



Lies My Teacher Told Me

Notes from: James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. New York, 1995.

"[T]he teaching of history, more than any other discipline, is dominated by textbooks. And. . . textbooks 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 national character."--pg. 2

"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 a dearth of female historical figures, or members of any group that has not achieved socioeconomic 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." --pg. 3

"Why are history textbooks so bad? Nationalism is one of the culprits. Textbooks are often muddled by conflicting desires to promote inquiry and to indoctrinate blind patriotism." --pg. 3

In this book Loewen examined twelve US History textbooks. They "averaged four and a half pounds in weight and 888 pages in length." --pg. 3

"Textbooks stifle meaning by suppressing causation. Students exit history textbooks without ever having developed the ability to think coherently about social life." --pg. 4"

Textbooks also keep students in the dark about the nature of history. History is a furious debate informed by evidence and reason. Textbooks encourage students to believe that history is facts to be learned. . . .Because textbooks employ such a godlike tone, it never occurs to most students to question them. . . . As a result of this, most high school seniors are hamstrung in their efforts to analyze controversial issues in our society." --pg. 5

"There are three great taboos in textbook publishing, sex, religion and social class.' . . . The notion that opportunity might be unequal in America, that not everyone has the 'power to rise in the world,' is anathema to textbooks authors, and to many teachers as well." --pg. 24"

[P]ressure 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." --pg. 25

"Denying students the humanness [of our heroes] keeps [them] in intellectual immaturity. It perpetuates what might be called a Disney version of history. . . . Our children end up without realistic role models to inspire them. Students also develop no understanding of causality in history." --pg. 27

"[T]he authors of American history textbooks 'need a crash course in cultural relativism and ethnic sensitivity.'" --pg. 91

"Most of our textbooks say nothing about Lincoln's internal debate. If they did show it, what teaching devices they would become! Students would see that speakers modify their ideas to appease and appeal to different audiences, so we cannot simply take their statements literally. If textbooks recognized Lincoln's racism, students would learn that racism not only affects Ku Klux Klan extremists but has been "normal" throughout our history. And as they watched Lincoln struggle with himself to apply America's democratic principles across the color line, students would see how ideas can develop and a person can grow." --pg. 172

"The civil rights movement has allowed us to rethink our history. Having watched Northerners, black and white, go south to help blacks win civil rights in the 1960's, today's textbook authors display more sympathy for Northerners who worked with Southern blacks during Reconstruction." --pg.190

"Surely high school students would be interested to learn that in 1950 physicians made two and a half times what unionized industrial workers

made but now make six times as much. Surely they need to understand that top managers of clothing firms, who used to make fifty times

what their American employees made, now make 1,500 times what their Malaysian workers earn. Surely it is wrong for our history textbooks and teachers to withhold the historical information that might prompt and inform discussion of these trends." --pg. 205

"Textbooks authors may not even need pressure from publishers, the right wing, the upper class, or cultural archetypes to avoid social stratification. As part of the process of herofication, textbook authors treat America itself as a hero, indeed as the hero of their books, so they remove the warts. Even to report the facts of income and wealth distribution might seem critical of America the hero, for it is difficult to come up with a theory of social justice that can explain why 1 percent of the population controls almost 40 percent of the wealth. Could the other 99 percent of us be that lazy or otherwise undeserving? To go on to include some of the mechanism -- unequal schooling and the like -- by which the upper class stays upper would clearly involve criticism of our beloved nation." --pg. 206

"High school American history textbooks. . . see our policies as part of a morality play in which the United States typically acts on behalf of human rights, democracy, and the 'American way.' When Americans have done something wrong, according to this view, it has been because others misunderstood us, or perhaps because we misunderstood the situation. But always our motives were good. This approach might be called the 'international good guy' view." --pg. 211

"Textbook failure to put Watergate into this perspective is part of the authors' apparent program to whitewash the federal government so that school children will respect it. Since the structural problem in the government has not gone away, it is likely that students will again, in their adult lives, face an out-of-control federal executive pursuing criminal foreign and domestic policies. To the extent that their understanding of the government comes from their American history courses, students will be shocked by these events and unprepared to think about them." --pg. 223

"By downplaying covert and illegal acts by the government, textbooks narcotize students from thinking about such issues. . . . Thus our American history textbooks minimize the potential power of the people. . . ." --pg.231

"[When covering Viet Nam] . . . no textbook includes any photograph of any destruction. . . [or] treats the My Lai massacre as anything but an isolated incident. In addition to leaving the students ignorant of the history of the war, the silence. . . on this matter also makes the antiwar movement incomprehensible." - -pg. 240

"Florida's Disney World presents an exhibit called "American Adventure." a twenty-nine-minute history of the United States. The exhibit completely leaves out the Vietnam War, the ghetto riots of the 1960's and 1990's, and anything else troubling about the recent past. The compressed and bland accounts of the recent past in American history textbooks show a similar failure of nerve on the part of authors, publishers, and many teachers. High school students deserve better than Disney World history, especially since their textbooks are by no

means as much fun as the amusement park."--pg. 247

"Perhaps textbook authors do not question the notion that bigger is better because the idea of progress conforms with the way Americans like to think about education: ameliorative, leading step by step to opportunity for individuals and progress for the whole society." --pg. 251

"[T]he United States has wound up with the largest gap of any country in the world between what historians know and what the rest of us are taught." (from: Marc Ferro, historian) --pg. 267"

[T]extbooks supply irrelevant and even erroneous details, while omitting pivotal questions and facts in their treatments of issues ranging from Columbus's second voyage to the possibility of impending ecocide. . . .[H]istory textbooks offer students no practice in applying their understanding of the past to present concerns, hence no basis for thinking rationally about anything in the future. Reality gets lost as authors stray further and further from the primary sources and even the secondary literature. Textbooks rarely present the various sides of historical controversies and almost never reveal to students the evidence on which each side bases its position." --pg. 265

"Something about the enterprise of writing a high school American history textbook converts historians into patriots." --pg. 279"

Many teachers don't know much history: a national survey of 257 teachers in 1990 revealed that 13 percent had never taken a college history course, and only 40 percent held a B.A. or M.A. in history or had a major with 'some history' in it. . . . Of course, teachers cannot teach that which they do not know." --pg. 280"

Many teachers are frightened of controversy because they have not experienced it themselves in an academic setting and do not know who to handle it. . . . Inertia is also built into the system: many teachers teach as they were taught. Even many college professors who well know that history is full of controversy and dispute become old-fashioned transmitters of knowledge in their own classrooms." --pg. 280

"Since textbooks employ a rhetoric of certainty, it is hard for teachers to introduce either controversy or uncertainty into the classroom without deviating from the usual standards of discourse. . . . It is hard for teachers to teach openly. They are afraid not to be in control of the answer, afraid of losing their authority over the class. . . . Who knows where inquiry might lead or how to manage it? . . . Instead of discussion and research, teachers emphasize 'simplistic teacher-controlled information.'" --pg. 281

"[P]rofessional historical organizations for at least a century have repeatedly exhorted teachers not to teach history as fact memorization. 'Stir up the minds of the pupils,' cried the American Historical Association in 1893; 'avoid stressing

dates, names, and specific events, 'historians urged in 1934. . . . Nevertheless, teachers continue to present factoids for students to memorize.' --pg. 281

"Relying on textbooks makes it easier for both parties, teachers and students, to put forth minimal effort. Textbooks' innumerable lists -- of main ideas, key terms, people to remember, dates, skills activities, matching, fill in the blanks, and review identifications -- which appear to be the bane of students' existence, actually have positive functions. . . . Fragmenting history into unconnected 'facts' also guarantees, however, that students will not be able to relate many of these terms to their own lives and will retain almost none of them after the six-weeks' grading period." --pg. 283

"Research suggests that the inquiry approach leads to higher student interest in contemporary politics. However, inquiry textbooks require more active teaching. Classes can't just plow through them. . . . Perhaps it is because inquiry textbooks do not rely on rote learning that teachers and administrators soon abandoned them. The inquiry approach was too much work." --pg. 284

"Teaching against a textbook can also be scary. Textbooks offer security. Teachers can hide behind them when principals, parents, or students challenge them to defend their work. Teaching against the text might be construed as critical of the school system. . . [that] selected it. Teachers could get in trouble for doing that." --pg. 284

"Some people feel that we should sanitize history to protect students from unpleasanties, at least until they are eighteen or so. Children have to grow up soon enough as it is, these people say; let them enjoy childhood. Why confront our young people with issues even adults can not resolve?"--pg. 286

"Some adults simply do not trust children to think. For several decades sociologists have documented Americans' distrust of the next generation. Parents may feel undermined when children get tools of information and inquiry not available to adults and use them in ways that seem to threaten adult-held values. Many parents want children to concentrate on the 3 R's, not on multicultural history. . . . Perhaps adults' biggest reason for lying is that they fear history -- fear that it isn't so wonderful, and that if children were to learn what has really gone on, they would lose all respect for our society. . . . Ironically, only people who themselves have been raised on shallow feel-good history could harbor such doubts." --pg. 289

"There is a certain contradiction in the logic of those who write patriotic textbooks. On the one hand, they describe a country without repression, without real conflict. On the other hand, they obviously believe that we need to lie to students to instill in them love of country. But if the country is so wonderful, why must we lie? . . . Ironically, our lying only diminishes us. . . . Surely in a democracy a historian's duty is to tell the truth. Surely in a democracy students need to develop informed reasons to criticize as well as take pride in their country. Maybe somewhere along the line we gave up on democracy?" --pg. 290

"To succeed, schools must help us learn about our society and its history and how to figure out answers for ourselves. At this crucial task most American textbooks and courses fail miserably." --pg. 307

"Covering fewer topics will enable classes to delve into historical controversies. Doing so is an absolute requirement if students are to learn that history is not just answers. The answers one gets depends on the questions one asks, and the questions one asks depends partly upon one's purpose and one's place in the social structure. Perhaps everyone in the class will not come to the same conclusion." --pg. 309

"Teaching history backwards from the present also grips students' attention. . . . Then students are challenged to discuss events and processes in the past that cause these differences." --pg. 310

"Citizens who are their own historians, willing to identify lies and distortions and able to use sources to determine what really went on in the past, become a formidable force for democracy." --pg. 312