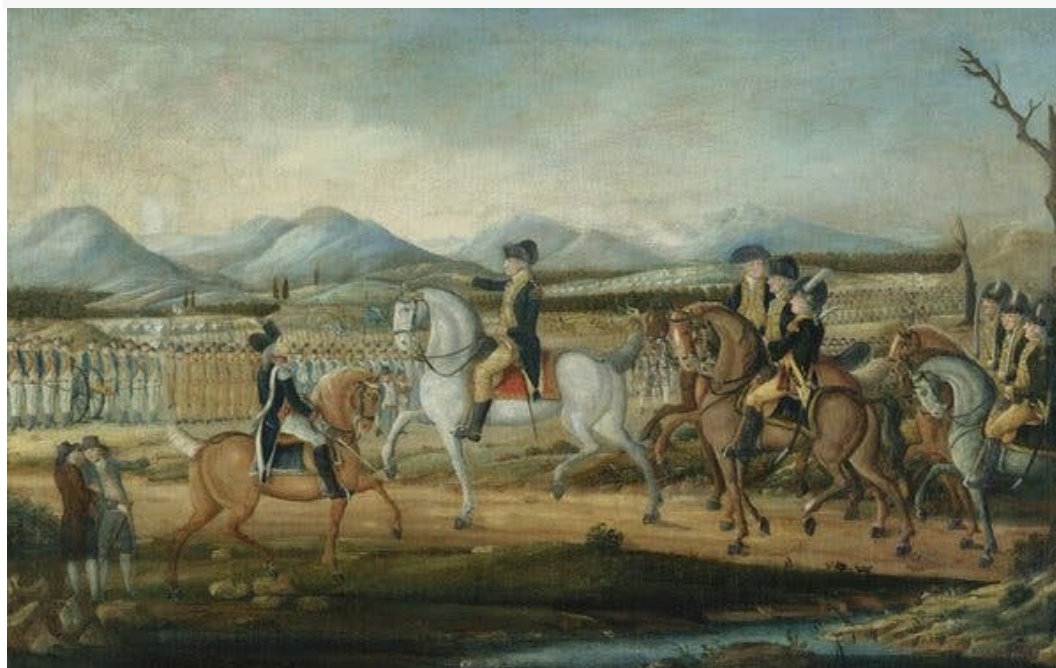
By David S. Reynolds

- May 18, 2021

AMERICAN REPUBLICS

A Continental History of the United States, 1783-1850

By Alan Taylor



George Washington marches to suppress the Whiskey Rebellion. Credit...Metropolitan Museum of Art

As politically and culturally divided as America is today, there was a time when it was even more so. In 1858, Abraham Lincoln captured the unprecedented peril the nation faced when he quoted Matthew 12:25: “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” The Civil War, which took 750,000 American lives, was the bloody outcome of the divide over slavery. As tragic as it was, the war had the positive outcome of pointing the nation toward civil rights for Black citizens.

In his stimulating new book, “American Republics,” the [historian Alan Taylor](#) takes us back to the decades before the Civil War, when America was not so much divided as it was fragmented. Covering the period between 1783, when the American Revolution ended, and 1850, when Congress passed compromise bills aimed (futilely) at saving the Union, Taylor describes a nation that was, in his words, “built on an unstable foundation of rival regions and an ambiguous Constitution.” In this “always-imperiled” country, as Taylor calls it, it seemed as if civil war could break out at any time between East and West or between North and South. Many histories of this important interregnum period have been written, but none emphasizes the fragility of the American experiment as strongly as Taylor’s book does.

It was a time when the primary presence of the national government in the everyday lives of Americans was the Postal Service. A general mistrust of federal authority bred passionate loyalty to one’s state. A Massachusetts politician declared: “Instead of feeling as a nation, a state is our country. We look with indifference, often with hatred, fear and aversion to the other states.” The fledgling states, Taylor demonstrates, lacked common bonds. He writes, “Carolinians resented Virginians almost as much as New Yorkers despised New Englanders.”

Even within individual states or among social groups, hostilities flared. In the 1780s, stringent economic conditions in western Massachusetts gave rise to [Shay’s Rebellion](#), in which debt-ridden farmers rose up in armed protest against state taxes. The rebellion was a warning sign of potential anarchy that contributed to the calling of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, which enhanced the power of the federal government — power that President George Washington put to use in 1794 when he enlisted 15,000 state militiamen to quell the so-called [Whiskey Rebellion](#), in which backcountry farmers from Pennsylvania down to Georgia staged an insurrection in anger over an excise tax on alcohol.

Taylor, acutely sensitive to such strains on the national fabric, traces the continuing conflict between competing visions of democracy: the Hamiltonian, which favored centralization and rule by the social elite; and the Jeffersonian, skeptical of national power and devoted to states’ rights and the common man. The overall drift of American politics, as Taylor points out, was toward democratization, epitomized by the populist Andrew Jackson, who served two terms as president (1829-37).

Taylor's special contribution in "American Republics" is his capacity for panning out to capture major historical trends. Not only does he cover about five decades in a relatively concise 384 pages of text, but he discusses events and people in various sections of the nation and in Canada and Mexico as well. The result of this broad-spectrum approach is, as Taylor's subtitle indicates, a truly continental history.

To the north, the British-ruled Canada was a tempting target for the United States. Thomas Jefferson said in 1812 that "the acquisition of Canada, this year, as far as the neighborhood of Quebec, will be a mere matter of marching." Others who envisaged a takeover of Canada, Taylor tells us, included the [Vermont politician Ira Allen](#) (brother of the famous Ethan), who schemed to form his own nation, United Columbia, by combining his state with Canada, and the Scottish-born Canadian [William Lyon MacKenzie](#), who organized secret lodges in the Northern United States with the idea of invading Canada and forming an independent country. Meanwhile, British loyalists in Canada mocked America as a hypocritical nation that boasted about liberty and equality but held millions of Black people in slavery.

To the south, Mexico was a magnifying mirror of America's instability. Recent historians have pointed out that Mexico, where slavery was abolished by law, was a desirable haven for enslaved people who fled from their Southern masters. True, Taylor argues, but economic inequality was far worse in Mexico than in the United States. So was political instability. Between 1822 and 1847, Taylor reports, Mexico witnessed 50 coups, many of them led by the magnetic but incompetent [Antonio López de Santa Anna](#), who became the nation's leader no less than 11 times.

Taylor's discussion of Mexico leads to his account of the Mexican-American War (1846-48), a conflict provoked by pro-slavery Southerners who wanted to seize the vast western lands then governed by Mexico. The war, which the United States won, resulted in the acquisition of territories that eventually became the states of Texas, California, Nevada, New Mexico, Arizona and Utah, as well as portions of five other future states. But gaining these territories raised a crucial question: Would slavery be allowed in them? The South's answer was a resounding yes, the antislavery North's, an increasingly vehement no. And so, the formerly fragmented nation was well on its way to becoming the House Divided.

In some of his former writings, like his Pulitzer Prize-winning books "William Cooper's Town" (about land development and society in central New York after the American Revolution) and "The Internal Enemy" (on enslaved Black Virginians who fled to British lines during the War of 1812), Taylor has proved himself adept in focused, suggestive microhistory. In "American Republics" he shows his skill in producing an expansive overview that synthesizes discoveries by historians, including himself. Taylor's citations of primary sources in "American Republics" are mostly quotations from other history books; phrases like "quoted in [such-and-such a book or article by so-and-so]" are used numerous times, providing readers with many leads for exploring areas of their own interest.

Taylor gives a nod to cultural history in his brief mention of the artists Thomas Cole and John Banvard, religious movements like Shakerism and Millerism, and writers like Cooper, Irving, Poe and Emerson. For those who want more information about these or other topics, Taylor's copious endnotes are a useful guide.

Whether as a gloss of received historical wisdom or as an overview whose originality lies in its comprehensiveness, "American Republics" succeeds admirably.

David S. Reynolds is a distinguished professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His latest book is "Abe: Abraham Lincoln in His Times."