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Teaching the Revolution

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To ask how American schools have taught the American Revolution is to pose a question of epic proportions. In almost no national undertaking is the “administrative decentralization” that Alexis de Tocqueville praised in the United States more obvious than in education.

Even if we sought only what *public* schools taught, we are faced with the reality that the United States is a nation of almost 100,000 public elementary and secondary schools and over 13,000 districts in 50 states, with each jurisdiction exerting varying degrees of control over each school’s curriculum.¹ Add to that 30,000 private schools and an uncertain number of alternative configurations like homeschools, virtual schools, and co-ops educating up to two million additional students, and the hope of determining with any certainty what American schools teach or what students learn rapidly dims.²

Indeed, an essential part of what schools teach students about our regime is encoded in this decentralized structure itself: federalism, free association, and, most importantly, self-government. Salutary as these structures are, however, they don’t make the task of surveying the changing place of the founding in American education easier.

One imperfect way around this obstacle is to examine the changing character of American schoolbooks. From *The Columbian Orator*, which inspired Frederick Douglass’s efforts to realize the promises of the Declaration of Independence, to William McGuffey’s Eclectic Readers, which shaped millions of children in 19th-century America, to Harold Rugg’s progressive and ultimately divisive *Man and His Changing Society* series, to more recent works like *The 1619 Project*, an essay anthology developed

by *The New York Times*, American history textbooks have themselves become part of our history. The shifts in their depictions of the American founding point to deeper shifts in national perceptions of the place and significance of the Revolution in American life.

On their own, of course, American textbooks cannot possibly encompass the whole endeavor of American civic or historical education. For one thing, textbooks are inert. They tell us only what their authors wrote in them but nothing about how teachers taught them or how pupils understood them, if they understood them at all. Undoubtedly, my classmates were not the first for whom the primary purpose of their history textbooks was to supply them with rolling paper. What goes unlearned from textbooks, moreover, does not simply remain unknown, because unlike other subjects learned exclusively by academic study, by far the most potent source of knowledge about our political regime comes from living in it.

Worse still, to the extent that textbooks have been significant sources of civic education, they have hardly spoken in one voice. While the market for textbooks was much smaller in the 19th century, such that a single series like McGuffey's readers could really be said to dominate it absolutely, by the 20th century hundreds of titles competed for school use at any given moment. But even as early as 1797, Caleb Bingham, author of *The Columbian Orator*, could open his offering with "Notwithstanding the multiplicity of School-Books now in use, . . ."³ First sectional tension, then ideological difference resulted in the publication of books designed explicitly to promote alternative historical narratives.

Without downplaying these significant shortcomings of using textbooks as metonyms for American education, the changes in their presentation of the Revolution and the founding period nonetheless illuminate something of how Americans' sense of their nation has changed. Given the market-driven nature of textbooks, successful entrants always had to reflect not just what authors believed but to some degree also what authors thought teachers, school boards, and parents wanted children to learn. In the mid-20th century, the development of formal district- and

state-based adoption processes added another layer of popular input into textbook content.⁴ And while the textbook market is fractured, some titles have always predominated and achieved widespread national use and approbation or—equally significantly—national controversy.

This chapter focuses on a small selection of such books, which have transcended regional and sectional boundaries and encroached on the national consciousness. Of course, there have been many others. To examine only a handful of titles across more than 200 years is not to offer a full picture of American schoolbooks by any means, but for that end, other studies are available to fill the gaps.⁵ What we do find when we examine this sampling of textbooks is a distinctive pattern of change in their depiction of the founding.

Through the end of the 19th century, before the development of a comprehensive system of public schooling, American schoolbooks like Bingham's *The Columbian Orator* and McGuffey's Eclectic Readers conscripted history and biography into the service of personal moral formation for their readers. Historical figures, particularly George Washington and a handful of other heroes of the American Revolution, were described not only in terms of their roles in political events but as exemplary individuals in the round, whose virtues were demonstrated by their public and private speeches. These speeches were to be objects of imitation for pupils, who would learn to read and speak by emulating the great rhetoricians of the past and, in the process, imbibe the virtues that their speeches extolled.

But by the turn of the century, American textbooks took on a more detached and scientific character, focused on understanding the country and its founding in the context of impersonal political and economic systems and processes, such as class conflict, industrialization, and democratization. Twentieth-century textbooks deployed history not as a goal to character formation but as one of several social sciences whose mastery would develop skills of social and economic “problem-solving.” This shift also entailed a reversal in the books’ approach toward the Revolution, which went from a triumph to, at best, a salutary but fumbling step toward gradual progress that would only reach its full potential centuries

later. By the 21st century, these trends had come almost full circle, with texts like *The 1619 Project* that rejected the founders outright and raised protest and resistance against government, rather than personal virtue or social reform, to the highest form of citizenship.

Tracing these shifts matters for understanding the cultural legacy of the American Revolution. For more than 200 years, students have been taught that 1776 bequeathed either exemplars to emulate, systems to manage, or structures to resist. Each stance disposes citizens differently toward the founders, political agency, and self-government. And these changes have not gone uncontested. Since the beginning of the 20th century, textbooks have been subject to recurring challenge and revision, particularly regarding their depictions of the Revolution. These “history wars” have also reflected latent American uncertainty and conflict about the meaning of the Revolution that we want to transmit to future generations.

The Revolution as Rhetorical and Personal Formation

Although probably not the bestselling school reader of the early republic, Bingham’s *The Columbian Orator* was a formidable contender, selling at least 200,000 copies and going through more than a dozen editions during its publication run between 1797 and 1820.⁶ A compilation of speeches and dialogues selected to “cultivate the art of oratory,” the text made a lifelong impression on 19th-century public intellectuals such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Horace Greeley, and, most famously, Frederick Douglass. Douglass first encountered *The Columbian Orator* while still enslaved in Baltimore and credited its antislavery selections with giving “tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance. . . . What I got . . . was . . . a powerful vindication of human rights.”⁷

The Columbian Orator, along with its companion volume for younger students, *The American Preceptor*, taught by the example of its sources rather than direct instruction from Bingham. In its earliest editions, it

contained about a dozen American selections out of about 80 speeches and dialogues from Rome, France, Britain, and Bingham's own imagination. The dialogues and exhortations composed by Bingham typically encouraged filial obedience, piety, industry, and other standard Christian and republican virtues. But they were not all stuffy or tiresome. For example, a dispute in Hades between the ghosts of an English gentleman and a Mohawk Indian over whose murderous customs were more honorable—dueling or scalping—concludes with the realization that the dissipated Englishman is no less “savage” than the Indian, and less forgivably so, given his purportedly civilized upbringing.⁸

Politically, Bingham's selections promoted expanded schooling and religious toleration and opposed slavery. He took for granted the righteousness of the American Revolution and the cause of liberty, including in his book numerous pro-American English works like William Pitt's and Charles James Fox's parliamentary speeches against British colonial policy in the 1760s and 1770s, as well as encomiums on the French Revolution after the Terror.⁹ By the end of its run, the American share of *The Columbian Orator* had nearly doubled, with nearly all the new additions coming from now-obscure New England politicians of the 1790s.¹⁰ But Bingham's American guiding lights remained Washington and Benjamin Franklin, excerpts from and about whom dot every edition of the *Orator* and the *Preceptor*.

By the 1830s, Bingham's books had gone out of print, and a newcomer that would leave an indelible mark on American education for almost a century appeared on the horizon: McGuffey's Eclectic Readers. The readers, which were ultimately graded into six levels that ranged from a basic monosyllabic primer to a serious rhetoric text, were initially published in 1836, with the last two readers written primarily by McGuffey's younger brother. However skeptical we might be of textbooks' formative significance, it would be difficult to overstate these unassuming editions' foundational influence on American education.

Their publication corresponded with the creation and diffusion of the common school movement across the country, particularly into the South

and West. For children who did not attend these schools, McGuffey's readers alone often formed the basis of such education as they managed. They were the source of still-ubiquitous American nursery rhymes and children's songs like "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." One historian observed that by 1850, when the American population stood at 16 million, seven million of the readers had been sold. By 1890, 100 million more had been published.¹¹

If there was one overarching teaching of the readers, it was personal virtue—or, as some have more cynically construed it, the suggestion that "virtue pays." Most of McGuffey's stories feature children being rewarded, and sometimes literally paid, for their sacrifices.¹² For example, a girl who gives up her piece of cake to a sick and hungry dog and his owner gets another cake and the satisfaction of contributing to the ailing duo's recuperation.¹³

But while McGuffey extols bourgeois virtues like industriousness and thrift, he does not privilege them over piety, patriotism, and being loved by one's friends and family. A boy who resists the urge to eat the strawberries he picked so he can bring them to his sick mother instead is rewarded with only her gratitude and blessing, which McGuffey assures his reader brings the boy twice the happiness that eating the strawberries himself would have accorded.¹⁴

Wealth is a less reliable reward for virtue than happiness, as another "good boy whose parents are poor" reflects after a long day of helping his family:

I have often been told, and I have read, that it is God who makes some poor, and others rich;—that the rich have many troubles which we know nothing of; and that the poor, if they are but good, may be very happy: indeed, I think that when I am good, nobody can be happier than I am.¹⁵

A less cynical and more accurate scholarly account of McGuffey's efforts is that "the readers made two essential points: people must learn to resist

immediate impulse to have the discipline to pursue higher things, and they must care about those around them.”¹⁶

The Revolution and the founders are also woven quite seamlessly into the readers’ overarching teaching. As the historian Johann N. Neem notes, “At the heart of *McGuffey’s Readers* was a reminder that individual success was linked to the health and well-being of one’s community. Various selections invoked the beauty of America’s landscape and its ideals of liberty to foster in students a love of their country.”¹⁷

They also invoked and lionized the heroes of the American founding. Washington, the Marquis de Lafayette, and Christopher Columbus appear interspersed in the early readers as characters exemplifying the same virtues that suffuse McGuffey’s other stories and excerpts.

Washington is portrayed as a child himself, learning lessons in piety and honesty from his father. *The Eclectic Second Reader*, for example, includes Mason Weems’s apocryphal story of Washington chopping down the cherry tree as a lesson in honesty and a story about Washington’s father planting cabbages spelling his name to teach the young George about the providential design of nature.¹⁸ Lafayette is praised for his selflessness and modesty in “cheerfully [spending] his time and fortune” to secure “our liberties.”¹⁹ This is, of course, a simplification of his motives, but in a manner that allows children to imitate him.

Starting with the *Eclectic Fourth Reader*, McGuffey, in the tradition of *The Columbian Orator*, relied more on excerpts of speeches, essays, and poems than on his or his brother’s original writings, and his selections included more overtly political texts. The *Fourth Reader* includes excerpts from Thomas Paine’s writings, Daniel Webster’s speech on Washington’s birthday, and Thomas Jefferson’s reconstruction of the Mingo leader Chief Logan’s lament over the murder of his family by white settlers, which had also appeared in Bingham’s *Orator*. The fifth and sixth readers, first published in the 1850s, similarly duplicate some of Bingham’s selections, including speeches by the British Prime Ministers William Pitt and Robert Walpole. They also include Patrick Henry’s 1775 “give me liberty or give me death” speech at the Virginia Convention and the 1830

Senate tariff debates between Webster and Robert Hayne, along with other Webster speeches and writings by Franklin.

If one were to attempt to classify these early textbook efforts politically, it might be fair to understand them as a formation in civic republican ideals, with a decidedly Whig flavor by the 1850s. But rather than merely conveying historical information, their primary purpose was character formation. While they included sketches of chronology and significant historical events, they more commonly focused on introducing famous and noble characters, including the Founding Fathers, as heroes for pupils' emulation. Students using Bingham's and McGuffey's readers should not just learn about Washington but should strive to *be* him. For younger pupils, this emulation was to take the form of imitating great men's conduct and virtues, and for this purpose, great men were often shrunk to a more palatable scale, on which they could appear as merely good men, not unlike the better characters a child might meet around town. Hence McGuffey's depiction of Washington as a very conscientious and well-behaved boy.

For older students, elocution was the key to living up to these heroic models. *The Columbian Orator* was forthrightly designed for that purpose, but the Eclectic Readers, despite the contemporary connotations of the term, were also designed to be read *aloud*. Each one came with a set of "suggestions to teachers" for its use and pedagogical tips for improving recitations, which made no functional distinction between learning to read and learning to speak properly.²⁰ Reading and elocution were not merely to be a mechanical practice, however:

This book is designed for other purposes than merely to teach the pupil to read. The selections have been made with a constant reference to the improvement of the *mind* as well as to the cultivation of the voice. Many of the lessons require thought, in order to be appreciated, and before they can be comprehended. Some of these require an extensive range of reading and deep reflection, to enable the reader fully to understand

the allusions, to enter into the spirit, and to realize the excellence of the extracts.²¹

Recitation and comprehension could be distinguished, but they remained connected in practice, with skill at the latter being required to achieve the former most effectively—“to enter into the spirit” of the selection. Douglass’s account of the effect of *The Columbian Orator*’s selections on him, that “they gave tongue to interesting thoughts of [his] own soul,” reflects this convergence of reading, speaking, and being.²² Through reading, students could come to a rational account of virtue, but through speech, they would reveal it in their own characters, so the two were yoked and developed in tandem by the extracts and stories of early American textbooks.

Bingham’s *The Columbian Orator* and McGuffey’s Eclectic Readers presented the American Revolution and its heroes as personalized models of character for each student to emulate through conduct and especially through speech. That this approach, and even just basic training in elocution, is entirely foreign to American education today is not surprising, however, given subsequent developments. A radically different approach and set of assumptions about the purposes of instruction in the American founding followed McGuffey after the final editions of his readers were published, in 1920, almost 50 years after his death.

The Revolution as Social and Economic Problem

At the turn of the 20th century, the country schoolhouse was fading into obsolescence, and the administrative school district, with graded classrooms, set textbooks, normal school-trained instructors, and a hierarchical organizational structure, was rapidly becoming the norm. American schools became the American school system. Urban reformers who aspired to build what the historian David B. Tyack has called “the one best system” of centralized and uniform national schooling never fully

achieved their goals, but they managed to impose a good deal of homogeneity onto previously quite heterogeneous local institutions.²³

In this context, textbooks began to generate national controversy for the first time. Such “history wars” would become recurring events in American education after the Progressive Era, and it was precisely depictions of the American Revolution and the founding that would frequently become the sore point in the controversy. However enthusiastic Americans were for change and progress, it seems there were some idols they hesitated to topple. Moreover, the constellations of interest groups that converged to push back against insufficiently appreciative depictions of the Revolution were broader than we might expect.

The first such war was set off when the arguments of progressive historians like Carl Lotus Becker and Charles A. Beard that the Revolution was fought to protect the economic interests of colonial elites began appearing in school textbooks. Perhaps predictably, patriotic groups like the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Daughters of the American Revolution opposed progressives’ depreciation of the founders.

But more surprisingly, so did African Americans and whites who did not descend from British Protestants, who saw in the deflation of the Revolution by progressive thinking a threat to their own quests for representation in the American pantheon.²⁴ If men like Washington and Jefferson were downgraded to greedy landowners and speculators, what stature could would-be heroes like Casimir Pulaski or Crispus Attucks ever hope to attain? The historian Jonathan Zimmerman argues, “Under this syllogism, any censure of the Founding Fathers weakened the Revolution; weakening the Revolution elevated England; and elevating the English belittled America’s other ethnicities.”²⁵

Ethnic and religious organizations like the Knights of Columbus joined with the Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion in opposing the insertion of “the New History” into K–12 education. As Zimmerman notes, “Ironically, ethnic groups often embraced so-called Progressive interpretations of the Civil War, industrialization, and the Progressive era itself. But they refused to apply this socioeconomic analysis to the Revolution,

insisting that America's conception and birth remain immaculate."²⁶ This strange-bedfellows coalition of immigrant groups and patriotic societies lobbied for state bills outlawing any school textbook that "defames our nation's founders," as one Wisconsin law from 1923 put it.²⁷

Reverence for the founders consequently held out against the broader shifts in history education even as other erstwhile figures of admiration came under suspicion. But by the 1930s, they too were subject to social and economic analysis. Rugg's *Man and His Changing Society* was a consummate expression of Progressive Era and early New Deal liberal thought, cheering on reforms that diminished the influence of "plutocrats" and corporations and expanded the purview of the central government as democratic victories for the common people. These textbooks were used in over 5,000 school districts at their peak. Zimmerman estimates that they were the most popular social studies textbooks in the country during this period.²⁸

Man and His Changing Society began as a series of pamphlets in the 1920s, which Rugg edited into a six-volume textbook series beginning in 1929. Rugg understood his textbooks as a "unified course in the social studies," synthesizing "history, geography, and civics" for the purpose of training "citizens of the world" by "introducing the economic, political, and social problems of American culture."²⁹ History was a series of "problems of living" amenable to technical solutions, which could be discerned when all the "facts" were clear.³⁰ The term "problem" appears constantly, at least 400 times across the series, with the fifth volume devoted entirely to an exposition of American problems. Of equal importance is Rugg's insistence that "we live in a new civilization"—another phrase that is repeated dozens of times across the series.³¹ As Rugg put it in his prefatory note "to those who use these books,"

In this book we are trying to help you to understand the world we live in today, and how that world became what it is. It is not only possible for you to understand many of the difficult problems of our new civilization; it is possible also for you to help in solving them. To do so, you should learn some of the

important facts about the modern world. You should then form your opinion according to the facts you have learned. . . . Try, therefore, to keep an open mind about every problem that you study.³²

Rugg intended the books for the middle grades, an older audience than McGuffey targeted with his early readers, but the same one targeted by the fourth and later readers. Yet the difference between his approach to history education and McGuffey's, which was still being assigned when Rugg's series was published, could not be starker.

At the outset, Rugg's priorities are an almost perfect inversion of McGuffey's and Bingham's. Political history does not even appear on Rugg's horizon until the fourth volume, *A History of American Government and Culture*. Before that, students learn about what Rugg terms "American Civilization," consisting of the economic and scientific developments that constitute the present "standard of living," which is Rugg's primary definition of a civilization. The second volume extends this "civilizational" examination to Europe, Russia, China, and Japan, focusing on the factors that facilitated (or obstructed) industrialization in each place. The third volume considers American history only in its "economic and social" aspects, which amounts to a chronology of American standards of living in different times and places—in colonial towns, on the frontier, on Southern plantations, in Western mines, and so on.

Instead of individual characters, Rugg presents readers with elaborate and impersonal structures and systems. We learn about how power is generated, trade conducted, and distances traversed. To the extent that commendable (if not quite heroic) individuals do appear, they take the form of inventors like Samuel Morse and Alexander Graham Bell, whose biographies Rugg sketches in a few sentences but who have no particular virtues of character except, implicitly, persistence in the face of skepticism of their inventions.³³ One supposes them worthy of emulation since they advanced our standard of living, but there is little hint from Rugg about how one might go about such emulation. He presents invention

itself as largely a matter of luck rather than any concerted plan. The individual agency that animates the characters in 19th-century textbooks is absent here.

When we finally reach the study of American political history, it is framed as a “march toward democracy,” a “three-century-long struggle to bring about . . . ‘Government of the people, by the people, for the people.’”³⁴ While optimistic in some ways, the progressives’ approach naturally renders America’s beginning as a series of undemocratic errors to be corrected rather than achievements meriting celebration. While our founding held some promising seeds for the future, our greatest national achievements—universal suffrage and a strong central government involved in improving the material life and health of all people through planning—are necessarily very recent developments.

In *Man and His Changing Society*, the Revolution takes on precisely this double character as the act of selfish “business leaders” who above all looked out for their class interests but also (often opportunistically) expressed higher principles that would ultimately result in the overthrow of their own “aristocratic” privileges. Rugg describes the colonial era as beset with conflict between the “ruling classes,” composed of wealthy landowners who “had a real contempt for the rank and file of the people,” and the “mass of the people,” who were constantly struggling for (and occasionally, as in the case of Bacon’s Rebellion, winning) a more democratic society.³⁵ The Revolution came about because of an analogous class antagonism between the colonies and Britain, where “a small group of wealthy landowners and merchants were gaining control of Parliament.”³⁶ This thrust all the colonists together into the position of “the people” vis-à-vis Britain, a division that trumped their prior intra-colonial class conflicts.

Individuals do appear in Rugg’s economy-centric narrative of the Revolution, but they are not characters so much as historical handymen who drop in from nowhere to perform some essential political task. For example, James Otis was a “young colonial lawyer” who gave a rousing defense of the Boston merchants, Samuel Adams was a “busy man” who orchestrated the Committees of Correspondence, and Patrick Henry gave

a “thrilling” speech at the Virginia Convention, a few lines of which are excerpted.³⁷ These tasks accomplished, each departs the stage, never to be heard from again. Were these good men or mediocrities? It is not Rugg’s task to render such judgments.

The only exception to this value-free submersion of individual character and agency is Washington. While Washington isn’t quite above the class struggle that animates all Rugg’s history, he is the only founder about whom Rugg offers an explicitly positive assessment: “Were his wealth and experience the only reasons for the confidence people gave him? No, indeed. He had other qualities for which even his enemies honored him—the qualities of a great and generous character.”³⁸ However, Rugg does not elaborate what such qualities might be. Even a great and generous character is just a fact, not intended for imitation or emulation by the reader.

Rugg’s more characteristic form of praise, however, is far more grudging. The delegates to the 1787 Constitutional Convention, for example, were “intelligent, even brilliant Americans,” but unfortunately from the “well-to-do and prosperous classes” and “exceedingly conservative.”³⁹ The result was a constitution whereby “the merchants, the landowners, the manufacturers, the shippers, and the bankers were given what they wanted, namely, a government which would stabilize money and trade, keep order within the country, and defend the nation against foreign enemies.”⁴⁰ While commendable in some ways, this Constitution was ultimately incompatible with the changing needs of the people. “The American Constitution was planned to provide for a stable, conservative, slowly changing government. Practically every provision prevented rapid change,” Rugg argues.⁴¹ But “even before 1900, a totally new civilization had been produced. . . . In this new civilization change is the most important characteristic.” Rugg invites readers to ask, “Did the Constitution of the United States and the business of government change to keep pace with the new manner of living?”⁴² The answer is of course a foregone conclusion.

Despite its enormous popularity in the 1930s, by the early 1940s Rugg’s opposition to free enterprise itself encountered opposition, and his books inspired another “history war” advanced by a coalition of business and

political groups spearheaded by the American Legion.⁴³ After several years of unrelenting criticism and removal efforts, the series fell out of favor by the mid-1940s.⁴⁴ During the Cold War, Rugg's overt anti-capitalism and praise of the Soviet Union largely disappeared from mainstream textbooks, and the Revolution once again excited praise. Consensus history texts like Thomas Bailey's 1956 *American Pageant* appended many flattering adjectives to revolutionary leaders ("George Washington was a giant among men; Benjamin Franklin was a master among diplomats," reads one characteristic line⁴⁵), but there was not much greater depth to their characterizations than Rugg had given.

Rugg's ideological orientation cost him his battle in the history wars, but his broader skepticism won out. Rugg's underlying progressive vision lived on in the "unfinished nation" paradigm that would come to dominate 20th-century textbooks long after his own had been dethroned.⁴⁶ On this view, the United States was founded in the pursuit of noble principles but could only gradually realize these principles through group conflict and struggle over time and even today falls short of its visionary aims.⁴⁷ The "unfinished nation" paradigm has the advantage of allowing textbook writers to account for recent or current injustices with optimism: Things may not be perfect yet, but they are ever on a trajectory toward improvement. The cost of this framework, however, is that it always entails a faintly patronizing attitude toward a benighted past, limiting even writers who might wish to depict the Revolution and its leaders as exemplary. In a narrative in which the arc of history bends toward justice, the arc itself becomes the main character in history rather than any individuals who shaped events.

The Return of Personalism?

Although McGuffey's readers have maintained something of a cult following among homeschoolers, it is difficult to imagine a wholesale return to Bingham and McGuffey's approach to American history in schools today.

Not only would their moral elevation of the founders and their vision of character formation be unappetizing to a large swath of Americans, but also much more basically, their de-emphasis of chronology and narrative history in favor of biographical sketch and rhetorical extract is incongruent with modern standards for history instruction. For all his ideological baggage, Rugg wrote a thorough and at times even lively narrative chronology of American history. Even conservative critics today would have to laud the comprehensiveness of Rugg's account compared with the truncated and infographic-infested options that dominate the modern textbook market.⁴⁸ Chronological narrative is now indisputably necessary in history education.

Nonetheless, perhaps the highly moralistic and personalized approach of 19th-century education *has* resurfaced in the present another way. History texts like *The 1619 Project*, the most recent combatant in our recurring history wars, focus a good deal on individuals and grant them substantial agency, delving extensively into the lives and motives of revolutionary figures like Jefferson.⁴⁹ But while McGuffey sought to elevate exemplary historic individuals for pupils to imitate, *The 1619 Project* inverts this aim. For example, it dilates on Jefferson only to demonstrate that he was a hypocrite and a rapist, a villain rather than a hero.

The journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, who created the 1619 Project and wrote its lead essay, is entirely frank about her intention to achieve precisely this inversion in the culture at large:

Origin stories function, to a degree, as myths designed to create a shared sense of history and purpose. . . . The origin story of the United States . . . portrays an intrepid, freedom-loving people. . . . This mythology has positioned almost exclusively white Americans as the architects and champions of democracy. . . .

But as this book has shown, a truer origin story requires us to place Black Americans prominently in the role of democracy's defenders and perfecters.⁵⁰

The necessity of downgrading the founders is clear from this, though like so many critical historians of the 20th century, Hannah-Jones cannot entirely deny the revolutionary cause itself, since the pursuit of liberty and equality remains her lodestar. What is odd is what follows on this downgrading of the men who made the Revolution. One might assume that the project of “placing Black Americans prominently in the role of democracy’s defenders” would mean replacing one set of (white) national heroes with a more genuinely heroic (black) set and that it might even do so in ways quite reminiscent of McGuffey and Bingham, with their emphasis on the connection between character and speech. Hannah-Jones does go on to offer a list of black protectors of democracy, several of whom wrote and spoke in ways that would make them ideal candidates for inclusion in a 19th-century type of textbook, such as David Walker, Ida B. Wells, and Fannie Lou Hamer. But beyond appending them to this list of potential counter-heroes, *The 1619 Project* hardly mentions them.

The 1619 Project thus obliquely recovers McGuffeyan personalism and concern with individual character, but only for negative ends—to tear down one pantheon of (already quite battered!) heroes, without replacing it with others. Hannah-Jones remains, in this respect, a direct descendant of Rugg and the progressive approach to history, only without the latter’s optimism. *The 1619 Project* presents history as governed by impersonal structures and systems. Individual agency, even when exercised by potentially heroic and brilliant individuals like Walker and Wells, is ultimately ineffective against “the racist systems that have undergirded our society for four hundred years.”⁵¹

In Hannah-Jones’s telling, while black agency suffers a grim prognosis, the casual choices of long-dead whites like Jefferson and Washington reverberate in our lives to this day. This is in effect the most perverse kind of personalism, in which only villains have agency and everyone else is ground down beneath the behemoth structures and systems that move political events. So unpopular was this framing that five states prohibited *The 1619 Project* in K–12 schools explicitly, and at least 13 others have at least discouraged its use through “divisive concepts” legislation.⁵²

Varieties of Oversimplification

It is easy today to deride the moralism and naivete of textbooks like *The Columbian Orator* and the Eclectic Readers. But read in light of what followed the 19th-century paradigm, it appears no less naive and simplistic than its successors. For all that we may charge Bingham and McGuffey with romanticizing the founders, flattening their complexities, or elevating flawed men to undeserved heights, the textbook writers who followed them have done just the same for their preferred protagonists.

Rugg's class-based analysis, despite its patina of sophistication and appeal to expertise ("The course is based upon an elaborate program of research," he boasts in each volume's introduction⁵³), is no less reductive. For Rugg, all events arise from class conflict between two clearly delineated groups—the people and the ruling class. The people are never wrong; the ruling class usually is. Rugg's goal is not to teach his readers anything so naive as how to be happy but rather how to solve social problems, and the qualities necessary for that are technical knowledge and an appropriately charitable view of the beneficiaries of one's solutions—the people. Yet for all his solicitousness for the people, Rugg was remarkably shortsighted about the possibility that the social planners running the government would form a new ruling class whose technocratic training would render them contemptuous (to borrow his term) of the very people they had been trained to serve.

Modern texts like *The 1619 Project* and its predecessor, Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*—a popular high school-level American history supplemental synthesis since the 1990s—suffer from similarly destructive simplifications, despite all their pages of scholarly citations. In these books also, the country is divisible into two classes: the ruling class and its victims.

Whereas Rugg concedes that the ruling class can occasionally act in the public interest when that interest is aligned with its self-interest, Hannah-Jones and Zinn depict those in power entirely as predatory villains. To be in power, to govern, is a fundamentally unethical activity,

since in their telling no one in American history has governed without oppressing. The only ethically acceptable alternative, and what they hope to cultivate in their readers by depicting the incessant villainy of the powerful, is protest and resistance against power. As a moral teaching, this is just as naive as Rugg's exhortation to technocracy for the sake of democracy. When protest and resistance are the highest forms of citizenship, the skills and responsibilities of statesmanship are devalued, leaving only instability and incompetence in office.⁵⁴

The increasingly utopian hopes that Americans have poured into schooling since the 1830s incline us to want to counter pedagogical naivete with greater sophistication. If Rugg's class binary is too reductive, the solution must be a more nuanced approach to class conflict. Or if Hannah-Jones's racial inversion of the American story is too simplistic, the solution must be greater complexity and ambiguity in our telling of the history of American race relations. But reduction and simplification—even to a degree that appears ridiculous to educated adults—is unavoidable in the teaching of history, which is always ultimately the task of instructing children with, on average, no great enthusiasm for the subject. The only question is who and what will be simplified and reduced. Heroes? Antiheroes? Impersonal forces?

What has remained notably consistent across American textbooks from the founding to the present is a reverence for the American Revolution that even those most intent on deromanticizing America haven't been able to slough off. Even the project of impugning American hypocrisy rests on respect for the promises of the Declaration of Independence, the standard that successive generations can be accused of forsaking. What has changed is the gradual depreciation and demonization of the individuals who signed the Declaration and made the Revolution. But even if we endorse this depreciation, without individuals or much concrete context at all the Revolution becomes an incomprehensible, disembodied abstraction—two lines about self-evident truths plucked from an old parchment that constitute an ideal from an otherwise benighted past that we have still failed to achieve in the present but that somehow ought to animate

our future. Who can be surprised if students lose patience with such a convoluted vision?

While it's unlikely and probably undesirable for our textbooks to revert wholesale to the 19th-century paradigm, the history wars of the 20th and 21st centuries have demonstrated that we haven't come up with any stable replacement for it either. The progressive paradigm gained a foothold that subsequently slipped away, and the structural racism paradigm, while initially praised by elite tastemakers, was almost immediately bushwhacked by half the country's state legislatures. What remains is the rudderless liberalism of the "unfinished nation," whose completion is anyone's guess. If national eighth-grade test scores in history and civics and the number of students pursuing history and even political science at the university level indicate anything about the effectiveness of such education, we have some reason to suspect it is going nowhere.⁵⁵

We have little to lose by reconsidering the role of character formation through elocution in elementary education. We would not need to abandon the narrative chronology we have come to view as essential to understanding history to combine it with increased attention to historical biography and rhetoric, the former having been diminished in curricula and the latter almost entirely abandoned (except extracurricular high school debate) despite its continuing centrality to our political life. A return to rhetoric today would almost certainly take its sources from a broader canon of speeches and texts than McGuffey's selections. The subsequent two centuries' worth of material from which to train students in recitation and debate offers a great variety to satisfy a polarized country. For both academic and civic ends, however, it may be salutary for students to try once again to "enter into the spirit" of the American founding.

Notes

1. Maya Riser-Kositsky, "Education Statistics: Facts About American Schools," *Education Week*, August 6, 2025, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/education-statistics-facts-about-american-schools/2019/01>.

2. Peter Jamison et al., "Home Schooling's Rise from Fringe to Fastest-Growing Form of Education," *The Washington Post*, October 31, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/interactive/2023/homeschooling-growth-data-by-district/>.

3. Caleb Bingham, *The Columbian Orator* [. . .] (Boston, 1797).

4. State-based adoption processes have also distorted popular influence by incentivizing publishers to focus on the preferences of the most populous (and so most lucrative) states: California, Texas, Florida, and New York. Even so, these states represent quite different constituencies regionally, demographically, and ideologically, so their dominance still permits a decent diversity of options.

5. For a synoptic study of 19th-century textbooks, see Ruth Miller Elson, *Guardians of Tradition: American Schoolbooks of the Nineteenth Century* (University of Nebraska Press, 1964). On curricular reform and textbooks in the first half of the 20th century, see Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893–1958*, 3rd ed. (Routledge, 2004). On 20th-century conflicts over history textbooks, see Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public . . . Schools*, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2022).

6. *The Columbian Orator's* primary competitor was Lindley Murray's *The English Reader*, which sold between one and two million copies in the early 19th century. Granville Ganter, "The Active Virtue of *The Columbian Orator*," *The New England Quarterly* 70, no. 3 (1997): 463, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/366763>.

7. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston, 1845), 39–40.

8. Bingham, *The Columbian Orator*, 53–54.

9. Pitt's and Fox's pro-American speeches are at Bingham, *The Columbian Orator*, 58–60, 156–58, 172–75, 184–85. "Address of Mr. Adet, French Ambassador, on Presenting the Colors of France to the United States, 1796" and Washington's response are at Bingham, *The Columbian Orator*, 85–88. Bingham also includes several speeches of Napoleon's from this period.

10. The 1819 edition, for example, features the poet David Everett and speeches by John Lothrop and John Phillips, father of the more famous orator Wendell Phillips.

11. D. A. Saunders, "Social Ideas in McGuffey Readers," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (1941): 580, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2744701>.

12. Saunders, "Social Ideas in McGuffey Readers," 584.

13. William H. McGuffey, *The Eclectic Second Reader* [. . .] (Cincinnati, 1836), 30–31.

14. William H. McGuffey, *McGuffey's New Third Eclectic Reader: For Young Learners* (Cincinnati, 1865), 94.
15. McGuffey, *The Eclectic Second Reader*, 45.
16. Johann N. Neem, *Democracy's Schools: The Rise of Public Education in America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 41.
17. Neem, *Democracy's Schools*, 45.
18. McGuffey, *The Eclectic Second Reader*, 112–15, 128–36. The story of the cherry tree also appears in McGuffey, *McGuffey's New Third Eclectic Reader*, 233–36.
19. McGuffey, *The Eclectic Second Reader*, 138.
20. See, for example, William H. McGuffey, *Eclectic Fourth Reader*, 6th. ed. (Cincinnati, 1838), xi–xii.
21. McGuffey, *Eclectic Fourth Reader*, xii.
22. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 39.
23. David B. Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Harvard University Press, 1974).
24. Zimmerman, *Whose America?*, 11–28.
25. Zimmerman, *Whose America?*, 18.
26. Zimmerman, *Whose America?*, 12–13.
27. Zimmerman, *Whose America?*, 23.
28. Zimmerman, *Whose America?*, 60.
29. Harold Rugg, *Man and His Changing Society* (Ginn, 1930), 2:iv; and Harold Rugg, *Man and His Changing Society*, vol. 5 (Ginn, 1931). Each of the six volumes of the series opens with a preface devoted to these considerations.
30. Harold Rugg, *Man and His Changing Society* (Ginn, 1930), 3:iii.
31. This is even the title of the first chapter of the first volume. Rugg, *Man and His Changing Society* (Ginn, 1929), 1:3.
32. Rugg, *Man and His Changing Society*, 1:10–11.
33. On Morse, see Rugg, *Man and His Changing Society*, 1:323–25. On Bell, see Rugg, *Man and His Changing Society*, 1:329–32.
34. Harold Rugg, *Man and His Changing Society* (Ginn, 1931), 4:14.
35. Rugg, *Man and His Changing Society*, 4:30–46.
36. Rugg, *Man and His Changing Society*, 4:53.
37. Rugg, *Man and His Changing Society*, 4:67, 76, 80.
38. Rugg, *Man and His Changing Society*, 4:85.
39. Rugg, *Man and His Changing Society*, 4:131.
40. Rugg, *Man and His Changing Society*, 4:141.
41. Rugg, *Man and His Changing Society*, 4:146.
42. Rugg, *Man and His Changing Society*, 4:146.
43. Zimmerman, *Whose America?*, 60–61.
44. Adam Laats, *The Other School Reformers: Conservative Activism in American Education* (Harvard University Press, 2015), 75; and Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893–1958*, 172–73.

45. Thomas Bailey, *American Pageant: A History of the Republic*, 5th ed. (D. C. Heath, 1975), 107.

46. I borrow this phrase from the title of one of the most popular textbooks of the past 30 years, Alan Brinkley's *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*.

47. Rugg, *Man and His Changing Society*, 4:14.

48. See, for example, David Randall et al., *Skewed History: Textbook Coverage of Early America and the New Deal*, National Association of Scholars, 2021, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED616081.pdf>.

49. Nikole Hannah-Jones et al., eds., *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (One World, 2021), 10–32, 52. Although *The New York Times* describes the book as intended for ninth- through 12th-grade students, the Pulitzer Center's curriculum guides introduce it in middle school, so I will treat it here as an analogue to Rugg's and McGuffey's texts. See, for example, 1619 Project, Education Materials Collection, "What Is the Legacy of Durham's Black Wall Street?," November 2, 2024, <https://1619education.org/builder/lesson/what-legacy-durhams-black-wall-street>.

50. Hannah-Jones et al., eds., *The 1619 Project*, 452.

51. Hannah-Jones et al., eds., *The 1619 Project*, 452.

52. Sarah Schwartz, "A Wave of New Legislation Aims to Ban DEI in Public Schools," *Education Week*, March 26, 2025, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/a-wave-of-new-legislation-aims-to-ban-dei-in-public-schools/2025/03>.

53. Rugg, *Man and His Changing Society*, 4:x.

54. See, for example, Yuval Levin, *A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream* (Basic Books, 2020), chap. 2.

55. National Assessment of Educational Progress eighth-grade history scores have decreased on average from their peak, in 2010–14, to levels first observed in the initial 1994 test. The share of total American bachelor's degrees in history has fallen from 2.2 percent in 1990 to 1.1 percent in 2021 and in political science from 3.3 percent to 1.9 percent. Nation's Report Card, "NAEP Report Card: U.S. History," <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/ushistory/results/achievement/>; US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, "Table 325.92. Degrees in Economics, History, Political Science and Government, and Sociology Conferred by Postsecondary Institutions, by Level of Degree: Selected Academic Years, 1949–50 Through 2020–21," 2022, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_325.92.asp; and US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, "Table 318.10. Degrees Conferred by Postsecondary Institutions, by Level of Degree and Sex of Student: Selected Academic Years, 1869–70 Through 2031–32," 2022, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_318.10.asp.