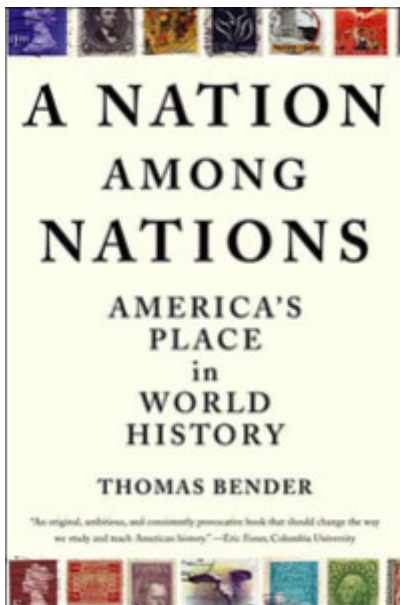
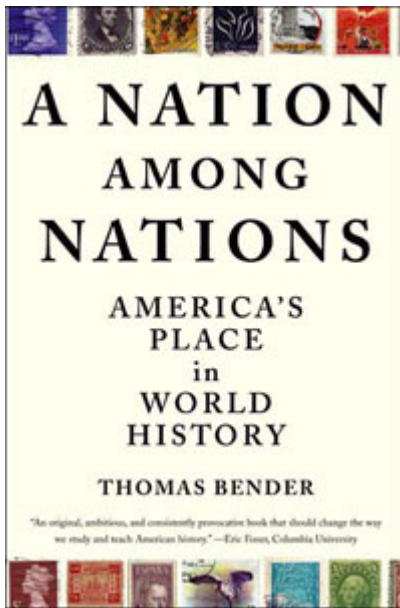


# Where in the World is the United States?



Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History*. New York: Hill & Wang, 2006. 368 pp., cloth, \$26.00; paper, \$15.00.

For some time now, historians of the United States have been exhorting each other to link historical writing on the United States more effectively to historical writing on the rest of the world. Prominent among these historians has been New York University history professor Thomas Bender. In *A Nation Among Nations*, Bender heeds his own advice. His goal, as he explains in his introduction, is to “end” American history in a double sense: he seeks both to terminate it as it has been conventionally understood and to give it a new purpose for the world in which we live (3). The result is a highly stimulating

analytical narrative that is consistently informative, occasionally revelatory, and never dull.

Bender rejects the presumption, which he traces to nineteenth-century historical writing, that the nation is freestanding and self-contained. On the contrary, he contends, national history has from the beginning been shaped by developments both larger and smaller than the nation itself. In making this claim, Bender most emphatically does *not* reject the nation as an object of historical inquiry. The nation, he contends, is far too important for historians to ignore, as the “most effective structure” not only for military mobilization and economic development but also for the clarification of “ethical responsibility” within the “human community” (298, 8). At present, there does not exist—and for the foreseeable future in all likelihood there will not exist—a “more effective or alternative institution” to “defend and protect citizens and human rights” (298). For all of these reasons, the nation must remain a “central object” of historical inquiry (8). Bender’s goal, rather, is to historicize the American nation by locating it in a global context.

*A Nation Among Nations* is filled with illuminating observations on a multitude of topics that have been culled from the scholarship of historians around the world. Only occasionally does Bender miss the opportunity to cast a familiar event in a new light. Historians of technology have for several decades underscored the global context in which American technological innovations occurred; had Bender drawn more extensively on the rich literature in this field, his thesis would have been even more compelling. A case in point is his brief discussion of telegraph inventor Samuel F. B. Morse. Morse, Bender contends, fundamentally changed the relationship of time and space by devising a mechanism that made it possible for the “first time in human history” for a message to “travel more rapidly than a messenger” (153). In fact, Morse’s electric telegraph had been preceded by the electric telegraph of the English inventors Charles Wheatstone and William F. Cooke, and as the historian of technology Daniel R. Headrick demonstrated in *When Information Came of Age* (2000), it drew much of its inspiration from, and was an incremental improvement upon, a French optical telegraph, which had been transmitting information faster than messengers for fifty years.

Much of the distinctiveness of Bender’s approach lies in the simultaneous focus on *history*—which he associates with temporality, or change over time—and *geography*, or what he calls territoriality. Territoriality, it turns out, has a history; in fact, its emergence in the nineteenth century was a major outcome of nation-building projects in the United States, Italy, and Germany.

The historicizing of territoriality is but one instance in which “self-aware communication” regarding common challenges has strengthened bonds among individuals whose lives would have rarely intersected prior to the great nineteenth-century innovations in communications: the modern postal system, the

elaboration of the press, the electric telegraph, and the ocean-going steamship (10). Sometimes the medium was the message. At one point, for example, Bender makes an analogy between present-day interactions on the World Wide Web and the fin de siècle information exchange among social reformers: no analogy better captured the “circulation of information” among these reformers than the “computer file sharing of the sort we are familiar with in the exchange of music files on the internet today” (287). Elsewhere Bender links information sharing with the cultivation of a praiseworthy cosmopolitanism. The more Americans know about the world, Bender posits, the more they can be expected to become “worldly citizens” who retain a concern for the “Opinions of Mankind” (297, 300). Only occasionally does Bender link self-awareness with intolerance, bigotry, or paranoia. An intriguing example is his comparison of the worldviews of historians of the United States in the 1890s with those in the 1950s. Though the 1890s generation was the more cosmopolitan, it embraced a racist conception of human potentiality that the latter rejected.

*A Nation Among Nations* is organized around five thematic chapters, which locate in a global context topics long familiar to historians of the United States. These topics are the age of discovery; the “great war” between France and Britain in the mid-eighteenth century; the Civil War; westward expansion; and progressivism. Each chapter, with the exception of the first and the last, revolves around warfare. If history department hiring committees took Bender’s intellectual priorities seriously—which, if present trends continue, they almost certainly will not—they should make the recruitment of historians of warfare a top priority. Indeed, *A Nation Among Nations* can be read as a thoughtful brief for the provocative claim that the history of war, broadly conceived, should occupy a central place on the U.S. history curriculum of every university, college, and community college history department in the country.

American history began, in Bender’s view, with the “ocean revolution” set in motion by the Genoese explorer Christopher Columbus. What Columbus discovered was less a new world than a new ocean. For humanity, this discovery was no less consequential than the invention of agriculture; for the inhabitants of the continents that it linked, it was the “central experience” during the long period that preceded the late-nineteenth-century industrial revolution (246).

The global context remained highly consequential during the eighteenth century, when Great Britain bested France in the Seven Years War—a conflict that Bender, like Fred Anderson and Drew Cayton, considers of fundamental importance to the making of the United States. Indeed, this chapter can be fruitfully compared with the related discussion of this theme in Fred Anderson and Drew Cayton’s *Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America, 1500-2000* (2005). Foreign relations remained of enormous concern to the founders of the republic, while the successful slave revolt known today as the Haitian Revolution had enduring consequences for the antislavery movement. Paradoxically, Bender posits, the Haitian Revolution *hindered* the antislavery movement by frightening slaveholders who might otherwise have endorsed

compensated emancipation. The Civil War, similarly, was one of several “federative crises” to engulf the world during the 1860s (134). Yet it remained distinctive to the extent that, in contrast to the somewhat analogous struggles in Germany and Italy, its catalyst was slavery. And, in particular, the “new idea” of public authority that northern leaders linked with territoriality—an idea that owed much of its credibility to prior improvements in communications—challenged the paternalistic authority that slaveholders maintained over their slaves (151).

Events originating outside of the territorial confines of the United States also shaped the westward movement, which Bender treats as a chapter in the history of empire. With the exception of the Civil War and emancipation, the dispossession of Native Americans was the “most important activity of the U.S. government in the nineteenth century” (191). The Spanish-American War, or what Bender terms the Spanish-Cuban-American War, was less an aberration than a continuation of American empire building that began with the founding of the republic.

By globalizing American history, Bender hopes to “imbue” American civic discourse and national history with an “appropriate humility” (298). This is an inspiring—and worthy—goal. Yet it remains to be determined whether it will be realized. As Americans learn more about the world through experiences other than book reading—e.g., terrorist attacks, corporate downsizing, warfare—it is at least as likely that they may, instead, become increasingly prideful. Americans have long presumed—Bender perceptively observes, in one of his many suggestive forays into the history of political economy—that the “free individual” should have privileged access to “all the goods of the world” (186). *A Nation Among Nations* underscores, often implicitly, the perils that this kind of hubris can entail. It is likely to find a wide audience among general readers, college and university professors intrigued by the “global” turn in U.S. history, and high school teachers seeking fresh perspectives on such venerable classroom staples as the age of exploration, the westward movement, and the Civil War. Engaging, accessible, and thought provoking, it provides an excellent introduction to recent historical writing on a variety of themes and may well point the way to a new, more globally oriented, history of the United States.

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