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Abstract

History textbooks provide an interesting perspective into the views and attitudes of their respective time period. The way textbooks portray certain events and groups of people has a profound impact on the way children learn to view those groups and events. That impact then has the potential to trickle down to future generations, fabricating a historical narrative that sometimes avoids telling the whole truth, or uses selective wording to sway opinions on certain topics. This paper analyzes the changes seen in how the Civil War is written about in twelve textbooks dated from 1876 to 2014. Notable topics of discussion include the discussion of slaves and slavery, as well as the recognition, or lack of, the impact of minority groups. Many changes were traced, some for the worse, and quite a few for the better. Despite the efforts to make history textbooks more inclusive and unbiased, there is still much room for improvement, especially in regard to facing race relations and the causes behind the bloodiest war ever fought on American soil.

Keywords

textbooks, history, Civil War, minorities, slavery, change, memory, race, gender

REWRITING HISTORY: A STUDY OF HOW THE HISTORY OF THE CIVIL WAR HAS CHANGED IN TEXTBOOKS FROM 1876 TO 2014

Skyler A. Campbell

Textbooks are powerful influencers in the education that students receive. However, this power is often misused to push specific political or social agendas. While serving as the foundation of learning in the classroom, textbooks—especially history textbooks—are riddled with the biases of their authors. The American Civil War is a prime example of the biases of authors and time creeping into the pages of textbooks. Similarities and differences across textbooks can be explained by the values of the society in which they were written. Consistencies, such as the character of Lincoln, highlight long-lasting themes valued by our country. Changes, such as the representation of minority groups, demonstrate a progressive nature to America and a desire to constantly improve the way we tell our history. The messages implanted in history textbooks often mirror the messages conveyed in society.¹

One such change occurred in the Civil War's aftermath. The daughters of Confederate soldiers joined

¹ I selected twelve textbooks from 1876-2014, based off research of which books were popular in certain eras, as well as working with what was readily available to me. That being said, these textbooks represent a small percentage of the total number of textbooks written on United States history. When I reference a specific year, I am speaking in regard to the twelve textbooks that I read.

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together to form the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), an organization that pushed for the adaptation of textbooks to preserve the memory of the Old South. The UDC fully believed that Northern accounts of the Civil War were incredibly inaccurate and designed to further embarrass the South as well as disregard the achievements and sacrifices of Confederate families. According to the UDC, the authentic history of the war “vindicated Confederate men, recorded the sacrifices of Confederate women, and exonerated the South.”² One of the UDC’s primary goals was to instill Confederate values and culture on Southern children. The United Daughters of the Confederacy did not shy away from clearly stating their commitment to instilling white supremacist values in their youth. White supremacy was therefore front and center in many UDC-written textbooks. Slavery was also present in these textbooks, contradicting the Northern notion that slavery was cruel and evil by instead stating that slaves were happy and unwilling to leave their masters’ side following the end of the war. Undertones of this “authentic history” can be found in textbooks throughout history.

While the UDC made sure to emphasize their Southern viewpoints in textbooks, the characters of prominent figures, mainly Lincoln and Lee, are consistently described in a way that mirrors how these players in history are talked about in common conversation. The character of

² Karen L. Cox, *Dixie's Daughters* (N.p.: University Press of Florida, 2003), 95.

Abraham Lincoln stayed relatively consistent from 1876 to the present. As early as 1876, Lincoln was portrayed as the model American, the prime example of a self-made man, and he served as proof “that, in the United States, poverty prevents no citizen from rising to the highest position in the gift of the people.”³ This description stays with him into the modern day. Many textbooks also give Lincoln credit for being the rock upon which the Union could always rely for guidance and stability. A 1997 textbook states, “At moments of frustration and even failure, [Lincoln’s] sense of humor saved him from despair.”⁴ In 1911, descriptions of Lincoln being a “friend of the South” began to surface. From that point onward, whenever Lincoln’s assassination was mentioned, the idea that the South lost its best friend and the country lost its best leader followed closely. Lincoln remains a popular figure throughout history.

Likewise, John Wilkes Booth is consistently portrayed as a villain throughout time. Early accounts of the assassination were very simple and to the point. In 1911, the same time emotion started to be placed in the descriptions of Lincoln and his assassination, John Wilkes Booth was characterized as a “miserable, half-crazed actor,” a description that lasted throughout the 1970s.⁵ Booth’s description changed briefly in the 1930s and again in 1954,

³ David B. Scott, *A School History of the United States* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1876), 321.

⁴ Herman J. Viola, *Why We Remember: United States History* (N.p.: Addison-Wesley, 1997), 467.

⁵ David S. Muzzey, *An American History* (N.p.: Ginn and Company, 1911), 467.

where it states he was driven to insanity over the surrender of the South.⁶ The notion of Booth being a Southern sympathizer faded for forty years until it resurfaced in 1991. This idea has remained in the pages of history textbooks since then. Even today, history equates Booth to evil.

Another Civil War character, General Robert E. Lee, remains relatively unscathed throughout history. Even though White House Chief of Staff John Kelly faced controversy in 2017 over his description of Confederate General Robert E. Lee as an “honorable man,” praise for General Lee’s character has been a staple in the Civil War section of United States history books dating back to 1911.⁷ *An American History* by David Saville Muzzey characterized Lee as “a gentleman of spotless purity of character—noble, generous, sincere, brave, and gifted.”⁸ Over and over again, Lee is revered for his incredible military ability and role as one of the United States’ most able officers prior to the Civil War. Countless attempts to defend Lee can be found in textbooks, like the following statement.

Although Lee belonged to an old southern family, he did not believe in slavery and had already freed his slaves. Furthermore, he was against secession and opposed to the war. But when the time came for him to choose the

⁶ Harold Rugg, *A History of American Government and Culture*, (N.p.: Ginn and Company, 1931), 354.

⁷ John F. Kelly, Interview by Laura Ingraham, Fox News, Oct. 2017. Accessed 24 Nov. 2017.

⁸ Muzzey, *An American History*, 426-427.

side he would support, he could not bring himself to bear arms against his beloved state, Virginia.⁹

This statement is repeated almost word for word in *America: Its People and Values* (1975). It was not until 2014 that a textbook acknowledged Lee's brilliant military ability without glorifying his actions in deserting the Union to fight for the Confederacy. Lee is repeatedly acknowledged as a military strategist and honorable man.

Unlike the Civil War characters such as Lincoln, Booth, and Lee, the causes of the Civil War have changed over time when it comes to our nation's textbooks. Following the foundation set forth by the UDC, the horrors of slavery and its role in the division of our nation were absent from early textbooks. From the very beginning, the UDC promoted a narrative where the South "fought the war not in order to preserve slavery, but rather to preserve the Constitution, specifically the Tenth Amendment, protecting states' rights."¹⁰ Thus, the argument for the war being caused by states' rights was born. In 1876, the war was attributed to the "long struggles for power in and out of Congress which ended at last in civil war."¹¹ Both sides were fighting for state majority leaning towards their respective stance on slavery. The South became anxious over the presumed Northern victory in the Kansas-Nebraska struggle, which

⁹ Howard B. Wilder, Robert P. Ludlum, Harriett M. Brown, and Howard R. Anderson, *This is America's Story*. (N.p.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1954), 383.

¹⁰ Cox, *Dixie's Daughters*, 12.

¹¹ Scott, *A School History of the United States*, 318.

placed the North in the majority for votes in Congress. However, for a brief moment in 1892, William Bryant, the author of *A Popular History of the United States*, very explicitly wrote, “The cause of contention was slavery; the foundation on which the new Confederacy was to be built was slavery.”¹² Twenty years later, in 1911, slavery was placed as the central and singular cause of the Civil War, contrasting the story of the war defending states’ rights. Muzzey shared that both Jefferson Davis and Alexander Stephens claimed in their postwar accounts that secession was caused by the denial of Constitutional rights, not slavery. Muzzey countered this by explaining that the only right the South fought for was the right to slavery. According to Muzzey, “it was a conflict in the interpretation of the Constitution; and slavery, and slavery *alone*, was the cause of that conflict.”¹³ Depending on the ideology of the era, the cause of the Civil War was either states’ rights or slavery. Eventually, it was inevitable that those two thoughts would be linked together.

Slavery remained the central cause of the Civil War until 1954, when textbooks began to agree with Davis and Jefferson’s earlier claim that secession and war were caused by states’ rights. Howard Wilder’s *This is America’s Story* (1954) addresses the growing notion of the violation of states’ rights in the South: “Southerners believed they could protect their way of living by insisting that the United States

¹² William C. Bryant and Sydney H. Gay, *A Popular History of the United States*, Vol. 4. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1892), 543.

¹³ Muzzey, *An American History*, 419

government should keep its hands off all matters which it had not been given the definite authority by the Constitution.”¹⁴ This passage hints at preserving the Southern way of life, which historically involved slavery. It also responds to the argument made in 1911 about the interpretation of the Constitution. Ever since 1954, the argument for states’ rights has been brought up in the pages of textbooks, often in conjunction with slavery.

Along with the differing views over the causes of the Civil War, American history textbooks have changed the way in which they approach the actual war. Early textbooks read very much like military journals, filled with hundreds of pages detailing every battle and naming every general. A lot of focus was given to the strategy used and the maneuvers executed by each individual regiment. It was not until 1911 that discussion of the war began to focus only on the most significant battles such as Bull Run, Shiloh, and Gettysburg. 1911 was also when politics and the economy began to be mentioned throughout the course of the war. Another shift in the way the war was taught came in 1919. Up until this point, the war had been told in chronological order; however, this changed when *Our United States: A History* (1919) organized the war into regions, focusing on the eastern and western campaigns. This method of organizing the war continues to be seen in textbooks today.

With war and battles come death and disease. However, early history textbooks focused on the battlefield rather than the causation of the death toll. More people died

¹⁴ Wilder et al, *This is America's Story*, 362.

in the Civil War from disease and infection than combat-related injuries, yet it was not until 1991 that a textbook mentioned the impact of disease: “More men died from wounds and sickness than on the battlefield itself.”¹⁵ Variations of this sentence can be found again in *Why We Remember: United States History* (1997) and *Discovering Our Past: A History of the United States* (2014). Prior to 1991, a lot of focus was given to battlefield deaths and the number of soldiers wounded. In 1892, at the end of each battle’s descriptions, there was a section set aside to talk about the battlefield casualties for each side. Dying on the battlefield has long been recognized as a cost of the war; however, the agonizing fate that so many men faced in the hospital tents and camps has only recently begun to appear in the pages of textbooks.

Just as the shifts in death toll and causation demonstrate how textbooks reinterpret the Civil War, we must also consider the changes in the representation of minority groups such as slaves and women. Recognition for minority groups’ role in the war effort did not show up in textbooks until several decades after the war. True to its name, *America: Its People and Values* (1975) has several highlights on various people, often from minority groups, that had an impact on the Civil War. These individuals include Luigi Palma di Cesnola, an Italian immigrant who fought for the Union, Fredrick Douglas, and Clara Barton.

¹⁵ Winthrop D. Jordan, Miriam Greenblatt, and John S. Bowes, *The Americans: A History* (Evanston, IL: McDougal, Littell & Company, 1991), 374.

This is the first time that a significant number of individuals from minority groups were represented and recognized for their important roles in war efforts. Prior to this, all spotlights were reserved for generals and politicians. The inclusion of important individuals from minority groups demonstrates a growing acceptance of minorities and their impact on history.

One of these groups gaining recognition is women. The first time the role of women was mentioned was in 1931, eleven years after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, which gave women the right to vote. This textbook explains that alongside men, “liberty-loving women too joined the movement” towards abolition.¹⁶ Following this statement, the author, Harold Rugg, introduces several key women who played a role in the abolitionist movement leading up to the war. The contributions of women were recognized briefly again in 1954, which simply stated that, while the men were at war, the women and slaves were left to do the work at home on the plantation.¹⁷ Women then remained absent until 1975, when the role of women evolved to demonstrate the importance of women in the war effort. In 1991, women were recognized as working government office jobs as well as working in the fields and factories while the men were at war. 1991 was also the first time that women’s role as battlefield nurses is recognized. *Discovering Our Past: A History of the United States* (2014) was the first book to tell

¹⁶ Rugg, *A History of American Government and Culture*, 302.

¹⁷ Wilder et al, *This is America's Story*, 393.

the story of the women who disguised themselves as men in order to fight for their country. “Frances Clayton disguised herself as a man to fight in the Civil War. As many as 400 other women did the same.”¹⁸ As women started to gain more recognition in society, textbook descriptions followed suit, eventually giving them recognition for their impact on historical events such as the Civil War.

Immigrants, like women, also faced a long road to recognition. The first mention of immigrants having a positive impact on the war was in 1975. Prior to this, immigrants, especially the Irish, were either ignored by textbooks or described with discrimination. An event that showcases the negative opinions towards immigrants, especially Irish immigrants, is the New York Draft Riots in 1863. In *A Popular History of the United States* (1892), “Irish assassins” were the responsible party that murdered the “helpless negroes.”¹⁹ Approximately 1.9 million Irish immigrants lived in the United States in the 1890s, and Irish-American relations were tense.²⁰ Americans believed immigrants, especially those from Ireland, were taking jobs and making life harder for American-born citizens. Many textbooks commented on how immigrants flocked to the United States and began to compete for jobs in the factories. However, the reference to the Irish as being “assassins”

¹⁸ Joyce Appleby, Alan Brinkley, Albert S. Broussard, James M. McPherson, and Donald A. Ritchie, *Discovering Our Past: A History of the United States* (N.p.: McGraw-Hill Education, 2014), 466.

¹⁹ Bryant, *A Popular History of the United States*, 560.

²⁰ "From Ireland to Germany to Italy to Mexico: How America's Source of Immigrants Has Changed in the States, 1850-2013," *Pew Research Center*, 28 Sept. 2015, accessed 29 Nov. 2017.

highlights the feelings of resentment towards Irish immigrants in the late 1800s. As time goes on, the role of Irish immigrants in the New York Draft Riots gets increasingly downplayed. A couple decades later, the attackers in the draft riots were described as “rioters (that) held New York in a reign of terror.”²¹ This transition to a less accusatory tone showcased the improving Irish-American relations over time.

Perhaps the group that experienced the most change in representation is slaves. The lives of slaves were not widely discussed in textbooks until 1919. Prior to this, there were a few passages that described slaves as contraband in textbooks from 1892 and 1911. *Our United States: A History* (1919) was very blunt about slaves being considered property before the Civil War. The author also looked down upon slave labor as being “ignorant, clumsy, and wasteful,” stating that slaves were too lazy to put in extra effort beyond that which would spare them punishment.²² However, it was not until 2014 that a significant section of the book was devoted solely to the purpose of describing the lives of enslaved people and the horrors faced in slavery. A major component in this section was the constant fear of being separated from family, a very powerful and personal tactic to use when teaching this subject to students.²³

²¹ William B. Guitteau, *Our United States: A History*, (N.p.: Silver, Burdett and Company, 1919), 458.

²² *Ibid.*, 406.

²³ Appleby et al, *Discovering Our Past: A History of the United States*, 393.

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Not only were the conditions and fears of slaves misrepresented in early textbooks, but there was a common misconception that the Emancipation Proclamation forever freed all slaves right away. This belief can be found in textbooks ranging from 1876 to 1968, a time period when society was plagued with questions regarding the civil rights of African Americans. *An American History* (1911) was the first textbook to recognize the Emancipation Proclamation as a war measure, which then remained in the description of the proclamation in textbooks for years to come. It was not until 1991 that a textbook began to represent emancipation more accurately by claiming that against popular belief, “no slaves became free immediately.”²⁴ In the aftermath of this statement, textbooks from the last twenty years or so have followed suit, stating that “the proclamation had little immediate effect.”²⁵ However, one effect that took place relatively quickly was the enlistment of black soldiers in the military.

Black soldiers were first mentioned in 1892, followed by a long hiatus until 1968 when they were once again added to textbooks, and it was not until 1975 that their significance to the war was recognized. Furthermore, it took until 1991 for the discrimination that many black soldiers faced to be addressed. One thing remained constant from 1876 to 2014, and that is the focus on the 54th Massachusetts. Early accounts of the 54th focus on the bravery and nobility

²⁴ Jordan et al, *The Americans: A History*, 368.

²⁵ William Deverell and Deborah G. White, *United States History: Beginning to 1914* (N.p.: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 2009), 530.

of their commander Robert Gould Shaw for taking up command of a black regiment. “The heroism that had braved the deep and bitter prejudice of the North, by taking command of this first colored regiment, and that proved the bravery and devotion of the blacks by their own splendid fighting, was not lost.”²⁶ More recent accounts still have a focus on Shaw but are more inclusive of the bravery of all members. “Though the Union could not capture the fort, the 54th became famous for the courage and sacrifice of its members.”²⁷ Society has a habit of honoring black accomplishments through the white men that helped, like Robert Shaw, thus not giving credit to the African Americans who did just as much, if not more. However, in recent years, an effort has been made to give more credit to African Americans.

Just as black soldiers of the Civil War are gaining traction in modern textbooks, so too has the life of post-war freedpeople. The description of newly freed slaves has undergone a massive evolution. After not being mentioned for almost half a century after the end of the war, early descriptions of newly freed slaves were extremely degrading. In 1911, David Muzzey wrote that “the negroes, who did not ask for political rights, were suddenly thrust into positions of high political office which they had no idea how to fill.”²⁸ This statement is not only incredibly demeaning but also highly inaccurate. Muzzey wrote this a generation

²⁶ Bryant and Gay, *A Popular History of the United States*, 544.

²⁷ Appleby et al, *Discovering Our Past: A History of the United States*, 477.

²⁸ Muzzey, *An American History*, 468.

after Reconstruction when the effects of the Civil War were still being felt. African Americans became easy scapegoats upon which to place the blame of post-reconstruction failures. However, these undignified descriptions of blacks after the war continue well into the 1930s, where blacks are described as being “like bewildered children.”²⁹ Descriptions of blacks being ignorant and child-like tie in with how the Black Codes were portrayed. During the battle for civil rights in the 1960s, the Black Codes were said to be designed to discourage vagrancy, minimize race tensions, and continue the treatment of blacks as inferior to whites.³⁰ In 1991, the Black Codes were recognized as denying basic rights; however, it was not until 2014 that Black Codes were recognized as placing freed African Americans in a position little better than slavery. Previously, textbooks stated how some individuals feared the Black Codes would restore slavery in all but name, but it was not until 2014 that that fear was recognized as actually happening. Over time, textbooks began to more accurately represent life for newly freed slaves in the aftermath of the war.

White supremacy is a continuous theme throughout the Civil War and continues to affect today’s society. However, very few textbooks are willing to specifically name this issue. There are a few exceptions, notably *American: Its People and Values* (1975) and *The Americans*:

²⁹ Rugg, *A History of American Government and Culture*, 366.

³⁰ John M. Blum, Bruce Catton, Edmund S. Morgan, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., and Kenneth M. Stamp, *The National Experience: A History of the United States to 1877*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968), 377.

A History (1991). Textbooks such as *An American History* (1911) and *Discovering Our Past: A History of the United States* (2014) come close to identifying white supremacy but shy away from directly saying its name. As time passed, textbooks became more inclusive of minority groups and began to discuss the reality of slavery; however, racism is an issue that still needs to be addressed. Students need to be educated on the role that race and white supremacy played in the worst war ever fought in the United States.

Over the years, textbooks have taken the liberty of promoting a specific agenda when it comes to the Civil War. Some groups, such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy, have purposefully shared the Southern viewpoint of states' rights and pro-slavery, while more recent textbooks have been willing to include the actual impact slavery had on people as well as society in general. Common characters like President Lincoln are consistently viewed in high regard throughout time, but the contributions of women and slaves have evolved to include a more realistic nature of events. Textbooks have been taking great leaps to become better. However, there is still much room for improvement. The UDC hoped to share an "authentic" Southern history, but hopefully a change in the way students are educated about moments such as the Civil War will cause them to see what is truly authentic and be the propellant for change.

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