

History And Politics: Reflections On The Texas Controversy

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Recent announcements from the Texas State Board of Education have once again alerted us to the dangers inherent in having history standards decided by political activists rather than scholars. The Board's fiat that history standards in Texas must include more conservative political information and interpretation, such as a greater emphasis on the enduring legacy of Ronald Reagan, is an invitation to publishers to edit their future textbooks to fit the State Board of Education's political leanings, and for teaching professionals in Texas to choose these revised textbooks for the instruction of students in Texas classrooms. The considered judgment of scholars and social studies educators is obviously a secondary consideration.

Textbook publishers will need to look to the standards established by the Texas State Board of Education for guidance when their textbooks are revised, or when the publisher is considering the production of a new edition, or a totally new text in a specific area (e.g. American History, Geography, or Government). Since Texas is a textbook adoption state, a committee appointed by the State Board of Education will make recommendations to the Board on which textbooks conform to all of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) requirements that constitute the standards, and which do not. The Board will then make a decision on which books to adopt. Because of the size of the Texas textbook market, the state has great influence on the decisions made by publishers about the content of their product. The Board of Education may be trying to create a situation in which "as Texas goes," so goes the nation, as publishers craft textbooks for Texas that can also be used in other states, with the result that the Texas message gets sent out nationwide.

The process in Texas stands in contrast to the procedures in most states, in which social studies standards reflect the judgments of social studies educators, rather than the dictates of a politically elected group that may not be well informed in the field of social education.

The conservative members of the Board of Education seem to view themselves as creating a kind of "citizen history" that reflects their core values and those of the Texas voters who elected them to the Board. However, their attempt to construct "citizen history" for Texas students is an exercise in rewriting the past to meet the needs of their current political arguments. It does not reflect the ideals of those historical scholars who have urged a more widespread personal involvement of citizens in the study of history, such as Carl Becker, a major force in the writing of history, who grandly announced that "Everyman is his own historian." By this, Becker referred to the fact that all people might take an interest in their predecessors and the world in which they lived. He wanted to present the study of history so that the subject seemed relevant to all—giving it a popular twist in the hope that such an approach would make the school subject more accessible, and, therefore, a more interesting adventure for children in school. While not entering into the controversy that Becker's assertion caused in the ranks of fellow historians, I would like to note that he was not asserting that everyone, or special interest groups, could construct a history to suit their own desires, political whims, or special occasion. He did not assert that in "being our own historian" we could make up our historical roots to suit whatever vision we have of what our history ought to be. He, like all true historians, was a "truth seeker."

My grandmother was the exemplar of what Becker was citing. She not only passed on the family Bible to me (containing as it did, the names and dates, and relevant news clippings) but an interest in "my own" history, and a lifelong interest in the genealogy of our family. This helped to guide me into the profession of history...or, at least, the teaching of it. While the dream of becoming a professional historian like Becker, Hofstadter, or Commager never became a reality, my genealogical interests continue to take up many kilobytes on my computer. And my historical training made me demand that my students should become skilled in the historical process:

seeking the facts, placing them in the context of the times, evaluating their validity when compared to other data, and reaching reasoned, conclusions about events and personalities. I wanted my students to be thinkers, intellectually honest and careful evaluators of the world about them. I didn't want them to become "political junkies." History is not a convenient hook upon which to hang one's prejudices or simplistic solutions to serious societal problems.

One of the striking revisions made in the Texas draft standards approved in March was the dropping of Thomas Jefferson from the list of thinkers who influenced the 18th and 19th century revolutions that are part of the study of world history. Jefferson seems to have been "demoted" from this section of the history standards because his insistence on the separation between church and state has put him on the ideological blacklist of some members of the Board of Education. However, I do not know any social studies teacher who would deny Jefferson's influence on 18th and 19th century revolutions. The American Revolution had a great impact on revolutionaries in Europe, and Jefferson's role as the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, as well as his political ideas, made him influential overseas.

It is particularly ironic that Jefferson should be dropped from the section on world revolutions, because he was present at the eruption of the most famous of these, the French Revolution, which broke out in 1789, when he was the U.S. minister to France. His residence in Paris was a regular meeting place for French revolutionaries, especially his friend, the Marquis de Lafayette, the French general who had fought prominently in the American Revolution. Lafayette was the architect of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, one of the cornerstone documents of the French Revolution. While drafting it, Lafayette often consulted with Jefferson, and sought his observations and advice before submitting a draft to the French National Constituent Assembly, which adopted the document in its final form in August 1789.¹

The Texas Board of Education decisions come after years in which radio hosts, political activists and partisan journalists have launched demagogic attacks on scholars, tagging them as "elitists." University faculty have regularly come under fire, as have social studies teachers, because their interpretations of history do not fit the simplistic and politicized versions that these advocates want to instill in American youth. In the face of these attacks, we must continue to insist that the history taught in schools should be based on the works of recognized scholars, who have been trained and tested in sorting out facts from fiction, in analyzing a vast array of data, and providing considered interpretations of that data.

It is all the more important to ensure that young Americans receive a social studies education that is rooted in scholarship because of the abundance of viewpoints and opinions to which we are currently exposed that are not rooted in scholarship. We are at a critical juncture in our nation's history. We have suffered an economic downturn whose magnitude is the greatest since the Depression of the 1930's. Great changes have taken place, including a major national shift that has resulted in the election of an African American to the highest office. We know from

Thomas Jefferson,
President of the United
States, courtesy of the
Library of Congress



history that such changes generate greater citizen interest and action than would ordinarily be present. People who lose their jobs, families who face house foreclosure, college or high school graduates who are entering a job market that has shrunk severely, people who normally face serious odds in the job market and are competing for available work at any level of proficiency, all have their own explanations of what has caused these hard times. It is easy for them to turn to facile answers about what has brought the miseries to their door. In these circumstances, it is common to invoke a simplistic view of history, or even for some to urge the emulation of the events of 1774–1776, which are seen as the epitome of citizen protest against the evils of an overbearing and unthinking government.

Simplistic views of history and heated political rhetoric have become a substitute for the proper analysis both of history and of current issues. Daily diatribes by would-be politicians and demagogic TV or radio personalities all interpret the present world in quick and easy, and often inaccurate, history lessons. Such history, untamed by knowledge, comes easily to mind (and to unchecked mouths) in troubled times such as ours. When these voices sound out, I wonder what has happened to the careful guardians of truth and accuracy, who ask for the examination of assertions in the spotlight of careful and caring truth seeking? What skills of determining fact from fiction, from opinion, from propaganda, from hate, were the tenets of instruction in the schools these political activists and media personalities attended, particularly in the field of social studies?

If a State Board of Education is to make a true contribution, it should be more concerned with truth seeking, with developing students' skills in detecting falsehoods and skewed opinions, and with training students to make balanced, objective analyses of our historic past. State education agencies should be more concerned with whether or not social studies (history and the social sciences) exist at all in their schools. A recent survey of social studies teachers across the nation reveals that the dominance of such programs as No Child Left Behind has so skewed school programs that social studies is in serious danger of being left out of a child's school experience completely. Were it not for national holidays or special birthdays, social studies instruction might well fall by the wayside in some schools. The inordinate emphasis given to reading and math because of federally-funded testing programs has resulted in the decline in time devoted to, or omission of, social studies in our schools. One could only hope that reading and math proficiency has, as a result, shown great improvement, but such is not the case. Indeed, leaving the national heritage behind is at least as serious as the mediocrity that apparently exists in reading and math.

All human beings have their own history, but a nation's history must not be made the handmaiden of politicians seeking to project their own narrowly conceived views for political purposes rather than the broader public interest. We can disagree on political decisions and moves; we can, as citizens, vote our

consciences and values; but we should not rewrite history for our own political or social convenience.

Of course, even recognized historical scholars have differences of interpretation and disagreements that can reach high temperatures. The investigation of these differences usually focuses on determining the historical accuracy of accounts and evaluating differences of interpretation. The problem with the conservative "citizen activist" interpretations of history that we are witnessing is that they are not aligned with the consensus of scholarly interpretations, and venture outside the range of interpretations that scholars endorse. They skew the historical record to fit a present-day political argument. While they are occasionally totally inaccurate, they are more likely to exaggerate or highlight the past achievements of a historical figure beyond what the true historical record reveals, or, conversely, to minimize the role of historical figures whose politics ran counter to the beliefs of these activists.

A major goal of social studies education is to help young people to become citizens who are smart listeners and cautious evaluators. Politics comes in a number of different guises, and training our students to become responsible civic participants must be a continuing theme of citizenship education. History, as represented in social studies standards, or school classrooms, must not be a platform for "politicking" but part and parcel of the training ground for intelligent civic behavior. We should not become a nation of lemmings quixotically responding to the latest political fashion. As a nation we should also be very concerned as to whether we allow social studies education to be shunted aside in the classrooms of our nation. Civic education, historical accuracy and honesty, are the key tenets of any social studies school program. If those programs disappear, or become the "left behind," we face a civic decline that will only encourage the enemies of true democratic behavior. 🌐

Note

- 1 Some interesting details about Jefferson and the French Revolution can be accessed on the Library of Congress website. Go to <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/jefferson/> and click on the section "A Revolutionary World."

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