

# From "Lies My Teacher Told Me"

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High school students hate history.

When they list their favorite subjects, history always comes in last. They consider it "the most irrelevant" of 21 school subjects, not applicable to life today. "Borr-r-ring" is the adjective they apply to it. When they can, they avoid it, even though most students get higher grades in history than in math, science, or English. Even when they are forced to take history, they repress it, so every year or two another study decries what our 17-year-olds don't know.

African American, Native American, and Latino students view history with a special dislike. They also learn it especially poorly. Students of color do only slightly worse than white students in mathematics. Pardoning my grammar, they do more worse in English and most worse in history. Something intriguing is going on here: surely history is not more difficult than trigonometry or Faulkner. I will argue later that high school history so alienates people of color that doing badly may be a sign of mental health! Students don't know they're alienated, only that they "don't like social studies" or "aren't any good at history." In college, most students of color give history departments a wide berth.

Many history teachers perceive the low morale in their classrooms. If they have lots of time, light family responsibilities, some resources, and a flexible principal, some teachers respond by abandoning the overstuffed textbooks and reinventing their American history courses. All too many teachers grow disheartened and settle for less. At least dimly aware that their students are not requiting their own love of history, they withdraw some of their energy from their courses. Gradually they settle for just staying ahead of their students in the books, teaching what will be on the test, and going through the motions.

College teachers in most disciplines are happy when their students have had more rather than less exposure to the subject before they reach college. Not in history. History professors in college routinely put down high school history courses. A colleague of mine calls his survey of American history "Iconoclasm I and II," because he sees his job as disabusing his charges of what they learned in high school. In no other field does this happen. Mathematics professors, for instance, know that non-Euclidean geometry is rarely taught in high school, but they don't assume that Euclidean geometry was mistaught. English literature courses don't presume that "Romeo and Juliet" was misunderstood in high school. Indeed, a later chapter will show that history is the only field in which the more courses students take, the stupider they become.

Perhaps I do not need to convince you that American history is important. More than any other topic, it is about us. Whether one deems our present society wondrous or awful or both, history reveals how we got to this point. Understanding our past is central to our ability to understand ourselves and the world around us. We need to know our history, and according to C. Wright Mills, we know we do. Outside of school, Americans do show great interest in history. Historical

novels often become bestsellers, whether by Gore Vidal (*Lincoln*, *Burr*) or Dana Fuller Ross (*Idaho! Utah! Nebraska! Oregon! Missouri! and on! and on!*). The National Museum of American History is one of the three big draws of the Smithsonian Institution. The Civil War series attracted new audiences to public television. Movies tied to history have fascinated us from *Birth of a Nation* through *Gone With the Wind* to *Dances With Wolves* and *JFK*.

Our situation is this: American history is full of fantastic and important stories. These stories have the power to spellbind audiences, even audiences of difficult seventh graders. These same stories show what America has been about and have direct relevance to our present society. American audiences, even young ones, need and want to know about their national past. Yet they sleep through the classes that present it.

What has gone wrong?

We begin to get a handle on that question by noting that textbooks dominate history teaching more than any other field. Students are right: the books are boring. The stories they tell are predictable because every problem is getting solved, if it has not been already. Textbooks exclude conflict or real suspense. They leave out anything that might reflect badly upon our national character. When they try for drama, they achieve only melodrama, because readers know that everything will turn out wonderful in the end. "Despite setbacks, the United States overcame these challenges," in the words of one of them. Most authors don't even try for melodrama. Instead, they write in a tone that if heard aloud might be described as "mumbling lecturer." No wonder students lose interest.

Textbooks almost never use the present to illuminate the past. They might ask students to learn about gender roles in the present, to prompt thinking about what women did and did not achieve in the suffrage movement or the more recent women's movement. They might ask students to do family budgets for a janitor and a stock broker, to prompt thinking about labor unions and social class in the past or present. They might, but they don't. The present is not a source of information for them. No wonder students find history "irrelevant" to their present lives.

Conversely, textbooks make no real use of the past to illuminate the present. The present seems not to be problematic to them. They portray history as a simple-minded morality play. "Be a good citizen" is the message they extract from the past for the present. "You have a proud heritage. Be all that you can be. After all, look at what the United States has done." While there is nothing wrong with optimism, it does become something of a burden for students of color, children of working class parents, girls who notice an absence of women who made history, or any group that has not already been outstandingly successful. The optimistic textbook approach denies any understanding of failure other than blaming the victim. No wonder children of color are alienated. Even for male children of affluent white families, bland optimism gets pretty boring after eight hundred pages.

These textbooks in American history stand in sharp contrast to the rest of our schooling. Why are they so bad? Nationalism is one of the culprits. Their contents are muddled by the conflicting desires to promote inquiry and indoctrinate blind patriotism. "Take a look in your history book, and you'll see why we should be proud," goes an anthem often sung by high school glee clubs,

but we need not even take a look inside. The difference begins with their titles: The Great Republic, The American Way, Land of Promise, Rise of the American Nation. Such titles differ from all other textbooks students read in high school or college. Chemistry books are called Chemistry or Principles of Chemistry, not Rise of the Molecule. Even literature collections are likely to be titled Readings in American Literature. Not most history books. And you can tell these books from their covers, graced with American flags, eagles, and the Statue of Liberty.

Inside their glossy covers, American history books are full of information - overly full. These books are huge. My collection of a dozen of the most popular averages four and a half pounds in weight and 888 pages in length. No publisher wants to be shut out from an adoption because their book left out a detail of concern to an area or a group. Authors seem compelled to include a paragraph about every president, even Chester A. Arthur and Millard Fillmore. Then there are the review pages at the end of each chapter. Land of Promise, to take one example, enumerates 444 "Main Ideas" at the ends of its chapters. In addition, it lists literally thousands of "Skill Activities," "Key Terms," "Matching" items, "Fill in the Blanks," "Thinking Critically" questions, and "Review Identifications" as well as still more "Main Ideas" at the ends of each section within its chapters. At year's end, no student can remember 444 main ideas, not to mention 624 key terms and countless other "factoids," so students and teachers fall back on one main idea: to memorize the terms for the test following each chapter, then forget them to clear the synapses for the next chapter. No wonder high school graduates are notorious for forgetting in which century the Civil War was fought!

None of the facts is memorable, because they are presented as one damn thing after another. While they include most of the trees and all too many twigs, authors forget to give readers even a glimpse of what they might find memorable: the forests. Textbooks stifle meaning as they suppress causation. Therefore students exit them without developing the ability to think coherently about social life.

Even though the books are fat with detail, even though the courses are so busy they rarely reach 1960, our teachers and our textbooks still leave out what we need to know about the American past. Often the factoids are flatly wrong or unknowable. In sum, startling errors of omission and distortion mar American histories. This book is about how we are mistaught.

Errors in history textbooks do not often get corrected, partly because the history profession does not bother to review them. Occasionally outsiders do: Frances FitzGerald's 1979 study, *America Revised*, was a bestseller, but she made no impact on the industry. In a sarcastic passage her book pointed out how textbooks ignored or distorted the Spanish impact on Latin America and the colonial United States. "Text publishers may now be on the verge of rewriting history," she predicted, but she was wrong - the books have not changed.

History can be imagined as a pyramid. At its base are the millions of primary sources - the plantation records, city directories, speeches, songs, photographs, newspaper articles, diaries, and letters from the time. Based on these primary materials, historians write secondary works - books and articles on subjects ranging from deafness on Martha's Vineyard to Grant's tactics at Vicksburg. Historians produce hundreds of these works every year, many of them splendid. In

theory, a few historians working individually or in teams then synthesize the secondary literature into tertiary works - textbooks covering all phases of United States history.

In practice, however, it doesn't work that way. Instead, history textbooks are clones of each other. The first thing editors do when recruiting new authors is to send them half a dozen examples of the competition. Often a textbook is not written by the authors whose names grace its cover, but by minions deep in the bowels of the publisher's offices. When historians do write them, they face snickers from their colleagues and deans - tinged with envy, but snickers nonetheless: "Why are you writing pedagogy instead of doing scholarship?"

The result is not happy for textbook scholarship. Many history textbooks do list up-to-the-minute secondary sources in bibliographies at the ends of chapters, but the contents of the chapters remain totally traditional - unaffected by the new research.

What would we think of a course in poetry in which students never read a poem? The editors' voice in literature textbooks may be no more interesting than in history, but at least that voice stills when the textbook presents original materials of literature. The universal processed voice of history textbook authors insulates students from the raw materials of history. Rarely do authors quote the speeches, songs, diaries, and letters that make the past come alive. Students do not need to be protected from this material. They can just as well read one paragraph from William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech as read two paragraphs about it, which is what American Adventures substitutes. No wonder students find the textbooks dull.

Textbooks also keep students in the dark about the nature of history. History is furious debate informed by evidence and reason, not just answers to be learned. Textbooks encourage students to believe that history is learning facts. "We have not avoided controversial issues" announces one set of textbook authors; "instead, we have tried to offer reasoned judgments" on them - thus removing the controversy! No wonder their text turns students off! Because textbooks employ this god-like voice, it never occurs to most students to question them. "In retrospect I ask myself, why didn't I think to ask for example who were the original inhabitants of the Americas, what was their life like, and how did it change when Columbus arrived," wrote a student of mine. "However, back then everything was presented as if it were the full picture," she continued, "so I never thought to doubt that it was." Tests supplied by the textbook publishers then tickle students' throats with multiple choice items to get them to regurgitate the factoids they "learned." No wonder students don't learn to think critically.

As a result of all this, high school graduates are hamstrung in their efforts to apply logic and information to controversial issues in our society. (I know because I encounter them the next year as college freshmen.) We've got to do better. Five sixths of all Americans never take a course in American history beyond high school. What our citizens "learn" there forms most of what they know of our past.

America's history merits remembering and understanding.