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***HIGH SCHOOL AMERICAN HISTORY (AFTER RECONSTRUCTION) TEXTBOOK
REVIEW***

Dr. Ricky Dobbs

Assistant Professor of History, Texas A&M University at Commerce

My name is Ricky Floyd Dobbs. I am an assistant professor of history at Texas A&M University-Commerce. My research specialization is Southern politics since 1945 and Texas history. I teach graduate and upper division courses in the following fields: Texas history, history of the South, Civil War and Reconstruction, Gilded Age and the Progressive Era, historical theory and methods. I also teach freshman United States survey, since 1877, regularly as a part of my duties.

I participated in the textbook review project of the Texas Public Policy Foundation. My politics are generally to the left of the Foundation's. However, in researching the work of the organization in the field of education, I found that we share common concerns, if not common ideas for improvement. I joined the effort not because of politics, but because the TPPF convinced me that it was serious about an academically meaningful review of the texts to better social studies education in Texas. I am pleased to say that I was given full discretion to review, think and write as I felt led by my training and knowledge.

There has been a great deal of talk of hidden agendas in these proceedings over the past few months. The great problem with our school texts is that they have no apparent agenda except to make money for publishing houses and please cranky officials. The great problem with these books is that they pull punches too much, misinterpret what text editors don't understand, and omit what offends without being true to history, because publishers want to sell books, any books. No academic historian that I know hates America. No academic historian that I know wants to destroy the free enterprise system. We all expect much of America, and we all expect justice in our economic system. No academic historian that I know wants to lead young people

astray. Telling the truth will lead no one astray. Suppressing it will kill the impulse to social improvement.

The textbooks offered for use in Texas public schools are adequate and very little more. They meet, with varying degrees of depth and breadth, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills standards. They share various weaknesses and strengths. There remain serious problems with academic quality in many cases, but there are bright spots out there. I was gratified that high school history is increasingly reflecting the multicultural approaches common in the discipline at the university level. I was also glad to see that students are being urged to think critically, albeit with some flawed pedagogical logic. Nonetheless, these texts can be better, and I will detail some areas for improvement as I go along.

Of the four texts that I have examined, *The American Republic*, published by Glencoe McGraw-Hill deserves special recognition. It was the best of the four. Organizationally, it is strong and coherent. With respect to content, *The American Republic* most resembles a good college-level textbook. Not only does it have the fewest factual problems, but the sophistication of its approach to the material surpasses the others. If the state's intention with high school history is to prepare students for higher education and/or informed citizenship, texts need to be of this quality or better.¹

The problems I encountered in the texts were common in varying extents to all of them. They were:

- Organizational incoherence.
- Triumphalism.
- Heroification.²
- Sanitization.
- Conflict avoidance.

Organizational incoherence means that a text is not only hard to follow, but that the organizational problems actually undermine or distort historical understanding. In one text, for example, the treatment of the 19th Century Populist Party is sprinkled across roughly seventy pages. It is nearly impossible, unless one already knows and understands Populism, to piece together a cogent story from these scattered snippets.³ Other texts suffer these problems as well. One text places Franklin Roosevelt's 1937 attempt to pack the Supreme Court a chapter section and six pages away from its nearest chronological connection. Interposed between the two portions of the narrative is the books' discussion of contemporary and present-day debate over the New Deal. The contemporary material is haphazardly thrown in with what "modern scholars" think of the period, and then, out of nowhere comes the court packing fight.⁴ How events get from one to another is vitally important to student understanding, but is utterly lost here.

¹ Appleby, et. al., *The American Republic Since 1877* (New York: Glencoe McGraw-Hill, 2003).

² Use of these two categorizations of textbook errors/omissions is inspired by the work of James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (New York: Touchstone, 1995).

³ Danzer, et. al., *The Americans: Reconstruction to the 21st Century* (New York: McDougal-Littell, 2003), p. 219, 220-222, 223, 238, 271, 286-287.

⁴ Clayton, et. al., *America: Pathways to the Present* (Glenview, IL: Prentice Hall, 2003), p. 544-551.

Triumphalism is the presentation and misinterpretation of historical events in a manner that suggests the inevitability of progress. Often, a triumphalist presentation will either discount or omit all negative aspects of a figure or event. Sometimes triumphalism invents positive outcomes that never happened. Three texts completely ignore the ugly, sometimes bloody, destruction of the Populist movement by the two major parties. In the South, this campaign against Populism brought disfranchisement of African Americans and poor whites. It contributed to the rise of segregation. All three books fail to make the connection. Instead, Populism leaves the stage in the setting sun:

“The goals of populism, however, lived on. In the decades ahead, other reformers, known as Progressives, applied populist ideas to urban and industrial problems. In so doing, they launched a new, historic era of reform.”⁵

Or another:

“Populism collapsed, burying the hopes of the farmers. The movement left two powerful legacies, however: a message that the downtrodden could organize and have political impact, and an agenda of reforms, many of which would be enacted in the 20th Century.”⁶

The music swells and the camera fades to black. Both passages have conflated two different impulses for change into a single constant force of progress in American history, while at the same time whitewashing the Progressive effort to eradicate Populism after 1896. But, all is well that ends well. Three of the books unquestioningly celebrated the commission system of municipal government, but failed to take into account the often antidemocratic designs of its Progressive advocates. After all, if it happened in the Progressive Era, it is by definition “progressive,” right?⁷

Heroification is the presentation of historical figures—except of course, Hitler and Stalin—as personifications of virtue and greatness, without attention to their human characteristics. In its worst form, it creates heroes out of people unworthy of the term. Heroes seem to get into publishers’ stables, are trotted out with each new edition, and never retired. A notable example of the worst kind of heroification is Charles Lindbergh, the aviator who flew across the Atlantic alone in 1927. Also, the Nazi sympathizer, who received decorations from the German government, praised Hitler, cavorted with British fascists, and warned that a Jewish conspiracy sought to embroil the US in World War II. In three of the books, Lindbergh appears as a lonely voice crying against war in 1940. Students are asked in two to consider how Lucky Lindy’s call for peace may have “damaged his reputation.” Of course, none of the books describes what he said that got him in so much trouble:

“[T]he three most important groups which have been pressing this country to war are the British, the Jewish and the Roosevelt Administration. . . .”

“The greatest danger to this country lies in their [the Jews’] large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio and our government. . . .”

⁵ Clayton, et. al., 282.

⁶ Danzer, et. al., 223.

⁷ Danzer, et. al., p. 309. Clayton, et. al., p. 391. Boyer and Stuckey, p. 300-301.

“If any one of these groups—the British, the Jews or the Administration—stops agitating for war, I believe there will be little danger of our involvement.”⁸

Instead Lindbergh is used as a civics lesson about the importance of speaking out on behalf of an unpopular cause.⁹

Sanitization of unpleasant realities is a common problem. One text explains the emergence of jazz in New Orleans’ Storyville district. It describes Storyville as the “entertainment” district of New Orleans. This failure to deal frankly with the incidence of prostitution renders without context the dispersal of such jazz greats as Joe “King” Oliver and Louis Armstrong from the Big Sleazy and the eventual spread of the music form across the nation.¹⁰ Given the recent silly flap over the withdrawn *Out of Many’s* references to prostitution in the Old West, I suspect that pulling punches was prudent. Without an understanding of why Storyville was closed down in the Progressive era, the appearance of jazz in St. Louis, Chicago and New York is a puzzling mystery. Two texts tidy up the story of the atomic bomb by claiming that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were targets of military or industrial importance. This is a point much in contention among historians. Primary sources indicate that the governmental committee that decided upon targets wanted cities which were largely spared by previous bombing. The committee also was less worried about the strategic value of proposed targets, but instead the bombing “should seek to make a profound psychological impression” upon the Japanese government and people.¹¹ On the other extreme, the texts generally avoid mentioning that the atomic bombs killed far fewer people and destroyed far less property than the conventional firebombing commonly used against Japan in 1945.

A final issue that weakens the books is conflict avoidance. The profusion of social, political, economic, religious, and racial conflict within American history is downplayed or not mentioned at all. One of the more troubling cases of this within the texts is the absence of any serious treatment of white opposition to integration in the South. The Ku Klux Klan is usually mentioned, but more common and less marginalized white hostility is not explained. One text even goes so far as to try to sweep it under the rug:

“Within a year, more than 500 school districts had desegregated their classrooms. In Baltimore, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C., black and white students sat side by side for the first time in history. However, in many areas where African Americans were in the majority, whites resisted desegregation. In some places, the Ku Klux Klan reappeared and White Citizens Councils boycotted businesses that supported desegregation.”¹²

First, most of those 500 districts would have been outside the South. Southern districts that integrated early usually had very small minority populations. Some districts opted for token

⁸ Charles Lindbergh, Speech for America First Committee, Des Moines, IA, September 11, 1941, quoted in *New York Times*, September 12, 1941.

⁹ Boyer and Stuckey, *The American Nation in the Modern Era* (Austin: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 2003), 520. Clayton, et. al., 586. Danzer, et. al., p. 449, 552.

¹⁰ Boyer and Stuckey, p. 430.

¹¹ Danzer, et. al., p. 584. Clayton, et. al., p. 621. Dan Kurzman, *Day of the Bomb: Countdown to Hiroshima* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1986), p. 410. Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Vintage, 1996), p. 523-528.

¹² Danzer, et. al., 703.

integration to stave-off full integration. But the text makes it appear as though things changed over night except in areas with a black majority. This simply is not true. Moreover, the third Klan and the Citizens' Councils deserve more explanation. The text's depiction of the Citizens' Council as being an organization that "boycotted" businesses that had integrated does not touch the half of it. The Citizens' Councils evolved into a nationwide organization that took over school boards, city councils, engaged in economic pressure tactics against the black community, passed laws and ordinances designed to frustrate efforts at integration, cooperated with the Ku Klux Klan, and even ran a shadow segregated school system in Mississippi. This marginalization of white resistance is distorts reality and is triumphalism at its worst.¹³

The same text claims that the governor of Texas "promised to comply" with integration after *the Brown* decision in 1954.¹⁴ I've spent the last eight years researching Allan Shivers. I can assure you he did not. The frequent opposition and obstruction the civil rights movement encountered from the federal government and major politicians is also handled gently or not at all. The Kennedy Administration's vacillation over and at times outright hostility toward civil rights is whitewashed. The efforts of J. Edgar Hoover's FBI to intimidate and undermine the movement and its leaders are also dropped out of the story.¹⁵ Students are deprived of knowing the truth, so that they can intelligently confront the future with the example of those who prevailed despite conflict. History becomes sterile and irrelevant, an endless line of pure marble figures astride horses or encased on granite buildings.

The four major problems create and exacerbate those problems that do exist in these texts.

- The state's accountability system.
- The poor quality of teacher preparation in the subject material.
- An excessively utilitarian rationale for the teaching of history.
- The politicization of the process itself.

The TEKS standards for "social studies" are a bureaucratic-academic giraffe, a creature of a committee, with minimal participation from professional scholars in the subject areas. Only in the public schools of America is there such a critter as "social studies." That should tell us a lot about what is wrong.

"Social studies" has for too long been the most neglected subject area among all the other benighted "content" areas out there. The recent TAAS scores dramatized this quite stunningly. One figure indicates that up to 60% of US history teachers are not properly credentialed in the subject material; another survey showed that when elementary school teachers were asked what subject could most easily be dropped from curricula; social studies received the most mentions. Other data indicate that teachers are so wedded to their textbooks that they are used more than 70% of the time to plan lessons.¹⁶

¹³ On the Citizens' Council movement see, Neil R. McMillan, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-1964* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994.)

¹⁴ Danzer, et. al., 703.

¹⁵ Danzer, et. al., 710-714. Clayton, et. al., 710-718. Boyer and Stuckey, 650-654. This book has a better treatment of the topic, but still shies away from the more plain-spoken analysis of the Kennedy civil rights record present in Boyer's own excellent college text, *Promises to Keep: the United States Since 1945*. Appleby, et. al., 753-756 does still a better job, but fails to explain the mechanics of Kennedy's dealings with Ross Barnett fully, nor does it mention FBI action against the movement until 1967.

¹⁶ Figures cited in Loewen, 288-289.

An excessively utilitarian rationale for teaching of “social studies” kills the content for students, marginalizes the value of knowing, and debases the disciplines stewed together into “social studies.” Knowledge has inherent value. Academic disciplines are worthy of study in and of themselves. There is no real “citizenship” or “patriotism” without knowledge. There is no “critical thinking” without knowledge either, as some of the teachers’ editions I read unintentionally demonstrated.

Lastly, the politicization of the adoption process contaminates the texts. The way the process is currently constructed is not an academic debate, but rather invites needless partisan controversy and grandstanding. The best evidence of this is the state and national press coverage that lifts the whole activity up for scorn. At the same time, what journalistic accounts have dealt seriously with the academic issues addressed by the review process? None. All are focused on potentially inflammatory tidbits—academic sound bites. If that is all they are given by the process, Texas will rightly remain a laughingstock. There has got to be a better way.

As a closing thought I’d like to leave you with a more leftist perspective on problems with the textbooks and the teaching of history in the public schools. University of Vermont sociologist James W. Loewen has dedicated himself to challenging textbooks and teachers to be better. His best know work, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, I heartily recommend. He came to be interested in this problem from observing his colleagues who taught history at the university:

College teachers in most disciplines are happy when their students have had significant exposure to the subject before college. Not teachers in history. History professors in college routinely put down high school history courses. A colleague of mine. . . sees his job as disabusing his charges of what they learned in high school. In no other field does this happen. Mathematics professors, for instance, know that non-Euclidean geometry is rarely taught in high school, but they don’t assume geometry was *mistaught*. Professors of English literature don’t resume that *Romeo and Juliet* was misunderstood in high school. Indeed, history is the only field in which the more courses students take, the stupider they become.¹⁷

On Monday, I will enter my freshman US survey with the same assumptions that Loewen’s colleagues have at the dawn of a new academic year. I hope this process will contribute to a day when I will not feel the need to undo what was not done right.

Thank you.

¹⁷ Ibid. 12.