

11. Why Is History Taught Like This?

Ten chapters have shown that textbooks supply irrelevant and even erroneous details, while omitting pivotal questions and facts in their treatments of issues ranging from Columbus's second voyage to the possibility of impending ecocide. We have also seen that history textbooks offer students no practice in applying their understanding of the past to present concerns, hence no basis for thinking rationally about anything in the future. Reality gets lost as authors stray further and further from the primary sources and even the secondary literature. Textbooks rarely present the various sides of historical controversies and almost never reveal to students the evidence on which each side bases its position. The textbooks are unscholarly in other ways. Of the twelve I studied, only the two inquiry textbooks contain any footnotes.⁴ Six of the textbooks even deny students a bibliography.

Despite criticisms by scholars, from Frances FitzGerald to Diane Ravitch and Harriet Tyson-Bernstein,⁵ new editions of old texts come out year after year, largely unchanged. Year after year, clones appear with new authors but nearly identical covers, titles, and contents. What explains such appalling uniformity? The textbooks must be satisfying somebody.

Publishers produce textbooks with several audiences in mind. One is their intended readers: students' characteristics, as publishers perceive them, particularly affect reading level and page layout. Historians and professors of education are another audience, perhaps two audiences. Teachers comprise another. Conceptions of the general public also enter publishers' thinking, since public opinion influences adoption committees and since parents represent a potential interest group that publishers seek *not* to arouse. Some of these groups have not been shy about what they want textbooks to do. In 1925 the American Legion declaimed that the ideal textbook:

must inspire the children with patriotism. ...
must be careful to tell the truth optimistically. . . .

must dwell on failure only for its value as a moral lesson, must speak chiefly of success—
must give each State and Section full space and value for the achievements of each.⁶

Shirley Engle and Anna Ochoa are longtime luminaries of social studies education who in 1986 voiced their recommendations for textbooks. From their vantage point, the ideal textbook should:

confront students with important questions and problems for which answers are not readily available;
be highly selective;
be organized around an important problem in society that is to be studied in depth;
utilize . . . data from a variety of sources such as history, the social sciences, literature, journalism, and from students' first-hand experiences.'

Today's textbooks hew closely to the American Legion line and disregard the recommendations of Engle and Ochoa. Why?

Is the secondary literature in history to blame? We can hardly expect textbook authors to return to primary sources and dig out facts that are truly obscure. A few decades back, the secondary literature in history was quite biased. Until World War II history, much more than the other social sciences, was overtly anti-Semitic and antiblack. According to Peter Novick, whose book *That Noble Dream* is probably the best account of the history profession in this century, looking at every white college and university in America, exactly *one* black was *ever* employed to teach history before 1945!⁸ Most historians were males from privileged white families. They wrote with blinders on. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., found himself able to write an entire book on the presidency of Andrew Jackson without ever mentioning perhaps the foremost issue Jackson dealt with as president: the removal of Indians from the Southeast. What's more, Schlesinger's book won the Pulitzer prize!

These days, however, the secondary literature in American history is much more comprehensive. About the plagues, for example, Herbert U Williams wrote "The Epidemic of the Indians of New England, 1616-1620," way back in 1909, and Esther W. Stearn and Allen E. Stearn wrote *The Effect of Smallpox on the Destiny of the Amerindian* in 1945. P. M. Ashburn's classic *The Ranks of Death: A Medical History of the Conquest of America* came out in 1947. In 1951

John Duffy wrote "Smallpox and the Indians in the American Colonies."¹ For that matter, the most famous of all primary sources on the Pilgrims, William Bradford's *Of Plimoth Plantation*, clearly discloses the plagues. So we cannot excuse history textbooks on the grounds that the historical literature is inadequate. The facts about Helen Keller are hardly obscure, either. No dusty newspaper archives need be searched. The truth about Woodrow Wilson's interventions and his racism has also been available in scholarly works for decades, although most biographies of the man ignore it. Indeed, every chapter of this book has been based on commonly available research. Competent historians will find nothing new here. The information is all there, in the secondary literature, but has not made its way into our textbooks, media, or teacher-training programs and therefore hasn't reached our schools. As a consequence, according to comparative historian Marc Ferro, the United States has wound up with the largest gap of any country in the world between what historians know and what the rest of us are taught."

Could these omissions be a question of professional judgment? Authors cannot include every event. The past is immense. No book claims to be complete. Decisions must be made. What is important? What is appropriate for a given age level? Perhaps teachers should devote no time at all to Helen Keller, no matter how heroic she was.

But when we look at what textbooks do include—when we contemplate the minute details, some of them false, that they foist upon us about Columbus, for example—we have to think again. Constraints of time and space cannot be causing textbooks to leave out any discussion of what Columbus did with the Americas or how Europe came to dominate the world, since these issues are among the most vital in all the broad sweep of the past.

Perhaps an upper-class conspiracy is to blame. Perhaps we are all dupes, manipulated by elite white male capitalists who orchestrate how history is written as part of their scheme to perpetuate their own power and privilege at the expense of the rest of us. Certainly high school history textbooks are so similar that they *look* like they might all have been produced by the same executive committee of the bourgeoisie. In *1984* George Orwell was clear about who determines the way history is written: "Who controls the present controls the past."¹²

The symbolic representation of a society's past is particularly important in stratified societies. The United States is stratified, of course, by social class, by race, and by gender. Some sociologists think that social inequality motivates people, prompting harder work and more innovative performance. Inequality is

also intrinsically unfair, however, because those with more money, status, and influence use their advantage to get still more, for themselves and their children. In a society marked by inequality, people who have endured less-than-equal opportunities may become restive. Members of favored groups may become ashamed of the unfairness, unable to defend it to the oppressed or even to themselves. To maintain a stratified system, it is terribly important to control how people *think* about that system. Marx advanced this analysis under the rubric *false consciousness*. How people think about the past is an important part of their consciousness. If members of the elite come to think that their privilege was historically justified and earned, it will be hard to persuade them to yield opportunity to others. If members of deprived groups come to think that their deprivation is their own fault, then there will be no need to use force or violence to keep them in their places.

"Textbooks offer an obvious means of realizing hegemony in education," according to William L. Griffen and John Marciano, who analyzed textbook treatment of the Vietnam War,

By hegemony we refer specifically to the influence that dominant classes or groups exercise by virtue of their control of ideological institutions, such as schools, that shape perception on such vital issues as the Vietnam War. . . . Within history texts, for example, the omission of crucial facts and viewpoints limits profoundly the ways in which students come to view history events. Further, through their one-dimensionality textbooks shield students from intellectual encounters with their world that would sharpen their critical abilities."

Here, in polite academic language, Griffen and Marciano tell us that controlling elements of our society keep crucial facts from us to keep us ignorant and stupid.

Most scholars of education share this perspective, often referred to as "critical theory."¹⁴ Jonathan Kozol is of this school when he writes, "School is in business to produce reliable people."¹⁵ Paulo Freire of Brazil puts it this way: "It would be extremely naive to expect the dominant classes to develop a type of education that would enable subordinate classes to perceive social injustices critically."¹⁶ Henry Giroux, Freire's leading disciple in the United States, maintains, "The dominant culture actively functions to suppress the development of a critical historical consciousness among the populace." David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot tell us when this all started: between 1890 and 1920 businessmen came to have by far a greater impact on public education than any other occupational

group or stratum.¹⁸ Some writers on education even conclude that upper-class control makes real improvement impossible. In a critique of educational reform initiatives, Henry M. Levin stated, "The educational system will always be applied toward serving the role of cultural transmission and preserving the status quo." "The public schools we have today are what the powerful and the considerable have made of them," wrote Walter Karp. "They will not be redeemed by trifling reforms."²⁰

These writers on education take their cue from an even **weightier** school of thought in social science, the power elite theorists. This school has shown that an upper class does exist in America, whose members can be found at elegant private clubs, gatherings of the Trilateral Commission, and board meetings of the directors of the multinational corporations. Rich capitalists control all three major TV networks, most newspapers, and all the textbook-publishing companies, and thus possess immense power to frame the way we talk and think about current events,²¹

Nevertheless, I wonder whether it is appropriate to lay this particular bundle on the doorstep of the upper class. To blame the power elite for what is taught in a rural Vermont school or an inner-city classroom somehow seems too easy. If the elite is so dominant, why hasn't it also censored the books and articles that expose its influence in education? Paradoxically, critical theory cannot explain its own popularity. Any upper class worth its salt—*so* dominant and so monolithic that it determines how American history is taught in almost every American classroom—must also have the power to marginalize those social scientists who expose it. But the upper class has hardly kept critical theory out of education. On the contrary, critical theorists dominate scholarship in the field. Their books get prominently published and well reviewed; education professors assign them to thousands of students every year.

The upper class controls publishing, to be sure, but its control does not extend to content, at least not if the books in question make money. Prentice-Hall, which published *Who Rules America Now?* by William Dornhoff, is owned by Simon and Schuster, which in turn is owned by Paramount, which used to be part of the conglomerate Gulf and Western but is about to become part of something else. *Savage Inequalities* by Jonathan Kozol was published by Crown, part of Random House, which is in turn part of the Newhouse corporate empire. One of the glories of capitalism is that somewhere there are publishers who will publish almost *any* book, so long as they stand to make a profit from it. If the upper class forces the omission of "crucial facts and viewpoints," then why has it failed to censor the entire marvelous secondary literature in American history—which

occasionally even breaks into prime-time public television in series like *Eyes on the Prize*, an account of the civil rights movement. The upper class seems to be falling down on the job.

The elite has also failed to censor American history museums. After textbooks, museums are probably our society's most important purveyors of American history to the public. Unlike textbooks, however, many history museums have undergone considerable changes in the last two decades. The National Museum of American History, part of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., offers an illustration. Its newer exhibits—such as *Field to factory*, about the northward migration of African Americans, *A More Perfect Union*, portraying Japanese American concentration camps during World War II, and *American Encounters*, about the clash and mix of Indian, Latino, and Anglo cultures in New Mexico—criticize aspects of our recent national past. In the same period, the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond, Virginia, mounted its first-ever exhibit on slavery, which included chains, torture devices, and a catalog that did not minimize the inhumanity of the institution.²¹ If museums reflect the interests of the power structure, are we to infer that the elite mellowed in the 1980s and early 1990s? These were Reagan-Bush years, when the administration criticized the arts and humanities endowments from a conservative and patriotic stance. We must conclude, mixing a metaphor, that the power elite did not have its thumb on every pie.

To be sure, museum boards include members of the upper class. Robert Heilbroner has pointed out that no matter what is done in America, members of the upper class usually have a hand in it; however, their participation does not mean that they directed the action, nor that it was in their class's interest.²⁵ In the early 1960s, for instance, when elite colleges and universities recruited almost solely in private and suburban public high schools and relied on standardized tests to screen applicants, their student bodies were overwhelmingly white. The power elite theorists could claim that the elite reserved these positions of privilege for their own offspring as part of the structure of unequal opportunity. In the late 1960s, when the same universities competed to recruit and admit African American students, the power elite theorists could claim that the elite was coopting the cream of ghetto society in order to stifle protest and maintain the structure of unequal opportunity. Thus critical or power elite theories seem to explain everything but may explain nothing.

Interestingly, the upper class may not even control what is taught in its "own" history classrooms. "Preppies" who attend the University of Vermont are more likely than public school graduates to have encountered high school his-

tory teachers who challenged them and diverged from rote use of textbooks. Such teachers' success in teaching "subversively" in the belly of the upper class should hearten us to believe that it can be done anywhere.³⁴

On the other hand, if textbooks are devised by the upper class to manipulate youngsters to support the status quo, they hardly seem to be succeeding. Instead of revering Columbus, students wind up detesting history. Evidence suggests that history textbooks and courses make little impact in increasing trust in the United States or inducing good citizenship, however these are measured.²⁵ Voting is the one form of citizenship that the textbooks push, yet voting in America is way down, especially among recent high school graduates. The fact that social studies and history courses give citizenship such a sanctimonious tinge may help explain why fewer than 17 percent of eligible voters aged eighteen to twenty-four voted in 1986.¹⁶

In sum, power elite theories may credit the upper class with more power, unity, and conscious self-interest than it has. Indeed, regarding their alleged influence on American history textbooks, they may be scapegoats: blaming the power elite is comforting. Power elite theory offers tidy explanations: educational institutions cannot reform because the upper class prevents it, or the reform is not in that class's interest. Accordingly, power elite theory may create a world more satisfying and more coherent in evil than the real world with which we are all complicit. Power elite theories thus absolve the rest of us from seeing that all of us participate in the process of cultural distortion. This line of thought not only excuses us from responsibility for the sorry state of American history as currently taught, it also frees us from the responsibility for changing it. What's the use? Any action we might take would be inconsequential by definition.

Upper-class control may not be necessary to explain textbook misrepresentation, however. Special pressures in the world of textbook publishing may account to some extent for the uniformity and dullness of American history textbooks. Almost half the states have textbook adoption boards. Some of these boards function explicitly as censors, making sure that books not only meet criteria for length, coverage, and reading level, but also that they avoid topics and treatments that might offend some parents. States without such boards are not necessarily freer of censorship, for there screening usually takes place on the local level, where concern about giving offense can be even more immediate. Moreover, states without textbook boards constitute smaller markets, since publishers must win approval at the individual district or school level. Therefore states without boards have less influence on publishers, who orient their best efforts toward the large states with adoption boards. California and

Texas, in particular, directly affect publishers and textbooks because they are large markets with statewide adoption and active lobbying groups. Schools and districts in nonadoption states must choose among books designed for the larger markets.²⁷

Textbook adoption processes are complex.^{ZB} Some states, such as Tennessee, accept almost every book that meets certain basic criteria for binding, reading level, and subject matter. Tennessee schools then select from among perhaps two dozen books, usually making districtwide decisions. At the other extreme, Alabama adopts just one book per subject. State textbook boards are usually small committees whose members have been appointed by the governor or the state commissioner of education. They are volunteers who may be teachers, lawyers, parents, or other concerned citizens. The daily work of the textbook board is typically performed by a small staff that begins by circulating specifications, which tell publishers the grade levels, physical requirements (size, binding, and the like), and guidelines as to content for all subjects in which they next plan to adopt textbooks. Publishers respond by sending books and ancillary materials. Meanwhile the board, with input from the person(s) who appointed them and sometimes with staff input as well, sets up rating committees in each subject area—for instance, high school American history. The staff holds orientation meetings for these rating committees, explains the forms used for rating the textbooks, and then sends the books to the raters.

Usually one formal meeting is set up for publishers' representatives to address the rating committees. Large states may hold several meetings in different parts of the state. At these meetings the representatives emphasize the ways in which their books excel. For the most part representatives push form, not content: they tout special features of layout, art work, "skills building," and ancillary material such as videos and exams.

Rating committees face a Herculean task. Remember that the twelve books I examined average 888 pages. I have spent much of the last ten years struggling to comprehend and evaluate these books. In a single summer raters cannot even read all the books, let alone compare them meaningfully. Raters also wrestle with an average of seventy-three different rating criteria, which they apply to each book they rate, an Augean stable. Therefore publishers' representatives can make a difference. Since raters have time only to flip through most books, they look for easy readability, newness, a stunning color cover, appealing design, color illustrations, ancillary filmstrips, and ready-made teaching aids and test questions, seizing on these attributes as surrogates for quality.²⁹ Unfortunately, marketing textbooks is like marketing fishing lures: the point is to catch

fishermen, not fish. Thus many adopted textbooks are flashy to catch the eye of adoption committees but dull when read by students.

What content do adopters want to see? First off, they look for their own state. In Vermont, woe to [he textbook that omits Chester A. Arthur, famed twenty-first president of these United States. While he never made it very far into the hearts of his countrymen, Arthur had best get into the pages of its textbooks, because he is one of only two presidents Vermont produced. The Alamo lies deep in the heart of (white) Texans; woe to any textbook that might point out that love of slavery motivated Anglos to fight there for "freedom." California's legislature recently debated a bill to require textbooks to include the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.³⁰ Usually adopters find the details they seek. Most textbook editors start their careers in publishing as sales representatives. They are not historians, but they know their market. They include whatever is likely to be of concern. Everything gets mentioned. Lynne Cheney, former director of the National Endowment for the Humanities, decried the result; "Textbooks come to seem like glossaries of historical events—compendiums of topics."¹¹

In some states the next step is hearings, in which the public is invited to comment on books approved by the rating committees. In Texas and California, *at least*, these are occasions at which organized groups attack or promote one or more of the selections, often contending that a book fails to meet a requirement found within the regulations or specifications. Although publishers lament the procedure, critics, particularly in Texas, have unearthed and forced publishers to correct hundreds of errors, from misspellings to the claim that "President Truman 'easily settled' the Korean War by dropping the atomic bomb!" Since adoption committees do try to please constituents, those who complain at hearings often make a difference.

Adoption states used to pressure publishers overtly to espouse certain points of view. For years any textbook sold in Dixie had to call the Civil War "the War between the States." Earlier editions of *The American Pageant* used the even more pro-Confederate term "the War for Southern Independence" and did "exceptionally well" in Southern states; only after the civil rights movement did *Pageant* revert to "the Civil War."³¹ Alabama law used to require that schools avoid "textbooks containing anything partisan, prejudicial, or inimical to the interests of the [white] people of the State" or that would "cast a reflection on their past history."⁴ Texas still requires that "textbooks shall not contain material which serves to undermine authority."³⁵ Such standards are astounding in their breadth and might force drastic cuts in almost every chapter of every

textbook, except that authors have already omitted most unpleasantries and controversies.

Many states have rewritten their textbook specifications to strike such blatant content requirements. Since at least 1970 Mississippi's regulations, for example, have consisted of a series of clichés with which no reasonable textbook author or critic could disagree. Publishers might be forgiven if they believe that the spirit of the old regulations still survives, however, for the initial rejection of *Mississippi: Conflict and Change* proves that it does. I was senior author of the book, a revisionist state history text finally published by Pantheon Books in 1974. I say "finally" because Pantheon brought it out only after eleven other publishers refused. The problem wasn't with the quality of the manuscript, which won the Lillian Smith Award. The problem was that trade publishers said they could not publish a textbook, while textbook publishers said they could not publish a book so unlikely to be adopted. Some publishers even feared that Mississippi might retaliate against their textbooks in other subjects! Textbook publishers proved partly right—the textbook board refused to allow our book. It contained too much black history, featured a photograph of a lynching, and gave too much attention to the recent past, according to the white majority on the rating committee. My coauthors and I, joined by three school districts that wanted to adopt the book, sued the state in a First Amendment challenge, *Loewtn a al. v. Tumipseed et al.*, and in 1980 got the book on the state's approved list.

Another force for uniform, conservative textbooks comes from publishing houses themselves, "There's a great deal of copying," Carolyn Jackson, who has probably edited more American history textbooks than any other single individual, told me. Every house covets the success of *Triumph of the American Nation*, which holds a quarter to a third of the American market. Although adequate scholarship exists in the secondary literature to support such ventures intellectually, not a single left-wing or right-wing American history textbook has ever been published. Neither has a major textbook emphasizing African American, Latino, labor, or feminist history as the entry point to general American history.⁵⁶ Such books might sell dozens of thousands of copies a year and make thousands of dollars in profit. At the least, they would command niches in the marketplace all their own. Publishers might do fine without Texas.³¹ Nonetheless no publishing house can see such possibilities; all are blinded by the golden prospect of putting out the next *Triumph* and making millions of dollars. One editor characterized a prospective book, perhaps unfairly, as too focused on "the mistreatment of blacks" in American history, "We couldn't have that as our only

American history," he continued. "So we broke the contract." The manuscript was never published. "We didn't want a book with an *axe* to grind," the editor concluded. Of course, one person's point of view is another's axe to grind, so textbooks end up without axes or points of view.

Thus textbook uniformity cannot be attributed exclusively to oven state censors. Even in the formerly communist countries of Eastern Europe, censorship was largely effected by authors, editors, and publishers, riot by state censors, and was "ultimately 3 matter of . . . sensitivity to the ideological atmosphere."³⁸ It is not too different here: textbook publishers rarely do anything that they *imagine* might risk state disapproval. Therefore they never stray *far* from the traditional textbooks in form, tone, and content. Indeed, when Scott, Foresman merely replaced *Macbeth* with *Hamlet* in their literature reader, educators and editors considered the change so radical that Hillel Black devoted three pages *to* the event in his book on textbook publishing, *The American Schootbook*³⁹ In American history, even more than in literature, publishers strive for a "balanced" approach to offend no one.

Publishers would undoubtedly think twice before including a hard-hitting account of Columbus, for example. In Chapter Two I used *genocide* to refer to the destruction of the Arawaks in the Caribbean. When scholars used the same term in applying for a grant for a television series on Columbus from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the endowment rejected them.⁴⁰ Lynne Cheney said that the word was a problem. The entire project, "1492: Clash of Visions," was too pro-Indian for the endowment. "It's OK to talk about (he barbarism of the Indians, but not about the barbarism of the Europeans," according to the series producer.⁴¹

For publishers to avoid giving offense is getting increasingly difficult, however. A dizzying array of critics—creationists, the radical right, civil liberties groups, racial minorities, feminists, and even professional historians—have entered the fray No longer do textbooks get denounced only as integrationist or liberal.¹ Now they are also attacked as colonialist, Eurocentric, or East-Coast-centric. Publishers must feel 3 bit flustered as they delete a passage modestly critical of American policy to please right-wing critics in one state, only to find they have offended left-wing critics in another. Including a photograph of Henry Cisneros may please Hispanics but risk denunciation by New Englanders demanding a photograph of John Adams.

Although publishers want to think of themselves as moral beings, they also want to make money. "We want to do well *while doing* good," the president of Random House, the parent company of Pantheon, said to me as he inquired

into the commercial prospects of our Mississippi textbook.⁴³ Thoughts of the bottom line narrow the range of thought publishers tolerate in textbooks. Publishers risk over half a million dollars in production costs with every new textbook. Understandably, this scares them.

What about the authors? Since every bad paragraph had to have an author, surely authors lie at the heart of the process. It's not always clear who the real authors are, however. According to Hillel Black, the names on the cover of a textbook are rarely those of the people who really wrote it.⁴⁴ Lewis Todd and Merle Curti may have written the first draft of *Rise of the American Nation* back in 1949, but by the time its tenth edition came out in 1991, now titled *Triumph of the American Nation*, Curti was ninety-five and Todd was dead. The people listed as authors on some other textbooks have even less to do with them. Some teachers and historians merely rent their names to publishers, supplying occasional advice in return for a fraction of the usual royalties, while minions in the bowels of the publishing houses do the work of organizing and writing the textbooks.⁴⁵

An executive at Prentice-Hall told me that James Davidson and Mark Lytle "have written every word" of *The United States—A History of the Republic*, except "the skills" sections and "maybe not the photo captions." She also told me that Daniel Boorstin "controls every word that goes into his book," which is not quite the same thing but does imply substantial author involvement. Prentice-Hall relies on Davidson and Lytle to keep *A History of the Republic* current in historical content, according to the publisher, but Mark Lytle claimed more modestly that he and his coauthor play only "a kind of authentication role" regarding new editions. The publisher initiates the new material and it is "too late to make any major changes once it reaches us." The bulk of the publisher's changes have been aimed toward keeping the book up to date in pedagogical style and changing the last chapter to bring the book closer to the present. Publishers tend to innovate more than authors, so although new editions may have new looks and even new bibliographies, they rarely have much new historical content. Gradually, as books move from first to fifth or eighth editions, the listed authors have less and less to do with them.⁴⁶

In interviews with me, publishing executives blamed adoption boards, school administrators, or parents, whom they feel they have to please, for the distortions and lies of omission that mar U.S. history textbooks. Parents, whether black militants or Texas conservatives, blame publishers. Teachers blame administrators who make them use distasteful books or the publishers who produced them. But authors blame no one. They claim credit for their books. Sev-

eral authors told me that they suffered no editorial interference. Indeed, authors of three different textbooks told me that their editors never offered *a single* content suggestion. "That book doesn't have fifty words in it that were changed by the editor!" exclaimed one author. "They were so respectful of my judgment, they were obsequious," said another. "I kept waiting for them to say no, but they never did."⁴⁷

If authors claim to have written the textbooks as they wanted, then maybe they are to blame for their books. Sometimes they don't know any better. I asked John Garraty, author of *American History*, why he omitted the plague in New England that devastated Zndian societies before the Pilgrims came. "I didn't know about it," was his straightforward reply,⁴⁸

Sometimes authors do know better. As previously mentioned, in *After [be Fact*, a book aimed at college history majors, James Davidson and Mark Lytle do a splendid job telling of the Indian plagues, demonstrating that they understand their geopolitical significance, their devastating impact on Indian culture and religion, and their effect on estimates of the precontact Indian population. In *After the Fact*, looking down from the Olympian heights of academe, Davidson and Lytle even write, "Textbooks have finally begun to take note of these large-scale epidemics." Meanwhile, their own high school history textbook leaves them out!^{49*}

How are we to understand this kind of behavior? Authors know that even if their textbook is good, it won't really count toward tenure and promotion at most universities, where the message is "*Sealscholars* don't write textbooks."⁵⁰ If the textbook is bad, the authors won't get chastised by the profession because professional historians do not read or review high school textbooks.⁵¹ Thus the authors' academic reputations are not really on the line.⁵²

Adoption boards loom in the textbook authors' minds to a degree, especially when publishers bring them up. Authors rarely have personal knowledge of the adoption process—I am an unfortunate exception! Editors may invoke students' parents as well as adoption boards in cautioning authors not to give offense. "I wanted a text that could be used in every state," one author told me. She relied on her publisher for guidance about what would and would not accomplish this aim. Mark Lytle characterized his own textbook as "a McDonald's version of history—if it has any flavor, people won't buy it." He based this conclusion on his publisher's "survey of what the market wanted."⁵³

On the other hand, publishers know that "students, parents, teachers want to see themselves represented in the texts," as one editor said to me, and occasionally influence authors to make their books *less* traditional. Michael Kammen

tells of a publisher who tried to persuade the two authors of an American history textbook to give more space to Native Americans. Thomas Bailey's publisher pressed him to include more women and African Americans in *The American Pageant*?*

Regardless of the direction of the input, publishers are in charge. "They didn't want famous people, because we'd be more tractable," Mark Lytle told me, explaining why a major publisher had sought out him and James Davidson, relative unknowns. Two widely-published authors told me that publishers tore up textbook contracts with them because they didn't like the political slant of their manuscripts. "We have arguments," one editor told me bluntly. "We usually win."

Very different **conditions** apply to secondary works in history, where the intended readership typically *includes* professional historians. Authors of book-length secondary works know that publishers and journal editors hire professional historians to evaluate manuscripts, so they write for other historians from the beginning. Writers also know that other historians will review their monographs after publication, and their reputation will be made or broken by those reviews in the historical journals.

With such different readerships, it is natural for secondary works and textbooks to be very different from each other. Textbook authors need not concern themselves unduly with what actually happened in history, since publishers use patriotism, rather than scholarship, to sell their books. This emphasis should hardly be surprising: the requirement to take American history originated as part of a nationalist flag-waving campaign early in this century." Publishers start the pitch on their outside covers, where nationalist titles such as *The Challenge of Freedom* and *Land of Promise* are paired with traditional patriotic icons: eagles, Independence Hall, the Stars and Stripes, and the Statue of Liberty.** Publishers market the books as tools for helping students to "discover" our "common beliefs" and "appreciate our heritage." No publisher tries to sell a textbook with the claim that it is more accurate than its competitors.

Textbook authors also bear their student readers in mind, to a degree. From my own experience I know that imagining what one's readers need is an important part of the process of writing a history textbook. Some textbook authors are high school teachers, but most are college professors who know only a few high school or junior high school students personally. Interviews with textbook authors revealed that their imagining of what students need is a strange process. Something about the enterprise of writing a high school American history textbook converts historians into patriots. One author told me that

she was the single parent of an eleven-year-old girl when she started work on her textbook. She "wanted to write a book that Samantha would be proud of." I empathized with this desire and told of my own single parenting of a daughter about the same age. Further conversation made clear, however, that this author did not simply mean a book her daughter would respect and enjoy. Rather, she wanted a book that would make her daughter feel good about *America*, a very different thing."

Other textbook authors have shared similar comments with me. They want to produce good citizens, by which they mean people who take pride in their country. Somehow authors feel they must strap on the burden of transmitting and defending Western civilization. Sometimes there was almost a touch of desperation in their comments—sort of an "après moi, le déluge." Authors can feel that they get only one shot at these children; if they do not reach them now, America's future might be jeopardized. In turn, this leads to a feeling of self-importance—that one is on the front line of our society, helping the United States continue to grow strong. Not only textbook authors feel this way: historians and history teachers commonly cite their role in building good citizens to justify what they do. In "A Proud Word for History," Allan Nevins waxed euphoric over "school texts that told of Plymouth Rock, Valley Forge, and the Alamo." He lauds history's role in making a nation strong. "Developing in the young such traits as character, morals, ethics, and good citizenship," according to Richard Gross, former president of the National Council for the Social Studies, "are the reasons for studying history and the social sciences."⁵⁸ When we were writing our Mississippi history my coauthors and I felt the same way—that we might improve our state and its citizens by imparting knowledge and changing attitudes in its next generation.


When the authors of American history textbooks have their chance to address the next generation at large, however, even those who in their monographs and private conversations are critical of some aspects of our society, they seem to want only to maintain America rather than change it. One textbook author, Carol Berkin, began her interview with me by saying, "As a historian, I am a feminist socialist."⁵⁹ My jaw dropped, because her textbook displays no hint of feminism or socialism. Surely a feminist author would write a textbook that would help readers understand why no woman has ever been president or even vice-president of the United States. Surely a socialist author would write a textbook that would enable readers to understand why children of working-class families do not become president or vice-president, the mythical Abraham Lincoln to the contrary.⁶⁰

If textbooks are overstuffed, overlong, often wrong, mindless, boring, and all alike, why do teachers use them? In one sense, teachers are responsible for the miseducation in OUP history classrooms. After all, the distortions and omissions exposed in the first ten chapters of this book are lies our teachers tell us. If enough teachers complained about American history textbooks, wouldn't publishers change them? Teachers also play a substantial role in adopting the textbooks; in most states, textbook rating committees are made up mainly of teachers, from whom publishers have faced no groundswell of opposition. On the contrary, many teachers like the textbooks as they are. According to researchers K. K. Wong and T. Loveless, most teachers believe that history textbooks are good and getting better.⁶¹

Could it be that they just don't know the truth? Many history teachers don't know much history, a national survey of 257 teachers in 1990 revealed that 13 percent had never taken a college history course, and only 40 percent held a B.A. or M.A. in history or had a major with "some history" in it.⁶² Furthermore, a study of Indiana teachers revealed that fewer than one in five stay current by reading books or articles in American history. A group of high school history teachers at a recent conference on Christopher Columbus and the Age of Exploration gasped aloud to learn that people before Columbus knew the world to be round. These teachers were mortified to realize that for years they had been disseminating false information. Of course, teachers cannot teach that which they do not know.

Most teachers do not like controversy. A study some years ago found that 92 percent of teachers did not initiate discussion of controversial issues, 89 percent didn't discuss controversial issues when students brought them up, and 79 percent didn't believe they should. Among the topics that teachers felt children were interested in discussing but that most teachers believed should not be discussed in the classroom were the Vietnam War, politics, race relations, nuclear war, religion, and family problems such as divorce.⁶³

Many teachers are frightened of controversy because they have not experienced it themselves in an academic setting and do not know how to handle it. "Most social studies teachers in U.S. schools are ill prepared by their own schooling to deal with uncertainty," according to Shirley Engle. "They are in over their heads the minute that pat answers no longer suffice." Inertia is also built into the system; many teachers teach as they were taught. Even many college history professors who well know that history is full of controversy and dispute become old-fashioned transmitters of knowledge in their own classrooms.⁶⁴



Since textbooks employ a rhetoric of certainty, it is hard for teachers to introduce either controversy or uncertainty into the classroom without deviating from the usual standards of discourse. Teachers rarely say "I don't know" in class and rarely discuss how one might then find the answer. "I don't know" violates a norm. The teacher, like the textbook, is *supposed* to know. Students, for their part, are supposed to learn what teachers and textbook authors already know.⁶⁵

It is hard for teachers to teach open-endedly. They are afraid not to be in control of the answer, afraid of losing their authority over the class. To avoid exposing gaps in their knowledge, teachers allow their students to make "very little use of the school's extensive resources," according to researcher Linda McNeil, who completed three studies of high school social studies classes between 1975 and 1981.⁶⁶ Who knows where inquiry might lead or how to manage it? John Goodlad found that less than one percent of instructional time involved class discussions requiring "reasoning or perhaps an opinion from students."⁶⁷ Instead of discussion and research, teachers emphasize "simplistic teacher-controlled information." Teachers' "patterns of knowledge control were, according to their own statements in taped interviews, rooted in their desire for classroom control," according to McNeil.⁶⁸ They end up adopting the same omniscient tone as their textbooks. As a result, teachers present a boring, overly ordered way of thinking, much less interesting than the way people really think. Summarizing McNeil's research, Albert Shanker, himself an advocate for teachers, notes that the same teachers who are "vital, broad-minded, and immensely knowledgeable in private conversations" nonetheless come across as "narrow, dull, and rigid in the classroom."⁶⁹

David Jenness has pointed out that professional historical organizations for at least a century have repeatedly exhorted teachers not to teach history as fact memorization. "Stir up the minds of the pupils," cried the American Historical Association in 1893; avoid stressing "dates, names, and specific events," historians urged in 1934; leaders of the profession have made similar appeals in almost every decade in between and since.⁷⁰ Nevertheless teachers continue to present factoids for students to memorize. Like textbook authors, teachers can be lazy. Teaching is stressful. Bad textbooks make life easier. They make lesson plans easy to organize. Moreover, publishers furnish lavish packages that include videos for classroom viewing, teachers' manuals with suggestions on how to introduce each topic, and examinations ready to duplicate and gradable by machine. Textbooks also offer teachers the security of knowing they are covering the waterfront, so their students won't be disadvantaged on statewide or nationwide standardized tests.

For all these reasons, national surveys have confirmed that teachers use textbooks more than 70 percent of the time.⁷¹ Moreover, most teachers prefer textbooks that are similar to the books they are already using, a big reason why the "inquiry textbook" movement never caught on in the late 1970s. "Teachers often prefer the errors they are familiar with to unfamiliar but correct information"—another reason why errors get preserved and passed on to new generations.⁷²

Laziness is not exactly a fair charge, however. When are teachers supposed to find time to do research so they can develop their own course outlines and readings? They already work a fifty-five-hour week. Most teachers are far too busy teaching, grading, policing, handing out announcements, advising, comforting, hall monitoring, cafeteria quieting, and then running their own households to go off and research topics they do not even know to question. After hours, they are often required to supervise extracurricular activities, to say nothing of grading papers and planning lessons.⁷⁵ During the academic year most school districts allow teachers just two to four days of "in-service training." Summers offer time to retool but no money, and we can hardly expect teachers to subsidize the rest of us by going three months with no income to learn American history on their own.

Some of the foregoing pressures affect teachers of *my* subject. But certain additional constraints affect teachers in American history. Like the authors of history textbooks, history teachers can get themselves into a mind-set wherein they feel defensive about the United States, especially in front of minority students. Like authors, teachers can feel that they are supposed to defend and endorse America. Even African American teachers may feel vaguely threatened by criticism of America, threatened lest they be attacked too. Teachers naturally identify with the material they teach. Since the textbooks are defensively boosterish about America, teachers who use them run the risk of becoming defensively boosterish too. Compare the happier estate of the English teacher, who can hardly teach, say, Langston Hughes's mildly subversive poem "Freedom Train" without becoming mildly subversive. Similarly, it is hard to teach *Triumph of the American Nation* without becoming mildly boring.

Social studies and history teachers often get less respect from colleagues than faculty in other disciplines. When asked what subject might be dropped, elementary school teachers mentioned social studies more often than any other academic area.⁷⁴ Some high school principals assign history to coaches, who have to teach something, after all. Assigning American history classes to teachers for whom history lies outside their field of competence—which is the

case for 60 percent of U.S. history teachers, according to a nationwide study.— obviously implies the subject is not important or that "anyone can teach it." History teachers also have higher class loads than teachers of any other academic subject.⁷⁵

Students too consider history singularly unimportant. According to recent research on student attitudes toward social studies, "Most students in the United States, at all grade levels, found social studies to be one of the least interesting, most irrelevant subjects in the school curriculum."⁷⁴

Many teachers in social studies sense what students think of their subject matter. All too many respond by giving up inside—not trying to be creative, making only minimal demands, simply staying ahead of their students in the book. Students in turn respond "with minimal classroom effort," and the cycle continues.⁷⁷

Relying on textbooks makes it easier for both parties, teachers and students, to put forth minimal effort. Textbooks' innumerable lists—of main ideas, key terms, people to remember, dates, skill activities, matching, fill in the blanks, and review identifications—which appear to be the bane of students' existence, actually have positive functions. These lists make the course content look rigorous and factual, so teachers and students can imagine they are learning something. They make the teacher appear knowledgeable, whereas freer discussion might expose gaps in his/her information or intelligence. Lastly, these lists of items give students a sense of fairness about grading: performance on "objective" exams seeking recall of specific factoids is easy to measure. Thus lists reduce uncertainty by conveying to students exactly what they need to know.⁷⁸ Fragmenting history into unconnected "facts" also guarantees, however, that students will not be able to relate many of these terms to their own lives and will retain almost none of them after the six-weeks' grading period.⁷⁹

In some ways the two inquiry textbooks in my sample are better than the ten narrative textbooks. Both inquiry books, *The American Adventure* and *Discovering American History*, suggest ways students can use primary materials while examining them for distortions. *The American Adventure* directly challenges ethnocentrism in its teachers' guide, a topic never mentioned in any of the other textbooks or their supplementary teaching guides. Research suggests that the inquiry approach leads to higher student interest in contemporary politics.⁸⁰ However, inquiry textbooks require much more active teaching. Classes can't just plow through them. Teachers must supplement them with additional information, leave out parts of the book, choose which exercises to assign, and work in concert with their school librarians. Perhaps it is because inquiry textbooks

do not rely on rote learning that teachers and school administrators soon abandoned them. The inquiry approach was too much work.³¹

If teachers seem locked into the traditional narrative textbooks, why don't teachers teach *against* them, at least occasionally? Teaching against the book is hard. We have already noted the logistical problems of time and workload. Resources are also a problem. Where do teachers find a point of leverage? If a state historical museum or university is nearby, that can help. But how do teachers know when they do not know something? How do they know when their book is wrong or misleading? Moreover, students have been trained to believe what they read in print. How can teachers compete with the expertise of established authors backed by powerful publishers?

Teaching against a textbook can also be scary. Textbooks offer security. Teachers can hide behind them when principals, parents, or students challenge them to defend their work. Teaching against the textbook might be construed as critical of the school system, supervisor, principal, or department head who selected it. Teachers could get in trouble for doing that.⁸²

A student of mine who was practice-teaching in an elementary school decided to introduce her students to what she had learned from my course about the Pilgrims, the plagues, and Thanksgiving. The professor of education who supervised her field placement vetoed her plan. "Telling the kids this information, going against their traditions, is like telling them there's no Santa Claus." He was also concerned that the information might "cause a big controversy with the families." With the approval of the classroom teacher, my student persevered, however. While she received no parental complaints, it is true that she risked being perceived as hostile or negative by some parents, administrators, and even fellow teachers.

Teachers *do* get fired, after all. I have interviewed several high school teachers and librarians who have been fired or threatened with dismissal for minor acts of independence such as making material available that some parents consider controversial. Teachers have been fired for teaching *Brave New World* in Baltimore, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* in Idaho, and almost everything else in between.⁸³ Knowing this, many teachers anticipate that powerful forces will pounce upon them and doubt that anyone will come to their defense, so they relax into what Kenneth Carlson called the "security of self-censorship."⁸⁴ I am convinced, though, that most teachers enjoy substantial freedom in practice. "Most teachers have little control over school policy or curriculum," wrote Tracy Kidder in *Among Schoolchildren*, "but most have a great deal of autonomy inside their classrooms." In *Who Controls Our Schools?*,

Michael W. Kirst agreed: "Teachers have in effect a pocket veto on what is taught. An old tradition in American public schools is that once the door of the classroom shuts nobody checks on what a teacher actually does."⁹⁵ Nonetheless even teachers who have little real cause to fear for their jobs typically avoid unnecessary risks.

Perhaps I have been too pessimistic here about teachers. Everywhere I have traveled to speak about the problems with textbooks, I have encountered teachers hungry for accurate historical information. I have met many imaginative teachers who make American history come alive—who bring in controversies and primary source material and challenge students to think. Despite these heroic exceptions in schools all over America, however, the majority of social studies teachers are part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Let us cast our net even wider. Are all of us involved? The myths in our history are not limited to our schooling, after all. These cultural lies have been woven into the fabric of our entire society. From the flat-earth advertisements on Columbus Day weekend to the racist distortion of Reconstruction in *Gone with the Wind*, our society lies to itself about its past. Questioning these lies can seem anti-American. Textbooks may only reflect these lies because we want them to. Textbooks may also avoid controversy because we want them to: at least half of the respondents in national public opinion polls routinely agree that "books that contain dangerous ideas should be banned from public school libraries."⁸⁶ And when the National Assessment for Educational Progress sent its social studies assessment instruments to lay reviewers "to help insure that [they] would be acceptable to the general public," the public replied, "references to specific minority groups should be eliminated whenever possible," "extreme care" should be used in wording any references to the FBI, the president, labor unions, and some other organizations, and "exercises which show national heroes in an uncomplimentary fashion though factually accurate are offensive."⁸⁷

John Williamson, the president of a major textbook publishing company, employed this line to defend publishers: "In the 30s, the treatment of females and of black people clearly mirrored the attitudes of society. All females were portrayed in homemaker roles . . . Blacks were not portrayed at all." Williamson went on to admit that recent improvements in the treatment of women and blacks have not been due to publishers, "much as we would like the credit." As in the past, "textbooks mirror our society and contain what that society considers acceptable." Williamson concluded that all this was as it should be—parents, teachers, and members of the community *should* have the right to pressure publishers to present history as they want it presented.¹¹⁸

Williamson has a point. However, when publishers hide behind "society," their argument invokes a chicken-and-egg problematic, for if textbooks varied more, pressure groups in society would have more alternatives for which to lobby. Moreover, Williamson has conceded the major point: that history textbooks stand in a very different relationship to the discipline of history than most textbooks do to their respective fields. "Society" determines what goes into history textbooks. By contrast, the mathematics profession determines what goes into math textbooks and, creationist pressure notwithstanding, the biology profession determines what goes into biology textbooks. To be sure, mathematics and biology textbooks are products of the same complex organizations and delicate adoption procedures as American history textbooks. To be sure, math and biology books also err. But only about history and social studies do writers actually ask, "Can textbooks have scholarly integrity?"⁸¹¹ Only in history is accuracy so political.

Consider the example of black soldiers in the Civil War. Even in the 1930s the facts about their contribution were plain for all to see in the primary sources and even the textbooks of the Civil War and Reconstruction eras. Depression-era textbooks omitted those facts, not because they were unknown but because including important acts by African Americans did not "mirror the attitudes of [white] society." Thus to understand how textbooks in the 1930s presented the Civil War, we do not look at the history of the 1860s but at the society of the 1930s. Similarly, to understand how textbooks today present the Civil War, the Pilgrims, or Columbus, we do not look at the 1860s, 1620s, or 1490s, but at the 1990s. What distortions of history does our society cause? We must not fool ourselves that the process of distorting history has magically stopped. We must not congratulate ourselves that our society now treats everyone fairly and manifests attitudes that allow accurate interpretations of the past. We must not pretend that, unlike all previous generations, we write true history. When parents and teachers do not demand from publishers and schools the same effort to present accurate history that we expect in other disciplines, we become part of the problem.

Because history is more personal than geology or even American literature, more about "us," there is an additional reason not to present it honestly; don't we want our children to be optimists? Some people feel that we should sanitize history to protect students from unpleasantness, at least until they are eighteen or so. Children have to grow up soon enough as it is, these people say; let them enjoy childhood. Why confront our young people with issues even adults cannot resolve? Must we tell all the grisly details about what Columbus did on Haiti, for example, to fifth-graders?⁹⁰ Sissela Bok wrote a whole book

about, and mostly against, lying; but she seems to agree that lying to children is OK, and compares it to sheltering them from harsh weather."

Certainly age-graded censorship is the one form of censorship that almost everyone believes is appropriate: fifth-graders should not see violent pornography, for instance. Some fifth- or even twelfth-graders who encounter illustrations of Spaniards cutting off Indians' hands or Indians committing suicide might have nightmares about Columbus. Withholding pornography is not a precise analogy to whitewashing history, however. When we fail to present students with the truth about, say, Columbus, we end up presenting a lie instead—at least a lie of serious omission, I doubt that shielding children from horror and violence is really the cause of textbook omissions and distortions. Books *do* include violence, after all, so long as it isn't by "us." For instance, *American History* describes John Brown's actions at Pottawatomie, Kansas, in 1856:

When Brown learned of the [Lawrence] attack, he led a party of seven men. . . . In the dead of night they entered the cabins of three unsuspecting families. For no apparent reason they murdered five people. They split open their skulls with heavy, razor-sharp swords. They even cut off the hand of one of their victims.

Telling of skulls split open and providing minutiae like the heft and sharpness of the swords prompt us to feel revulsion toward Brown. Certainly the author does not provide these details to shield students from unpleasanties.

If textbooks are going to include severed hands, those of the Arawaks cut off by Columbus are much more historically significant. Columbus's severings were systematic and helped depopulate Haiti. *American History*, having omitted these atrocities, cannot claim to present Pottawatomie evenhandedly.

Violence aside, what about shielding children from other untoward realities of our society? How should social studies classes teach young people about the police, for instance? Should the approach be Officer Friendly? Or should children receive a Marxist interpretation of how the power structure uses the police as its first line of control in urban ghettos? Does the approach we choose depend on whether we teach in the suburbs or the inner city? If a more complex analysis of the police is more useful than Officer Friendly for inner-city children, does that mean we should teach about slavery differently in the suburbs from the inner city?

In 1992 Los Angeles exploded in a violent race riot, triggered by a white suburban jury's acquittal of four police officers who had been videotaped

beating a black traffic offender, Rodney King. Almost every child in America saw this most famous of all home videotapes. Therefore almost every child in America learned that Officer Friendly is not the whole story. We do not protect children from controversy by offering only an Officer Friendly analysis in school. All we do is make school irrelevant to the major issues of the day. Rock songs bought by thirteen-year-olds treat AIDS, nuclear war, and ecocide. Rap songs discuss racism, sexism, drug *use*—and American history. We can be sure that our children already know about and think about these and other issues, whether we like it or not. Indeed, attempts by parents to preserve some nonexistent childhood innocence through avoidance are likely to heighten rather than reduce anxiety.^{U2} Lying and omission are not the right ways. There is 3 way to teach truth to a child at any age level.

Maybe textbooks that emphasize how wonderful, fair, and progressive our society has been give some students a basis for idealism. It may be empowering for children to believe that simply by living we all contribute to a constantly improving society. Maybe later, when students grow up and learn better, they will be motivated to change the system to make it resemble the ideal. Maybe stressing fairness as a basic American value provides a fulcrum from which students can criticize society when they discover, perhaps in college history courses, how it has often been unfair. This all may be an instance of Emily Dickinson's couplet "The Truth must dazzle gradually/ Or every man be blind."⁹³

Since fewer than one American in *six* ever takes an American history course after leaving high school, it is not clear just when the next generation will get dazzled by the truth in American history. Another problem with this line of thinking is that the truth may then dazzle students with the sudden realization that their teachers have been lying to them. A student of mine wrote of having been "taught the story of George Washington receiving a hatchet for his birthday and proceeding to chop down his father's favorite cherry tree." To her horror this student later discovered that "a story I had held sacred in my memory for so long had been a lie." She ended up "feeling bitter and betrayed by my earlier teachers who had to lie to build up George Washington's image, causing me to question all that I had previously learned." This student's alienation pales besides that of African Americans when they confront another truth about the Founding Fathers: "When I first learned that Washington and Jefferson had slaves, I was devastated," the historian Mark Lloyd told me. "I didn't want to have anything more to do with them."¹⁴ Selling Washington as a hero to Native Americans will eventually founder on a similar rock when they learn what he did to the Iroquois.

It is hard to believe that adults keep children ignorant in order to preserve their idealism. More likely, adults keep children ignorant so they *won't* be idealistic. Many adults fear children and worry that respect for authority is all that keeps them from running amok. So they teach them to respect authorities whom adults themselves do not respect. In the late 1970s survey researchers gave parents a series of statements and asked whether they believed them and wanted their children to believe them. One statement stood out: "People in authority know best." Parents replied in these proportions:

- 13%— "believe and want children to believe"
- 56%— "have doubts but still want to teach to children"
- 30%— "don't believe and don't want to pass on to children"

Thus a majority of parents wanted their children *not* to doubt authority figures, even though the parents themselves doubted."

Some adults simply do not trust children to think. For several decades sociologists have documented Americans' distrust of the next generation. Parents may feel undermined when children get tools of information and inquiry not available to adults and use them in ways that seem to threaten adult-held values. Many parents want children to concentrate on the 3 R's, not on multicultural history.⁶ Shirley Engle has described "a strident minority [of teachers and parents] who do not really believe in democracy and do not really believe that kids should be taught to think."⁷ Perhaps adults' biggest reason for lying is that they fear our history—fear that it *isn't* so wonderful, and that if children were to learn what has really gone on, they would lose all respect for our society. Thus when Edward Ruzzo tried in 1964 to cover up Warren G. Harding's embarrassing love letters to a married woman, he used the rationale "that anything damaging to the image of an American President should be suppressed to protect the younger generation." As fudge Ruzzo put it, there are too many juvenile delinquents as it is.⁸

Ironically, only people who themselves have been raised on shallow feel-good history could harbor such doubts. Harding may not have been much of a role model, but other Americans—Tom Paine, Thoreau, Lincoln, Helen Hunt Jackson, Martin Luther King, and yes, John Brown, Helen Keller, and Woodrow Wilson too—are still celebrated by lovers of freedom everywhere. Yet publishers, authors, teachers, and parents seem afraid to expose children to the blazing idealism of these leaders at their best. Today many aspects of American life, from the premises of our legal system to elements of our popular culture, inspire other

societies. If Russia can abandon boosterish history, as it seems to have done, surely America can too. "We do not need a bodyguard of lies," points out Paul Gagnon. "We can afford to present ourselves in the totality of our acts."^{1c}

Textbook authors seem not to share Gagnon's confidence, however. There is a certain contradiction in the logic of those who write patriotic textbooks. On the one hand, they describe a country without repression, without real conflict. On the other hand, they obviously believe that we need to lie to students to instill in them love of country. But if the country is so wonderful, why must we lie?

Ironically, our lying only diminishes us. Bernice Reagon of the Smithsonian Institution has pointed out that other countries are impressed when we send spokespeople abroad who, like herself, are willing to criticize the United States. Surely this is part of what democracy is about. Surely in a democracy a historian's duty is to tell the truth. Surely in a democracy students need to develop informed reasons to criticize as well as take pride in their country. Maybe somewhere along the line we gave up on democracy?

Lying to children is a slippery slope. Once we have started sliding down it, how and when do we stop? Who decides when to lie? Which lies to tell? To what age group? As soon as we loosen the anchor of fact, of historical evidence, our history textboat is free to blow here and there, pointing first in one direction, then in another. If we obscure or omit facts because they make Columbus look bad, why not omit those that make the United States look bad? or the Mormon Church? or the state of Mississippi? *This* is the politicization of history. How do we decide what to teach in an American history course once authors have decided not to value the truth? If our history courses aren't based on fact anyway, why not tell one story to whites, another to blacks? Isn't Scott, Foresman already doing something like that when it puts out a "Lone Star" edition of *Land of Promise*, tailoring the facts of history to suit (white) Texans?

These are rhetorical questions, I suppose. Because they commonly repeat treatments from earlier textbooks for the most part, authors rarely answer them consciously. In any event, postmodernists caution us not to "privilege" one account over others with the label "true." Philosopher Martin Heidegger once defined truth as "that which makes a people certain, clear, and strong," and American history textbooks apparently intend to do just that, at least for conventional European Americans.¹⁰¹ Before we abandon the old "correspondence to fact" sense of truth in favor of Heidegger's more useful definition, however, we may want to recall that he gave it in the service of Adolf Hitler. Moreover, if

the textbooks aren't true, they leave us with no grounds for defending the courses based on them, when students charge that American history is a waste of time. Why should children believe what they learn in American history, if their textbooks are full of distortions and lies? Why should they bother to learn it?

Luckily, as the next chapter tells, they don't.

William Jennings Bryan: "I do not think about the things that I do not think about."
Clarence Darrow: 'Do you ever think about the things that you *do* think about?'
—*Inherit the Wind*¹

Learning social studies is, to no small extent, whether in elementary school or
the university, learning to be stupid.
—*Jules Henry*²

Yeah, I cut class, I got a D
'Cause history meant nothin' to me.
—*Jungle Brothers*³

The truth shall make us free.
The truth shall make us free.
The truth shall make us free some day.
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
The truth shall make us free some day.
—*Verse of "We Shall Overcome"*

12. What Is the Result of Teaching **History** Like This?

All over America, high school students sit in social studies and American history classes, look at their textbooks, write answers to the questions at the end of each chapter, and take quizzes and examinations that test factual recall. When I was subjected to this regimen, I never answered any of the terms at the end of the chapter until the sixth week of each six-week grading period. Then the teacher and I would negotiate what proportion of the terms I had to define correctly to get an A" (usually something like 85 percent) and I would madly write out definitions through the last two days of class. Three years later, when my sister took American history, student culture had developed a more effective technique. Students did the work on time, writing real definitions to the first two and last two terms, but for the thirty or forty in the middle they free-associated whatever nonsense they wanted. "Hawley-Smoot Tariff I have no idea, Mr. De Moulin," might be one entry. Or "Blue Eagle: FDR's pet bird who got very sad when he died," Educational theorists call such acts "day-to-day resistance"—a phrase that comes from theorizing about slavery—but I did not know that then. I was just envious that my class hadn't thought of such a marvelous labor-saving ploy.

Of course, fooling the teacher is of little consequence. Quite possibly my sister's teacher even knew of the ruse and joked about it with his colleagues, the way masters chuckled that their slaves were so stupid they had to be told every evening to bring in the hoes or they would leave them out in the night dew. Some social studies and history teachers try to win student cooperation by telling them, when introducing a topic, not to worry, they won't have to learn much about it. Students happily acquiesce.⁴ Students also invest a great deal of creative energy in getting teachers to waste time and relax requirements.⁵ Teachers acquiesce partly because, as with much day-to-day resistance during slavery, yielding does not really threaten the system. Day-to-day school resistance also provides students a form of psychic distance, a sense that although the system may have commanded their pens, it has not won real cooperation from their minds.

Indeed, it hasn't. Study after study shows that students successfully resist learning American history.⁶ A few years ago I observed a class of students being tested on George F. Baer, the Hepburn Act, the Newlands Reclamation Act, the Northern Securities Case, and the Elkins Act—and this merely got them part of the way through Teddy Roosevelt's first term! All they could hope to do was cram these items into short-term memory for the test, then forget them to make room for the next list. In the process, they failed to gain *any* insights or to distinguish *any* facts as important enough to merit recall after the end of the grading period.

When two-thirds of American seventeen-year-olds cannot place the Civil War in the right half-century, or 22 percent of my students reply that the Vietnam War was fought between North and South *Korea*, we must salute young people for more than mere ignorance.⁷ This is resistance raised to a high level. Students are simply not learning even the details of American history that textbooks and teachers stress. Still less are they learning to apply lessons from the past to current issues. Students are left with no resources to understand, accept, or rebut historical referents used in arguments by candidates for office, sociology professors, or newspaper journalists. If knowledge is power, ignorance cannot be bliss.

Emotion is the glue that causes history to stick. We old-timers remember where we were when we heard of the death of John F. Kennedy because it affected us emotionally. American history is a heartrending subject. When students read real voices from our past, the emotions do not fail to move them. Recall Las Casas's passionate denunciations of the Spanish treatment of Indians: "What we committed in the Indies stands out among the most unpardonable offenses ever committed against God and mankind." Consider the famous final words of William Jennings Bryan to the 1896 Democratic national convention: "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns. You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold." Or Helen Keller's attack on the Brooklyn *Eagle*: "Socially blind and deaf, it defends an intolerable system." Or Franklin D. Roosevelt's words in the depression, assuring us we had "nothing to fear but fear itself." Events and images also call forth strong feelings. The saga of Elizabeth Blackwell in medical school, the liberation of Nazi death camp inmates by American (and Russian and British) soldiers, the ultimate success of Jonas Salk in finding a vaccine that would kill polio—these are stirring stories. As textbook critic Mrs. W. K. Haralson writes, "There is no way the glowing, throbbing events of history can be presented fairly, accurately, and factually without involving emotion."⁸

Earlier chapters and courses are many teachers s might be worth seeps into these contrary, most of tional landscape studying it is g< teacher told me, boring."

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"Children, meaningless dat: forget most of t students forget i African America or Asian Araeri because the wa' color and childi white males ine' of mine, who wi crable Indian pc when he broug brought forth tl that day and no seems reasonab! school year, in 3 Unlike the Abet offense and do self-image to sw

Earlier chapters have shown, however, that American history textbooks and courses are neither dispassionate nor passionate. All textbook authors and many teachers seem not to have thought deeply about just what in our past might be worthy of passion, or even serious contemplation. No *real* emotion seeps into these books, not even real pride.⁹ Instead, heroic exceptions to the contrary, most American history courses and textbooks operate in a gray emotional landscape of pious duty in which the United States has a good history, so studying it is good for students. "They don't think of history as drama," one teacher told me. "They all tell me they hate history, because it's dead facts, and boring."

Another way to cause history to stick is to present it so that it touches students' lives. To show students how racism affects African Americans, a teacher in Iowa discriminated by eye color among members of her all-white class of third-graders for two days. The film *A Class Divided* shows how vividly these students remembered the lesson fifteen years later.¹⁰ In contrast, material from US. history textbooks is rarely retained for fifteen weeks after the end of the school year. By stressing the distant past, textbooks discourage students from seeking to learn history from their families or community, which again disconnects school from the other parts of students' lives.

"Children, [like most adults, do not readily retain isolated, incoherent, and meaningless data." Since textbooks provide almost no causal skeleton, students forget most of the mass of detail they "learn" in their history courses. Not all students forget it equally, however. Caste minority children—Native Americans, African Americans, and Hispanics—do worse in all subjects, compared to white or Asian American children, but the gap is largest in social studies. That is because the way American history is taught particularly alienates students of color and children from impoverished families. Feel-good history for affluent white males inevitably amounts to feel-bad history for everyone else. A student of mine, who was practice-teaching in Swanton, Vermont, a town with a considerable Indian population, noticed an Abenaki fifth-grader obviously timing out when he brought up the subject of Thanksgiving. Talking with the child brought forth the following reaction: "My father told me the real truth about that day and not to listen to any white man scum like you!" Yet Thanksgiving seems reasonably benign compared to, say, Columbus Day Throughout the school year, in a thousand little ways, American history offends many students. Unlike the Abenaki youngster, most have-not students do not consciously take offense and do not rebel but are nonetheless subtly put *off*. It hurts children's self-image to swallow what their history books teach about the exceptional fair-

ness of America. Black students consider American history, as usually taught, "white" and assimilative, so they resist learning it. This explains why research shows a bigger performance differential between poor and rich students, or black and white students, in history than in other school subjects.¹² Girls also dislike social studies and history even more than boys, probably because women and women's concerns and perceptions still go underrepresented in history classes."

Afrocentric history arose partly in response to this problem. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., denounces Afrocentrism as "psychotherapy" for blacks—a one-sided misguided attempt to make African Americans feel good about themselves.¹⁴ Unfortunately, the Eurocentric history in our textbooks amounts to psychotherapy for whites. Since historians like Schlesinger have not addressed Eurocentrism, they do not come into the discussion with clean hands. To be sure, the answer to Eurocentric textbooks is not one-sided Afrocentric history, the kind that has Africans inventing everything good and whites inventing slavery and oppression. Surely we do not really want a generation of African Americans raised on antiwhite Afrocentric history, but just as surely, we cannot afford another generation of white Americans raised on complacent celebratory Eurocentric history. Even if they don't learn much history from their textbooks, students are affected by the book's slant. Martha Toppin found unanimous agreement with this proposition among ninety high school students: "If Africa had had a history worth learning about, we would have had it last year in Western Civilization."¹⁵ The message that Eurocentric history sends to non-European Americans is; your ancestors have not done much of importance. It is easy for European Americans and non-European Americans to take a step further and conclude that non-European Americans are not important today.

From the beginning, when textbooks call Columbus's 1492 voyage "a miracle" and proclaim, "Soon the grateful captain wades ashore and gives thanks to God," they make the Christian deity God and put Him [*sit*] on the white side. Omitting the Arawaks' perspective on Haiti continues the process of "otherizing" nonwhites in this first diorama from our history. If the "we" in a textbook included American Indians, African Americans, Latinos, women, and all social classes, the book would read differently, just as whites *talk* differently (and more humanely) in the presence of people of color. Surely it is possible to write accurate multicultural history that spreads the discomfort around, rather than distorting history to help only affluent white children feel comfortable about their past. Maybe we can even write and teach an American history that children of the nonelite would *want to* study.

Equally as worrisome is the impact of American history courses on white affluent children. This grave result can best be shown by what I call the "Vietnam exercise." Throughout the Vietnam War, pollsters were constantly asking the American people whether they wanted to bring our troops home. At first, only a small fraction of Americans favored withdrawal. Toward the end of the war, a large majority wanted us to pull out.

Not only did Gallup, Roper, the National Opinion Research Center, and other organizations ask Americans about the war, they also usually inquired about background variables—sex, education, region, and the like—so they could find out which kinds of people were most hawkish (prowar), which most dovish. Over ten years I have asked more than a thousand undergraduates and several hundred nonstudents their beliefs about what kind of adults, by educational level, supported the war in Vietnam. I ask audiences to fill out Table 1, trying to replicate the results of the January 1971 national Gallup survey on the war. By January 1971, as I tell audiences, the national mood was overwhelmingly dove: 73 percent favored withdrawal. (I excluded "don't knows.")

Table 1

In January 1971 the Gallup Poll asked: "A proposal has been made in Congress to require the U. S. government to bring home all U. S. troops before the end of this year. Would you like to have your congressman vote for or against this proposal?"

Estimate the results, by education, By filling out this table:

Adults with:

	College Education	High School Education	Grade School Education	Total Adults
% for withdrawal of U.S. troops (Doves)				73%
% against withdrawal Of U.S. troops (Hawks)				27%
Totals	100%	100%	100%	100%

Most recent high school graduates are not able even to construct a simple table or interpret a graph. Accordingly, I teach audiences how the table must balance—how, if grade-school-educated adults, for instance, were more dovish than others, hence supported withdrawal by more than 73 percent, some other group must be less dovish than 73 percent for the entire population to balance out at 73 percent doves. If you wish to be an active reader, you might fill out the table yourself before reading further.

By an overwhelming margin—almost 10 to 1—audiences believe that college-educated persons were more dovish. Table 2 shows a typical response.

Table 2

	Adults with:			
	College Education	High School Education	Grade School Education	Total Adults
% for withdrawal of U.S. troops (Doves)	90%	75%	60%	73%
% against withdrawal of U.S. troops (Hawks)	10%	25%	40%	27%
Totals	100%	100%	100%	100%

I then ask audiences to assume that their tables are correct—that the results of the survey correspond to what they guessed—and to state at least two reasonable hypotheses to explain these results. Their most common responses:

Educated people are more informed and critical, hence more able to sift through misinformation and conclude that the Vietnam War was not in our best interests, politically or morally.

Educated people are more tolerant. There were elements of racism and ethnocentrism in our conduct of the war- educated people are less likely to accept such prejudice.

Less-educated people, being of lower occupational status, were more likely to be employed in a war-related industry or in the armed forces themselves, hence had self-interest in being prowar.

There is nothing surprising here. Most people feel that schooling is a good thing and enables us to sift facts, weigh evidence, and think rationally. An educated people has been said to be a bulwark of democracy.

However, the truth is quite different. Educated people disproportionately supported the Vietnam War. Table 3 shows the actual outcome of the January 1971 poll:

Table 3

	Adults with:			
	College Education	High School Education	Grade School Education	Total Adults
% for withdrawal of U.S. troops (Doves]	60%	75%	80%	73%
% against withdrawal Of U.S. troops (Hawks)	40%	25%	20%	27%
Totals	100%	100%	100%	100%

These results surprise even some professional social scientists. Twice as high a proportion of college-educated adults, 40 percent, were hawks, compared to only 20 percent of adults with grade school educations. And this poll was no isolated phenomenon. Similar results were registered again and again, in surveys by Harris, NORC, and others. Way back in 1965, when only 24 percent of the nation agreed that the United States "made a mistake" in sending troops to Vietnam, 28 percent of the grade school-educated felt so. Later, when less than half of the college-educated adults favored pullout, among the grade school-educated 61 percent did. Throughout our long involvement in Southeast Asia, on issues related to Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, or Laos, the grade school-educated were *always* the most dovish, the college-educated the most hawkish.

Today most Americans agree that the Vietnam War was a mistake, politically and morally; so do most political analysts, including such men as Robert McNamara and Clark Clifford, who waged the war.¹⁶ If we concur with this now conventional wisdom, then we must concede that the more educated a person was, the more likely s/he was to be wrong about the war.

Why did educated Americans support the war? When my audiences learn that educated people were more hawkish, they scurry about concocting new explanations. Since they are still locked into their presumption that educated people are more intelligent and have more good will than the less educated, their theories have to strain to explain why less-educated Americans were right. The most popular revamped theory asserts that since working-class young men bore the real cost of the war, "naturally" they and their families opposed it. This explanation seems reasonable, for it does credit the working class with opposing the war and with a certain brute rationality. But it reduces the thinking of the working class to a crude personal cost-benefit analysis, implicitly denying that the less educated might take society as a whole into consideration. Thus this hypothesis diminishes the position of the working class—which was more correct than that of the educated, after all—to a mere reflex based on self-interest. It is also wrong. Human nature doesn't work that way. Research has shown that people of whatever educational level who expect to go to war tend to *support* that war, because people rarely don't believe in something they plan to do. Working-class young men who enlisted or looked forward to being drafted could not easily influence their destinies to avoid Vietnam, but they could change their attitudes about the war to be more positive. Thus, cognitive dissonance helps explain why young men of draft age supported the war more than older men, and why men supported the war more than women. While less-educated families with sons in the Vietnam conflict often formed pockets of support for the war, such pockets were exceptions to the dovishness that pervaded the less-educated segments of our populace.¹⁷

By now my audiences are keen to learn why educated Americans were more hawkish. Two social processes, each tied to schooling, can account for educated Americans' support of the Vietnam War. The first can be summarized by the term *allegiance*. Educated adults tend to be successful and earn high incomes—partly because schooling leads to better jobs and higher incomes, but mainly because high parental incomes lead to more education for their offspring. Also, parents transmit affluence and education directly to their children. Successful Americans do not usually lay their success at their parents' doorstep, however. They usually explain their accomplishments as owing to their own individual characteristics, so they see American society as meritocratic. They achieved their own success; other people must be getting their just desserts. Believing that American society is open to individual input, the educated well-to-do tend to agree with society's decisions and feel they had a hand in forming them. They identify more with our society and its policies. We can use the term

vested interest here, so long as we realize we are referring to an ideological interest or need, a need to come to terms with the privilege with which one has been blessed, not simple economic self-interest. In this sense, educated successful people have a vested interest in believing that the society that helped them be educated and successful is fair. As a result, those in the upper third of our educational and income structure are more likely to show allegiance to society, while those in the lower third are more likely to be critical of it.

The other process causing educated adults to be more likely to support the Vietnam War can be summarized under the rubric *socialization*. Sociologists have long agreed that schools are important socializing agents in our society. "Socializing" in this context does not mean hobnobbing around a punch bowl but refers to the process of learning and internalizing the basic social rules—language, norms, etiquette—necessary for an individual to function in society. Socialization is not primarily cognitive. We are not persuaded rationally not to pee in the living room, we are *required* not to. We then internalize and obey this rule even when no authority figure lurks to enforce it. Teachers may try to convince themselves that education's main function is to promote inquiry, not iconography but in fact the socialization function of schooling remains dominant at least through high school and hardly disappears in college. Education as socialization tells people what to think and how to act and requires them to conform. Education as socialization influences students simply to accept the tightness of our society. American history textbooks overtly tell us to be proud of America. The more schooling, the more socialization, and the more likely the individual will conclude that America is good.

Both the allegiance and socialization processes cause the educated to believe that what America does is right. Public opinion polls show the non-thinking results. In late spring 1966, just before we began bombing Hanoi and Haiphong in North Vietnam, Americans split 50/50 as to whether we should bomb these targets. After the bombing began, 85 percent favored the bombing while only 15 percent opposed. The sudden shift was the result, not the cause, of the government's decision to bomb. The same allegiance and socialization processes operated again when policy changed in the opposite direction. In 1968 war sentiment was waning; but 51 percent of Americans opposed a bombing halt, partly because the United States was still bombing North Vietnam. A month later, after President Johnson announced a bombing halt, 71 percent favored the halt. Thus 23 percent of our citizens changed their minds within a month, mirroring the shift in government policy. This swaying of thought by policy affects attitudes on issues ranging from our space program to

environmental policy and shows the so-called "silent majority" to be an unthinking majority as well. Educated people are overrepresented among these straws in the wind.¹⁸

We like to think of education as a mix of thoughtful learning processes. Allegiance and socialization, however, are intrinsic to the role of schooling in our society or any hierarchical society. Socialist leaders such as Fidel Castro and Mao Tse-tung vastly extended schooling in Cuba and China in part because they knew that an educated people is a socialized populace and a bulwark of allegiance. Education works the same way here: it encourages students not to think about society but merely to trust that it is good. To the degree that American history in particular is celebratory, it offers no way to understand any problem—such as the Vietnam War, poverty, inequality, international haves and have-nots, environmental degradation, or changing sex roles—that has historical roots. Therefore we might expect that the *more* traditional schooling in history that Americans have, the *less* they will understand Vietnam or any other historically based problem. This is why educated people were more hawkish on the Vietnam War.

Table 2 supplies an additional example of nonthinking by the educated and affluent: they are wrong about who supported the war. By a nine to one margin, the hundreds of educated people who have filled out Table 1 believed that educated Americans were more dovish. Thus the Vietnam exercise suggests two errors by the elite. The first error that educated people made was being excessively hawkish back in 1966, 1968, or 1971. The second error they made was in filling out Table 1.

Why have my audiences been so wrong in remembering or deducing who opposed the Vietnam War? One reason is that Americans like to believe that schooling is a good thing. Most Americans tend automatically to equate *educated* with *informed or tolerant*.TM Traditional purveyors of social studies and American history seize upon precisely this belief to rationalize their enterprise, claiming that history courses lead to a more enlightened citizenry. The Vietnam exercise suggests the opposite is more likely true.

Audiences would not have been so easily fooled if they had only recalled that educated people were and are more likely to be Republicans, while high school dropouts are more likely to be Democrats. Hawkish right-wing Republicans, including the core supporters of Barry Goldwater in 1964, of Ronald Reagan in 1980, and of groups like the John Birch Society, come disproportionately from the most educated and affluent segments of our society, particularly dentists and physicians. So we should not be surprised that education correlates

with hawkishness. At the other end of the social status spectrum, although most African Americans, like most whites, initially supported U.S. intervention in Vietnam, blacks were always more questioning and more dovish than whites, and African American leaders—Muhammad Ali, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X—were prominent among the early opponents of the war.²⁰

American history textbooks help perpetrate the archetype of the blindly patriotic hardhat by omitting or understating progressive elements in the working class. Textbooks do not reveal that CIO unions and some working-class fraternal associations were open to all when many chambers of commerce and country clubs were still white-only. Few textbooks tell of organized labor's role in the civil rights movement, including the 1963 March on Washington. Nevertheless many members of my audiences are aware that educated Americans are likely to be Republicans, hard-liners on defense, and right-wing extremists. Some members of my audiences know about Goldwater voters, Muhammad Ali's induction refusal, Birchers and education, or labor unions and the war—information that would have helped them fill in the blanks in Table 1 correctly. Somehow, though, they never think to apply such knowledge. Most people fill out the table in a daze without ever using what they know. Their education and their position in society cause them not to think.²¹

Such nonthinking occurs most commonly when society is the subject. "One of the major duties of an American citizen is to analyze issues and interpret events intelligently," *Discovering American History* exhorts students. Our textbooks fail miserably at this task. The Vietnam exercise shows how bad the situation really is. Most college students, even high school students, would never put up with such obvious contradictions when thinking about, say, chemistry. When the subject is the social world, however, they are often guilty of nonsensical reasoning. Sociology professors are amazed and depressed at the level of thinking about society displayed each fall by the upper-middle-class students entering their first-year classes. These students cannot use the past to illuminate the present and have no inkling of causation in history, so they cannot think coherently about social life. Extending the terminology of Jules Henry, we might use "social stupidity" to describe the illogical intellectual process and conclusions that result.

Students who have taken more mathematics courses are more proficient at math than other students. The same is true in English, foreign language studies, and almost every other subject. Only in history is stupidity the result of more, not less, schooling. Why do students buy into the mindless "analysis" they encounter in American history courses? For some students, it is in their ideolog-

ical interest. Upper-middle-class students are comforted by a view of society that emphasizes schooling as the solution to intolerance, poverty, even perhaps war. Such a rosy view of education and its effects lets them avoid considering the need to make major changes in other institutions. To the degree that this view permeates our society, students automatically think well of education and expect the educated to have seen through the Vietnam War.

Moreover, thinking well of education reinforces the ideology we might call American individualism. It leaves intact the archetypal image of a society marked by or at least striving toward equality of opportunity. Yet precisely to the extent that students believe that equality of opportunity exists, they are encouraged to blame the uneducated for being poor, just as my audiences blame them for being hawks on the war in Vietnam. Americans who are not poor find American individualism a satisfying ideology, for it explains their success in life by laying it at their own doorstep. This enables them to feel proud of their success, even if it is modest, rather than somehow ashamed of it. Crediting success to their position in social structure threatens those good feelings. It is much more gratifying to believe that their educational attainments and occupational successes result from ambition and hard work—that their privilege has been earned. To a considerable degree, working-class and lower-class Americans also adopt this prevailing ethic about society and schooling. Often working-class adults in dead-end jobs blame themselves, focusing on their own earlier failure to excel in school, and feel they are inferior in some basic way²²

Students also have short-term reasons for accepting what teachers and textbooks tell them about the social world in their history and social studies classes, of course. They are going to be tested on it. It is in the students' interest just to learn the material. Arguing takes more energy, doesn't help one's grade, and even violates classroom norms. Moreover, there is a feeling of accomplishment derived from learning something, even something as useless and mindless as the answers to the identification questions that occupy the last two pages of each chapter in most history textbooks. Students can feel frustrated by the ambiguity of real history, the debates among historians, or the challenge of applying ideas from the past to their own lives. They may resist changes in the curriculum, especially if these involve more work or work less clearly structured than simply "doing the terms." After years of rote education, students become habituated to it and inexperienced and ineffectual at any other kind of learning."

In the long run, however, "learning" history this way is not really satisfying. History textbooks and most high school history teachers give students no reason to love or appreciate the subject. We must not ignore the abysmal ratings that his-

tory courses receive,²⁴ and we cannot merely exhort students to like history more. But this does not mean the sorry state of learning in most history classrooms cannot be changed. Students will start learning history when they see the point of doing so, when it seems interesting and important to them, and when they believe history might relate to their lives and futures. Students will start finding history interesting when their teachers and textbooks stop lying to them.

Once you have learned how to ask questions—relevant and appropriate and substantial questions—you have learned how to learn and no one can keep you from learning whatever you want or need to know.

—Neil Postman
and Charles Weingartner¹

Do not try to satisfy your vanity by teaching a great many things. Awaken people's curiosity. It is enough to open minds; do not overload them.

—Anatole France²

He is a lover of his country who rebukes and does not excuse its sins.

—Frederick Douglass³

The future of mankind lies waiting for those who will come to understand their lives and take up their responsibilities to all living things.

—Vine Deloria, Jr.⁴