A Short History of America

From Tea Party to Trump



Simon Jenkins

A Short History of America

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To the memory of Gayle, a true Texan

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Louisiana Purchase, 1803–4
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Author's Note

The word 'America' in my title and throughout this book is common usage for the United States of America. The same applies to the epithet American. The book also covers the story of the North American continent as a whole prior to the War of Independence and the formation of the United States.

The words used to refer to different races have changed many times throughout history, and today's most appropriate usage is not a settled debate. For example, indigenous tribes long referred to as Indians are now customarily called Native Americans, though their statistics are still gathered by the National Congress of American Indians. I use modern terminology unless I am quoting historical texts where the now-outdated term is integral to the intended meaning of the quote.

The book is written in British English not American English. Hence my use of British spellings and the absence of railroads, sidewalks and subways in their American meaning.

This is not an academic work and its sources are secondary rather than primary, but I have tried to indicate the authors of quotes and other material in the text. The Further Reading section indicates the range of books on which I have drawn. The dates of significant individuals are given, except in the case of presidents, where the dates are of their terms of office.

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Introduction

The United States of America began life in the eighteenth century on a sliver of land on the North American continent. That continent had long been settled by peoples out of Asia and was not occupied by Europeans until the sixteenth century. The settlers came initially from Spain, moving up from the Caribbean, to be followed by the French to the north and the English along the Atlantic coast. By far the most numerous were the English, arriving in their thousands from a country they felt could not tolerate their beliefs or respond to their dreams. They came primarily as farmers and formed what became vigorous self-governing communities.

American history constantly reverts to these beginnings, to the ambitions of the early settlers and their so-called Founding Fathers. Emanating chiefly from the east-coast colonies of Virginia and Massachusetts, these individuals, some wealthy, others pious, wedded themselves to classical history and Enlightenment philosophy. Their intention was twofold: to formulate an ideology of political freedom and to create a constitution that would join their scattered settlements in a secure union.

The first, a eulogy of liberty and equality, was noble but partial. The Virginians were slave-owners and the colonists had scant respect for the Native peoples they were soon to drive into near oblivion. The second intention was specific. It was to enable thirteen self-governing colonies to combine in such a way as to form a confederacy yet retain their individual character and self-government.

The resulting document is a work of political architecture that I believe holds the single key to America's story. It contrived to bind together a group of small agrarian communities isolated far from their ancestral homes, and yet the same architecture was to sustain what became the most powerful country on earth. One of the

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constitution's creators, Alexander Hamilton, insisted it be called an experiment, designed to find a way of devolving power among the communities, or states, and with the centre that honoured local democratic autonomy. The result was a civil war. But the union has lasted to this day and could serve as a model to nations still sundered by the strains of political union. They include many in the Europe America was founded to escape, not least the United Kingdom.

To the rights awarded to states under the US constitution was added a further safeguard: the separation of powers within the central government. Its institutions were checked and balanced in a triumvirate of the president and two houses of Congress. Though the price was often inertia and stalemate, this curbed the centralizing tendencies that have dragged so many powerful states down the road to dictatorship. Even today, America has not taken that path. That is why I treat its constitution as the leitmotif of its history, even as it is under peculiar strain as I write.

As America came to draw population from a wide variety of nations and peoples, it has always coated its history in patriotism. It has elevated its heroic events and dressed them in myth, which in turn has opened them to controversy. From Jamestown and the *Mayflower* to the Boston Tea Party and Yorktown, the national story follows an often exhilarating course. Each age has been christened with a title, as in the City upon a Hill, the Frontier Spirit, the Gilded Age, the Roaring Twenties. Its early years are fleshed out with personalities, from Pocahontas and John Smith to George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. The very word 'America' evokes images of Pilgrim Fathers, cowboys and Indians, Mississippi steamboats, the Italian Mafia and the Hollywood sign.

Controversy has never been far behind. From the enslavement of imported Africans after 1619 to the extermination of the Pequot and other tribes in 1638 there is often another side to be told. Jefferson's 'empire of liberty' was to many a war of violent conquest. Traditional histories rarely mention George III's ban on trans-Appalachian expansion. The Civil War and Reconstruction require constant reinterpretation, as do the Mexican and Sioux wars. There was a dark

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side even to American prosperity, from the railway monopolists and robber barons to the handling of the Great Depression. In this history, I have tried to balance these still-sensitive issues.

What is incontrovertible is that by the turn of the twentieth century an America had emerged that was a global phenomenon. The laws of supply and demand, fuelled by a constant influx of labour, capital and raw materials, had begun producing wealth beyond the world's imaginings. At one point 80 per cent of all motor cars were being made – and driven – in America. For a brief spell during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, the country even began a tentative empire of its own beyond the borders of North America.

A growing self-confidence was boosted by America's participation in the twentieth century's two world wars and the subsequent Cold War. Their outcome projected the nation into an age when military power was newly defined and deployed. Though America was geographically secure, it felt the need for a defence establishment unrivalled on earth. It was to defend in alliance with others the values inherited from its Founding Fathers against 'the forces of evil' anywhere on the planet.

Following the USSR's defeat in the Cold War, Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet president, asked 'what America would do now for an enemy'. There have been many analyses of America's answer. The concept of policing a 'new world order' advanced by successive occupants of the White House has had a relatively brief life. It seemed at times as if America was judge, jury and executioner to the world, especially after the trauma of 9/11 and failures in Iraq and Afghanistan. Successive presidents have seemed deaf to the pleas of their founder, George Washington, to steer clear of foreign conflicts, even as one intervention after another ended in failure.

The struggle over whether and when to intervene has gone back to the birth of the United States. It has been a struggle between the isolationism of the early Virginians and the missionary ambition of their Massachusetts colleagues. It is easy to admire the latter, and their desire to export values of liberty and democracy to the rest of the world. The manner of doing so – with increasing

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belligerence – has been controversial. As it is, interventionists fight with isolationists, warriors with peacemakers, global philanthropists with those committed to the country's self-interest. The ever uncertain outcome of this argument is the essence of America's recent history, rarely more so than at the time when this book was written. I only hope that a better understanding of the past leads to the same of the present.

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Out of Asia

Before 1492

The scene is a muddy shoreline of a lake in White Sands, New Mexico, and the time is some 23,000 years ago. It is of the footprints of a woman leading, sometimes carrying, a child for at least a mile amid the prints of mammoths and sloths. The wonders of archaeology have enabled the pollen and other substances attached to the prints to be dated with relative precision. They are the earliest known traces of human occupation on the American continent.

These prints, discovered in 2009, are now inaccessible but moulds of them are displayed in an adjacent museum. Even detached from their setting, they convey an eerie intimacy. We appear to be walking alongside them, witnessing fellow human beings journeying through life and leaving their mark on the sands of time. To see them is intensely moving.

The history of the nation that now occupies that land – the United States of America – is known to a degree shared by few others, if only because it is so comparatively short. Its two and a half centuries are, for the most part, openly recorded, but of the continent on which that union settled and of its earliest peoples we know little. Until the turn of the twenty-first century it was generally thought that the two American continents, north and south, were first occupied between 15,000 and 14,000 years ago. The earliest signs of human habitation were traces of stone tools embedded in the datable skeletons of mastodons and mammoths. Their users were held to be immigrants from Siberia, crossing a previously frozen land bridge known as Beringia, where is now the Bering Strait, into

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Alaska. Genetic archaeology has confirmed that the first Americans were unquestionably of Asian origin.

This period of occupation was associated with finds in the 1920s in Clovis, New Mexico, but the so-called Clovis culture has now been superseded as the continent's first. The sciences of radiocarbon dating and DNA sequencing have unearthed earlier activities associated with camps, animal traps, tools and seeds. From Idaho in the north to Chile in the south, evidence of human occupation is dated as far back as possibly 33,000 years ago. That date, currently the earliest recorded, applies to tools found in Chiquihuite, a cave in central Mexico, though it remains controversial. What we can say for sure is that the New Mexico footprints are the first traces of actual human beings so far discovered on North or South American soil.

The footprints have been attributed to 'a failed colonization which may well have left no genetically detectable heritage'. Some have even suggested they might have followed a migration by Polynesians (originally from Asia) journeying across the Pacific. As for the earliest known remains of an actual person, that title rests with the bones of a small boy found in Montana in 1968. Known as the Anzick child after the farm where he was discovered, he is just 12,600 years old. His DNA has been related both to Siberia and to South America. Anzick is the oldest known American.

These early inhabitants would have been groups of hunter-gatherers who moved south from Beringia either down the west coast of America – since dubbed the 'kelp highway' – or down an ice-free corridor to the south-western prairies east of the Rocky Mountains. Climate change would have led the newcomers ever further south, eventually into central and southern America. Here they evolved into the Maya, Toltec, Inca and Aztec peoples.

Those who turned east into North America were long a mystery. They would have moved in family groups in pursuit of wild game, with little need to combine into large tribes for reasons of succour or security. That is probably why the National Congress of American Indians has, with the aid of scholarship, managed to identify as many as 574 distinct Native American tribes inhabiting various parts

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of what is now the United States of America, of which 229 are in Alaska. Over millennia they made their way into the Great Plains and the Mississippi Basin, possibly driven by the gradual extinction of mammoths and other beasts on which they depended. Where they came across fertile soil they began to settle. They found copper and developed pottery and weaving.

Attempts to categorize the phases of American prehistory along the lines of Europe's variously distinct 'ages' of Stone, Bronze and Iron have proved elusive. All that is known is that human settlement was taking place across North America as early as thirteen millennia ago, with ever greater complexity. At Watson Brake in Louisiana, mounds and pits associated with static communities and religious ceremonies have been dated to 5,500 years ago. These are older than either Egypt's pyramids or England's Stonehenge and suggest that North America had communities that developed in parallel with their better-known counterparts in South America. These so-called 'mound cultures' were spread across the Mississippi Basin for thousands of years.

Ancient Americans may have lacked the three chief agents of change in European and Asian societies – iron, horses and writing – but this did not appear to impede their development of subsistence farming and territorial settlement. There remains an aura of suspense surrounding American prehistory, as we wait in hope for science one day to reveal people and activities as yet undiscovered. Of all the rights of the world's indigenous peoples, the most fundamental is the right to a history. But where that history resides only in mounds, pits, tools and seeds, the challenge of painting a detailed picture remains great indeed.

As we advance over time through what is termed the Common Era that began 2,000 years ago, one of the oldest and possibly the largest of North America's known settlements survives at Cahokia in Illinois. This is located at the junction of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers near the present city of St Louis. It dates from *c*.900–1350 CE and was clearly a major concentration of people. Research has yielded a 'built-up area' of some six square miles, spread round a

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palisaded enclave. The city appears to have comprised 120 ceremonial earthen mounds and building clusters, some with courtyards and even steam baths.

Cahokia was constructed on a grid pattern with no outer defences. At its peak in *c.*1100, contemporary with Europe's Norman period, it is estimated to have housed between 10,000 and 20,000 people. The outer settled area may have embraced many more, possibly double this number. At the centre, Cahokia's Monks Mound pyramid would have risen a hundred feet, half the estimated height of Mexico City's lost Tenochtitlan. Its base was equal in size to that of Egypt's Great Pyramid at Giza and overlooked what would have been a plaza of fifty acres. Another, Mound 72, contained the 'birdman tomb', wherein a figure with bird-like mask and wings was interred with dozens of apparent acolytes and shell jewellery *c.*950. The inhabitants left no writing, but their funerary carving indicates a talent for decoration.

There has been much debate over how stable was the hierarchy that prevailed over Cahokia. Such a large settlement suggests a complex society with a developed leadership. It is hard to believe it was not preceded by other settlements now unknown. They clearly indulged in human sacrifice, with some 270 victims over six episodes discovered in Mound 72. Such activities would have required a degree of authority and order, not to mention an economy able to produce and distribute food. Cahokia's pre-eminence may have depended on the presence of its two rivers. Trade by water was easier than trade by land. We know that copperware was exported north to the Great Lakes and south to the Gulf of Mexico. What is clear at least is that North America at the end of the first millennium was host to a city bigger than London or Paris at the time.

The decline of this remarkable place was probably due to climate change, possibly associated with the Little Ice Age in the fourteenth century. There was a brief resurgence in the seventeenth century when the settlement was visited by French explorers, whose more pious element gave the Monks Mound its name by living next to it, and they named the neighbouring colony after their king, Louis.

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Even after Cahokia's abandonment, the Mississippi culture survived in the basin's Natchez and Choctaw peoples. The Natchez were remarkable for a language apparently unrelated to other Native tongues. They became allies of the French colonists of the basin. Relations deteriorated in the early eighteenth century and an uprising in 1729 led to widespread massacres by the colonists. The French transported thousands of Natchez into Caribbean slavery.

Though smaller than Cahokia, the settlement of the Pueblo branch of the Navajo people at Chaco Canyon in New Mexico has the advantage of stone structures still standing. Founded *c*.850, the population at its twelfth-century peak was estimated to be 15,000. The buildings are closely packed and circular, many two storeys high but ruined and roofless. They appear to be honeycombed with apartments, while below them are underground kivas or ceremonial chambers. The stone-walled Chetro Ketl appears to be one such kiva.

On the outskirts stands the semicircular Pueblo Bonito, apparently a palace compound containing some three hundred rooms. Inside were found the skeletons of nine of the city's matrilineal rulers. Another palace, Pueblo Pintado, appears to have been of sumptuous size, one of some 150 such great houses linked by roads in the surrounding desert. With their surviving walls and chambers, these are the most evocative ruins in America.

Chaco Canyon lies at the centre of what was once a road network extending for about sixty miles. As at Cahokia, this implies trading or pilgrimage activities of some sophistication, clearly comparable with those in South America. Again the cause of decline in the twelfth century would appear to be climate change and desertification. Today Chaco stands magnificent in its isolation, with no modern roads or buildings intruding on its antiquity. The absence of artificial light has made Chaco a popular destination for stargazers.

Another prominent survivor of the Pueblo culture lies in southern Colorado at Mesa Verde. This dates from the tenth century, a time when these landscapes must have been fertile and alive with people. With a population of some 20,000, its extraordinary troglodyte dwellings sprout from mountainside alcoves reached by steps

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and ladders. Cliff Palace has around 150 cliffside rooms carved from its surrounding rock. Mesa Verde too appears to have fallen victim to environmental change. It remains the most vivid of these ruined settlements, with rooms through which we can walk, and views out over the now barren desert.

Such survivors are few and far between, but these and lesser ones at Taos, Casa Grande, Canyon de Chelly and elsewhere are sufficient to suggest that the America 'discovered' in the fifteenth century was not the wilderness of 'savage' hunter-gatherers described by early European explorers. Native Americans had already inhabited, prospered and in some sense controlled much of this continent for thousands of years.

Their descendants managed to resist colonial invaders to the extent of retaining their identity into modern times. Of the 574 tribes still recognized today, no fewer than 147 languages have been distinguished. Nowhere in Europe is there a remotely comparable tribal or cultural longevity. The tribes' distinctive identities and histories were long ignored, to be researched and revealed only in the twentieth century. I like to think the obsession modern America has with localism – such as the refusal to combine smaller states into large ones – is a reflection of this prehistoric diversity.

There are few signs that pre-Columbian American society was ever naturally violent or warlike. Many tribes were ruled by matriarchies and most engaged in early cohabitation with Spanish, French and English colonists as they pushed north from the Gulf of Mexico, south from Canada or west from the east coast. Most of these sought trade, as of gold and furs. It was largely the British quest for land to settle that fuelled clashes down the east coast, such as with the Iroquois, the Lenape and the Powhatan.

Here even the British authorities were adamant that their colonists should not spread westwards over the Appalachian Mountains into what they defined as Indian territory. Charles II (*r.*1662–85) expressly forbade any such move. Only after the creation of the independent United States in the eighteenth century did its frontiersmen become conquerors of what was to become America's

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