Patriotism through history books as an obstacle to higher quality education

In his first inaugural Address, President Abraham Lincoln defined a nation as a group of people who share a common country, common government, fraternal affection and a memory. A nation can be thought of as an “imagined community,” thus a national identity becomes a constructed idea. In the United States, national identity has been constructed on the basis of “the mystic cords of memory” which unites all Americans as each individual salutes the same flag that represents one national history (qtd in Thomas). Since the United States is populated by thousands of different groups of people and lacks a national ethnicity, this national identity has always been one of the means in which the American people are tied together. As early as the Civil War era, the government tried to project a set of ideals thought of as American to unite the dividing country. The story “The man without a country,” showed the conversion of Phillip Nolan, an expatriate to the most devout and loyal citizen in the country. “Philip Nolan became ‘a sort of national myth’ and his story remained a ‘classic that almost everybody knows and that every child has read’” (Thomas). This tale was used to spread a sense of Americanism and promote patriotism during the Civil War period and beyond as it has only recently faded out of the curriculum. American leaders were rewritten as American heroes to fit into the “national myth” and were presented to schoolchildren as flawless individuals with only love and passion for their country. These texts were circled through schools across the country, and continue to be taught today. Children are taught the stories of heroes and in the process become so preoccupied
with a single focus that they never think to question the missing sides of the stories. In American history there are heroes, and enemies, and it is seldom, if ever that America is represented as the enemy.

On a July 4th speech given by Frances Wright in 1828, she acknowledges this problem and demands for a reinterpretation of patriotism as she claims:

Here, as in other countries, we hear of patriotism; that is, of love of country in an exclusive sense; of love of our countrymen in contradistinction to the love of our fellow-creatures; of love of the constitution, instead of love or appreciation of those principles upon which the constitution is, or ought to be, based, and upon which, if it should be found not to be based, it would merit no attachment at all (Wright 4).

Over 175 years ago, Wright saw the problem of this blind sense of patriotism and today its effects are widespread. Only in recent years have scholars joined together to demand change, condemning history books as “quasi-official stor[ies], sort of sanctioned version[s] of history” (Lindaman xviii). A national bestselling author of *Lies My Teacher Told Me* and Professor of sociology, James Loewen also characterizes these texts as “muddled by the conflicting desires to promote inquiry and to indoctrinate blind patriotism” which “leave out anything that might reflect badly upon our [American] national character” (Loewen 13).

Although many books are published seeking to expose the myths of textbooks and provide real accounts of American history, the textbooks themselves have not been revised. Regardless of their heritage, every school child reads these texts throughout their secondary education and feels connected with his or her peers through this national identity presented through a series of fabricated events. Many students never reach higher education, and even if they do, at the university level they never take an American history course. These ideals based
largely on myths stay with students and strengthen their sense of patriotism. As a dominant world power, the citizens of the United States have many opportunities to travel and work worldwide. Through textbooks, the United States molds citizens who are prepared to defend the nation’s value and integrity abroad. Loewen asserts that “students exit history textbooks without having developed the ability to think coherently about social life” (15). Since students are never asked to critically analyze, they only see history as a tale of victors and losers, and continue to apply the same methodology of thinking to contemporary society. The attempt of the United States to increase the quality of education domestically may be considered a “Monroe Doctrine of Education.” Although ideally it is set up to create a better educated public to compete internationally, in reality it is creating an avenue for its own ulterior motive of securing a loyal citizenry. As the Monroe Doctrine did not keep Latin America free from foreign interference, the current style of promoting education is hindering the development of citizens who are able to critically analyze and challenge the government, thus falling short of their very duties as democratic citizens.

This focus on education became a national priority during the Cold War era with the rising fear of American insufficiency in the fields of mathematics and sciences to countries worldwide, particularly the Soviet Union. The arms race created an emphasis on national and international testing, thus developing the continual concern of how American students match up to students around the world. Many testing agencies exist globally such as The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) which has been devised in order to compare the students in the United States to students in other countries, specifically in the fields of math and science. American students are ranked substantially below students in other developed countries, not only in the fields of math and science, but in reading and writing levels
as well. In an article titled, “Europe vs. America” Judt states, “American children consistently underperform their European peers in both literacy and numeracy.” The extremely low figures on international tests have led to widespread concern within the United States, which has launched many different governmental programs. Most recently, the Bush administration has passed the No Child Left Behind Act, which has many aims, but some of the most significant are to ensure that all children are able to read and that educational standards for the economically disadvantaged are maintained. Prior to this Federal Act, the Department of Education of the State of California compiled a set of standards for each subject taught in secondary education that function as guidelines for teachers. The standards are the minimum points necessary to cover in order to ensure that students are receiving sufficient education, and are able to perform well on tests.

The problem facing the nation today is that after completing public schooling, many students are still lacking the necessary basic skills and knowledge which schools are designed to provide. In theory, the State standards are designed to ensure that graduating students will have met basic requirements, thus limiting the number of uneducated students graduating from the public school system. However, teaching to the standards raises its own set of problems in the educational field. Since test scores have been improving slightly each year, teaching to standards is viewed as a step forward in school reformation; nonetheless, many scholars claim that in actuality this method hinders the educational development of American children. This can be seen specifically through United States history textbooks which are structured and written in a manner designed to instill specific idealist interpretations and understandings of history amongst students. This method of portrayal “reduce[s] [history] to a series of inoffensive facts and figures [which assumes that] students [are] incapable of discussing and debating important topics and
issues” (Lindaman xx). Often times, history is taught as a linear series of events aligned with their respective dates that students must memorize. This teaching style does not allow students to develop their own opinions or interpret events in history, in turn, hindering their ability to critically analyze. This argument is seldom presented, as most people focus on the lack of funding of government educational programs. While the government tries to maintain its integrity globally, it calls for serious educational reforms; however, these reforms also have a concealed negative side. If students score higher on tests, the government receives praise for effective reforms. This not only generates more support domestically, but also increases international standing. Although teaching to these standardized tests produces higher scores, it does not enable students to fully develop intellectually. Students begin to substitute critical thinking with memorization and replace creative debate with the regurgitation of facts. Since this style of teaching helps to keep the population in a very impressionable state, the government deliberately fails to recognize the shortcomings of the reforms. Whereas scholars claim that students are not encouraged to think for themselves, the government focuses on the increasing test scores to overshadow the fact that these methods of teaching in the public school system create a new generation less inclined to challenge decisions. As the government presents this façade of promoting higher quality education both globally and locally, it is actually undermining its own integrity by producing a nescient citizenry.

The formation of these citizens is achieved through the method used to teach United States history throughout secondary education. Towards the end of elementary school, children break away from social studies and begin to focus on California and United States history. This study is further developed at the intermediary level, particularly the eighth grade; nonetheless, the information the students are learning at this level is not an accurate portrayal of United States
history. These textbooks portray United States history from an isolationist standpoint with minimal focuses on foreign affairs. For many years, this tactic designed to provoke nationalism and patriotism encountered no dissent; however, contemporary scholars are trying to restructure teaching methods by using what is now termed comparative history. Many teachers are trying to erase the myths and minimize the heroic glorifications in American history texts by using primary source documents, and teaching American history with respect to the United States’ global position. Even though some teachers are working for this change, this innovative teaching style is not accepted or practiced nationwide and is particularly difficult in districts where schools are simply trying to cover the bare minimum to raise their overall testing scores. With the pseudo national focus directed towards improving schools themselves, refining textbook material remains low on the long list of necessary school reforms. Some argue that the textbooks remain low on the list as intended because they are producing a desirable outcome for the government. Less dissent and an apathetic populace undermine the very establishment of the United States as an electoral democracy; nevertheless, fit the needs of the current political powers and agendas. As a result these misrepresentations in history books remain, and are continuously taught to newer generations of students. A focus on intermediary schools in Southern California displays how these myths and fabrications in textbooks such as Call to Freedom pose a significant problem for teachers and students alike.

History textbooks are written through a victor’s perspective while emphasizing the benevolence of American leaders. The embellishment of accomplishments of leaders and omissions of their subsequent flaws in textbooks is what Loewen calls “heroification.” As entire textbooks are constructed based on these biases and exaggerations, history books have grown to depict an almost completely fabricated version of American history. President Monroe is one of
the best examples of this heroification process. His Monroe Doctrine became one of the most widely recognized U.S. foreign policies, and was revered as the speech that finally declared the Americas closed to European colonization. This Doctrine is presented in a unique fashion to American students. Prior to the introduction of the Doctrine itself, it is noted that “most American officials sympathized with [the Central and South American] revolutions, seeing them similar to the American Revolution” (Holt 370). Following a direct comparison to the American Revolution the text explains that “President Monroe became increasingly more concerned that rival European powers might try to take control of the Latin American countries” (Holt 370). With this introduction, the analogy of Latin American countries as the former American colonies is created. It is thereby implied that the European powers are capable of all the atrocities Britain committed against its former northern American colonies, making it seem like Latin American colonies need help to stand up to their respective European colonizers. With a hero like President Monroe, the United States becomes the perfect country fit for the job of liberating its neighbors from oppressive Europeans.

However, Mexican textbooks have a completely different interpretation of the Doctrine and do not treat it with the same admiration; rather, they evaluate and criticize Monroe’s true ambitions hidden within the Doctrine. In reference to westward expansion the Mexican text describes new territories as being “incorporated by means of despoiling indigenous populations.” The use of a word such as despoil is a direct attack on the American system of expansion as it depicts the “march west” as robbing indigenous people of their homelands, whereas American texts give the sense that the land was rightfully and originally American land. The text then critiques the Doctrine itself by stating how the “declaration could be manipulated in order to justify the imperialistic component of the U.S. itself.” This interpretation no longer illustrates the
United States as a nation eagerly ready to help its neighbors to the south, rather accuses the nation of seeking its own imperialist goals while using Latin American nations as a scapegoat. The textbook concludes the section by addressing that the Doctrine’s tendency was “to assume the role of protector of the young Hispano-American nations, to intervene in their politics and determine their destinies” (Lindaman 61-3). Here, the Mexican textbook suggests that the United States was trying to shape the countries around it in order to secure its own destiny. Monroe is a hero and an intruder; while to Americans he is a proponent of peace, to the rest of the Americas he is not much better than the previous European colonizers.

While studying early American history, most students recall deep tensions with England, but fail to learn or never really taught about the complicated relationship with our neighbor to the south, Mexico. The minimal attention given to Mexico is demonstrated through the eighth grade California state standards. The first four divisions of the standards include 22 subdivisions about beginnings of the United States. The next division is titled “Students analyze U.S. foreign policy in the early Republic” and only includes three subdivisions which are the least extensive of any of the standards. It is in the second subdivision where one finds mention of the Monroe Doctrine and westward expansion in relation to the Mexican-American War. These points are not a main focus as the West is usually introduced to emphasize the growing tensions between free and slave states. Somewhere between industrialization, immigration, and the growth of slavery, the Mexican-American war receives a second mention, this time covering two subdivisions. However, it is interesting to note that the students are encouraged to discuss Mexican settlements in relation to their “attitudes to slavery” which sets up the scene leading into the Civil War era (CA board of Education). The standards take foreign affairs issues and recode them to represent the domestic issue of slavery in order to shift the focus to the Civil War. This preoccupation with
the Civil war intensifies national identity and patriotism as students understand firsthand the importance of a unified nation. The students are not allowed a deeper understanding of the Mexican-American war, or territory disputes because they are taught to focus on the aftermath of the war as it related to the issue of slavery, and the dividing nation. As they focus on the triumph of the nation itself, students are not taught to question the international policies and actions of the time, thus are less inclined hold the United States accountable for any problems in the world today as a result of past mistakes.

Professor of history at Boston University and author of many American history texts, Howard Zinn, criticizes the American educational system as a whole as following a “quiz culture” and cites a sample question: “Who was the President during the Mexican-American War?” (68). Most eighth grade students would probably be able to answer the question correctly; however, when asked why the war started, problems would develop. Although most textbooks now note that President Polk placed troops in a disputed region in order to provoke war with Mexico, a significant focus is not dedicated to the “antiwar sentiment.” Although Call to Freedom does have a subsection on “antiwar sentiment,” most of it is focused on opposition of the war because of the concern of expansion of slavery. “The Whig party thought that the conflict was unjustified and unnecessary” (Holt 518). This is one of few sentences written to account for opposition to the war on the grounds that taking Mexican land was wrong. The text does not spend enough time for most students to even develop this idea as it immediately transitions to the following paragraphs that focus on the worries of spread of slavery. Aside from the focus on slavery, much time is not given to antiexpansionists and transcendentalist views because of the preexisting idea of Manifest Destiny. In the previous section, the students are exposed John O’Sullivan’s article about Manifest Destiny: “The American claim is by the right
of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent to which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty” (qtd. in Holt 512). Manifest destiny is presented as an American idea that was developed and rightfully fulfilled. There is one sentence which states that the notion “ignored thousands of Indians and Mexicans” (Holt 512), but the text never challenges the original idea.

Howard Zinn states, “American foreign policy teaches nothing that would suggest a critical look at American foreign policy” (50). The representation of the Mexican-American war and its aftermath do not reflect negatively upon the United States, when in reality, the war was the beginning of a series of imperialist efforts which restructured much of Latin America today. The treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo took away more than half of Mexico’s territory and “plunged [Mexico into] a crisis that unleashed new internal conflicts” (Lindaman 78). On the contrary, for the United States, this treaty signified the addition “of more than 500,000 square miles [increasing] the size of the United States by 25 percent” (Holt 522). The loss of Mexican territory is not even mentioned as a consequence of the war, rather it is noted that “some Americans wanted to take all of Mexico” (Holt 522). The only opposition to Mexican cession existed because Whigs “thought that Mexicans would not make good republican citizens,” completely overlooking the fact that the invasion could have been completely wrong to being with (Holt 522). The Mexican text views the treaty far more critically as it states in a negative tone that “the demands of the USA did not end […]they] demanded the cession of Baja California territory.” The Mexican government first resisted this attempt, but then later sold the territory for ten million pesos “of which the US Congress only agreed to pay seven” (Lindaman 78). Students in the United States are only aware that the U.S. achieved its goals and acquired its territory; they are not notified however, of the price that Mexico had to pay for the United States to fulfill its
“manifest destiny.” As a result, Mexican texts are highly critical of manifest destiny, which they label as the thesis that “invoked Providence in an act similar to feudal crusades” (Lindaman 69). In American texts there is an emphasis on the acquisition of new lands and westward expansion whereas the Mexican text explicitly states “the briefest recounting of the interventions and actions of the United States in America in the 19th century would fill several pages of this unit. Let us limit ourselves to only the most general cases which were, unfortunately, neither the only nor the last” (Lindaman 70). As a dominating power on the North American continent and later the world, American history does not provide sufficient about relations with foreign countries. History books spend an entire chapter on Reconstruction after the Civil War, but only spend a few paragraphs explaining the aftermath of war with other nations, which are often times incomplete, as in the case of the Mexican-American War of 1846. As seen through this Mexican text, U.S. presence had a tremendous affect on the development and progress of Mexico; in effect, the exclusion of this historical perspective in American texts, not only leaves students with an inaccurate account of history but also a false basis for a sense of patriotism and national identity.

With this style of textbooks in circulation, students rarely a chance to experience real history. The fabrications designed to create loyal citizens in actuality create ineffective, passive citizens who would be unable to carry out the traditions set forth by the founding fathers. The diminution of history to a set of facts, many of which are incorrect or extremely one-sided, also reduces the possibilities for debate and critical discussion in the classroom. These textbooks focus on American heroes and glorify past events, which creates a tendency for students to accept history as a set of facts and continue disregarding their importance. Since history represented in these textbooks is a story of the past seldom connected to the world today,
students do not realize the importance of historical analysis nor have the opportunity to explore it. It is this lack of greater understanding (as opposed to primary understanding through memorization) which hinders American schoolchildren from corresponding to students abroad.
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