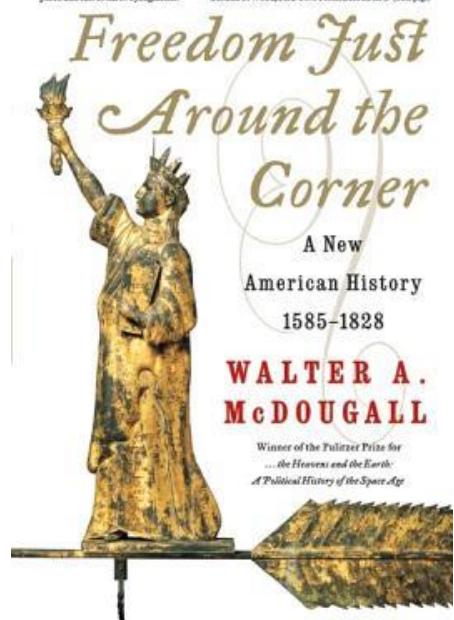


"This unusual book... may have a major impact on how we Americans understand ourselves... Fast-paced and full of shrewd judgments." —Gordon S. Wood, *New York Times Book Review* (book page)



Freedom Just Around the Corner: A New American History: 1585-1828

Walter A. McDougall

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Freedom Just Around the Corner: A New American History: 1585-1828 Walter A. McDougall
A powerful reinterpretation of the founding of America by a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian.

"The creation of the United States of America is the central event of the past four hundred years," states Walter McDougall in his preface to *Freedom Just Around the Corner*. With this statement begins McDougall's most ambitious, original, and uncompromising of histories. McDougall marshals the latest scholarship and writes in a style redolent with passion, pathos, and humour in pursuit of truths often obscured in books burdened with political slants.

With an insightful approach to the nearly 250 years spanning America's beginnings, McDougall offers his readers an understanding of the uniqueness of the "American character" and how this character has shaped the wide ranging course of historical events. McDougall explains that Americans have always been in a unique position of enjoying "more opportunity to pursue their ambitions?an any other people in history." Throughout *Freedom Just Around the Corner* the character of the American people shines, a character built out of a freedom to indulge in the whole panoply of human behaviour. The genius behind the success of the United States is founded on the complex, irrepressible American spirit.

A grand narrative rich with new details and insights about colonial and early national history, *Freedom Just Around the Corner* is the first instalment of a trilogy that will eventually bring the story of America up to the present day, a story epic, bemusing, and brooding.

Freedom Just Around the Corner: A New American History: 1585-1828 Details

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Author : Walter A. McDougall

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From Reader Review Freedom Just Around the Corner: A New American History: 1585-1828 for online ebook

Ethan says

An entertaining read. He tries to cram too much in, and as it is does not live up to his claim that he will do an inclusive social history that gives proper weight to women and African-Americans, as well as other groups (though he does better than many surveys do).

His thesis is that Americans have always been hustlers in both the hard working and the pejorative sense. He's fairly persuasive on that count. He's all excited about the Freemasons (just that many many early big deal Americans were Freemasons, which became a kind of civic religion, or at least strongly influenced what our civic religion became) and I don't really know enough to know how to take that argument. It smacks a little of "National Treasure" but still might be on target.

Lauren Albert says

McDougall is very good at showing both sides of prominent figures from every part of the political spectrum. He shows their flaws but without ever neglecting to show their strengths and achievements. I thought he was pretty evenhanded with this. And, as another reviewer points out, he discusses the treatment of Native Americans and African Americans honestly while still trying to show what reasoning was behind it. Not excuses but explanations. An overall good survey.

Susanna - Censored by GoodReads says

Highly readable.

Did Thomas Jefferson run over his dog? I think the nicest thing he could bring himself to say about Jefferson was that he did actually found the University of Virginia.

Paul Lunger says

There are ways to do books on the early years of American history & then there are ways not to. Walter A. McDougall's "Freedom Just Around the Corner: A New American History: 1585-1828" is not the way to do history. The book itself while being well intentioned tries to tell history from a slightly unbiased & view of the people & also attempts to summarize the important points since most people (he assumes) will already know it. The chapters themselves are at times laborious & also uneven with topics all over the place as well as the chronology. The only thing that's a little different about the book is that once he reaches the Washington administration & the entrance of new states beyond the original 13 there is a bit of history about each new state & it's entrance to the union. Beyond that skip this new version of history since the average reader will probably not learn anything new.

Graeme Hinde says

This is an excellent history of the founding of a republic and an empire. The prose is propulsive, the biographical sketches are colorful and balanced, neither too reverent nor overly iconoclastic, and the choice of coverage is refreshing without being revisionist. For instance, his analysis of the dominance of freemasonry among our founding fathers is enlightening, and his lengthy discussion on the Erie Canal is surprisingly fascinating. Most importantly, his treatment of slavery throughout the book is focused, penetrating, and brave. He neither lionizes nor vilifies, and captures all the actors in their flawed humanity.

Cat says

In his foreword, McDougall is candid about his own doubts about whether America needs yet another multi-volume set of tomes chronicling its history. As the existence of this book indicates, McDougall answered his own doubts.

The book is built around the central thesis that "America is a nation of hustlers". McDougall's central insight proves to be fresh and interesting enough to carry subject matter that has (as the author admits) been covered many times before.

His synthesis of recent scholarship in the field of American History is top notch, and the notes alone make the book worth the cover price. Interested readers will find hundreds of jumping off points for further exploration in the field of American history.

McDougall is cognizant of the diversity of "histories" which have multiplied in recent years. He includes citations to and summaries of gender and ethnic histories that demonstrate his familiarity with recent scholarship.

At the same time, he drops footnotes lauding Huntington (a historian favored by conservatives) and certainly doesn't shy away from the "great man" school of scholarship.

I especially enjoyed the treatment of the links between intellectual history in Britain in the pre-revolutionary era with the developments in America leading up to the revolution.

On the whole, this is a balanced, nuanced reading of American history and I anticipate the next chapter (this is projected to be a three volume set).

Taras says

Best history books are written by people from other countries. Otherwise one is too influenced by the government and/or pop versions of history presented in history class and pop culture.

It takes focused cynicism to dismiss all that one is taught about a subject, then learn and present it anew. This book was both dry, informative and witty. Will have to read it a few more times later. Notes section takes up a quarter of the book.

Things I learned in this book:

- * Success of Anglo-Saxons in Americas is largely due to coincidence and luck. French could've run this continent.
- * American revolution was mostly a British loss.
- * A Polish engineer gets a lot of credit for American military victories.
- * Religion was always at the core of American values. The only reason it wasn't written into the constitution is because there wasn't one religion everyone could get behind
- * Staggering amount of corruption in early American politics
- * Walter, like his other FPRI fellows is a collector of fancy words. There was a word I had to look up on every single Kindle page. This book would be inaccessible without a thesaurus. Lots of 16th century slang. "Irascible belligerents" ftw.
- * American colonies started out with near-zero taxation and unpoliced trade. This might explain the modern aversion to taxation. Tea party revolt was a lot more nuanced than taxation-without-representation. Was partially a result of the colonies growing too fast to have proportional representation in British government...eg they were on track to become bigger and more powerful than mother country
- * American religion (mostly via revivals) was as dynamic and possibly more innovative than finance, technology, government sectors

Taras says

This is basically part 1 to The Tragedy of U.S. Foreign Policy. My fav view of american history.

Tim says

A little iconoclastic, not entirely politically correct, but incredibly well-written and engaging and not at all afraid of criticizing America - not with direct moral condemnation, but with the heavy weight of the details of our common past. Sharp on our sharp practices - he finds America a nation of hustlers and hucksters. I would have a historian's disagreements hearing the Puritans described in this way (though he makes a good case), but it more than works for the early 19th c.. And he is unflinchingly accurate in his reminder of the constant crushing of the Indian and the slave - from his writing we understand why Americans did these things, but he provides no excuse to accompany the understanding.

Reading the end of this book is a romp. The last full chapter focused on getting to Jackson and his election in 1828. "Democracy triumphed, which is to say whatever triumphs in a democracy is by definition democratic." (496) "Washington, Franklin, Hamilton, Adams, and Jefferson had imagined the American experiment coming to all sorts of bad ends. They never imagined the Federal City overrun by frontiersmen who cared nothing for history and loved only cheap land and credit, whiskey, tobacco, guns, fast women, fast horses, and Jesus. Not necessarily in that order." (497) As the final sentence of the book notes, quoting a satirical frontier con-man, "It is good to be shifty in a new country." (513)

Throughout McDougall looks at American history from new angles, brings out new and familiar faces (his emphasis on small, 2-3 page, biography opens up the past wonderfully - I will use some of those biographies in my classes), and moves the narrative relentlessly forward. The movement does not come by assuming the future we already know, but by the force and pace of his narrative skill. If I sometimes disagree with him, it is always a wonderfully entertaining ride. Not many history books have made me laugh aloud this often. His next volume is out now - I will get it very soon.

Jim Fyfe says

By Far the best single volume of US History I have ever read! McDougall's analysis is clear, original and best of all, underpinned with wry humor and a keen understanding of human nature. I've read it three times and still find new stuff! Wonderful.

Patrick says

Reread - May-July 2011 Still incredibly interesting, informative, and thought provoking. I hadn't noticed previously how McDougall briefly addresses the semi-fabricated English Whig history of democracy and common law that many of the founding fathers were taught. Reading the Cleon Skousen, Tea Party stuff I have recently shows the continuing influence of mediocre quality history. Most of the politicians and parties were for strict constitutional reading when out of power, but felt free to act how they thought best when in power. Goodreads friends, seriously try at least parts of this book. Modern politics often sells a founding "myth" rather than history.

4-27-09 The perspective is original and engaging, but doesn't come off as pushing an agenda. The facts and characters are presented informatively and intriguingly. I really like this author/historian. The more full review starts at the 4-27 note.

2-2-09

I'm still working on this. I generally read 5-10 pgs a day, sometimes less, occasionally more. It's AWESOME! The description I just read last week of 4 distinct groups of people in the colonial US, and each with their own particular concept of "freedom," really sets the stage for the conflict over the Articles of Confederation, Constitution, and eventually the Civil War. It's so much more nuanced than just the "Northerners" and "Southerners" that you get in school. I'm anxious to read his account of the War of Independence and the creation of the Constitution. Seriously, this author just brings large concepts and movements into comprehensibility so well.

4-27-09

Done! I honestly think many, many people should read this book. McDougall's framing idea of Americans being "hustlers" in both the positive and negative sense is extremely illuminating, even if it will give some a little heartburn when applied to beloved figures. The "creative corruption" that accompanies just about every aspect of progress in America is another interesting concept. He doesn't defend it morally, but proposes that many political, social, and mechanical innovations that benefit society as a whole would have been delayed or drastically altered without the "grease" of corrupt side money being made by the principal characters. Sort of an argument that the means justified the end for the historical figures while we are left to decide if we think the ends justified the means.

I already mentioned the 4 concepts of freedom which are fascinating. The framing of the constitution was eye-opening. It literally was ratified by the bare minimum of states and a single vote when a North Carolinian representative didn't return to the convention for reasons still unknown today. The author also convincingly argues the widespread existence of an unconscious "American civil religion" where the fact/myth/idea of America is the object of worship. The concept totally makes sense to me after attending my county Republican Party convention last weekend. God and country, and not necessarily in that order.

I'm already forgetting a lot from both this book and the 2nd volume, but McDougall's description of the 2nd great awakening (Joseph Smith decides to pray in the midst of the upheaval) that ends the book was really thought provoking as well.

To my friends: Get the book. Read it. As a whole or in pieces (such as the 3-6 page descriptions of the origins of every state after the 13 colonies), you will learn things you didn't know and be introduced to a perspective that will challenge your thinking.

John Beeler says

Ok, so it's a return to exceptionalism, even if that exceptionalism is that we're a bunch of exceptional cons and pirates. Still, I find it refreshing and compelling.

Kevin says

Conservative in temperament, *Freedom Just Around the Corner* produces a judiciously balanced history of America from its origins in English political and religious movements to the beginnings of the Age of Jackson (it is the first volume in a proposed three-volume series). In simplest terms, McDougall argues that America's essential character (as well as the driving force behind its eventual political, economic, and cultural success) is that of a hustling, or what might be called "creative corruption" (something akin to Plunkett's "honest graft"). In other words, America has succeeded because its political system has allowed a large number of people to pursue their own ends using whatever means they saw fit, so long as that hustling creates some net benefit. This cynical (or perhaps realistic) portrayal of American history downplays both the political idealism trumpeted in more nationalistic histories and well the group power struggles highlighted by Howard Zinn and other historians on the left.

To focus on the book's main argument (a valuable one for a complete understanding of our history) ignores many of its other charms. McDougall is an engaging, and often very funny writer, and he leaves almost no major event undiscussed. I particularly appreciated his short profile of each state as it comes into the Union, providing interesting details that are often overlooked in a national history.

Randall says

In American history books, one usually has to watch out for hidden bias. Certain hot topics tend to be either ignored or overemphasized in many accounts. These include topics like slavery, religion, the faults of the founding fathers, and events that may 'diminish the greatness of America'. McDougall acknowledges all of these dynamics and their importance, but doesn't drone on with agenda on any of them. This is probably the best American history for adult readers out there to be written in the last couple of decades. I adored history in high school and college, but still found there was so much about my country I didn't know. As a build up to my DC vacation, this read was an awesome choice.

Walter says

Think the US government today is full of scoundrel, hustlers and plutocrats (with a few men of character shouting into the wind)? This is not new. McDougal explores in great detail the period of colonial and early US history, giving great insight into the habits and characters of many men who have today turned into either paragons of virtue or the blackest rogues. The uncomfortable truth, of course, is that it's not that simple. For all the rancor in the capital today, there have been analogues in past eras. The US was and continues to be a 'nation of hustlers.'
