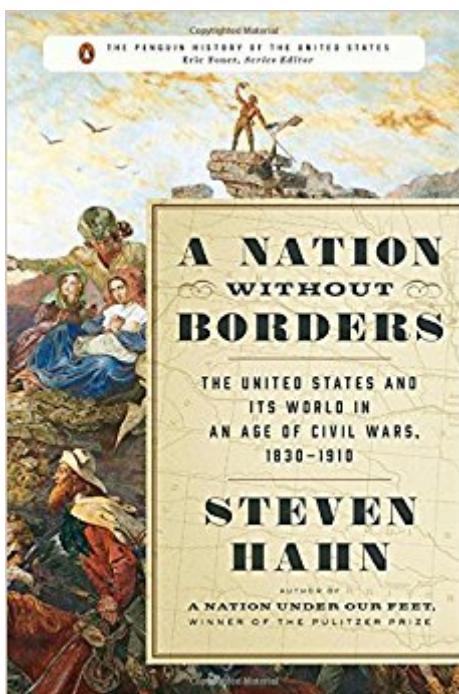


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# A Nation Without Borders: The United States And Its World In An Age Of Civil Wars, 1830-1910 (The Penguin History Of The United States)



## Synopsis

A Pulitzer Prize–winning historian's "breathtakingly original" (Junot Diaz) reinterpretation of the eight decades surrounding the Civil War. "Capacious [and] buzzing with ideas." --The Boston Globe Volume 3 in the Penguin History of the United States, edited by Eric Foner In this ambitious story of American imperial conquest and capitalist development, Pulitzer Prize–winning historian Steven Hahn takes on the conventional histories of the nineteenth century and offers a perspective that promises to be as enduring as it is controversial. It begins and ends in Mexico and, throughout, is internationalist in orientation. It challenges the political narrative of "sectionalism," emphasizing the national footing of slavery and the struggle between the northeast and Mississippi Valley for continental supremacy. It places the Civil War in the context of many domestic rebellions against state authority, including those of Native Americans. It fully incorporates the trans-Mississippi west, suggesting the importance of the Pacific to the imperial vision of political leaders and of the west as a proving ground for later imperial projects overseas. It reconfigures the history of capitalism, insisting on the centrality of state formation and slave emancipation to its consolidation. And it identifies a sweeping era of "reconstructions" in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that simultaneously laid the foundations for corporate liberalism and social democracy. The era from 1830 to 1910 witnessed massive transformations in how people lived, worked, thought about themselves, and struggled to thrive. It also witnessed the birth of economic and political institutions that still shape our world. From an agricultural society with a weak central government, the United States became an urban and industrial society in which government assumed a greater and greater role in the framing of social and economic life. As the book ends, the United States, now a global economic and political power, encounters massive warfare between imperial powers in Europe and a massive revolution on its southern border—the remarkable Mexican Revolution—which together brought the nineteenth century to a close while marking the important themes of the twentieth.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“A massive and masterly account of America’s political and economic transformation between 1830 and 1910 . . . Hahn describes his book as telling a familiar story in an unfamiliar way. It is much more than that. Attempting a synthesis of a century’s worth of American history is a daunting task. Writing one as provocative and learned . . . as this one is a triumph, nothing less.” •David Oshinsky, *The Washington Post* “Rarely has there been a more forthright challenge to old stereotypes than in Steven Hahn’s *A Nation Without Borders*, his distinguished volume in the Penguin History of the United States on the period 1830-1910 . . . rich in insight on the making of the US during a crucial period.” •Peter Clarke, *Financial Times* “Vivid detail . . . *A Nation Without Borders* is a detailed, dense . . . His chronicle is breathtaking in its scope and brilliant in its subtle and original conceptualization of the nation during this period. It is often affecting, too, especially in its descriptions of labor activism . . . There is a cautionary tale here for our own time.” •John Stauffer, *The Wall Street Journal* “In his comprehensive *A Nation Without Borders*, Hahn . . . provides the most sweeping indictment to date of the American appetite for conquest.” •The New York Times Book Review “Capacious [and] buzzing with ideas.” •The Boston Globe “Brisk and thought-provoking . . . Readable and illuminating, and Hahn’s thesis will lead many writers, students, and history buffs to rethink what they have learned from a new perspective.” •The Weekly Standard “This breathtakingly original history of the United States . . . which begins and ends in Mexico, naturally . . . strikes like lightning. It illuminates the complex sweep of forces that came together in the decades surrounding the Civil War to forge the American nation. Only Hahn could have written such a revelatory book.” •Junot Diaz, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Brief Wondrous Life of*

Oscar Wao" This magisterial and authoritative monograph is a must-read for anyone interested in U.S. history." *Library Journal* (starred review)"A compelling examination of the long, divisive road to America's emergence, in 1919, as 'the most formidable power in the world.'" *Kirkus*"Given Hahn's unimpeachable body of knowledge, readers can be confident that they're getting the most current understanding of the history of the U.S.bears reading by all serious students of the American past." *Publishers Weekly*"A bold reinterpretation of the American nineteenth century, this tour de force bristles with fresh insights gained from often surprising vantage points... It confirms Hahn's position as one of the most important interpreters of the American experience. A must read for anyone interested in the history of the United States." *Sven Beckert*, author of *Empire of Cotton*"Steven Hahn has given us an ambitious and marvelously grounded rethinking of our history during eighty of its most turbulent, violent and creative years. It challenges some of our most fundamental predilections and reimagines how the nation we know came to be. It is guaranteed to rearrange your mental furniture." *Elliott West*, author of *The Contested Plains*

Steven Hahn is a professor of history at New York University. His previous work of history, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, received the Pulitzer Prize in History (2004), the Bancroft Prize in History (2004), and the Merle Curti Prize in Social History (2004), and was a finalist for the Lincoln Prize and Frederick Douglass Prize. His other books include *The Political Roots of Slavery and Freedom* and *The Roots of Southern Populism*. He formerly taught at the University of Pennsylvania.

This is the third volume of the Penguin History of the United States. It covers a large chunk of American history, from the early 19th century to just prior to WWI. In large part because of the large extent of the period discussed, this book is uneven. Hahn adopts a hybrid chronological-thematic form of organizing the text. The individual chapters are largely devoted to exploring major themes as they arose in chronological context. The initial chapters on the antebellum US cover the nature of US expansion, the impacts, both political and economic, of slavery, the increasing penetration of market economies in American life, and the demise of the decentralized state in the great sectional conflicts that led to the Civil War. Chapters of the second half cover the Civil War, the development of a more powerful central state, the great advance, in large part on the back of an increasingly powerful state, of industrial capitalism, and the variety of reform and other reactions to these immense social changes. Hahn attempts a consistent theme throughout the chapters, which is that

of constant expansion, a form of imperialism. Many of the individual chapters and sections are very good. Much of the second half of the book, Hahn's area of expertise, is particularly good. The sections dealing with industrialization, the changes in the US political system, and the diverse and often contradictory nature of reform movements are excellent. These sections are really the best overviews of these complex subjects that I've read. This book, however, falls between two stools. As a survey, it is a failure. Because of the long period covered, it simply doesn't have the necessary narrative to be an adequate basic introduction. As a more analytic book focused on major themes, it is more successful but suffers from including too much narrative. A more successful analytic book would have to be shorter and more focused on major themes. A lot of Hahn's discussions are well worth reading but will only be really intelligible to individuals with a good background knowledge of American history. There are other defects. Hahn (and the reviewers' quotes on the dust jacket) tout this as a new interpretation. Its not. Hahn's emphasis on "empire" is hardly novel, as can be seen by looking at the list of books (some published decades ago) in the excellent bibliography. In addition, and as is unfortunately common, the term empire is used in such a general way as to be useless as an analytic category. The book promises some kind of broad comparative perspective, but other than short and actually superfluous introductory and epilogue sections dealing with Mexico, there is little comparative analysis in this book. If, for example, you were taking the idea of empire seriously in comparative perspective, you'd have to discuss what made the expansion of the American *herrenvolk* republic different compared to, say, imperial Russia or the Argentine expansion into the Pampas. As is common among historians, there is little use of quantitative data. A few charts on population growth, economic statistics, etc., would be very useful and markedly enhance the discussions in the text. To be fair, writing a major survey is very difficult and I suspect that Hahn was not responsible for the excessively ambitious choice of period. For individuals looking for strong major surveys, I can't recommend this book. I think readers' time would be better spent on the relevant books in the outstanding Oxford History of the US series. The Oxford series, however, hasn't issued the volumes dealing the aftermath of the Civil War and the ensuing decades. For that period, I would read an introductory text such as Alan Brinkley's fine book and then the relevant chapters of this book.

thanks

A revelatory read.

A groundbreaking survey of the growth of the American empire. I have never read any book of history which so dramatically described the efforts of the American slaves to fight for their freedom. It is equally valuable as a history of American policy toward its indigenous people. The book is unsparing in its description of the Army's wars of extermination of our native people.. The book also gives unique histories of the American wars with Mexico, and its naked aggrandizement in seizing Hawaii and the Philippines. More importantly author traces the long running conflict between ordinary Americans and the corporate world. I highly recommend it. Alvin ZiontzSeattle, Wa.

Hahn provides a captivating and original account of 19th century U.S. history that places the West at the epicenter of the related processes of nation building and capitalist transformation. This is a remarkable work of synthesis and reinterpretation.

An important and challenging book, abolishing many of the time-worn pieties of our history. Reading it together with Ibram X. Kendi's *Stamped from the Beginning*, another remarkable piece of scholarship, was particularly helpful.

The weakness of this book is not that it is clearly not a narrative or survey history of the period between 1830 and 1910, but that even the themes underlying the book are so often weak. The book fills 500 pages with an 18 page epilog before bibliography, notes, and index but the distribution of topics is poor for the 500 pages. Ostensibly covering to 1910, according to its subtitle, mention of McKinley and Roosevelt and the events of Cuba and the Philippines are not significantly discussed until well into the 400s of pages; Cuba and the Philippines not until page 488. Hayes and the issues of 1877 not discussed until page 376 (75% into the text). There is some good presentation of material setting up the Civil War and Reconstruction, but ultimately the book is a disappointment because of its unevenness of coverage' can't really claim to cover the years contained in the subtitle. Might be 2.5 stars, but closer to 2 than 3 stars.

Not even? Yes. However, I would still contend that this is worth someone's read if they are looking for a general introduction to the American experience from Reconstruction through World War Two. That being said they should not expect a very detailed analysis of events taking place after the 1880s.

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