

The Atlantic

EDUCATION

Who Should Decide How Students Learn About America's Past?

Some politicians want to get rid of the AP U.S.-history curriculum because it paints a cynical picture of the country's backstory.



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FEB 24, 2015

My 5-year-old son won't learn the same history in high school that I did when I was a teenager. Certain events that I was tested on will probably be entirely omitted from his history curriculum. New details, observations, and commentary—sometimes subtle, often not—will be added to his textbooks with the benefit of more time, scholarship, and perspective. To borrow the words of *History in the Making* author Kyle Ward, social movements that

were once relegated to a brief paragraph or two, like that of LGBT rights, may "explode into pages of new information."

History is written by the winners, the saying goes. Credited to a "cynic," the axiom first appeared in *The Boston Herald* in 1929, according to Fred Shapiro, author of the *Yale Book of Quotations*. Indeed, it's disheartening to think that champions get to write the official story—especially when that story involves a national biography, in which patriotism can collide with flawed historical realities. In a 2002 article for the *Smithsonian* magazine, the American historian [Stephen Ambrose once asked](#), "To what degree do the attitudes of Washington and Jefferson toward slavery diminish their achievements?" It's a question I don't remember addressing in high school. Much of the research about the founding fathers and slavery, including Ambrose's article, had yet to be published. The scientific journal didn't [report](#) on the DNA results linking Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings until four years after I graduated.

Who decides which events become part of the national narrative as more information comes to light?

Conflicts about how to teach children American history began almost as early as the subject itself. This school year, the fury is over the new U.S. History Advanced Placement course—in particular, whether its perspective is overly cynical about the country's past. The controversy raises significant questions about the role of revisionism in education: How should students learn about oppression and exploitation alongside the great achievements of their country? And who decides which events become part of the national narrative as more information comes to light?

Nowhere is the tension between revision and respect for historical figures and events more apparent than it is in classroom curricula. School boards and state legislatures have great influence over what and how children are taught—as do historians. However, the [media](#) and [lawmakers](#) often reduce revisionism to two poles: a liberal left that pursues an overly "negative" reinterpretation of U.S. history versus a conservative right that just wants students to memorize a list of names and facts—and "[smudge out the ugly parts.](#)"

But biases have come from across the political spectrum and have worked their way into history instruction for every generation, Ward shows. In his research, Ward has compared U.S. textbooks from different eras and has found both biases of exclusion—whether an event is discussed in the first place—and biases of description, or how the event is portrayed to students. Coverage of the feminist movement exemplifies how modern textbooks have evolved. In contrast to earlier decades, the story of women's rights had by the 1990s expanded "exponentially," with debates around stereotyped occupations and gender roles being featured on television. At the same time, history, as Ambrose wrote, abounds with ironies and contradictions. The challenge is to teach high-school students the critical-thinking skills that allow them to recognize the biases in their textbooks and to appreciate the troubling paradoxes of America's past.

Oklahoma is the latest battleground over history instruction and the role schools play in teaching students about conflict and oppression. A group of state lawmakers objected to the revised 125-page [Advanced Placement U.S.-history guidelines](#), which were implemented this past school year and developed by the College Board, a nonprofit that oversees the national AP program. So, last week, Republican state Rep. [Dan Fisher](#) introduced a [bill](#) directing the Board of Education to adopt a new U.S. history program starting this upcoming fall. Though Fisher has since backed off from the

proposal, his bill would have required Oklahoma schools to teach certain "documents"—including the Ten Commandments and the Magna Carta—in lieu of the current AP materials.

Part of this controversy centers on the role of Christianity in the founding of the U.S. And though the Magna Carta granted rights to a group of 13th-century English barons and is [widely acknowledged](#) to have inspired American revolutionaries centuries later, it's debatable whether teaching it to students makes sense for an AP U.S. history course. In fact, I read it for my 10th-grade British-history class. Meanwhile, it's less clear how the Ten Commandments would fit into a strictly American history curriculum. Advocates seem to [justify their inclusion](#) in the learning materials with personal beliefs rather than specific instructional benefits. It's worth noting that, as *Tulsa World* has reported, Fisher is a [member of "the Black Robe Regiment,"](#) an organization that pushes for Christian-based governance; he's given public presentations about the role of ministers in the country's birth while wearing an 18th-century pastor's robe. But Fisher's interpretation of U.S. history explains why the issue is so controversial; even among historians there is [plenty of discussion](#) about how to characterize the religious beliefs and practices of the country's founding fathers.

Fisher's proposed legislation would have cut funding for any AP U.S.-history program in Oklahoma until the new conditions were met. In an interview with CNN, Fisher reasoned that there is a "pretty strong leaning" in the latest AP guidelines toward everything that is "wrong in America." And according to *Tulsa World*, he criticized the new curriculum because it doesn't teach "American exceptionalism." The measure passed a committee hearing last Monday with an 11-4 bipartisan vote, but by Wednesday—after receiving a barrage of national scrutiny—Fisher made a hasty retreat, reportedly clarifying that [he supports the AP program and intends to "fix the bill."](#)

The sudden détente suggests his bill was little more than partisan politics. The controversy, however, is far from resolved. Oklahoma is one of several states somehow opposing the College Board's new outline.

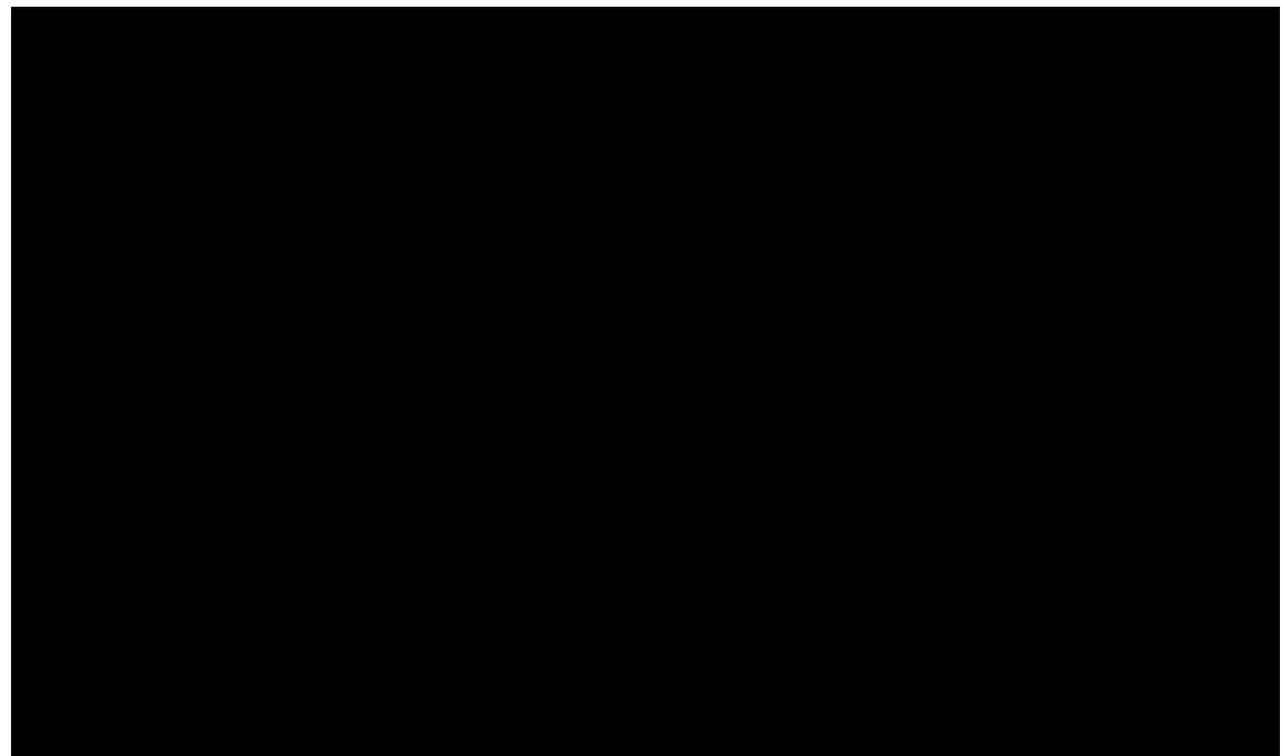
"History's job isn't to make people feel happy about themselves or their culture. That's why we have religion, churches, and community organizations."

Fisher joins a slew of politicians and education policymakers who oppose the current AP U.S.-history guidelines. The Republican National Committee [condemned the new framework](#) back in August, criticizing the guidelines for emphasizing negative aspects of U.S. history and minimizing, if not ignoring, the positive. The committee argued, for example, that the College Board presents an inaccurate view of the motivations of 17th- to 19th-century settlers and American involvement in World War II. And last fall, the school board in Jefferson County, Colorado, announced plans for a [curriculum-review committee](#) aimed at ensuring AP U.S.-history materials "promote citizenship, patriotism, essentials and benefits of the free enterprise system, respect for authority and respect for individual rights." [Students protested](#) the initiative, walking out of class and forcing four school shutdowns in the Denver area. Similar events also [unfolded in Texas](#) around the same time. And lawmakers in [Georgia](#), [North Carolina](#), and [South Carolina](#) have also threatened to cut funding for the AP program or otherwise reject the new course materials. For its part, the College Board responded to the criticism in an [open letter](#), apologizing for some of the new framework's omissions and any confusion it caused; it also clarified that teachers should teach about the country's founding documents, the Holocaust, and the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement.

How should Americans remember the Civil War? How should they

remember the founding fathers? These are perennial issues that will continue to inspire debate, according to [Thomas Donnelly](#), counsel for the Constitutional Accountability Center. "We frequently look at history textbooks as the *impromada* of the American truth," said Donnelly, who in 2009 published an [article in the *Yale Law Journal*](#) analyzing the ways in which widely used high-school textbooks teach students about constitutional debates. Donnelly concluded that the texts reinforce a culture of extreme deference to the Supreme Court, limiting mentions of popular resistance and institutional checks like judicial impeachment and "court-packing."

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According to the College Board, more than a third of the country's public high-school students [took at least one AP exam](#) in 2013, a 14 percent increase from a decade prior. AP programs by definition aren't designed to replicate high-school classes; on the contrary, the courses are supposed to promote college-level thinking and reward students who pass the exams with college credit. AP U.S. history, in particular, is designed to teach students [to think like historians](#) and scrutinize the past through critical

reflection—skills integral to the first year of a college education, explained James Grossman, executive director of the American Historical Association.

It's undeniable that a proper study of the country's history is key to American citizenship. But therein lies the problem: [What does "proper" mean?](#) An AP U.S. history class, Grossman said, should force students to scrutinize the people they're studying and the context in which certain events happened. What social, political, and economic structures were in place during that time? After all, placing some of the founding fathers—such as Jefferson—in their cultural context helps explain both their brilliance and the troubling parts of their personal choices much better than decontextualizing them would. And to disregard the imperfections of American history simply isn't feasible: It's hard to imagine a student unaware of segregation or racism by the time he or she enters an AP U.S.-history classroom—especially in light of recent high-profile news events [such as Ferguson](#), which spotlight the country's residual racial tensions. The assumption that American teenagers haven't already heard some of the country's historical complexities seems naïve. "Our past," Grossman wrote in a recent [New York Times op-ed](#), "is now more diverse than we once thought, whether we like it or not."

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Americans want to be descendants of a noble people, explained [David Blight](#), a U.S.-history professor and the director of Yale's Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition. Americans want to be the people who emancipated the slaves—not the people who enslaved them. "But history's job isn't to make people feel happy about themselves or

their culture," he said. "That's why we have religion, churches, and community organizations. That's why we have rabbis and psychologists, not historians." Yes, teaching history is about telling a dramatic story—but it's also about explaining and interpreting past events analytically. It's impossible to teach about 9/11, Blight noted, without recounting the sequence of events that preceded that morning—the recurring acts of terrorism, the previous attack on the World Trade Center, and so on— as well as the prolonged aftermath in the Middle East, "especially the disastrous Iraq War." "How much do you talk about the perpetrators?" asked Blight, who specializes in public history and serves on several boards, including an advisory group for the 9/11 memorial and museum. "It's a question we grappled with in advising the curators who built the museum."

The winners may write history, but it's up to others to teach it. Ultimately, educators—not academic researchers, think tanks, or politicians—are the ones who decide daily how to explore topics such as race and slavery in their high-school classrooms. "I always have a discussion with the students sometime in the first month about the apparent and the not-so-apparent biases in the textbook," said Thom Peters, an American-history teacher at Hopkins School in New Haven, Connecticut—the man who taught me U.S. history when I was in the 11th grade. But there is a small danger, he explained, that students will begin to dismiss everything as "biased" and unreliable. Indeed, they may reject reading the text altogether, relying upon the teacher to give the "correct view"—a simpler to way to learn high-school history, he said, but certainly not the best.

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