

# The White Gunman, The Anti-Semitic Automaker, and Other Dilemmas of a History Textbook Author

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History textbook authors get a bad rap. Deservedly so: they are implicated in the reproduction of social hierarchies; they gloss over the oppression that is inextricably intertwined with nation-building; and they marginalize women, poor people, and those with less racial privilege.<sup>1</sup> In one recent case, for instance, a Texas history book referred to enslaved people as “workers,” without noting that they were forced to labor without pay or freedom under brutal conditions.<sup>2</sup> Each decision textbook authors make, from the words they choose to the structure of their sentences, can be analyzed to reveal their position in discourses of power.

I have enjoyed reading critical deconstructions of history textbooks, and I have tried to contribute to the genre myself.<sup>3</sup> But there is not much literature in which history textbook authors investigate their own ethical and ideological choices. As I shifted from textbook critic to textbook writer, I found myself examining the implications of the sentence-level choices I made. I was inspired to explore several decisions that I struggled with as I wrote and revised a 2017 textbook called *Teaching U.S. history Thematically: Document-based Lessons for the Secondary Classroom*.<sup>4</sup> As I look back over multiple drafts of my manuscript and correspondence between me and my editor,<sup>5</sup> I see how the final text was built up through a dialogue of second (and third and fourth) thoughts, yielding a “final product” that represents an arbitrary stopping point on a journey I have not yet finished.

In this article, I examine four dilemmas that arose, which I refer to as: The White Gunman; The Anti-Semitic

Automaker; The Missing Weapons of Mass Destruction; and The Big-Government Liberal. My response to these dilemmas reflects my place in a network of relationships—not only with the book’s readers, but also with former students, with other scholars, and with publications staff.

## No Escaping Ideology

Taking for granted that all curricula are ideological, and that schooling reproduces the interests of the dominant social class, history textbooks in particular play a key role in building the boundaries between “us” and “them” that form the basis of national identities.<sup>6</sup> These ideologies are embedded in language, as well as in the silences around which historical narratives are structured.<sup>7</sup> While there is certainly historical truth, there is no neutral point from which to narrate the past, and there are no objectively correct words to choose when doing so; every claim is open to contestation. I do not believe that history textbook authors

can escape their particular social positions—the best we can do is acknowledge our biases and react with humility and interest when others point out our blind spots. I examine how decisions about the textbook I wrote were both mine (I am responsible for them) and not-only-mine (part of particular sociopolitical worlds). I want to open the door to criticism and improve my practice as a textbook author, as well as to encourage teachers and students to investigate historiography for themselves.

## Who Am I, What Was I Trying to Do, and Why Does It Matter?

I am a middle-class, White woman with progressive political views, and I have taught history in two very different settings. I started my career in a high-poverty, public high school in the Bronx where most students were Black or Latinx. Then I moved to the Midwest and taught eighth grade at a private school where most students were White and middle class, with many coming from conservative, rural households. When I became a teacher-educator and decided to write a textbook, my goal was to create a text that could be used in either of those settings, and that could give students as demographically distant as the ones I had taught a common vocabulary and set of analytical skills that could narrow the gulf between them.

Their understandings of the past might never coincide, but I hoped that I could show them that different perspectives on history exist, that people's perspectives are influenced by their identity and experiences, and that debates about those perspectives are inextricably tied to the present. I wanted to foster a "political classroom"<sup>8</sup> in which students could discuss controversial issues (e.g., racism, same-sex marriage, and gun laws) informed by historical context.

In order to achieve those aims, I gathered 60 of what I consider the most important documents from U.S. history—speeches by government officials and government critics, Supreme Court cases, photographs, and political cartoons. I organized them into seven thematic units, each structured around an essential question. I excerpted each document and incorporated it into a lesson in which I provide a few bullet points to introduce the document, as well as questions and activities for students to complete before, during, and after reading it. My goal is for students to build an understanding of how a diverse array of historical figures has approached questions that have recurred throughout American history. Each of the seven thematic units begins with a recent document related to a current issue, which anchors the essential question to the present and sets the stage for an understanding of continuity and change.

One of the greatest difficulties I faced in writing the book was managing my own biases. In order to increase students' abilities to form their own interpretations, I included documents rather than narrating events myself. Yet my perspective, which I identified as "left-leaning" in the introduction, influenced both the selection of documents and the way I present them. I felt my own biases most strongly when I tried to write the bullet points that introduce each source. I wanted this information to frame the document and refresh students' memories on background reading they had done, without taking more than five or ten minutes for the teacher to deliver.

These short texts were the only part of the lessons where I took the authoritative tone that characterizes most history textbooks. As a result, I questioned which details were essential, which could be left out, and what words I should use.

My concern was no less vivid when I was introducing documents from the eighteenth century than it was when introducing those from the twenty-first. I felt torn between writing the kind of "social justice" textbook<sup>9</sup> I had sometimes chosen to use in my own classrooms and one that would do more than preach to the choir. A "balanced" view was not my goal; for instance, providing the perspectives of both slaves and slaveowners without stating clearly that slavery was racist and wrong would be unconscionable. Yet I wondered if it was possible to hold on to my own progressive values while writing a textbook that even conservative students and teachers would use—and which would help all readers understand where other people were coming from, whether or not they agreed. This mission was especially challenging in the wake of Donald Trump's election, as political divides have deepened. If I am honest with myself, I do hope that students' analyses of the documents I present will draw them toward what I call "social justice." But that transformation is much more meaningful if they get there using their own hearts and brains than it is if I try to drag them there. My dilemmas arose as I navigated the tension between those two possibilities.

### **The White Gunman**

The first dilemma I describe centers on when it is appropriate to mention the race of a historical figure. A unit on civil liberties begins with a speech President Barack Obama made about reforming gun laws in the wake of a crime committed by James Holmes, a person I initially identified as a "White gunman" who "killed 12 people in a mass shooting in a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado." In my effort to demonstrate to students the racial diversity of the people who have contributed to our

country's history, I always identified the race of Black, Latinx, Asian, and Native American historical figures. Yet I had not identified historical figures such as Thomas Jefferson as White, thus allowing Whiteness to remain an assumed norm. (The exception was John Brown, although I struggled with that decision as well: Did identifying John Brown's whiteness make it seem as if it should be surprising for White people to fight for the rights of Black people?)

In an effort to counter-balance the media's tendency to identify the race of non-White criminals only,<sup>10</sup> I had decided to describe Holmes as White. However, I worried that identifying his race might create the impression that a White person committing a crime was extraordinary. I wondered if I should call him "mentally ill," or whether that would be perceived as an excuse for behavior that is rarely granted to those of other races. Therefore, in a subsequent draft I deleted "White," and I eventually deleted "gunman" as well. The final text identifies him only by name, and includes the description of his crime that I quoted above. I am still questioning my choice.

### **The Anti-Semitic Automaker**

Another dilemma concerns whether to mention automaker Henry Ford's anti-Semitism. I include an excerpt of Ford's autobiography in a unit on the relationships among government, businesses, and workers. In framing the document, I described Ford as an "inventor and businessperson who founded the Ford Motor Company." I also noted that he "pioneered the use of the assembly line" and that "his business model involved producing goods most people could afford, and paying workers high wages." With Ford, as with many other historical figures, I struggled over whether to include less flattering details about his life—especially because Ford was one of the figures I expected students from conservative backgrounds to identify with most, and one whom I did not personally revere. I did not want to put on a pedes-

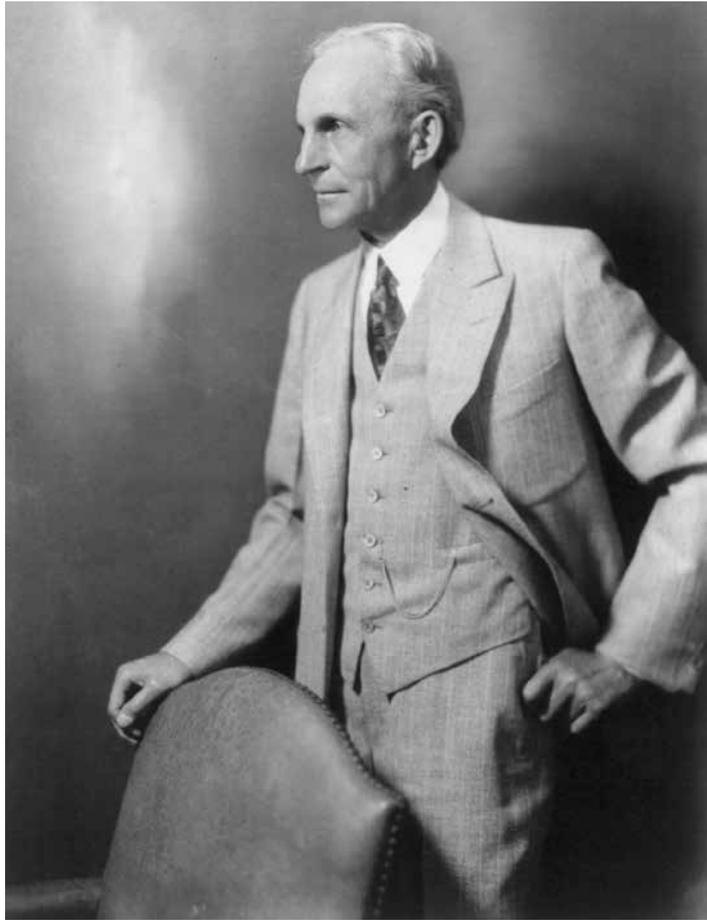
tal people whose views and actions were offensive. On the other hand, space was too limited for a laundry list of unfavorable facts about each historical figure, and my biases influenced which people I was willing to characterize negatively. For instance, I was eager to note that many Founders owned slaves, but I did not want to mention that Martin Luther King Jr. had been unfaithful to his wife.

To conserve space, I decided to include unheroic details only insofar as they were related to the document or theme under study. For instance, because Thomas Jefferson's inaugural address praises "equal justice and exact justice for all men," I noted that Jefferson "owned slaves and expressed racist views," adding that he also "at times advocated for an end to the slave trade." Would that last phrase be

seen as that of an apologist, or as adding complexity to the picture? The hardest choices I encountered were often about where to end the story and how deep to delve into the details. It was relatively easy to avoid falsehood, but really difficult to avoid sins of omission.

Henry Ford's case was tougher. Ford's anti-Semitism was not directly related to the excerpt of his autobiography that I included. Yet when I had taught this text in a middle school classroom, a Jewish student brought up Ford's anti-Semitism and asked why I had not told the class about it.

Finally, I decided I could reference Ford's anti-Semitism insofar as it affected his hiring practices, which were certainly related to the business model he discussed in his autobiography. Therefore, I added the sentence, "Ford discrimi-



(Photo Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

**Business magnate Henry Ford, founder of the Ford Motor Company, purchased *The Dearborn Independent* in 1918 and published a series of anti-Semitic articles that ran in 91 issues. Ford bound the columns into four volumes and distributed half a million copies.**

nated against some groups; for instance, he did not hire Jewish workers." I feel comfortable with this decision, but there are probably additional details I should have included about other historical figures, and I hope well-informed readers will point them out to me.

### **The Missing Weapons of Mass Destruction**

The third dilemma centers on how much to include about the justification presented by the administration of George W. Bush for attacking Iraq in 2003. I include Bush's 2001 speech about the War on Terror in a unit on foreign policy. When I originally introduced the document, I stated that Iraq was "alleged to have connections to al-Qaida and to have 'weapons of mass destruction' that could be used in a terrorist attack." My

editor, who shares my liberal/progressive political orientation, encouraged me to add that "it was later revealed that false evidence for the 'weapons of mass destruction' had been used to gain support for the war and approval from Congress." Although I believe this claim to be true, I was concerned that I would alienate students or teachers who did not already share these views.

In this case, I struggled with whether a post-modern view of the blurry line between theory and fact had a place in history textbooks. When could I confidently state a point of fact versus propose a theory supported by evidence? What my editor suggested was reasonable, but combined with other points I had included in the book, it might lead some to feel that I was forcing my own interpretation on students instead of letting them consider the evidence for themselves.

In the end, I decided to state that the weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) "were never found." I also pointed students toward resources through which they might discover that evidence for WMDs had been fabricated. I told "the truth," but an incomplete truth. My concern was that stating "the facts" outright would cause some students to resist them, whereas letting them arrive at what I consider "the truth" on their own would be more educative and less likely to spark backlash.

### **The Big-Government Liberal**

The fourth dilemma involves my effort to craft descriptions of the terms "liberal" and "conservative" in our contemporary political context. I include a speech by Ronald Reagan in a unit on American democracy, followed by a speech by

Barack Obama. I wanted to give students language to describe the political differences between those two figures. Yet I found it nearly impossible to compose descriptions that would be acceptable to both liberals and conservatives.

My first attempt defined conservatives as supporting “small government” and “lower taxes,” and liberals as supporting “higher taxes” and “big government”—a description some liberals might find pejorative (although I do not). My editor pointed out that despite conservatives’ supposed commitment to “small government,” Reagan had, for instance, increased military spending. She also noted that the lower taxes advocated by conservatives applied mostly to corporations and suggested the term “corporation supportive” to describe such tax preferences. Although I did not dispute her insights, I struggled to find language that was not inflammatory to either side. After all, a conservative (or leftist) could point out that the “social safety net” programs I associated with liberals were sometimes ineffective.

Turning to the most accessible (if not scientific) vetting process of the digital age, I posted drafts of my descriptions on Facebook and asked for feedback from my (mostly liberal) friends. Some suggestions were helpful. For instance, one person pointed out that by saying that people who were socially conservative “favored traditional ways of life,” I was allowing conservatives to define what “tradition” was; I changed the phrase to “ways of life that they define as traditional.” Another friend pointed out that by describing the terms, I was artificially stabilizing them—and potentially preventing students from imagining third-party alternatives. I worried that my effort to place Reagan’s views on the current political spectrum interfered with what Sam Wineburg calls “the strangeness of the past.”<sup>11</sup> Most of all, my discussions with my editor and friends convinced me that I would never arrive at definitions that pleased everyone. But the alternative was saying nothing, and

I did not think that was fair to students who really wanted to know what the adults around them meant when they used those terms.

In the final version, I tried to define liberals and conservatives in as charitable a way as I could, using the words they would use to describe themselves rather than the way they might characterize each other (“heartless reactionaries who worship the free market”; “bleeding-heart elitists who think the government is the solution to all problems”). I stated, “currently, in the U.S., conservatives favor an economic system in which a small federal government places lower tax rates on wealthy people and corporations and reduces regulations on businesses in order to promote economic growth.” (I didn’t add my opinion that this doesn’t work.) If I want students to develop skills in analyzing evidence and assessing theories, I cannot draw these conclusions for them. Nonetheless, I am aware that the descriptions I crafted are vulnerable to criticism from many angles.

### You Be the Judge

These examples illustrate that history textbook authors may be aware of the ideological critiques that could be leveled against them. However, they may struggle to find solutions to the socio-political conundrums that arise while writing these textbooks. My experience has shown me that it is much easier to criticize other people’s history textbooks than it is to write one that I am comfortable defending. I hope this essay will encourage other history textbook authors to “go public” with the dilemmas they faced; I am eager to hear from scholars, practitioners, and students on how they would have approached the issues I describe.

Moreover, I hope that social studies teachers will encourage their students to view all documents, whether primary or secondary sources, from a historiographical angle. The words on the page do not fall from the sky; they were labored over by humans who cannot escape their own

biases. History textbooks must remain open to criticism from their readers and from society at large. It is only when we, as teachers, invite students to analyze school curricula that we will be truly training them as historians and citizens. 🌍

### Notes

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5. My gratitude goes to Jean Ward at Teachers College Press for her careful edits as well as her willingness to let me examine our correspondence for this piece.
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