This book reinterprets the rise of the natural and social sciences as sources of political authority in modern America. Andrew Jewett demonstrates the remarkable persistence of a belief that the scientific enterprise carried with it a set of ethical values capable of grounding a democratic culture—an political function widely assigned to religion. The book traces the shifting formulations of this belief from the creation of the research universities in the Civil War era to the early Cold War years. It examines hundreds of leading scholars who viewed science not merely as a source of technical knowledge, but also as a resource for fostering cultural change. This vision generated surprisingly nuanced portraits of science in the years before the military-industrial complex and has much to teach us today about the relationship between science and democracy.

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Science, Democracy, and the American University

From the Civil War to the Cold War

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This book seeks to explain what several generations of thinkers had in mind when they devoted their lives to the project of making America scientific. In writing it, I benefited from many important studies of science and values that have appeared in recent decades. This theme has weighed heavily on the minds of American scholars since the 1960s, when the mobilization of technical expertise in the service of war, counterinsurgency, and domestic surveillance generated widespread criticism of putatively value-neutral knowledge. Yet as I waded through primary sources from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I noticed that questions of democratic theory and practice frequently loomed behind debates about religious belief, scientific authority, and epistemological frameworks in a way that scholars had not recognized.

In that context, it struck me that the question “What should we believe?” often referred to a democratic “we” – the citizens of the United States. And the answers given seemed to be powerfully shaped by what the askers believed to be the cultural, social, and political effects of particular truth claims and methodological approaches. Moreover, remarkably few of the arguments I found prefigured today’s understanding of science as a purely technical, value-neutral practice. In fact, from the 1860s to the 1960s, scientific thinkers in the United States repeatedly insisted that science did imply certain values – in fact, exactly those values needed to sustain the cultural foundations of American democracy.

At the heart of my argument is a claim of complexity: Many more scholars addressed the question of science and democracy, and many more understandings of those key terms and their relationship flourished among them, than historians have realized. The reader may believe that one of the voices I present here is right. My own sympathies, such as they are, will be fairly clear. Yet I am not prepared to choose once and for all between the competing arguments – only to listen with care and respect.

During this book’s long gestation, many colleagues, friends, and family members listened to me in such a manner. Without them, the project would never have come to fruition. As a graduate student in the Department of History
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