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“We have never known what death was before” U.S. history textbooks and the Civil War



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ABSTRACT

Textbooks are a significant element of the social studies curriculum and teacher pedagogical choice (Apple, 2004; Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991). Students' views of American history are dramatically affected by the textbook narratives to which they are exposed, and teachers often tilt their curricular choices based on the textbooks available to them (Luke, 2006 Schug, Western & Enochs, 1997). The history of our nation's armed conflicts is often presented, through our textbooks and our pedagogy, as a history of reluctant violence, which promotes a particular moral agenda that exerts control over our students' future beliefs and decisions. This is particularly important with regard to our textbook depictions of the U.S. Civil War, which holds a curricular status as a necessary and moral conflict. This study examines the manner in which U.S. history textbooks present the U.S. Civil War, as compared to relevant historiography, and presents recommendations for how teachers may approach the moral realities of war with their students.

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Introduction

This study considers the manner in which U.S. history textbooks conceptualize the Civil War—what caused it, how it was fought, and how it was ended. Textbooks, in spite of predictions and expectations, still form the curricular foundation for most American history classrooms. Given their outsized importance, the narratives presented in textbooks impact both teacher choices and student understanding of the wars our nation has fought. The manner in which such wars are presented to our students, then, is a vital issue for educators and all citizens. The Civil War, arguably the most extensively covered conflict in U.S. history and most often cited as definitional to the American character, occupies a central point in American history classrooms.

The impact of textbooks is evident in descriptions of the Second Battle of Bull Run, 1862. Compared to other engagements of the Civil War, it was not a particularly distinguished battle—no major territory was won or lost, no crucial towns seized or conceded, no changes on either side precipitated by the battle's outcome. After the battle, General Alpheus S. Williams said this about its outcome: “A splendid army almost demoralized, millions of public property given up or destroyed, thousands of lives of our best men sacrificed for no purpose” (as cited in Hennessey, 1993).

The American Vision (Appleby, Brinkley, Broussard, McPherson, & Ritchie, 2005) is a U.S. history textbook. Published by Glencoe, this textbook enjoys wide usage across the nation, including many Florida school districts (Florida School Book Depository, 2008). *The American Vision* has this to say about the Second Battle of Bull Run:

As McClellan's troops withdrew, Lee decided to attack the Union forces defending Washington. The maneuvers by the two sides led to another battle at Bull Run, near Manassas Junction—the site of the first major battle of the war. Again,

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the South forced the North to retreat, leaving the Confederate forces only 20 miles (32 km) from Washington. (Appleby, Brinkley, Broussard, McPherson, & Ritchie, 2005, p. 362).

The textbook narrative moves then in a longer discussion of the Battle of Antietam, considered by most historians to be of greater importance, a battle with over twenty-three thousand casualties on both sides, eclipsing the “mere” 18,000 killed or wounded at Bull Run.

One victim of Second Bull Run was James Palmer, from South Carolina. Upon learning his fate, his sister, Sarah, fell into grief—to their sister, Harriet, she wrote, “I can’t realize that I am never to see that dear boy again [.]” The loss of a loved one, in a battle far from home, with little hope of explanation or even the recovery of his remains, was a cruelty virtually unknown in the nineteenth century. “We have never known what death was before”, Sarah wrote to her sister (Faust, 2008, p. 144).

The depiction of Second Bull Run found in *The American Vision* is free of such human costs or considerations. It is a factual, dispassionate account of a minor battle in the midst of a larger, more important narrative, the Civil War. In that account, however, *The American Vision* does what most textbooks do—it presents a single, unifying picture of American history, generally free from depictions of the inherent brutality and cruelty of war.

In this article, I examine the narratives drawn from six textbooks published nationally and in use in most U.S. states. Most publishers do not release information regarding the volume of their textbook publications, so the degree to which these texts are present in U.S. classrooms is largely inferential. However, all five appear on the textbook adoption list of Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2010), California (California Department of Education, 2012), and Florida (Florida School Book Depository, 2008), and are cited by the American Textbook Council as being in wide usage (American Textbook Council, 2006). While local adoption varies from district to district, all of these textbooks are generally similar in scope and sequence of topic. The textbooks featured in this study are: *The American Journey* (Goldfield et al. 2007), *America: Pathways to the Present* (Cayton, Perry, Reed, & Winkler, 2007), *The American Nation: a History of the United States* (Carnes & Garraty, 2008), *America: History of Our Nation* (Davidson & Stoff, 2009), *United States History* (Lapansky-Werner, Levy, Roberts, & Taylor, 2010), and *The Americans* (Danzer, Klor de Alva, Krieger, Wilson, & Woloch, 2005).

Research method

This study utilizes a *critical analysis* method, described by Merriam (1988) as a technique which attempts to uncover evidence of ideology and implicit motive through the selection, prioritization and arrangement of content. As opposed to the content analysis method (which essentially quantifies a narrative’s content and “codes” them according to the amount of coverage), a critical analysis searches for “ideological perspectives” embedded “in the use of language, through nuance, descriptors, and choice of wording, and in visual images accompanying the text” (Harrison-Wong, 2003, p. 33). Also, the design, goals, and placement of instructional exercises are analyzed to determine whether or not they present students with the opportunity to engage in critical evaluation of U.S. policy choices, or if instead they lead to a consensus viewpoint. Paxton (1999) point out that historical narrative is not scientifically produced, but is instead a personally configured creation of the author, an “act of rhetorical interpretation” (p. 6). Critical analysis methodology, in this case, is used to explore the motives and impact of such textbook narrative.

I also incorporate an analytic methodology based on what Leahy (2007) termed the *historical narrative approach*. This method compares textbook narrative with other historical narratives, while pointing out alternative interpretations, omissions, distortions, and the presence of historical “myth.” There are three main advantages to this method. First, it allows the analysis to more accurately reflect the historical record, as a variety of historical sources are used as a foundation to construct a narrative from which to critique textbooks. Second, the emphasis on the historical record highlights the similarities and differences between the textbook sample and other historical accounts in a manner that is easy for readers to follow and comprehend. Third, this method allows the major historiographical works surrounding the topic to set the scope of the analysis, rather than relying on the scope and sequence of the textbook narrative or arbitrary categories determined by the researcher. Conversely, there is a singular disadvantage to this method—its inherent subjectivity, since the critique is necessarily limited to topics selected by the researcher. Given the qualitative nature of this brand of research, subjectivity is not considered a fundamental flaw; and, as Leahy points out, being “openly self-reflective, including alternative interpretations, and seeking out disconfirming evidence can minimize this approach’s inherent subjectivity” (Leahy, 2007, p. 125). In addition to specialized historiography for particular topics, there are three primary generalist works used for this study. These are: James McPherson’s *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988), David Williams’ *A People’s History of the United States* (2005), and Christopher Olsen’s *The American Civil War: A Hands-On History* (2006).

It is important to consider, at the outset, why textbooks—long derided as an inadequate feature of an outdated classroom—are still worth exploring. The role of the textbook in determining and dictating curriculum is well-explored (Stevens & Wood, 1992; Apple, 1993, 2000, 2004; Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991). There has been, over the last 2 decades, any number of technology advocates that insist the textbook will fade away in the face of new digital resources. This may prove to be so; still, there are considerable impediments in the effective implementation of technology in the classroom, including time demands, a lack of pedagogical training in effective use of such technology, and a comparatively low comfort level with applications that may be markedly different from their preexisting skill set (Berson & Balyta, 2004). And in truth, teachers—despite rhetoric to the contrary—are often reluctant to give up on textbooks. Schug et al. (1997) found that teachers

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