

How Not To Teach American History

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Given the myriad crises our country now confronts, who would have guessed that among them would be how we teach American history? Nevertheless, as a new school year begins, the content, presentation and teaching of US history are in the news almost daily. Should statues honoring civil war figures—at least those from the losing side—or former slaveholders be retained? Do we need to change the names of streets or buildings if they bear the names of historical figures that do not satisfy present moral or political sensibilities? Should history texts be rewritten to diminish their emphasis on our flawed heroes while increasing the teaching of racial, ethnic and gender minorities? In short, should we be about the business of erasing, rewriting, apologizing for, protecting against, knocking down or covering up our history as many have proposed?

The recent controversy over historic murals at George Washington High School in San Francisco presents a microcosm of the problems. A 1936 painting depicting the life of George Washington shows two features that some found troublesome: White settlers standing over the body of a Native American and slaves working at Washington's estate. Some students, faculty and parents said the mural was racist and offensive. Others said no, it tells the truth about that era and should be seen. Still others said, regardless of the historical questions, it is a work of art and should remain. Washington High graduate, actor Danny Glover, said, "Art has to make us feel uncomfortable. That's what art does."

Initially the school board decided to do away with the mural but after a hue and cry from many—including minority groups and artists—it reversed course and, by a one-vote margin, concluded it would cover them up at a cost of over \$600,000. The sense was that showing the art would traumatize students and others in the community, but that destroying it permanently went too far. At the root of the debate is whether such depictions are appropriate for learning from our history or, alternatively, whether history must be presented in a way that does not offend.



What happens in the schools constitutes the ground war in the battle over American history, but elites are busily engaged in an air war. The New York Times joined the battle this month by introducing The 1619 Project, “a major initiative...to reframe the country’s history, understanding 1619 as our true founding.” The beginning of slavery in 1619 explains everything, including the brutality of American capitalism, says the Times, and it will “publish essays demonstrating that nearly everything that has made America exceptional grew out of slavery.”

Meanwhile, across the country in California, the state school board has proposed a draft ethnic studies curriculum that seeks not just to celebrate the historic contributions of minorities, but to “critique empire and its relationship to white supremacy, racism, patriarchy, cisheteropatriarchy, capitalism, ableism, anthropocentrism and other forms of power and oppression at the intersection of our society.” That is hardly the way to open a conversation about the historic contribution of ethnic groups.

The bombs are dropping and the guns are firing in the war over America’s history.

Can We Make Sense of This Moment?

Why should the teaching of American history have become so controversial at this moment? Surely one factor is a shift in how we think about students themselves. For many years, now, the term “helicopter parents” has described a heightened involvement by adults to keep careful watch over their kids, fearful that in this complex age, their child will be left behind.

A new term, “lawnmower parents,” seems to characterize the current age even better, since these adults now seek to mow down any and every obstacle that might stand in a child’s path. Children are thought of as “snowflakes” who might melt if exposed to too much heat, including the fires of controversy or even criticism. Taking down murals and rewriting stories of an uncomfortable history becomes part of the strategy of coddling and protecting sensitive kids rather than letting them confront the difficulties of history and make sense of them for themselves, developing judgment and resilience for life.



Another important factor is the movement, begun several decades ago, to demythologize American history. Howard Zinn led this charge with his *People's History of the United States* (1980), a textbook that reveals the selfish motives and cruel actions of America's traditional heroes, while retelling America's narrative from the perspective of their victims. By Zinn's account, Columbus came to murder natives and steal gold, while the Founders developed a constitutional republic that would protect their slaves and property.

The counter-narratives continues into modern times, when World War II was about "advancing the imperial interests of the United States," and the last fifty years were "a capitalistic encouragement of enormous fortunes alongside desperate poverty, a nationalistic acceptance of war and preparations for war."

In the early going, *The People's History*, was assigned by teachers as a supplement or counterpoint to traditional history textbooks. However, today it has sold over two million copies and has become, as Professor Sam Wineburg of Stanford University has said, "mainstream" and, in many circles, "the dominant narrative." One way to read the battle over American history, then, is a conflict between the traditional heroic view and Zinn's account of resistance. But it is no longer enough for Zinn's story to be presented as a counterpoint to the traditional view, allowing students to make their own choices, but Zinn's disciples now feel the need to eliminate the heroic view and favorable understanding of American history altogether. We live in a moment when many feel a need to throw out the baby of America's accomplishments with the bathwater of colonialism. Zinn's work presents not merely a counterpoint but a new orthodoxy.

In seeking to understand the current history wars, we might go so far as to say that they have become politics by other means. American history has been afflicted by presentism, examining our past with 21st century sensibilities and standards. If colonials owned slaves, for example, our present standards must cause us to reject them, even erase their names from our history. If a leader was on the wrong side of the Civil War, we may no longer honor them, despite any other accomplishments. Professor Wineburg calls this "reading the present into the past." Since we now find politics in every part of the curriculum—even in biology and art—we should not be surprised to find it in history class. Indeed, publishers sell very different history textbooks in conservative Texas than they do in liberal California.



Toward Better Teaching of History and Civics

As a starting point, all sides should be able to agree that we have been teaching history and civics poorly. In the most recent report of the National Educational Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, or “America’s report card”), only 18% of 8th graders tested as “proficient” or better in American history while a mere 23% were “proficient” or better in government and civics. Only 1-2% tested as “advanced” in these subjects. The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation reported last year that only 36% of Americans could pass the US Citizenship Test, including questions about the ratification and provisions of the US Constitution, the participants in World War II and other history basics. An Annenberg Public Policy Center Study in 2017 reported that 75% of students did not know the three branches of government and 37% could not name one right in the First Amendment.

A number of curriculum experts advocate the more promising approach of teaching students using primary documents, not just textbooks. The Ashbrook Center in Ohio has trained and retrained thousands of teachers to use primary documents—not just the Constitution and Declaration, but speeches, letters, and other documents of the time—to recreate events and debates in our history. This engages students more actively than the passive reading of a textbook and invites them to understand history from the perspective of the participants, not just through the political lens of the 21st century. Teachers report both greater excitement and understanding from the use of primary documents as well as the prospect that students can draw their own conclusions. Several other curriculum efforts such as the DBQ Project and programs at Berkeley, Stanford and Brown University similarly put primary documents at the center of history teaching.

There is even a new and improved textbook, finally, in American history: Wilfred M. McClay’s *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story* (Encounter Books, 2019). McClay succeeds in delivering an inspiring narrative of American history, without rewriting, whitewashing, avoiding or politicizing. Author Gordon S. Wood understood the value of such a narrative during, as he put it, “a time of severe partisanship that has infected many accounts of our nation’s past.” History, in McClay’s hands, is a compelling and hopeful narrative, not a collection of disputed facts and intrusive opinions.



Dare we further propose that another important objective in teaching American history should be to help students not only understand but also love their country and be prepared to serve as well-informed citizens? The Founders understood that a free republic would only work if an informed citizenry supported it and education was high on their agenda. More recently, President Ronald Reagan, in his farewell message, warned of the need to return the teaching of civics and history to develop “an informed patriotism.” Sociologist James Loewe, author of *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, reminds us that, “We aren’t just learning about the past to satisfy our curiosity—we are learning about the past to do our jobs as Americans.” Professor Sam Wineburg agrees: “It is not popular to talk about in an era of identity politics, but history teaching in school has a civic purpose, not only a disciplinary purpose.”

Conclusion

We live in a time when we seem to engage in every possible approach to history except to learn from it. We seek to erase it, cover it over, topple it down, rewrite it, apologize for it, skip it—but not to put it out there to learn from it. The evidence suggests students are doing very little learning of history as it is but, with all the bad ways we are presenting history, we should not be surprised. It is time we return to an understanding that history and civics are essential underpinnings for good citizenship, and that teaching them includes, most assuredly, the basics but also an appreciation of one’s country and a willingness to be prepared to serve it.

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