

American Business History: A Very Short Introduction, authored by Walter A Friedman, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020, 176 pp., \$11.95, ISBN: 9780190622473

Introduction

This well-organized and succinct history of business in the United States is both an interesting, well-written narrative that can be read cover-to-cover and an excellent resource for encyclopedia-style information on certain industries, decades, prominent business people, and companies that helped form the country's economy to today. It also includes the evolution of the financial banking system and government programs that aided the development of innovation and entrepreneurship, such as the New Deal. The author is a professor at Harvard Business School and the Director of the Business History Initiative at that institution and has written several other books on the history of business.

Scope

This book would be of use in any introductory business course as well as interesting reading for scholars of business or the general public. It would be suitable for both public and academic libraries, both for quick reference and research questions and for those interested in a short, readable history on the topic of American business.

Organization and Content

This "Very Short Introduction" lives up to its name, keeping the narrative to a tight 138 pages, with additional resources provided for further reading. The chapters are organized chronologically, grouped by a few decades at a time, which also follow themes of the dominant economic drivers of that time. Each chapter is introduced with a brief abstract summarizing the contents and is subdivided further by more specific themes. The timeline goes right up to 2020 and the final chapter lends some thoughts on the sustainability of continued capitalism and growth. The table of contents is helpful, but would be improved if it outlined the subheadings found within each chapter; for example, Chapter 8, "Corporate America, 1945–1980", contains subsections including "Organization men and women," "American manufacturing," "Hi-tech," "Low-tech," and "Services," among others. There is a surprisingly short (given the clearly extensive research and knowledge of the author) list of references at the end, followed by a more extensive list of further reading organized by the themes within the book, which could serve as an additional resource list for class use. The book also includes some interesting historical illustrations and has a fairly detailed index that would be very useful for quick reference transactions.

One organizational note --more of a quibble-- with the e-book format provided by the publisher is that it isn't particularly intuitive. There is no ability to "page through" the book, so navigation must be done via the table of contents. This is fine if one is using it for a quick bit of research or encyclopedic reference, and a bonus is that the detailed index is hyperlinked to the relevant pages. However, if one is reading the entire book, a print copy may be preferable. There are also slight formatting errors in the e-book, with some odd spacing issues.

Evaluation

The premise of this title is that the rise of the U.S. as a major world economy was an unexpected one, given its relatively late founding and initially small population. The book follows the major developments that helped grow the U.S. from fledgling upstart to superpower within a few hundred years. It outlines the major contributors to that growth, including manufacturing, capitalizing on natural resources (both animal and mineral), agriculture, and the ability to attract entrepreneurs, aided by the capitalist values built into the U.S. Constitution and continued policy making to encourage innovation. The author is not afraid to look at those who paid dearly for the (largely) European population that became prosperous at the expense of others: the decimation of the indigenous population, the hard work and suffering of enslaved people who made possible the large trade in cotton, and the continued inequities between workers based on class, gender, and race. This ability to look critically at difficult truths makes this more than just a fact-based or even a pro-American business history and lends credibility as a thoughtful piece of literature. Though it certainly can be used to dip into smaller sections for quick research, the narrative is deftly woven together with anecdotes of early business ventures, prominent figures throughout the decades, and working conditions, which makes for interesting descriptive reading rather than a more encyclopedic or textbook treatment. The rise of management as a profession in itself would be of interest for any business major, as well as the general public. Recommended for all libraries, particularly in the United States.

Footer:

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