

Spirited Americans: A Commentary on America's Optimists -- from the Puritans to the Cyber-Century

A.E. Jeffcoat

Winslow House Books (January 2000)

Unknown \$24.95 (360pp)

978-0-9672022-0-4

Clinton scandals. Rap music lyrics. Social scourges. The list of discouraging, depressing realities of modern American life goes on and on. Many even believe that the nation's best days are behind it. In his person-focused examination of American history and its great leaders, however, Jeffcoat suggests that instead of bemoaning the loss of a better past, Americans can gather the gumption to move forward by glancing backward.

"Our history should leave Americans confident in their native ability to cope with crisis and move on," he says. "After all, the sturdy republic survived a Civil War, a World War, a Great Depression, a second World War, a challenge by a more powerful superpower that beat us into space and innumerable other challenges — only to come cruising into the 21st century far and away the most powerful and prosperous nation ever to exist on earth."

Tracing the events that date back not just to the start of the republic but to the moment when Columbus set foot in the Western world, why they unfolded as they did and what that portends for the future are the significant questions Jeffcoat endeavors to answer, or at least explain.

It's a ponderous text, particularly the first two parts, which chronicle Columbus' discovery through World War II. Peppering his retrospective, however, with little-known details—like the fact that impeachment was once a threat to Lincoln—Jeffcoat does demonstrate to readers that American politics, society and business are built on indefatigable optimism.

The connection between that optimism and morality and religion is a point he returns to continually. "Of all the factors influencing public spirits and national optimism the most important, along with economic prosperity, has been the strength of the moral convictions that rise primarily from religious faith," he says.

Today, there has been a "dramatic turning away" from the faith of the Founders, Jeffcoat says. Economic prosperity exists, without a doubt. Yet most Americans say in polls that despite personal well-being, the nation's overall moral decay is a pressing problem that must be addressed.

Perhaps this "split personality" phenomenon is the best evidence optimism remains alive and well. Americans are the best off they've ever been, but they're still convinced something can be done to make life better.

CARI NOGA (January / February 2000)

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