At first glance, the title of Zbigniew Lewicki’s enormous 2009 monograph appears improper, first because it appears to borrow the scope and ambition of the similarly titled *The Rise of American Civilization* by Charles and Mary Beard, and second, because the term “history of civilization” suggests that, from the very beginning, some kind of civilization existed and then it rose. However, its subtitle, “The Creative Era,” dissolves any doubt about the aptness of the main title.

Lewicki’s volume is unlike any other history of America in Polish historiography, with its tendency to emphasize a political narrative. Lewicki gives more than adequate attention to this familiar story, but he puts those events in the rich context of the lives and society of the people who made it. The only comparable volume in Polish to recast the political narrative is Vernon Louis Parrington’s *Main Currents in American Thought* (translated in 1970). Over the course of twelve chapters, Lewicki describes the everyday life of the first settlers and their descendents, their efforts to conquer nature and hostile Indians, to build a life for themselves in a new land, and their struggles in the wars between the various European powers seeking to control their destiny. The book is about the people who made the foundations of the federal Union. The author presents changes in the conditions of life and in the mentality of the inhabitants in different parts of the British Empire in America. He often gives his own opinion to the presented facts, quotes, and legends. In this way, he strives to separate facts from the myths and legends that arose with the Pilgrims, and especially with the Founding Fathers. Lewicki’s *History of American Civilization* takes up broad questions of culture, education, literature, and religion, as well as more intimate ones of architecture, meals, clothes, furniture, and inventions. Additionally, the life and works of the political, cultural and political leaders are presented. Benjamin Franklin, as the best known American of the times of Enlightenment, is a kind of leitmotif in this book, with Lewicki referring to his life and writings several times. Similarly, George Washington, as Commander of Continental Army and the first president of the United States of America, also appears in many parts of the book.

Lewicki does not write about the American past—he paints it. The language is vivid and compelling, coupling his erudition with his passion for the subject. There are many picturesque descriptions of people’s behavior, life, culture, and even everyday problems and illness. There are many well-quitted quotes (it is a pity
that the source of each is not always clear), and many pictures also illustrate the
text.

One of the more subtle contributions of this volume is that Lewicki proposes
new translations to some words, names, and titles. Sometimes he is right proposing
a new meaning for words, such as “state.” It is particularly useful in his discussion
of states in the era of The Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union. Then
the term “state” could be translated as country, a national being in its
geographical boundaries. Until now, Polish historiography on America uses this
term in the American meaning of state, which means the colony after the
announcement of The Declaration of Independence. On the other hand, some of
Lewicki’s proposals may lead to confusion, particularly when the term in question
is very well known in history, literature, and philosophy. For example, in Polish,
the word “pilgrims” is parallel to “wanderers,” which means the men who are
walking to fulfill their mission, task, or idea. The monument of the man called
“The Pilgrim” at Nowa Słupia in Poland is also known as “The Wanderer.” But, if
in historiography, the term “Pilgrim” is already widely used, it seems unnecessary
to change it into “Wanderer.”

Additionally, the Polish translation of Benjamin Franklin’s early writings known
as Poor Richard’s Almanack should be translated in a different way. Richard was
not poor in the meaning of lack of money or property. Rather, he was a simple
man, who reached his social and economic position by his work. He did not waste
his time doing nothing but worked hard to change his social status. That is why
the word “poor” should be translated as “kindly,” or “kind-hearted.”

While one of the strengths of this consistently informative and interesting book
is its scope, specialists may dispute some of the details and interpretations
Lewicki provides. For example, the causes of the War of Independence were not
only taxes. The idea of self-government in colonies was growing stronger and
stronger. The colonial political leaders did not think about independence during
the nearly ten years after the Stamp Act was issued. Some scholars argue that
had the British government done a better job of explaining the nature of this tax
the uproar and discontent it sparked would have been limited. Since it was a new
kind of tax laid on all the colonies at the same time, and nearly on all the people
(previously taxes had been levied only on chosen groups, for example on the hat
or iron makers), and further, since the colonial assemblies had no right to
discuss it, to repeal it, the colonists for the first time started the policy of non-
importation of the English goods imported to the colonies, setting the precedent
of tactics they used against the Townshend Duties. On the other hand, it is
commendable that Lewicki has shown and emphasized the stubborn (if not
unreasonable) policy of British Parliament towards the American colonies. The effect of joining the idea of self government in colonies with such shortsighted policies from London caused the very dangerous mixture, which, in effect, caused the American Revolution and the War of Independence.

It is disappointing that a number of minor factual errors mar such a meticulously researched volume. For example, Lewicki does not use the whole name of the Articles of Confederation (Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union). After passing the Declaration of Independence it was necessary to create a union of states to gain strength during the war with England. The union should not be temporary, as the previous ones, so “and Perpetual Union” was added to the main name, which clearly explains the idea the full intention. The colonies, after 1776 referred to themselves as states, should be united with each other not only during the War of Independence, but also when the war ended and England would recognize the independence of its former possessions in North America. In fact, the war united the colonies, but when it ended, the union was not well-organized and it fell into great troubles. If unsolved, they might have brought the end of the newly born independence.

In conclusion, both specialists and the general public can benefit from reading A History American Civilization. In addition to the main text, it includes a brief chronology of the most important events at the end of the book. A useful index of names aids readers in quickly finding a particular topic. The bibliography is divided into two parts. In the first one books of Polish authors are presented; the second lists American works and sources. The Polish editions of American books (translated into Polish) are also added there, as well as the books on philosophy and fashion.

But the real strength of A History of American Civilization is that it is a beautifully written—painted—book on the beginnings of the American nation, society, and state. It shows the complicated process of creating, from very different and distant pieces, a new and united state. This book is written in a picturesque and light style, contributing to the work’s ability to communicate so much information in such easily remembered detail. In short, regardless of whether one agrees with Lewicki’s interpretations, his History of American Civilization offers the most comprehensive understanding of the American past available in Polish. It is highly recommended for all Polish readers.

Prof. Jolanta A. Daszyńska
University of Łódź.