

# Lies My Teacher Told Me

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## Introduction

### SOMETHING HAS GONE VERY WRONG

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*It would be better not to know so many things than to know so many things that are not so.*

-Josh Billings

*American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it.*

-James Baldwin

*Concealment of the historical truth is a crime against the people.*

-Gen. Petro Grigorenko, *Letter to a History Journal*, USSR, 1975

*Those who don't remember the past are condemned to repeat the eleventh grade.*

-James W. Loewen

High school students hate history. When they list their favorite subjects, history invariably comes in last. Students consider history "the most irrelevant" of twenty-one subjects commonly taught in high school. Bor-r-ing is the adjective they apply to it. When students can, they avoid it, even though most students get higher grades in history than in math, science, or English. Even when they are forced to take classes in history, they repress what they learn, so every year or two another study decries what our seventeen-year-olds don't know.

African American, Native American, and Latino students view history with a special dislike. They also learn history especially poorly. Students of color do only slightly worse than white students in mathematics. If you'll pardon my grammar, non-white students do more worse in English and most worse in history.

Something intriguing is going on here: surely history is not more difficult for minorities than trigonometry or Faulkner. Students don't even know they are alienated, only that they "don't like social studies" or "aren't any good at history." In college, most students of color give history departments a wide berth.

Many history teachers perceive the low morale in their classrooms. If they have a lot of time, light domestic responsibilities, sufficient resources, and a flexible principal, some teachers respond by abandoning the overstuffed textbooks and reinventing their American history courses. All too many teachers grow disheartened and settle for less. At least dimly aware that their students are not requiting their own love of history, these teachers withdraw some of their energy from their courses. Gradually they end up going through the motions, staying ahead of their students in the textbooks, covering only material that will appear on the next test.

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 calls his survey of American history "Iconoclasm I and II," because he sees his job as disabusing his charges of what they learned in high school. In no other field does this happen. Mathematics professors, for instance, know that non-Euclidean geometry is rarely taught in high school, but they don't assume that Euclidean geometry was mis-taught. Professors of English literature don't presume 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.

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

Outside of school, Americans show great interest in history. Historical novels often become bestsellers. The National Museum of American History is one of the three big draws of the Smithsonian Institution. Movies based on historical incidents or themes are a continuing source of fascination, from *Birth of a Nation* through *Gone with the Wind* to *Saving Private Ryan*. Our situation is this: American history is full of fantastic and important stories. These stories have the power to spellbind audiences, even audiences of difficult seventh-graders. These same stories show what America has been about and are directly relevant to our present society. American audiences, even young ones, need and want to know about their national past. Yet they sleep through the classes that present it.

### What has gone wrong?

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

Textbooks almost never use the present to illuminate the past. They might ask students to consider gender roles in contemporary society as a means of prompting students to think about what women did and did not achieve in the suffrage movement or in the more recent women's movement. They might ask students to prepare household budgets for the families of a janitor and a stockbroker as a means of prompting thinking about labor unions and social classes in the past and present. They might, but they don't. The present is not a source of information for writers of history textbooks.

Conversely, textbooks seldom use the past to illuminate the present. They portray the past as a simple-minded morality play. "Be a good citizen" is the message that textbooks extract from the past. "You have a proud heritage. Be all that you can be. After all, look at what the United States has accomplished." While there is nothing wrong with optimism, it can become something of a burden for students of color, children of working-class parents, girls who notice the dearth of female historical figures, or members of any group that has not achieved socio-economic success. The optimistic approach prevents any understanding of failure other than blaming the victim. No wonder children of color are alienated. Even

for male children from affluent white families, bland optimism gets pretty boring after eight hundred pages.

Textbooks in American history stand in sharp contrast to other teaching materials. Why are history textbooks so bad? Nationalism is one of the culprits. Textbooks are often muddled by the conflicting desires to promote inquiry and to indoctrinate blind patriotism. "Take a look in your history book, and you'll see why we should be proud," went an anthem often sung by 1950s high school acapella groups. But we need not even look inside. The titles themselves tell the story: *The Great Republic*, *The American Way*, *Land of Promise*, *Rise -- the American Nation*. Such titles differ from the titles of all other textbooks students read in high school or college. Chemistry books, for example, are called *Chemistry* or *Principles of Chemistry*, not *Rise of the Molecule*. And you can tell history textbooks just from their covers, graced as they are with American flags, bald eagles, the Statue of Liberty.

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

None of the facts is remembered, because they are presented simply as one damn thing after another. While textbook authors tend to include most of the trees and all too many twigs, they neglect to give readers even a glimpse of what they might find memorable: the forests. Textbooks stifle meaning by suppressing causation. Students exit history textbooks without having developed the ability to think coherently about social life.

Even though the books bulge with detail, and even though the courses are so busy they rarely reach the 1990s, our teachers and our textbooks still leave out most of what we need to know about the American past. Some of the factoids they present are flatly wrong or unverifiable. In sum, startling errors of omission and distortion mar American histories.

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

History can be imagined as a pyramid. At its base are the millions of primary sources—the plantation records, city directories, speeches, songs, photographs, newspaper articles, diaries, and letters that document times past. Based on these primary materials, historians write secondary works—books and articles on subjects ranging from daftness on Martha's Vineyard to Grant's tactics at Vicksburg. Historians produce hundreds of these works every year, many of them splendid. In theory, a few historians, working individually or in teams, then synthesize the secondary literature into tertiary works—textbooks covering all phases of U.S. history.

In practice, however, it doesn't happen that way. Instead, history textbooks are clones of each other. The first thing editors do when recruiting new authors is to send them a half-dozen examples of the competition. Often a textbook is written not by the authors whose names grace its cover, but by minions deep in the bowels of the publisher's offices. When historians do write textbooks, they risk snickers from their colleagues—tinged with envy, but snickers nonetheless: "Why are you devoting time to pedagogy rather than original research?" The result is not happy for textbook scholarship. Many history textbooks list up-to-the-minute secondary sources in their bibliographies, yet the narratives remain totally traditional—unaffected by recent research.

What would we think of a course in poetry in which students never read a poem? The editors' voice in an English literature textbook might be as dull as the voice in a history textbook, but at least in the English textbook the voice stills when the book presents original works of literature. The omniscient narrator's voice of history textbooks insulates students from the raw materials of history. Rarely do authors quote speeches, songs, diaries, or letters. Students need not be protected from this material. They can just as well read one paragraph from William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech as read *American Adventures*'s two paragraphs about it.

Textbooks also keep students in the dark about the nature of history. History is furious debate informed by evidence and reason. Textbooks encourage students to believe that history is facts to be learned. "We have not avoided controversial issues," announces one set of textbook authors; "instead, we have tried to offer reasoned judgments" on them—thus removing the controversy! Because textbooks employ such a godlike tone, it never occurs to most students to question them. "In retrospect I ask myself, why didn't I think to ask, for example, who were the original inhabitants of the Americas, what was their life like, and how did it change when Columbus arrived," wrote a student of mine over 20 years ago. "However, back then everything was presented as if it were the full picture," she continued, "so I never thought to doubt that it was."

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

## Chapter 1

### HANDICAPPED BY HISTORY: The Process of Hero-Making

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*What passes for identity in America is a series of myths about one's heroic adventures.*

-James Baldwin

*One is astonished in the study of history at the reverence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over. We must not remember that Daniel Webster got drunk but only remember that he was a splendid Constitutional lawyer. We must forget that George Washington was a slave owner. . . , and simply remember the things we regard as creditable and inspiring. The difficulty, of course, with this philosophy is that history loses its value as an incentive and example; it paints perfect men and noble nations but does not tell the truth.*

-W.E.B. DuBois

*By idolizing those whom we honor, we do a disservice both to them and to ourselves . . . We fail to recognize that we could go and do likewise.*

-Charles V. Willie

This chapter is about heroification, a degenerative process (much like calcification) that makes people over into heroes. Through this process, our educational media turn flesh-and-blood individuals into pious, perfect creatures without conflicts, pain, credibility, or human interest.

Many American history textbooks are studded with biographical vignettes of the VERY famous (*Land of Promise* devotes a box to each president) and the regular-famous (*The Challenge of Freedom* provides "Did You Know?" boxes about Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman to graduate from medical school in the United States, and Lorraine Hansberry, author of *A Raisin in the Sun*, among many others). In themselves, vignettes are not a bad idea. They instruct by human example. They show diverse ways that people can make a difference. They allow textbooks to give space to characters such as Blackwell and Hansberry, who relieve what would otherwise be a monolithic parade of white male political leaders. Biographical vignettes also provoke reflection as to our purpose in teaching history: Is Chester A. Arthur more deserving of space than, say, Frank Lloyd Wright? Who influences us more today—Wright, who invented the carport and transformed domestic architectural spaces, or Arthur, who, um, signed the first Civil Service Act? Whose rise to prominence provides more drama—Blackwell's or George W. Bush's (the son of a former President, a former governor of Texas, and a wealthy oil industrialist)? The choices are debatable, but surely textbooks should include some people based not only on what they achieved but also on the distance they traversed to achieve it.

We could go on to third- and fourth-guess the list of heroes in textbook pantheons. My concern here, however, is not who gets chosen, but rather what happens to the heroes when they are introduced into our history textbooks and our classrooms. Two twentieth-century Americans provide case studies of heroification: Woodrow Wilson and Helen Keller. Wilson was unarguably an important president, and he receives extensive textbook coverage. Keller, on the other hand, was a "little person" who pushed through no legislation, changed the course of no scientific discipline, declared no war. Only one of the twelve history textbooks I surveyed includes her photograph. But teachers love to talk about Keller and often

show audiovisual materials or recommend biographies that present her life as exemplary. All this attention ensures that students retain something about both of these historical figures, but they may be no better off for it. Heroification so distorts the lives of Keller and Wilson (and many others) that we cannot think straight about them.

Teachers have held up Helen Keller, the blind and deaf girl who overcame her physical handicaps, as an inspiration to generations of schoolchildren. Every fifth-grader knows the scene in which Anne Sullivan spells W-A-T-E-R into young Helen's hand at the pump. At least a dozen movies have been made on Keller's life. Each yields its version of the same cliché. A McGraw-Hill educational film concludes; "The gift of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan to the world is to constantly remind us of the wonder of the world around us and how much we owe those who taught us what it means, for there is no person that is unworthy or incapable of being helped, and the greatest service any person can make us is to help another reach true potential."

To draw such a bland maxim from the life of Helen Keller, historians and filmmakers have disregarded her actual biography and left out the lessons she specifically asked us to learn from it. Keller, who struggled so valiantly to learn to speak, has been made mute by history. The result is that we really don't know much about her. Over the past ten years, I have asked dozens of college students who Helen Keller was and what she did. They all know that she was a blind and deaf girl. Most of them know that she was befriended by a teacher, Anne Sullivan, and learned to read and write and even to speak. Some students can recall rather minute details of Keller's early life: that she lived in Alabama, that she was unruly and without manners before Sullivan came along, and so forth. A few know that Keller graduated from college. But about what happened next, about the whole of her adult life, they are ignorant. A few students venture that Keller became a "public figure" or a "humanitarian," perhaps on behalf of the blind or deaf. "She wrote, didn't she?" or "she spoke"—conjectures without content. Keller, who was born in 1880, graduated from Radcliffe in 1904 and died in 1968. To ignore the sixty-four years of her adult life or to encapsulate them with the single word "humanitarian" is to lie by omission.

The truth is that Helen Keller was a radical socialist. She joined the Socialist party of Massachusetts in 1909. She had become a social radical even before she graduated from Radcliffe, and not, she emphasized, because of any teachings available there. After the 1917 Russian Revolution, she sang the praises of the new communist nation: "In the East a new star is risen! With pain and anguish the old order has given birth to the new, and behold in the East a manchild is born! Onward, comrades, all together! Onward to the campfires of Russia! Onward to the coming dawn!" Keller hung a red flag over the desk in her study. Gradually she moved to the left of the Socialist party and became a Wobbly, a member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the syndicalist (communist) union persecuted by Woodrow Wilson.

Keller's commitment to socialism stemmed from her experience as a disabled person and from her sympathy for others with handicaps. She began by working to simplify the alphabet for the blind, but soon came to realize that to deal solely with blindness was to treat symptom, not cause. Through research she learned that blindness was not distributed randomly throughout the population but was concentrated in the lower class. Men who were poor might be blinded in industrial accidents or by inadequate medical care; poor women who became prostitutes faced the additional danger of syphilitic blindness. Thus Keller learned how the social class system controls people's opportunities in life, sometimes determining even whether they can see. Keller's research was not just book-learning; "I have visited sweatshops, factories, crowded slums. If I could not see it, I could smell it."

At the time Keller became a socialist, she was one of the most famous women on the planet. She soon became the most notorious. Her conversion to socialism caused a new storm of publicity—this time outraged. Newspapers that had extolled her courage and intelligence now emphasized her handicap.

Columnists charged that she had no independent sensory input and was in thrall to those who fed her information. Typical was the editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, who wrote that Keller's "mistakes spring out of the manifest limitations of her development." Keller recalled having met this editor: "At that time the compliments he paid me were so generous that I blush to remember them. But now that I have come out for socialism he reminds me and the public that I am blind and deaf and especially liable to error. I must have shrunk in intelligence during the years since I met him." She went on, "Oh, ridiculous *Brooklyn Eagle*! Socially blind and deaf, it defends an intolerable system, a system that is the cause of much of the physical blindness and deafness which we are trying to prevent."

Keller, who devoted much of her later life to raising funds for the American Foundation for the Blind, never wavered in her belief that our society needed radical change. Having herself fought so hard to speak, she helped found the American Civil Liberties Union to fight for the free speech of others. She sent \$100 to the NAACP with a letter of support that appeared in its magazine *The Crisis*—a radical act for a white person from Alabama in the 1920s. She supported Eugene V Debs, the Socialist candidate, in each of his campaigns for the presidency. She composed essays on the women's movement, on politics, on economics. Near the end of her life, she wrote to Elizabeth Curley Flynn, leader of the American Communist party, who was then languishing in jail, a victim of McCarthyism: "Loving birthday greetings, dear Elizabeth Flynn May the sense of serving mankind bring strength and peace into your brave heart!"

One may not agree with Helen Keller's positions. Her praise of the USSR now seems naive, embarrassing, to some even treasonous. But she was a radical—a fact few Americans know, because our schooling and our mass media left it out.

What we did not learn about Woodrow Wilson is even more remarkable. When I ask my college students to tell me what they recall about President Wilson, they respond with enthusiasm. They say that Wilson led our country reluctantly into World War I and after the war led the struggle nationally and internationally to establish the League of Nations. They associate Wilson with progressive causes like women's suffrage. A handful of students recall the Wilson administration's Palmer Raids against left-wing unions. But my students seldom know or speak about two antidemocratic policies that Wilson carried out: his racial segregation of the federal government and his military interventions in foreign countries.

Under Wilson, the United States intervened in Latin America more often than at any other time in our history. We landed troops in Mexico in 1914, Haiti in 1915, the Dominican Republic in 1916, Mexico again in 1916 (and nine more times before the end of Wilson's presidency), Cuba in 1917, and Panama in 1918. Throughout his administration Wilson maintained forces in Nicaragua, using them to determine Nicaragua's president and to force passage of a treaty preferential to the United States.

In 1917 Woodrow Wilson took on a major power when he started sending secret monetary aid to the "White" side of the Russian civil war. In the summer of 1918 he authorized a naval blockade of the Soviet Union and sent expeditionary forces to Murmansk, Archangel, and Vladivostok to help overthrow the Russian Revolution. With the blessing of Britain and France, and in a joint command with Japanese soldiers, American forces penetrated westward from Vladivostok to Lake Baikal, supporting Czech and White Russian forces that had declared an anticommunist government headquartered at Omsk. After briefly maintaining front lines as far west as the Volga, the White Russian forces disintegrated by the end of 1919, and our troops finally left Vladivostok on April 1, 1920.

Few Americans who were not alive at the time know anything about our "unknown war with Russia," to quote the title of Robert Maddox's book on this fiasco. Not one of the twelve American history textbooks in my sample even mentions it. Russian history textbooks, on the other hand, give the episode considerable coverage. According to Maddox: "The immediate effect of the intervention was to prolong a bloody civil war, thereby costing thousands of additional lives and wreaking enormous destruction on an

already battered society. And there were longer-range implications. Bolshevik leaders had clear proof . . . that the Western powers meant to destroy the Soviet government if given the chance."

This aggression fueled the suspicions that motivated the Soviets during the Cold War, and until its breakup the Soviet Union continued to claim damages for the invasion.

Wilson's invasions of Latin America are better known than his Russian adventure. Textbooks do cover some of them, and it is fascinating to watch textbook authors attempt to justify these episodes. Any accurate portrayal of the invasions could not possibly show Wilson or the United States in a favorable light. With hindsight we know that Wilson's interventions in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Nicaragua set the stage for the dictators Batista, Trujillo, the Duvaliers, and the Somozas, whose legacies still reverberate. Even in the 1910s, most of the invasions were unpopular in this country and provoked a torrent of criticism abroad. By the mid-1920s, Wilson's successors reversed his policies in Latin America. The authors of history textbooks know this, for a chapter or two after Wilson they laud our "Good Neighbor Policy," the renunciation of force in Latin America by Presidents Coolidge and Hoover, which was extended by Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Textbooks might (but don't) call Wilson's Latin American actions a "Bad Neighbor Policy" by comparison. Instead, faced with pleasantries, textbooks wriggle to get the hero off the hook, as in this example from *The Challenge of Freedom*: "President Wilson wanted the United States to build friendships with the countries of Latin America. However, he found this difficult. . ." Some textbooks blame the invasions on the countries invaded: "Wilson recoiled from an aggressive foreign policy," states *The American Pageant*. "Political turmoil in Haiti soon forced Wilson to eat some of his anti-imperialist words . . . Wilson reluctantly dispatched marines to protect American lives and property." *Land of Promise* is vague as to who caused the invasions but seems certain they were not Wilson's doing: "He soon discovered that because of forces he could not control, his ideas of morality and idealism had to give way to practical action." *Promise* goes on to assert Wilson's innocence: "Thus, though he believed it morally undesirable to send Marines into the Caribbean, he saw no way to avoid it." This passage is sheer invention. Unlike his secretary of the navy, who later complained that what Wilson "forced [me] to do in Haiti was a bitter pill for me," no documentary evidence suggests that Wilson suffered any such qualms about dispatching troops to the Caribbean.

All twelve of the textbooks I surveyed mention Wilson's 1914 invasion of Mexico, but they posit that the interventions were not Wilson's fault. "President Wilson was urged to send military forces into Mexico to protect American investments and to restore law and order," according to *Triumph of the American Nation*, whose authors emphasize that the president at first chose not to intervene. But "as the months passed, even President Wilson began to lose patience." Historian Walter Karp has shown that this version contradicts the facts—the invasion was Wilson's idea from the start, and it outraged Congress as well as the American people. According to Karp, Wilson's intervention was so outrageous that leaders of both sides of Mexico's ongoing civil war demanded that the U.S. forces leave; the pressure of public opinion in the United States and around the world finally influenced Wilson to recall the troops.

Textbook authors commonly use another device when describing our Mexican adventures: they identify Wilson as ordering our forces to withdraw, but nobody is specified as having ordered them in! Imparting information in a passive voice helps to insulate historical figures from their own unheroic or unethical deeds.

Some books go beyond omitting the actor and leave out the act itself. Half of the twelve textbooks do not even mention Wilson's takeover of Haiti. After U.S. marines invaded the country in 1915, they forced the Haitian legislature to select our preferred candidate as president. When Haiti refused to declare war on Germany after the United States did, we dissolved the Haitian legislature. Then the United States

supervised a pseudo-referendum to approve a new Haitian constitution, less democratic than the constitution it replaced; the referendum passed by a hilarious 98,225 to 768. As historian Piero Gleijes has noted, "It is not that Wilson failed in his earnest efforts to bring democracy to these little countries. He never tried. He intervened to impose hegemony, not democracy." The United States also attacked Haiti's proud tradition of individual ownership of small tracts of land, which dated back to the Haitian Revolution, in favor of the establishment of large plantations. American troops forced peasants in shackles to work on road construction crews. In 1919 Haitian citizens rose up and resisted U.S. occupation troops in a guerrilla war that cost more than 3,000 lives, most of them Haitian. Students who read *Triumph of the American Nation* learn this about Wilson's intervention in Haiti: "Neither the treaty nor the continued presence of American troops restored order completely. During the next four or five years, nearly 2,000 Haitians were killed in riots and other outbreaks of violence." This passive construction veils the circumstances about which George Barnett, a U.S. marine general, complained to his commander in Haiti: "Practically indiscriminate killing of natives has gone on for some time." Barnett termed this violent episode "the most startling thing of its kind that has ever taken place in the Marine Corps."

During the first two decades of this century, the United States effectively made colonies of Nicaragua, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and several other countries. Wilson's reaction to the Russian Revolution solidified the alignment of the United States with Europe's colonial powers. His was the first administration to be obsessed with the specter of communism, abroad and at home. Wilson was blunt about it. In Billings, Montana, stumping the West to seek support for the League of Nations, he warned, "There are apostles of Lenin in our own midst. I cannot imagine what it means to be an apostle of Lenin. It means to be an apostle of the night, of chaos, of disorder." Even after the White Russian alternative collapsed, Wilson refused to extend diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union. He participated in barring Russia from the peace negotiations after World War 1 and helped oust Bela Kun, the communist leader who had risen to power in Hungary. Wilson's sentiment for self-determination and democracy never had a chance against his three bedrock "ism"s: colonialism, racism, and anticomunism. A young Ho Chi Minh appealed to Woodrow Wilson at Versailles for self-determination for Vietnam, but Ho had all three strikes against him. Wilson refused to listen, and France retained control of Indochina. It seems that Wilson regarded self-determination as all right for, say, Belgium, but not for the likes of Latin America or Southeast Asia.

At home, Wilson's racial policies disgraced the office he held. His Republican predecessors had routinely appointed African-Americans to important offices, including those of port collector for New Orleans and the District of Columbia and register of the treasury. Presidents sometimes appointed African Americans as postmasters, particularly in southern towns with large black populations. African Americans took part in the Republican Party's national conventions and enjoyed some access to the White House. Woodrow Wilson, for whom many African Americans voted in 1912, changed all that. A southerner, Wilson had been president of Princeton, the only major northern university that refused to admit blacks. He was an outspoken white supremacist—his wife was even worse—and told racist stories in cabinet meetings. His administration submitted a legislative program intended to curtail the civil rights of African Americans, but Congress would not pass it. Unfazed, Wilson used his power as chief executive to segregate the federal government. He appointed southern whites to offices traditionally reserved for blacks. Wilson personally vetoed a clause on racial equality in the Covenant of the League of Nations. The one occasion on which Wilson met with African American leaders in the White House ended in a fiasco as the president virtually threw the visitors out of his office.

Wilson's legacy was extensive: he effectively closed the Democratic Party to African Americans for another two decades, and parts of the federal government remained segregated into the 1950s and beyond." In 1916 the Colored Advisory Committee of the Republican National Committee issued a statement on Wilson that, though partisan, was accurate: "No sooner had the Democratic Administration

come into power than Mr. Wilson and his advisors entered upon a policy to eliminate all colored citizens from representation in the Federal Government."

Of the twelve history textbooks I reviewed, only four accurately describe Wilson's racial policies. *Land of Promise* does the best job:

Woodrow Wilson's administration was openly hostile to black people. Wilson was an outspoken white supremacist who believed that black people were inferior. During his campaign for the presidency, Wilson promised to press for civil rights. But once in office he forgot his promises. Instead, Wilson ordered that white and black workers in federal government jobs be segregated from one another. This was the first time such segregation had existed since Reconstruction. When black federal employees in Southern cities protested the order, Wilson had the protesters fired. In November, 1914, a black delegation asked the President to reverse his policies. Wilson was rude and hostile and refused their demands.

Unfortunately, except for one other textbook, *The United States -- A History of the Republic, Promise* stands alone. Most of the textbooks that treat Wilson's racism give it only a sentence or two; five of the books never even mention this "black mark" on Wilson's presidency. One that does. *The American Way*, does something even more astonishing: it invents a happy ending! "Those in favor of segregation finally lost support in the administration. Their policies gradually were ended." This is simply not true. Omitting or absolving Wilson's racism goes beyond concealing a character blemish. It is overtly racist. No black person could ever consider Woodrow Wilson a hero. Textbooks that present him as a hero are written from a white perspective. The coverup denies all students the chance to learn something important about the interrelationship between the leader and the led. White Americans engaged in a new burst of racial violence during and immediately after Wilson's presidency. The tone set by the administration was one cause. Another was the release of America's first epic motion picture.

The filmmaker David W. Griffith quoted Wilson's two-volume history of the United States, now notorious for its racist view of Reconstruction, in his infamous masterpiece *The Clansman*, a paean [exultation] to the Ku Klux Klan for its role in putting down "black-dominated" Republican state governments during Reconstruction. Griffith based the movie on a book by Wilson's former classmate, Thomas Dixon, whose obsession with race was "unrivaled until Mein Kampf." At a private White House showing, Wilson saw the movie, now retitled *Birth of a Nation*, and returned Griffith's compliment: "It is like writing history with lightning, and my only regret is that it is all so true." Griffith would go on to use this quotation in successfully defending his film against NAACP charges that it was racially inflammatory.

This landmark of American cinema was not only the best technical production of its time but also probably the most racist major movie of all time. Dixon intended "to revolutionize northern sentiment by a presentation of history that would transform every man in my audience into a good Democrat! . . . And make no mistake about it—we are doing just that." Dixon did not overstate by much. Spurred by *Birth of a Nation*, William Simmons of Georgia reestablished the Ku Klux Klan. The racism seeping down from the White House encouraged this Klan, distinguishing it from its Reconstruction predecessor, which President Grant had succeeded in virtually eliminating in one state (South Carolina) and discouraging nationally for a time. The new KKK quickly became a national phenomenon. It grew to dominate the Democratic Party in many southern states, as well as in Indiana, Oklahoma, and Oregon. During Wilson's second term, a wave of antiblack race riots swept the country. Whites lynched blacks as far north as Duluth, Minnesota.

Americans need to learn from the Wilson era that there is a connection between racist presidential leadership and like-minded public response. To accomplish such education, however, textbooks would

have to make plain the relationship between cause and effect, between hero and followers. Instead, they reflexively ascribe noble intentions to the hero and invoke "the people" to excuse questionable actions and policies. According to *Triumph of the American Nation*: "As President, Wilson seemed to agree with most white Americans that segregation was in the best interests of black as well as white Americans."

Wilson was not only antiblack; he was also far and away our most nativist president, repeatedly questioning the loyalty of those he called "hyphenated Americans," "Any man who carries a hyphen about with him," said Wilson, "carries a dagger that he is ready to plunge into the vitals of this Republic whenever he gets ready." The American people responded to Wilson's lead with a wave of repression of white ethnic groups; again, most textbooks blame the people, not Wilson. *The American Tradition* admits that "President Wilson set up" the Creel Committee on Public Information, which saturated the United States with propaganda linking Germans to barbarism. But *Tradition* hastens to shield Wilson from the ensuing domestic fallout: "Although President Wilson had been careful in his war message to state that most Americans of German descent were 'true and loyal citizens,' the anti-German propaganda often caused them suffering."

Wilson displayed little regard for the rights of anyone whose opinions differed from his own. But textbooks take pains to insulate him from wrongdoing. "Congress," not Wilson, is credited with having passed the Espionage Act of June 1917 and the Sedition Act of the following year, probably the most serious attacks on the civil liberties of Americans since the short-lived Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. In fact, Wilson tried to strengthen the Espionage Act with a provision giving broad censorship powers directly to the president. Moreover, with Wilson's approval, his postmaster general used his new censorship powers to suppress all mail that was socialist, anti-British, pro-Irish, or that in any other way might, in his view, have threatened the war effort. Robert Goldstein served ten years in prison for producing *The Spirit of '76*, a film about the Revolutionary War that depicted the British, who were now our allies, unfavorably. Textbook authors suggest that wartime pressures excuse Wilson's suppression of civil liberties, but in 1920, when World War I was long over, Wilson vetoed a bill that would have abolished the Espionage and Sedition acts. Textbook authors blame the anti-communist and anti-labor union witch hunts of Wilson's second term on his illness and on an attorney general run amok. No evidence supports this view. Indeed, Attorney General Palmer asked Wilson in his last days as president to pardon Eugene V. Debs, who was serving time for a speech attributing World War I to economic interests and denouncing the Espionage Act as undemocratic." The president replied, "Never!" and Debs languished in prison until Warren Harding pardoned him. *The American Way* adopts perhaps the most innovative approach to absolving Wilson of wrongdoing; *Way* simply moves the "red scare" to the 1920s, after Wilson had left office!

Because hero ideation prevents textbooks from showing Wilson's short-comings, textbooks are hard-pressed to explain the results of the 1920 election. James Cox, the Democratic candidate who was Wilson's would-be successor, was crushed by the nonentity Warren G. Harding, who never even campaigned. In the biggest landslide in the history of American presidential politics, Harding got almost 64 percent of the major-party votes. The people were "tired," textbooks suggest, and just warned a "return to normalcy." The possibility that the electorate knew what it was doing in rejecting Wilson never occurs to our authors. It occurred to Helen Keller, however. She called Wilson "the greatest individual disappointment the world has ever known!"

It isn't only high school history courses that heroify Wilson. Textbooks such as *Land of Promise*, which discusses Wilson's racism, have to battle uphill, for they struggle against the archetypal Woodrow Wilson commemorated in so many history museums, public television documentaries, and historical novels.

For some years now, Michael Frisch has been conducting an experiment in social archetypes at the State University of New York at Buffalo. He asks his first-year college students for "the first ten names that you think of" in American history before the Civil War. When Frisch found that his students listed the same political and military figures year after year, replicating the privileged positions afforded them in high school textbooks, he added the proviso, "excluding presidents, generals, statesmen, etc." Frisch still gets a stable list, but one less predictable on the basis of history textbooks. Seven years out of eight, Betsy Ross has led the list. (Paul Revere usually comes in second.)

What is interesting about this choice is that Betsy Ross never did anything. Frisch notes that she played "no role whatsoever in the actual creation of any actual first flag." Ross came to prominence around 1876, when some of her descendants, seeking to create a tourist attraction in Philadelphia, largely invented the myth of the first flag. With justice, high school textbooks universally ignore Betsy Ross; not one of my twelve books lists her in its index. So how and why does her story get transmitted? Frisch offers a hilarious explanation: If George Washington is the Father of Our Country, then Betsy Ross is our Blessed Virgin Mary! Frisch describes the pageants reenacted (or did we only imagine them?) in our elementary school years: "Washington [the god] calls on the humble seamstress Betsy Ross in her tiny home and asks her if she will make the nation's flag, to his design. And Betsy promptly brings forth—from her lap!—the nation itself, and the promise of freedom and natural rights for all mankind."

I think Frisch is onto something, but maybe he is merely on something. Whether or not one buys his explanation, Betsy Ross's ranking among students surely proves the power of the social archetype. In the case of Woodrow Wilson, textbooks actually participate in creating the social archetype. Wilson is portrayed as "good," "idealist," "for self-determination, not colonial intervention," "foiled by an isolationist Senate," and "ahead of his time." We name institutions after him, from the Woodrow Wilson Center at the Smithsonian Institution to Woodrow Wilson Junior High School in Decatur, Illinois, where I misspent my adolescence. If a fifth face were to be chiseled into Mount Rushmore, many Americans would propose that it should be Wilson's." Against such archetypal goodness, even the unusually forthright treatment of Wilson's racism in *Land of Promise* cannot but fail to stick in students' minds.

Curators of history museums know that their visitors bring archetypes in with them. Some curators consciously design exhibits to confront these archetypes when they are inaccurate. Textbook authors, teachers, and moviemakers would better fulfill their educational mission if they also taught against inaccurate archetypes. Surely Woodrow Wilson does not need their flattering omissions, after all. His progressive legislative accomplishments in just his first two years, including tariff reform, an income tax, the Federal Reserve Act, and the Workingmen's Compensation Act, are almost unparalleled, Wilson's speeches on behalf of self-determination stirred the world, even if his actions did not live up to his words.

Why do textbooks promote wartless stereotypes? The authors' omissions and errors can hardly be accidental. The producers of the filmstrips, movies, and other educational materials on Helen Keller surely know she was a socialist; no one can read Keller's writings without becoming aware of her political and social philosophy. At least one textbook author, Thomas Bailey, senior author of *The American Pageant*, clearly knew of the 1918 U.S. invasion of Russia, for he wrote in a different venue in 1973, "American troops shot it out with Russian armed forces on Russian soil in two theatres from 1918 to 1920." Probably several other authors knew of it, too. Wilson's racism is also well known to professional historians. Why don't they let the public in on these matters? Heroification itself supplies a first answer. Socialism is repugnant to most Americans. So are racism and colonialism. Historian Michael Kammen suggests that authors selectively omit blemishes in order to make certain historical figures sympathetic to as many people as possible. The textbook critic Norma Gabler has testified that textbooks should "present our nation's patriots in a way that would honor and respect them"; in her eyes, admitting Keller's

socialism and Wilson's racism would hardly do that." In the early 1920s the American Legion said that authors of textbooks "are at fault in placing before immature pupils the blunders, foibles and frailties of prominent heroes and patriots of our Nation." The Legion would hardly be able to fault today's history textbooks on this count.

Perhaps we can go further. I began with Helen Keller because omitting the last sixty-four years of her life exemplifies a sort of culture-serving distortion. We teach Keller as an ideal, not a real person, to inspire our young people to emulate her. Keller becomes a mythic figure, the "woman who overcame"—but for what? There is no content! Just look what she accomplished, we're exhorted—yet we haven't a clue as to what that really was.

Keller did not want to be frozen in childhood. She herself stressed that the meaning of her life lay in what she did once she overcame her disability. In 1929, when she was nearing fifty, she wrote a second volume of autobiography, entitled *Midstream*, that described her social philosophy in some detail. Keller wrote about visiting mill towns, mining towns, and packing towns where workers were on strike. She intended that we learn of these experiences and of the conclusions to which they led her. Consistent with our American ideology of individualism, the truncated version of Helen Keller's story sanitizes a hero, leaving only the virtues of self-help and hard work. Keller herself, while scarcely opposing hard work, explicitly rejected this ideology.

I had once believed that we were all masters of our fate—that we could mould our lives into any form we pleased. ... I had overcome deafness and blindness sufficiently to be happy, and I supposed that anyone could come out victorious if he threw himself valiantly into life's struggle. But as I went more and more about the country I learned that I had spoken with assurance on a subject I knew little about. I forgot that I owed my success partly to the advantages of my birth and environment. . . . Now, however, I learned that the power to rise in the world is not within the reach of everyone.

Textbooks don't want to touch this idea. "There are three great taboos in textbook publishing," an editor at one of the biggest houses told me, "sex, religion, and social class." While I had been able to guess the first two, the third floored me. Sociologists know the importance of social class, after all. Reviewing American history textbooks convinced me that this editor was right, however. The notion that opportunity might be unequal in America, that not everyone has "the power to rise in the world," is anathema to textbook authors, and to many teachers as well. Educators would much rather present Keller as a bland source of encouragement and inspiration to our young—if she can do it, you can do it! So they leave out her adult life and make her entire existence over into a vague "up by the bootstraps" operation. In the process, they make this passionate fighter for the poor into something she never was in life: boring.

Woodrow Wilson gets similarly whitewashed. Although some history textbooks disclose more than others about the seamy underside of Wilson's presidency, all twelve books reviewed share a common tone; respectful, patriotic, even adulatory. Ironically, Wilson was widely despised in the 1920s, and it was only after World War II that he came to be viewed kindly by policymakers and historians. Our postwar bipartisan foreign policy, one of far-reaching interventions sheathed in humanitarian explanations, was "shaped decisively by the ideology and the international program developed by the Wilson Administration," according to historian N. Gordon Levin, Jr. Textbook authors are thus motivated to underplay or excuse Wilson's foreign interventions, many of which were counterproductive blunders, as well as other unsatisfactory aspects of his administration.

A host of other reasons—pressure from the "ruling class," pressure from textbook adoption committees, the wish to avoid ambiguities, a desire to shield children from harm or conflict, the perceived need to control children and avoid classroom disharmony, pressure to provide answers—may help explain why

textbooks omit troublesome facts, A certain etiquette coerces us all into speaking in respectful tones about the past, especially when we're passing on our heritage to our young. Could it be that we don't *want* to think badly of Woodrow Wilson? We seem to feel that a person like Helen Keller can be an inspiration only so long as she remains uncontroversial, one-dimensional. We don't want complicated icons. "People do not like to think. If one thinks, one must reach conclusions," Helen Keller pointed out. "Conclusions are not always pleasant," Most of us automatically shy away from conflict, and understandably so. We particularly seek to avoid conflict in the classroom. One reason is habit: we are so accustomed to blandness that the textbook or teacher who brought real intellectual controversy into the classroom would strike us as a violation of polite rhetoric, of classroom norms. We are supposed to speak well of the deceased, after all. Probably we are supposed to maintain the same attitude of awe, reverence, and respect when we read about our national heroes as when we visit our National Cathedral and view the final resting places of Helen Keller and Woodrow Wilson, as close physically in death as they were distant ideologically in life.

Whatever the causes, the results of Heroification are potentially crippling to students. Helen Keller is not the only person this approach treats like a child. Denying students the humanness of Keller, Wilson, and others keeps students in intellectual immaturity. It perpetuates what might be called a Disney version of history: The Hall of Presidents at Disneyland similarly presents our leaders as heroic statesmen, not imperfect human beings. Our children end up without realistic role models to inspire them. Students also develop no understanding of causality in history. Our nation's thirteen separate forays into Nicaragua, for instance, are surely worth knowing about as we attempt to understand why that country embraced a communist government in the 1980s. Textbooks should show history as contingent, affected by the power of ideas and individuals. Instead, they present history as a "done deal."

Do textbooks, documentary films, and American history courses achieve the results they seek with regard to our heroes? Surely textbook authors want us to think well of the historical figures they treat with such sympathy. And, on a superficial level at least, we do. Almost no recent high school graduates have anything "bad" to say about either Keller or Wilson. But are these two considered heroes? I have asked hundreds of {mostly white) college students on the first day of class to tell me who their heroes in American history are. As a rule, they do not pick Helen Keller, Woodrow Wilson, Christopher Columbus, anyone from Plymouth Colony, John Smith or anyone else in Virginia colony, Abraham Lincoln, or indeed anyone else in American history whom the textbooks implore them to choose. Our post-Watergate students view all such "establishment" heroes cynically. They're bor-r-ring.

Some students choose "none"—that is, they say they have no heroes in American history. Other students display the characteristically American sympathy for the underdog by choosing African Americans: Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, perhaps Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, or Frederick Douglass. Or they choose men and women from other countries: Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela.

In one sense this is a healthy development. Surely we want students to be skeptical. Probably we want them to challenge being told whom to believe in. But replying "none" is too glib, too nihilistic, for my taste. It is, however, an understandable response to heroification. For when textbook authors leave out the warts, the problems, the unfortunate character traits, and the mistaken ideas, they reduce heroes from dramatic men and women to melodramatic stick figures. Their inner struggles disappear and they become goody-goody, not merely good.

Like other peoples around the world, we Americans need heroes. Statements such as "If Martin Luther King were alive, he'd . . ." suggest one function of historical figures in our contemporary society. Most of us tend to think well of ourselves when we have acted as we imagine our heroes might have done. Who our heroes are and whether they are presented in a way that makes them lifelike, hence usable as role models, could have a significant bearing on our conduct in the world.

Often, the first “hero” in presented in American history is none other than Christopher Columbus. “Care should be taken to vindicate great names from pernicious erudition,” wrote Washington Irving, defending heroification. Irving’s three-volume biography of Columbus, published in 1828, still influences what high school teachers and textbooks say about the Admiral of the Ocean Sea (the title bestowed to him by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain upon his return from his first voyage in 1492). Therefore, it will come as no surprise that heroification has stolen from us the important facets of his life, leaving only melodramatic minutiae.

## **Chapter 2. 1493:**

### **The True Importance of Christopher Columbus**

In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Christopher Columbus sailed in from the blue. American history books present Columbus pretty much without precedent, and they portray him as America's first great hero. In so canonizing him, they reflect our national culture. Indeed, now that President's Day has combined Washington's and Lincoln's birthdays, Columbus is one of only two people the United States honors by name in a national holiday. The one date that every school child remembers is 1492, and sure enough, all twelve textbooks I surveyed include it. But they leave out virtually everything that is important to know about Columbus and the European exploration of the Americas. Meanwhile, they make up all kinds of details to tell a better story and to humanize Columbus so that readers will identify with him.

Columbus, like Christ, was so pivotal that historians use him to divide the past into epochs, making the Americas before 1492 "pre-Columbian." American history textbooks recognize Columbus's importance by granting him an average of eight hundred words, two and a half pages, including a picture and a map, which is a lot of space, considering all the material these books must cover. Their heroic collective account goes something like this:

Born in Genoa, Italy, of humble parents, Christopher Columbus grew up to become an experienced seafarer. He sailed the Atlantic as far as Iceland and West Africa. His adventures convinced him that the world must be round. Therefore the fabled riches of the spices, silk, and gold from the East could be had by sailing west, superseding the overland route through the Middle East, which the Turks had closed off to commerce.

To get funding for his enterprise, Columbus beseeched monarch after monarch in western Europe. After at first being dismissed by Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, Columbus finally got his chance when Queen Isabella decided to underwrite a modest expedition.

Columbus outfitted three pitifully small ships, the Nina, the Pinto, and the Santa Maria, and set forth from Spain. The journey was difficult. The ships sailed west into the unknown Atlantic for more than two months. The crew almost mutinied and threatened to throw Columbus overboard. Finally they reached the West Indies on October 12, 1492.

Although Columbus made three more voyages to America, he never really knew he had discovered a New World. He died in obscurity, unappreciated and penniless. Yet without his daring American history would have been very different, for in a sense Columbus made it all possible.

Unfortunately, almost everything in this traditional account is either wrong or unverifiable. The authors of history textbooks have taken us on a trip of their own, away from the facts of history, into the realm of myth. They and we have been duped by an outrageous concoction of lies, half-truths, truths, and omissions, that is in large part traceable to the first half of the nineteenth century.

The textbooks' first mistake is to underplay previous explorers. People from other continents had reached the Americas many times before 1492. Even if Columbus had never sailed, other Europeans would have soon reached the Americas. Indeed, Europeans may already have been fishing off Newfoundland in the 1480s. In a sense Columbus's voyage was not the first but the last "discovery" of the Americas. It was

epoch-making because of the way in which Europe responded. Columbus's importance is therefore primarily attributable to changing conditions in Europe, not to his having reached a "new" continent.

American history textbooks seem to understand the need to cover social changes in Europe in the years leading up to 1492. They point out that history passed the Vikings by and devote several pages to the reasons Europe was ready this time "to take advantage of the discovery" of America, as one textbook puts it. Unfortunately, none of the textbooks provides substantive analysis of the major changes that prompted the new response.

All but one of the twelve books I examined begin the Columbus story with Marco Polo and the Crusades. (*American Adventures* starts simply with Columbus.) Here is their composite account of what was happening in Europe:

Life in Europe was slow paced. Curiosity about the rest of the world was at a low point. Then, many changes took place in Europe during the 500 years before Columbus's discovery of the Americas in 1492. People's horizons gradually widened, and they became more curious about the world beyond their own localities.

Europe was stirring with new ideas. Many Europeans were filled with burning curiosity. They were living in a period called the Renaissance. What started Europeans thinking new thoughts and dreaming new dreams? A series of wars called the Crusades were partly responsible. The Crusades caused great changes in the ways that Europeans thought and acted. The desire for more trade quickly spread. The old trade routes to Asia had always been very difficult.

The accounts resemble each other closely. Sometimes different textbooks even use the same phrases. Overall, the level of scholarship is discouragingly low, perhaps because their authors are more at home in American history than European history. They provide no real causal explanations for the age of European conquest. Instead, they argue for Europe's greatness in transparently psychological terms "people grew more curious." Such arguments make sociologists smile: we know that nobody measured the curiosity level in Spain in 1492 or can with authority compare it to the curiosity level in, say, Norway or Iceland in 1005.

Here is the account in *The American Way*:

What made these Europeans so daring was their belief in themselves. The people of Europe believed that human beings were the highest form of life on earth. This was the philosophy, or belief, of humanism. It was combined with a growing interest in technology or tools and their uses. The Europeans believed that by using their intelligence, they could develop new ways to do things.

This is not the place to debate the precepts or significance of humanism, a philosophical movement that clashed with orthodox Catholicism. In any case, humanism can hardly explain Columbus, since he and his royal sponsors were devout orthodox Catholics, not humanists. *The American Way* tells us, nonetheless, that Columbus "had the humanist's belief that people could do anything if they knew enough and tried hard enough." This is Columbus as the Little Engine That Could!

Several textbooks claim that Europe was becoming richer and that the new wealth led to more trade. Actually, as the historian Angus Calder has pointed out, "Europe was smaller and poorer in the fifteenth century than it had been in the thirteenth," owing in part to the bubonic plague.

Some teachers still teach what their predecessors taught me forty years ago: that Europe needed spices to disguise the taste of bad meat, but the bad Turks cut off the spice trade. Three books, *The American Tradition*, *Land of Promise*, and *The American Way* repeat this falsehood. In the words of *Land of Promise*, “Then, after 1453, when Constantinople fell to the Turks, trade with the East all but stopped.” But A. H. Lybyer disproved this statement in 1915! Turkey had nothing to do with the development of new routes to the Indies. On the contrary, the Turks had every reason to keep the old Eastern Mediterranean route open, since they made money from it.

In 1957 Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff published a book that has become a standard treatise for graduate students of history, *The Modern Researcher*, in which they pointed out how since 1915 textbooks have perpetuated this particular error. Probably several of the half-dozen authors of the offending textbooks encountered *The Modern Researcher* in graduate school. Somehow the information did not stick, though. This may be because blaming Turks fits with the West's archetypal conviction that followers of Islam are likely to behave irrationally or nastily. In proposing that Congress declare Columbus Day a national holiday in 1963, Rep. Roland Libonati put it this way: “His Christian faith gave to him a religious incentive to thwart the piratical activities of the Turkish marauders preying upon the trading ships of the Christian world.” *The American Tradition*, *Land of Promise*, and *The American Way* continue to reinforce this archetype of a vaguely threatening Islam. College students today are therefore astonished to learn that Turks and Moors allowed Jews and Christians freedom of worship at a time when European Christians tortured or expelled Jews and Muslims. Not a single textbook tells that the Portuguese fleet in 1507 blocked the Red Sea and Persian Gulf to stop trade along the old route, because Portugal controlled the new route, around Africa.

Most textbooks note the increase in international trade and commerce, and some relate the rise of nation-states under monarchies. Otherwise, they do a poor job of describing the changes in Europe that led to the Age of Exploration. Some textbooks even invoke the Protestant Reformation, although it didn't begin until twenty-five years after 1492!

What is going on here? We must pay attention to what the textbooks are telling us and what they are not telling us. The changes in Europe not only prompted Columbus's voyages and the probable contemporaneous trips to America by Portuguese, Basque, and Bristol fishermen, but they also paved the way for Europe's domination of the world for the next five hundred years. Except for the invention of agriculture, this was probably the most consequential development in human history. Our history books ought to discuss seriously what happened and why, instead of supplying vague, nearly circular pronouncements such as this, from *The American Tradition*: “Interest in practical matters and the world outside Europe led to advances in shipbuilding and navigation.”

Perhaps foremost among the significant factors the textbooks leave out are advances in military technology. Around 1400, European rulers began to commission ever bigger guns and learned to mount them on ships. Europe's incessant wars gave rise to this arms race, which also ushered in refinements in archery, drill, and siege warfare. China, the Ottoman Empire, and other nations in Asia and Africa now fell prey to European arms, and in 1493 the Americas began to succumb as well.

We live with this arms race still. Since the demise of the Soviet Union, the nuclear arms race may have come to a temporary resting point. But the West's advantage in military technology over the rest of the world, jealously maintained from the 1400s on, remains very much contested. Western nations continue to try to keep non-Western nations disadvantaged in military technology. Just as the thirteen British colonies tried to outlaw the sale of guns to Native Americans, the United States now tries to outlaw the sale of nuclear technology to Third World countries. Since money is to be made in the arms trade, however, and since all nations need military allies, the arms trade with non-Western nations persists. The

Western advantage in military technology is still a burning issue. Nonetheless, not a single textbook mentions arms as a cause of European world domination.

In the years before Columbus's voyages, Europe also expanded the use of new forms of social technology, bureaucracy, double-entry bookkeeping, and mechanical printing. Bureaucracy, which today has negative connotations, was actually a practical innovation that allowed rulers and merchants to manage far-flung enterprises efficiently. So did double-entry bookkeeping, based on the decimal system, which Europeans first picked up from Arab traders. The printing press and increased literacy allowed news of Columbus's findings to travel across Europe much farther and faster than news of the Vikings' expeditions.

A third important development was ideological or even theological: amassing wealth and dominating other people came to be positively valued as the key means of winning esteem on earth and salvation in the hereafter. As Columbus put it, "Gold is most excellent; gold constitutes treasure; and he who has it does all he wants in the world, and can even lift souls up to Paradise."

By 1493 Columbus planned to plunder Haiti. The sources are perfectly clear about Columbus's motivation: in 1495, for instance, Michele de Cuneo wrote about accompanying Columbus on his 1494 expedition into the interior of Haiti: "After we had rested for several days in our settlement, it seemed to the Lord Admiral that it was time to put into execution his desire to search for gold, which was the main reason he had started on so great a voyage full of so many dangers." Columbus was no greedier than the Spanish, or later the English and French. But textbooks downplay the pursuit of wealth as a motive for coming to the Americas when they describe Columbus and later explorers and colonists. Even the Pilgrims left Europe partly to make money, but you would never know it from our textbooks. Their authors apparently believe that to have America explored and colonized for economic gain is somehow undignified.

A fourth factor affecting Europe's readiness to embrace a "new" continent was the particular nature of European Christianity. Europeans believed in a transportable, proselytizing religion that rationalized conquest. (Followers of Islam share this characteristic.) Typically, after "discovering" an island and encountering a tribe of Indians new to them, the Spaniards would read aloud (in Spanish) what came to be called "the Requirement." Here is one version:

I implore you to recognize the Church as a lady and in the name of the Pope take the King as lord of this land and obey his mandates. If you do not do it, I tell you that with the help of God I will enter powerfully against you all. I will make war everywhere and every way that I can. I will subject you to the yoke and obedience to the Church and to his majesty. I will take your women and children and make them slaves. . . . The deaths and injuries that you will receive from here on will be your own fault and not that of his majesty nor of the gentlemen that accompany me.

Having thus satisfied their consciences by offering the Indians a chance to convert to Christianity, the Spaniards then felt free to do whatever they wanted with the people they had just "discovered."

A fifth development that caused Europe's reaction to Columbus's reports about Haiti to differ radically from reactions to earlier expeditions was Europe's recent success in taking over and exploiting various island societies. On Malta, Sardinia, the Canary Islands, and, later, in Ireland, Europeans learned that conquest of this sort was a route to wealth. In addition, new and more deadly forms of smallpox and bubonic plague had arisen in Europe since the Vikings had sailed. Passed on to those the Europeans met, these diseases helped Europe conquer the Americas and, later, the islands of the Pacific. Except for one paragraph on disease in *The American Pageant*, not one of the twelve textbooks mentions either of these factors as contributing to European world dominance.

. . . High school students don't usually think about the rise of Europe to world domination. It is rarely presented as a question. It seems natural, a given, not something that needs to be explained. Deep down, our culture encourages us to imagine that we are richer and more powerful because we're smarter. Of course, there are no studies showing Americans to be more intelligent than, say, Iraqis. Still, since textbooks don't identify or encourage us to think about the real causes, "we're smarter" festers as a possibility. Also left festering is the notion that "it's natural" for one group to dominate another. While history brims with examples of national domination, it also is full of counterexamples. The contact between Norse and Indians around 1000 A.D., for example, though mostly unfriendly, was not marked by domination. The triracial Native American societies that developed after 1492 from Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, through Florida to Ecuador, also offer evidence that domination is not natural but cultural.

The way American history textbooks treat Columbus reinforces the tendency not to think about the process of domination. The traditional picture of Columbus landing on the American shore shows him dominating immediately, and this is based on fact; Columbus claimed everything he saw right off the boat. When textbooks celebrate this process, they imply that taking the land and dominating the Indians was inevitable if not natural. This is unfortunate, because Columbus's voyages constitute a splendid teachable moment. As official missions of a nation-state, they exemplify the new Europe. Merchants and rulers collaborated to finance and authorize them. The second expedition was heavily armed. Columbus carefully documented the voyages, including directions, currents, shoals, and descriptions of the Indians as ripe for subjugation. Thanks to the printing press, detailed news of Haiti and later conquests spread swiftly. Columbus had personal experience of the Atlantic islands recently taken over by Portugal and Spain, as well as with the slave trade in West Africa. Most important, his purpose from the beginning was not mere exploration or even trade, but conquest and exploitation, for which he used religion as a rationale. If textbooks included these facts, they might induce students to think intelligently about why the West dominates the world today.

The textbooks concede that Columbus did not start from scratch. Every textbook account of the European exploration of the Americas begins with Prince Henry the Navigator, of Portugal, between 1415 and 1460. Henry is portrayed as discovering Madeira and the Azores and sending out ships to circumnavigate Africa for the first time. The textbook authors seem unaware that ancient Phoenicians and Egyptians sailed at least as far as Ireland and England, reached Madeira and the Azores, traded with the aboriginal inhabitants of the Canary Islands, and sailed all the way around Africa before 600 B.C. Instead, the textbooks credit Bartolomeu Dias with being the first to round the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa in 1488. Omitting the accomplishments of the Afro-Phoenicians is ironic, because it was Prince Henry's knowledge of their feats that inspired him to replicate them. But this information clashes with another social archetype: our culture views modern technology as a European development. So the Afro-Phoenicians' feats do not conform to the textbooks' overall story line about how white Europeans taught the rest of the world how to do things. None of the textbooks credits the Muslims with preserving Greek wisdom, enhancing it with ideas from China, India, and Africa, and then passing on the resulting knowledge to Europe via Spain. Instead, they show Henry inventing navigation and imply that before Europe there was nothing, at least nothing modern.

In fact, Henry's work was based mostly on ideas that were known to the ancient Egyptians and Phoenicians and had been developed further in Arabia, North Africa, and China. Even the word the Portuguese applied to their new ships, caravel, derived from the Egyptian caravos. Cultures do not evolve in a vacuum; diffusion of ideas is perhaps the most important cause of cultural development. Contact with other cultures often triggers a cultural flowering. Anthropologists call this phenomenon efflorescence. Children in elementary school learn that Persian and Mediterranean civilizations flowered in antiquity due to their location on trade routes. Here with Henry at the dawn of European world domination, textbooks have a golden opportunity to apply this same idea of cultural diffusion to Europe, but they squander it.

Not only did Henry have to develop new instruments, according to *The American Way*, but “people didn’t know how to build seagoing ships, either.” Students are left without a clue as to how aborigines ever reached Australia, Polynesians reached Madagascar, or Afro-Phoenicians reached the Canaries.

The evidence for each of these pre-Columbian journeys offers fascinating glimpses into the societies and cultures that existed on both sides of the Atlantic and in Asia before 1492. They also reveal controversies among those who study the distant past. If textbooks allowed for controversy, they could show students which claims rest on strong evidence, which on softer ground. As they challenged students to make their own decisions as to what probably happened, they would also be introducing students to the various methods and forms of evidence oral history, written records, cultural similarities, linguistic changes, human blood types, pottery, archaeological dating, and plant migrations that researchers use to derive knowledge about the distant past. Unfortunately, textbooks seem locked into a rhetoric of certainty. . . It’s easier just to retell the old familiar Columbus story.

Seven of the twelve textbooks I studied at least mention the expeditions of the Norse. These daring sailors reached America in a series of voyages across the North Atlantic, establishing communities on the Faeroe Islands, Iceland, and Greenland. The Norse colony on Greenland lasted five hundred years (982-C.1500), as long as the European settlement of the Americas until now. From Greenland a series of expeditions, some planned, some accidental, reached various parts of North America, including Baffin Land, Labrador, Newfoundland, and possibly New England.

. . . It may be fair to say that the Vikings' voyages had little lasting effect on the fate of the world. Should textbooks therefore leave them out? Is impact on the present the sole reason for including an event or fact? It cannot be, of course, or our history books would shrink to twenty-page pamphlets. We include the Norse voyages, not for their ostensible geopolitical significance, but because including them gives a more complete picture of the past. Moreover, if textbooks would only intelligently compare the Norse voyages to Columbus's second voyage, they would help students understand the changes that took place in Europe between 1000 and 1493. As we shall see, Columbus's second voyage was ten times larger than the Norse attempts at settlement. The new European ability to mobilize was in part responsible for Columbus's voyages taking on their awesome significance.

Although seafarers from Africa and Asia may also have made it to the Americas, they never make it into history textbooks. The best known are the voyages of the Afro-Phoenicians, probably launched from Morocco but ultimately from Egypt, that are said to have reached the Atlantic coast of Mexico in about 750 B.C. Organic material associated with colossal heads of basalt that stand along the eastern coast of Mexico stand has been dated to around 750 B.C. The stone heads are realistic portraits of West Africans, according to the anthropologist Ivan Van Sertima, who has done much to bring these images into popular consciousness. Around the same time Indians elsewhere in Mexico created small ceramic and stone sculptures of what seem to be Caticasoid and Negroid faces. As Alexander von Wuthenau, who collected many such terracotta statues, put it, “It is contradictory to elementary logic and to all artistic experience that an Indian could depict in a masterly way the head of a Negro or of a white person without missing a single racial characteristic, unless he had seen such a person.” Although some scholars have dismissed the Caucasoid images as “stylized” Indian heads and the Negroid faces as representing jaguars or human babies, the faces nonetheless stare back at us, steadfastly Caucasoid or Negroid, hard to explain away. Ivan von Sertima and others have adduced additional bits of evidence, including similarities in looms and other cultural elements, identical strains of cotton that probably required human intervention to cross the Atlantic, and information in Arab historical sources about extensive ocean navigation by Africans and Phoenicians in the eighth century B.C.

What is the importance today of these African and Phoenician predecessors of Columbus? Like the Vikings, they provide a fascinating story, one that can hold high school students on the edge of their seats. We might also realize another kind of importance by contemplating the particular meaning of Columbus Day. Italian Americans infer something positive about their “national character” from the exploits of their ethnic ancestors. The American sociologist George Homans once quipped, explaining why he had written on his own ancestors in East Anglia, rather than on some larger group elsewhere; “They may be humans, but not Homans!” Similarly, Scandinavians and Scandinavian Americans have always believed the Norse sagas about the Vikings, even when most historians did not, and finally confirmed them by conducting archaeological research in Newfoundland.

If Columbus is especially relevant to western Europeans and the Vikings to Scandinavians, what is the meaning to African Americans of the pre-Columbian voyagers from Africa? After visiting the Von Wuthenau museum in Mexico City, the Afro-Carib scholar Tiho Narva wrote, “With his unique collection surrounding me, I had an eerie feeling that veils obscuring the past had been torn asunder. . . . Somehow, upon leaving the museum I suddenly felt that I could walk taller for the rest of my days.” Von Sertima’s book is in its sixteenth printing and he is lionized by black undergraduates across America. Rap music groups chant “but we already had been there” in verses about Columbus. Obviously, African Americans want to see positive images of “themselves” in American history. So do we all.

As with the Norse, including the Afro-Phoenicians gives a more complete and complex picture of the past, showing that navigation and exploration did not begin with Europe in the 1400s. Like the Norse, the Afro-Phoenicians illustrate human possibility, in this case black possibility, or, more accurately, the prowess of a multiracial society. Unlike the Norse, the Africans and Phoenicians seem to have made a permanent impact on the Americas. The huge stone statues in Mexico imply as much. It took enormous effort to quarry these basalt blocks, each weighing ten to forty tons, move them from quarries seventy-five miles away, and sculpt them into heads six to ten feet tall. Wherever they were from, the human models for these heads were important people, people to be worshiped or obeyed or at least remembered. However, archaeologists have not agreed that they were Afro-Phoenicians, so including the story opens a window through which students can view an ongoing controversy.

. . . American history textbooks promote the belief that most important developments in world history are traceable to Europe. To grant too much human potential to pre-Columbian Africans might jar European American sensibilities. As Samuel Marble put it, “The possibility of African discovery of America has never been a tempting one for American historians.” Teachers and curricula that present African history and African Americans in a positive light are often condemned for being Afrocentric. White historians insist that the case for the Afro-Phoenicians has not been proven; we must not distort history to improve black children’s self-image, they say. They are right that the case hasn’t been proven, but textbooks should include the Afro-Phoenicians as a possibility, a controversy.

. . . When Columbus reached Haiti, he found the Arawaks in possession of some spear points made of “guanine.” The Indians said they got them from black traders who had come from the south and east. Guanine proved to be an alloy of gold, silver, and copper, identical to the gold alloy preferred by West Africans, who also called it “guanine.” Islamic historians have recorded stories of voyages west from Mali in West Africa around 1311, during the reign of Mansa Bakari II. From time to time in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, shipwrecked African vessels-remnants, presumably, of transatlantic trade washed up on Cape Verde. From contacts in West Africa, the Portuguese heard that African traders were visiting Brazil in the mid-1400s; this knowledge may have influenced Portugal to insist on moving the pope’s “line of demarcation” further west in the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494). Traces of diseases common in Africa have been detected in pre-Columbian corpses in Brazil. Columbus’s son Ferdinand, who accompanied the admiral on his third voyage, reports that people they met or heard about in eastern

Honduras “are almost black in color, ugly in aspect,” probably Africans. The first Europeans to reach Panama-Balboa and company-reported seeing black slaves in an Indian town. The Indians said they had captured them from a nearby black community. Oral history from Afro-Mexicans contains tales of pre-Columbian crossings from West Africa. In all, then, data from diverse sources suggest that pre-Columbian voyages from West Africa to America were probable.

... While leaving out Columbus's predecessors, American history books continue to make mistakes when they get to the last “discoverer.” They present cut-and-dried answers, mostly glorifying Columbus, always avoiding uncertainty or controversy. . . [T]extbooks get the date right, and the names of the ships, but most of the rest that they tell us is untrustworthy. Many aspects of Columbus's life remain a mystery. He claimed to be from Genoa, Italy, and there is evidence that he was. There is also evidence that he wasn't: Columbus didn't seem to be able to write in Italian, even when writing to people in Genoa. Some historians believe he was Jewish or convert to Christianity, probably from Spain (Spain was pressuring its Jews to convert to Christianity or leave the country.) He may have been a Genoese Jew. Still other historians claim he was from Corsica, Portugal, or elsewhere.

What about Columbus's social class background? One textbook tells us he was poor, “the son of a poor Genoese weaver,” while another assures us he was rich, “the son of a prosperous wool-weaver.” Each is certain, but people who have spent years studying Columbus say we cannot be sure.

We do not even know for certain where Columbus thought he was going. Evidence suggests he was seeking Japan, India, and Indonesia; other evidence indicates he was trying to reach “new” lands to the west. Historians have asserted each viewpoint for centuries. Because “India was known for its great wealth,” Las Casas points out, it was in Columbus's interest “to induce the monarchs, always doubtful about his enterprise, to believe him when he said he was setting out in search of a western route to India. After reviewing the evidence, Columbus's recent biographer Kirkpatrick Sale concluded “we will likely never know for sure.” Sale noted that such a conclusion is “not very satisfactory for those who demand certainty in their historical tales.” Predictably, all our textbooks are of this type: all “know” he was seeking Japan and the East Indies. Thus authors keep their readers from realizing that historians do not know all the answers, hence history is not just a process of memorizing them.

The extent to which textbooks sometimes disagree, particularly when each seems so certain of what it declares, can be pretty scary. What was the weather like during Columbus's 1492 trip? According to *Land of Promise*, his ships were “storm-battered”; but *American Adventures* says they enjoyed “peaceful seas.” How long was the voyage? “After more than two months at sea,” according to *The Challenge of Freedom*, the crews saw land; but *The American Adventure* says the voyage lasted “nearly a month.” What were the Americas like when Columbus arrived? “Thickly peopled,” in one book, quoting Columbus; “thinly spread,” according to another.

To make a better myth, American culture has perpetuated the idea that Columbus was boldly forging ahead while everyone else, even his own crew, imagined the world was flat. The *American Pageant* is the only textbook that still repeats this hoax, “The superstitious sailors . . . , grew increasingly mutinous,” according to *Pageant*, because they were “fearful of sailing over the edge of the world.”

In truth, few people on both sides of the Atlantic believed in 1492 that the world was flat. Most Europeans and Native Americans knew the world to be round. It looks round. It casts a circular shadow on the moon. Sailors see its roundness when ships disappear over the horizon, hull first, then sails.

Washington Irving wins credit for popularizing the flat-earth fable in 1828. In his bestselling biography of Columbus, Irving described Columbus's supposed defense of his round-earth theory before the flat-earth

savants at Salamanca University. Irving himself surely knew the story to be fiction. He probably thought it added a nice dramatic flourish and would do no harm. But it does. It invites us to believe that the “primitives” of the world, admittedly including pre-Columbian Europeans, had only a crude understanding of the planet they lived on, until aided by a forward-thinking European. It also turns Columbus into a man of science who corrected our faulty geography. Intense debunking of the flat-earth legend by professional historians has made an impact. Yet even the eleven textbooks that do not repeat Irving's fiction choose wholly ineffectual words to counter it. This passage from *Triumph of the American Nation* exemplifies the problem: “Convinced that the earth was round, a knowledge shared by many informed people of the day, Columbus believed that if he sailed far enough to the west he would reach Asia.” To be sure, the minor subordinate clause quietly notes that not everyone, perhaps not even most people, believed in flat-earth geography. But the main subordinate clause and the primary clause emphasize Columbus's own belief that the earth was round. The sentence makes little sense unless the reader infers that Columbus's belief was unusual. I have talked not only with students but also with teachers who have read textbooks like *Triumph* without noticing this point. Thus teachers often still believe and still relay to their students the flat-earth legend.

Even the death of Columbus has been changed to make a better story. Having Columbus come to a tragic end—sick, poor, and ignorant of his great accomplishment—adds melodramatic interest. “Columbus's discoveries were not immediately appreciated by the Spanish government,” according to *The American Adventure*. “He died in neglect in 1506.” In fact, Spain “immediately appreciated” Columbus's “discoveries,” which is why they immediately outfitted him for a much larger second voyage. In 1499 Columbus made a major gold strike on Haiti. He and his successors then forced hundreds of thousands of Indians to mine the gold for them. Money from the Americas continued to flow in to Columbus in Spain, perhaps not what he felt he deserved, but enough to keep all wolves far from his door. Columbus died well off and left his heirs well endowed, even with the title, “Admiral of the Ocean Sea,” now carried by his eighteenth-generation descendant. Moreover, Columbus's own journal shows clearly that he knew he had reached a “new” continent.

The errors textbooks make about Columbus do not result simply from sloppy scholarship. Textbooks want to magnify Columbus as a great hero, a “man of vision, energy, resourcefulness, and courage,” in the words of *The American Pageant*. Some of the details the textbook authors pile on are harmless, I suppose, such as the fabrications about Isabella's sending a messenger galloping after Columbus and pawning her jewels to pay for the expedition. All of the enhancements humanize Columbus, however, to induce readers to identify with him. Here is a passage from *Land of Promise*:

It is October, 1492. Three small, storm-battered ships are lost at sea, sailing into an unknown ocean. A frightened crew has been threatening to throw their stubborn captain overboard, turn the ships around, and make for the safety of familiar shores. Then a miracle: The sailors see some green branches floating on the water. Land birds fly overhead. From high in the ship's rigging the lookout cries, “Land, land ahead!” Fears turn to joy. Soon the grateful captain wades ashore and gives thanks to God.

Now, really. The ships were not “storm-battered.” To make a better myth, the textbook authors want the voyage to seem harder than it was, so they invent bad weather. Columbus's own journal reveals that the three ships enjoyed lovely sailing. Seas were so calm that for days at a time sailors were able to converse from one ship to another. Indeed, the only time they experienced even moderately high seas was on the last day when they knew they were near land.

To make a better myth, to make the trip seem longer than it was, most of the textbooks overlook Columbus's stopover in the Canary Islands. The voyage across the unknown Atlantic took one month, not two.

To make a better myth, the textbooks describe Columbus's ships as tiny and inefficient, when actually "these three vessels were fully suited to his purpose," as naval author Pietro Barozzi has pointed out.

To make a better myth, six of twelve textbooks exaggerate the crew's complaints into a near-mutiny. The primary sources differ. Some claim the sailors threatened to go back home if they didn't reach land soon. Other sources claim that Columbus lost heart and that the captains of the other two ships persuaded him to keep on. Still other sources suggest that the three leaders met and agreed to continue on for a few more days and then reassess the situation. After studying the matter, Columbus's biographer Samuel Eliot Mortson reduced the complaints to mere griping: "They were all getting on each other's nerves, as happens even nowadays." So much for the crew's threat to throw Columbus overboard.

... To make a better myth, our textbooks find space for many other humanizing particulars. They have the lookout cry "Tierra!" or "Land!" Most of them tell us that Columbus's first act after going ashore was "thanking God for leading them safely across the sea" even though the surviving summary of Columbus's own journal states only that "before them all, he took possession of the island, as in fact he did, for the King and Queen, his Sovereigns." Many of the textbooks tell of Columbus's three later voyages to the Americas, but they do not find space to tell us how Columbus treated the lands and the people he "discovered."

... Christopher Columbus introduced two phenomena that revolutionized race relations and transformed the modern world: the taking of land, wealth, and labor from indigenous peoples, leading to their near extermination, and the transatlantic slave trade, which created a racial underclass.

Columbus's initial impression of the Arawaks, who inhabited most of the islands in the Caribbean, was quite favorable. He wrote in his journal on October 13, 1492: "At daybreak great multitudes of men came to the shore, all young and of fine shapes, and very handsome. Their hair was not curly but loose and coarse like horse-hair. All have foreheads much broader than any people I had hitherto seen. Their eyes are large and very beautiful. They are not black, but the color of the inhabitants of the Canaries." (This reference to the Canaries was ominous, for Spain was then in the process of exterminating the aboriginal people of those islands.) Columbus went on to describe the Arawaks' canoes, "some large enough to contain 40 or 45 men." Finally, he got down to business: "I was very attentive to them, and strove to learn if they had any gold. Seeing some of them with little bits of metal hanging at their noses, I gathered from them by signs that by going southward or steering round the island in that direction, there would be found a king who possessed great cups full of gold." At dawn the next day, Columbus sailed to the other side of the island, probably one of the Bahamas, and saw two or three villages. He ended his description of them with these menacing words: "I could conquer the whole of them with fifty men and govern them as I pleased." On his first voyage, Columbus kidnapped some ten to twenty-five Indians and took them back with him to Spain. Only seven or eight of the Indians arrived alive, but along with the parrots, gold trinkets, and other exotica, they caused quite a stir in Seville. Ferdinand and Isabella provided Columbus with seventeen ships, 1,200 to 1,500 men, cannons, crossbows, guns, cavalry, and attack dogs for a second voyage...

When Columbus and his men returned to Haiti in 1493, they demanded food, gold, spun cotton, whatever the Indians had that they wanted, including sex with their women. To ensure cooperation, Columbus used punishment by example. When an Indian committed even a minor offense, the Spanish cut off his ears or

nose. Disfigured, the person was sent back to his village as living evidence of the brutality the Spaniards were capable of.

After a while, the Indians had had enough. At first their resistance was mostly passive. They refused to plant food for the Spanish to take. They abandoned towns near the Spanish settlements. Finally, the Arawaks fought back. . . The attempts at resistance gave Columbus an excuse to make war. On March 24, 1495, he set out to conquer the Arawaks. Bartolome de Las Casas described the force Columbus assembled to put down the rebellion. "Since the Admiral perceived that daily the people of the land were taking up arms, ridiculous weapons in reality . . . he hastened to proceed to the country and disperse and subdue, by force of arms, the people of the entire island . . . For this he chose 200 foot soldiers and 20 cavalry, with many crossbows and small cannon, lances, and swords, and a still more terrible weapon against the Indians, in addition to the horses: this was 20 hunting dogs, who were turned loose and immediately tore the Indians apart." Naturally, the Spanish won. According to Kirkpatrick Sale, who quotes Ferdinand Columbus's biography of his father, "The soldiers mowed down dozens with point-blank volleys, loosed the dogs to rip open limbs and bellies, chased fleeing Indians into the bush to skewer them on sword and pike, and 'with God's aid soon gained a complete victory, killing many Indians and capturing others who were also killed.'"

Having as yet found no fields of gold, Columbus had to return some kind of dividend to Spain. In 1495 the Spanish on Haiti initiated a great slave raid. They rounded up 1,500 Arawaks, then selected the 500 best specimens (of whom 200 would die en route to Spain). Another 500 were chosen as slaves for the Spaniards staying on the island. The rest were released. A Spanish eyewitness described the event: "Among them were many women who had infants at the breast. They, in order the better to escape us, since they were afraid we would turn to catch them again, left their infants anywhere on the ground and started to flee like desperate people; and some fled so far that they were removed from our settlement of Isabela seven or eight days beyond mountains and across huge rivers; wherefore from now on scarcely any will be had." Columbus was excited: "In the name of the Holy Trinity, we can send from here all the slaves and brazil-wood which could be sold," he wrote to Ferdinand and Isabella in 1496. "In Castile, Portugal, Aragon, . . . and the Canary Islands they need many slaves, and I do not think they get enough from Guinea." He viewed the Indian death rate optimistically: "Although they die now, they will not always die. The Negroes and Canary Islanders died at first."

In the words of Hans Koning, "There now began a reign of terror in Hispaniola." Spaniards hunted Indians for sport and murdered them for dog food. Columbus, upset because he could not locate the gold he was certain was on the island, set up a tribute system. Ferdinand Columbus described how it worked: "(The Indians) all promised to pay tribute to the Catholic Sovereigns every three months, as follows: In the Cibao, where the gold mines were, every person of 14 years of age or upward was to pay a large hawk's bell of gold dust; all others were each to pay 25 pounds of cotton. Whenever an Indian delivered his tribute, he was to receive a brass or copper token which he must wear about his neck as proof that he had made his payment. Any Indian found without such a token was to be punished." With a fresh token, an Indian was safe for three months, much of which time would be devoted to collecting more gold. Columbus's son neglected to mention how the Spanish punished those whose tokens had expired: they cut off their hands.

All of these gruesome facts are available in primary source material—letters by Columbus and by other members of his expeditions and in the work of Las Casas, the first great historian of the Americas, who relied on primary materials and helped preserve them. I have quoted a few primary sources in this chapter. Most textbooks make no use of primary sources. A few incorporate brief extracts that have been carefully selected or edited to reveal nothing unseemly about the "Great Navigator".

The tribute system eventually broke down because what it demanded was impossible. To replace it, Columbus installed the encomienda system, in which he granted or “commended” entire Indian villages to individual colonists or groups of colonists. Since it was not called slavery, this forced-labor system escaped the moral censure that slavery received. Following Columbus's example, Spain made the encomienda system official policy on Haiti in 1502; other conquistadors subsequently introduced it to Mexico, Peru, and Florida.

The tribute and encomienda systems caused incredible depopulation. On Haiti the colonists made the Indians mine gold for them, raise Spanish food, and even carry them everywhere they went. The Indians couldn't stand it. Pedro de Cordoba wrote in a letter to King Ferdinand in 1517, “As a result of the sufferings and hard labor they endured, the Indians choose and have chosen suicide. Occasionally a hundred have committed mass suicide. The women, exhausted by labor, have shunned conception and childbirth . . . Many, when pregnant, have taken something to abort and have aborted. Others after delivery have killed their children with their own hands, so as not to leave them in such oppressive slavery.”

Beyond acts of individual cruelty, the Spanish disrupted the Indian ecosystem and culture. Forcing Indians to work in mines rather than in their gardens led to widespread malnutrition. The intrusion of rabbits and livestock caused further ecological disaster. Diseases new to the Indians played a role, although smallpox, usually the big killer, did not appear on the island until after 1516. Some of the Indians tried fleeing to Cuba, but the Spanish soon followed them there. Estimates of Haiti's pre-Columbian population range as high as 8,000,000 people. When Christopher Columbus returned to Spain, he left his brother Bartholomew in charge of the island. Bartholomew took a census of Indian adults in 1496 and came up with 1,100,000. The Spanish did not count children under fourteen and could not count Arawaks who had escaped into the mountains. Kirkpatrick Sale estimates that a more accurate total would probably be in the neighborhood of 3,000,000. “By 1516,” according to Benjamin Keen, “thanks to the sinister Indian slave trade and labor policies initiated by Columbus, only some 12,000 remained.” Las Casas tells us that fewer than 200 Indians were alive in 1542, By 1555, they were all gone.

Thus nasty details like cutting off hands have somewhat greater historical importance than nice touches like “Tierra!” Haiti under the Spanish is one of the primary instances of genocide in all human history. Yet only one of the twelve textbooks, *The American Pageant*, mentions the extermination. None mentions Columbus's role in it.

. . . To her credit, Queen Isabella opposed outright enslavement and returned some Indians to the Caribbean. But other nations rushed to emulate Columbus. In 1501 the Portuguese began to depopulate Labrador, transporting the now extinct Beothuk Indians to Europe and Cape Verde as slaves. After the British established beachheads on the Atlantic coast of North America, they encouraged coastal Indian tribes to capture and sell members of more distant tribes. Charleston, South Carolina, became a major port for exporting Indian slaves. The Pilgrims and Puritans sold the survivors of the Pequot War into slavery in Bermuda in 1637. The French shipped virtually the entire Natchez nation in chains to the West Indies in 1731.

A particularly repellent aspect of the slave trade was sexual. As soon as the 1493 expedition got to the Caribbean, before it even reached Haiti, Columbus was rewarding his lieutenants with native women to rape. On Haiti, sex slaves were one more perquisite that the Spaniards enjoyed. Columbus wrote a friend in 1500, “A hundred castellanoes are as easily obtained for a woman as for a farm, and it is very general and there are plenty of dealers who go about looking for girls; those from nine to ten are now in demand.”

The slave trade destroyed whole Indian nations. Enslaved Indians died. To replace the dying Haitians, the Spanish imported tens of thousands more Indians from the Bahamas, which “are now deserted,” in the words of the Spanish historian Peter Martyr, reporting in 1516. Packed in below deck, with hatchways closed to prevent their escape, so many slaves died on the trip that “a ship without a compass, chart, or guide, but only following the trail of dead Indians who had been thrown from the ships could find its way from the Bahamas to Hispaniola.” Puerto Rico and Cuba were next.

Because the Indians died, Indian slavery then led to the massive slave trade the other way across the Atlantic, from Africa. This trade also began on Haiti, initiated by Columbus's son in 1505. Predictably, Haiti then became the site of the first large-scale slave revolt, when blacks and Indians banded together in 1519. The uprising lasted more than a decade and was finally brought to an end by the Spanish in the 1530s. Of the twelve textbooks, only six mention that the Spanish enslaved or exploited the Indians anywhere in the Americas. Of these only four verge on mentioning that Columbus was involved. *The Untied States: A History of the Republic* places the following passage about the fate of the Indians under the heading “The Fate of Columbus”: “Some Spaniards who had come to the Americas had begun to enslave and kill the original Americans. Authorities in Spain held Columbus responsible for the atrocities.” *Life and Liberty* implies that Columbus might have participated: “Slavery began in the New World almost as soon as Columbus got off the boat.” Only *The American Adventure* clearly associates Columbus with slavery. *American History* levels a vague charge: “Columbus was a great sailor and a brave and determined man. But he was not good at politics or business.” That's it. The other books simply adore him.

As Kirkpatrick Sale poetically sums up, Columbus's “second voyage marks the first extended encounter of European and Indian societies, the clash of cultures that was to echo down through five centuries.” The seeds of that five century battle were sown in Haiti between 1493 and 1500. These are not mere details that our textbooks omit. They are facts crucial to understanding American and European history. Capt. John Smith, for example, used Columbus as a role model in proposing a get-tough policy for the Virginia Indians in 1624: “The manner how to suppress them is so often related and approved, I omit it here: And you have twenty examples of the Spaniards how they got the West Indies, and forced the treacherous and rebellious infidels to do all manner of drudgery work and slavery for them, themselves living like soldiers upon the fruits of their labors.” The methods unleashed by Columbus are, in fact, the larger part of his legacy. After all, they worked. The island was so well pacified that Spanish convicts, given a second chance on Haiti, could “go anywhere, take any woman or girl, take anything, and have the Indians carry him on their backs as if they were mules.” In 1499, when Columbus finally found gold on Haiti in significant amounts, Spain became the envy of Europe. After 1500 Portugal, France, Holland, and Britain joined in conquering the Americas. These nations were at least as brutal as Spain. The British, for example, unlike the Spanish, did not colonize by making use of Indian labor but simply forced the Indians out of the way. Many Indians fled British colonies to Spanish territories (Florida, Mexico) in search of more humane treatment.

Columbus's voyages caused almost as much change in Europe as in the Americas. This is the other half of the vast process historians now call the Columbian exchange. Crops, animals, ideas, and diseases began to cross the oceans regularly. Perhaps the most far-reaching impact of Columbus's findings was on European Christianity. In 1492 all of Europe was in the grip of the Catholic Church. As L-trousu puts it, before America, “Europe was virtually incapable of self-criticism.” After America, Europe's religious uniformity was ruptured. For how were these new peoples to be explained? They were not mentioned in the Bible. The Indians simply did not fit within orthodox Christianity's explanation of the moral universe. Moreover, unlike the Muslims, who might be written off as “damned infidels,” Indians had not rejected Christianity, they had just never encountered it. Were they doomed to hell? Even the animals of America posed a religious challenge. According to the Bible, at the dawn of creation all animals lived in the Garden of

Eden. Later, two of each species entered Noah's ark and ended up on Mt. Ararat. Since Eden and Mt. Ararat were both in the Middle East, where could these new American species have come from? Such questions shook orthodox Catholicism and contributed to the Protestant Reformation, which began in 1517.

Politically, nations like the Arawaks without monarchs, without much hierarchy, stunned Europeans. In 1516 Thomas More's *Utopia*, based on an account of the Incan empire in Peru, challenged European social organization by suggesting a radically different and superior alternative. Other social philosophers seized upon the Indians as living examples of Europe's primordial past, which is what John Locke meant by the phrase, "In the beginning, all the world was America." Depending upon their political persuasion, some Europeans glorified Indian nations as examples of simpler, better societies, from which European civilization had devolved, while others maligned the Indian societies as primitive and underdeveloped. In either case, from Montaigne, Montesquieu, and Rousseau down to Marx and Engels, European philosophers' concepts of the good society were transformed by ideas from America.

America fascinated the masses as well as the elite. . . Europe's fascination with the Americas was directly responsible, in fact, for a rise in European self-consciousness. From the beginning America was perceived as an "opposite" to Europe in ways that even Africa never had been. In a sense, there was no "Europe" before 1492. People were simply Tuscan, French, and the like. Now Europeans began to see similarities among themselves, at least as contrasted with Native Americans. For that matter, there were no "white" people in Europe before 1492. With the transatlantic slave trade, first Indian, then African, Europeans increasingly saw "white" as a race and race as an important human characteristic.

Columbus's own writings reflect this increasing racism. When Columbus was selling Queen Isabella on the wonders of the Americas, the Indians were "well built" and "of quick intelligence." "They have very good customs," he wrote, "and the king maintains a very marvelous state, of a style so orderly that it is a pleasure to see it, and they have good memories and they wish to see everything and ask what it is and for what it is used." Later, when Columbus was justifying his wars and his enslavement of the Indians, they became "cruel" and "stupid," "a people warlike and numerous, whose customs and religion are very different from ours."

It is always useful to think badly about people one has exploited or plans to exploit. Modifying one's opinions to bring them into line with one's actions or planned actions is the most common outcome of the process known as "cognitive dissonance," according to the social psychologist Leon Festinger. No one likes to think of himself or herself as a bad person. To treat badly another person whom we consider a reasonable human being creates a tension between act and attitude that demands resolution. We cannot erase what we have done, and to alter our future behavior may not be in our interest. To change our attitude is easier. Columbus gives us the first recorded example of cognitive dissonance in the Americas, for although the Indians may have changed from hospitable to angry, they could hardly have evolved from intelligent to stupid so quickly. The change had to be in Columbus.

The Americas affected more than the mind. African and Eurasian stomachs were also affected. Almost half of all major crops now grown throughout the world originally came from the Americas. According to Alfred Crosby, adding corn to African diets caused the population to grow, which helped fuel the African slave trade to the Americas. Adding potatoes to European diets caused the population to explode in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which in turn helped fuel the European emigration to the Americas and Australia. Crops from America also played a key role in the ascendancy of Britain, Germany, and, finally, Russia; the rise of these northern nations shifted the power base of Europe away from the Mediterranean.

Shortly after ships from Columbus's second voyage returned to Europe, syphilis began to plague Spain and Italy. There is likely a causal connection. On the other hand, more than two hundred drugs derive from plants whose pharmacological uses were discovered by American Indians.

Economically, exploiting the Americas transformed Europe, enriching first Spain, then, through trade and piracy, other nations. Columbus's gold finds on Haiti were soon dwarfed by discoveries of gold and silver in Mexico and the Andes. European religious and political leaders quickly amassed so much gold that they applied gold leaf to the ceilings of their churches and palaces, erected golden statues in the corners, and strung vines of golden grapes between them. Marx and Engels held that this wealth "gave to commerce, to navigation, to industry an impulse never before known." Some writers credit it with the rise of capitalism and eventually the industrial revolution. Capitalism was probably already underway, but at the least, American riches played a major role in the transformation. Gold and silver from America replaced land as the basis for wealth and status, increasing the power of the new merchant class that would soon dominate the world. Where Muslim nations had once rivaled Europe, the new wealth undermined Islamic power. American gold and silver fueled a 400 percent inflation that eroded the economies of most non-European countries and helped Europe to develop a global market system. Africa suffered: the trans-Saharan trade collapsed, because the Americas supplied more gold and silver than the Gold Coast ever could. African traders now had only one commodity that Europe wanted: slaves. In anthropologist Jack Weatherford's words, "Africans thus became victims of the discovery of America as surely as did the American Indians."

Astoundingly, not one textbook I surveyed describes these geopolitical implications of Columbia's encounter with the Americas. Three of the twelve books credit Indians with having developed important crops. Otherwise, the west-to-east flow of ideas and wealth goes unnoticed. Eurocentrism blinds textbook authors to contributions to Europe, whether from Arab astronomers, African navigators, or American Indian social structure. By accepting this limited viewpoint, our history textbooks never invite us to think about what happened to reduce mainland Indian societies, whose wealth and cities awed the Spanish, to the impoverished peasantry they are today. They also rob us of the chance to appreciate how important America has been in the formation of the modern world.

This theft impoverishes us, keeps us ignorant of what has caused the world to develop as it has. Clearly our textbooks are not about teaching history. Their enterprise is Building Character, They therefore treat Columbus as an origin myth: He was good and so are we. In 1989, President Bush invoked Columbus as a role model for the nation: "Christopher Columbus not only opened the door to a New World, but also set an example for us all by showing what monumental feats can be accomplished through perseverance and faith." The columnist Jeffrey Hart recently went even further: "To denigrate Columbus is to denigrate what is worthy in human history and in us all." Textbook authors who are pushing Columbus to build character obviously have no interest in mentioning what he did with the Americas once he reached them even though that's half of the story, and perhaps the more important half.

I am not proposing the breast-beating alternative: that Columbus was bad and so are we. On the contrary, textbooks should show that neither morality nor immorality can simply be conferred upon us by history. Merely being part of the United States, without regard to our own acts and ideas, does not make us moral or immoral beings. History is more complicated than that.

Again we must pause to consider: who are "we"? Columbus is not a hero in Mexico, even though Mexico is much more Spanish in culture than the United States and might be expected to take pride in this hero of Spanish history. Why not? Because Mexico is also much more Indian than the United States, and Mexicans perceive Columbus as white and European. "No sensible Indian person," wrote George P.

Horse Capture, “can celebrate the arrival of Columbus.” Cherishing Columbus is a characteristic of white history, not American history,

Columbus's conquest of Haiti can be seen as an amazing feat of courage and imagination by the first of many brave empire builders. It can also be understood as a bloody atrocity that left a legacy of genocide and slavery that endures in some degree to this day. Both views of Columbus are valid; indeed, Columbus's importance in history owes precisely to his being both a heroic navigator and a great plunderer. If Columbus were only the former, he would merely rival Leif Erikson. . . The worshipful biographical vignettes of Columbus in our textbooks serve to indoctrinate students into a mindless endorsement of colonialism that is strikingly inappropriate in today's postcolonial era. In the words of the historian Michael Wallace, the Columbus myth “allows us to accept the contemporary division of the world into developed and underdeveloped spheres as natural and given, rather than a historical product issuing from a process that began with Columbus's first voyage.”

We understand Columbus and all European explorers and settlers more clearly if we treat 1492 as a meeting of three cultures (Africa was soon involved), rather than a discovery by one. The term New World is itself part of the problem, for people had lived in the Americas for thousands of years. The Americas were new only to Europeans. The word discover is another part of the problem, for how can one person discover what another already knows and owns? . .

The process of exploration has itself typically been multiracial and multicultural. William Erasmus, a Canadian Indian, pointed out, “Explorers you call great men were helpless. They were like lost children, and it was our people who took care of them.” “African pilots helped Prince Henry's ship captains learn their way down the coast of Africa.” On Christmas Day 1492, Columbus needed help. The Santa Maria ran aground off Haiti. Columbus sent for help to the nearest Arawak town, and “all the people of the town” responded, “with very big and many canoes.” “They cleared the decks in a very short time.” Columbus continued, and the chief “caused all our goods to be placed together near the palace, until some houses that he gave us where all might be put and guarded had been emptied.” On his final voyage Columbus shipwrecked on Jamaica, and the Arawaks there kept him and his crew of more than a hundred alive for a whole year until Spaniards from Haiti rescued them.

So it has continued. Native Americans cured Cartier's men of scurvy near Montreal in 1535. They repaired Francis Drake's Golden Hind in California so he could complete his round-the-world voyage in 1579. Lewis and Clark's expedition to the Pacific Northwest was made possible by tribe after tribe of American Indians, with help from two Shoshone guides, Sacagawea and Toby, who served as interpreters. When Admiral Peary discovered the North Pole, the first person there was probably neither the European American Peary nor the African American Matthew Henson, his assistant, but their four Inuit guides, men and women on whom the entire expedition relied. Our histories fail to mention such assistance. They portray proud Western conquerors bestriding the world like the Colossus at Rhodes.

So long as our textbooks hide from us the roles that people of color have played in exploration, from at least 6000 B.C. to the twentieth century, they encourage us to look to Europe and its extensions as the seat of all knowledge and intelligence. So long as our textbooks simply celebrate Columbus, rather than teach both sides of his exploit, they encourage us to identify with white Western exploitation rather than study it.

. . . All around the globe, however, the nations that were “discovered,” conquered, “civilized,” and colonized by European powers are now independent, at least politically. Europeans and European Americans no longer dictate to them as master to native and therefore need to stop thinking of themselves

as superior, morally and technologically. A new and more accurate history of Columbus could assist this transformation.

Of course, this new history must not judge Columbus by standards from our own time. In 1493 the world had not decided, for instance, that slavery was wrong. Some Indian nations enslaved other Indians. Africans enslaved other Africans. Europeans enslaved other Europeans. To attack Columbus for doing what everyone else did would be unreasonable.

However, some Spaniards of the time, Bartolome de las Casas, for example, opposed the slavery, land grabbing, and forced labor that Columbus introduced on Haiti. Las Casas began as an adventurer and became a plantation owner. Then he switched sides, freed his Indians, and became a priest who fought desperately for humane treatment of the Indians. When Columbus and other Europeans argued that Indians were inferior, Las Casas pointed out that Indians were sentient human beings, just like anyone else. When other historians tried to overlook or defend the Indian slave trade, begun by Columbus, Las Casas denounced it as “among the most unpardonable offenses ever committed against God and mankind.” He helped prompt Spain to enact laws against Indian slavery. Although these laws came too late to help the Arawaks and were often disregarded, they did help some Indians survive. Centuries after his death, Las Casas was still influencing history; Simon Bolivar used Las Casas’s writings to justify the revolutions between 1810 and 1830 that liberated Latin America from Spanish domination.

When history textbooks leave out the Arawaks, they offend Native Americans. When they omit the possibility of African and Phoenician precursors to Columbus, they offend African Americans. When they glamorize explorers such as De Soto just because they were white, out histories offend all people of color. When they leave out Las Casas, they omit an interesting idealist with whom we all might identify. When they glorify Columbus, our textbooks prod us toward identifying with the oppressor. When textbook authors omit the causes and process of European world domination, they offer us a history whose purpose must be to keep us unaware of the important questions. Perhaps worst of all, when textbooks paint simplistic portraits of a pious, heroic Columbus, they provide feel-good history that bores everyone.

Considering that virtually none of the standard fare surrounding Thanksgiving contains an ounce of authenticity, historical accuracy, or cross-cultural perception, why is it so apparently ingrained? Is it necessary to the American psyche to perpetually exploit and debase its victims in order to justify its history?