



Rewriting the history textbooks: An assault on history and our common past

Allan C. Brownfield

March 27, 2019

WASHINGTON: The assault on American history has been growing for many years. Consider the treatment of George Washington. The first president of the United States is disappearing from the nation's schools.

Several years ago James Rees, executive director of Mt. Vernon, Washington's historic Virginia estate, notes:

"The evidence is overwhelming that George Washington is rapidly being short-tripped in the classrooms across the country. For instance, my fourth-grade textbook in Richmond had ten times more coverage of George Washington than the textbooks used in that same school in 1982. Imagine what it must be now."

Joseph Ellis, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian and author of "His Excellency, George Washington," points out that,

"One of the major trends... is something called social history. It's the study of the ordinary figures, the inarticulate who aren't the most prominent. There are people, who think we should identify great achievements, not as the product of individuals but should see it in more collective respects."

Recently, the University of Norte Dame, responding to complaints from students, decided to "shroud" its twelve 134-year-old murals depicting Christopher Columbus.

In a somewhat bizarre explanation for this action, Norte Dame's president, the Rev. John Jenkins, says that his decision to cover the murals was not to conceal anything. Instead, his actions are to tell the "full story" of Columbus's activities.

In a lecture delivered to a Hillsdale College audience entitled "Shall We Defend Our Common History?" Roger Kimball, editor, and publisher of "The New Criterion," says:

"Welcome to the new Orwellian world where censorship is free speech, and we respect the past by trying to elide it. Over the past several years we have seen a rising tide of assaults on statues and other works of art representing our nation's history by those who are eager to squeeze that complex story into a box defined by the evolving rules of political correctness. As the French writer Charles Peguy once observed,

‘It will never be known what acts of cowardice have been motivated by the fear of not looking sufficiently progressive.’”

In the background of all this, in Kimball’s view,

“Is the conviction that we blessed members of the most enlightened cohort ever to grace the earth with its presence, occupy a moral plane superior to all who came before us. Consequently, the defacement of murals of Christopher Columbus —and statues of later historical figures like Teddy Roosevelt—is perfectly virtuous and above criticism since human beings in the past were by definition so much less enlightened than we.”

We can fill pages with examples of efforts to remove our common history from view. The English department at the University of Pennsylvania, in the face of student protests, removed a portrait of William Shakespeare and replaced it with a photograph of Andre Lord, a black feminist writer.

“Students replaced the Shakespeare portrait,” announced department chairman Jed Esty, “and delivered it to my office as a way of affirming their commitment to a more inclusive mission for the English department.”

More than a decade ago, David McCullough, the historian, and presidential biographer, began arguing that bad history textbooks are as great a threat to American freedom as terrorists:

“Something is eating away at the National memory, and a nation, or a community, or a society can suffer as much from the adverse effects of amnesia as can an individual.”

Several years ago, at the annual Jefferson Lecture for the National Endowment for the Humanities, McCullough declares:

“For a free, self-governing people, something more than a vague familiarity with history is essential if we are to hold onto and sustain our freedom. But I don’t think history should ever be made to seem like some musty , unpleasant pill to be swallowed only for our own good. History, let us agree, can be an immense source of pleasure. For almost anyone with the normal human allotment of curiosity and an interest in people, it is a field day.”

More than two-thirds of college students and administrators who participated in a survey were unable to remember that the Bill of Rights guarantees freedom of religion and the press. In surveys conducted at 139 colleges and universities, more than one-fourth of students and administrators did not list freedom of speech as an essential right protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution. More than three-fourths did not name freedom of assembly and association or the right “to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

Prof. Allan Charles Kors, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, said that,

“If one thinks of the First Amendment as a foundational American liberty, the ignorance and misunderstanding of it by administrators at our nation’s colleges and universities is frightening, and the general ignorance and misunderstanding of it by students is quite depressing.”

A study several years ago of seniors at 50 top colleges and universities by the

An American Council of Trustees and Alumni survey of 50 college seniors, found that half didn't know George Washington was the commanding general of the Continental Army during the American Revolution. Or that Washington was the leader accepting Brig. Gen. Charles Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown. Thirty-six percent thought Ulysses S. Grant was commander of the Union Army during the Civil War.

Six percent said it was Douglas MacArthur, U.S. commander during the Korean War. Thirty-two percent said Washington. It was a multiple choice question.

Prof. Wilfred McClay of the University of Tennessee lamented that.

"...when students at Harvard and other great universities are not learning the basics of American history, it is safe to assume that almost no one is and that there will be almost no one to pass such knowledge on to the next generation. Historical memory is as much a necessity to the preservation of liberty and American security as is our own armed forces."

The Cato Institute reports that voters do not know enough about the issues. Or the candidates, in order to cast an informed ballot.

"An informed electorate is a prerequisite for democracy," writes Ilya Somin, a professor of law at George Mason University. "If voters do not know what is going on in politics, they cannot rationally exercise control over government policy."

Voter ignorance, he says, is doubly dangerous. Ignorance opens the door to manipulation of the public by the elite. It encourages politicians to make policy errors to win votes from an ill-informed public. These actions create a larger government. This larger government leads to a voting public less likely to have the time to learn about the behemoth Government.

Thus, the government becomes too large to be effectively controlled by the people.

To learn from history and from those who have come before us, we must understand that they, like ourselves, were imperfect human beings.

Even earlier, people who distinguished themselves in art, government, music, and other endeavors did believe the world was flat. Are we not able to look at earlier periods in history and respect and honor the achievements of those people? Can we do that, while, at the same time, reject the narrow views which may have characterized their time?

Is it really necessary to cover portraits of Columbus and remove portraits of Shakespeare?

We are guilty of what the Quaker theologian Elton Trueblood called "the sin of contemporaneity."

The application of today's values to those who have come before us.

Because they held views we now know were wrong must we abandon our respect for Moses and Jesus. Or Plato and Aristotle. What about Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci? That would make little sense.

Let us, instead, embrace our history, both the good and less edifying. Let us learn from it. Contempt for the past tells us much more about ourselves than about our ancestors. Moreover, what it tells us is not good.

