

The American Challenge: Preserving the Greatness of America in the 21st Century: What Every American Should Know about Their Country

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Readers of this reference book, study guide, and how-to manual in one are also charged with an interesting “challenge”: Could you pass the US citizenship test? Concerned about the lack of knowledge among the general citizenry about America’s origins, Etheredge, a former naval officer, provides a guide that strives to instill pride in American heritage, encourage civic responsibility, and promote patriotism.

Available in print, e-book, and color PDF versions, each section gives an overview of a segment of American history and culture. An easy-to-follow timeline traces historical events, and in the enhanced PDF version audio excerpts of speeches bring these events to life.

Significant cultural contributions by poets, athletes—and even outlaws—are described. Song lyrics with a patriotic theme are included, with recordings also available on the PDF version. The most unsuccessful of all the sections includes a large list of notable American actors and actresses. It would be more informative if well-known films, plays, or television programs they appeared in were listed as well, establishing context.

Brief biographical descriptions in encyclopedia style detail each president and his notable contributions. Famous speeches from Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy, as well as other leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., will likely encourage readers to learn more about the speakers and topics. It is regrettable, however, that among the thirty-three speeches in the section on great orators, there are no speeches by women.

Trivia questions and common phrases and idioms—such as “throw in the towel” and “spill the beans”—offer a fun way for young children to learn, as do visual aids provided through symbols and icons, such as state flags and illustrated instructions on flag etiquette, which can also be a useful how-to guide for many organizations.

The citizenship test in the final chapter is eye-opening at one hundred questions. Presented in a study-guide format, page numbers and websites are provided so readers can easily locate the answers (the enhanced PDF version allows readers to immediately jump to the corresponding page), making it a handy practice test that could also be valuable for elementary school teachers using it in a classroom setting.

Offering a mostly neutral account of American political and cultural events, there are a few examples of a conservative slant, referring to the 2010 healthcare bill as “Obamacare,” and describing the Patriot Act as widely supported, ignoring such vigorous opponents to the legislation as the American Library Association and the ACLU. That said, overall this account of American life will be a helpful resource for individuals, educators, and organizational leaders interested in increasing civic engagement.

MARIA SIANO (February 14, 2012)

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