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# Skewed History

Textbook Coverage of Early America  
and the New Deal





# *Skewed History*

## Textbook Coverage of Early America and the New Deal

A report by the

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ASSOCIATION  
*of* SCHOLARS

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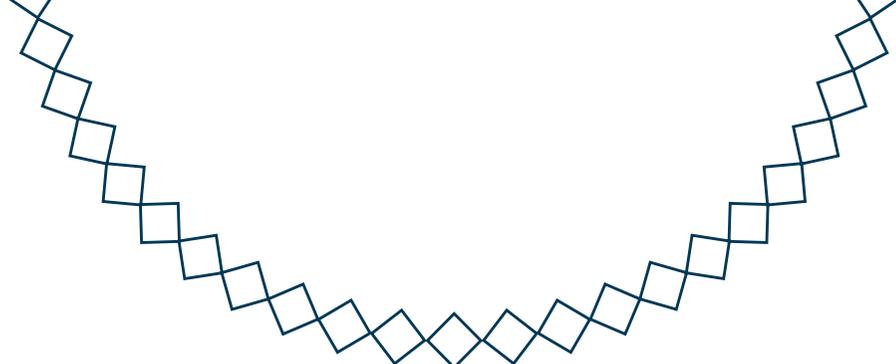
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# About the National Association of Scholars

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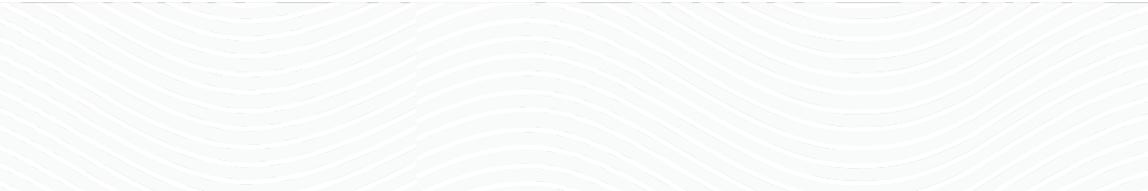
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*Disfigured History: How the College Board Demolishes the Past.* 2020.

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# Preface and Acknowledgments

Peter W. Wood

President,

National Association of Scholars

America cannot survive if its children do not learn the history of their country. That's because, in America, our history is the foundation of our public life and civic participation. We are a self-governing republic, and every bit of that depends on our knowing who we are and how we came to be that way.

Even those who hate America realize that our history is the key to our strength. That's why they try so hard to erase, distort, and corrupt that history. Many others, who do not hate America but who nurse grievances against American society, look to the telling of history to advance their claims to redress.

All of this plays out in the textbooks that American schools use to teach history. Some of those textbooks have, in the past, been mere celebrations of America's achievements. Others, unfortunately, have been mere diatribes concentrating on America's faults—real and fancied. The majority of American history textbooks today fall between patriotic panegyric and cynical denunciation. They often edge, however, closer to the latter. America's faults tend to loom very large in contemporary textbooks, while its accomplishments are writ small.

Our history told well should never omit America's faults, but it should also serve as more than just a record of 'what happened.' The deeper purpose of teaching our history is to teach affection for our country. Learning the truth and developing affection for America are not at

cross-purposes. That's because our history is a history of overcoming great obstacles and, taught accurately, inspires love and delight. There is no more important component to American education.

Unfortunately, it has become increasingly difficult for American students to learn proper American history. As the 1776 Commission correctly noted in its *The 1776 Report*, a coterie of radicals has seized control of much of American history and civics instruction.<sup>1</sup> They seek to use American history and civics to teach social justice ideology and identity-group politics; American history and government are either ignored or tendentiously rewritten so as to present American history in the worst possible light. The rewriting of American history and government extends to state history standards, College Board Advanced Placement history examinations—and textbooks.

The National Association of Scholars (NAS) focuses primarily on college education, but we have frequently addressed K-12 education too. That's because undergraduate education cannot function properly with students who have not received a good education in high school. We have focused our critique on areas including Common Core, Advanced Placement History Instruction, and science education.<sup>2</sup> Here we expand our critique to high school American history textbooks, both for the standard curriculum and for advanced placement courses.

What follows is a collection of four essays by five historians who examined how five different textbooks treat four separate eras of American history.

This report revises material NAS produced with a 2020 Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). NAS is grateful to the NEH for its grant to fund our *History Instructional Materials and Support* project,

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1 The President's Advisory 1776 Commission, *The 1776 Report*, 2021, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The-Presidents-Advisory-1776-Commission-Final-Report.pdf>.

2 Peter W. Wood, ed., *Drilling through the Core: Why Common Core is Bad for America* (Pioneer Institute, 2015); David Randall, *Disfigured History: How the College Board Demolishes the Past* (National Association of Scholars, 2020), <https://www.nas.org/reports/disfigured-history>; *Climbing Down: How the Next Generation Science Standards Diminish Scientific Literacy* (National Association of Scholars, 2021), <https://www.nas.org/reports/climbing-down>.

without which this report could not have been written. Our grant also included a separate, equally large section, which we directed toward our subcontractor, American Achievement Testing.<sup>3</sup> American Achievement Testing dedicated their portion of the NEH CARES grant toward crafting American history lesson plans, and other related material, geared to Wilfred McClay's excellent new American history textbook, *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story* (2019).<sup>4</sup> We combined our critiques of existing American history textbooks with constructive work to make a better American history textbook available to schoolchildren.

This combination, however, was at the highest level of the project. None of the essays collected here were written with McClay's work in mind. Rather, these are essays by five independent scholars, who (with one exception) did not consult with one another. Each wrote a critique of how current history textbooks covered one of four sections of American history. Kevin R. C. Gutzman wrote on the European Settlement of North America (1492-1660). Bruce P. Frohnen wrote on Colonial America (1660-1763). Jason C. Ross wrote on The Nation's Founding (1763-1789). Amity Shlaes and William Pettinger together wrote on The New Deal (1933-1940).<sup>5</sup>

Each of these critiques examines the historical coverage of a particular period in five textbooks. Three of those textbooks are intended for regular high school American history classes. They are:

*American History*, 2018 edition, HMH Social Studies

*United States History*, 2016 edition, Pearson

*United States History and Geography*, 2018 edition, McGraw Hill

3 American Achievement Testing, <https://www.aateducation.org>.

4 David Randall, "The Hopeful Land," *Academic Questions* 32, 3 (2019), pp. 422-25, <https://www.nas.org/academic-questions/32/3/the-hopeful-land>.

5 Kevin R. C. Gutzman is Professor and former Chairman in the Department of History at Western Connecticut State University. Bruce P. Frohnen is Professor of Law at Ohio Northern University's Pettit College of Law. Jason Ross is Associate Professor and Associate Dean in Liberty University's Helms School of Government. Amity Shlaes is the author of four *New York Times* bestsellers, including *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression*, and chairs the board of the Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation.

The other two textbooks are intended for advanced placement American history classes. They are:

*The Unfinished Nation*, Ninth Edition, McGraw Hill

*America's History*, Ninth Edition, Bedford St. Martin's

To these essays we added an introduction by David Randall, NAS's director of research, which complements the scholars' essays and adds some further critiques.

This report, therefore, is *not* a unified product—and not intended to be one. We gave rough guidelines of coverage to these scholars, but we desired their independent opinions. None of them is responsible for the critiques of any other scholar—or of anything written by NAS. If there is any overlap in the critiques of these scholars, it is an overlap they arrived at independently.

As it so happens, there *is* substantial overlap. The authors repeatedly note that basic history textbooks suffer from distracting graphics and a checklist format. The textbooks, particularly the advanced ones, suffer a general skew in favor of both progressive politics and the progressive interpretation of history. The textbooks minimize or erase religion (especially Protestantism) from American history, and where they mention it, they frequently fail to provide a proper explanation. The textbooks tend to narrow political theory to a cramped left-Enlightenment mold in eighteenth-century America and an equally cramped left-liberal mold in 1930s America. The textbooks tend to articulate liberal economic presumptions, most notably as regards the New Deal, but also as regards colonial America. Finally, the textbooks no longer seek to provide character instruction to educate our children to become virtuous citizens who cherish and will fight for liberty.<sup>6</sup>

The scholars express this gently and without venom. They recognize that it is easy to criticize and that the authors of these textbooks

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6 I extract this paragraph from David Randall's essay below.

have worked hard on a difficult task. They do not impugn the textbook writers' motives; rather, they simply point out where they have erred, by omission, by questionable interpretation, and sometimes by outright error. The gentleness and the nuance of their critiques strengthens the criticism they do provide.

These critiques, by the nature of the case, are partial. The scholars only critiqued selected periods of history within these textbooks, not the textbooks in their entirety. We chose this approach to achieve depth of examination rather than breadth. NAS plans to build upon this report with a larger project to analyze every history textbook certified by the College Board as appropriate for an Advanced Placement history examination. There are currently 41 in total for European History, United States History, and World History. When that larger project is completed, NAS will be able to make a comprehensive critique of the full range of history textbook coverage.

But this is to anticipate. The critiques in this report already give a good sense of how history textbooks characteristically go wrong, and how they should be improved.

NAS intends these critiques to provide guidance to members of textbook adoption committees, school boards, and the general public—as will the more comprehensive critiques we plan to write. We intend to accompany those critiques with scorecards that can provide an easy checklist by which to judge history textbooks. But the policy we recommend is that schools choose better textbooks, that publishers commission better textbooks, that authors write better textbooks, and that new textbook publishers step forward to publish more accurate history if the current publishers do not. State legislation should play a supplementary role by improving the history standards which textbooks aim to fulfil.

We particularly aim to improve the College Board's standards. One book we reviewed in particular, *The Unfinished Nation*, contains an embarrassing number of factual errors; these not only passed the review

of the McGraw Hill editorial team but also the College Board's audit. If the College Board's audit is to mean anything, it cannot blithely accept textbooks that contain obvious errors of fact.

This report underscores a longstanding problem. Everyone involved in writing textbooks seems to be a political progressive. We cannot know that for sure. We have made no effort to examine the political views of the various authors. We are simply confronted with the results of their efforts. The characteristic errors of these textbooks—the omissions, the slants, the nature of the actual factual errors—all point to a milieu in which, when it came to possibly biased statements, no one came forward to ask, “*Are you sure this is true?*” Statements that accord very well with current progressive platitudes are persistently set forward as fact, even when they are in dispute and, worse, even when they are demonstrably false. The textbooks' flaws reflect a political monoculture among publishers and textbook authors, where there is not one person in the room to question progressive assumptions, or to flag the soft slide that presents historical interpretation as historical fact.

The College Board and the textbook publishers should make efforts to secure contrarian readers as they assess textbooks. This should include securing progressive readers to assess more conservative textbooks—but at the moment, Wilfred McClay's *Land of Hope* is the only such book on the market. They should also consider commissioning more conservative scholars to take part in writing textbooks. Above and beyond the arguments for intellectual diversity, increased conservative participation would provide an easy means to reduce the number of embarrassingly obvious errors and interpretive skews in these textbooks.

I've focused on the political skew of these textbooks, but the scholars' essays also emphasize that many of these textbooks are dull. They combine flashy, distracting graphics with a checklist format designed to satisfy the requirements of state history standards and College Board Course and Exam Descriptions. This is probably most attributable to state history standards, whose own bureaucratic catalogues of required material encourage textbook authors to check boxes rather than to craft

exciting, coherent narratives. Nevertheless, some of these textbooks sparkle more than others—several of the scholars praised *America's History*. Textbook publishers should put greater emphasis on providing well-written textbooks that actually make history exciting.

This report fundamentally sends a challenge to America's textbook publishers: publish better American history textbooks! We understand the hurdles, including many history teachers who prefer the current offerings because they agree with the biases. That means you have your work cut out for you. Publishing first-rate American history textbooks and getting them adopted into the nation's classrooms will be hard. But we will be glad to help.



# Skewed History: A Survey

David Randall

# Skewed History: A Survey

## Introduction

America's current generation of United States history textbooks is a mixed bag. The textbooks we have reviewed are usually glitzy, frequently dull, sometimes solid—and sometimes mediocre, or even marred by unprofessional mistakes. Where they are alike, it is generally because they have been forced into a common textbook mold or subjected to the fads of progressive politicization. These textbooks rarely present outright factual errors, but their interpretations can be tendentious, and they frequently leave out central chunks of American history. The textbooks eliminate a great deal of American history by silent excision.

Our study here focuses on four historical periods and five textbooks. The four historical periods are:

1. The European Settlement of North America (1492-1660), studied by Kevin R. C. Gutzman (Western Connecticut State University);
2. Colonial America (1660-1763), studied by Bruce P. Frohnen (Ohio Northern University College of Law);
3. The Nation's Founding (1763-1789), studied by Jason C. Ross (Liberty University, Helms School of Government); and
4. The New Deal (1933-1940), studied by Amity Shlaes and William Pettinger (Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation).

We have examined three textbooks intended for regular high-school American history classes (*American History*, 2018 edition, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; *United States History*, 2016 edition, Pearson; *United States: History and Geography*, 2018 edition, McGraw Hill) and two textbooks intended for Advanced Placement American history classes (*The*

*Unfinished Nation*, Ninth Edition, McGraw Hill; *America's History*, Ninth Edition, Bedford/St. Martin's).<sup>7</sup> We cannot and do not pretend to provide a comprehensive judgment of how American history textbooks cover American history, but our selective analysis provides a window into the general operations of American history textbooks.

"We" are not a committee; each of these scholars has written his own review of a particular period, arguing an individual critique. I do not speak for them and they bear no responsibility for what I have written. To understand each scholar's views, I direct the reader to his individual review and his own words.

## Summary Critique

My own summary critique of these sections of these five textbooks, partly drawn from these scholars' individual critiques, would focus on these broad areas:

**Format:** The basic history textbooks suffer from distracting graphics and checklist format. Students are not expected to read a coherent narrative of American history; nor are they provided the means to do so.

**Progressive Skew:** The textbooks, particularly the advanced ones, suffer a general skew in favor of both progressive politics and the progressive interpretation of history. The most noticeable instances are aspects of identity politics and the cant of *diversity*.

**Religion:** The textbooks minimize or erase religion (especially Protestantism) from American history, and where they do mention it, they frequently fail to provide a proper explanation.

**Political Theory:** The textbooks tend to narrow political theory to a cramped left-Enlightenment mold in eighteenth-century America and an equally cramped left-liberal mold in 1930s America.

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7 Rebecca Edwards et al., *America's History*, vols. 1-2 (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2018); Alan Brinkley, John Giggie, and Andrew Huebner, *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*, 9th ed. (Columbus: McGraw Hill, 2019); Joyce Appleby et al., *United States: History and Geography* (Columbus: McGraw Hill, 2018); Emma Lapsansky-Werner et al., *United States History* (New York: Pearson, 2016); Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, *American History* (Orlando, FL: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018).

**Economics:** The textbooks tend to articulate liberal economic presumptions, most notably as regards the New Deal, but also as regards colonial America.

**Character Instruction:** The textbooks no longer seek to provide character instruction to educate our children to become virtuous citizens who cherish and will fight for liberty. This absence is most apparent in their treatment of the American Revolution. While some textbooks provide a vestigial recitation of some of the facts that used to be provided for that purpose, they rarely recollect the reason such facts were taught in the first place.

“Vestigial” may be literal—and all our critiques should be read with that word in mind. Textbook publishers revise and revise, and any given textbook is usually a mixture of text written decades ago and text added in the last year. *The American Pageant* (Cengage), unreviewed by us, is currently in its 17<sup>th</sup> edition; it presumably preserves substantial amounts of text written for the 1<sup>st</sup> edition in 1956, as well as a litter of text added piecemeal over the decades. We have not read every edition of the textbooks to see what text was added when. As a rule of thumb, I suspect that recent revisions tend to dumb down and politicize better text from older editions—that what is good in these textbooks is not new, and what is new is not good. But that suspicion is as yet unsubstantiated. If it is true, however, I warn the reader that where we praise the textbooks, it is possible that the material we praise will not survive later revisions.

What follows are my own critiques of all the sections of the textbooks under review. They sometimes echo and draw upon the critiques of the other authors; sometimes they are individual. They are more of an outline of criticisms than a tightly integrated essay. In all cases, these critiques’ virtues should be ascribed to my colleagues, the errors to me.

## Format

Most broadly, these textbooks suffer from their “textbook” format. They provide outlines of “essential facts”—and sacrifice everything else to the presentation of these facts. *American History* provides the purest example of a textbook whose history has been stripped down to the barest checklist format—it does not even have credited authors, merely an advisory board. Dutifully, robotically, these textbooks provide an outline of essential topics, such as Joint Stock Companies, King Philip’s War (a.k.a. Metacom’s War, for the more virtue-signaling textbooks), and the National Recovery Administration. The textbook format sacrifices, above all, a central narrative and a focus upon individual Americans. The dedicated slog from topic to topic not only prevents any sustained focus on themes that define American history—liberty and prosperity, for notable examples—but precludes the chance to develop any other sustained theme as well. The textbook format renders it difficult or impossible to sustain an argument that America’s history displays any enduring character—which renders it correspondingly difficult or impossible to make the historiographical and civic argument that America *does* possess such a character.

Likewise, the focus on “essential facts” renders it impossible to get any sense of the individual Americans who made our history—their character, or the way they acted in America’s history throughout their lives. Very occasionally, a textbook will provide a brief paragraph on an individual figure, as *United States: History and Geography* does for Patrick Henry and Roger Sherman.<sup>8</sup> For the most part, however, the great figures of American history drift through as briefly mentioned names. Even Franklin Delano Roosevelt is astonishingly shadowy in *American History*’s coverage of the New Deal.<sup>9</sup> The assumption, almost certainly mistaken, appears to be that students already know who these figures are. But they do not, and so these brief allusions do nothing to prevent the Americans

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8 *United States: History and Geography*, 46, 90.

9 *American History*, 781.

who made America's history from drifting into insubstantiality. This absence of sustained biographical treatment drains the interest from these textbooks—where are the heroes to cheer and the villains to hiss? It also underwrites the interpretation of American history—of history in general—that individuals do not matter in history, that individuals do not *make* history.

The busy graphics of these textbooks further interrupt the narrative progression—above all in the basic textbooks, *American History*, *United States History*, and *United States: History and Geography*. These three textbooks in particular resort to a large number of intrusive graphics, often providing minimal information. These graphics inflate the page count, reduce the word count, and make it difficult to pay sustained attention to the words. The textbooks display a lack of confidence that the student readers will pay attention to a sustained narrative of pure text—and make it impossible for them to do so.

## Progressive Skew

Beyond the general inhibitions of the textbooks' structure, a variety of progressive political prejudices distorts the history these textbooks provide. For the most part, this is not a question of outright mistakes, but of structure, emphasis, and omission. There is a constant, light massaging of the American history to forward a progressive narrative—and sometimes a heavier skew.

### **America Unexceptional—Except Where Damnable**

The textbooks' most basic structural choice is to downplay what is distinctive in American history—above all, the linked histories of faith, prosperity, and liberty. Some parts of this history remain. *America's History* notes of New England that “by establishing a ‘holy commonwealth,’ they [the Puritans] gave a moral dimension to American history

that survives today.”<sup>10</sup> *America's History* likewise briefly mentions that “For Fish and thousands of other ordinary settlers, New England had proved to be a new world of opportunity.”<sup>11</sup> But the textbooks generally obscure America’s piety and prosperity—indeed, any of its virtues. The textbooks structure their history so that what is exceptional about America barely registers. Indeed, they also obscure the exceptional nature of England and Europe.

They do so partly by the simple matter of sequencing. The textbooks generally, with astonishing rigidity, sequence the narrative to provide Indian and African history first, then European, and then a narration of every other colony’s history before getting to New England. In *America's History*, the chapter “American Experiments, 1521-1700” starts with slavery, not liberty.<sup>12</sup> New England, and its distinctive, extraordinary history of liberty, then receive a bland description that tells as little as possible about what distinguished New England not only from the other colonies but also from all the world. The textbooks’ sequencing renders it difficult or impossible for students to know or care that America and its freedoms are uniquely worthy of admiration.

The textbooks add to their sequencing a carping belittling of European and American achievement. *United States: History and Geography* accompanies its account of the remarkable European age of discovery with the marginally relevant note that “Scientific advances by Muslim scholars aided Europeans in making oceanic exploration possible and desirable.”<sup>13</sup> *The Unfinished Nation*, a serial sneerer, pettily refers to “William Dawes and Paul Revere”<sup>14</sup> and dismisses Washington’s extraordinary military recovery at the end of 1776 in Trenton and Princeton as “two minor battles.”<sup>15</sup> *The Unfinished Nation* likewise makes much of the lack of universal uptake of the scientific method in colonial

10 *America's History*: I, 58.

11 *America's History*: I, 65.

12 *America's History*: I, 38.

13 *United States: History and Geography*, 10.

14 *The Unfinished Nation*, 103.

15 *The Unfinished Nation*, 114. For further sneering and captiousness, see, for example, *The Unfinished Nation*, 6, 97, 99.

America, without noting that only European civilization possessed the scientific method at all.<sup>16</sup> More important are descriptions such as that which *The Unfinished Nation* makes of the Constitution, “with its protections for the propertied white male elite and exclusion of everyone else from citizenship rights.”<sup>17</sup> Setting aside that citizenship and suffrage are not identical, *The Unfinished Nation* fundamentally misses the point that the Constitution *included* an unprecedentedly broad number of citizens—that it made America a revolutionarily democratic polity. The textbooks instinctively belittle when they should marvel.

Where they do not belittle, they damn: *America’s History* judges that “Warfare, mass enslavement, death, and destruction lay at the heart of colonial enterprise.”<sup>18</sup> *The Unfinished Nation*, in its historiographical review, ends with the latest scholarly viewpoints—which presumably lurk behind the textbooks’ sneers.

[M]any others have located in the nation’s birth foundational commitments to white supremacy, male dominance, and the destruction of indigenous peoples, despite various efforts by these groups to claim the Revolution’s transformative potential for themselves. For these and other scholars, America’s gradual (and still incomplete) inclusion of marginalized groups came in spite of, rather than because of, the intentions of the country’s founders.<sup>19</sup>

We may fear that such judgments soon will become textbook orthodoxy.

16 *The Unfinished Nation*, 60. *The Unfinished Nation* sneers selectively. It states that “seventeenth-century medicine rested ... on ideas produced 1,400 years before” (*The Unfinished Nation*, 60) but fails to note that eighteenth-century colonial medicine was remarkably receptive to the most up-to-date Enlightenment medical theory. Helen Brock, “North America, a western outpost of European medicine,” in *The Medical Enlightenment of the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Andrew Cunningham and Roger French (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 194–216.

17 *The Unfinished Nation*, 109.

18 *America’s History*: I, 2.

19 *The Unfinished Nation*, 110.

## Progressive Jargon

The textbooks diligently follow the coercive linguistic fashions of the progressive intelligentsia, many of which serve to obscure history. The textbooks are partway through the shift from the simple, informative “slaves” to “enslaved”—a wordy locution whose only substantive point is to obscure the legal and moral reality that slaves were slaves.<sup>20</sup> The textbooks likewise gyrate among Indians, Native Americans, First Peoples, and Indigenous Peoples, as they expend enormous intellectual energy on changing the nomenclature—to no substantive point save to prevent Americans from thinking of themselves as native in their own country, and to make unclear who took part in such conflicts as the French and Indian War. By now the misuse of “gender” to refer to “sex” has become universal, and students are thereby prevented from learning that gender ideology is a recent imposition from women’s studies departments and not an actual attribute of human beings or their history.

Such cant produces significant historical distortion. *The Unfinished Nation* takes the time to note that the Barbados Slave Code of 1661 said nothing about “health care”<sup>21</sup>—without noting that American employer-sponsored health care dates essentially to World War II, and that the very term “health care” is a gross anachronism when applied to the seventeenth century. *The Unfinished Nation*’s condemnation of the Barbados Slave Code for not making provisions for “health care, housing, food, or a period of rest” moreover implies, strangely, that slavery would have been more justified if it had provided such material comforts as a substitute for liberty.

More subtly, the textbooks pervasively invoke modern progressive argot. *United States History* blandly announces that “Climate Change Encourages Adaptation.”<sup>22</sup> *America’s History* denominates a section on

20 Eric Zorn, “Language matters: The shift from ‘slave’ to ‘enslaved person’ may be difficult, but it’s important,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 6, 2019, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/columns/eric-zorn/ct-column-slave-enslaved-language-people-first-debate-zorn-20190906-audknctayrarfjimpz6uk7hvy-story.html>.

21 *The Unfinished Nation*, 45.

22 *United States History*, 5.

elite Southern culture “White Identity and Equality.”<sup>23</sup> *American History* judges that “The U.S. Constitution is a ‘living’ document, capable of meeting the changing needs of Americans.”<sup>24</sup> *America’s History* refers to mob riots as “purposeful crowd actions” and states that colonial boycotts of the 1760s “raised the political consciousness of rural Americans.”<sup>25</sup> *The Unfinished Nation* resurrects Freudian jargon to state that “Male doctors felt threatened by the midwives”<sup>26</sup>—a formulation that not incidentally renders it impossible to consider whether doctors had good reason to believe that midwives provided inferior care. *The Unfinished Nation* also produces that hoariest of progressive chestnuts, “The discovery of the Americas did not begin with Christopher Columbus.”<sup>27</sup>

Some textbook jargon also preserves the old-fashioned liberal distaste for the free market. *The Unfinished Nation* states that “Commerce was also a principal reason for the rise of slavery in the Americas, and for the growth of the slave trade between European America and Africa”<sup>28</sup>—as if commerce were not a universal medium of human exchange and hardly a distinguishable cause for a local phenomenon such as the Atlantic slave trade. *America’s History* likewise uses the odd locution that “In 1750, about forty merchants controlled more than 50% of Philadelphia’s trade”<sup>29</sup>—a peculiarly conspiratorial phrasing to describe a remarkably free market where each of the most successful merchants participated in barely 1% of the total trade. Such phraseology betrays an all-too-common, unsubstantiated characterization of the free market as a force for villainy.

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23 *America’s History*: 1, 98.

24 *American History*, 166.

25 *America’s History*: 1, 102, 149, 162.

26 *The Unfinished Nation*, 60.

27 *The Unfinished Nation*, 1.

28 *The Unfinished Nation*, 16.

29 *America’s History*: 1, 100.

## Diversity

The textbooks particularly conform to the modern cant of *diversity*. In some part the textbooks use *diversity* as a transparent euphemism, as when non-white Americans are labeled as *diverse*: e.g., *American History's* section titled "Diverse Writers Depict American Life."<sup>30</sup> In some part the textbooks use *diversity* to disguise the failure of description and analysis. The Middle Colonies are always "diverse": so *United States History* states that, "The Middle Colonies developed an ethnic and religious diversity greater than either the Chesapeake or New England areas where almost all of the white colonists came from England."<sup>31</sup> When *The Unfinished Nation* states that "the arrival of whites [in Spain's American empire] launched a process of interaction between diverse peoples that left no one unchanged," or that "Diversity and difference characterized individual colonies,"<sup>32</sup> it conveys intellectual laziness rather than sophistication.

The textbooks also cite diversity with unthinking approval: *America's History* provides "Native American Diversity and Complexity" as a section title,<sup>33</sup> while *United States History* provides "Diversity in New Netherland Thrives."<sup>34</sup> Some textbooks make a stab at rational argument: *United States History* states that, "Settlers [in New Jersey] were allowed religious freedom, which helped attract an ethnically diverse population and fostered tolerance."<sup>35</sup> *United States History* also briefly mentions that, "The diversity of the Middle Colonies violated the traditional belief that political order depended on ethnic and religious uniformity"<sup>36</sup>—but it does not mention *why* that traditional belief existed, with reference not least to Europe's terrible Wars of Religion, the British Civil Wars, or the age-old fault-lines of tribe and nation that have indeed precipitated vast amounts of violence in world history. None of these textbooks consider

30 *American History*, 810.

31 *United States History*, 53. See also *United States History*, 5, 50, 52, 56; *American History*, 64; *America's History*: 1, 113; *The Unfinished Nation*, 43.

32 *The Unfinished Nation*, 11-12, 81.

33 *America's History*: 1, 3.

34 *United States History*, 50.

35 *United States History*, 52.

36 *United States History*, 53. See also *America's History*: 1, 117.

whether the political primacy of Massachusetts and Virginia in colonial and revolutionary America derived not only from size and age but also from the political cohesion they derived from greater ethnic and religious uniformity among the white population.

Indeed, only *America's History* seriously explores the idea that diversity might not have been an unalloyed good in colonial America: "In the 1740s [in Pennsylvania], the flood of new migrants reduced Quakers to a minority. ... In New York, a Dutchman declared that he 'Valued English Law no more than a Turd'."<sup>37</sup> *America's History* even mentions how economic elites use diversity to secure their interests, and how diversity erases cultural heritage: "White planters welcomed ethnic diversity to deter slave revolts. ... signs of [African] ethnic identity fell into disuse on culturally diverse plantations."<sup>38</sup> Only this one textbook provides a bare hint that might be applied to critique the modern corporate diversity regime.

More to the point, the textbooks scarcely consider the idea asserted most forcefully of late by Christopher Caldwell, that in human history *diversity* usually means *fatal weakness*:

The Indians had diversity. That meant some fought with Philip and others fought against him. The Christians among them were an important source of intelligence to the English. War split up not just families but, among the tribal leaders, marriages. King Philip was driven eastward, back across Massachusetts, to his homeland and his fate.<sup>39</sup>

But when *America's History* lauds "Native American Diversity and Complexity",<sup>40</sup> or when *American History* remarks that "The native groups of North America were as diverse as the environments in which

37 *America's History*: I, 115, 117-18.

38 *America's History*: I, 93.

39 Christopher Caldwell, "Plymouth Rock Landed on Them," *Claremont Review of Books*, Fall 2020, <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/plymouth-rock-landed-on-them/>.

40 *America's History*: I, 3.

they lived”,<sup>41</sup> they do not consider the Caldwellian argument that this was a gift from an evil fairy. When *United States History* likewise states “Diversity in New Netherland Thrives”,<sup>42</sup> it does not connect this diversity to the English defeat of the Dutch in North America. Contrariwise, while *American History*’s coverage of New-Deal America differentiates the history of Mexican Americans and Indians,<sup>43</sup> only *United States History* even briefly touches on how the New Deal annealed Southern and Eastern European immigrants to the American nation, not least by way of shared loyalty to and affection for unions, government programs, and the Democratic Party.<sup>44</sup> The textbooks distort American history by their endless, moralizing emphasis on *diversity* and their silence about the cohering forces that have united the American people.

The textbooks complement their intellectually vacuous emphasis on diversity by minimizing America’s specifically *English* inheritance. Most notably, this translates to an excessive emphasis on the (French) Enlightenment and John Locke, and a minimization of the republican tradition, of common law and juries, and of the particularly English commonwealth tradition tracing from the English Civil War through *Cato’s Letters* to the revolutionary generation. Likewise, it minimizes the specifically Anglo-Scottish religious inheritance, the common quasi-Calvinist Protestantism that even the most high-church Anglican in Tidewater Virginia shared with a backwoods Presbyterian—or even with a Baptist or a Quaker, whose theological rebellions were departures from Calvinism.

Where they do not minimize America’s English inheritance, the textbooks minimize common American culture and character. Of the five textbooks, only *United States: History and Geography* accompanies its narrative of the American Revolution with a section on “An American

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41 *American History*, 8.

42 *United States History*, 50.

43 *American History*, 802. See also *America’s History: II*, 701-04; *The Unfinished Nation*, 568-69; *United States History*, 552-53.

44 *United States History*, 553; and see Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Works in Chicago 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); 323-60; Thomas Bell, *Out of This Furnace* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1976).

Culture Emerges.”<sup>45</sup> More generally, the minimization of America’s common character extends to the very title of *The Unfinished Nation*, which “is a reminder of America’s exceptional diversity—of the degree to which, despite all the many efforts to build a single, uniform definition of the meaning of American nationhood, that meaning remains contested.”<sup>46</sup> None of the textbooks attempts a perfectly ordinary, concise description of the characteristics of the American nation—settlement by a core of English colonists, who established a country built around the English language, Protestantism, common law, representative government, a culture of liberty, remarkably democratic laws and mores, and equally remarkable broad prosperity. Their unwillingness to make this basic claim amounts to collective historical malpractice.

## Africans

The textbooks generally skew their coverage of African and black American history by way of ethnic-studies cheerleading. For a notable example, the textbooks frequently include mention of temporally distant African kingdoms such as Songhai and Kongo, by way of making a dubious equivalence between the social and political complexity of Africa and Europe.<sup>47</sup> But only *America’s History* names actual slaver kingdoms that dominated the regions and times from which African slaves came—kingdoms, such as Dahomey and Asante, whose activities were directly responsible for gathering the vast mass of slaves for export to the Americas.<sup>48</sup> This absence renders the African background of black Americans a caricature. It also makes it impossible for students to compare the way Indian tribes and African kingdoms pursued parallel strategies for monopolizing trade with Europeans—fur and slaves, respectively, in return for guns and other manufactured goods. *United*

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45 *United States: History and Geography*, 75. *The Unfinished Nation* provides some delayed coverage (156-58).

46 *The Unfinished Nation*, xxiii.

47 *America’s History*: 1, 23-28; *American History*, 16-18; *The Unfinished Nation*, 17-18; *United States History*, 10-12.

48 *America’s History*: 1, 87-88.

*States History* astutely notes that “Every American Indian nation tried to attract European traders and keep them away from their Indian enemies”<sup>49</sup>—but cannot make the appropriate comparisons to the African slave kingdoms. Nor, indeed, do the textbooks allow students to compare the Africans’ and Indians’ activities with European attempts to attain trade monopolies in this period.

The coverage of Africa’s pre-Atlantic slave trade is patchy. *America’s History* rightly mentions that nine million Africans were sold across the Sahara between 700 and 1900.<sup>50</sup> *The Unfinished Nation* elides the vast Muslim slave trade by the disingenuous statement that “As early as the eighth century, West Africans began selling small numbers of slaves to traders from the Mediterranean and later to the Portuguese.”<sup>51</sup> *United States History* argues that African slavery can be distinguished from Europe’s colonial slavery “Most importantly, [because African] slavery was not based on the notion of racial superiority or inferiority.”<sup>52</sup> This statement omits the strong racial inflections of Muslim slavery.<sup>53</sup>

All the textbooks save *United States: History and Geography* mention Olaudah Equiano as a witness to the slave trade. Of those four, only *America’s History* mentions the possibility that he was an unreliable witness:

Olaudah Equiano claimed to have been born in Igboland (present-day southern Nigeria). But Vincent Caretta of the University of Maryland has discovered strong evidence that Equiano was born in South Carolina. He suggests that Equiano drew on conversations with African-born slaves

49 *United States History*, 31.

50 *America’s History*: I, 31.

51 *The Unfinished Nation*, 18. See also *United States History*, 13.

52 *United States History*, 12-13.

53 Bruce S. Hall, *A History of Race in Muslim West Africa, 1600-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Chouki El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 54-61; Ronald Segal, *Islam’s Black Slaves: The Other Black Diaspora* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001).

to create a fictitious account of his kidnapping at the age of eleven and a traumatic passage across the Atlantic.<sup>54</sup>

Caretta published his biography of Equiano in 2005; the textbook companies have had ample time to include text that alerts students that Equiano may not be a trustworthy source—or to seek out substitute sources.

*The Unfinished Nation* stands out here, as elsewhere, for statements that seem at best exaggerated. So *The Unfinished Nation* claims that “In every colony, slave labor was essential to economic productivity”<sup>55</sup>—an argument which places great weight on *essential* and seems difficult to square with the fact that, in 1780, eight newly-independent states were no more than 10% black—New Hampshire only 0.6%. *The Unfinished Nation* also places great emphasis on “quiet” slave resistance: “Subtler, often undetected forms of resistance were practiced within the confines of slavery as enslaved people evaded or defied their masters’ wishes through lying, cheating, stealing, and foot-dragging.”<sup>56</sup> If these “forms of resistance” were so subtle and undetected, how precisely do we know about them now? Telepathy? Intuition? It is also more flattering than accurate to describe “lying, cheating, stealing, and foot-dragging” as *resistance*. Only a physicist would call this *resistance*—and he would know that such *resistance* is no more than *drag* or *friction*.

## Indians

The textbooks’ ethnic-studies cheerleading continues with their coverage of Indian history. Fundamentally, the extended coverage of Indian history is based on the false claim articulated by *United States History* that “Their cultures represent a central part of our heritage and history.”<sup>57</sup> This, of course, is not true: Americans learned from Indians

54 *America’s History*: 1, 90. See also *American History*, 83; *The Unfinished Nation*, 62; *United States History*, 55.

55 *The Unfinished Nation*, 65.

56 *The Unfinished Nation*, 70; and see 46.

57 *United States History*, 4.

what crops to grow but took nothing of importance from Indian civilization—not religion, not politics, not social organization, not technology. The textbooks justify their extended coverage of the Indians with a piety lacking historical warrant.

The textbooks generally tend to underplay Indian atrocities against colonists. Only *America's History* mentions the Deerfield Massacre of 1704, perhaps the single most famous Indian raid of the eighteenth century.<sup>58</sup> None of the five textbooks mentions explicitly that Anne Hutchinson and most of her family were massacred by Siwanoy Indians in 1643. Three textbooks fail to mention how Hutchinson died.<sup>59</sup> The other two describe her death elliptically: *American History* mentions that “she died in a war fought between the Dutch and Native Americans”,<sup>60</sup> and *The Unfinished Nation* that “in 1643 she and her family died during an Indian uprising.”<sup>61</sup> The passive voice of *died* obscures who killed her.

Consider also *The Unfinished Nation's* treatment of Pontiac's War (1763-66):

Five hundred soldiers and 2,000 white settlers ended up dead in a region spanning from the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River to the Appalachians. The British determined to inflict horrific damage in return. Even as they negotiated, authorities at Fort Pitt gave blankets that had come from a smallpox hospital to a delegation of Delawares. The disease tore through the Indians the following summer.<sup>62</sup>

Set aside *The Unfinished Nation's* odd decision to include the Black Legend of the Smallpox Blankets, upon which more scrupulous historians

58 *America's History*: 1, 85.

59 *America's History*: 1, 60; *United States History*, 46; *United States: History and Geography*, 20.

60 *American History*, 61.

61 *The Unfinished Nation*, 36.

62 *The Unfinished Nation*, 91.

have cast a skeptical eye.<sup>63</sup> The phrase *ended up dead* is a classic of minimization—a passive voice that avoids saying who killed whom or detailing precisely how the victims died. Such verbal games pervade the textbooks.

Four textbooks mention the savage war in upstate New York during the American Revolution, fought between the Patriots and the Iroquois led by Chief Joseph Brant, allied with Tory forces.<sup>64</sup> All four mention the brutal destruction of the Iroquois nation. But *United States History* and *United States: History and Geography* only mention that the Iroquois “attacked” frontier settlements earlier. *The Unfinished Nation* mentions “a series of raids.” Only *America’s History* goes so far as to describe these raids as “devastating attacks on American settlements.” None mention details such as the 1778 Cherry Valley Massacre—the Iroquois slaughter of civilians that was the proximate spark of the 1779 Sullivan Expedition that devastated the Iroquois.

Returning to the beginnings of English America, *The Unfinished Nation* engages in bizarre extenuation of mass slaughter by the Powhatans: “Although they killed about one-quarter of the total population of Jamestown, the Powhatans were not seeking to eliminate all settlers; they did not practice what would become known as ‘total warfare.’”<sup>65</sup> If killing one quarter of the population isn’t “total warfare,” what is?

The phrase “total warfare” also hints at an extraordinary absence in the books. None of the textbooks analyze the settlers’ Indian-fighting as part of the “American Way of War,” drawing upon English practice in Ireland, and practiced most notably in the Civil War and World War II—total warfare by a prosperous society to devastate the enemy and permanently destroy his war-fighting capacity.<sup>66</sup> The textbooks’ silence about this basic feature of American military history both impoverishes the

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63 Patrick J. Kiger, “Did Colonists Give Infected Blankets to Native Americans as Biological Warfare?” *History*, November 25, 2019, <https://www.history.com/news/colonists-native-americans-smallpox-blankets>.

64 *America’s History*: 1, 172; *The Unfinished Nation*, 114; *United States History*, 101; *United States: History and Geography*, 68–69.

65 *The Unfinished Nation*, 29.

66 John Grenier, *The First Way of War: American War Making on the Frontier, 1607–1814* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977)

narrative and gives a false impression that the brutality of Indian fighting was an artifact of race war rather than at least in part, and perhaps entirely, of Anglo-American strategic culture.

The textbooks commit another extraordinary omission when they avoid mention of captivity narratives—the memoirs of English men and women taken captive by Indians—although these were:

- the first American literary productions to gain a large market even in England, and certainly central to colonial culture;
- one of the most significant ways of gaining insight into colonial women, and how they managed to acquire a public voice; and
- essential sources for the actual fabric of cross-cultural “interaction” between whites and Indians.<sup>67</sup>

Politically correct shyness has eliminated, throughout these textbooks, any mention of this vital component of colonial history.

The textbooks generally fall silent on the astonishing disproportion of power between European settlers and Indians, which underlaid the settlers’ general, continuing, and extraordinary advance westward. *The Unfinished Nation* is notable for its special pleading to dispute this basic fact of American history:

“Never was colonial rule inevitable ... Eventually the British learned the lessons that the French had long ago absorbed—that simple commands and raw force were ineffective in creating a working relationship with the tribes; that they

<sup>67</sup> Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire, and the World, 1600-1850* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), 168-202; Kathryn Zabelle Derounian, “The Publication, Promotion, and Distribution of Mary Rowlandson’s Indian Captivity Narrative in the Seventeenth Century,” *Early American Literature* 23, 3 (1988), 239-61; Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola, ed., *Women’s Indian Captivity Narratives* (New York: Penguin, 1998); Tara Fitzpatrick, “The Figure of Captivity: The Cultural Work of the Puritan Captivity Narrative,” *American Literary History* 3, 1 (1991): 1-26; Greg Sieminski, “The Puritan Captivity Narrative and the Politics of the American Revolution,” *American Quarterly* 42, 1 (1990), 35-56.

too had to learn to deal with Indian leaders through gifts and ceremonies and mediation.”<sup>68</sup>

But *The Unfinished Nation* reveals the reality by its own statements: “the natives learned to handle the rifles, and even to repair them very effectively on their own.”<sup>69</sup> The disproportion of power between settlers and Indians lay precisely (if not exclusively) in the inability of Indians to manufacture guns or gunpowder, even after some centuries. *The Unfinished Nation* distinguishes itself by the most extensive, explicit claims that this disproportion of power did not exist, and by providing supposedly substantiating facts that actually disprove the contentions they are marshaled to support.

## Women

The textbooks’ treatment of women generally provides an anachronistic and negative judgment of women’s roles in Europe and America—as if the lack of the modern panoply of women’s rights somehow speaks badly of colonial America. *United States History* puts it that “Women Have Limited Rights;”<sup>70</sup> *American History* that women had “second-class citizenship,” and that “From earliest western civilization, traditional women’s roles and rights were very limited;”<sup>71</sup> *America’s History* that women were subordinated to men;<sup>72</sup> and *The Unfinished Nation* that “Women were barred from voting, as they were virtually everywhere in the colonies.”<sup>73</sup> None of the textbooks make the basic acknowledgment that *no* civilization on earth gave women full civic and legal equality—and that the civilizations that would pioneer such equality were those of England and America.

68 *The Unfinished Nation*, 49.

69 *The Unfinished Nation*, 39.

70 *United States History*, 64.

71 *American History*, 93, 138.

72 *America’s History*: I, 107-08.

73 *The Unfinished Nation*, 35.

Compare the above with *United States History*'s description of Indian women:

There was a respectful equality among the various groups of American Indians. Usually, work was divided along gender lines. Men assumed more dangerous tasks, such as hunting and warfare. Women cared for the children, wove baskets, made pottery, prepared meals, and gathered food. If their people cultivated crops, that work also usually fell to women.<sup>74</sup>

A virtually identical description could have been written about colonial Americans—save that the description of colonial American women would have to include those aspects of women's role in society and culture that would make possible the extraordinary triumphs of the American women's rights movements in the ensuing centuries. Only *America's History*,<sup>75</sup> for example, mentions the distinctive role of women in colonial Quaker communities,<sup>76</sup> much less how influential it would be for future feminism.<sup>77</sup>

## Colonial America

The textbooks distort several further aspects of colonial American history in ways that merit extended criticism.

### Religion

The textbooks (as Gutzman, Frohnen, and Ross all emphasize) provide too little explanation of colonial Protestantism in general, and

<sup>74</sup> *United States History*, 9. See also *The Unfinished Nation*, 6.

<sup>75</sup> *America's History*: I, 78.

<sup>76</sup> *United States History* states that "Quakers welcomed both men's and women's contributions to their meetings" (*United States History*, 52), but this sentence is only minimally revealing.

<sup>77</sup> E.g., Rebecca Larson, *Daughters of Light: Quaker Women Preaching and Prophesying in the Colonies and Abroad, 1700-1775* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

of its pervasive role in colonial life. In particular, the textbooks grossly underplay the relationship of Puritanism and democracy, especially the hinge provided by the Puritans' extraordinarily democratic conception of church government, which they then applied to the realm of secular politics. The minimization of Thomas Hooker (1586-1647), the founder of Connecticut and the paradigmatic figure of Puritan democracy, is emblematic. *America's History* and *American History* fail to mention Hooker entirely and *United States History* mentions him only as founder of Connecticut.<sup>78</sup> *The Unfinished Nation*<sup>79</sup> and *United States: History and Geography*<sup>80</sup> do mention the *Fundamental Orders of Connecticut* (1639)—but neither mentions Hooker's *A Survey of the Summe of Church-Discipline* (1648), the link between Puritan theology and American democracy. Such absences make it impossible to explain the peculiarly American intertwining of faith and democracy.

The textbooks also provide no sense of the internal evolution of Puritan belief between John Winthrop and Jonathan Edwards. None mention the Half-way Covenant (1657, 1662), that halfway point between the salvation of the elect and the salvation of all who seek to be saved that provides the proper context for Jonathan Edwards' proto-evangelism. Neither do they provide more than shallow coverage of the effects of religious-regional English cultures on the formation of Tidewater Virginia (Anglican), New England (Puritan), Pennsylvania (Quaker), and Appalachia (Presbyterian).<sup>81</sup> Only *America's History* mentions the Quaker abolitionist John Woolman, author of the seminal anti-slavery work *Some Considerations of the Keeping of Negroes* (1753);<sup>82</sup> with this erasure goes the erasure of eighteenth-century Quaker abolitionism—and of the tradition of American religious devotion to anti-slavery activism that is older than our independence. The textbooks scarcely mention the religious fervor that played a role in the American Revolution, both for Patriots

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78 *United States History*, 46.

79 *The Unfinished Nation*, 35.

80 *United States: History and Geography*, 20.

81 David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

82 *America's History*: I, 50.

and for Loyalists.<sup>83</sup> These collective absences virtually erase the religious aspects of colonial and revolutionary history—and thus the heart of early American history.

### Compressed Narrative, 1689 to 1754

The textbooks tend to compress colonial political and military history between the Glorious Revolution and the Seven Years War—most notably, by minimizing or eliminating the War of the Spanish Succession (Queen Anne’s War) and the War of the Austrian Succession (the War of Jenkins’ Ear; King George’s War). These wars provided the rhythm of colonial life; much of colonial life was spent either in a state of war or with the prospect of war with Europeans and allied Indians in mind.

So the textbooks do not mention naval impressment—conscription of mariners to serve in Britain’s navy—although conscription of colonial Americans was a fundamental fact of life in American ports, and (as witness many anti-impressment riots in colonial America) a long-term contributor to America’s ultimately revolutionary disaffection from Great Britain.<sup>84</sup> *The Unfinished Nation* alone mentions the parallel impressment of colonials for the British Army.<sup>85</sup> Likewise, only *America’s History*<sup>86</sup> and *The Unfinished Nation*<sup>87</sup> mention the role of New England troops in capturing Louisbourg from the French in 1745—and neither explains how that military success, which gave Boston’s Louisburg Square its name, produced a victory cult within the American colonies that itself colored American character, and which was part of the long process by which colonials gained the military self-confidence to challenge Great Britain in the American Revolution.

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83 Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010); Gregg L. Frazer, *God Against the Revolution: The Loyalist Clergy’s Case Against the American Revolution* (Lawrence, KS: The University Press of Kansas, 2018).

84 Denver Brunsman, *The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013).

85 *The Unfinished Nation*, 87.

86 *America’s History*: I, 103.

87 *The Unfinished Nation*, 85.

No textbook mentions Blackbeard (Edward Teach) or the role of colonial Americans as members, facilitators, victims, or opponents of pirate crews. Neither do they mention colonial privateering, nor, save *United States: History and Geography*,<sup>88</sup> its Revolutionary successor, or even the name of John Paul Jones. Textbooks ought to include pirates, privateers, and naval heroes simply to keep students reading—but also because their excision removes an important dimension of colonial and Revolutionary history.

### Republicanism

Frohnen and Ross have both stressed how the textbooks tend to emphasize the importance of the more radical, French Enlightenment as a source for revolutionary political thought, and to minimize the contribution of English political traditions. I will note in particular that while four of the textbooks do mention *republicanism*, they tend to minimize its importance and to distort its character by emphasizing its egalitarianism and eliding mention of its fundamental focus on liberty and tyranny.<sup>89</sup> No textbook mentions what may have been the single most influential republican text in colonial and revolutionary America, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon's *Cato's Letters* (1720-23). These specific absences and distortions underscore the large absences and distortions noted by Frohnen and Ross.

## American Revolution

Ross has ably discussed much that is relevant about the textbooks' coverage of the American Revolution. I will focus on how the textbooks have chipped away parts of Revolutionary history that taught crucial moral lessons to students.

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<sup>88</sup> *United States: History and Geography*, 69.

<sup>89</sup> *America's History*: I, 149, 167; *American History*, 145; *The Unfinished Nation*, 25; *United States History*, 116, 118.

Not everything has disappeared. All five textbooks mention Baron von Steuben, the man who introduced (modified) Prussian discipline to the ragtag Continental Army, and four mention Patrick Henry's heroic defiance, *Give me liberty or give me death*, or some less quotable variation.<sup>90</sup> But only *The Unfinished Nation* mentions that John Adams defended the British soldiers charged with committing the Boston Massacre;<sup>91</sup> none mentions the moral that was taught to generations of Americans—the importance of the rule of law, the importance of defending men who are your political enemies, and the importance of the office of the lawyer to defend anyone accused of a crime, no matter how high the popular passions.

The textbooks are likewise highly imperfect in their treatment of the capture of Fort Ticonderoga and the Knox Expedition. Most omit the story entirely. *The Unfinished Nation* mentions the capture of Fort Ticonderoga, but not the transport of Ticonderoga's cannon to the Patriot army in Boston.<sup>92</sup> Only *United States History* spells out the sequence properly:

In January 1776, six months after the Battle of Bunker Hill, Colonel Henry Knox arrived with cannons to reinforce the Patriots outside Boston. His men had hauled the cannons hundreds of miles from upstate New York, where Ethan Allen's militia men had captured them from Fort Ticonderoga. With Patriot cannons shelling both Boston and the British ships in the harbor, the British abandoned the city in March.<sup>93</sup>

Even *United States History* underplays the extraordinary elan by which Ethan Allen and Benedict Arnold captured Fort Ticonderoga, and Henry Knox's logistical triumph in bringing the cannon by winter

90 *America's History*: I, 165, 177; *American History*, 134, 141 MC2; *The Unfinished Nation*, 111; *United States History*, 91, 100; *United States: History and Geography*, 46, 67.

91 *The Unfinished Nation*, 97.

92 *The Unfinished Nation*, 112.

93 *United States History*, 98.

through the backlands of New York and Massachusetts. The story of the Noble Train of Artillery is a set-piece of American military virtue—and it scarcely has a place in these textbooks.

Only *United States: History and Geography*<sup>94</sup> preserves the famous quotation (ascribed here to William Prescott) of the Battle of Bunker Hill: “Don’t fire until you see the whites of their eyes!” *The Unfinished Nation*<sup>95</sup> and *United States History*<sup>96</sup> mention Bunker Hill, but not the quotation. *America’s History* and *American History* don’t mention Bunker Hill at all. No textbook fully explains what is implied by those words—that half-trained civilians did not turn and flee as a line of the British army, among the world’s most formidable troops, approached them with a steady tramp. No textbook properly explains that the Patriot soldiers’ courage and self-control as they fought were vital for our nation’s independence—for if they could not win the battle, they fought quite hard enough to make the British victory Pyrrhic, ensuring that the Siege of Boston continued, and inhibiting the confidence of British troops throughout the remainder of the war. *United States History*<sup>97</sup> and *United States: History and Geography*<sup>98</sup> come close to telling the story properly, but even their treatment does not precisely articulate how difficult was the Patriot task. That no textbook spells out these lessons is a sad and noteworthy absence.

Most astonishing, perhaps, is the disappearance of Benedict Arnold’s actual treason—the attempt to seize George Washington and deliver up the key Patriot stronghold of West Point to the British. Three textbooks do not mention Arnold’s treason at all. *America’s History* mentions his treason, but not what it was.<sup>99</sup> Only *The Unfinished Nation* describes Arnold’s actual treason.<sup>100</sup> America’s textbooks used to teach of Arnold’s treason

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94 *United States: History and Geography*, 54.

95 *The Unfinished Nation*, 112.

96 *United States History*, 98.

97 *United States History*, 98.

98 *United States: History and Geography*, 54.

99 *America’s History*: I, 181.

100 *The Unfinished Nation*, 114-15.

not least to make clear to our children how abhorrent was treason to the United States—so abhorrent that *Benedict Arnold* was a synonym for *traitor*. Our current textbooks have no interest in teaching that lesson.

Most largely, the textbooks fail to underscore properly how wonderful and inspirational the American Revolution was. Only *United States History* presents our Revolution properly:

By eighteenth-century standards, the American Revolution was very radical. For the first time, overseas colonies of a European empire had escaped control of their mother country to create a republican union—something long dismissed as a dangerous fantasy. By defying the conventional wisdom of their time, the Patriots began an enormous experiment aimed at creating a more open and equal society. ... Over the next three centuries, the Patriots' principles inspired revolutions around the world.<sup>101</sup>

None of the other textbooks articulates this most important truth.

The textbooks do preserve some of the incidents that used to be taught to teach moral lessons—but without teaching the lessons. The incidents without the lessons are vestigial fossils of the old history that taught the story of how Americans created their republic, not least to teach their descendants the character needed to preserve the republic. A history of the American Revolution cannot entirely be a story of how Americans won their independence because ordinary men, militia, and volunteers displayed the fighting virtues—courage, intelligence, self-control, hard labor, and endurance. But these textbooks only seem fitfully aware that history might serve to teach such lessons at all.

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101 *United States History*, 103, 105.

# The New Deal

The textbooks' coverage of the New Deal incarnates a Faustian bargain. The books all focus remarkably on *what did the federal government do during the 1930s?* Occasionally they give space to critics of the New Deal, then and now, but the overwhelming focus on the federal government's actions gives the impression that everything important in the 1930s was part of the story of the rise of the Rooseveltian state. Everything that cannot be included in that story—gets left out.

This approach can be justified: a strong historical narrative ought to provide focus, and it is certainly reasonable to think that the rise of the Rooseveltian state is the proper focus for the 1930s. Some of the textbooks provide sections on American society and culture in the 1920s that effectively (if often implicitly) provide coverage for 1930s developments, albeit out of historical sequence. But at least one textbook ought to tell the history of the 1930s as something other than a story about the federal government.

In general, I am ambivalent in my critiques of the textbooks' coverage of the New Deal. I believe the textbooks should be less Procrustean and selective in their narratives, but I acknowledge that every textbook ought to provide some selection and focus.

## Progressive Distortion

The textbooks generally exhibit a progressive skew both in what they say and what they omit. *America's History* provides the odd statement that “The ideological differences between Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt were not vast”<sup>102</sup>—a statement that presumes a perspective of rigid socialism or rigid libertarianism rather than a perspective from within the American political mainstream, where the differences between Hoover and Roosevelt seem quite large. *The Unfinished Nation*

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102 *America's History*: II, 683. See also *The Unfinished Nation*, 579.

states that “Some nations, among them the Soviet Union and China, remained relatively unconnected to the global economy and suffered relatively little from the Great Depression”<sup>103</sup>—a statement that elides the incomparably worse suffering the Soviet Union and China endured during the 1930s, from Stalin’s collectivization, genocidal terror-famine, and mass killings in the USSR, and from Japanese invasion in China. Connection to the global economy would seem a small price to pay, given those alternatives. *America’s History* takes the time to exhibit high moral dudgeon about “atrocious federal practices, such as forcing Indian children into white-run boarding schools”<sup>104</sup>—but no textbook mentions that Herbert Hoover’s vice-president, Charles Curtis, was the only man of American Indian descent ever to be elected to national office. Such statements illustrate a too-common progressive distortion of the textbooks.

Only *America’s History*<sup>105</sup> and *The Unfinished Nation*<sup>106</sup> mention the Scottsboro Boys—but their coverage amply demonstrates progressive distortion. Both mention Communist support for the Scottsboro Boys, and *America’s History* provides the drippily enthusiastic judgment that “the Scottsboro Boys, as they were known, inspired solidarity within African American communities.” Only *The Unfinished Nation* mentions the tight Soviet control of the American Communist Party—and neither mentions the NAACP’s intense suspicion of and hostility to the Communist Party, which they regarded as using black Americans for its own purposes. Yet the mutual hostility of black supporters of the Communist Party and the NAACP during and after the trials of the Scottsboro Boys provides evidence that the Scottsboro Boys drove a wedge among black Americans rather than inspiring solidarity.<sup>107</sup> The failure to note that basic point exemplifies the damage a pervasive progressive skew imposes on these textbooks’ narrative of the 1930s.

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103 *The Unfinished Nation*, 564.

104 *America’s History*: II, 702.

105 *America’s History*: II, 700-01.

106 *The Unfinished Nation*, 567-68, 577-78.

107 James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994).

## Economics

Amity Shlaes and William Pettinger have provided an extended and persuasive critique of the textbooks' omissions, errors, and narrow interpretations in their coverage of the economic policy of the 1930s. I will only add a few points to supplement their critique.

Most notably, none of the textbooks mention the Depression of 1920-21—and America's swift, successful recovery from that Depression by means of deflation and free-market policies. When, for example, *United States: History and Geography* mentions that "Hoover believed that American 'rugged individualism' would keep the economy moving and that the government should not step in to help individuals",<sup>108</sup> it doesn't mention that he believed so in 1929 because such a policy had been remarkably successful in 1921. The elimination of the 1920-21 Depression from the textbooks skews the history of the 1920s, but also removes crucial context by which to understand Hoover's policies at the beginning of the Great Depression.

More broadly, the textbooks ignore the business history of the 1930s—the history of how American private enterprise transformed the country in parallel with the government. Most directly, while *America's History*<sup>109</sup> and *The Unfinished Nation*<sup>110</sup> mention "welfare capitalism" in the 1920s, neither mentions that the continuing extension of private benefits by American corporations from the age of "welfare capitalism" through the 1930s and onward has resulted in an American welfare state cobbled together around a patchwork of public and private benefits. The exclusive focus on the federal government's initiatives in the 1930s thus mischaracterizes the nature of the American welfare state, which has always jointly depended on government and private enterprise.

The textbooks also ignore what American businesses actually *did* in the 1930s. Only *The Unfinished Nation* mentions American technological

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108 *United States: History and Geography*, 508. See also *America's History*: II, 681.

109 *America's History*: II, 655.

110 *The Unfinished Nation*, 543-44.

progress in the 1930s, including early computers.<sup>111</sup> No textbook mentions Edwin Armstrong's 1933 invention of FM radio, DuPont's invention of nylon, 3M's invention of scotch tape, the invention of the radio telescope at Bell Telephone Laboratories, or the invention of such ubiquitous parts of American society and culture as the parking meter, the shopping cart, the electric guitar, beer cans, and the beach ball. These broadly-ranging inventions and their effects, the products of American businesses, deserve at least a passing mention—and, arguably, sustained attention.

Nor do any textbooks mention how General Motors' focus on marketing, organization, and consumer credit brought it leadership over Ford's more narrow-minded focus on automotive technology; only *United States: History and Geography* mention that "By the mid-1920s, General Motors and Chrysler competed successfully with Ford".<sup>112</sup> By contrast, four textbooks mention the strikes against General Motors in the 1930s.<sup>113</sup> It is remarkable, and symptomatic, that the textbooks tell more about the strikes against General Motors than about how General Motors forged the corporate model that would make it the paradigmatic American corporation.

## Absences

Returning to the New Deal itself, none of the textbooks provide coverage of the contributions of local government to the New Deal. The most extraordinary omission is New York City—how Fiorello LaGuardia and Robert Moses seized the opportunity provided by federal funds to make New York the urban showcase of the New Deal. But neither do they mention George Earle's "Little New Deal" in Pennsylvania. This absence also makes it impossible to understand the Republicans' choice of Alf Landon as presidential candidate in 1936—he is variously described as

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111 *The Unfinished Nation*, 542-43.

112 *United States: History and Geography*, 474. *United States: History and Geography* also refers to the "1920s managerial revolution" without mentioning General Motors. *United States: History and Geography*, 476.

113 *America's History*: II, 697; *The Unfinished Nation*, 598; *United States History*, 546; *United States: History and Geography*, 531.

“moderate” or “progressive”,<sup>114</sup> but the textbooks’ structure precludes analysis of the basic point that Landon’s policy as governor of Kansas was part of a spectrum of local responses to the New Deal, Democratic and Republican, and that the Republican Party’s choice of Landon as their candidate for president in 1936 reflects that nuanced *local* history.

The textbooks do provide coverage of 1930s culture—but patchily. *United States History*,<sup>115</sup> *United States: History and Geography*,<sup>116</sup> and *The Unfinished Nation*<sup>117</sup> all possess dedicated sections on 1930s culture. But these textbooks have a tendency to subordinate culture to their larger “social” narrative—for example, *United States History*’s section titles, “Depression-Era Films Reflect Social Issues” and “The Depression Era Reflected in Literature.”<sup>118</sup> Entertainment that doesn’t grimly and dutifully reflect social issues, such as soap operas, gets labeled “escapist”<sup>119</sup>—a tag that brings to mind Tolkien’s note that only men with the minds of jailors sneer at “escapism.”<sup>120</sup>

The textbooks’ social focus leads to the serious neglect of authors who ought to be included in any survey of 1930s literature, and any understanding of 1930s America. Willa Cather is only mentioned in *American History*<sup>121</sup> and *United States: History and Geography*<sup>122</sup> as part of 1920s culture; there is no hint of her extraordinary decade of work in the 1930s, which included *Shadows on the Rock*, *Lucy Gayheart*, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, and *Obscure Destinies*. No textbook mentions Nobel Prize winner Pearl Buck and *The Good Earth* (1931)—although Buck and her work would be a wonderful way to teach about American missionary culture and the associated emotional attachment to China possessed by millions of Americans that would play so important a role in America’s

114 *America’s History*: II, 693; *The Unfinished Nation*, 601.

115 *United States History*, 558-62.

116 *United States: History and Geography*, 505-06.

117 *The Unfinished Nation*, 572-76.

118 *United States History*, 559, 561.

119 *The Unfinished Nation*, 572, 575-76.

120 J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” in *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: Harper Collins, 1997), 148.

121 *American History*, 738.

122 *United States: History and Geography*, 484.

entry into World War II. *United States History*<sup>123</sup> and *The Unfinished Nation*<sup>124</sup> mention William Faulkner in their 1920s culture sections, but only *United States: History and Geography* mentions Faulkner in coverage of 1930s culture<sup>125</sup>—though this was the decade of *As I Lay Dying*, *Light in August*, and *Absalom, Absalom*. Only *The Unfinished Nation*<sup>126</sup> and *United States: History and Geography*<sup>127</sup> mention Eugene O’Neill, and then as part of 1920s culture; gone therefore is *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *Ah, Wilderness!*, and *The Iceman Cometh*. The textbooks’ “social interest” frame seriously constricts the 1930s culture they do present.

Present-mindedness distorts the textbooks even when they do cover popular culture. *The Unfinished Nation*<sup>128</sup> and *United States History*,<sup>129</sup> doubtless inspired by the present-day cult of comic books, both mention the birth of the comic book in the 1930s. No textbook mentions the birth of Golden Age science fiction at the same time, or the broader current of pulp adventure fiction. How can you understand Superman and Batman if you have never heard of Ellery Queen, the Shadow, or Doc Savage—or John W. Campbell, Jr. and *Astounding Science Fiction*? The textbooks make the birth of the comic book genre unintelligible by failing to provide this cultural context.

Perhaps the most important absence from these textbooks is the birth of modern secular liberal academic culture—the culture that produced the authors of these textbooks, and which is therefore peculiarly invisible to them. Most directly, the textbooks don’t mention the emergence of key formative works of modern American intellectual endeavor, which have shaped academic research since—for example, Aldo Leopold’s *Game Management* (1933), Margaret Mead’s *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935), and Talcott Parsons’ *The Structure of Social Action* (1937). They do not mention the creation of modern cultural institutions,

123 *United States History*, 503.

124 *The Unfinished Nation*, 553.

125 *United States: History and Geography*, 505-06.

126 *The Unfinished Nation*, 553.

127 *United States: History and Geography*, 485.

128 *The Unfinished Nation*, 574-75.

129 *United States History*, 562.

such as the Museum of Modern Art (1929 opening, 1939 relocation to current location), the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg (opened 1932), and the School of American Ballet (opened 1934). Neither do they mention the Modernist-Fundamentalist split of the 1920s and 1930s, by which the Main Line Churches abandoned Biblical fundamentalism and divorced it from American elite culture. The secular and liberal intellectual and cultural presumptions of the modern American elite were formed in the 1930s—but that is not part of the textbooks' story. The textbooks' authors are fish who cannot perceive water.

Put another way, the 1930s gave birth to the society and culture that dominates America in 2021—not simply an America with a hypertrophied federal government's role in the economy, but an America that blends the economic dominance of federal government, local government, and big business, whose culture is dominated by academic secular liberalism, and yet an America whose most enduring ornaments consist of those authors and genres who escape the yoke of “social relevance” defined by secular liberals. This is a slightly more complicated story to tell than one of “the rise of the federal government”—but not an impossible one. These textbooks make it very difficult to discern that such a narrative is possible—or any narrative besides the rise of the Rooseveltian state.

## Errors: The Shame of *The Unfinished Nation*

Many of these textbooks distort by arguable interpretations and selective silences. Several of the textbooks contain outright errors. The smallest are typographical, as when *United States: History and Geography* states that the English Bill of Rights dates to 1789 rather than 1689,<sup>130</sup>

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130 *United States: History and Geography*, 59.

when *The Unfinished Nation* dates a conflict between the Acoma Pueblos and the Spanish to 1898 rather than 1598,<sup>131</sup> or when *The Unfinished Nation* spells historian Amity Shlaes' last name as Schlaes.<sup>132</sup>

Other errors are more severe—and they appear in the two advanced history textbooks. More precisely, aside from one notable error in *America's History*, the vast majority of the substantive errors appear in *The Unfinished Nation*. The errors in both textbooks reflect ambition: they cluster in the references to non-American history, which the authors admirably incorporate into the narrative of American history. But ambition ought to be equaled by capacity. American history textbooks ought not to misinform students about any history, even that beyond America's borders.

The most notable error in *America's History* concerns African history:

“the expansion of the Atlantic slave trade increased the extent of slavery in Africa. Sultan Mawlay Ismail of Morocco (r. 1672-1727) owned 150,000 black slaves, obtained by trade in Timbuktu and in wars he waged in Senegal. In Africa, as in the Americas, slavery eroded the dignity of human life.”<sup>133</sup>

Certainly, the Sultan possessed 150,000 black slaves, generally serving in his army.<sup>134</sup> But this was an extension of Muslim slavery, with no relationship to the Atlantic slave trade. Most practically, as the book itself notes, Morocco's slaves were acquired overland from Timbuktu and Senegal, not from European slave traders. The facts of Moroccan slavery argue the lesser importance of Atlantic slavery within African slavery as a whole, not its greater importance. *America's History* falsifies history, for

131 *The Unfinished Nation*, 11.

132 *The Unfinished Nation*, 595.

133 *America's History*: II, 89.

134 Chouki El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

no discernable reason save a desire to give Europeans some metaphysical responsibility for all African slavery, and to excuse Muslims of their own real responsibility.

But if *America's History* has one notable error, *The Unfinished Nation*, just in the sections reviewed here, is riddled with mistakes.

“Recent DNA evidence has identified a possible early population group that does not seem to have Asian characteristics. This suggests that thousands of years before Columbus, there may have been some migration from Europe.”<sup>135</sup>

The DNA evidence suggests the possibility that distant cousins of the Australasians migrated separately to the Americas, or that there was stratification within the population of Siberian migrants that has not survived among surviving Indian populations. It is also consistent with the uncontroversial argument that Paleo-Siberians contributed both to European and to Amerindian populations. It does not suggest migration from Europe, as per the Solutrean hypothesis.

“Ferdinand Magellan ... proceeded to the Philippines. Magellan died in a conflict with local Indians.”<sup>136</sup>

The inhabitants of the Philippines are not Indians; the Philippines are not in India or the Americas. It is barely conceivable that the authors half-recalled that at a later point the Spaniards referred to some Filipinos as *indios*—but in the unlikely case that this is true, nomenclature this obscure requires explanation.

135 *The Unfinished Nation*, 2.

136 *The Unfinished Nation*, 9.

“His [Charles II’s] son, James II, faced a hostile Parliament that suspected him of Catholic allegiances.”<sup>137</sup>

James II was Charles II’s younger brother, not his son. This error is inexcusable.

“By 1688, the opposition to the king was so great that Parliament voted to force out James II.”<sup>138</sup>

William of Orange and the Dutch army landed in England in 1688 and James II fled the country; the Convention Parliament voted in 1689 to declare that James II had abdicated the throne. The textbook at best conflates two distinct events.

“She [Anne Hutchinson] sparked the **Antinomian** heresy, a phrase literally meaning she went against the laws of the ruling society.”<sup>139</sup>

The opponents of Antinomianism polemically gave the word that connotation; *literally*, Merriam-Webster defines *antinomian* as “(1) one who holds that under the gospel dispensation of grace the moral law is of no use or obligation because faith alone is necessary to salvation; 2) one who rejects a socially established morality.” The authors of *The Unfinished Nation* use *literally* in the vulgar second definition: “used for emphasis or to express strong feeling while not being literally true.” This is not appropriate for a textbook.

137 *The Unfinished Nation*, 41.

138 *The Unfinished Nation*, 52.

139 *The Unfinished Nation*, 132.

“Indeed, the English colonies would eventually become the destination for millions of forcibly transplanted Africans.”<sup>140</sup>

This is true only if one includes England’s Caribbean colonies; the figure for the mainland English colonies is 400 to 500 thousand. Since the subject of the text appears to be “The area that would become the United States”,<sup>141</sup> this sentence is more likely an outright falsehood and not just misleading.

“Germany had similar laws [to the revocation of the Edict of Nantes] banning Protestantism, driving many Germans to America where they settled in Pennsylvania.”<sup>142</sup>

Germans fled the war-torn Rhineland; Protestant sectarians fled longstanding persecution by both Catholic and Protestant rulers; and some Catholic Germans were among the refugees. The complex situation in Germany should not be compared to the French one—and certainly not by claiming a similar legal dynamic.

While discussing the Seven Years War, the text refers four times to the “Austro-Hungarian Empire” and “Austria-Hungary.”<sup>143</sup> The Empire of Austria fought in the Seven Years War. Austria-Hungary did not come into existence until 1867—and the name-change registered an important stage in the disintegration of the Austrian empire. No self-respecting history professor, whatever their specialty, should make this mistake.

140 *The Unfinished Nation*, 55.

141 *The Unfinished Nation*, 55.

142 *The Unfinished Nation*, 63.

143 *The Unfinished Nation*, 86-87.

“Russia became concerned about the Austro-Hungarian Empire’s possible dominance in central Europe and allied itself with the British and the Prussians.”<sup>144</sup>

Russia, Austria, and France were allied against Britain and Prussia. The Russians, among their motivations, were indeed concerned about *Prussian* expansion.

“[George III] suffered, apparently, from a rare mental disease that produced intermittent bouts of insanity. ... Yet even when George III was lucid, which was most of time in the 1760s and 1770s, he was painfully immature and insecure.”<sup>145</sup>

George III at most suffered one transitory episode of insanity in 1765; his madness only began in 1788, and he did not become permanently insane until 1811. Insanity had nothing to do with George III’s character, beliefs, or actions before or during the American Revolution.

“American and French forces quickly descended on Yorktown along with the battle-hardened all black First Rhode Island regiment.”<sup>146</sup>

The phrasing oddly suggests that Rhode Island’s black soldiers were not American. In any case, only 140 of the 225 soldiers in the First Rhode Island were black.<sup>147</sup>

144 *The Unfinished Nation*, 86.

145 *The Unfinished Nation*, 90.

146 *The Unfinished Nation*, 117.

147 Michael Lee Lanning, *African Americans in the Revolutionary War* (New York: Citadel Press, 2005), 75-76.

“Efforts to teach Anglo farming methods, whereby men did the farming and women cared for the home, clashed with Native American practices and traditions.”<sup>148</sup>

The text refers broadly to the eastern United States in the Jeffersonian era—when the settlers were *English*, not *Anglo*. *Anglo* is a term from later generations, referring generally to the southwestern portions of the United States acquired from Mexico, where Spanish was in use. The textbook uses bizarrely anachronistic nomenclature.

“Hollywood continued to exercise tight control over its products in the 1930s through its resilient censor Will Hays, who ensured that most movies carried no sensational or controversial messages.”<sup>149</sup>

Will Hays *tightened* the censorship in the 1930s, against significant resistance by Hollywood directors and studios. The Motion Picture Production Code was articulated as late as 1930 and was only fully in place in 1934. The textbook’s language registers uncertain command of the relevant facts.

*The Unfinished Nation* goes beyond doubtful interpretations to the downright misleading and the outright error. The authors deserve censure for their unprofessional performance—as does McGraw Hill, which should never have allowed a textbook with so many mistakes to be published.

## Conclusion

I have emphasized my critiques—and much of what I do not critique is solid enough. The three basic textbooks (*American History*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; *United States History*, Pearson; *United States: History*

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148 *The Unfinished Nation*, 141.

149 *The Unfinished Nation*, 573.

*and Geography*, McGraw Hill) are generally adequate in what they cover, albeit uninspired, imprisoned by their textbook format, and marred by politicizations such as the *diversity* cant of our day. They have been shorn of much of the religious, political, economic, and moral framework that informs true American history. But they at least convey many basic facts.

The two advanced textbooks (*The Unfinished Nation*, McGraw Hill; *America's History*, Bedford St. Martin's) are more ambitious. Both have greater narrative drive and individuality—but both are also more affected by progressive distortion. Both also make actual mistakes in the history they present—*America's History* occasionally, *The Unfinished Nation* with appalling frequency.

*America's History* is the most engaging of any of the history texts. Of the basic textbooks, *United States History* gives the American Revolution something like its true value, and for that reason alone deserves the palm among its peers.

The basic textbooks require more in the way of narrative thrust—and more individuality, to prevent them from decaying into identical checklists. The advanced textbooks need particularly to guard against politicization—they have more rope with which to hang themselves, and unfortunately they have indeed chosen to do so.

These textbooks are at best acceptable—and when they are, they can be made much better. America should expect more of its history textbooks.



**European  
Settlement of  
North America  
(1492-1660)**

Kevin R.C. Gutzman

## European Settlement of North America (1492-1660)

### Summary Evaluation

**T**hough these textbooks<sup>150</sup> are in some senses dissimilar, they have notable commonalities. Each begins with an extensive section reflecting the recent fad among academic historians of “Atlantic World” history. That section begins with a subsection on the Pre-Columbian New World, a subsection on West Africa up to the time of Columbus, and a subsection on Europe up to that time. Each book strains to flatter the Indian and African societies and, where there is conflict, to measure the Europeans by a stricter standard; so, for example, Aztec mass human sacrifice appears in only one of them. With scattered exceptions to be described hereafter, the books omit the Christian history necessary to understanding, e.g., the conflict between England and Spain in the sixteenth century and the reasons the Separatists who founded Plymouth Colony left England for The Netherlands in the first place. Again, with exceptions to be noted hereafter, the books’ outlines are so similar that it is as if their authorial teams had used the same template.

### *United States: History and Geography* (McGraw Hill)

#### Preliminary Notes

Perhaps betraying its age, this book’s cover image is dominated by the smiling face of Thomas Jefferson.

<sup>150</sup> Rebecca Edwards et al., *America’s History*, vol. 1, *To 1877* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2018); Alan Brinkley, John Giggie, and Andrew Huebner, *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (Columbus: McGraw Hill, 2019); Joyce Appleby et al., *United States: History and Geography* (Columbus: McGraw Hill, 2018); Emma Lapsansky-Werner et al., *United States History* (New York: Pearson, 2016); Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, *American History* (Orlando, FL: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018).

Its title reflects what I understand to be a trend away from using “America” to signify the USA—a trend I first noticed in the 1980s. Unless I am mistaken, it has its origin among identitarian people in/from Latin America. The argument behind it is that the USA is not all of America, and so should not be called by that name. Encountering this assertion are two problems: 1) Americans have always been called that; and 2) while only people from the USA are called that, Mexico too has “United States” in its name.

Another nod to contemporary avant-garde sensibilities is the use of locutions such as “prior to about 1500” instead of the formerly standard “Pre-Columbian.”

The brief author biography of Joyce Appleby at p. iii uses the present tense, although she died late in 2016.

Of 945 pages of text, the chapter covering the period, “Colonizing America: From Prehistory to 1754,” takes up 38.

## General Analysis

In general, the chapter’s coverage makes sense. It starts in Lesson 1, “North America Before Columbus,” with what is thought to be known about the first arrivals of men via the Bering Strait. Then a hop, skip, and jump through various groups takes the reader from Mesoamerica through settlements in today’s American Southwest. The lesson leaves to the instructor to say why these various peoples and cultures are being described—I think perhaps in too cursory a way: four pages of text cover the Olmec, Maya, Toltec, Aztec, Hohokam, Anasazi, Mississippian, Algonquian, and Iroquois peoples. Having all of these names introduced seemed rather pointless to me when I was a high school student, and this treatment seems likely to leave the same impression on students 10, these four decades later. Overall, this quick survey of Pre-Columbian North America gives little in the way of particulars beyond some highlights—there is no attention paid to the Aztec religion’s brutality, including in the form of mass human sacrifice, for example, and there is a complete

omission of the brutality typical of Indians' ways of war. Their forms of government are essentially omitted, as is the fact that Columbus' arrival in the New World meant that, for the first time, there would be writing, the wheel, and other such Old-World discoveries.

Lesson 2, "Europe Begins to Explore," traces the economic impulse behind European exploration to the First Crusade. It does not explain what Pope Urban II's office signified, what authority he had, or anything about him other than that he called the Crusade. Here is a problem that will run through the rest of this part of the book: religious terms are used over and over without any explanation being provided. There needs to be a section laying out the development of European Christianity at the beginning of this lesson, as distinctions and conflicts among different groups of Christians will recur through the rest of the book. These distinctions are especially important in the section on the settlement of the English/British colonies in North America.

Lesson 3, "Founding the Thirteen Colonies," describes the settlement of each colony in chronological order, beginning with the Chesapeake colonies. For some reason, however, the lesson's header refers to the New England colonies, which only began to be settled thirteen years after Virginia, as "the first successful English colonies in the Americas." Chronology remains a problem in the Chesapeake section, for the General Assembly of 1619 and after is referred to as the "House of Burgesses"—which only became a separate house of the General Assembly in 1642. More peculiarly, although *Johnson v. Castor* (which goes unmentioned) is decades away in 1619, John Rolfe's reference to "20 and odd Negroes" becomes "enslaved Africans."

The Powhatan Indians' attack on several Virginia Colony villages on Good Friday, 1622 is here "an attempt to defend their territory"—a highly slanted description of an attempt to extirpate the colonists, one-third of whom were killed. That the Indians took advantage of the holy day to catch the colonists unawares also goes unmentioned.

The "Pilgrims and Puritans" section unintentionally highlights the need for more explanation of religious life and ways. How can a student

be expected to understand that “Separatists concluded that the Anglican Church was too corrupt to be reformed”? Why the Pilgrims chose the Netherlands as their initial destination too goes unexplained. What a New England “common house” was likely will be a puzzle to virtually any child as well.

Another notable omission in this section is any reference to the source of John Winthrop’s “city upon a hill” metaphor. For some reason, the book leaves not only the Biblical source but also the metaphor out of its account of the sermon. (It also does not explain how Winthrop could have been entitled to preach a sermon.)

On the same page, the Mayflower Compact is referred to as “the first plan for self-government ever put into effect in the English colonies.” Surely Virginia had such a plan. If the point is that the Compact was a proto-constitution, the writers should find a clearer way of saying so.

On page 20, the organization of New Hampshire and Maine is explained, but government and religion are omitted. The account of King Philip’s War does not say who started the war or acknowledge anything about slavery in its aftermath. We get through this period without any mention of John Eliot or the Praying Towns—surely one of the most important and interesting aspects of seventeenth-century New England history.

The account of the English Civil War on pages 20-21 says nothing about religion, without which neither King Charles’ nor Parliament’s behavior is comprehensible.

Inexplicably, Barbados is omitted entirely from this account of the Carolinas’ establishment, as is slavery. So too the transformation of Georgia from a proprietary to a royal colony omits slavery. The summary of the period says nothing about the establishment of an elected assembly—something novel in the New World—in each colony by this time.

Lesson 4, “Population and Economy,” considers each of the three major regions of English settlement in turn from north to south. For some reason, however, it omits Plymouth Colony leader William Bradford’s account of his colony’s experiment with common ownership of land—an

idea he traced to Plato. Unsurprisingly to us, as Bradford put it, “this community [of ownership] (so far as it was) was found to breed much confusion and discontent and retard much employment that would have been to their benefit and comfort. For the young men, that were most able and fit for labour and service, did repine that they should spend their time and strength to work for other men’s wives and children without any recompense.” In relation to the women of the colony, he explained, “And for men’s wives to be commanded to do service for other men, as dressing their meat, washing their clothes, etc., they deemed it a kind of slavery, neither could many husbands well brook it.” Lest this desire to work for their own individual families’ betterment rather than for society in general be counted against the Plymouth settlers, Bradford concluded, “Let none object this is men’s corruption, and nothing to the course itself. I answer, seeing all men have this corruption in them, God in His wisdom saw another course fitter for them.”<sup>151</sup> In other words, Bradford judged responsiveness to economic incentives to be an attribute of man’s fallen nature—and thus a fact that had to be accommodated. The result of these observations was, Bradford wrote, that “the Governor [Bradford] (with the advice of the chiefest amongst them) gave way that they should set corn every man for his own particular, and in that regard trust to themselves; in all.... And so assigned to every family a parcel of land, according to the proportion of their number.... This had very good success, for it made all hands very industrious, so as much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been by any means the Governor or any other could use....” The women too “now went willingly into the field, and took their little ones with them to set corn; which before would allege weakness and inability; whom to have compelled would have been thought great tyranny and oppression.” The omission of this story and other information like it from textbooks has affected our contemporary society significantly.

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151 William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 121.

On the positive side, the text makes the important points that local democratic government developed early in New England and that this set the stage for the Revolution—though, as in discussing the Mayflower Compact, it does not mention that this grew naturally from Puritan ecclesiology. The following paragraph about New England education omits both the fact that colonial Massachusetts was the first society we know of with universal literacy and the story of Eliot’s Praying Towns. Though inherently interesting, even praiseworthy, the story of the Puritan colonists’ massive and highly successful endeavors to provide the previously illiterate people they encountered in New England with a Bible in their own language and to tutor them in Christianity, into which they were happy to usher them, would jar with the general slant of this text.

The section on the Middle Colonies<sup>152</sup> does not explain why the Quaker colonies had religious toleration. In other words, it does not explain what made a Quaker a Quaker. The description of the Boston/New York/Philadelphia merchants who “controlled the city’s [*sic*] trade” and “patterned themselves after the British upper class” is cartoonish. The explanation of the late-17<sup>th</sup>-century shift away from indentured servants and to African slaves omits both the improvement of English economic conditions and England’s naval successes as factors changing the cost relationship between the two.

That people from western Africa bore a hereditary resistance to mosquito-borne illnesses goes unmentioned in the discussion of death rates in the early decades of the southern colonies.

Lesson 5, “Governance and New Ideas,” begins with an “It Matters Because” statement that, “The ideas of the Enlightenment and the Great Awakening were the foundation of the colonists’ quest for independence from England and for the formation of a representative democracy.” This must be wrong, as several of the colonies were founded by people desirous of a large degree of self-rule before the Enlightenment and Great Awakening could have affected them. This statement also omits

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152 *United States: History and Geography*, 24-25.

the insistence of the British (no longer merely English) colonists throughout the Imperial Crisis on “the rights of Englishmen”—the historic rights that the colonists insisted were their inheritance under the common law. Cartoonishly, it adopts the teleological approach of assuming that “a ... democracy” in the twenty-first-century sense is what anyone had in mind—or even would have approved—in the seventeenth.

Next comes a section on mercantilism, which explains the policy goals that Colbert and the like strove to achieve.<sup>153</sup> The explanation of the drawbacks of a statecraft geared toward accumulating bullion for the king’s treasury without introducing the concept of comparative advantage—that is, without explaining why mercantilism necessarily makes people poorer than they would be under a (non-)system of free exchange—leaves the impression that states err in not pursuing mercantilist policies today.

This is where my assigned period leaves off in chapter 1. A student has made it this far without seeing Harvard College mentioned, and that too seems impossible to justify—unless providing students a chronicle of the landmarks of their society is not the goal. There are useful maps in the back of the book, and the Assessment section at the end of chapter 1 takes several different approaches in thought-provoking ways.

## *America’s History*, (Bedford/St. Martin’s)

The Preface to this edition notes that the text will stress trendy developments in historiography, such as “the history of capitalism” and “the way Native Americans shaped, and were shaped by, the contact experience—a focus that carries through the ninth edition in a continental perspective and sustained coverage of Native Americans, the environment, and the West in every era.” Stressed, too, will be “the opportunity, as well as the instability and violence, inherent in the colonial enterprise.”<sup>154</sup> This is particularly unsurprising in light of co-author

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153 *United States: History and Geography*, 29.

154 *America’s History*, xiv.

Hinderaker's Backcountry expertise. That secondary-school students' limited attention to American history should be squandered in part on these academic fad subjects rather than be focused on mastering the basic elements of the American story is inexcusable.

Chapter 1 begins with a statement that, although the text's coverage could begin (as such texts once routinely did) in 1607, "to our minds, it's best to consider the early decades of British and French colonization—1607 to 1700—in tandem with a deep exploration of precontact Native American and African societies." Thus, a substantial part of the pre-American Revolution portion of the book is given over to material before the period of, outside the area of, and not directly related to English/British colonization. Here one sees the influence of the recent creation, spurred by Bernard Bailyn, of an "Atlantic History" school. A student of American history should ideally understand the European and African contexts of this subject, but including extensive treatment of those contexts in a high-school history text can only be a distraction. One would not, I think, begin a book on the Trump Administration with an essay on the Magna Charta, or even on the history of partisan congressional investigations, though understanding those topics might deepen one's understanding of the Trump Administration. It is false that, "To begin, we need to understand the three worlds as distinct places, each home to unique societies and cultures."<sup>155</sup> [Meaningless verbiage such as the portion of that sentence following "distinct" abounds in this text.]

Pages 6-18 consider "The Native American Experience." That the story begins in Siberia highlights the awkwardness of the new term "Native American" for the people who, the text says, were called "Indians" from the time Columbus gave them that name until the last couple of decades. The point of the term is to call into question the legitimacy of Americans' presence in the New World—which, one infers, rightly belongs to its "Natives." [*sic*] Also, on page eight, one learns of "the Aleut and Inuit peoples, the 'Eskimos.'" This too replaces longstanding and universally familiar terminology.

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155 *America's History*, 6.

The text explains how the chief Pre-Columbian/prehistoric civilizations of North and South America came to exist and describes some of their features clearly. I think the task of setting the stage for European colonization could be achieved in less than half the space here devoted to it, and with greater effect. One paragraph after another situating a people in the New World landscape, naming it, describing its economy and what is known of its political organization, etc., can only be a kind of blur for high school kids—most of whom will have even less knowledge of, say, the Andes than they do of a different time zone from their own in the United States. So, on page 15, one reads in order of Comanches, who were Shoshonean, and then Sioux, Crow, Hidatsa, Mandan, Caddos, Bannocks, Northern Paiutes, Shoshones, Utes, and Southern Paiutes, all in a half-page. If there is to be such a chapter, however, at least the illustrations are well-selected and their captions are informative. Of particular pertinence, too, is the breakout section on page 14 describing and explaining the eastern woodlands Indians' practice of periodically burning out their territory, and thereby of clearing the ground between its trees, which facilitated both the farming and the hunting in which those people engaged.

The difficulty in introducing these peoples in a few pages is highlighted by an excerpt from an old history textbook explaining that the Indians were by 1492 “divided into at least two thousand cultures” and “spoke numerous languages mutually unintelligible to the many speakers.”<sup>156</sup> These Indians “did not conceive of themselves as a single people,” it concludes, which might provide some clarity to a bewildered teenager if he did not then read another excerpt on the same page insisting that, no, Indians were not really separate, as they traded goods and copied others' practices.

Following these thirteen pages on pre-Columbian Indians are five describing western Europe at the beginning of European colonization of the Americas. This text does a good job describing the colonizing societies' social structures and their inhabitants' life expectations. Of particular

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156 *America's History*, 18.

importance are the clarity with which it lays out the background to the surge of exploration across the Atlantic and the way it provides a basis for later sections' explanations of the founding of England's first overseas colonies. A student who understands this material will be able to grasp why the various colonies with religious missions were founded and what the matters of contention among various Christian groups were. The text does err in saying that Constantine rather than Theodosius made Christianity Rome's official religion. It also does not say what "Renaissance" means or why the movement has that name.<sup>157</sup>

The three pages describing the sections of West and Central Africa that became pivotal to the slave trade also are well done. Again, the maps and figures are superb. Not only is the culture of that region described well, but the reasons the slave trade could develop there are laid out clearly. Pages 30-36 describe the roles of Portugal and Spain in starting the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and the novelty of interaction between Europeans and Africans in this experience is made clear both by the text and by the illustrations.

Chapter 2, "American Experiments," comes to the actual settlements of the first colonies. It is the same length, 32 pages, as Chapter 1. Significant attention goes to the Spanish and Portuguese colonies before England is mentioned. (A "Chapter Chronology" chart on the third page omits establishment of the Church of England in Virginia in 1619, the year it mistakenly says the House of Burgesses first met. (The actual date for the separate house is 1642.))

The first paragraph of chapter 2, however, is devoted to the Virginia and Maryland legislatures' legal definitions of slavery in the 1660s. *Johnson v. Castor*, the Virginia court case in which the judges accepted one African resident's argument that he owned another, thus recognizing slavery's legality in Virginia for the first time, goes unmentioned, and no reference back to chapter 1's coverage of Pre-Columbian and West African slavery is made. This introductory section does lay out a helpful

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157 *America's History*, 21.

taxonomy, however: tribute colonies were exactly that, plantation colonies produced staples using slaves, and “neo-Europes” (a rather infelicitous term I had never previously encountered) were attempts to replicate European society to some degree.

Once again, substantial space goes to Spanish tribute colonies. Next, the idea of the “Columbian Exchange” sets the Anglophone experience in a larger context. Then comes the Tudor initiative to hem in Spain’s exploitation of the New World by establishing North American colonies of England’s own—taking up nearly three pages. Philip II draws significant attention—just enough to lay the groundwork for consideration of the fatally flawed economic model of tributary colonies. Why he cared to attack England on behalf of the Catholic Church in 1588 goes unexplained; students are merely told that he “intended to restore the Roman Church in England” without being given any idea why. This kind of omission repeatedly marks this book as well.

When at last “England’s Tobacco Colonies” are introduced, we learn that Virginia was a “joint-stock corporation”—a term I had never seen before. If, like the various other newfangled terms encountered to this point, “joint-stock corporation” is intended to supplant “joint-stock company” for some political reason, I do not know what that reason is, and the book gives no indication. One shortcoming of this section is its lack of a map, so that, e.g., “between the James and Potomac rivers” [*sic*] has no obvious meaning. The account of Virginia’s settlement and early economic and political history is generally clear—with the caveat, again, that the House of Burgesses did not become a body separate from the governor and Council until 1642.

Although the Powhatans’ attack on the Virginia Colony in 1622 is described as “a surprise attack” and their leader’s intention to slaughter every last Englishman is made clear, there is no mention at all of the fact that the Indians chose Good Friday as a date when the English would be easily surprised.

The book’s account of Maryland’s establishment omits any explanation of the difference between Episcopalianism and Catholicism, as

well as the reasons why Lord Baltimore might have cared to establish a Catholic-tolerant colony. Students cannot understand from reading this account of Maryland's establishment,<sup>158</sup> then, why anyone would have bothered.

On pages 48-9, the book provides detailed treatment of the story of Pocahontas, John Smith, and John Rolfe. Its treatment of how people on either side of the English-Powhatan cultural divide might have understood the famous events in which they were prominent is particularly interesting. In terms of pedagogy, the authors here do an excellent job of providing different kinds of evidence and prompting students to consider the various questions they raise.

In general, the section on the establishment of Virginia and early Virginia plantation life is well-done. Indentured servitude is described clearly, as is that institution's place in the colony's early history. The related map is clear. The breakout section on climate and American colonization makes its point and prompts thought well.<sup>159</sup> One can say the same about the account of the establishment of New France, particularly as regards its relatively sparse European population and its economic focus. The short account of New Netherland is apt.<sup>160</sup>

The longer part of the chapter focused on early New England, however, has several shortcomings.<sup>161</sup> First, devoting more attention to New England than to Virginia reflects a rejection of Jack Greene's argument in *Pursuits of Happiness* that, despite Harvard's dominance of American intellectual history, Virginia should be understood not only as the first, most populous, most extensive, and most lucrative British North American colony, but also as the most typical one.<sup>162</sup>

Second, the book says of John Winthrop that he left England for North America because he found England "morally corrupt," and it omits that his famous "City upon a Hill" line is a New Testament quotation of Jesus,

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158 *America's History*, 47.

159 *America's History*, 52.

160 *America's History*, 55-57.

161 *America's History*, 58-65.

162 Jack P. Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

besides what He meant by it. Unspecified “other” Puritans “believed that they were God’s chosen people, the new Israelites,” one reads at the end of the same three-paragraph passage. Without substantial attention to the theological issues driving Puritan migration, this section is nonsensical.

The section on Anne Hutchinson makes the Massachusetts Bay Puritans’ teachings concerning sex roles seem idiosyncratic rather than typical of Christians the world over in their day. It also says that “Puritan women could not be ministers or lay preachers, nor could they vote in church affairs” without providing any context—say, a list of early seventeenth-century societies in which women voted or were leaders in religious affairs. One infers that the Puritan men were misogynist. The book also misses the opportunity to explain to readers the significance of Hutchinson’s denial that there was a “covenant of works,” insisting on only a “covenant of faith.”

Another instance of new terminology is the authors’ reference to the “Puritan-Pequot War” when they come to describe the Pequot War (which found not only Puritans but also other Indian peoples ranged against the Pequots). As the first violent acts were committed by Indians, the book avoids ascribing initiative by saying, “A series of violent encounters began in July 1636.” The section on the war ends with consideration of the Puritans’ attitude toward New England Indians. John Eliot’s remarkable missionary efforts, part of an overall effort in which Eliot invented a script for the Indians’ use, Puritans imparted literacy to as many as half of New England Indians, and 10% of those Indians became full members of Puritan religious communities, is slighted: somehow, the authors characterize that last cohort as “relatively few.” Surely this mammoth achievement tells us something important about New England Puritans’ understanding of their relationship to their aboriginal neighbors and of those neighbors’ place in the cosmos. It would tell students too, if they knew of it.

The following section, “The Puritan Revolution in England,” runs off a list of events—that the Scots resisted imposition of a Church of England prayer book, that many English Puritans joined the Scots, that

Parliament beheaded King Charles I, that bishops were banished—without saying why any of them occurred. Even when dealing with religious controversies, the authors dodge religious issues.

Pages 62-3 are devoted to the Salem Witchcraft Scare. More than a page goes to a breakout section of prominent Bay Colony minister Cotton Mather’s summaries of testimony. Giving more than twice as much attention to this essentially unimportant—though notorious—event as to, say, the Pequot War has no obvious justification.

Pages 65-8 deal with King Philip’s War in New England, the Pueblo Revolt in northernmost New Spain, and Bacon’s Rebellion in Virginia, which all occurred at about the same time. Why the story of an Indian revolt in New Spain is included is hard to say. King Philip’s War is referred to as “Metacom’s War” in bold type the first time it is mentioned, though it has been known as “King Philip’s War” since the seventeenth century and the text later says of Metacom that he is “also known as King Philip.” These numerous changes in nomenclature without any evident pedagogical justification can only serve to make learning more difficult. The accounts of King Philip’s War and Bacon’s Rebellion are fair to both sides, and they make clear why friction arose between the Indians and the colonists in both New England and Virginia. The same can be said for the chapter summary.

## *United States History (Pearson)*

This volume too begins with a chapter—one of twenty—with sections on American Indians (“the peoples of the Americas”), West Africans, European contact, and Spanish and French New World exploration and colonization. It starts with Indians’ migration from northeastern Asia across the Bering Strait, discusses significant climate change about 10,000 years ago, and follows those people down the West Coast through South America. More than once, students encounter a string of unfamiliar names. (Of “at least 375 distinct languages,” some were “Athapaskan, Algonquian, Caddoan, Siouan, Shoshonean, and Iroquoian,” and “people

in the Southeast included Choctaws, Chickasaws, Natchez, and Creeks.”) It is hard to imagine a typical teenager retaining much from these six pages.

Next come four pages of text, illustrated with beautiful and informative figures, on “The West Africans.” Ghana, Mali, and Songhai receive more useful treatment than the Indian groups did. The following cultural section treats the region generally in a clear and accessible way. It raises the subject of slavery in a fashion that makes the appearance of Portuguese traders and their participation in that trade seem to follow in course. Although the book says that, in West Africa, “slavery was not based on the notion of racial superiority or inferiority,” it could delve further into the (absence of) moral arguments about the institution. One is merely told that, “The Portuguese did not invent the slave trade, but they did greatly expand it.” An alternative description might have been that “the local African kings” met the demand from the Portuguese just as, the book says, they had previously met the demand from Arabs.

The next ten-page section, “Europeans Make Contact,” recounts European discovery and colonization of America. It begins with cursory geostrategic and social descriptions of western Europe c. 1400. Of particular note in this connection are the dog-eat-dog relations among major states (Portugal, Castile, England, and France) and the highly stratified sociopolitical structure of the region. The following, short section on economic integration resulting from the Crusades begins with the amusing statement that those wars’ purpose was “to capture and hold Jerusalem and all of the Holy Land where Jesus lived and died.” “In the end,” it concludes, “the Muslims defeated the Christian Crusaders.” There’s no word on how the Moslems came to be in the Holy Land or what precipitated the events of A.D. 1095.

The Moslems’ control of the trade routes formerly used by Europeans spurs exploration down the western coast of Africa, in this account, particularly through the initiative of Henry the Navigator. Ironically, Moslems’ technology assists the European sailors in navigating the routes they discover. (This attention to non-Westerners’ technological

achievements stands out in a book in which Europeans' are mainly ignored.) Spanish sailors' exploits and a major miscalculation lead to Columbus's trans-Atlantic voyages. His motives are made clear. The labor theory of value—exploded long ago among economists—makes an appearance when “the mineral and plantation wealth of the Americas—produced by the labor of African slaves—help[s] finance the expansion of European commerce.” There is a clear description of the Treaty of Tordesillas, by which Spain and Portugal partitioned the New World. Both the book's account of Spanish conquest in the New World and its description of the Columbian Exchange are clear and accessible, as are the related illustration and graph. The figures on Europeans' and Indians' shares of world population in 1492 and 1800 are awful—and clear.

The next portion of Chapter 1, “Spain and France in the Americas,” begins by noting that Spain's acquisition of enormous hoards of gold and silver in the Americas led the Dutch, French, and English to decide they must colonize in the New World too. This is placed in the context of divisions among Protestants, who were together the objects of Spanish kings' efforts “to suppress Protestantism.” A list of Protestant denominations is just that—without explanation.<sup>163</sup>

The account of Spanish rule in the New World includes attention not only to governance in Peru and New Spain but also to racial categories the Spanish established in those possessions. This story naturally leads to an account of the Pueblo Revolt, a kind of climax to that section. The thirty-five-page section concludes with the story of the establishment of New France. All of this is by way of background to the American history, supposedly the book's topic.

Chapter 2 has six sections, four and the beginning of the fifth of which are relevant to my assigned period. Their topics are the Southern, New England, and Middle colonies, immigration and slavery in the English/British colonies, and life in the colonies. The general explanation of these colonies' establishment is unexceptionable. So too is the specific account

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163 *United States History*, 25-26.

of the Lost Colony of Roanoke. When it comes to Jamestown, John Smith is named, his name highlighted, without any explanation. The effects of Jamestown's poor setting on the early colonists also receive important attention. A fine map shows the relationship between Virginia's boundaries and the Powhatans' lands. Pocahontas is mentioned, but not overemphasized, and the role of tobacco in the colony's history is described well. Pages 40 and 41 feature two of several figures, which are difficult to read because multiple dark colors are superimposed on top of one another.

From page 41, one sees the term "American Indians" over and over. Seldom does "Indians" appear without "American," as if someone might mistake occupants of seventeenth-century Virginia for South Asians. (On pages 47-9, "Indian" appears in fourteen places, with "American" in thirteen of them.) The brutal behavior of Bacon's rebels and "his" rebellion's place in the grim history of Virginian-Indian relations receive good treatment. The offensiveness of Governor Berkeley's behavior also comes across clearly.

Less than a half-page suffices to describe the settlements of Maryland, the Carolinas, and Georgia.<sup>164</sup> I think that South Carolina, in particular, ought to receive more attention; Barbados goes unmentioned, though historians commonly consider it, via South Carolina, the "cultural hearth" of much of the Deep South.

Section 2.2, "New Lives in New England," is excellent. In particular, the religious elements of the story are treated fully. This is one of the few textbook accounts I've seen, including in college textbooks, that clearly distinguishes Separatists from Puritans (though "grace" and "salvation" are not defined). On pages 45-6, Winthrop's "city upon a hill" metaphor is not attributed to Jesus. An important element of the story, that Massachusetts Bay Colony colonists uniquely got to choose their own governor, appears. The role of religious dissension in the founding of subsequent New England colonies is explained, though Anne Hutchinson's pivotal theological error at her heresy trial would surprise

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164 *United States History*, 42-43.

students who knew only that “she ably defended herself.” The insinuation that Puritans objected to her leadership role due to their own psychological features elides their biblical rationale.<sup>165</sup> The text gives only two paragraphs to the Salem Witchcraft Scare, omitting the larger civilizational context. (I think it should be omitted, but if included, it should be explained fully.) King Philip’s War is called “King Philip’s War,” though King Philip’s Indian name is also mentioned. That event and the Pequot War receive due attention, including explanations of their long-term significance.

Section 2.3, “The Middle Colonies Thrive,” explains why both The Netherlands and Sweden established colonies, describes early New Netherland, and tells what the Swedish colony’s legacy is. It next makes clear what made the Quaker colonies special and lays out reasons for their success. Section 2.4, “Immigration and Slavery in the Colonies,” distinguishes indentured servitude from slavery. Its section on “The Transatlantic Slave Trade” carefully avoids saying the slaves were brought from Africa and that they were sold to Europeans by Africans. (“Most of those enslaved were kidnapped by armed men or taken in wars between kingdoms.”) “Europeans,” it then states forthrightly, “promoted the trade.” (This kind of game runs throughout the book.) Although the “triangular trade” is mentioned, only two of the three angles are described. The section on “Africans in the American Colonies” describes Africans in the Americas as “a rich culture,” which needs no comment. The section on slave resistance mentions the Stono Rebellion without noting how unusual and, in the New World context, small that event was. A student reading this section is unlikely to realize that the question of why slave rebellions in what are now the United States were so much more infrequent and confined than those farther south has been a topic of discussion among historians of American slavery for several decades.

The last part of this text on the period under consideration here is in Section 2.5, “Economic and Social Life in the Colonies.” This part of

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165 *United States History*, 46.

the book begins with a description of mercantilism, and from reading it, students would have no idea that economists today overwhelmingly agree that tariff and trade walls generally hinder rather than aid in economic development.

## *The Unfinished Nation* (McGraw Hill)

Chapter 1, “The Collision of Cultures,” begins with the flat statement that, “The discovery of the Americas did not begin with Christopher Columbus.” Typically of contemporary books, it uses “men and women” instead of “people” by the end of the first paragraph and says of the pre-Columbian populations that Spaniards and Portuguese “came to call [them] ‘Indians.’” “The Peoples of the Precontact Americas” notes that Peru and Chile may have been populated by Europeans even before the great migration from eastern Asia by land saw other people move down the west coast of North America.<sup>166</sup>

The tale here is similar to those in the other texts, with even an illustration on page 13 that we saw on page 22 of *United States History* (above). Of particular use, however, is a section unlike what one finds in those texts: an explanation of the “Atlantic World” approach to early American history.<sup>167</sup>

Mercantilism is explained briefly as a prod to colonization (!), then comes a section on the Protestant Reformation. The distinction between Lutheranism and Calvinism is a bit muddled, but the significance of the English Reformation and the advent of the Stuart Dynasty is clear. There follows a section on “The French and the Dutch in America.”<sup>168</sup>

Chapter 2’s title, “Transplantations and Borderlands,” reflects a recent trend in academic historiography related to the “Atlantic World” impulse: talk about “borderlands.” The term refers to the furthest bounds of European settlement. So, for example, the first paragraph

<sup>166</sup> *The Unfinished Nation*, 2.

<sup>167</sup> *The Unfinished Nation*, 16-17.

<sup>168</sup> *The Unfinished Nation*, 22-23.

of this chapter says, “All of English North America was, in effect, a borderland during the early years of colonization.” Friction with other Europeans and with nearby Indians was constant. Ultimately, however, the English won out.<sup>169</sup> Neither this book nor any of the others explain why Englishmen arriving at, say, the site of Jamestown might consider the land before them unoccupied.

This book’s account of the earliest years at Jamestown parallels those in the other books, all the way down to the error about a separate House of Burgesses from 1619 and the omission of the occasion for the Powhatans’ 1622 attack on the Virginia Colony.<sup>170</sup> (Overlap among these books’ tables of contents is extensive.) The tale of the transition from indentured servitude to slavery among blacks in the colony comes across clearly. The book’s account of the after-effects of Bacon’s Rebellion, though a bit speculative, is thought-provoking: fearing future class conflict, the landed gentry began in that pivotal event’s aftermath to rely more completely on African labor. One might have hoped for some mention of economic developments in England, which pushed down the supply of white men willing to travel to Virginia, and English naval success in the Atlantic, which made transportation of slaves to North America cheaper.<sup>171</sup> The earliest days of Maryland, Lord Baltimore’s role, and his religious motivation at center stage are laid out clearly up to the ballooning presence of slavery in the late seventeenth century.<sup>172</sup>

Next up is “The Growth of New England,” which describes the birth of a region discovered and named, ironically, by John Smith. Neither the content of Separatism nor the role of religion in the Mayflower Compact is explained. Though William Bradford’s leadership of the relatively unprosperous Plymouth Colony is mentioned, his account of the colony’s experience with communal land ownership is not.

Massachusetts Bay Colony’s settlement is described, complete with Winthrop’s “city upon a hill” metaphor—whose Biblical inspiration

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169 *The Unfinished Nation*, 25.

170 *The Unfinished Nation*, 29.

171 *The Unfinished Nation*, 31.

172 *The Unfinished Nation*, 32-33.

goes unmentioned. Puritanism's ethical content is described well, as is Boston's relationship to Plymouth, surrounding towns, and the Wampanoags in the earliest days. Incongruously, exclusion of women from the suffrage in early Connecticut, and "virtually everywhere in the colonies," is mentioned—without any reference to the fact that women were not voting in France, Spain, Russia, the Ottoman Empire, India, China, Prussia, the Holy Roman Empire, Switzerland, Persia, England, Scotland, Ireland, or essentially anywhere else at the time.<sup>173</sup>

The section on settlement of the other New England colonies does a fair job of presenting some of the religious reasons for their founding, though one reading this section would not know how the Puritans' religion affected their daily lives. The stories of Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams are presented clearly.<sup>174</sup> The story of King Philip's War (referring again to "Metacom, whom the English called 'King Philip'") has its central place. In the end, survivors are sold into slavery outside New England.

In general, this book has far more text and far less in the way of visual presentation than the others. The five pages on the founding of the Middle Colonies are not illustrated. It mistakenly makes James II the son, rather than a brother, of Charles II. The story of Carolina, with its heavy Barbadian tinge, is told clearly. The same can be said of the colonies whose founding is chronicled in a section on "New Netherland, New York, and New Jersey."

## *American History* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)

Bulky and heavy, this book too begins with the migration of men from northeastern Asia to North and South America. Again their movement is distant in time—"as early as 22,000 years ago" via "a land bridge." Here,

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173 *The Unfinished Nation*, 35.

174 *The Unfinished Nation*, 35-36.

North America was settled before South. The unfamiliar “Inuit” is used instead of “Eskimos.”<sup>175</sup> The accounts given here of the various early Indian groups in North America are quite similar to those described above.

Next comes a section on “West African Societies Around 1492.”<sup>176</sup> Its account of important features of West African civilization takes on a kind of breathlessness completely absent from sections on European societies (“the fabled Songhai city of Timbuktu,” “the bustling prosperity of Timbuktu,” “its lively intellectual climate”), but it provides both a clear picture and links to later elements of American society (Africans teaching whites to cultivate rice, for example). The breakout section on the contemporary popularity of kente cloth<sup>177</sup> seems gratuitous—yet another nod to identity politics.

Lesson 3, “European Societies Around 1492,”<sup>178</sup> is the best of these five books’ introductions to the Europeans who settled the United States. Its account of Christianity is particularly useful, but it also makes clear how the Crusades, the explosion of Europe’s population, and technological discoveries aided in colonization.

Lesson 4, “Transatlantic Encounters,”<sup>179</sup> describes Columbus’s voyages and the subsequent European division over control of the New World, with the Treaty of Tordesillas at the center of the story. The impact on the Indians, the beginning of the slave trade, and the Columbian Exchange are described. Then, students are given prompts both for and against Columbus and are asked to write their own arguments on one side or the other.<sup>180</sup> They have very little ground for doing so other than the prompts—one admiring, one harshly negative. Lesson 5, “Spain’s Empire in the Americas,”<sup>181</sup> describes the establishment of New

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175 *American History*, 5.

176 *American History*, 14–20.

177 *American History*, 20.

178 *American History*, 21–28.

179 *American History*, 29–35.

180 *American History*, 34.

181 *American History*, 36–43.

Spain on the ruins of the Aztec Empire and the expansion of Spanish power—which finally runs aground on the defeat of the Spanish Armada (1588).

Module 2 of this text, “The American Colonies,” begins with the question, “Why did American colonies in different regions develop varying economic, political, and societal practices?” Lesson 1, “The English Settle Virginia”,<sup>182</sup> at last takes up the topic of the settlement of England’s first colony. John Smith’s role is highlighted, as are the negative attributes of the site where the colonists established their first settlement: Jamestown. A fine account of the latest archeological discoveries concerning the first fort is handsomely illustrated. Then comes the section on the identification of tobacco as Virginia’s staple crop and the role of indentured servants in its early history.

The conflict between Virginia and the local Powhatans leading up to the attack of Good Friday, 1622 draws attention. The book, like the others I have analyzed, mistakenly says the House of Burgesses met in 1619.<sup>183</sup> The class tensions and hostile relations with Indians underlying Bacon’s Rebellion are spelled out clearly.

Lesson 3, “Colonial Settlement Continues”,<sup>184</sup> follows the story down through the settlement of Pennsylvania and the conquest of New Netherland. A breakout section on Puritan poet Anne Bradstreet does not explain the religious reason why, seeing her house burn down, she blessed God “that gave and took.”<sup>185</sup> It also does not say where John Winthrop got the image of a “city upon a hill” or explain why Puritans saw the elimination of Catholic elements of Anglican ritual as “purif[i-cation].”<sup>186</sup> Too, it omits from its account of Plymouth Colony the story told by William Bradford of radical shortfalls in agricultural production resulting from communal land ownership.<sup>187</sup> Why it says Massachusetts

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182 *American History*, 48-55.

183 *American History*, 53.

184 *American History*, 56-71.

185 *American History*, 56.

186 *American History*, 57.

187 *American History*, 57-58.

Bay “Puritans made no effort to create a democracy” right before stating that “all adult males who belonged to the Puritan church” were eligible to vote in Massachusetts Bay is unclear.<sup>188</sup>

Roger Williams’ flight from Massachusetts Bay Colony and Anne Hutchinson’s banishment, resulting in the founding of Rhode Island, are explained.<sup>189</sup> So too are the Pequot War and King Philip’s War. (Once again, the Wampanoag chief is referred to as “Metacom, whom the English called King Philip” [*sic*]).<sup>190</sup> New Netherland/New York is “diverse,” its spectacular harbor unmentioned.<sup>191</sup> Pennsylvania’s radical founder is described, though his devotion to education goes unacknowledged.<sup>192</sup> The founding of Maryland, Georgia, and the Carolinas is handled quickly.

The Little Ice Age coincident with the English/British colonies’ settlement and other climatic realities are the subjects of an interesting section.<sup>193</sup> The section ends with attention to Mercantilism/the Navigation Acts, about which no opinion is offered.<sup>194</sup>

## General Conclusions

These five books’ treatments of American colonial history in its earliest decades are remarkably similar. The inclusion of abundant material deemed important by the Atlantic History school in each of these books reflects more an academic fad than a judgment about how best to introduce to high school students the early history of the societies that became the United States. The books cover this period with descriptions of nearly the same events, and their attitudes concerning those events are nearly identical.

The story of slavery in Anglophone North America is treated repeatedly as peculiar. More than once, information about slavery in the rest

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188 *American History*, 59.

189 *American History*, 60–61.

190 *American History*, 63.

191 *American History*, 64.

192 *American History*, 65, 67.

193 *American History*, 70–71.

194 *American History*, 73.

of the Atlantic World, besides of the world generally, is omitted. That goes as well for the Virginia court case of *Johnson v. Castor*, in which one African man succeeded in persuading a Virginia court to declare him legal owner of another African man—and thus to recognize slavery as a legal institution in Virginia for the first time. None of these books mention it. References to women's place in colonial societies imply that, for example, exclusion of women from leadership roles in religious institutions was unusual rather than universal. The sections on, for example, Pennsylvania's establishment by Quakers do not mention that, say, Islam did not (and does not) allow women imams, etc. This is not to say that negative aspects of the story should be slighted or ignored. Rather, they should be put in context. The writing teams of these five books take care not to contrast colonial North America with Spanish colonies farther south, West African societies, or the enormous Ottoman Empire to Europe's south and east when doing so would put the English in a good light; only the opposite.

So too is the story of socialized land ownership in the early Plymouth Colony left out of all five books. Why not tell this story—that the Pilgrims tried communal real estate holding, found it economically ruinous, and so turned to private landholding? The question answers itself. Surely this story was more important in the history of colonial America than, say, that of the Salem Witchcraft Scare, which is a curiosity of no substantial importance that receives significant attention in each of these books. Why?

# Colonial America (1660-1763)

Bruce P. Frohnen

## Colonial America (1660-1763)

### Introduction

**T**he history of colonial America has almost disappeared from most high school American history texts in favor of increasingly lengthy and ideologically skewed treatments of pre-Columbian cultures. This is unfortunate because the colonial era is of extreme importance for understanding the nature and development of American traditions and the American way of life. It was during this time—from the restoration of the Stuart monarchy to the end of the Seven Years' War—that the colonists forged the institutions, beliefs, and practices they later saw at risk of destruction from Parliament's determined moves toward consolidation and establishment of total British control over their land and people.

To understand our constitutional order, students must understand the political (as well as religious, economic, and social) forms that brought resistance to British power and helped produce the specific form of government adopted in the United States. This means teaching about common practices and motivations (e.g., economic opportunity and the formation of religious communities) as well as currently highlighted ethnic and other divisions. It also means introducing students to fundamental ideas regarding the nature of the person and community, rights and duties, and the rule of law. As important, students must be introduced to the embedded nature of such ideas—their importance, not as mere abstractions, but as traditions that shaped both daily life and lasting institutions.

To teach about these traditions requires recognizing the legitimacy of the American project itself. If young people are to become functioning citizens within our constitutional order, and if they are to dedicate themselves to its improvement, they must begin from an understanding of what it is, and especially of how those who made these traditions saw

themselves and their goals. If students are taught their history from an adversarial perspective that emphasizes its failings, or as a subject merely of disinterested, dissecting analysis, rather than as a story of which they themselves are a part, they will be discouraged from taking ownership of their own lives. They will be taught an ideology of resentment, an untutored refusal to learn from the past, rather than the need to engage with the story that shapes their lives as persons and as members of American communities.

The reference to “story” is intentional, for students cannot enter into charts, graphs, and timelines. These sometimes-necessary tools can convey data but cannot provide access points into the lives and minds of our forebears. And such access is essential for any reasonable understanding of the import of bare but manipulable facts.

## The Essentials of Colonial History

The story of the colonial era is one of development—of the communities, ideas, and habits undergirding our system of ordered liberty under law. Its retelling in high school texts should focus on the development of self-government in the colonies. The isolation of small communities ruled by a relatively disinterested mother country and separated from one another in an often-hostile environment in terms of climate, health, and disputes with the Indians both required and fostered an entrepreneurial and experimental spirit. Americans were overwhelmingly settlers; they formed small communities in a new land. As a consequence, they were in a position to try out new forms of governance, from utopian dreams among the Puritans and the founders of Georgia to the development of independent plantation life in the South, as they responded to differing and changing circumstances. Moreover, while they hailed from many different homelands, their background (as David Hackett Fischer’s

*Albion's Seed* in particular has pointed out<sup>195</sup>) was concentrated in particular areas of Britain, bringing deeply held cultural patterns with them, which helped shape their responses to their new circumstances.

Recognizing colonial isolation must not entail ignoring the English background and influence in the colonies. It is important for students to learn that England was in fact a less powerful and centralized home country than Spain or other colonial powers, leaving the colonists largely on their own, with more local control and freedom. But England's salutary neglect was exercised toward a particular group of settlers who brought their own attitudes and ways of life to the New World. While settlers came to North America to escape various forms of oppression in their home countries, the dominant English settlers were not raised within an absolutist tradition. English local liberties were deeply interwoven among the settlers, many of whom had escaped, if not taken part in, a civil war fought in significant measure over retention of balanced government and local and individual rights rooted in the English Charter tradition.

The Charter tradition, going back at least to Magna Carta, generally receives some attention from texts dealing with the founding of American colonies (the Mayflower Compact and various colonial charters and frames of government are crucial here). In addition, however, history texts need to make clear the importance of ideas regarding limited government and the rights and duties of persons and communities, both as incorporated into colonial life from its foundings and as developed through the (limited) American experience of the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

It is important as well for texts to introduce students to the reality of colonial wars. Conflicts with the Indians were violent, though hardly as one-sided as is generally reflected in contemporary treatments. These conflicts, which brought the butchering of women and children on both sides, established an atmosphere requiring active communal self-defense

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195 David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

among the settlers. There also were colonial echoes of imperial wars (e.g., Queen Anne's War) that helped shape colonial social as well as military life. Such conflicts and their inevitable results are increasingly overlooked in favor of a caricature of settlers as wanton murderers.

All texts will point to inequalities in the colonies based on sex, race, and class. But it would be a travesty and a distortion not to note the relative equality of the era. Also important are the bases of this greater equality in religion (especially in the north), in the thin and sparse nature of the class system in the American colonies, and in the existence of simple room to move. Even in the south, the backcountry and frontier afforded opportunities for settlers to avoid harsh hierarchies and set up a combination of dynamic commercial enterprises and localized agricultural communities. It was this combination that rendered slavery in the north a relatively short-lived anomaly and that made the southern slave society a horrible exception, but a limited exception nevertheless. Slavery, then, needs to be discussed fully and appropriately but in the context of American freedom.

The centrality of religion in the founding of the American colonies demands extensive treatment in terms of colonial development. Religious beliefs shaped governmental forms as well as social practices central to colonists' ways of life. While too many texts emphasize small-scale tragedies, like the Salem Witch Trials, that were in fact a pale reflection of events on the other side of the Atlantic, much greater attention is due the Great Awakening. This variegated set of events was the beginning of an evangelical style rooted in revival of pre-existing piety combined with an increase in self-reliance before God and a further questioning of entrenched hierarchies. The religiosity of the Great Awakening was in tension with but not opposed to the rationalism of the Enlightenment. As Henry May makes clear in *The Enlightenment in America*,<sup>196</sup> that Enlightenment was distinctly moderate, rooted in the finding of order in the universe in keeping with both natural rights and religion. During

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196 Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1976).

this era, religious believers (and not just deists) applied a kind of natural-law theorizing to politics in justifying natural rights. Both movements combined the spirit of liberty and skepticism with a strong faith in the order of the universe.

Mercantilism and trade policy, especially as embodied in the Navigation Acts, are a part of colonial development as well. Still, these forms of British control always were in conflict with Americans' unruly nature and their tendency to avoid taxes and to trade even where officially forbidden. In addition, because these policies were left unenforced over many decades, Americans grew accustomed to thinking of them as of very limited applicability and legitimacy within the colonies, causing surprise and concern when Britain changed course.

Finally, the roots of the revolution were already forming before the end of the French and Indian War in 1763. The desire among the British for a more centralized empire caused them to use tools like general warrants (writs of assistance) and to seek to tamp down American settlements in the West on account of the trouble they brought with the Indians. The result was a particularly American brand of resistance and, eventually, revolution.

## Evaluation of Five U.S. History Textbooks

Herewith brief reviews of three standard and two Advanced Placement U.S. History textbooks<sup>197</sup> in light of the essentials of colonial American history.

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197 Rebecca Edwards et al., *America's History*, vol. 1, *To 1877* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2018); Alan Brinkley, John Giggie, and Andrew Huebner, *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (Columbus: McGraw Hill, 2019); Joyce Appleby et al., *United States: History and Geography* (Columbus: McGraw Hill, 2018); Emma Lapsansky-Werner et al., *United States History* (New York: Pearson, 2016); Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, *American History* (Orlando, FL: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018).

## *United States History (Pearson)*

### Strengths

The text's discussion of the Navigation Acts, and mercantilism more generally, is largely accurate.<sup>198</sup> The text also mentions the role of Magna Carta in forging practices associated with due process,<sup>199</sup> though it provides nothing on the central provision dealing with freedom of the Church.

### Weaknesses

Weakness is pervasive in this volume. The section on colonial history is so brief, and so taken up with charts and illustrations, that there is scant room for substantive discussion. One result is a condensing of the material, for example lumping colonial foundations together with colonial development; the other is a pervasive superficiality and a total lack of coherent narrative.

As damaging is the text's minimization of the Puritan experience and accomplishment. At pages 44 and 45, the text portrays the Puritans as troublemakers who challenged the Church of England, calling down on themselves the firing of some ministers and the censoring and destruction of some books. No mention is made of imprisonments, restrictions on employment and economic activities, rampant spying, and other measures that drove them to emigrate, first to the Netherlands and then to the New World. Once in America, the text indicates, the Puritans did very little to improve the lives of their, or any other, people. Of constitutional government there is essentially no discussion, with the Mayflower Compact receiving a single, non-substantive mention as a source of self-government. Oddly, the Compact is quoted extensively and made a topic of discussion in the "topic assessment" section on page 74—raising the question of where the students are to actually learn about it before discussing it. Settlers themselves are blamed for imposing "gender roles"

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<sup>198</sup> *United States History*, 61.

<sup>199</sup> *United States History*, 67.

on Indians within praying towns (as if there were no gender roles among the Indians themselves) and for the commission of atrocities with no mention of Indian actions on these lines.<sup>200</sup>

A major portion of the text is given over to discussing issues of ethnic diversity. The line of argument is one of simple-minded, identitarian ideology: The middle colonies anticipated America's future by bringing together members of many ethnicities and fostering religious toleration on account of religious diversity and Quaker influence, especially in Pennsylvania.<sup>201</sup> This is, of course, an extreme exaggeration and simplification of the history, especially in terms of the limits on Quaker generosity, power, geographic reach, and sheer numbers during this era. Meanwhile, according to this text, backcountry farmers, especially in the South, were merely "excluded from society." The discussion overlooks Fischer's work on immigration patterns and the importance of inherited traditions (including among the Scots-Irish who consciously chose the "exclusion" of independence in the backcountry) in forging disparate settler cultures throughout the colonies.

Far from showing the centrality of religion in shaping communities and political as well as other traditions, this text portrays religion as by nature intolerant, other than as represented in the diversity of the middle colonies, where that very diversity (overlooking both the commonality of Christian and broader biblical religiosity) is credited with making toleration inevitable.<sup>202</sup> As to the Great Awakening, it is portrayed as a useful outpouring of emotion that undermined church authority, thereby making room for greater tolerance and equality. The only other notable discussion of religion occurs earlier,<sup>203</sup> where a series of highly misleading charts magnify the tragedies of the Salem Witch Trials as part of a fragmentary and misleading portrayal of religion and social hierarchy.

More generally, the text subjects the American colonies during the era of their most vigorous development to a critique rooted in

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200 *United States History*, 48.

201 *United States History*, 50-54.

202 *United States History*, 70-71.

203 *United States History*, 47.

multicultural ideology and hostility toward all economic inequalities,<sup>204</sup> as well as an outdated, narrow focus on the rise of individualism that overlooks the vast literature on communitarian forms in the colonies (e.g., Barry Alan Shain's *The Myth of American Individualism*<sup>205</sup>). The common law itself is portrayed as the protector of individual rights only, and not of the local, customary rules it so often embodied.<sup>206</sup>

### **Distinctions between Teacher and Student editions.**

The Teacher's edition tracks closely with the student edition. Taken together, the two editions provide more structure than content. The exceedingly brief bits of treatment provided to students are backed up by numerous simple-minded projects (e.g., groups commenting on a projected image of the fort at Jamestown) that may or may not allow them to extrapolate from the book's sketchy information and integrate it with their own rudimentary experience and opinions. There also is an emphasis on videos (visual imagery which can be powerful but often lacks factual content) and instructions to the teacher to drill students in the authors' chosen vocabulary and descriptions. This approach is further extended in the Reading and Note Taking Study Guide, including brief summary narratives accompanied by review questions and various pedagogical "aids" emphasizing the training of students in currently popular techniques. The result is an overwhelmingly remedial approach to American history rooted in an ideological hostility toward settlement and a multicultural interpretation of what makes for a worthwhile society.

## ***United States: History and Geography (McGraw Hill)***

### **Strengths**

The text does well to point out<sup>207</sup> the effects of geography on the various colonies, shaping their economy and forms of settlement. There is a

204 *United States History*, 60.

205 Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

206 *United States History*, 68.

207 *United States: History and Geography*, 23.

brief discussion of self-government in New England, noting the influence of the General Court, selectmen, and the town meeting. The importance of colonists' active participation in their own local government is noted as well, as is the centrality of religion in New England and its influence, for example in the formation of local schools.<sup>208</sup>

The text provides a balanced (though exceedingly brief) picture of the ethnic makeup of settlers in the Middle Colonies, also noting the mercantile nature of the more urbanized areas of these colonies. The treatment of the Southern Colonies also is more balanced, if even briefer, than most, noting the existence of small farmers in the backcountry, indentured servants, and the growth of slave labor over decades in part as a response to changing conditions.

There is an adequate discussion of colonial economics differentiating according to region and detailing the so-called "triangular trade," though without noting, here, the varied sources of slaves. The discussion of mercantilism and the Navigation Acts, while brief, is sufficient to point out their role in shaping economic and political structures within the Empire. The facts of James II's attempt to consolidate the colonies and the more influential Glorious Revolution are noted. While the discussion of the Enlightenment is horribly brief and two-dimensional, focusing on Locke's contract theory, it does include a sidebar on the trial of John Peter Zenger for libel that well illustrates Americans' opposition to English power and determination to maintain local control (including jury nullification) well before the Revolution.<sup>209</sup>

## Weaknesses

A single chapter of less than 40 pages covers prehistory to 1754. It cannot be stressed too strongly how much is simply left out or glossed over in this brief, superficial treatment of this important era. Discussions of cultural patterns within the colonies, the charter tradition, and the centrality of religious belief to the development of political practices are

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208 *United States: History and Geography*, 24.

209 *United States: History and Geography*, 32.

not present. In all other areas, only the briefest treatment is provided. There simply is not enough here to constitute even a minimally adequate discussion of colonial development.

The treatment of the Enlightenment attempts to tie the ideas of Rousseau to American politics, a highly tendentious assertion, particularly in light of the failure to deal with much more frequently cited thinkers like Burlamaqui and, especially, the entire common sense school.<sup>210</sup>

The treatment of the Great Awakening<sup>211</sup> is skewed and in important ways simply wrong. Linking the movement exclusively with European pietism (a much larger movement with highly differentiated influences in America, many of them specifically on German separatist groups), the text reduces the Great Awakening to an emotional religious fervor opposed to the rationalism of the Enlightenment. It all but dismisses the Great Awakening as fire-and-brimstone fear-mongering whose only positive influence was to undermine allegiance to traditional authority.

### **Distinctions between Teacher and Student editions.**

No Teacher edition was provided. There is extensive online content in the form of videos, animation, maps, charts, and so on.

## ***American History (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)***

### **Strengths**

This text is a committee-produced outline with occasional content and commentary intended to check off various boxes of historical coverage and educratic buzzwords. As such, it provides superficial treatment of all the major and some minor events one (or one's textbook adoption committee) would expect to see in such a book. Everything from the Navigation Acts to the Salem Witch Trials to salutary neglect is mentioned. It will receive cursory treatment, here, because there simply is not enough content even for remedial teaching purposes.

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210 *United States: History and Geography*, 32.

211 *United States: History and Geography*, 33.

## Weaknesses

Because the field of American history has become so politicized, any cookbook approach to the subject will end up emphasizing current prejudices and distortions (e.g., the irrationality of religion, the importance of diversity for toleration, and the universal, unmitigated, inexcusable oppression of women and people of color) to the near-exclusion of the central narrative of developing colonial self-government. Thus, one sees the usual caricatures of religion as irrational, of the Enlightenment as a secular flowering of reason, and, of course, of diversity.

### *The Unfinished Nation (McGraw Hill)*

## Strengths

This text is not a cookbook. It is a well-crafted volume that maintains an actual narrative of American history, including 60 pages of real text dealing with colonial development without drowning the reader in various pedagogical mechanisms. The text's emphasis on political struggles, while overdone, provides information on the constant conflicts in the colonies that maintained limited, balanced government.

## Weaknesses

Unfortunately, the text has a definite, relentless ideological position and subsequent methodology. It takes a decidedly structuralist approach to history and puts power politics at the center of its treatment, not just of wars, but of the loci of power within societies, and in dealings between settlers and Indians and other "peripheral" or marginalized groups. A semi-Marxist methodology focusing on class structure, the influence of the means of production, and the opiate of religion and political ideas is fleshed out with the current fads based in race and gender studies.

The text presents an extremely biased, negative portrayal of religion. For example, it refers to the earliest New England settlers as merely "a discontented congregation of Puritan Separatists" who "illegally"

emigrated to Holland and eventually America<sup>212</sup>—apparently without any real reason derived from their oppressive treatment by English authorities. The text goes on to reproduce an excerpt from Cotton Mather focusing on his seeing “the Devil as the root of mishap and evil”<sup>213</sup> without mentioning Mather’s scientific work, including in the treatment of smallpox, or any of the various crucial works in constitutionalism and the development of self-government by Calvinist leaders including, as one example among many, John Winthrop’s *Model of Christian Charity*. Quakers, as usual, are given more favorable treatment as precursors of an individualist brand of religiosity, though with little mention of their own reputation for imperious dealings with other settlers or their own political tribalism.<sup>214</sup>

Structuralist jargon and paradigms abound, with talk of “middle grounds” and “peripheries” that emphasize the lack of human initiative and choice in history and politics.<sup>215</sup> While this perspective does not prevent mention of important developments such as the Glorious Revolution’s impact in America, it gives to them a kind of *Game of Thrones* quality that dehumanizes important figures, obscuring developments in political thinking and constitutional structures behind historical forces and power politics. The effect is particularly pronounced in the treatment of slavery and the development of industry in the colonies, which are treated as inevitable developments (naturally limited in the case of industry) resulting from the structural requirements of self-interested categories of people and, of course, class.<sup>216</sup> Thus, while acknowledged, factors such as covenantalism and township governance are mere mentions without any clear context or importance for American

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212 *The Unfinished Nation*, 33.

213 *The Unfinished Nation*, 38.

214 *The Unfinished Nation*, 45.

215 E.g., *The Unfinished Nation*, 49.

216 *The Unfinished Nation*, 65, 69.

development.<sup>217</sup> To the extent self-government receives any treatment, it is as a result of England's salutary neglect in a sentence here and there within a larger, structural argument.<sup>218</sup>

Religion itself generally is treated as a cover for other, presumably more real, motivations and structures such as gender and class, though religious sentiments are likened to the "anticommunist frenzy" of the Cold War.<sup>219</sup> Indeed, religion is treated as an irrational impulse with political and social implications. Thus, the Great Awakening and the Enlightenment in this text are treated as antagonist forces, in which "science and human reason" are opposed by "the traditional emphasis on a personal God deeply involved in individual lives"<sup>220</sup>—the latter view being treated as obviously irrational, opposed to "book learning" and even "rational thought."<sup>221</sup> One result is studied ignorance of important aspects and motivations for heroic action; for example, the text claims that "Jesuit missionaries interacted comfortably with the natives" by simply superimposing some (Catholic) beliefs on top of their pre-existing societies.<sup>222</sup> The martyrs of the faith boiled alive for their acts of evangelization during this time might be surprised at such treatment of their missions.

### Distinctions between Teacher and Student editions.

No Teacher edition was provided.

## *America's History* (Bedford/St. Martin's)

### Strengths

One might think there would be much good to be said of a text that devotes more pages<sup>223</sup> to colonial development. And the authors make a

217 *The Unfinished Nation*, 71.

218 E.g., *The Unfinished Nation*, 80.

219 *The Unfinished Nation*, 72.

220 *The Unfinished Nation*, 74.

221 *The Unfinished Nation*, 76-77.

222 *The Unfinished Nation*, 84.

223 *America's History*, 38-135.

point of hitting the essential historical elements of rebellions, Navigation Acts, Glorious Revolution, etc. One can piece together the overall story of colonial development from the text. It is, however, an atrociously ideological treatment that intentionally marginalizes actual colonial developments shaping what would become the American republic and people.

### Weaknesses

This is an especially slanted and destructive text, seeking not to educate but to indoctrinate and to make students into the “right kind” of historians—with the “right kind” of opinions on public policy issues from climate change<sup>224</sup> to multiculturalism. In the process, it so overemphasizes “global context” that it makes American actors and developments all but disappear in a welter of anthropological and multiculturalist ideology highlighting the accomplishments of every society except the European settlers (here invariably treated as marauders and conquerors).

As to the European invaders, they are portrayed as dominated by fear of witchcraft,<sup>225</sup> the drive to put down Native American resistance to the destruction of their societies,<sup>226</sup> and a preoccupation with internal class strife.<sup>227</sup> Anglo-American settlers are not alone in receiving such treatment because the text gives almost as much coverage to Spanish and other forces seen as destroying the idyllic world of “America” that preceded invasion. The result, in addition to an utterly one-sided treatment of settlers (and conquerors) is further marginalization of the people and institutions that would come to dominate in the founding of the American republic.<sup>228</sup>

Within the eastern portion of North America, the world of this text is one in which Indian power is rightfully dominant and courted by various Europeans for their own ends, until eventually the invaders manage to

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224 E.g., *America's History*, 52.

225 E.g., *America's History*, 62-63.

226 E.g., *America's History*, 65-66.

227 *America's History*, 67.

228 E.g., *America's History*, 68.

undermine the Indians through various improper means.<sup>229</sup> Europeans somehow manage to gain power through the bad faith dealings of people who depend on the work of others (especially slaves) to put themselves at ease and in wealth. In this context the salutary neglect of England is destructive because it allowed for the rule of “local ‘big men’” who “ran their societies as they wished.”<sup>230</sup> Quakers are, of course, presented as a more tolerant, individualistic, and less theocratic exception.<sup>231</sup>

The core of the text is its treatment of the “margins” of classic American history. It details at length the lives of Indians as political entities,<sup>232</sup> lives which were enviable until European disease and bad action forced Indians to react to European constructs. The reality of brutal inter-tribal warfare is simply ignored. Slavery’s development is treated at greater length (complete with many lurid details)<sup>233</sup> than the development of English colonies. Of course, “white identity” and the economies of all the colonies are portrayed as parasitic upon enslaved labor.<sup>234</sup>

In a brief discussion, colonial developments after the Glorious Revolution are portrayed as a matter of colonists “copying” English Whig practices amid the development of mercantilism and benign neglect.<sup>235</sup>

The chapter dealing with perhaps the most essential era of colonial development, from 1720-1763, focuses on the conflict between supposedly anti-rational pietists and the beleaguered, outnumbered champions of “rational thought” who “viewed human beings as agents of moral self-determination and urged Americans to fashion a better social order.”<sup>236</sup> The anti-religious bias is maintained throughout a chapter devoted to proclaiming the flaws of settlers in America and their crimes against women and people of color. Added to this is a ham-fisted paean to ethnic

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229 *America's History*, 74.

230 *America's History*, 76.

231 *America's History*, 78.

232 *America's History*, 82-86.

233 *America's History*, 86-97.

234 *America's History*, 98-103.

235 *America's History*, 101-04.

236 *America's History*, 106.

diversity as the key to toleration and political freedom. Religious diversity also is painted as the (traditionally suppressed) key to freedom, at least until rationalism can triumph.<sup>237</sup>

### **Distinctions between Teacher and Student editions.**

No Teacher's edition was provided but teachers are pointed to a vast array of coursepacks, test banks, lecture outlines, and videos to bring home the text authors' skewed vision.

## Conclusions

These five United States history texts share certain common themes and elements, including: the wrongs done to women and people of color; the economic importance of the unjust institution of slavery; the prevalence of a theocratic, narrow religiosity in New England that produced dissent; the dominance of Quaker toleration and religious diversity in the Middle Colonies, leading to greater religious and political toleration, as well as greater prosperity and the kind of individualism to be praised in American development; and the fostering of slavery in the Southern colonies on account of wealthy settlers, aided by their English patrons, seeking easy wealth through a passive labor force. More generally, texts report on central points of development, from wars of conquest against the Indians to the Glorious Revolution's ushering in of salutary neglect and greater individualism. Such points of reference are followed by a long world war that presages the developments eventually producing revolution.

It would be easy to simply argue that this story (sometimes told in narrative, too often only in bits and pieces through charts, graphs, and snippets of analysis or sidebars) is increasingly pushed aside by ideological screeds emphasizing multiculturalism, identity politics, and various other fads currently dominant among historians. This is all true

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<sup>237</sup> E.g., *America's History*, 117.

and highly damaging to students and their ability to enter into their own history, to recognize it as their own, whether they seek to celebrate or denigrate it. But the problem goes deeper than that, because the central story itself is superficial and skewed in important ways. The hostility shown toward religion, its portrayal as an overwhelming force for illegitimate authority and the rule of passion over reason obscures and even blots out the deep ties between religion and culture, and between both of those and the development of constitutional self-government in America. Donald Lutz (e.g., in his *The Origins of American Constitutionalism*<sup>238</sup>) and others have made this connection clear without recourse to theological argumentation. Likewise, the common-law roots of constitutionalism are given short shrift despite their central role in American political and cultural development. The simplistic but pervasive juxtaposition of a passionately irrational Great Awakening and the Enlightenment's championing of true (secular) rational thought is a caricature of both that warps any possible understanding of the interaction between faith and reason at the heart of the American experience. This caricature is as damaging as the hammering of themes of oppression that fails to show the humanity of all the persons involved, as well as the cultural and historical context of even very clear injustices.

A central reason for the simplification and thinning-out of political and constitutional development in history texts is the felt need to emphasize social and economic history. This might have benefits, were the subjects covered in a balanced manner aimed at showing students the ground on which their own society stands. Instead, the settler peoples are portrayed as playthings of forces beyond their control—forces generally hostile to decency and, of course, academics' core values of identitarianism and equality of condition. Such imposition of currently favored academic ideology over an accurate portrayal of the manner in which people viewed themselves and their own norms makes it impossible to show the developing character of the American people and their

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238 Donald S. Lutz, *The Origins of American Constitutionalism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988).

republic. It shows only the playing out of ideological notions of diversity, multiculturalism, and structures of power—highly suspect intellectual categories of dubious relevance to actual actors in history.

Whether inexcusably dumbed-down or overly intellectualized, American history texts require a radical overhaul to bring them into some kind of harmony with the people, as well as their institutions, beliefs, and practices, under study. Major rethinking, reform, and rewriting is necessary if textbooks are to help students connect with their own history and people and so gain the perspective as well as the tools they need to become functioning members of a functioning polity.



**American  
Founding Era  
(1763-1789)**

Jason Ross

## American Founding Era (1763-1789)

### Introduction

A textbook account of the nation's founding period (roughly from 1763-1789) will treat two chief historical themes. First is the story of the relationship between the British Empire and its North American colonies. This should address changes to that relationship resulting from the French and Indian War, leading to economic, cultural, and political tensions between the imperial center and the colonial periphery. A textbook account will also show how these tensions sparked a period of political debate within the colonies by which they developed a relatively coherent and consistent view of their relationship to Great Britain — one that differed substantially from the view common in Britain. This period of political ferment culminated in the Declaration of Independence by which Americans announced themselves as “one people” intending “to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another,” and by which the colonies of British North America declared themselves “to be Free and Independent States.”

By this Declaration of Independence, Americans announced that they would take up arms to respond to British hostilities and fight a war for their independence from Great Britain. This leads to the second historical chapter from the nation's founding period—a story of the implications of independence, including in the relationship that formed among those newly “free and independent states.” Students should be taught that the states individually began to implement new republican constitutions following their independence, and that the states as a group began to operate as a confederation, ultimately cemented under the Articles of Confederation. They should also be introduced to the challenges faced by the Confederation Congress, including with regard to raising revenue, maintaining trust and credit with other world powers, and managing western lands. Finally, students should be introduced to

the work of the Federal Convention of 1787, which was called to address the weakness of the Articles of Confederation, and that produced a draft of a new Constitution. This Constitution was presented to the people of the several states for their deliberation and ratification and was ratified with the expectation of amendments that would protect the rights of individuals.

In addition to learning about the historical origins of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, students should also be introduced to the central principles of government these documents assert. This should include the principles of democracy or equality, especially in contrast to the social and political inequality that Britain's subjects in North America experienced prior to the Revolution. It should also include republican government or popular sovereignty, by which the people are understood to be the source of political authority. Students should understand the principle of individual rights, which find protection through written constitutions and through constitutional mechanisms like bills of rights, limited government, separation of powers, and checks and balances. Finally, students should understand American federalism, including: 1) its origins in the experience of the colonies as distinct political entities within the British Empire; 2) its role in establishing a union that was "partly national" and "partly federal"; and 3) its implications for profound disagreements that extended into the early republic, including on the issue of slavery.

The authors of a textbook treatment of the nation's founding period will also necessarily need to describe the relationship between these two chapters of American history. It has been common for historians since Charles Beard to treat the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution as politically democratic or socially egalitarian, by contrast to the framing of the Constitution, which they present as a secret cabal or an anti-democratic counter-revolution.<sup>239</sup> This type of a contrast has also been extended to the issue of slavery, where some point to the anti-slavery

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239 Charles Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1914).

potential of the Declaration of Independence and the Revolution, but find the Constitution tainted with pro-slavery compromises, and even pro-slavery intent.<sup>240</sup> These theses have not withstood scholarly scrutiny.<sup>241</sup> Still, they are provocative and pervasive, even amongst historians, and could be relied on as a shorthand by textbook writers pressed for space to address the complicated interaction of anti- and pro-slavery beliefs and public policy positions—within state governments, in the structure of the Confederation, during the Federal Convention, and in the early years of the new republic.

Across the chapters, textbooks should attend to the questions of what allowed some of those living in Britain's former North American colonies to think of themselves as "one people," and of what prevented others living in those colonies from being recognized as part of this people. This will include the cultural similarities shared by most colonists as a result of their British heritage, and the political principles they adopted during their periods of resistance and rebellion against Great Britain. This should not overlook their cultural differences (which may seem irrelevant to us, but which seemed profound to them) including of religious profession and practice, and related to the distinct cultures that existed across the different regions of North America, and even within those regions. Finally, students should understand how issues of race and slavery prohibited African slaves and their descendants from immediately

240 David Waldstreicher, *Slavery's Constitution: From Revolution to Ratification* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009); George W. Van Cleve, *A Slaveholder's Union: Slavery, Politics, and the Constitution in the Early American Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

241 Beard's economic critique of the Constitution was challenged principally by Robert E. Brown, *Charles Beard and the Constitution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), and Forrest McDonald, *We the People: The Economic Origins of the Constitution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). Douglass Adair was among the first to redirect attention to the intellectual origins of American political thought in a series of articles and essays since republished in *Fame and the Founding Fathers* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998). This focus on the ideas of the American founding continued in Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), and Gordon Wood, *Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1967). As the shock of Beard's economic critique wore off on the strength of a new appreciation for the ideas of the founders, historian and New Left activist Staughton Lynd resurrected and reframed Beard's critique of the Constitution's framers with a focus on their treatment of slavery. See his collected articles in *Class Conflict, Slavery, and the United States Constitution: Ten Essays* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1967). Lynd's concerns now dominate the academy, as in the sources cited in note 2, but have been ably challenged by James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), and *The Scorpion's Sting: Antislavery and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), and by Sean Wilentz, *No Property in Man: Slavery and Antislavery at the Nation's Founding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

being perceived as members of that “one people.” But they should also begin to see how the principles of equality and natural rights professed by the Declaration of Independence, and the commitment to individual rights demonstrated by the Constitution and Bill of Rights, pointed to the injustices of slavery and suggested the possibility of the full inclusion of blacks, and of people of all races and religions, in American citizenship.

## Individual Textbook Reviews

The textbooks reviewed vary widely in their quality and in their expectations of students.<sup>242</sup> Here is a brief introduction to and assessment of each text, beginning with the three texts geared to standard U.S. history courses and ending with the two texts geared to Advanced Placement U.S. history courses. Reviewed together, the textbooks reveal the difficulty of striking a balance between being both accessible to a wide range of students and also of being interesting and engaging.

### *American History* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt’s *American History* is clearly written for the mass student market. Perhaps it is more accurate to say the text has been produced, rather than written; no authors are listed or credited. Instead, an “Educational Advisory Panel” of middle and high school teachers is said to have “provided ongoing review during the development of prototypes and key elements of this program.”<sup>243</sup> Little authorial point of view is evident in the text. Instead, it seems as if the textbook came off of an assembly line, made up of tersely titled sections including:

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242 Rebecca Edwards et al., *America’s History*, vol. 1, *To 1877* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2018); Alan Brinkley, John Giggie, and Andrew Huebner, *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (Columbus: McGraw Hill, 2019); Joyce Appleby et al., *United States: History and Geography* (Columbus: McGraw Hill, 2018); Emma Lapsansky-Werner et al., *United States History* (New York: Pearson, 2016); Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, *American History* (Orlando, FL: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018).

243 *American History*, iii.

“The American Colonies, 1584-1764,” “The American Revolution, 1759-1784,” “The U.S. Constitution, 1780-1789,” “A New Nation, 1788-1817,” etc. The publisher intends for this text to be used as widely as possible.

But again, perhaps it is more accurate to say that the publisher intends for this text to be adopted as widely as possible. At almost 1,500 pages, the text is designed to be hard for educational bureaucrats to set aside, even if it will be hard for students to pick up. Perhaps students are not expected to take the text home, but to leave it at their desks like a library’s copy of the unabridged Webster’s Dictionary, and instead to get their “content” from video resources provided by The History Channel, with which the publisher has a marketing deal. Finally, the designation of each chapter as a “module” comprised of “lessons” reinforces the notion that this is less a textbook to be read than a classroom resource.

Each lesson ends with assessment activities that focus more on process than on substance. In each module assessment, students are asked the same question: “For each key term or person in the lesson, write a sentence explaining its [*sic*] significance.” In various modules, students are asked to: “Create a cluster diagram and fill it with events that demonstrate the conflict between Great Britain and the American colonies”;<sup>244</sup> “Create a diagram. Fill it in with details presenting causes, ideas, and results related to the Declaration of Independence”;<sup>245</sup> “Use a web diagram to record the issues debated at the Constitutional Convention.”<sup>246</sup>

Additional assessment activities, as well as responses to each module’s introductory “Why It Matters Now” question, seem meticulously designed to avoid directing students toward any conclusion or even thought that may be deemed controversial. Explaining why “The Stirrings of Rebellion” still matter, the textbook explains, “The events that shaped the American Revolution are a turning point in humanity’s fight for freedom.”<sup>247</sup> The Declaration of Independence “continues to

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244 *American History*, 113.

245 *American History*, 120.

246 *American History*, 159.

247 *American History*, 106.

inspire and challenge people everywhere.”<sup>248</sup> The Constitution “remains the basis of our government.”<sup>249</sup> These statements, of course, are true, but banal. This is what makes them so appealing to a mass market textbook producer, but likely uninspiring to a student.

### *United States History (Pearson)*

If Houghton Mifflin Harcourt’s *American History* has all the vices of a mass-produced textbook, at the very least it is solidly built. Pearson’s *United States History* is a busy textbook, which gives the impression that it is trying to outdo other mass-market texts with more glitz, but it ends up with less polish. The layout is busy and cluttered with irrelevant images. The first two pages of Chapter 3 (“The American Revolution”) are mostly covered with a photograph of a cannon, and the first two pages of Chapter 4 (“Establishing the New Nation”) are mostly covered with a photograph of a scrolled reprint of the Constitution sitting on an American flag. The photo credit for the textbook’s cover reads, “Small American flags for sale in a Megastore.”

Individual graphics can also be busy. One graphic covering a third of a page, titled “After the American Revolution: New Revolutions Begin,” contains a projection of the entire globe, on which three European nations and ten Central and South American nations are shaded and labeled to designate when they fought revolutions. This is too much space for the minimal amount of information conveyed. In this case, students are asked to use the map to answer a question for which the map barely begins to prepare them: “Describe the spread of revolutionary movements worldwide during the late 1700s and early 1800s.” At best, students would be able to list this information. Finally, some of the graphics have an amateurish quality. A table of “Weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation” looks like a square yellow Post-It Note with

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248 *American History*, 114.

249 *American History*, 154.

seven bullet points. In at least two places, there is so much crammed into captions that some of the text does not fit or is covered up by extraneous materials.<sup>250</sup>

The text is cluttered with information but lacks a coherent narrative to drive it. The chapter on the American Revolution is introduced with the essential question, “When is war justified?” The chapter, “Establishing a New Nation,” raises the essential question, “What is the proper role of government?” These are certainly interesting and important questions, but they are abstract and philosophical rather than practical and historical. Neither question is directly addressed in the substance of either chapter, though both chapters ask students to “Write about the Essential Question: Use evidence from your study of this Topic to answer the question.” Both chapters also present students with fifteen other assessment questions, asking them to write a paragraph to, “Explain the roles of military leaders,” or to “Explain the battles of Trenton and Princeton,” or to “Make an argument about a constitutional issue,” or to answer any number of other scattered questions. At least Houghton Mifflin Harcourt’s *American History* introduced students to banalities about the subject; Pearson’s *United States History* does not even do this.

### ***United States: History and Geography (McGraw Hill)***

*United States: History and Geography* (McGraw Hill) is a refreshing contrast, offering a crisp, concise, and student-friendly introduction to American history. The text is admirably sympathetic toward young people and is designed with their needs in mind. Each chapter begins with a passage titled, “The Story Matters....” Then, within each chapter, every discrete lesson begins with a passage titled, “It Matters Because....” The authors understand that students do not yet know the American story or why it matters. They do not condescend to the readers on account of this lack of knowledge, but take seriously their responsibility

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<sup>250</sup> *United States History*, 77, 84.

to persuade students as to the significance of the material. Just as the authors appear to respect their student audience for who they are, they also appear to respect the United States and its history for what it is. This text is presented from the point of view of the American people and is not ashamed of the traditional narrative by which this people was born in a fight with the British Empire, in an effort to secure its customary and natural rights.

Each chapter is introduced by an “Essential Question”—one that is actually essential—and consists of three or four distinct lessons which explore facets of that question relevant to the chapter’s substance. Each chapter is also framed by a timeline of key events and a “Place & Time” feature that situates the action geographically. Finally, each lesson is supplemented with relevant color graphics, critical thinking prompts, vocabulary aids, and primary source excerpts with interpretive activities. There is a good balance of narrative, graphics, and activities, and the text in each section is particularly well-structured, with three or four major sections, each easily digestible for students at around 500 words, broken into clear subsections.

### ***America’s History (Bedford/St. Martin’s)***

This text is the first of two directed at Advanced Placement students. It is written at a surprisingly high level. Testing of three random passages places their Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level of the paragraphs rated at 13.9, 16.2, and 12.4, and overall at 13.7.<sup>251</sup> In other words, for a textbook marketed to an audience of students around the tenth-grade level, the text on average is aimed at a college junior.

This analysis, if anything, understates the difficulty of the text. Each chapter of the textbook contains four learning features that may be of interest to the textbook’s authors, but that are of questionable accessibility to students. The most useful and accessible of these features

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251 The Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, The Readable Blog, January 26, 2017, updated November 10, 2020, .

is called “Analyzing Voices.” In this sensible but challenging exercise, students are asked to interpret and analyze extended primary sources from two different historical actors on a common theme. (The textbooks reviewed previously have similar features, but with much shorter primary source excerpts.) Also useful is a historiographical feature called “Interpretations.” Students are given a question of historical interpretation, then are introduced to the opposing judgments of two historians and asked to analyze them.

If the mass-market textbooks are generally written for publishers rather than for students, one might begin to suspect this text is written more for its authors than for students. Reinforcing that suspicion are the third and fourth features. “Thinking Like a Historian” is a more involved version of the “Analyzing Voices” feature, asking students to evaluate six historical sources and to write a short essay interpreting and analyzing the sources. The intellectual demands of the exercise and the historiographical concerns addressed mark a substantial leap beyond the previous exercise. (This exercise also provides one of the textbook’s authors an occasion to present students with his own research interest—the relationship between British colonial administrators and Native Americans—that is, at best, minimally relevant to high school students.)

Finally, the “America in Global Context” feature presses students toward comparative history, but in the most abstract way. In the chapter titled, “The Problem of Empire, 1754-1776,” students learn about imports and exports to and from Great Britain, and from and to various regions of its imperial dominions at various stages of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Students are asked, “How did the American Revolution (1776-1783) impact the economic relationship between Great Britain and its mainland colonies?” If this question is broader than could reasonably be addressed by the data provided, the next question implies its own answer: “Is it reasonable to conclude that political independence did not bring economic independence?”<sup>252</sup> In the chapter titled, “Making War and Republican

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252 *America’s History*, 144.

Governments, (1776-1789),” this feature is, puzzlingly, on the issue of “China’s Growing Empire,” and it attempts a forced connection with the substance of the chapter. This is a very challenging text, even for Advanced Placement students.

### *The Unfinished Nation (McGraw Hill)*

This final text seems much better targeted to the needs of its students. It reads much more crisply than Bedford/St. Martins’ *America’s History*, and a test of three random passages indicates a Flesch-Kincaid grade level of 10.7. Like the *America’s History* text, *The Unfinished Nation* contains educational features to supplement the textbook narrative, though they seem more appropriate to the student audience and more relevant to the historical substance.

A feature called “Consider the Source” closes each chapter with a relevant primary source (Benjamin Franklin’s “Testimony Against the Stamp Act” from the chapter “The Empire in Transition,” Abigail Adams’ correspondence with her husband John in the chapter “The American Revolution,” and an excerpt from George Washington’s “Farewell Address” from the chapter “The Constitution and the New Republic”). The authors present students with three questions for each source, one to “understand,” one to “analyze,” and one to “evaluate.”

The “America in the World” feature successfully situates different chapters in our nation’s narrative within global historical developments. In fewer than 1,000 words, the authors explain the French and Indian War in North America as part of “The First Global War,” and they explain the American Revolution as part of “The Age of Revolutions.” Finally, the authors introduce students to historiographical questions in a feature titled “Debating the Past.” Again, in a crisp essay of less than 1,000 words, the authors give students a balanced synopsis of historical schools of thought related to the Revolution and Declaration of Independence, and

to the formation of the Constitution. McGraw Hill has published a textbook that is likely to be accessible to students and to meet their particular needs.

## Review of Key Themes

### The British Empire and the American Colonies

Each of the textbooks begins its treatment of the origins of the American Revolution with the French and Indian War. Some devote more attention to it than is warranted in a brief survey course, with the mass-market textbooks by Pearson (*United States History*) and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (*American History*) each giving it a full lesson. The standard McGraw Hill text (*United States: History and Geography*) grants it a few paragraphs, enough to establish the rivalry of colonial powers France and Great Britain both in North America and globally, and to set up the implications of Britain's victory for management of new territorial claims.

These texts move directly to “The Stirrings of Rebellion” (*American History*), “The Causes of the Revolution” (*United States History*), and “Growing Discontent” (*United States: History and Geography*), related to the standard list of inflammatory taxes imposed on the colonies. The Advanced Placement texts treat the issue of imperialism distinctly. McGraw Hill's AP text (*The Unfinished Nation*) refers to the weakness and instability of George III and his ministers as chief causes for the “dramatic and ...disastrous redefinition of the colonial relationship.”<sup>253</sup> The Bedford/St. Martin's text (*America's History*) is far more sympathetic to the British Empire, going so far as to write the chapter—“The Problem of Empire, 1754-1776”—effectively from the British perspective. With the enormous war debt that the empire had incurred, the authors observe,

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253 *The Unfinished Nation*, 90.

“The British ministry could no longer let the colonies manage their own affairs.”<sup>254</sup> This textbook’s authors value the historian’s pretense to objectivity over the civic educator’s role to explain to young citizens their nation’s origins and character.

*America’s History* also most fully embraces the trend in historical scholarship toward questions of identity.<sup>255</sup> Thus, as its authors demonstrate how many Britons viewed Americans as unruly and undesirable, the text concludes, “the stage [was] set for a struggle between the conceptions of identity—and empire—held by British ministers, on the one hand, and many American colonists on the other.”<sup>256</sup> This suggestion of the emergence of distinct and irreconcilable self-conceptions of Britons and British Americans is unique among the textbooks reviewed. But it points to a gap in all of their treatments of the causes of the Revolution. This is their omission of any recognition of the pervasive and profound influence of dissenting Protestantism in British America.<sup>257</sup> All focus some attention on the legal and constitutional controversies between the colonies and the Empire; some point to “Enlightenment ideas” (without much defining them), to the emergence of popular protest movements like “the Sons of Liberty,” and to a growing critique of the practice of “virtual representation.” In this way, the texts all address the question of why the colonists were increasingly aligning against Great Britain. But none of the textbooks explain why British Americans were *for* liberty, so much so that they were willing to fight and die for it. Liberty for Americans then (and arguably now) has a religious or spiritual dimension to it that merely legal or economic explanations miss. If *America’s History* can be credited

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254 *America’s History*, 143.

255 T. H. Breen, *The Will of the People: The Revolutionary Birth of America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); Jack P. Greene, *The Intellectual Construction of America: Exceptionalism and Identity From 1492 to 1800* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

256 *America’s History*, 142.

257 Carla G. Pestana, *Protestant Empire: Religion and the Making of the British Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

for pointing to the emergence of distinct identities between “one people” in Britain’s North American colonies and their “British brethren,” all of the texts overlook the substance of that identity.

### Free and Independent States: The Revolution and the Critical Period

Each of these textbooks instead continues to present the decision to declare independence as the product of persuasion by the ideas of the Enlightenment. In particular, each text credits Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* for creating a massive change in public opinion. “In January 1776 public opinion began to change when Thomas Paine published a persuasive pamphlet called *Common Sense*.”<sup>258</sup> “In January 1776, a short but powerful book swung popular opinion in the colonies in favor of independence.”<sup>259</sup> “With popular sentiment in flux, a single brief pamphlet helped tip the balance.”<sup>260</sup> “It helped to overcome many colonists’ doubts about separating from Britain.”<sup>261</sup> “Thomas Paine’s impassioned pamphlet ... sold more than 100,000 copies in only a few months and helped build support for the idea of independence in the early months of 1776.”<sup>262</sup> It does not discount the significance of this widely circulated text to observe that it was so widely successful because it proclaimed publicly what had been repeated privately in innumerable political sermons in the decade prior—and, in fact, over two centuries prior—“resistance to tyrants is obedience to God.”<sup>263</sup>

None of the texts presents the Declaration of Independence as making the case that George III was a tyrant, or as calling for resistance to a tyrant. Only one of the texts (*America’s History*) points out that the

<sup>258</sup> *United States: History and Geography*, 57.

<sup>259</sup> *United States History*, 95.

<sup>260</sup> *America’s History*, 167.

<sup>261</sup> *American History*, 116.

<sup>262</sup> *The Unfinished Nation*, 110.

<sup>263</sup> This proclamation, originated by John Knox in his *The History of the Reformation of Religion in Scotland* (1558), became so pervasive that even Thomas Jefferson came to employ it in his own personal seal. Personal Seal, Thomas Jefferson Encyclopedia, <https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/personal-seal>.

Declaration of Independence denounced George III as a “tyrant,” but even it places more emphasis on “the ideas of the European Enlightenment.”<sup>264</sup> Two of the texts—Houghton Mifflin Harcourt’s *American History* and McGraw Hill’s *United States: History and Geography*—offer annotated versions of the Declaration of Independence. Both focus on the influence of John Locke’s abstract “Enlightenment philosophy” and theory of natural rights. And while *American History* notes the list of “the king’s many tyrannical actions that have forced his American subjects to rebel,”<sup>265</sup> *United States: History and Geography* simply points to a generic “List of Grievances.”<sup>266</sup> Again, these textbooks all agree in presenting the justifications for independence in purely rationalist terms, as the logical consequence for the British Empire’s violations of certain abstract principles. They do not recognize the degree to which the definition and denunciation of the British king as a tyrant triggered a responsibility amongst a lawful and godly people to resist this king’s authority.<sup>267</sup>

The textbooks uniformly identify the chief effect of the American Revolution as the establishment of some form of republicanism and some form of democracy. In both cases these treatments raise questions. These are presented most sharply in *American History*, which asserts that the Revolution “stimulated a rise of egalitarianism—a belief in the equality of all people.” Also, “[t]he egalitarianism of the 1780s, however, applied only to white males.” Further, “[t]he new egalitarianism did not apply to African Americans either.”<sup>268</sup> *The Unfinished Nation* highlights the Declaration’s proposition that “All men are created equal,” but notes, “for now, those rights went to a limited population of Americans.”<sup>269</sup> *United States: History and Geography* is less harsh in its judgments, simply noting the contradictions between “traditional practices that restricted

264 *American History*, 168.

265 *American History*, 122.

266 *United States: History and Geography*, 61.

267 For other approaches to the Declaration of Independence, see Jeff Broadwater, *Jefferson, Madison, and the Making of the Constitution* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997); Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era: 1730-1805*, 2 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998).

268 *American History*, 138.

269 *The Unfinished Nation*, 125-26.

the rights of many people on the basis of their race, class, or gender” and the principles of an “ideal republic,” in which “all citizens are equal under the law, regardless of their wealth or social class.”<sup>270</sup> That text’s authors do not address the question of where the “ideal republic”—purely egalitarian with respect to race, class, and gender—had ever existed in human history, or even in the human imagination. This points to a major failure in these textbooks. They do not sufficiently credit America’s revolutionary generation for having introduced the now unassailable ideas of democracy and republicanism, and they too readily blame that generation for its failure to reconstruct society according to those ideals immediately and completely.<sup>271</sup>

Some of the textbooks point to immediate anti-slavery implications drawn by the legislatures of newly independent states, but others emphasize pro-slavery implications. Even some of the textbooks which acknowledge legislation emancipating slaves do so grudgingly. One concedes, “The Revolution led to emancipation in the North,” but qualifies that in the North “slavery was not critical to the economy and slaves numbered only 5% of the population.”<sup>272</sup> The fact remains that five states plus Vermont had abolished slavery by 1787, in what one eminent historian recently called “the largest emancipation of its kind to that point in modern history.”<sup>273</sup> Great Britain would not do so until 1833. These texts fail our founding generation, and our students, in overlooking or downplaying this success.

### Framing a New Union

In overlooking the anti-slavery dynamics active in the American founding era, these history textbooks also fail as history. They assume that the political and social outcomes our nation has seen, particularly as related to slavery, were somehow predestined or foreordained. This is

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270 *United States: History and Geography*, 71.

271 Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

272 *United States History*, 104.

273 Wilentz, *No Property in Man*, 25.

evident in their treatment of the Confederation Congress and its efforts to administer the territories to the west.<sup>274</sup> All address the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, of course—and some favorably. *American History* and *The Unfinished Nation* both point out that the Ordinance barred slavery from that territory. *United States History* infers that this restriction “set a precedent that would later alarm people in southern states who wanted to expand slavery throughout the territories.”<sup>275</sup> *United States: History and Geography* addresses the Northwest Ordinance’s ban on slavery, concluding, “This meant that as the nation expanded, it would be divided between Southern slaveholding states and Northern free states.”<sup>276</sup> *America’s History* asserts that the Ordinance “extended the geographical division between slave and free areas that would haunt the nation in the coming decades.”<sup>277</sup> But not one of them points out the origins of the Northwest Ordinance in an ordinance proposed in 1784 by Thomas Jefferson, by which slavery would be outlawed in the West by 1800. Jefferson would later write to his friend James Madison, distraught, that the proposal failed by one vote due to the absence of a single delegate to the Confederation Congress; though sixteen delegates voted for the proposal, and only seven against, the voting rules of the Articles allowed a small minority of slave states to exercise an outsized influence on the politics of the Confederation.<sup>278</sup> If not for the accident of one delegate’s illness, how might our nation’s history have turned out differently? And is this not exactly the kind of question that would stimulate young minds to reflect on how seemingly insignificant events can have profound historical significance?

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274 In addition to the sources cited in note 3, note the tenuousness of American political institutions prior to the ratification of the Constitution as described in David Hendrickson, *Peace Pact: The Lost World of the American Founding* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003); Jack Rakove, *The Beginnings of National Politics: An Interpretive History of the Continental Congress* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979); and George W. Van Cleve, *We Have Not a Government: The Articles of Confederation and the Road to a Constitution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

275 *United States History*, 113.

276 *United States: History and Geography*, 84.

277 *America’s History*, 189.

278 Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, April 25, 1784. See image of original, with Jefferson’s emphasis, at Image 1 of Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, April 25, 1784, Library of Congress, [https://www.loc.gov/resource/mjm.02\\_0158\\_0160/?sp=1](https://www.loc.gov/resource/mjm.02_0158_0160/?sp=1).

The textbooks all agree that the union under the Articles was too weak to manage its trade and currency, too weak to honor its treaties with foreign powers, and in fear of uprisings by angry debtors like the rebellion in Massachusetts led by Daniel Shays. The textbooks likewise all agree that James Madison was, at least, one of the leading figures behind the Convention, if not the leading figure. But the textbooks do not consult Madison's own assessment of the union under the Articles—his “Vices of the Political System of the U.S.”<sup>279</sup> And though they all credit Madison with devising the Virginia Plan, which set the agenda for the early part of the Convention, not one of them points out that this plan (like the “Vices”) was centrally concerned not with the problem of weak government but with the problem of representation. Most critically, Madison's Virginia Plan sought to strengthen the union by establishing a government that would not permit a small minority of states to exercise an outsized influence on national politics.

As the textbook narratives arrive at the convention in Philadelphia in 1787, they once again assume the outcome of that event. All but *American History* refer to it as the “Constitutional Convention,” though nobody at the time—with the exception perhaps of James Madison—knew it by that name or conceived of it for that purpose. Likewise, they assume the “compromises” that event produced. In their defense, it is impossible in the short scope available in a textbook to do justice to the twists and turns of the convention.<sup>280</sup> Just as the voting dynamics established by the Articles of Confederation gave an advantage to the Southern states (notably South Carolina and Georgia) most stubborn in their defense of slavery, those same voting dynamics had the same effect in the Convention. So too did the convention's occasional (and overlooked) practice of delegating the most vexing issues to smaller committees, so as to cut through debates that otherwise might have had no end. The convention's

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279 Robert A. Rutland and William M. E. Rachal, eds., *The Papers of James Madison*, vol. 9, 9 April 1786–24 May 1787 and supplement 1781–1784 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 345–358.

280 Richard Beeman, *Plain, Honest Men: The Making of the American Constitution* (New York: Random House, 2009); Christopher Collier and James Lincoln Collier, *Decision in Philadelphia: The Constitutional Convention of 1787* (New York: Random House, 1986).

compromises regarding slavery seem so familiar to us now that they appear to have been fated from the beginning. What is more, the term “compromise” has been drained of its bitterness and filled back up with saccharine, leaving students with the mistaken impression that the so-called compromises regarding slavery may have been made eagerly. Students get, at best, a minimal sense of the distrust that existed between and among the states. They get a minimal sense of the ways in which the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation played out in the convention, notably in the success of South Carolina and Georgia in exercising an outsized influence on the outcomes of the convention. And finally, they get a minimal sense of the major accomplishment it was to vest their new government with an anti-slavery power (albeit delayed): to prohibit the slave trade.

Students are also taught that the fix was in regarding the Constitution’s ratification.<sup>281</sup> The textbooks reviewed are particularly critical of the motives of the Constitution’s framers in seeking ratification by state conventions, rather than by state legislatures. *American History* hints at cynical motives, holding that the framers “largely bypassed the state legislatures, whose members were likely to oppose the Constitution.”<sup>282</sup> *The Unfinished Nation* argues, “the convention changed the rules” by which the Constitution would be ratified.<sup>283</sup> *United States History* makes the accusation more directly: “To improve the odds of ratification, the delegates [in Philadelphia] arbitrarily decided to change the rules.”<sup>284</sup> *America’s History* adds that the delegates “arbitrarily—and cleverly—declared” that the Constitution should be ratified through state conventions.<sup>285</sup> Not one of the textbooks addresses the principled explanation that the proposed Constitution was to establish a government partly national and partly federal; ratification by state legislatures would imply that the union was wholly federal. Nor does any of the

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281 Pauline Maier, *Ratification: The People Debate the Constitution, 1787-1788* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011).

282 *American History*, 161.

283 *The Unfinished Nation*, 141.

284 *United States History*, 123.

285 *America’s History*, 195.

textbooks observe that Madison, in his “Vices,” had located one of the Confederation’s most serious problems in the unstable and unjust republican governments of the states (which, incidentally, were responsible for all the laws within the Confederation permitting slavery).

### **The American People**

In sum, the textbooks suggest (sometimes strongly) that the ratification period closed a chapter of American history during which wealthy and racist white males conspired to dupe the people into accepting a flawed Constitution. This is a shame, and a missed opportunity to show students how the popular debate over ratification was the most democratic political engagement in human history, allowing hundreds of citizens to participate in the ratifying conventions directly, and thousands or tens of thousands to engage in the public ratification debates. More, this was almost certainly the most consequential popular political engagement in human history, as it resulted in the addition of a Bill of Rights to the Constitution. Here the people demanded the freedoms of religion, speech, press, petition, and assembly, which, incidentally, would be embraced most firmly and employed most consequentially by those in the early republic calling for an end to slavery, and in the modern republic by those calling for protections of the civil rights of African Americans. They also demanded protections of their rights as individuals, most notably not to be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of law. This, again, would later become central to arguments for the equal treatment of African Americans under the law.

The Constitution’s framers built, under duress, and under the flawed rules of the Articles of Confederation, an incomplete or imperfect political form to govern a union now partly federal but also partly national. But the American people in the ratification debate built a political culture that endures to this day. In demanding that the new Constitution explicitly state protections for their individual rights, they fully realized the abstract notion of popular sovereignty. In defining those rights, they

made the Declaration's appeal to resist tyrants a central and regular feature of their new political culture. The story of the American people's participation in the founding of the world's first democratic republic is capable of inspiring young citizens into a constructive engagement with their nation's past, present, and future. That these and other textbooks do not convincingly tell this story about the American founding represents a failure to respect the efforts of all good democratic and republican citizens before us who fought so hard to leave the nation better than they found it.

## Conclusion

Substantively, what stands out in a review of these textbook accounts of the American founding period, from the prelude to the American Revolution to the ratification of the Constitution, is a critical disposition toward the work of those who founded our nation which can only serve to leave students disinterested, at best, and apathetic or jaded at worst. Rather than being introduced to a story about the birth, development, and travails of the world's first democratic republic, students are taught to be suspicious of America's founders. Students could be taught about the ambitions of the framers to determine "the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not, of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend, for their political constitutions, on accident and force."<sup>286</sup> Further, students could be taught about what "accident and force" meant to our founding generation, who experienced arbitrary rule at the hands of a hereditary monarch and a grasping legislature, and who understood liberty also in light of the arbitrary rule exercised by some Southern plantation owners over slaves. Finally, students could be taught

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286 Alexander Hamilton, "Federalist 1," in *The Federalist*, ed. George W. Carey and James McClellan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 1.

that the project of democratic republican government is not simply novel in human history but is also a project that requires our ongoing vigilance to sustain.

This disservice to our students in the substance of these textbooks is matched by the disservice done to them in the style and format of the texts. These textbooks demonstrate relatively little concern for what students need. Instead, they demonstrate concern on the part of the publishing companies for the needs of textbook adoption committees, leaving them disjointed and distended, substituting for a meaningful narrative a facsimile of comprehensiveness. These texts also demonstrate concern on the part of the authors for the fads and fashions of the historical profession, distracting students with detours into identity politics, and even into the narrow academic interests of the authors, rather than giving students a broad sense of the historical drama that was unfolding. The historical drama of the world's first democratic republic continues, but the way that students are taught about its first chapters leaves them no way to understand their role in it, other than to be critical of it or cynical about it. These textbooks have done our students, and our history, the gravest disservice.

# The New Deal (1933-1940)

Amity Shlaes and  
William Pettinger

## The New Deal (1933-1940)

### Introduction

The Great Depression is one of the most important periods in American history. The period tested American resolve as few others had. That is in good measure due to the Depression's duration. Successive credit, equity, and banking crises, the loss of farms, homes, or employment, and environmental disasters such as the Dust Bowl stretched the privation to a full ten years. Even today, the notion of an unemployment rate above 10% induces panic. Then, unemployment consistently stood above ten percent, and ranged closer to 20%, even above 20%, for months at a time.<sup>287</sup> At the time such blows felt like divine retribution. The conviction that “we got through it,” as Americans still say of the period, represents the premier evidence of American toughness and gives Americans inspiration to this day.

But how did America “get through it”? The disaster of the 1930s raises questions that strike at the heart of American identity. What enabled the country to make it through the challenges of the 1930s? Did Americans survive the 1930s and flourish later because of a federal government effort mounted from afar, or in spite of that effort? Where did individuals, local communities, and voluntary organizations fit into the story?

The typical narrative begins by contending that errors in the 1920s, particularly the failure of markets and money, caused the Great Depression. In this version of history, the 1920s economy was as ephemeral as a bubble in Jay Gatsby's champagne glass. Two villains dominate this story, Presidents Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover. Capitalism failed and America made it through the Great Depression because of the federal government's ambitious New Deal. Americans are taught that the 1929 crash set off ten years of trouble. Intervention proved benevolent and

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287 Richard Vedder and Lowell Gallaway, *Out of Work: Unemployment and Government in Twentieth-Century America* (New York City: New York University Press, 1997), 77.

beneficent. Banks failed across the land; Americans lost their savings. The federal government under President Franklin Roosevelt saved the banking system. When it came to recovery, New Deal authorities opted for a kind of proto-Keynesianism—spending more in peacetime than preceding national governments had. In the standard narrative, this spending is rated important, though insufficient. The federal government also regulated more heavily than preceding governments, and this too is portrayed positively, or at least excused. Many Americans have accepted the idea that the actions of the New Deal itself were intrinsically good, and that its benefits outweighed its costs. Even those who find much to criticize in the New Deal argue that, without it, the country would have collapsed into despair and, they warn, tipped into fascism or communism. Contemporary historians positively rate Roosevelt's policy of "bold persistent experimentation" because the experimentation inspired hope. To the same extent that Coolidge and Hoover are put down in these standard stories, Roosevelt is lionized. Presidential history has been reduced to a zero-sum game.

Proceeding from this story, Americans today reason that great interventions in the style of the New Deal are warranted—either as national morale boosters, or as remedies to downturns. Among presidential advisors and congressmen, America's 1930s record serves as justification for Keynesian spending. The predominant narrative also serves as justification for a suspension of disbelief—hope as a substitute for policy—and a justification for subsequent and even more consequential policy pushes in areas from labor policy to fiscal and monetary policy. In the 1960s, President Lyndon Johnson explicitly sold his Great Society as a continuation of the New Deal; today, a larger share of federal spending derives from the Great Society legislation than from the New Deal. The Great Depression is the *Ur*-justification, the model used to justify all models.

## The Truth about the Depression

These assumptions, however, are based on a chain of falsehoods, in a sense as tragic as the chain of misfortunes that sustained the Depression. In fact, the 1920s economic growth was genuine. Coolidge was more hero than failure. Herbert Hoover on the other hand was a mixed bag, not to be lumped in with Coolidge. Hoover understood the international circumstances better than Coolidge, as well as the banking challenges in America. Hoover fancied himself an active leader and indeed proved active, bullying businesses counterproductively at times and constructing new institutions such as the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. Hoover's policies and actions bear a closer resemblance to those of Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt than they do to those of Warren Harding or Coolidge.

A trigger is not the same thing as a cause. The Crash of 1929 triggered an economic panic, as crashes had triggered panics before. This panic could have ended quickly, as had the panic of the early 1920s, what James Grant has called the Forgotten Depression.<sup>288</sup> What caused the duration of the Great Depression? What put the "Great" in "Great Depression" was sustained hostility toward the private sector and economic policy so relentlessly arbitrary that the usual engine of recovery, that very private sector, froze in its tracks. Herbert Hoover inflicted the first part of this damage, whether through a troubling tariff, applying upward pressure to wages, or blaming markets. Roosevelt continued and expanded Hoover's damage, with wrongheaded moves that hurt the economy even before he became president. Take, for example, the field of banking. Bank failures were indeed dramatic in number. Accounting for banks that closed or were forced to merge, something like four in ten banks failed from 1929 to 1933. But the majority of the failures were failures of unit banks, small, one-town banks. And while bank failures and bank runs may have drastically reduced the money supply or narrowed credit,

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288 James Grant, *The Forgotten Depression: 1921: The Crash That Cured Itself* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014).

fewer than three percent of total deposits were actually lost.<sup>289</sup> Roosevelt nonetheless exploited the anxiety to build support for dramatic reform, including deposit insurance, and more importantly, to build support for unprecedentedly arbitrary moves in the monetary arena. A micro-story: as Jonathan Alter notes, in the winter of 1932-1933, outgoing President Hoover implored Roosevelt to work with him to halt the snowballing bank crisis.<sup>290</sup> Yet, Roosevelt intentionally ignored Hoover, waiting until March—inaugurations were then in March—so that he might have a crisis of sufficient scale to warrant grand intervention.

Forgotten in American memory are sectors of the economy that could have pulled America out of the slump, as the energy industry pulled it out of the post-2008 recession. The potential savior of the 1930s was electric power. Even at the toughest moments of the Great Depression, Americans continued to use more electricity than they had ever before. Yet as both candidate and president, Roosevelt deliberately worked to annihilate private companies in this sector. While campaigning in 1932, Roosevelt vilified utility holding companies, singling out for special assault Samuel Insull, the Chicago utilities magnate. Roosevelt spoke of “the Ishmaels and the Insulls, whose hand is against every man.” Insull was, like Hoover, a mixed bag: he overleveraged his company, at cost to his employees and the city. Nonetheless, one can now see in retrospect that Insull proved something of a prophet in his understanding of electricity networks and that his conglomerate was no Enron. So powerful were Roosevelt’s slanderous public statements and legislative attacks, and, of course, his prosecution of Insull by various government authorities that Insull’s name was effectively erased from history. Once in office, FDR suffocated the entire sector, crowding out even industry reformers more polished than Insull by supplanting them with government institutions like the Tennessee Valley Authority and the Rural Electrification Act. For good

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289 The Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, *Banking and Monetary Statistics: 1914-1941* (Washington, DC, 1943), 281-286, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://fraser.stlouisfed.org/title/banking-monetary-statistics-1914-1941-38/part-i-6408/section-7-bank-suspensions-334466>.

290 Jonathan Alter, *The Defining Moment: FDR's 100 Days and the Triumph of Hope* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2006), 178.

measure, Roosevelt also lobbied for and signed a law, the Public Utilities Holding Company Act, that cut off electric companies from the capital that they needed. A book's treatment of the Tennessee Valley Authority and the energy sector in the 1930s can serve as a kind of gauge of the authors' understanding of the period. In addition to cutting off such areas of promising growth, Roosevelt passed laws and took actions so counterproductive that they resulted in the "Depression within the Depression," when unemployment shot up again and business retreated into hibernation. In short, the loveable, hopeful New Deal wrought economic havoc.

Neglected in contemporary histories too is the key role that the local community, Tocqueville's America, played up to the New Deal and during it. Small towns, churches, and voluntary organizations of all stripes and colors formed key rallying points for Americans. In the 1930s, genuine community civics were still strong; Americans helped one another. When they could not find community, Americans built new communities—new churches and new organizations. One such group was Alcoholics Anonymous, which found a way to console and heal addicted citizens that has served Americans long after the New Deal. America's robust insurance companies and private companies were entirely capable of providing a pension and insurance system as strong as Social Security, yet the Social Security Act of the New Deal blocked that opportunity and shut them out.

It is also important to remember that data provide strong evidence against the standard narrative. As mentioned, unemployment in the 1930s was not merely dramatic but enduring. Under normal circumstances, the American economy tends to recover after a few years of economic downturn. However, the failure of the Dow Jones Industrial Average, something of a proxy for growth, to return to its 1920s levels even as the population grew likewise provides irrefutable evidence of the failure of progressive policy. Gross domestic product per capita, which grew from its tiny crash base, but not enough to get us back to 1929 levels, also demonstrates the New Deal's failure to revive the economy. The key

question about the Depression's end is not "how did World War II end the Depression?" but rather "why did the Depression last all the way to the war?"

At the time, plenty of people spoke up. Senator Bennett Champ Clark begged to allow private companies to opt out of Social Security, which would have established a kind of natural experiment in the pension market between the public and private sector. However, Clark lost the legislative fight. Today, Wendell Willkie is remembered as a political maverick who came out of the world of business to run for president in 1940. Few remember what motivated the businessman to shift to politics: his own experience with the political persecution of utilities. Willkie was chairman of one of the most promising utilities, Commonwealth and Southern. Rather than keep his silence as the TVA executive, David Lilienthal ravaged Commonwealth and Southern, and Willkie fought back until he saw that he could not win without political change. Willkie then entered politics on an anti-New Deal campaign, calling the New Deal's success "a bedtime story." Less famous individuals spoke out, but their thoughts are also disregarded. The chief economist of Chase Bank, Benjamin Anderson, also concluded that the Great Depression was caused by the federal government's decision to "play God." When the administrations of the 1930s failed to restore economic vitality, Anderson commented that the government then compounded its errors by moving to "play God yet more vigorously."<sup>291</sup> Anderson had it right. The overarching explanation for the duration was the intervention.

## The Tragic Myth and its Authors

The reasons that this conclusion has been obscured are several. During the 1930s, Roosevelt won unimaginable popularity with a strategy that politicians of both parties have since made their template: strategic payments or political concessions to select voting demographics. From

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<sup>291</sup> Benjamin Anderson, *Economics and the Public Welfare: A Financial and Economic History of the United States, 1914-1946*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1980), 496.

the tribute to organized labor that was the Wagner Act to the pensions for senior citizens in Social Security, the Roosevelt Administration systematically identified the desires of each group and met them. Because such concessions were coming in such a rough time, and because their scale was novel, they were enormously popular. To sense the magnitude of the shift, it helps to look at the relationship between state and local spending on the one hand and federal spending on the other. Outside wartime, the states and towns had always spent more than Washington. Due to FDR's political offerings to the electorate in 1936, the federal government outspent the state and local governments for the first time. Then, in the 1940s, Franklin Roosevelt led America to a resounding victory in what is considered a "good war." In retrospect, that feat seems more important to most Americans than anything that occurred prior to it in the 1930s; it seems impolite, blasphemous even, to find fault in a war hero. The subsequent wartime success of New Deal politicians and their successors obscured the failures of the 1930s in the minds of Americans, and the postwar boom in part enabled by America's adversaries' economic devastation delivered prosperity that central planning failed to deliver. Americans knew the Depression was over, and with an almost superstitious lack of curiosity, they declined to ask themselves why.

Academia itself has cemented the myth. Since World War II, both high school and university texts have focused on hope, neglecting to cover the damage that the New Deal inflicted. In the period of the Cold War, the nation believed in experts; therefore, the failures of the New Deal experts were overlooked. After the Cold War, progressive scholars likewise chose to overlook what the New Deal did to workers. One might have expected thinkers in the center or right to rebut coherently. Instead of focusing on the New Deal, they squabbled among themselves—Monetarists versus Austrians versus traditional pre-war economists. Money was a key part, but only one part of the Great Depression story. Even Milton Friedman himself did not blame the entire Depression on monetary policy. Yet Friedman's innovation, Monetarism, took on a life of its own as it became the top doctrine of center-right economics. Unlike

Friedman himself, Friedman's successors emphasized the money supply challenges to the exclusion of other explanations for the Depression. Gold standard activists and Austrian economists, for their part, exaggerated the inflation of the 1920s and preoccupied themselves with challenging the monetarists. This secondary economic battle was conducted on confusing terms, intimidating non-economists, especially historians. Out of anxiety over appearing economically illiterate, even conservative historians frequently overlook or gloss over what really happened in the 1930s. They obfuscate and mediate, rather than elucidate.

The press, radio, television, and now social media platforms have also done their part to reinforce the academy's narrative. The general tendency of the press to mistake political success for economic success causes the media to overrate the New Deal. News hands today work from a nonsensical equation: "Because Roosevelt won in a landslide in 1936, he vanquished the Depression."

## High School Textbooks and Great Depression History

To see where current teaching fits into this trend, your authors reviewed five popular high school textbooks.<sup>292</sup> In reviewing, we recognized the difficulty that textbook authors confront: that of balancing the demands of a diverse range of school districts' political and cultural preferences. Some textbooks manage this balancing act with more grace than others. Nevertheless, all of the authors face the same challenge: educating future citizens. Whether read by an inner-city teen in Chicago or a farmer's daughter in Idaho, the books all must succeed at conveying the important lessons of the Great Depression.

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<sup>292</sup> Rebecca Edwards et al., *America's History*, vol. 2, *Since 1865* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2018); Alan Brinkley, John Giggie, and Andrew Huebner, *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*, 9th ed. (Columbus: McGraw Hill, 2019); Joyce Appleby et al., *United States: History and Geography* (Columbus: McGraw Hill, 2018); Emma Lapsansky-Werner et al., *United States History* (New York: Pearson, 2016); Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, *American History* (Orlando, FL: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018).

With the exception of Alan Brinkley's *The Unfinished Nation*, and the occasional exception of Edwards et al.'s *America's History*, these textbooks do not feature a strong overarching narrative. Rather, they generally teach by suggestion. Picking over them, one can find the pieces of the fashionable pro-New Deal story. For starters, the books conflate the triggers of the 1929 stock market crash and the causes of the lengthy Great Depression itself. None of the reviewed textbooks accurately relates this 1929 story to students. They all utilize the tenuous argument that a growing disparity between the rich and the poor in America weakened the economy to the point that it collapsed in 1929 and could not recover through its regular operation.<sup>293</sup> This *Great Gatsby* conclusion simply lacks evidence; rapidly growing societies usually feature income disparities. While this narrative may ring with satisfactory echoes of the post-Occupy-Wall-Street world, a gap between rich and poor does not constitute an adequate assessment of the triggers of the Great Depression.

Among the reviewed textbooks, there are passages of truth. *America's History*, for example, explains well how the early Depression was a part of a larger, worldwide slump in the economy that began in Europe.<sup>294</sup> *United States History* points out that the Federal Reserve conducted a procyclical monetary policy at the outset of the Depression that worsened the decline.<sup>295</sup> Altogether, a teacher or student could piece together a decent record of the early Depression Era from the facts contained among all of these textbooks. But none of the texts provides enough material for a truly fair consideration of the crash. Useful, for example, would be a marquee treatment of a chart documenting the multiple steep crashes of the market that preceded 1929, to offer the reader evidence that crashes do not always lead to a depression.

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293 *America's History*, 658; *The Unfinished Nation*, 563; *United States: History and Geography*, 501; *United States History*, 518-9; *American History*, 754.

294 *America's History*, 680.

295 *United States History*, 521.

## Effects of the Government Intervention under Hoover and Roosevelt

After the triggers of the crash, the results of post-crash federal policy constitute the next most important subject that any textbook account of the era should cover. Unfortunately, the textbooks in this review also fail to sufficiently convey a balanced picture of the New Deal. Any good history of the New Deal should cover the fact that the New Deal's programs largely failed to achieve their goals while running roughshod over the Constitution. The reviewed textbooks do succeed at highlighting the Roosevelt administration's failures to address racial discrimination and the negative effects of some New Deal programs upon African Americans.<sup>296</sup> However, the discussion of the New Deal and race cannot substitute for what's missing: an account of the economic failings of President Roosevelt's signature policy.

The National Industrial Recovery Act, which created the National Recovery Administration (NRA), represents one of the most radical and important bills pushed through Congress by FDR. The books mention the NRA's weaknesses and failures but fail to supply the substantial evidence that the NRA contributed to the duration of the downturn. The textbooks in this review also cover for the NRA by downplaying the Administration's grand ambition—to run the entire industrial economy through codes. Missing here, for example, is testimony from the small businesses mercilessly targeted by the NRA such as Schechter Poultry, the company whose Supreme Court case eventually ended the NRA. The texts often prefer to discuss the NRA's more famous sibling, the Public Works Administration. This does a disservice to students, as the story of the NRA represents one of the central stories of the New Deal's attempt

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296 *America's History*, 700; *United States: History and Geography*, 522; *United States History*, 552; *American History*, 801; *The Unfinished Nation*, 567-9.

to introduce broad government planning into the economy. *United States History* does the best job of ascribing ambition to the NRA by quoting FDR's lofty praise of its mission to reorganize the U.S. economy.<sup>297</sup>

When it comes to the Tennessee Valley Authority, the symbol of the New Deal's commitment to improve the American standard of living, the texts offer a misleading account. The texts glowingly point to how many people gained access to cheap electricity but ignore the very real possibility that the private sector was well on its way to electrifying America, even in the Tennessee Valley, when Roosevelt began his persecution of it. None of the textbooks seriously discuss the enormous cost of the TVA or ask why taxpayers from across the nation should be asked to contribute to electrifying one region. Three of the textbooks briefly point to criticisms of the TVA in a weak attempt to be evenhanded. *United States History* tells the reader that the TVA unfairly benefited from not paying federal taxes.<sup>298</sup> The Houghton Mifflin Harcourt textbook cites the displaced farmers and the government's unfair advantage over private enterprise.<sup>299</sup> *The Unfinished Nation* acknowledges the most damning fact about the TVA: the regions serviced remained impoverished despite the grand efforts of the federal government.<sup>300</sup>

## The Texts' Conclusions

All of the textbooks end their discussion of the political history of the Depression by discussing the emergence of a New Deal Coalition that altered the dynamic of American politics. They all note that FDR built a strong coalition of Southern Democrats, union workers, African Americans, progressive intellectuals, and New Deal beneficiaries. No one can dispute this.

Interestingly, *United States: History and Geography* does note that administrations of both parties have agreed on the basic premises of the

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297 *United States History*, 540.

298 *United States History*, 539.

299 *American History*, 818.

300 *The Unfinished Nation*, 592.

New Deal since Roosevelt's presidency.<sup>301</sup> Also, since *The Unfinished Nation* utilizes the progressive if not near-Marxist lens when examining history, it does the most thorough job of pointing out the limitations of the New Deal. It points to the conservative influence of the Southern Democrats and blames the New Deal for not actually reforming the American economy.<sup>302</sup>

On economics, however, the books let readers down. Whether the topic is the 1929 Crash, the early New Deal, or the Depression within the Depression of 1937 and 1938, the books exculpate the true offenders. They defer to the predominant Keynesian narrative that only unprecedented spending or further intervention could have turned the economy around. They suggest or maintain that the Second World War dragged the United States out of the Depression. This is only true insofar as a transfusion saves a patient for a day. What that patient really may need as a cure is a combination of change in diet, shift in medication, and heart surgery. Since the New Deal was intervention, those who want to suggest that intervention failed are forced into the awkward counterfactual mode: had the Administration cut taxes, pulled back agencies, and left businesses alone, the economy of the 1930s would have recovered sooner. This feels weak. But the evidence for the contention—common among many New Deal critics in the 1930s—exists in the example of the 1920s, when the government did all those things. A strong text would therefore spend more energy comparing the two decades. It would spend time on Keynes' own critique of the New Deal: Keynes disliked Roosevelt's monetary moves in 1933 so much that he called them "a gold standard on the booze" and berated Roosevelt for his politicized prosecution of business.

## Our Conclusion: A Surprise

With the exception of Brinkley's *The Unfinished Nation*, these texts surprise by not offering what one would expect: a strong progressive

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301 *United States: History and Geography*, 535.

302 *The Unfinished Nation*, 610.

narrative. Rather, the texts offer hardly any narrative at all. In the case of *America's History*, this approach feels forgivable because the authors' friendly sense of inquiry shines through. But generally speaking, these books spam the readers with progressive-tilted anecdote and factoid. The post-1960s fad for multimedia collage history—pictures instead of words, themes instead of chronology, online interactive resources instead of books—baffles students and conveniently obscures the texts' incoherence. You get the feeling that students spend as much time shifting from medium to medium as they do thinking about the period that they are studying. Taken together, the texts' approaches to the Depression amount to a kind of tragic abdication.

Most of the teacher guides were not made available at the time of this review. Nonetheless, a point in regard to texts and teachers is worth making. The avalanche-as-argument approach doubtless fosters in those students who care—not all, but some—a sense of anxiety. A teacher therefore becomes the pupil's last opportunity to find coherence. That makes the classroom teacher all the more important. The teacher is the only source who can shine a light amid the welter of themes and factoids. Since many teachers lean left and will most openly display that bias when leading unrecorded classroom instruction, students never have the opportunity to consider, let alone articulate, a position of skepticism toward the New Deal. Study of U.S. history turns into a desperate effort at understanding, with a general sense that progressivism is better than *laissez-faire*—and halts there. The justified suspicion on the part of students that standardized test reviewers may share the teachers' point of view makes ambitious students likely to regurgitate their teacher's arguments on such tests.

What might be a better way to teach the late 1920s and early 1930s? First of all, education should be accomplished through a balanced analysis of policy and its results, delivered clearly and without animus. One option is to jettison the pretense of narrative altogether and to teach the 1930s as an evidence-based analysis class. A curriculum based nearly entirely on primary sources might be the answer. Forced to confront

documents from the Depression, even a politically biased teacher must find ways to explain all arguments and present all evidence. A teacher does not have to agree with the documents, but he or she will have to ask the class: why does this author think what he thinks? Primary sources that might provide balance include Benjamin Roth's *The Great Depression: A Diary* and Odette Keun's *A Foreigner Looks at the TVA*. Both tell of the New Deal from important but oft-overlooked perspectives. In *Economics and the Public Welfare*, Benjamin Anderson provides a magisterial overview of the Depression's events. The testimony of the beleaguered merchants in the Supreme Court case that brought down the NRA, *A.L.A. Schechter Poultry v N.R.A.*, can give students a feel for the heavy-handed intrusion of the New Deal into the operations of the smallest businesses. Dozens of good primary source documents can be found in *Annals of American History*, an Encyclopedia Britannica publication, Volume 15. At the conclusion of such a course, students could be required to write expository essays delivering both sides of an issue: Was the Tennessee Valley Authority good for America or bad, and what are the arguments for each opinion?

If the task is delivering a new narrative textbook, a wealth of economic and historical analysis awaits the author seeking for balance as well. Beyond the primary sources, there is Gene Smiley's *Rethinking the Great Depression*, a neglected primer. Smiley not only counters the predominant unemployment narrative with an arsenal of data but also offers his straightforward alternative. Burton Folsom's *New Deal or Raw Deal* also provides a good counterbalance to the prevailing history of the Great Depression. Folsom goes into particular depth on the politics of the New Deal and its counterproductive effects. By way of general economic history, Gary Walton and Hugh Rockoff's *History of the American Economy* would provide useful insight. For the story of the persecution of Samuel Insull, and of the promising utilities sector in general, this review recommends Forrest McDonald's *Insull*. For the damage caused by high-wage policy, Lee Ohanian and Harold Cole lay out the evidence

extensively.<sup>303</sup> For the blow that the New Deal dealt to Tocqueville's America, a good primer is *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State: Fraternal Societies and Social Services*. In the book, David Beito sketches the kind of vibrant community institution challenged, at times mortally, by the New Deal. John Cogan's *The High Cost of Good Intentions: A History of U.S. Federal Entitlement Programs* provides useful lessons on the harm wrought by federal anti-poverty programs, in the New Deal and later. *Out of Work: Unemployment and Government in Twentieth-Century America* by Richard Vedder and Lowell Gallaway shines important light on how the unemployment crisis during the Great Depression came about. Finally, Robert Higgs' *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of American Government* elucidates the creeping process by which the slow expansion of the federal government crowded out the private sector.

A final thought about texts generally: if a textbook, and not primary sources, is to provide the basis of a course, analysis alone cannot suffice. Balanced history is only the first part of the task. After all, the mind constantly looks for ways to weave facts together to draw a purpose or meaning from them. When one reads about some event or person, one's mind immediately tries to fit that information into a narrative or lesson. In searching for the meaning of an event, one's mind relies on the information presented before and after that event.<sup>304</sup> When readers trust the author for his strong narrative, they take in more from him. The author gains in authority. That authority carries over from novels to history and, even, AP textbooks. The narrative strength of Brinkley's book explains why his text, biased as it is, satisfies the reader more. A better American history textbook will not only supply facts but also provide a

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303 Lee Ohanian and Harold L. Cole, *New Deal Policies and the Persistence of the Great Depression: A General Equilibrium Analysis*, Working Paper Number 597 (Minneapolis: Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, 2001), <https://www.minneapolisfed.org/research/working-papers/new-deal-policies-and-the-persistence-of-the-great-depression-a-general-equilibrium-analysis>.

304 Scholars refer to narrative sequencing in the study of serious texts as the law of logographic necessity; every detail and fact within a text has a relationship to the other details and facts by means of order and position. However, this principle extends beyond the study of serious texts. Filmmakers recognize this as the Kuleshov effect. They understand that the placement of every frame has a relationship with the frames preceding it and following it. For example, if one watches a scene of children playing and then one of an old man smiling, the viewer thinks of the man as a pleasant grandfather, but when the children are substituted for a young lady, the man becomes a deviant. Furthermore, this dialogue of details within a work occurs even when not intended by the author. The tendency to imagine a narrative gives readers pleasure.

clear, organized, and compelling narrative for students. That narrative should not simply be “The New Deal was awful” or the “The New Deal was great.” That narrative should offer the most accurate story: “the New Deal inspired but did not always deliver what it promised: jobs.”

If high school readers cannot identify where the New Deal succeeded—in inspiring citizens—and where it failed—in getting them jobs—these young people are not prepared to evaluate future economic crises or political crisis agendas. An American history textbook with a strong balanced narrative that recounts the Depression well and accurately would provide an invaluable service to the republic.



## About the Authors

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**Amity Shlaes** is the author of *Great Society: A New History*, out in paperback this past winter. She is also the author of four *New York Times* bestsellers, *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression*; *The Forgotten Man: Graphic*, a full-length illustrated version of the same book drawn by Paul Rivoche; *Coolidge*, a full-length biography of the thirtieth president; and *The Greedy Hand: How Taxes Drive Americans Crazy*. Miss Shlaes chairs the board of the Calvin Coolidge Presidential Foundation, a national foundation based in the birthplace of President Coolidge, Plymouth, VT.

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