In the 1960s, however, the civil rights movement, women's liberation, and the student rebellion (with its condemnation of the war in Vietnam) challenged the consensus of values upon which historians and social scientists of the 1950s had centered their interpretations. This turmoil set the stage for the emergence of another group of scholars. New Left historians began to reinterpret the past once again. They emphasized the significance of conflict in American history, and they resurrected interest in those groups ignored by the consensus school. In addition, New Left historians critiqued the expansionist perspective of the United States and emphasized the difficulties confronted by non-Americans, African Americans, women, and urban workers in gaining citizenship status.

Progressive, consensus, and New Left history is still being written. The recent generation of scholars, however, focuses upon social history. The key concern is to discover what the lives of "ordinary Americans" were like. These new social historians employ previously overlooked court and census documents, house deeds and tax records, letters and diaries, photographs, and other archives to reconstruct the everyday lives of average Americans. Some use new methodologies, such as quantification (enhanced by advancing computer technology) and oral history, while others borrow from the disciplines of science, economics, sociology, anthropology, and psychology for their historical investigations.

The proliferation of historical approaches, which are reflected in the debates in this book, has had mixed results. On the one hand, historians have become so specialized in their respective time periods and methodologies that it is difficult to synthesize the recent scholarship into a comprehensive text for the general reader. On the other hand, historians know more about the American past than at any other time in history. They strive to ask new questions that previously were considered to be too mundane or other scholars in social sciences. Although there is little agreement about the answers to these questions, the methods employed and issues explored make the "new history" exciting field to study.

Issue 1 discusses the key element of historical truth and the extent to which historians, applying the technique of empirical research, can determine what happened in the past. Oscar Handlin insists that the truth of past events is absolute and knowable if pursued by historians employing the scientific method of research. William McNeill, however, argues that the absolute knowledge of human behavior is unattainable because historians do not have facts at their disposal and because they tend to organize their evidence to make intellectual choices based on subjective judgments. Consequently, historians' interpretations may be challenged by others who approach the evidence from a different point of view.

The topics that follow represent a variety of perspectives and approaches. Each of these controversial issues can be studied for its individual import to our nation's history. Taken as a group, they interact with one another and further larger historical themes. When grouped thematically, the issues continue motifs in the development of American history.
Most historians have argued that Abraham Lincoln 1860 because sectional conflicts over the slavery issue the nation and destroyed the second political party comprised of Whigs and Democrats. Political historians, employing analysis of election issues, voter behavior, and legislative patterns at both national and national levels, however, have rejected or significantly modified emphasis on sectionalism in the 1850s. In Issue, Joel H. Silbey that historians have paid too much attention to the sectional conflict over slavery and have neglected to analyze local ethnocultural issues as keys to the Civil War. Michael F. Holt maintains that both northern Republicans and southern Democrats seized the slavery issue to highlight the sharp differences existing between them and thus to reinvigorate the loyalty of their traditional partisans.

Abraham Lincoln’s image as “the Great Emancipator” is the focus of the essays in Issue 16. Allen Guelzo insists that the Emancipation Proclamation represented a culmination of Lincoln’s long-standing commitment to end slavery in the United States. Vincent Harding, however, defends the position that slaves were the agents of their own freedom, while Lincoln was reluctant to make emancipation a war issue.

In Issue 17, post-Civil War political corruption is discussed with a focus on William M. “Boss” Tweed and his activities at Tammany Hall, the Democratic machine’s headquarters in New York City. Alexander B. Callow, Jr., asserts that Tweed exercised a corrupting influence over the city and state governments and the business community. Leo Hershkowitz emphasizes the services that Tweed provided to benefit New York City.

Conclusion

The process of historical study should rely more on thinking than on memorizing data. Once the basics of who, what, when, and where are determined, historical thinking shifts to a higher gear. Analysis, comparison and contrast, evaluation, and explanation take command. These skills not only increase our knowledge of the past but also provide general tools for the comprehension of all the topics about which human beings think.

The diversity of a pluralistic society, however, creates some obstacles to comprehending the past. The spectrum of differing opinions on any particular subject eliminates the possibility of quick and easy answers. In the final analysis, conclusions are often built through a synthesis of several different interpretations, but, even then, they may be partial and tentative.

The study of history in a pluralistic society allows each citizen the opportunity to reach independent conclusions about the past. Since most, if not all, historical issues affect the present and future, understanding the past becomes essential to social progress. Many of today’s problems have a direct connection with the past. Additionally, other contemporary issues may lack obvious direct antecedents, but historical investigation can provide illuminating analogies. At first, it may appear confusing to read and to think about opposing historical views, but the survival of our democratic society depends on such critical thinking by acute and discerning minds.