

Journey Toward Wholeness News! Twelfth Issue

A cyber newsletter bringing you news from the UUA's Journey Toward Wholeness anti-oppression, anti-racist, multicultural initiative

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SEARCHING FOR THE TRUTH IN WHITEWASHED HISTORY TEXTBOOKS

By Lois Fahs Timmins, Ed.D.

Dr. James W. Loewen, the author of "Lies My Teacher Told Me," is currently a professor of sociology at the University of Vermont. After teaching many years in Mississippi, he wrote the first revisionist high school history textbook published in the United States, "Mississippi: Conflict and Change."

He deserves credit for all the ideas in this article, except the last paragraph. Direct quotes are in quotation marks; other ideas have been encapsulated and slightly rewritten.

Though in 1975 he received the Lillian Smith Award for the best non-fiction book about the South, the State of Mississippi rejected his textbook for use in its public schools. In 1980, Dr. Loewen and three local school boards sued the Mississippi State Textbook Board (Loewen et al. vs. Turpinseed et al.) and won a sweeping victory on the basis of the First and Fourteenth Amendments.

Dr. Loewen studied twelve history textbooks widely used throughout the U.S. in high schools and occasionally in junior high schools and colleges. He covers Christopher Columbus, the First Thanksgiving, the treatment of Native Americans, slavery, Reconstruction, and the nadir of U.S. racism from 1890 to 1920. He uses textbook quotes about prominent leaders and contrasts these with primary sources and facts well known by historians.

He also discusses how textbooks are written, published, and accepted and how these factors contribute to poor teaching and poor learning of history. "Five out of six adults do not take a course in history after high school." "Many Freshmen college students do not know in what century the Civil War was fought." He concludes that the textbooks represent an overarching greed for profit and fear of non-acceptance which far outweigh the search for truth.

"Facts that are well-known to professional historians are hidden from teachers, students, and the general public." "Some of the information provided is incorrect, some confusing, some unverifiable, along with startling omissions." Some groups cannot find themselves in the history books, and consequently are

unable to identify with the heroes portrayed. "This makes history hard to learn for students of color, children of working class parents, girls who notice a dearth of female historical figures, and those in any group which has not achieved economic success."

THE TEXTBOOK'S MAJOR PURPOSE IS TO PROMOTE PATRIOTISM

"The goal is to indoctrinate students so they will be 'good American citizens' with a fervent love for their country. The covers are emblazoned with patriotic symbols: the American flag, the bald eagle, the Statue of Liberty." Stories present every problem as if it is already solved in the U.S. They reiterate endlessly, "Look at what the U.S. has accomplished." "You have a proud heritage."

CREDIT IS GIVEN TO WHITES FOR EVERYTHING, INCLUDING PROGRESS

The textbooks promote the belief that the most important developments in world history are traceable to white Europeans, who get most of the space while the contributions, courage, and rebellions of African Americans, Native Americans, or Hispanics are downplayed, diminished in size, or omitted altogether. This process is known as "whitewashing."

The impression is left that white Europeans were the ones who taught simpler people to do important things. [Euro-centrism or Ethnocentrism] For example, Henry the Navigator of Portugal is portrayed as "discovering" the Azores and the Madeira Islands. The textbooks do not mention that it is now believed that Afro-Phoenicians sailed these same routes as early as 600 B.C.E.

CONQUEST, EXPLOITATION, AND RACISM ARE PORTRAYED AS HEROIC

The texts suggest that Christopher Columbus' voyage in 1492 was unprecedented and portray him as America's first great hero. "Everything in the usual account about Christopher Columbus is either wrong or unverifiable." The textbooks don't say that Columbus' voyages set the precedent for the transatlantic slave trade for the next four hundred years.

The texts don't report that on his first voyage Christopher Columbus kidnapped twenty-five Arawak Indians in Hispaniola [Haiti] and took them back with him to Spain as slaves, or that his conquest was only possible because Europeans had developed superior military technology including learning how to mount cannons on ships.

On his second voyage, Columbus came armed with seventeen ships (instead of three) plus 1200-1500 soldiers, cannons, crossbows, guns, cavalry, and attack dogs. "With his military might he easily overpowered the Arawaks." He controlled them with vicious punishments for even minor offences by cutting off their ears and noses. When the Indians rebelled, Columbus started a war against them, killing thousands. "He rounded up 2500 Arawaks, selected 500 of their best specimens to take back to Spain as slaves. Another 500 were chosen to serve as slaves to the soldiers who remained in Haiti. He extorted gold from the Arawaks by a system of tribute." They had to bring him gold every three months or suffer punishment. When the tribute system broke down, he installed forced-labor. Thousands of Arawaks rebelled by committing suicide, others were shipped as slaves to other places in the Caribbean and Europe. Within sixty years after Columbus' arrival, the Arawaks were all gone - victims of genocide.

"Only one textbook mentions the genocide in Haiti. Only six out of twelve textbooks say that the Spanish enslaved or exploited the Indians anywhere in America." "Only one book clearly associated Columbus with slavery, saying vaguely, 'Columbus was a great sailor and a brave and determined man. But he was not good at politics or business.'"

"No sensible Indian person," wrote George P. Horse Capture, "can celebrate the arrival of Columbus." The rest of us celebrate it with a national holiday in October.

IDEALISTIC ACTIVISM IS EITHER IGNORED OR VILIFIED

Courageous leaders are silenced by not quoting their impassioned speeches, and are vilified with slur words. "Slavery is treated without racism and abolitionism without idealism."

Only textbooks after 1970 expressed any sympathy for John Brown or for his cause, though he was the most radical white abolitionist. "One text called him 'deranged,' 'gaunt,' 'grim,' 'terrible,' 'crack-brained,' 'probably of unsound mind.'" Texts only recount his violent insurrections at Potowatomie KS and Harper's Ferry VA. (In truth, John Brown made many trips back and forth to Canada escorting groups of runaway slaves on the Underground Railroad. He also conducted organizational meetings in Canada and helped to teach people how to adjust to their new lives there.)

After he was hanged in 1859, John Brown's beliefs and actions inspired many others. Soldiers, black and white, marched into battle singing "John Brown's Body Lies A-Mouldering in the Grave." A few years later it was given new words to the same tune by Julia Ward Howe, and we sing it today as "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

During the Reconstruction Period after the Civil War, for the first time many Blacks were elected to public office. Yet, the textbooks tell us that during Reconstruction "the Blacks 'failed' because of lack of knowledge and education." During the same period many Blacks and Whites went to the South to help with the Freedmen's Bureau and to establish schools and colleges for emancipated Blacks. Schools and churches were burned and idealists were threatened with violence and death. Many Blacks were killed. The textbooks attribute the efforts of the idealists to "self-interest" and "ambition" and lump them all together into one undesirable group with the label "carpetbaggers" and "scalawags."

ETERNAL PROGRESS IN THE UNITED STATES IS THE HISTORY BOOK MESSAGE

"Ten out of twelve textbooks offer no clue that race relations in the U.S. systematically worsened during the period between 1890 and 1920. During this time every southern and border state legally made African Americans into second-class citizens." They were disenfranchised by voting restrictions; the Supreme Court upheld segregation in schools, colleges, hospitals, on railroads and ships, in public accommodations, and in the Armed Services. Blacks were barred from being mail carriers and playing baseball in the Major Leagues where they had previously done well. The Kentucky Derby eliminated black jockeys after they had won 15 out of the first 28 Derbies. Rewriting of the dramatic scripts of Uncle Tom's Cabin "changed Uncle Tom from a martyr who gave his life to protect his people to a sentimental dope who was loyal to his friendly master." The number of houses bombed, churches burned, and Blacks lynched escalated wildly during this period.

Many of these regressive racist policies were continued until the Civil Rights Movement from 1954-1970. A number of Civil Rights workers were killed: Medgar Evers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, Viola Luizzo, Michael Schwerner, and Rev. James Reeb (a Unitarian minister). Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X were assassinated. Public opinion galvanized enough to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Although some things are better now, and only older people can remember the worst days, violence continues and racism is still rampant in the U.S. "People of color are still blamed for being on the bottom. Whites are still exonerated for violence and oppression. Massive racial disparities still exist."

"The siren song of progress (and growth) lulls us into thinking that the problem is over and nothing more needs to be done. When we make racism invisible we obstruct our ability to see the truth in the present."

Racism has gotten worse in the past and can easily get worse in the present and the future. Have we stopped searching for the truth about racism simply because we don't see it? If so, like the textbooks, we are whitewashing history.

James W. Loewen, "Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your History Textbooks Got Wrong." New York, The New Press, 1995. Distributed by W.W. Norton, Inc. 500 Fifth Avenue, NY 10110
