

A COMPANION TO POST-1945 AMERICA

Edited by

Jean-Christophe Agnew and Roy Rosenzweig

A Companion to Post-1945 America

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Introduction

JEAN-CHRISTOPHE AGNEW AND
ROY ROSENZWEIG

The title of this Blackwell Companion – *Post-1945 America* – says a good deal about the difficulties that beset anyone looking to encapsulate the past half-century of American history. The period is still unnamed and unplaced in the broad genealogy of the American past. At least, that is the impression one takes from the titles of many of the surveys that have thus far been published: *The Unfinished Journey*, *Moving On*, *Grand Expectations*, and, simplest of all, *More* (Chafe, 1998; Moss, 1994; Patterson, 1996; Collins, 2000). If the period is still “busy being born,” perhaps that is because no one yet dares to write its epitaph. We know, or think we know, when the period began, which is to say on or around the dropping of the first atomic bomb on August 6, 1945. But we are not so certain when, or even whether, it has ended.

Some historians might point to the mid-1970s as an appropriate milestone or tombstone for the “postwar era”; Watergate, the oil crisis, and the defeat in Vietnam all marking the end of what Henry Luce had heralded in 1941 as the American Century. Others would no doubt choose 1989 or 1991 – the years of communism’s collapse – to designate the end of the twentieth century, if not the end of history itself. Still others would identify September 11, 2001 as the point at which “everything changed.” But even the most recent divisions leave the awkward remainder of our current moment. It is as if, having outlived our own historical obituary, we find ourselves belated and not much else: post-Cold War, yes, but postcolonial, postindustrial, and postmodern as well. Our title, then, is more than a convenient placeholder, for “*Post-1945*” captures the compound sense of our last half-century as a sequence of aftermaths: a series of almost compulsive reckonings with a world made *before* 1945. On the one hand, we are awash in books, films, and memorials on the Good War and the Greatest Generation; on the other, we behold a concerted effort to dismantle the so-called “safety nets” woven by that same generation – from Social Security to Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaties.

The ambivalence with which we look back upon the odyssey of the past fifty years is likewise visible in the titles of the historical surveys that have appeared in the interim: *A Troubled Journey*, *A Troubled Feast*, *Affluence and Anxiety*, *Present Tense*, to name just a few (Siegel, 1984; Leuchtenburg, 1973; Degler, 1968; Schaller et al., 1992). To be sure, these phrases bespeak something more than the mixed judgment of the historians who use them; they also evoke the conflicting emotions that Americans of the time experienced toward their new, global hegemony. A source of pride at one moment could in the blink of an eye feel like a hostage relationship. Vietnam,