

THE ENDURING CONSERVATIVE VICTORY IN THE  
CULTURE WARS OVER AMERICAN HISTORY  
EDUCATION

by

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In the past century, Americans have worked to define their national identity in public debates about American history textbooks. My thesis explores how conservatives have hijacked these debates to promote an uncomplicated, sanitized, and sanctimonious vision of American nationalism. I analyze public discussions about American history textbooks in each of the three “culture wars” waged over history education in the last century. In each instance, progressives advocated that history texts ought to offer more diverse narratives and accurately explain the United States’ oppression of black people. In response, conservatives repeatedly incited public outrage that these narratives undermined American exceptionalism. Their arguments stifled progressives’ efforts. Conservatives launched these cultural attacks because diversified textbooks contravened history texts’ original purpose: to promote a whitewashed narrative of American history that valorized a racially exclusive national identity. This crusade against textbook reform represented an important pillar of the conservative backlash against black Americans’ civil rights gains in the twentieth century by sustaining the racial barriers placed on American nationalism.

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# Introduction

## Background

In this thesis, I analyze discussions in *The New York Times* about history textbooks during the last century's culture wars. I build upon other scholars' explorations of culture wars throughout American history, but through the lens of public writing in the *Times*. In these articles, I explore connections between writers' criticisms of history textbooks and differing ideological views of American nationalism. Specifically, I discover a pattern replicated in every culture war: conservative backlash in the public discussion against progressives' efforts to create more inclusive and accurate history textbooks. I argue that this pattern evidences a broader effort by conservatives in the United States to uphold exceptionalist narratives of American history and foster a racially exclusive national identity.

Each instance of conservative backlash in the culture wars followed moments of political upheaval in which people of color, and especially black Americans, made inroads in staking their rightful claims to American identity through progressive reforms to history textbooks. Such moments threaten conservatives' hold on the political and economic power they have amassed through centuries of unparalleled oppression and exploitation of black people. Conservatives' campaigns in the culture wars universally sought to suppress this history and uphold false, sanitized myths that valorized the American project as a white European invention. In each of the three cases I explore, these campaigns successfully stifled progressives' attempts to teach students this history and reverse its cruelest effects on America's marginalized and oppressed people. Ultimately, I argue that conservatives' victories in the culture wars over history

education represent an important pillar of their concentrated backlash against civil rights gains in the twentieth century, and successfully maintained the racial boundaries placed on American national identity.

I arrive at this conclusion by analyzing the three distinct culture wars that have occurred over history education in America. First, I explore how the political upheaval of the Progressive Era gave rise to a culture war in the 1920s, when conservatives fought to establish the whitewashed and exceptionalist national myth as the foundation of American nationalism in a new national culture. This battle countered progressives' efforts to introduce racially inclusive narratives to American history textbooks and established a precedent whereby conservatives wielded their political power to strike down progressives' gains.

Next, I turn to the 1960s, when the civil rights and new left movements identified historicism as a vital tool in changing American society. These groups and their progressive allies made important changes to history textbooks across the country that reflected the nation's history of oppression and framed antiracism as an essential part of American identity. Again, however, conservatives successfully rolled back these changes by halting federal initiatives to introduce multicultural history textbooks and portraying federal education aid as a tyrannical infringement of states' rights.

Ultimately, I analyze the culture war of the 1980s and 1990s, when progressives made their greatest gains: they introduced multicultural history textbooks which challenged the notion that race is a biological fact, explained how American prosperity is built on racist exploitation, and demonstrated how that history profoundly affects the nation in the present. These reforms, however, posed a mortal threat to exceptionalist

myths, especially as progressives attempted to institute nationally standardized textbooks rewritten in the multicultural tradition. As such, conservatives again launched a cultural crusade against progressives' gains, successfully using their political power to crush this multicultural movement and keep American nationalism grounded in racist and exceptionalist myths.

## **Theory**

This thesis is grounded in interdisciplinary theories of nationalism, especially those that connect nationalism, narratives, and print. In the modern world, we organize by nation. We define people by their nationalities, fight wars for one nation or another, and even describe epidemics by their national origin. But nations have not always dominated: the nation only arose as a concept in the modern era, following a number of monumental shifts in international power. After centuries of European religious wars between Catholics and Protestants, during which eight million people died fighting for their denomination, envoys from both sides met in Westphalia (now Germany) to codify, for the first time, national political boundaries.<sup>1</sup> The Peace of Westphalia defined each European state's sovereign boundaries and allowed them to set their own religious affiliations.<sup>2</sup>

These treaties laid the foundation for the modern nation by placing defined territories under sovereign political rule. In his famous book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson defines the nation as “an imagined political community [that is]

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<sup>1</sup> Jason Farr, "Point: The Westphalia Legacy and the Modern Nation-State," *International Social Science Review* 80, no. 3/4 (2005): 156.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, Anderson argues, the nation is a social construct that arise from political sovereignty in a defined area. Before Westphalia, the Church was the locus of political power, leaving borders between different religious territories hazy and ever-changing.<sup>4</sup> Afterwards, however, sovereign states could flourish, and the modern nation in turn.

The modern nation depends on political allegiance from the population within its sovereign borders. Indeed, although nations are social constructs, they command tremendous loyalty from millions of people. Historian Peter Alter observes that the nation “manages to mobilize the political will of a people” using nationalism: “an ideology and a political movement which holds the nation and sovereign nation-state to be crucial indwelling values.”<sup>5</sup> Here, Alter provides a broad definition of nationalism: the political culture that fosters allegiance to a nation. But Alter’s definition excludes the essential fact that nationalism underpins the nation. As Anderson explains, nations depend on nationalism for their existence in the present and survival in the future. Nationalism’s political power, Anderson explains, only flourished after three crucial historical developments in post-Westphalian Europe.

First, as literacy spread in Europe, most people began using vernacular languages rather than the traditional Latin.<sup>6</sup> This change built cultural unity within European nations and dismantled religious authority in promulgating universal truths. Second, sovereign governments usurped religious monarchs as society’s rulers, further eroding the Church’s authority under the new national system.<sup>7</sup> Finally, people in

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<sup>3</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 5-6.

<sup>4</sup> Farr, “The Westphalia Legacy,” 157.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Alter, *Nationalism*, tr. Stuart McKinnon-Evans (London, 1994), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 36.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*



different nations – now speaking different languages under different political leadership – developed differing ideas about the history of their society and the world.<sup>8</sup> These changes, Anderson argues, occurred after the invention of “print capitalism,” the system of mass printing under a capitalist economy. Indeed, in Anderson’s estimation, capitalism incentivized publishers to print books in national languages instead of regional dialects or arcane Latin to maximize circulation in modern European nations.<sup>9</sup> As a result, those nations’ populations developed common national identities, based on a shared language, politics, and history.

Crucially, though, a nation’s history is as imagined as the nation itself. The histories that took hold under print capitalism disseminated myths designed to legitimize the nation as fundamental and immutable. “Imagined communities,” Anderson writes, “conjured up by ... print-capitalism always regarded themselves as somehow ancient.”<sup>10</sup> Anderson further argues that myths of nations’ permanence developed as “responses by power-groups threatened with exclusion from, or marginalization in, popularly imagined communities.”<sup>11</sup> Here, Anderson reveals how modern nationalisms include historical myths designed to maintain elites’ power in the nation. Historian Lloyd Kramer builds on Anderson’s analysis in “Historical Narratives and the Meaning of Nationalism,” writing that “individuals came to identify with public communities that were vastly larger than the local worlds in which they lived their daily lives” by “reading the stories of their nations in schools, literature, and newspapers.”<sup>12</sup>

More broadly, Kramer argues that “the history of ideas never reaches a point of

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 110.

<sup>12</sup> Lloyd Kramer, "Historical Narratives and the Meaning of Nationalism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58, no. 3 (July 1997): 529, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3653913>.

uncontested closure and never finally escapes the political and cultural contexts in which all historical narratives are produced.”<sup>13</sup> Narratives presented in history textbooks play important roles in crafting a nation’s enduring cultural and political climate. These stories underpin national identity and are often at the heart of political battles over a nation’s future.

### **Literature Review**

My thesis is a history of ideas about American nationalism encapsulated in public discussions about history education. Public education has been compulsory in the United States for over a century. During this time, history textbooks have played crucial roles in shaping Americans’ national identities. Public discussion about those narratives bring out the political and cultural contexts that give political salience to debates about American history education. Throughout the last century, these debates have taken the form of “culture wars,” wherein different ideological, economic, and religious groups fight for American national identity. My thesis will draw upon a robust literature regarding culture wars in America. The phrase “culture war” was first popularized by sociologist James Davison Hunter in his 1991 book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, in which he argues that modern America faces an impassable and increasingly polarized divide between religious fundamentalists and secular progressives.<sup>14</sup> Hunter identifies culture wars throughout U.S. history, including slavery, the Scopes Trial, and the Equal Rights Amendment, in each instance identifying how fundamentalists and secularists have battled over American identity.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 525.

<sup>14</sup> James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, (New York: Hachette, 1991).

Hunter's work proves crucial in my thesis in that it provides the basic progressive-conservative binary along which I analyze the last century's culture wars.

Historian Andrew Hartman engages with similar ideas in *A War for the Soul of America: History of the Culture Wars*.<sup>15</sup> Hartman focuses his inquiry, however, on one period of culture wars in America: the 1980s and 1990s. Hartman echoes Hunter's finding, arguing that "liberal, progressive, and secular Americans" fought "their conservative, traditional, and religious counterparts" in a battle for American national identity.<sup>16</sup> Hartman focuses a chapter on the culture wars over education, affirming that "debates about education have long acted as a proxy for arguments about whose values will shape the nation's future."<sup>17</sup> Hartman's situates his analysis in a broader historical timeline of progressive change and reaction in American politics: he frames the culture war as a conservative reaction to the sixties' progressive cultural upheavals.<sup>18</sup> Hartman concludes that neoconservatives in the Republican Party consolidated control over the federal educational apparatus in the 1980s and '90s, and used that power to institute nationwide standards for public curricula, reversing the 1960s' secular reforms.<sup>19</sup> However, I disagree with Hartman's claim that the 20<sup>th</sup> century's culture wars began as a reaction to progressive gains in the 1960s; instead, I argue these culture wars have occurred since the 1920s, when a national mass culture first emerged in America.<sup>20</sup>

The existing literature also provides a framework for this thesis's chronology and points of emphasis. Culture wars arise when a historical moment calls into question

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<sup>15</sup> Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: History of the Culture Wars*, (University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 200.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 72.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 218.

<sup>20</sup> Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 265.

the basic ideas Americans hold about their nation. Historian Jonathan Zimmerman surveys important moments in culture wars over education in his book *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools*.<sup>21</sup> Zimmerman identifies moments such as the 1920s' mass immigration and the 1960s' Civil Rights Movements as important shifts in the American political demographic that ignited culture wars over education. I make use of Zimmerman's chronological distinctions in dividing my analysis into three sections about the three culture wars over history education in the twentieth century. Similarly, in *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past*, historians Gary Nash, Charlotte Crabtree and Ross Dunn also assert that culture wars arise as a response to expanding American demographics and political representations, and engage a fundamental tension between a progressive, inclusive American identity and a conservative, exclusionary one.<sup>22</sup> Their analysis centers on the planning and drafting processes surrounding the *National History Standards*, when conservatives led by Lynne Cheney sought to standardize whitewashed history curricula across the nation. The authors played central roles in drafting these *Standards*, and their detailed accounts of the political context is crucial to my discussion of the culture war of the 1980s and 1990s.

This thesis also draws from, and contributes to, the broader political science literature on conservative backlash in the second half of the twentieth century. Joseph Lowndes' book *From the New Deal to the New Right* reveals how the modern conservative movement arose from Southerners' repeated efforts to roll back civil rights

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<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools*, (Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Gary Nash, Charlotte Crabtree and Ross Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past*, (New York: Vintage, 2000).

gains since the New Deal.<sup>23</sup> One of Lowndes' fundamental assertions aligns elegantly with mine: that Southerners drove the political movement behind modern conservatism "because they ... believed that white supremacy was not merely a southern concern but the true ground of American national identity."<sup>24</sup> As my analysis reveals, conservatives used culture wars to incite outrage against historically-accurate narratives about race in American textbooks and replace them with racist myths about American exceptionalism. These culture wars offer a new perspective on the rise of the conservative movement, with public discourse at the forefront of the cultural shifts that undergird political realignments. My research traces these debates further back than the New Deal, locating their roots in the 1920s, when a unified national culture emerged after World War I and the rise of mass media. Debates about history textbooks served as pivotal rhetorical fronts in conservatives' battles not only to enshrine exceptionalism in American identity, but to forge a new political coalition in the Republican Party founded explicitly on racial antagonism.

## **Methods**

No publication compares to the *New York Times* in terms of the quality and quantity of public writing it has produced on history education in America. Therefore, the bulk of my primary source material comes from this publication. As the nation's premier newspaper of record, the *Times* offers an ideal barometer of historical public opinion in America, which guides my exploration of nationalism in history education.

Indeed, *Times* authors' criticisms of history curricula and textbooks often invoke ideas

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<sup>23</sup> Joseph Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and the Southern Origins of Modern Conservatism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

about America and how it ought to be portrayed to future generations, especially in relation to current political events. Letters to the editor serve an especially important role in my analysis, because they illuminate the political ideas and nationalist sentiments expressed by regular educated citizens. Similarly, the *Times*' robust scholarly and editorial discussions of current events bring out the broader ideological trends at play in each of the culture wars I study.

Like Hunter and Hartman, I employ the progressive-conservative binary in dividing the ideas expressed in the public discussion. While this method reduces a broad and nuanced spectrum of ideas into two categories, it has remained a consistent feature in these because it allows for a clear, chronological analysis of the ideological tug-of-war inherent to culture wars. I have chosen to marshal evidence specifically from three chronological windows, which reflect the scholarly consensus on the most salient culture wars in modern America: the first in the 1920s, again in the 1960s, and finally in the 1980s and 1990s. Across all of these culture wars, I analyze a total of 122 *Times* articles written about history textbooks and their significance in the nation's broader political and cultural discussions. The 1960s' culture war produced the most discussion in the *Times* than its counterparts. I uncovered 60 relevant articles from that period, compared to 37 from the 1980s and 1990s, and 25 articles from the 1920s. These statistics are meaningful in that they reflect the intensity and consistency with which the public discussed history textbooks during each culture war. Beyond that, they point to broader trends in how Americans have looked to public writing as the primary arena for the nation's cultural discourse. No newspaper matches the *Times*' ubiquity and reputation within the United States, and its contributors' discussions of the culture wars

constitute the most accurate available representation of the dominant ideas, beliefs, and nationalisms in their respective periods of American history.

## Chapter 1: The 1920s

The 1920s played host to America's first culture war. For the first time, the nation was connected from coast to coast by railroads, telephone cables, and most importantly, national news media.<sup>25</sup> Thus, as the national discussion accompanied a national economy and culture, American nationalism became a priceless political commodity. For the first time, Americans could ask crucial questions about their identity while imagining the entire nation as part of one community. In the 1920s, conservatives in the North and South realized they could achieve a lasting victory by weaving whitewashed, exceptionalist narratives into American history education. They did so by waging a culture war in the reunified United States, in which they fought against religious liberalism, racial and ethnic diversity, and the ideological movements that threatened their economic supremacy in the North and South.

These battles came to life in the public discussion over what American students ought to learn about their nation's history. Specifically, discussions about history education in the *New York Times*, America's first and premier national newspaper of record, evidence a battle for American nationalism between Protestant, fundamentalist conservatives and liberal progressives. The former group sought to propagate exceptionalist, whitewashed narratives of American history across the unified country. The latter group, inspired by the Progressive Era's social reforms, pushed in the other direction to teach American students a more accurate and inclusive story of their nation's history.<sup>26</sup> Together, these opposite ideological forces animated America's first culture war and foreshadowed the next century of battles for American nationalism.

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<sup>25</sup> Zimmerman, *Whose America?*, 14.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 15.



One of the most prominent controversies in the 1920s' culture wars was Prohibition, which reflected growing concerns about the nation's moral and religious deterioration. Indeed, while ushered in by Progressive reformers in an effort to ensure scientific progress, evangelical Christians seized upon Prohibition as a critical piece of their vision of American nationalism.<sup>27</sup> As historian Barry Hankins writes, battles over Prohibition really demonstrated religious conservatives' anxiety, whose "communitarian notion that the family was the basic unit of freedom clashed with the newer idea of individual rights," or as we know it, modern liberalism.<sup>28</sup> Losing their grip on the reins of American nationalism, these fundamentalists, as they called themselves, thus turned to history education as the culprit. Historian George Marsden describes the fundamentalists as "almost uniformly conservative in politics by the 1920s," who demonstrated "unqualified ... patriotism" and "expressed alarm not only about modernism and evolution, but also about the spread of communism."<sup>29</sup> In every case, however, the fundamentalists' efforts hinged on the belief that "the strength of the American Republic was rooted in Christian principles."<sup>30</sup> These fundamentalists formed the conservative front of the 1920s' culture war, during which they promoted exclusionary and exceptionalist myths in debates about American history education.

Conservatives directed their backlash against a new wave of Progressive Era history textbooks which they believed minimized Protestantism's role in the nation's past. For instance, an Episcopalian minister forced New York's Superintendent of Schools Dr. William O'Shea to ban a textbook written by a prominent Columbia

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<sup>27</sup> Barry Hankins, *Jesus and Gin: Evangelicalism, the Roaring Twenties and Today's Culture Wars*, (New York: St. Martin's, 2010), 23.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 207.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 141.

historian, calling it in the *New York Times* “a work that amounts to out and out propaganda ... the Church of England and all the branches of Protestantism are persistently criticized.”<sup>31</sup> In response to the Reverend’s condemnation, the textbook’s author wrote to the newspaper three days later, arguing that the book “has not been attacked on historical grounds. Its statements of facts are not in question,” but “it has been barred because one man found it offensive.”<sup>32</sup> Hayes’ complaint rang true: religious conservatives attacked Progressive Era history texts not for their inaccuracy, but because the textbooks challenged the Protestants’ exceptionalist vision of American nationalism.

In the 1920s, conservatives attacked the liberalization of history education as part of a broader culture war to construct an exceptionalist, sanitized American myth. After all, the Progressive Era’s history texts rejected the narratives these conservatives hoped to preserve: one progressive wrote to the *Times* that “new social and economic conditions” ought to be “reflected in the laws and public opinion concerning the teaching of history.”<sup>33</sup> But the population’s continued adherence to strict Protestant values was a prerequisite for exceptionalist myths’ survival in the United States. In the 1920s’ culture war, conservatives worked to roll back the increasing diversity in American history education by delineating the cultural and religious boundaries of American identity. They decried progressives’ reforms as “un-patriotic and pro-Catholic,” associating Americanness fundamentally with conservative, evangelical Protestantism.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> “City Schools Bar Prof. Hayes’ History,” *The New York Times*, May 2, 1930.

<sup>32</sup> “Board Will Revise History it Banned,” *The New York Times*, May 5, 1930.

<sup>33</sup> “History in the Schools”, *The New York Times*, December 5, 1926.

<sup>34</sup> “City Schools Bar Prof. Hayes’ History,” *The New York Times*, May 2, 1930.

More significantly, conservatives secured an unprecedented victory by forcing educational authorities to institute universal standards dictating which history textbooks were acceptably patriotic for use in public schools. After the controversy over J. H. Hayes' book, for example, the Superintendent declared that the city would create "an approved list of modern history textbooks from which teachers may choose."<sup>35</sup> The standardization of history textbooks represented an important victory for conservatives in the culture war of the 1920s. In New York, history textbooks earned could not be used in public schools if objected to by "any section of the city" for their religious bias.<sup>36</sup> In effect, this policy gave conservatives total power over which history textbooks students would read. Progressives concentrated their efforts on including several diverse views of American history; only conservatives brought objections to these texts, yet their complaints were enough to remove the books from use in schools.

Monumental demographic changes in 1920s America also animated conservatives' efforts to direct the culture war. Most notably, black Americans' mass migration North in search of industrial jobs and greater freedom challenged the Lost Cause narrative of the South's benevolence towards black Americans.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, as cities welcomed more black Americans, Confederate sympathizers emerged from the conservative woodwork to shape history textbooks to their liking. These conservatives eschewed equality in favor of rigid racial and economic hierarchies designed to saturate power in the hands of wealthy white people.

Sometimes, popular Southern narratives about the Civil War's causes entered into conservative critiques. After all, despite no longer owning slaves, conservatives

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Zimmerman, *Whose America?*, 42.

sought to maintain their economic power by exploiting black Americans for cheap labor. But in the new industrial city of the 1920s, whites and black Americans worked together on factory floors and shared walls in tenement buildings. Conservatives deployed racist myths about the Civil War to incite racial animosity and paralyze cross-racial class consciousness before it could emerge. One conservative writer insisted to the *Times* that American students ought to learn that “the South was right, eternally and everlastingly right, in fighting for principles upon which our glorious country was founded.”<sup>38</sup> Another wrote a letter to the editor imploring that Northern schoolchildren learn how “Abraham Lincoln ... was personally responsible for forcing the war upon the South.”<sup>39</sup> A Baltimore writer insisted they also learn how “abolitionists ... arou[s] hatred, intolerance,” and viewed “the Constitution as ‘a covenant with death and a league with hell.’”<sup>40</sup> In these appeals, conservatives sought to associate both nationalist virtue and historical truth with Confederate ideas about race and slavery. They framed American nationalism as a prize reserved for whites only, and decried Progressive Era policies as perversions of “true” American identity, which rested firmly in racially exclusive Southern narratives.

Conservatives in the 1920s also sought to exclude narratives about non-white immigrants from American nationalism. In the public discussion, they demanded that school history textbooks focus solely on narratives that exclusively credited Anglo-Americans for the nation’s prosperity. “The alarming fact is that un-American and even anti-American history textbooks could find their way into American public schools,”

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<sup>38</sup> “Confederates Assert Lincoln Forced War; Call for ‘Fair’ School Histories,” *The New York Times*, June 22, 1922.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Matthew P. Andrews, “The Will to Peace: Prohibition and Slavery,” *The New York Times*, January 3, 1926.

argued one conservative Times columnist.<sup>41</sup> This writer's revulsion came from the fact recognized in newer history textbooks that "other countries [aside from England] were jointly the maternal ancestor" of the United States.<sup>42</sup> After all, these texts challenged popular narratives that American economic power arose from European colonization itself and not the brutal institution of slavery that accompanied it. David Muzzey's "An American History," one of the earliest national history texts, affirmed specifically that "America is the child of Europe."<sup>43</sup> This narrative suited the conservative agenda, as it framed the American project as both inherently exceptional and grounded in whiteness.

On the other hand, progressive reformers worked to introduce more honest perspectives of America's early history. New York's School Superintendent Dr. William O'Shea ensured that "the history textbooks have been selected with the end in view of giving impartial accounts of the transactions between this country and England in former days," and emphasized the educational value in understanding the British perspective of the American Revolution.<sup>44</sup> Princeton historians wrote in support of the progressives' efforts: "if we are to profit by experience, [our nation's] failures and weaknesses should be pointed out," they argued, accusing conservatives' quest to whitewash history as a "calculated [campaign] to impair the integrity of education ... in public institutions of learning."<sup>45</sup> These progressive historians accurately diagnosed conservatives' assault on history education as an effort to restrict most Americans' ability to learn about and identify with their nation.

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<sup>41</sup> "Offending History Books Now Barred," *The New York Times*, June 20, 1922.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> David S. Muzzey, *An American History*, (Boston: Ginn, 1911), 13.

<sup>44</sup> "No Hate is Taught in Schools, Says O'Shea," *The New York Times*, October 11, 1927.

<sup>45</sup> "Princeton Fights History Censorship," *The New York Times*, February 13, 1924.

Despite advocating for textbooks to include immigrants' stories, white liberal reformers largely ignored black Americans' treatment in history texts. One concerned progressive entered the history textbook debate to defend Abraham Lincoln's legacy, labeling him "most essentially a man of peace," but none argued explicitly for including black Americans' experiences in America.<sup>46</sup> This silence is unsurprising given the broader timeline of the civil rights movement's ascension into mainstream political discourse, which began in the New Deal era.<sup>47</sup> In the 1920s' culture war, then, racial liberalism was not yet an organizing principle of progressive politics. While civil rights groups like the NAACP were active across the nation, American politics – and by association, the public discussion – skewed far to the right.<sup>48</sup> The new national culture was founded in large part on white supremacist myths, such as those manifest in D.W. Griffith's 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*: the first ever shown in the White House.<sup>49</sup> In this climate, the culture war was not fought on explicitly racial grounds. Conservatives' appeals to exceptionalist myths went largely unchallenged, especially when they silenced black Americans' role in the nation's development.

Ultimately, conservatives in the 1920s' culture war tied American nationalism to whitewashed, exceptionalist historical myths. They ensured that history textbooks forged a national myth that tied American nationalism to Protestantism and whiteness. Despite progressives' efforts to complicate exceptionalist historical narratives, religious minorities, immigrants, and especially black Americans' monumental contributions to the nation's economic and cultural achievements fell victim to accusations of un-

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<sup>46</sup> "Confederates Assert Lincoln Forced War; Call for 'Fair' School Histories," *The New York Times*, June 22, 1922.

<sup>47</sup> Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 93.

<sup>48</sup> Hankins, *Jesus and Gin*, 2-4.

<sup>49</sup> "President to See Movies," *Washington Evening Star*, February 18, 1915.

Americanness and treachery. Worse, conservatives achieved a victory that laid the scaffolding for the next century of culture wars in America. By forcing government officials to set standards for which history textbooks were appropriately patriotic, conservatives in the 1920s secured white supremacy's place in American nationalism for decades to come.

## Chapter 2: The 1960s

In the 1960s, Americans asked essential questions about the core of American nationalism. According to Andrew Hartman, “the sixties ushered in an intense new form of polarization that hinged on the very question of America and its meaning.”<sup>50</sup> This polarization appeared “new” compared to the 1920s’ culture war because it brought about a sudden and monumental reorganization of American politics and culture around a single issue: race. Civil rights activists in the 1960s brought about a wholesale realignment of the American party system, culminating decades of effort by black leaders to bring civil rights into the core of the Democratic Party’s national platform.<sup>51</sup>

As a result, racial liberalism became the proving ground for American nationalism, especially in the public discussion about how students in America should learn their nation’s history. Drawing from the Civil Rights Movement, Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society, and the War on Poverty, progressives sought to broaden American history textbooks to include the enduring legacy of slavery. In the twentieth century, this legacy took the form of the Jim Crow regime, segregation, and structural poverty which black Americans had faced since the nation’s founding. On the other hand, conservatives sought to reinforce the racial bounds on American nationalism with an ideological revolt against the progressives’ efforts. Not only did conservatives decry these attempts to diversify history textbooks, they actively sought changes of their own, which supplanted coverage of racial oppression with whitewashed narratives that supported segregation and Jim Crow. Ultimately, progressives in the 1960s’ culture war made a monumental push towards racial liberalism in history education, but also

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<sup>50</sup> Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 12.

<sup>51</sup> Eric Schickler, *Racial Realignment*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 397-8.



sparked a conservative backlash rooted in ahistorical and racist myths that continued throughout the twentieth century.

The 1960s' culture war delivered meaningful blows to past decades' whitewashed patriotic historicism. These blows came from an allied front of progressive movements that identified historicism, and particularly the historical narratives presented in American history textbooks, as a vital tool in the fight to redefine American identity. On the one hand, the New Left comprised mostly white college students engaged in "the most heartening and exemplary struggle" against racial oppression and achieved sweeping reforms in favor of equality.<sup>52</sup> On the other, the Civil Rights Movement, which was born in the New Deal and grew throughout the 1940s and 1950s and found its organizational peak in the 1960s, led to the first federal legislation in favor of racial equality since Reconstruction.<sup>53</sup> The Civil Rights Act of 1964 broke the back of the Jim Crow regime in the South, and the Voting Rights and Fair Housing Acts of 1965 and 1968 respectively opened up vast swaths of the nation's political and economic markets from which black Americans had previously been excluded.<sup>54</sup> What remained, then, was to forge these activists' legal and cultural achievements into cornerstones of American nationalism.

The culture war of the 1960s began in the schools, where historians and teachers advocated for new history curricula that reflected the decade's progressive advancements. In Hartman's words, "cosmopolitan-minded educators believed it their job to solidify civil rights gains by making antiracism manifest in the curriculum."<sup>55</sup>

These educators sought to dismantle the racist institutions developed since

<sup>52</sup> Students for a Democratic Society, *Port Huron Statement*, June 15, 1962.

<sup>53</sup> Joseph E. Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, (New Haven: Yale University Press), 93.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 201.

Reconstruction; doing so required combating the exceptionalist narratives that gave them life. Famous historian C. Vann Woodward, whose *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* was praised by Martin Luther King, Jr. as “the historical bible of the civil rights movement,” became an outspoken public advocate for diversifying the narratives presented in American history textbooks.<sup>56</sup>

In the *New York Times*, Woodward warned of a “civil war over the Civil War” in the 1960s, in which “one is expected to choose sides, and history becomes the continuation of war by other means.”<sup>57</sup> Woodward’s observation encapsulated a growing sense of urgency among progressives to address conservatives’ takeover of American history textbooks that began in the culture war of the 1920s. Though the Union had won the Civil War a century before, Woodward wrote correctly that “the Rebels have won the battle of books,” by “denying that there was an illiberal consensus of racism in 1860, unlimited by region or party, and defining the Mason and Dixon line as the boundary between right and wrong.”<sup>58</sup> Woodward’s incisive observations reveal how progressives endeavored to recapture American nationalism after conservatives’ ideological and cultural dominance in the Jim Crow era.

Emboldened by surging social and political movements for racial equality, progressive reformers in the 1960s worked to purge sanitized and whitewashed narratives from American history textbooks. A 1961 report by *Times* education editor Fred M. Hechinger revealed that many public schools in the Northeast continued to use history textbooks from the 1930s, which presented “seriously outdated” accounts of

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<sup>56</sup> Sheldon Hackney, “C. Vann Woodward, Dissenter,” *Historically Speaking* 10, no. 1 (2009): 31.

<sup>57</sup> C. Vann Woodward, “Our Past Isn’t What it Used to Be,” *The New York Times*, July 28, 1963.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

American history.<sup>59</sup> “Even in the best of the new books the Negro tends to disappear entirely ... from the end of Reconstruction to the [*Brown v. Board of Education*] decision of 1954,” Hechinger noted.<sup>60</sup> In these texts, according to progressive historian Fawn Brodie, “the Lost Cause seems no longer lost,” while “slavery [is] taught in many textbooks ... [as] an ancient practice of small consequence, which would somehow have easily evolved into freedom without a war.”<sup>61</sup> Lost Cause narratives did not feature exclusively in southern curricula, either: as another concerned historian discovered, “the majority of history texts” available to American high school students “perpetuate the myth that slavery was not the root and the single most important cause of the Civil War.”<sup>62</sup> Such textbooks, in Brodie’s view, were written to maintain “an elaborate legal, constitutional and economic superstructure of argument to justify the creation of the Southern nation.”<sup>63</sup> In other words, these textbooks served to embed racist myths about the Civil War in the lessons American students learn about their nation, thus placing white supremacist ideas at the core of American nationalism.

In an effort to extinguish these racist narratives, progressives in the 1960s offered more accurate and inclusive accounts of the nation’s past in history textbooks. Questions remained, however, as to how “the intolerable neglect of the Negro’s part in American history ... can be corrected with maximum educational and historical gains.”<sup>64</sup> Thousands of black students in newly-integrated public schools across New York, Chicago, and New Haven walked out of their classes demanding black teachers,

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<sup>59</sup> Fred M. Hechinger, “Textbooks Found Too Few, Too Old: 1933 Works Still Used,” *The New York Times*, December 13, 1961.

<sup>60</sup> Fred M. Hechinger, “Textbooks and the Negro Stereotype,” *The New York Times*, November 20, 1966.

<sup>61</sup> Fawn M. Brodie, “Who Won the Civil War, Anyway?” *The New York Times*, August 5, 1962.

<sup>62</sup> Fred M. Hechinger, “History has Mistreated the Negro,” *The New York Times*, May 25, 1969.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> F.M.H., “Integration Now for Negro History,” *The New York Times*, April 7, 1968.

courses in black history and culture, and representation in student government.<sup>65</sup> Black Nationalist groups demanded “a separatist piece of education” devoted specifically to the innumerable contributions black Americans made to the nation’s founding and growth.<sup>66</sup>

Crucially, most historians and civil rights activists in the progressive movement argued that black history ought to be taught at the center of American history. One progressive argued that separate black studies curricula constituted “another form of segregation,” because “the history of blacks and whites in America is so intertwined that they should not be separated for high-school students.”<sup>67</sup> Similarly, a high school teacher argued insightfully that “the assertion that the Negro has no history worth mentioning basic to the theory that he has no humanity worth defending.”<sup>68</sup> The teacher’s view mirrored the civil rights consensus: racial reconciliation required that black Americans receive the same benefits of citizenship – including representation in national historical narratives – as whites.<sup>69</sup>

Progressives in the 1960s viewed black Americans’ representation in history textbooks as a crucial step towards enshrining racial liberalism in American nationalism. “How a person thinks about Negro slavery historically ... has immense impact on students’ attitudes toward race relations today,” Chicago historian Mark L. Krug wrote in the *Times*.<sup>70</sup> In Krug’s view, maintaining a “free democratic society” requires that history textbooks recognize and explain “the basic evil of slavery and

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<sup>65</sup> “1,000 Boycott Class in History Protests,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 1968; “Negro Groups Urge ‘Boycott’ of High Schools in Chicago,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 1968.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> J. Anthony Lukas, “Educators Turn to a Balanced Teaching of Negroes’ Role in American History,” *The New York Times*, July 8, 1968.

<sup>68</sup> Fred M. Hechinger, “Integration Now,” *The New York Times*, April 7, 1968.

<sup>69</sup> Lowndes, *New Deal to New Right*, 41.

<sup>70</sup> Fred M. Hechinger, “History Texts Take a New Look at Slavery,” *The New York Times*, June 14, 1970.

bondage of men.”<sup>71</sup> To this end, many school districts and individual educators moved to diversify their history curricula in accordance with progressives’ demands. As one reporter noted, schools “have rewritten curriculum guides; built up library collections ... and run workshops and inservice courses for teachers of history” designed to address deficiencies and inaccuracies in black Americans’ representation.<sup>72</sup> These reforms came to fruition thanks in part to federal funding from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, signed by President Johnson in 1965.<sup>73</sup> The law allocated billions of dollars to education reform, including \$100 million earmarked for new textbooks and school materials to be distributed by federal agencies to equalize educational differences across racial and socioeconomic groups.<sup>74</sup> With these funds, progressives could distribute new, more accurate history textbooks across the nation: an effort that spurred broad-based resistance among conservatives who feared the Lost Cause’s disappearance from American nationalism.

The 1960s’ culture war over history education became a heated ideological battle when conservatives launched a political counterinsurgency against the progressives’ textbook reforms. Conservatives’ complaints hinged upon a narrative of “government tyranny,” but this time in the educational context. One writer claimed that “a federal aid program would be used to enforce racial desegregation of public schools,” evidently threatening the strict racial order fundamental to maintaining Jim Crow.<sup>75</sup> The best way to “end progressive education,” another conservative explained, was to “fight

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> M. A. Farber, “Allen Calls on Schools to Stress History of Minority Groups,” *The New York Times*, April 25, 1968.

<sup>73</sup> Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn, *History on Trial*, 87-88; Lawrence McAndrews, “Public School Aid, 1965-81,” in *The Era of Education*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 9-10.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>75</sup> John D. Morris, “School Aid Foes Rise in Congress,” *The New York Times*, April 9, 1963.

federal control” by blocking funding for textbooks that explained black Americans’ central role in the nation’s history.<sup>76</sup> While serving as Vice President, Richard Nixon himself argued that “if the federal government gets into the business of subsidizing generally throughout the country ... inevitably we will move into ... potential tyranny.”<sup>77</sup> By suggesting that federal intervention on behalf of racial equality amounted to “tyranny,” Nixon directly invoked an exclusionary vision of American identity based on racist myths. Like other conservatives, he sought to portray progressives’ efforts to liberalize history education as an attack on the core of American nationalism.

In the public discourse over history textbook reform, conservatives in the 1960s articulated a version of American nationalism fundamentally incompatible with racial liberalism. In a letter to the *Times*, an Indiana conservative admonished progressives’ argument that “the state has an equalizing obligation ... based on the false assumption that the state can satisfactorily educate all.”<sup>78</sup> As such, he argued, government efforts directed at liberalizing history curricula “exercise [a] form over tyranny over all ... [with a] commitment to God-centered or pedagogically different or superior schools.”<sup>79</sup> The author made his statement’s racial implications clear. He described “freedom of choice in education” as a constitutional right, thus framing progressives’ efforts at racial equality as violations of America’s basic national principles.<sup>80</sup> This writer’s appeal to “freedom of choice” language mirrored other conservatives’ arguments, which used the

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<sup>76</sup> Peter Bart, “Schools on Coast Embattled Anew,” *The New York Times*, May 15, 1966.

<sup>77</sup> Gene Currivan, “Aid for Teachers’ Salaries is Major Point at Issue Between Parties,” *The New York Times*, July 31, 1960.

<sup>78</sup> William H. Slavick, “Letter: Private School Aid Wanted,” *The New York Times*, July 15, 1961.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

language of “states’ rights” in defending against progressive reforms.<sup>81</sup> “Wherever federal aid is given there will be federal control ... [and] religious and moral values are slighted,” another contributor opined.<sup>82</sup> While the author never specified which values were slighted, it is more than telling that her letter came in response to an editorial advocating federal spending on diversifying history curricula.

While most conservatives saw “states’ rights” as the best defense against progressive reforms, others advocated for state intervention to uphold exceptionalist myths. Dr. James B. Conant, who served as President of Harvard University from the 1930s until the 1950s, led the charge to develop nationwide standards for history curricula. Though Conant proposed that America “aim for nationwide policies which will be hammered out through interstate agreement,” his plan hinged fundamentally on expanding Southern states’ political influence in the educational sphere.<sup>83</sup> A *Times* column referenced Conant’s plan as an argument against federal education funding: in Conant’s words, “a nationwide educational policy cannot evolve unless the states’ education authorities are rapidly improved and strengthened.”<sup>84</sup> Like other conservatives, Conant avoided outrightly tying his advocacy for state funding to the language of states’ rights against racial equality. But Southern states’ educational infrastructures lagged far behind their Northern counterparts, and Conant’s plan would substantially expand Southerners’ influence in crafting history textbooks across the nation.<sup>85</sup> More importantly, the scheme presaged the next forty years of conservatives’

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<sup>81</sup> Fred M. Hechinger, “Education and Federal Aid,” October 4, 1965.

<sup>82</sup> G. E. Stein, “No Federal Aid Wanted,” *The New York Times*, July 3, 1961.

<sup>83</sup> Fred M. Hechinger, “Education and Federal Aid,” October 4, 1965.

<sup>84</sup> Fred M. Hechinger, “The News of the Week in Education,” January 17, 1965.

<sup>85</sup> Robert A. Margo, *Race and Schooling in the South, 1880-1950: An Economic History*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 125.

efforts to advance an exclusionary version of American nationalism by expanding Southern influence in the national education discussion and national politics at large.

In the 1960s' culture war, conservatives worked to empower Southern state governments as arbiters of federal education funding while simultaneously restoring exceptionalist narratives in nationally-standardized history textbooks. In the short term, delegating funding to individual states gave Southern state authorities disproportionate power in restricting the content of national history textbooks, even though almost all were written, published, and used in the North.<sup>86</sup> In the long term, national standardization represented an opportunity for conservatives to permanently install racist language in history textbooks. In this sense, victory in the culture wars over history textbooks was influential in conservatives' political counterinsurgency against the 1960s' civil rights and progressive movements.

This counterinsurgency took the form of Richard Nixon's victory in the 1968 presidential election, in which he won Southerners' support with a platform of civil rights rollback. Kevin Phillips, the shrewd analyst behind Nixon's campaign, spoke openly about conservatives' intentions in recasting the narratives presented in American history textbooks. "When the average voter steps into the booth he registers the prejudice or the allegiance bred by a mix of geography, history and ethnic reaction which stems from a past he knows only murkily," Phillips asserted in an interview with the *Times*.<sup>87</sup> If conservatives hoped to continue their electoral dominance in the Republican Party, Phillips insisted history textbooks censor "the grievances of the colored minorities" and the "exploitation and exclusion practiced against them."<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> McAndrews, "Public School Aid," 11.

<sup>87</sup> James Boyd, "Nixon's Southern strategy: 'It's All In the Charts'," *The New York Times*, May 17, 1970.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*



Instead, he expressed his desire that textbooks warn American students against the “alien causes [of] the Negro politicians and Federal interference with local autonomy ... of sharecroppers, Appalachian mountaineers, fishing villages where the catch is getting smaller each year, dairy country where the farms are getting fewer, valleys full of redundant industries and company cottages.”<sup>89</sup> Phillips framed progressives’ efforts to liberalize history education as an attack on white people’s economic and political opportunities, and by extension, their share of American national identity.

Phillips’ language became the foundation of the Republican Party’s appeals to a conservative majority that persisted throughout the twentieth century and into the present.<sup>90</sup> Conservatives earlier in the century sought to portray Reconstruction as an unjust infringement on Southerners’ freedom; in the 1960s, they framed civil rights reforms as tyrannical overreach by an oppressive federal government. These discussions took on unique salience in the context of history textbooks, as these narratives would set the terms for future generations’ understanding of American nationalism. After all, progressives won the 1960s’ battle in the culture war for history education. By the decade’s end, American history texts told a vastly different story than they did at its beginning. Whitewashed narratives gave way to realistic depictions of the horrors of slavery and Jim Crow, accurate accounts of the Civil War and Reconstruction, and even the importance of the civil rights and Black Power movements in contemporary American politics.<sup>91</sup>

However, as conservatives claimed a national majority with the Republican Party at the end of the 1960s, they mobilized their new political power to steer history

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Lowndes, *New Deal to New Right*, 139.

<sup>91</sup> Fred M. Hechinger, “History Texts Take A New Look at Slavery,” *The New York Times*, June 14, 1970; Leonard Buder, “U. F. T. Issues Guide in Negro History,” *The New York Times*, October 21, 1969.

education and American nationalism back South.<sup>92</sup> Nixon's Administration slashed federal education funding, handed states and school districts independent budgetary control, and redirected public school funds to racially exclusive private schools.<sup>93</sup> "If the Administration policy is to give new authority to the states and local governments, I think we black people are in for a great deal of difficulty," an official in Washington, D.C. remarked.<sup>94</sup> "The Republican Administration has given hope of a return to plantation days," echoed a teacher in Jackson, Mississippi, pointing out how public schools' funding had dried up while local authorities redirected money to whites-only private schools.<sup>95</sup> Across the nation, Nixon's reforms empowered local governments to redirect funds away from public schools and into whites-only private schools.<sup>96</sup> As early as 1970, public schools' funding disappeared and more than 5,000 black educators lost their jobs in the South alone, leaving white teachers and officials exclusive control over which narratives of American history students learned.<sup>97</sup>

Less than two years into conservatives' new dominance in American politics, progressives' victories in the 1960s' culture war were already slipping. In the decades that followed, conservatives' political dominance continued, as did their constant rollback of progressives' efforts to liberalize history education.

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<sup>92</sup> Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 265.

<sup>93</sup> Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 127.

<sup>94</sup> John Herbers, "Negro Officials Score Nixon Plan," *The New York Times*, September 13, 1969.

<sup>95</sup> Paul Delaney, "Negro Jobs Loss Found in Schools," *The New York Times*, June 17, 1970.

<sup>96</sup> Gary Nash, Charlotte Crabtree and Ross Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past*, (New York: Vintage, 2000), 87.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*; Paul Delaney, "Negro Jobs Loss Found in Schools," *The New York Times*, June 17, 1970.

### Chapter 3: The 1980s and 1990s

Ronald Reagan launched his campaign for the presidential election of 1980 in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where three civil rights volunteers were lynched by a Klan-led white mob just sixteen years before. In his own words, Reagan's campaign represented "a great national crusade to make America great again" after the 1960s' progressive movements for civil rights and educational reform.<sup>98</sup> His promises proved wildly popular: he won 44 of 50 states and solidified the political future of a conservative majority built on a backlash against progressive and civil rights reforms.<sup>99</sup> Indeed, Reagan's victory fulfilled Kevin Phillips' prophecy from more than a decade before that an "emerging Republican majority ... will dominate American politics," whose "common denominator is hostility to blacks and browns among slipping Democrats and abandonment of the Democratic party because of its identification with the colored minorities."<sup>100</sup> This "Reagan Revolution" brought about the peak of this dominance, when Republicans won five out of seven presidential elections under the banner of civil rights rollback and "colorblind" policies which replaced the Jim Crow regime with new institutions that replicated its oppression and exploitation of black Americans.<sup>101</sup>

Conservatives' dominance also ignited a culture war of unprecedented proportions, in which history textbooks once again rose to the forefront of the national discussion. This third culture war escalated in the national discussion during the 1980s, as progressives' efforts to build on the 1960s' reforms were met with defiance by

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<sup>98</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Acceptance of the Republican Nomination for President," (speech, Detroit, July 17, 1980).

<sup>99</sup> Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 3.

<sup>100</sup> James Boyd, "Nixon's Southern strategy: 'It's All In the Charts'," *The New York Times*, May 17, 1970.

<sup>101</sup> Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right*, 155.

conservatives emboldened by the Reagan Revolution. As one progressive historian reflected candidly, “most U.S. history books are very good ... the role of black Americans is no longer neglected, but the treatment of women, people of Hispanic origin, Asians and American Indians is still inadequate.”<sup>102</sup> This scholar’s view reflected a broader progressive shift away from the 1960s’ focus on civil rights antiracism and towards more diverse narratives of “multiculturalism.”<sup>103</sup> The multicultural view became popular in the 1980s, Hartman writes, because it “allowed radical educators ... to teach about black identity as distinct from normative white American identity,” while also attracting “a wider array of teachers [who] allowed it to become the implicit ethos of the national curriculum.”<sup>104</sup> In other words, multiculturalism promoted a racially inclusive vision of American nationalism that built on the 1960s’ revisionism.

Included in progressives’ shift to multiculturalism was an increased focus on social science principles in history education: across the nation, textbooks began stressing the fact that history is, by nature, up for debate. In the *Times*, progressive educators demanded that textbooks recognize “that there are differing interpretations of many basic themes in American history,” and that they “ought to ... give more weight to the country’s diverse ethnic traditions and the sufferings of ... minority cultures.”<sup>105</sup> The fundamental problem with the status quo, wrote another teacher, was that “history is still generally being taught with a European point of view,” while “the Afro-centric

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<sup>102</sup> Fred M. Hechinger, “Panel of Experts Sees Trend Toward ‘Smarter’ Textbooks,” *The New York Times*, June 3, 1986.

<sup>103</sup> Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 202.

<sup>104</sup> Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 203.

<sup>105</sup> Sam H. Verhovek, “Plan to Emphasize Minority Cultures Ignites a Debate,” *The New York Times*, June 21, 1991.

point of view is offered as ... a direct challenge to the Euro-centric format.”<sup>106</sup> These educators’ appeals reflected broader changes in history textbooks across the nation, which began reflecting America’s multicultural history.<sup>107</sup>

These new multicultural texts shared one vital component: realistic descriptions of the monumental horrors perpetrated against black Americans and other people of color. Students began learning of the “intellectual and educational oppression that has characterized the culture and institutions of the United States and European American world for centuries.”<sup>108</sup> Other textbooks identified and criticized “the requirement, common in the past, that [minorities] shed their specific cultural differences in order to be considered American.”<sup>109</sup> In this language, the multicultural textbooks of the 1990s diverged in important ways from their predecessors in the 1960s, which held that “recognition of ethnic difference ... was politically possible only under the umbrella of a muscular national identity.”<sup>110</sup> No longer did inclusion in American nationalism require people of color to abandon their own identities in favor of dominant Anglo-American norms. Instead, 1990s progressives worked to teach students how prior constructions of American nationalism operated on the fundamental practice of denying black Americans and other people of color their most basic freedoms.

Progressives in the 1990s accurately treated America’s history of racial oppression as a monumental impediment to equality, not as an aberration to be remedied with conciliatory historical narratives. By illuminating oppressed peoples’ perspectives in new textbooks, they raised a new racial consciousness among American

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<sup>106</sup> Amy H. Hearsh, “Educators Assess Black History Effects,” *The New York Times*, February 26, 1989.

<sup>107</sup> Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 202.

<sup>108</sup> “New York Report on Multicultural Textbooks,” in *Historic Documents of 1991* (Washington, DC: CQ, 1992).

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 61.

students. As an Illinois teacher observed in her classroom, textbooks “that include a black historical perspective build self-esteem among black students, give both black and white students a “true” understanding of history and help to reduce racial tensions.”<sup>111</sup> In this sense, progressives in the 1990s posed an even greater threat to uncomplicated and false versions of American history than their predecessors in the 1960s.

While 1990s reformers accepted the civil rights era argument that black history is fundamental to the nation’s history, they rejected the notion that such a history could be reduced to the language of “shared contributions.”<sup>112</sup> Instead, progressives drew attention to how whites barred black people’s own historical narratives, national identities, and access to the prosperity they built with their labor. For example, teachers in Portland, Oregon, successfully rewrote their district’s curriculum to include “the history that the exploiters of Africa want the world to ignore.”<sup>113</sup> These educators specifically demanded that their textbooks demonstrate how America was built on the institution of chattel slavery, and how that institution built America’s economic supremacy while stripping black people of their individual and collective identities.<sup>114</sup>

Evidently, progressives’ campaign to introduce multicultural textbooks in the late 1980s and early 1990s represented a unique challenge to conservative hegemony over American history textbooks. After all, textbooks that asked students to critically evaluate historical truth could hardly do so without introducing alternative, or even radical, narratives of America’s past. However, these textbooks also found political adherents outside progressive circles, because, in Hartman’s words, these narratives

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<sup>111</sup> Amy H. Hearth, “Educators Assess black History Effects,” *The New York Times*, February 26, 1989.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid; J. Anthony Lukas, “Educators Turn to a Balanced Teaching of Negroes’ Role in American History,” *The New York Times*, July 8, 1968.

<sup>113</sup> Suzanne Daley, “Inspirational Black History Upsets Traditionalists,” *The New York Times*, October 10, 1990.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

offered a “method for inculcating democratic values in a multicultural society.”<sup>115</sup> Liberals and even moderate conservatives accepted the importance of teaching diverse viewpoints to students whose previous history education had covered “only a small part of human experience ... intrinsically contaminated with racism.”<sup>116</sup> This widespread political support led publishers to adopt multicultural ideas in new textbooks, thus introducing students to more accurate and realistic narratives of American history.<sup>117</sup>

Crucially, these narratives profoundly influenced students’ ideas about American nationalism. “Our blood, sweat and tears are spread all over this country,” one black student explained to the *Times*.<sup>118</sup> She continued, adding that “we’re not about to leave now, and we expect to be treated like the first-class citizens we are.”<sup>119</sup> This student’s sentiments reflect how the 1990s’ multicultural history textbooks proffered a nationalism that clearly refuted racist and exceptionalist myths. Unlike their 1960s’ counterparts, these texts went beyond proving that slavery caused the Civil War: they contradicted the notion that race is an essential biological truth, instead accurately portraying racial categories as weapons of control and exploitation.<sup>120</sup>

As they had in the 1960s and the 1920s before that, conservatives responded to progressives’ early victories in the 1990s’ culture war with a concerted campaign to reinsert exclusionary and whitewashed narratives into American history textbooks. Once again, the conservatives’ campaign started in the public discussion, in which they introduced arguments framing progressives’ achievements as attacks on American

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<sup>115</sup> Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 266.

<sup>116</sup> Sam H. Verhovek, “Plan to Emphasize Minority Cultures Ignites a Debate,” *The New York Times*, June 21, 1991.

<sup>117</sup> Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 215-216.

<sup>118</sup> Lena Williams, “Black Americans Sense a New Patriotism,” *The New York Times*, July 4, 1990.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 131.

nationalism. These arguments initially emerged from “traditionalist” historians like Arthur J. Schlesinger, who argued in the *Times* that new textbooks’ “Europhobia” would create a “cult of ethnicity” among black Americans and other people of color, who threatened to turn America into a “quarrelsome splatter of enclaves.”<sup>121</sup> In this statement, Schlesinger framed multicultural textbooks and the racial equality they promoted as antithetical to American identity.

Similarly, historian Diane Ravitch voiced her support for the conservative protest, opining that multicultural textbooks “strive to offend no one while including almost everything.”<sup>122</sup> True to conservative form, Ravitch dismissed progressives’ efforts to accurately reflect people of color’s experiences as trivial attempts to satisfy requirements of political correctness. Even in her article’s lede, Ravitch identified newly rewritten textbooks the main “cause for concern” in progressives’ wider “ignorance or indifference about studying our past.”<sup>123</sup> On the contrary, progressives’ entire focus in the 1990s was expanding and diversifying the narratives presented in history texts. The issue for Ravitch, Schlesinger, and their conservative allies was that the new narratives challenged traditional ones rooted in critiques of America’s bloody and complicated history.

To combat multiculturalist progressives and revive exceptionalist myths, 1990s conservatives turned to a new strategy: national standardization. These efforts indirectly followed James Conant’s 1965 proposal to maximize Southern states’ sway in national negotiations over American history textbooks’ contents.<sup>124</sup> Indeed, 1990s conservatives

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<sup>121</sup> Robert Reinhold, “Class Struggle: In its Controversial New Textbooks, California is Rewriting History,” *The New York Times*, September 29, 1991.

<sup>122</sup> Diane Ravitch, “Decline and Fall of Teaching History,” *The New York Times*, November 17, 1985.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Fred M. Hechinger, “Education and Federal Aid,” October 4, 1965; Zimmerman, *Whose America?*, 216.



argued as Conant did that standardizing textbooks would engender greater unity and, more importantly, national pride. This patriotism was, as conservative educator Albert Shanker explained, the necessary remedy to multicultural textbooks, which “will obviously lead to a badly fragmented curriculum,” and “divide our country up like a pie among competing groups.”<sup>125</sup> Shanker’s statement, published in the *Times* as an advertisement visually masquerading as an editorial, implied that progressives’ multicultural narratives sought to strip white people of their entitled share of American identity. Ravitch similarly argued that states “have given up on any attempt to agree on what their students should learn,” and that some students could only access textbooks that inappropriately shortchanged the “white, European history” that she claimed gave rise to the American values of freedom and democracy.<sup>126</sup> These statements served as a thinly-veiled argument that whitewashed, exceptionalist myths ought to guide the standard narratives presented American history textbooks.

These public appeals to standardize history education proved popular among conservative leaders, who worked to permanently embed exceptionalist myths in the standard narrative of American history. Bill Honig, California’s superintendent of public education, sought to use his state as an incubator for conservatives’ national push to standardize history textbooks. Honig launched attacks of his own at progressives and multicultural textbooks, which he absurdly labeled “nothing but racism” against whites.<sup>127</sup> In order to escalate his assault on multicultural texts, and bolster conservatives’ broader retaliation in the culture war, Honig enlisted Ravitch to lead in

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<sup>125</sup> Albert Shanker, “Advertisement: Where We Stand,” *The New York Times*, January 28, 1990.

<sup>126</sup> Diane Ravitch, “Decline and Fall of Teaching History,” *The New York Times*, November 17, 1985; Sarah Kershaw, “Storm Center: Diane Ravitch Becomes a Flashpoint in the Education Wars,” *The New York Times*, December 1, 1996.

<sup>127</sup> Edward B. Fiske, “New York Seeks a Curriculum with Cultural Balance,” *The New York Times*, February 7, 1990.

creating history standards for schools in California.<sup>128</sup> Following Honig's directive, Ravitch wrote the state's *History-Social Science Framework*, which jettisoned the multicultural approach in favor of a traditional narrative. Specifically, these standards required textbooks to celebrate America's tradition – described ironically as both “unique” and handed down from white Europeans – of allowing people of all backgrounds and groups to prosper equally.<sup>129</sup> Ravitch's *Framework* thus provided a clear demonstration of standardization's power to beat back progressives' multicultural advances and restore white-centered history textbooks.

Given the California experiment's promise, conservatives used it as a springboard to achieve the ultimate goal of national standardization. As with resistance to the civil rights movement three decades earlier, rejecting multicultural history textbooks became a central plank in the Republican Party's platform. In fact, Pat Buchanan's opening address at the 1992 Republican National Convention served as a conservative manifesto on the importance of controlling America's historical narratives. Buchanan warned his audience of “a cultural war ... for the soul of America,” in which the “Judeo-Christian values and beliefs upon which America was founded” were under attack by “radical and liberal ... prophets of doom” intent on destroying the United States.<sup>130</sup> Conservatives' charge in this fight, Buchanan later said, was to “take back our cities, and take back our culture, and take back our country” from progressives and their “cultural allies” in the “LA mob ... who never heard of Robert Frost, [but] can recite

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<sup>128</sup> Diane Ravitch, “History's Struggle to Survive in the Schools,” *OAH Magazine of History* 21, no. 2 (April 2007), 31.

<sup>129</sup> Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 266; Charlotte Crabtree and Diane Ravitch, *The History-Social Science Framework for California Public Schools* (Sacramento: California Department of Education, 1988), 448.

<sup>130</sup> Pat Buchanan, “Culture War Speech: Address to the Republican National Convention,” August 17, 1992.

the lyrics of Ice-T and 2 Live Crew.”<sup>131</sup> Here, Buchanan openly asserted that blackness and black culture were antithetical to Americanness, as were progressives’ efforts to dismantle Lost Cause myths. “Slavery vs. freedom, that’s all it was about, they tell us,” Buchanan reminded his audience.<sup>132</sup> But “[Confederates] were fighting for the things for which men have always fought: family, faith, friends, and country.”<sup>133</sup> Finally, Buchanan connected his piecemeal observations of progressives’ assault on American national identity. “If a country forgets where it came from, how will its people know who they are?” Buchanan asked. “The battle over our schools,” he concluded, “is part of the war to separate parents from children, one generation from another, and all Americans from their heritage.”<sup>134</sup> In other words, by contradicting exceptionalist myths, encouraging skepticism of “objective standards of right and wrong,” and empowering black people to demand basic protections against state-sponsored poverty and violence, multicultural history textbooks affronted American national identity.

After Buchanan’s speech, conservatives saw a political mandate to pursue national standards in history textbooks which used racist myths as the driving force of American history. Buchanan’s vitriol, delivered on one of the nation’s biggest political stages, handed conservatives the ideal opportunity to achieve their goal by riding a wave of public outrage against multiculturalism.<sup>135</sup> As one lawyer opined in the *Times*, standardizing textbooks would allay the “fundamental concerns of the Euro-American

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<sup>131</sup> Pat Buchanan, “Culture War Speech: Address to the Republican National Convention,” August 17, 1992; Pat Buchanan, “The Cultural War for the Soul of America,” September 14, 1992.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> Sandra F. VanBurkleo, “The National History Standards and the Culture Wars of Our Times.” *Michigan Historical Review* 22, no. 2 (1996), 172; Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn, *History on Trial*, 180; Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 266.

majority ... about reverse discrimination” represented by multicultural narratives.<sup>136</sup>

Another conservative claimed such textbooks were not only anti-American, but entirely worthless, as “our American heritage and culture ... are superior to other foreign or historic cultures.”<sup>137</sup>

Building from the example set by Honig and Ravitch in California, Republicans embarked on a national offensive led by one of the 1990s’ culture wars’ boldest generals: future second lady Lynne Cheney, who chaired the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) from 1986 until 1993. As Hartman explains, Cheney’s primary objective as Chair was to “reposition the traditional American narrative at the center of the [national] curriculum.”<sup>138</sup> To do so, Cheney’s NEH offered a \$1.6 million grant for the creation of national history standards which, she and other conservatives hoped, would finally end progressives’ attempts to defeat the Lost Cause.

Cheney awarded the NEH grant to a group of scholars at the University of California who had conducted detailed studies of history curricula across the nation since 1988 as the National Center for History in the Schools (NCHS).<sup>139</sup> The NCHS’ research, Cheney believed, made it an ideal candidate to write standards that would be palatable to both Northern and Southern state representatives. Though the NCHS’ ranks included historians with diverse perspectives from across the ideological spectrum, Hartman writes, “Afrocentrists and conservative Christians, ... were deliberately left out of the process for fear that their historical visions could never be reconciled.”<sup>140</sup>

Indeed, NCHS proposal’s stated mission was to engender a broad consensus that would

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<sup>136</sup> Peter Applebomes, “Duke’s Followers Lean to Buchanan,” *The New York Times*, March 8, 1992.

<sup>137</sup> “School Board Will Recognize Other Cultures, but as Inferior,” *The New York Times*, May 13, 1994.

<sup>138</sup> Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 271.

<sup>139</sup> Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 268.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

“avoid the pitfalls of the culture wars,” and create standards grounded strictly in academic historiography.<sup>141</sup> In 1992, the NCHS began writing the *National History Standards* based on these principles. The project was led by Gary Nash, a progressive social historian, and Charlotte Crabtree, an education scholar who co-wrote California’s *Framework* four years earlier. Crabtree’s efforts to bring multicultural narratives to the state standards fell victim to revisions by her co-author, Diane Ravitch, and the conservative political commission led by Bill Honig.<sup>142</sup>

However, the process in 1992 was much different. Unlike Ravitch, Schlesinger, and the other traditionalists who influenced the California standards, Nash’s scholarship brings to light marginalized and oppressed peoples’ central role in shaping the nation’s history.<sup>143</sup> More importantly, these principles translated to the NCHS’ standards-writing process, which sought to “reflect the nation’s diversity, exemplified by race, ethnicity, social status, gender, and religious affiliation.”<sup>144</sup> Still, the scholars who wrote the *Standards* believed their work would successfully appease progressive multiculturalists and traditionalists alike: each member of the committee was a respected scholar in their field, and the standards, in Nash’s words, drew “broad-based and enthusiastic ... support” from historians and educators across the country. The venerable American Historical Association (AHA) and Organization of American Historians (OAH) gave the *Standards* draft their full endorsement; even the American Federation of Teachers led by conservative Albert Shanker declared that “these standards simply represent what a good history education should contain.”<sup>145</sup> In short, the *Standards* constituted the best

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid; Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn, *History on Trial*, xxii.

<sup>142</sup> Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn, *History on Trial*, 108-113.

<sup>143</sup> See, for example, Nash’s 2005 book *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America*.

<sup>144</sup> Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 269.

<sup>145</sup> Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn, *History on Trial*, 179-180.

chance at ending the culture wars over history textbooks since they began in the 1920s with a definitive, nationally-standardized, and most importantly, historically accurate narrative of American history.

This opportunity was immediately extinguished by Lynne Cheney and her conservative allies, because the *Standards* did not frame exceptionalist myths as the standard version of American history. Days before the *Standards*' publication in 1994, Cheney sealed their political fate with an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled "The End of History."<sup>146</sup> Cheney accused the NCHS of "unleash[ing] the forces of political correctness" in pursuit of "the revisionist agenda, no longer bothered to conceal their great hatred for traditional history."<sup>147</sup> She expressed similar rage at the AHA, which she claimed "hijacked standards-setting" by suggesting that older, traditionalist narratives placed too much emphasis on Western historical traditions.<sup>148</sup> She further argued that black and Native American "political groups" were responsible for "obliterating" traditional history" with their complaints of "omissions and distortions."<sup>149</sup>

Cheney directed the bulk of her indignation at the *Standards*' emphasis on racial oppression at the expense of whitewashed myths: Harriet Tubman featured six times, the Ku Klux Klan 17 times, while Confederate hero Robert E. Lee received zero mentions.<sup>150</sup> These statistics, Cheney wrote, meant that "our past will begin to disappear from our schools": this threat had to be avoided at any cost, because "we are a better people than the National Standards indicate, and our children deserve to know it."<sup>151</sup> Given the nature of her complaints, Cheney's use of "our" and "we" surely did

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<sup>146</sup> Lynne Cheney, "The End of History," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 20, 1994.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

not refer to the black and Native American people whose stories were highlighted in the *Standards*. Instead, she plainly defined the conservative campaign against the *Standards* as a campaign against multiculturalism and in favor of racist exceptionalism.

Cheney's article proved a raging success, prompting conservatives across the nation to scramble to stop the *Standards*' adoption. Academics like Diane Ravitch protested that the standards vastly exaggerated "the struggle by the oppressed to wrest rights and power from white male Protestants ... while greed, racism, and corruption appear to be the real commonalities of American history."<sup>152</sup> Worse, conservatives in government sprang into action to condemn the *Standards*: Slate Gorton, a Republican from Washington, argued on the Senate floor that they represented "an ideologically driven, anti-Western monument to politically correct caricature" intended to "destroy our Nation's mystic chords of memory."<sup>153</sup> Just one Senator, Jim Jeffords of Vermont, defended the *Standards* by correctly pointing out that Cheney's criticisms were drawn "not [from] the standards themselves but ... the examples of activities for students in each grade."<sup>154</sup> But Jeffords' logic and accuracy, like the historians' at NCHS, did nothing to stop the conservative fervor. A Senate vote passed 99-1 condemning the *Standards* and advising against the implementation of any draft which did not "show a decent respect for the contributions of Western civilization."<sup>155</sup> Although, as Hartman writes, some Democrats believed the vote would only prompt a reexamination and revision of the *Standards*, the Senate's denouncement only spelled the *Standards*' doom.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Linda Symcox, *Whose History? The Struggle for National Standards in American Classrooms*, (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001), 134.

<sup>153</sup> Symcox, *Whose History?*, 1.

<sup>154</sup> Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn, *History on Trial*, 234.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America*, 275.

In the end, the 1990s' culture war ended how its ancestors did in the 1920s and the 1960s: with a conservative victory. An ideological crusade from racist conservatives once again rescued the nation's exceptionalist myths from progressives' efforts to refute them with multicultural and historically accurate narratives in American history textbooks. In doing so, conservatives prevented progressives from teaching students how the brutal oppression and exploitation faced by black Americans throughout the nation's history explained the injustices and inequalities in the present. Most significantly, as their last act in the culture war, conservatives stopped a national effort to ensure that every American history textbook included the basic facts of the nation's history that exposed the distortion and bigotry behind exceptionalist myths.



## Conclusion

In 2010, Texas' state Board of Education introduced new state standards for history textbooks. The majority-Republican Board claimed it was "adding balance" to the historical narratives students learn, by removing all mentions of a constitutional separation of church and state, praising the conservative resurgence of the 1980s, blaming addiction, crime, and violence on failures of "personal responsibility," and censoring civil rights and Black Power activists' achievements in the 1960s.<sup>157</sup> The national press lit up with the rumblings of another culture war, as progressives rightly accused Texas' Board of "revisionist brainwashing" and "force-feed[ing] children conservative dogma."<sup>158</sup> But this culture war never came. Indeed, there is no longer a war to fight: conservatives have already won. The culture wars of the 1920s, 1960s, and 1990s ensured that racist and exceptionalist myths will remain essential features of American history textbooks and American nationalism. Outraged progressives made this fact clear when they erroneously described the ideas presented as representing "a small pod of pale ultra-conservatives" in the Deep South.<sup>159</sup> After all, though Texas' standards were rife with Lost Cause myths and whitewashed narratives, those ideas have long constituted the standard narrative that students in America learn about their nation's history.

In truth, it may be that progressives' efforts in each of the culture wars hinged on an unrealistic optimism about their capacity to reform American nationalism. After all, racism, oppression, and exploitation have played central roles in every development

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<sup>157</sup> James C. McKinley Jr., "Texas Conservatives Win Curriculum Change," *The New York Times*, March 12, 2010.

<sup>158</sup> Mark Morford, "Dear Texas: Please shut up. Sincerely, History," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, March 17, 2010; Sam Tanenhaus, "In Texas Curriculum Fight, Identity Politics Leans Right," *The New York Times*, March 20, 2010.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

in American history, and to stop them in their tracks by raising the nation's historical consciousness is a tremendous task. More than fifty years ago, C. Vann Woodward asked an important question: "Is there nothing about the South that is immune from the disintegrating effect of nationalism and the pressure for conformity?"<sup>160</sup> "There is only one thing that I can think of," Woodward continued: "and that is history."<sup>161</sup> Here, Woodward elucidated the central problem in the culture wars: that the horrible realities of the nation's history cast a permanent shadow on its future.

As America came together as a unified, modern, and supremely powerful nation in the twentieth century, it wrestled with its own past: not only the past written in books and textbooks, but the version implanted in its citizens' minds. Ultimately, these battles were irreconcilable. Progressives' unrelenting efforts to reform the narratives written in history textbooks met staunch resistance from conservatives who were so deeply committed to white supremacist nationalism that they waged enormous political and cultural wars to defend it. As Woodward wrote presciently, "the danger in the wholesale rejection of the South by the modern Southerner bent on reaffirming his Americanism is the danger of affirming more than he bargains for."<sup>162</sup> His prediction rang true: conservatives, politically united by racial animosity, successfully maintained whitewashed and exceptionalist myths by making them essential features of American identity.

While each progressive voice advocating a new, more inclusive national identity has identified education as the path to progress, conservatives have decisively won the battle to control the education that American students receive. More recent debates over

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<sup>160</sup> C. Vann Woodward, "The Search for Southern Identity," *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 34, no. 3 (1958), 330-331.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

history standards, such as Texas' in 2010, only reveal how the conservative campaign to save exceptionalist myths has poisoned the root of America's public school system. Despite progressives' noble intentions in reforming history education, their efforts were not enough. To excise white supremacy from American nationalism, progressives must direct their efforts beyond textbooks and the exceptionalist myths in their pages.

This thesis evidences conservatives' century-long effort to protect a whitewashed, exceptionalist narrative of their nation's history that subjugated black peoples' voices and experiences. Racist myths played important roles in animating the backlash against progressive gains in the twentieth century; including, as this research reveals, progressive American history textbooks. These myths permit political rhetoric like Nixon's or Reagan's, which won massive popular support by portraying civil rights progress as a dangerous encroachment on white people's rights. However, conservatives' appeals to Lost Cause myths in public discussions about history textbooks represent just one part in the larger political engine that drove the civil rights rollback.

The surge of conservatism in national politics occurred in response to black Americans' legal and material gains during the twentieth century. In this sense, it was a backlash against the broadening of American identity – and the economic and political spoils that identity entails – to include people of color and especially black Americans. As Keeanga-Yahmatta Taylor masterfully explains in *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, a massive array of policies converged to forge a new regime of racial oppression after the end of Jim Crow and segregation.<sup>163</sup> Under racist “tough-on-crime”

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<sup>163</sup> Keeanga-Yahmatta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016) 12-18.

policy initiatives, police departments in American cities have developed military arsenals designed to violently control black communities.<sup>164</sup> These racist policing practices fit into a greater scheme designed to oppress and exploit black Americans through the criminal justice system.<sup>165</sup> Mandatory sentencing laws operate to target black Americans and incarcerate them at disproportionate rates in dangerous, overcrowded private prisons.<sup>166</sup>

In addition, slashes in social spending and welfare programs have created massive wealth inequality that most profoundly affects black Americans, and black women in particular.<sup>167</sup> These policies all underpinned conservatives' backlash in the twentieth century, which brought about a cultural shift that indicated white supremacy's resurgence at the core of American nationalism. As Taylor explains, "the mantras of the 'culture of poverty' and 'personal responsibility' reemerged as popular explanations for Black deprivation."<sup>168</sup> All of these observations point to a much broader conservative effort outside of polluting history textbooks with sanitized and exceptionalist myths. This backlash constituted a massive political, economic, and cultural effort to maintain the oppressive institutions placed on black Americans since the nation's founding, and reinforce white supremacy's place at the center of American nationalism.

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid, 19-25.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid, 22.

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