

# Contents

<b>Series Foreword</b> by James A. Banks	ix
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	xv
<b>Introduction: History as Weapon</b>	1
A Lesson from Mississippi	2
A Lesson from Vermont	7
Why History Is Important to Students	10
Why History Is Important to Society	15
<b>1. The Tyranny of Coverage</b>	<b>19</b>
Forests, Trees, and Twigs	19
Winnowing Trees	21
Deep Thinking	23
Relevance to the Present	25
Skills	28
Getting the Principal on Board	30
Coping with Reasons to Teach "As Usual"	32
You Are Not Alone	36
Bringing Students Along	38

<b>2. Expecting Excellence</b>	<b>42</b>
Racial and Socioeconomic Characteristics Affect Teacher Expectations	42
Research on Teacher Expectations	47
“Standardized” Tests Affect Teacher Expectations	49
Statistical Processes Cause Cultural Bias in “Standardized” Tests	51
Social Class Affects “Standardized” Test Scores	54
Internalizing Expectations	56
Teachers and “Standardized” Tests	58
Teachers Can Create Their Own Expectations	60
<b>3. Historiography</b>	<b>68</b>
A Tale of Two Eras	68
The Civil Rights Movement, Cognitive Dissonance, and Historiography	71
Studying Bad History	76
Other Ways to Teach Historiography	80
<b>4. Doing History</b>	<b>83</b>
Doing History to Critique History	83
Writing a Paper	87
<b>5. How and When Did People Get Here?</b>	<b>103</b>
A Crash Course on Archeological Issues	105
Presentism	109
Today’s Religions and Yesterday’s History	110
Conclusions About Presentism	112
Chronological Ethnocentrism	113
Primitive to Civilized	114
Costs of Chronological Ethnocentrism	116

<b>6. Why Did Europe Win?</b>	<b>123</b>
The Important Questions	123
Looking Around the World	124
Explaining Civilization	127
Making the Earth Round	128
Why Did Columbus Win?	131
The Columbian Exchange	133
Ideological Results of Europe's Victory	136
Cultural Diffusion and Syncretism Continue	137
<b>7. The \$24 Myth</b>	<b>141</b>
Deconstructing the \$24 Myth	141
A More Accurate Story	145
Functions of the Fable	147
Overt Racism?	150
Additional Considerations	153
<b>8. Teaching Slavery</b>	<b>155</b>
Relevance to the Present	155
Hold a Meta-Conversation	159
Slavery and Racism	162
Four Key Problems of Slave Life	165
Additional Problems in Teaching the History of Slavery	170
<b>9. Why Did the South Secede?</b>	<b>175</b>
Teachers Vote	175
Teaching Against the Myth	179
Examining Textbooks	183
Genesis of the Problem	186

<b>10. The Nadir</b>	<b>189</b>
Contemporary Relevance	189
Onset of the Nadir	192
Historical Background	194
Underlying Causes of the Nadir of Race Relations	195
Students Can Reveal the Nadir Themselves	197
During the Nadir, Whites Became White	200
End of the Nadir	204
Implications for Today	206
<b>Afterword: Still More Ways to Teach History</b>	<b>209</b>
<b>Notes</b>	<b>213</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>239</b>
<b>About the Author</b>	<b>246</b>



## History as Weapon

**H**ISTORY AND SOCIAL STUDIES,<sup>1</sup> as usually taught before college, can hinder rather than help build students' understanding of how the world works. Indeed, my bestseller, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, opens with the claim that American history as taught in grades 4 through 12 is in crisis and typically makes us stupider.

Of course, it's easy to make such a bold statement. At some point since 1980 just about *every* field in education has been declared "in crisis."<sup>2</sup> The reception of *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, however, implies that many readers, including many teachers of American history in grades 4 through 12, agree with my assessment. In 2007, *Lies* passed a million copies sold and was selling at a higher rate than ever, even though it had been on the market, unchanged, for twelve years.<sup>3</sup> Teachers have been special fans, leading to overflow workshops at venues like the National Council for the Social Studies and the National Association for Multicultural Education. So maybe I'm right. Maybe history/social studies *is* in crisis.

Certainly we can do better.

Since *Lies My Teacher Told Me* came out in 1995, I have traveled the country, giving workshops for school districts and teacher groups on how to teach history and social studies better. Some of the ideas I present in these workshops came from other K–12 teachers I have met over the years. Others derive from my own teaching experience and from my years of thinking about what Americans get wrong about the past. This book collects the best shticks from those workshops for the benefit of teachers and future teachers I will never meet.

Teachers who already teach beyond and occasionally against their U.S. history textbooks will find that this book will help them explain their approach to other teachers who still teach traditionally. For those who have not yet dared to break away from the security of just teaching the textbook, this book will provide specific ways to do so—ways that have worked for other teachers. It may also help them explain their new approach to principals and more traditional parents.

Before plunging into *how* to teach history better, however, we need to spend a few pages considering *why*. This introduction begins with a cautionary tale from Mississippi, showing how history was used there as a weapon to mislead students and keep them ignorant about the American past. Moving north to Vermont, I show that ignorance about the past is hardly limited to Mississippi. Mississippi merely exemplified the problem in exaggerated form, as Mississippi embodied many national problems in exaggerated form in the late 1960s and '70s. The introduction goes on to dissect the usual reasons that teachers and textbooks give to persuade students that history is worth knowing. I suggest other more important reasons why history is important, both to the individual and society. The introduction then closes with a brief overview of the book.

### A LESSON FROM MISSISSIPPI

I first realized how history distorts our understanding of society in the middle of my first year of full-time teaching, at Tougaloo College in Mississippi. I had started teaching at Tougaloo, a predominantly black institution, in the fall of 1968, after finishing my doctorate in sociology at Harvard University. That first year, in addition to my sociology courses, I was assigned to teach a section of the Freshman Social Science Seminar. The history department had designed this seminar to replace the old "Western Civ" course—History of Western Civilization—then required by most colleges in America, including most black colleges. The FSSS introduced students to sociology, anthropology, political science, economics, and so on, in the context of African American history—appropriate enough, 99% of our students being African Americans.

African American history uses the same chronology as American history, of course, so the second semester began right after the Civil War, with Reconstruction. I had a new group of students that first day of the spring semester in January 1969, and I didn't want to do all the talking on the first day of class. So I asked my seminar, "What was Reconstruction? What images come to your mind about that era?"

The result was one of those life-changing "Aha!" experiences—or, more accurately, an "Oh, no!" experience. Sixteen of my seventeen students told me, "Reconstruction was that time, right after the Civil War, when African Americans took over the governing of the Southern states, including Mississippi, but they were too soon out of slavery, so they messed up, and reigned corruptly, and whites had to take back control of the state governments."

I sat stunned. So many major misconceptions of facts glared from that statement that it was hard to know where to begin a rebuttal. African Americans never took over the Southern states. All Southern states had white governors and all but one had white legislative majorities throughout Reconstruction. Moreover, the Reconstruction governments did not “mess up.” Mississippi in particular enjoyed less corrupt government during Reconstruction than at any point later in the century. Across the South, governments during Reconstruction passed the best state constitutions the Southern states have ever had, including their current ones. They started public school systems for both races. Mississippi had never had a statewide system for whites before the Civil War, only scattered schools in the larger towns, and of course it had been a felony to teach blacks, even free blacks, to read and write during slavery times. The Reconstruction governments tried out various other ideas, some of which proved quite popular. Therefore, “whites” did not take back control of the state governments. Rather, *some* whites—Democrats, the party of overt white supremacy throughout the nineteenth century—ended this springtime of freedom before full democracy could blossom. Spearheaded by the Ku Klux Klan, they used terrorism and fraud to wrest control from the biracial Republican coalitions that had governed during Reconstruction.

How could my students believe such false history? I determined to find out. I visited high schools, sat in on history classes, and read the textbooks students were assigned. Tougaloo was a good college—perhaps the best in the state. My students had learned what they had been taught. Bear in mind that they had been attending all-black high schools with all-black teaching staffs—massive school desegregation would not take place in Mississippi until January 1970, a year later. In school after school, I saw black teachers teaching black students white-biased pseudo-history because they were just following the book—and the textbooks were written from a white supremacist viewpoint.

The yearlong Mississippi History course was the worst offender. It was required of all 5th- and 9th-graders, in public and private schools, owing to a state law passed after the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, intended to desegregate the public schools. This Mississippi statute was part of a package of obstructionist measures designed to thwart the Court and maintain “our Southern way of life,” which every Mississippian knew meant segregation and white supremacy. The one textbook approved for the 9th-grade course, *Mississippi: Yesterday and Today* by John K. Bettersworth, said exactly what my students had learned. Other than “messing up” during Reconstruction, this book

omitted African Americans whenever they did anything notable. Among its 60 images of people, for instance, just 2 included African Americans.<sup>4</sup>

I knew John Bettersworth. In my junior year in college, I attended Mississippi State University, where he taught history. He knew better. Indeed, when he reviewed several books on Reconstruction in the *New York Times Book Review*, he made clear that he knew that the interracial Republican coalition that governed Mississippi during Reconstruction had done a good job under difficult circumstances. But in his 9th-grade textbook, Bettersworth wrote what he imagined the Mississippi State Textbook Board wanted to read. He knew full well that historians did not (and still do not) review high school textbooks, so his professional reputation would not be sullied by his unprofessional conduct.<sup>5</sup>

Dr. Bettersworth could not have believed that his textbook was an innocent way to make a few thousand dollars without hurting anyone. At Mississippi State, he encountered the graduates of Mississippi high schools by the hundreds, and he knew how racist some of them could be—partly because they believed the BS (Bad Sociology) about African Americans in his textbook.

Perhaps as a passive form of resistance against their racist textbooks, many Mississippi teachers—white as well as black—spent hours of class time making students memorize the names of the state’s 82 counties, their county seats, and the date each was organized as a county. Or, perhaps more likely, they did this because it had been done to them. Regardless, these 250 twigs of information were useless and soon forgotten.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, students learned nothing about the past from this book that would help them deal with the wrenching changes Mississippi was going through in the 1960s and ’70s.

Black students were particularly disadvantaged. What must it do to them, I wondered that January afternoon, to believe that the one time their group stood center-stage in the American past, they “messed up”? It couldn’t be good for them. If it had happened, of course, that would be another matter. In that case, it would have to be faced: why did “we” screw up? What must we learn from it? But nothing of the sort had taken place. It was, again, Bad Sociology.

For more than a year, I tried to interest historians in Mississippi in writing a more accurate textbook of state history. Finally, despairing of getting anyone else to do so, I put together a group of students and faculty from Tougaloo and also from Millsaps College, the nearby white school, got a grant, and we wrote it. The result, *Mississippi: Conflict and Change*, won the Lillian Smith Award for best Southern nonfiction the year it came out. Nevertheless, the Mississippi State Textbook Board rejected it as unsuitable. In most subjects, the board selected three to five textbooks. In



Mississippi history, they chose just one. Only two were available, which might be characterized “ours” and “theirs.” By a two-to-five vote, the board rejected ours, accepting only theirs. Two blacks and five whites sat on the board.

Our book was not biased toward African Americans. Six of its eight authors were white, as were 80% of the historical characters who made it into our index. An index 20% nonwhite looks pretty black, however, to people who are used to textbooks wherein just 2% of the people referred to are nonwhite. Moreover, in contrast to the white supremacist fabrications offered in “their book,” our book showed how Mississippi’s social structure shaped the lives of its citizens. So, after exhausting our administrative remedies, we—coeditor Charles Sallis and I, accompanied by three school systems that wanted to use our book—eventually sued the textbook board in federal court. The case, *Loewen et al. v. Turnipseed et al.*, came to trial in 1980, Judge Orma Smith presiding. Smith was an 83-year-old white Mississippian who believed in the 1st amendment—students’ right to controversial information—and was bringing himself to believe in the 14th amendment—blacks’ right to equal treatment.<sup>7</sup>

For a week we presented experts from around the state and around the nation who testified that by any reasonable criteria, including those put forth by the state itself, our book was better than their book. Among other topics, they found *Conflict and Change* more accurate in its treatment of prehistory and archaeology, Native Americans, slavery, Reconstruction, Mississippi literature, the Civil Rights era, and the recent past.

Then came the state’s turn. The trial’s dramatic moment came when the Deputy Attorney General of Mississippi asked John Turnipseed, one of the board members who had rejected our book, why he had done so. Turnipseed asked the court to turn to page 178, on which was a photograph of a lynching. “Now you know, some 9th-graders are pretty big,” he noted, “especially black male 9th-graders. And we worried, or at least *I* worried, that teachers—especially white lady teachers—would be unable to control their classes with material like this in the book.”

As lynching photos go, ours was actually mild, if such an adjective can be applied to these horrific scenes. About two dozen white people posed for the camera behind the body of an African American man, silhouetted in a fire that was burning him. The victim’s features could not be discerned, and no grisly details—such as whites hacking off body parts as souvenirs—were shown or described. Nevertheless, our book was going to cause a race riot in the classroom.

We had pretested our book—along with Betterworth’s—in an overwhelmingly white classroom and an overwhelmingly black classroom. Both had preferred ours by huge margins. So we had material to counter



This is the lynching photo to which Turnipseed objected. A lynching is a public murder, done with considerable support from the community. Often, as here, the mob posed for the camera. They showed no fear of being identified because they knew no white jury would convict them.

this argument when our turn came for rebuttal. We never had to use it, however, because at that point Judge Smith took over the questioning.

“But that happened, didn’t it?” he asked. “Didn’t Mississippi have more lynchings than any other state?”

“Well, yes,” Turnipseed admitted. “But that all happened so long ago. Why dwell on it now?”

“Well, it *is* a *history* book!” the judge retorted. And we nudged each other, realizing we were going to win this case. Eventually, in a decision the American Library Association ranks as one of its “notable First Amendment court cases,” the judge ordered Mississippi to adopt our book for the standard six-year period and supply it to any school system, public or private, that requested it, like any other adopted book.<sup>8</sup>

Although we won the lawsuit, that experience proved to me that history can be a *weapon*, and it had been used against my students. This book helps teachers arm students with critical reading and thinking skills—historiography, for example—so they will not be defenseless. Indeed, they can even learn to do history themselves.

## A LESSON FROM VERMONT

After eight years, I moved to the University of Vermont. Again, I found myself teaching 1st-year undergraduates, this time in huge classes in Introductory Sociology. I enjoyed these freshman classes, not least because they opened a wonderful window on the world of high school. The view was mighty discouraging at times. My UVM students—as the University of Vermont is known—showed me that teaching and learning “BS history” in high school was and is a national problem. These students were also ignorant of even the basic facts of our past, as were my Mississippi students, despite the hours spent in most high schools memorizing them.

In 1989, their ignorance astounded me in a course I taught intended for advanced undergraduates in education, history, and sociology. On the first day of class I gave my students a quiz. It contained some comical items (some posted at my website, [uvm.edu/~jloewen/](http://uvm.edu/~jloewen/)), but also perfectly straightforward questions like this one: “The War in Vietnam was fought between \_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_.” To my astonishment, 22% of my students replied “North and South *Korea!*”

Now, please don’t infer that something special—and specially wrong—has eroded history education in Vermont. The University of Vermont is a national institution; only 40% of its students come from within the state. Moreover, repeated national studies show that high school students learn history exceptionally badly. In 2003, for instance, the National Assessment of Educational Progress granted “advanced” status in U.S. history to only 1% of high school seniors. College graduates did little better. In 2000, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni commissioned the Center for Survey Research at the University of Connecticut to administer a 34-item “high school level American history test” to 556 seniors at 55 top colleges and universities. “Nearly 80% . . . received a D or F,” according to a summary. More than a third didn’t know that the Constitution established the three-way division of power in the U.S. government; 99%, on the other hand, could identify “Beavis and Butt-Head” as adolescent television cartoon characters.<sup>9</sup> College courses failed to fill in the gaps in their knowledge, partly because many college students never take a history course, it having been so boring in high school.<sup>10</sup>

University of Vermont students were particularly bad, however, in learning and applying the basic concepts of sociology. Indeed, they were so bad at it that I coined a new term for the syndrome that they exhibited: soclexia. This learning disorder makes it very difficult for its victims to grasp the basic idea of sociology. It may be genetic; certainly it strikes certain racial and economic groups more than others. Children from white

(and Asian American) upper-class and upper-middle-class families are especially vulnerable.<sup>11</sup>

What is the basic idea of sociology? It is this: *Social structure pushes people around, influences their careers, and even affects how they think.* I was unprepared for the level of soclexia I experienced in Vermont. My Tougaloo students readily understood that social structure pushed people around. Not one of their parents was an architect, for example, because no school in the Deep South in their parents' generation both taught architecture and admitted African Americans. So my Tougaloo students knew how social structure might influence careers. Then, too, neighbors of theirs—white children—had been their friends when they were four and five years old, but by the time they were fourteen and fifteen a barrier had gone up between them. My black undergraduates could see that this racial bias was hardly innate; rather, it showed that social structure affects how people think. Hence they were open to the sociological perspective.

My UVM students, in contrast, were very different. To be sure, they could memorize. If I asked them on a quiz, "What is the basic idea of sociology?" they would reply, "Social structure pushes people around, influences their careers, even affects how they think." But when I asked them to apply that idea to their own lives or to the next topic we dealt with in introductory sociology, most were clueless.

To understand their soclexia, it helps to know that during the years I taught there (1975–1996), UVM usually ranked #1 as the most expensive state university in America, both in-state and out of state. Hence, it drew extraordinarily rich students. In 1996, the last year I collected data (and no one else ever did), the median family income for out-of-state students at the University of Vermont (and most students came from out of state) was \$123,500 (about \$160,000 in 2008 dollars). In that year, the national median family income was \$42,300 (about \$55,000 in 2008 dollars). Only 5.5% of all families made \$123,500 or more. Yet half of all out-of-state families at the University of Vermont came from this elite income group. The mean family income of UVM students was higher still.<sup>12</sup>

Despite being so rich, my students believed that they—not their parents' social positions—were responsible for their own success—which consisted mostly of their having been admitted to the University of Vermont. *They* pushed social structure around, most felt, and if some people were poor, that was their own damn fault—they simply hadn't pushed social structure around *enough*. Most of my students had no understanding that for children of their social class background, gaining admission to college was not an outstanding personal accomplishment but merely meeting expectations—going along with the flow.

I tried to show them that their understanding of the social world was itself a product of social structure—indeed, was entirely predictable from their membership in the upper-middle and lower-upper classes. In short, their view that social structure made no difference was the ideology “appropriate” to their position in social structure. It is precisely these classes that hold the idea that class makes no difference.

Their class position was not the sole cause of their soclexia. Their high school education contributed as well. Not their high school coursework in sociology—few high schools offer sociology, even as an elective. But there is one course that everyone takes and that purports to be about our society—American history. Unfortunately, American history as presented in high school textbooks (and by teachers who rely on them) not only leaves out social class entirely, it also avoids any analysis of what causes what in our society, past or present. Thus, American history is a key breeding ground of soclexia.

Indeed, in my experience, the more history a student has taken in high school, the *less* able s/he is to think sociologically. Some college history professors agree. A friend who taught the U.S. history survey at Vermont nicknamed its two semesters “Iconoclasm I and II,” because he had to break the icons—the false images of the past that students carried with them from their high school history courses—to make room for more accurate information. He actually preferred students from other countries, who knew no American history at all or, as is often the case, knew it more accurately and more analytically than do American high school graduates.

In no other discipline do college professors prefer students with *less* preparation! On the contrary, the math department is delighted when high school graduates have taken a fifth year of math. After giving them a test to ensure that they have retained what they learned, the department places such students in advanced instead of introductory calculus. Shakespeare professors are similarly happy to teach students who have already read *Lear* in high school, along with the more usual *Romeo and Juliet*. While they may not place such a person in “Advanced Shakespeare” and may teach *Lear* differently, nevertheless, the student has read the play and thought about it and will be a pleasure to teach.

Not so in history.

I responded to my students’ ignorance of American history just as I had in Mississippi: I visited nearby high schools to watch teachers in American history classrooms and studied the textbooks they used. I found that most of them relied far too much on these textbooks. This was not a local Vermont problem. Research shows that students spend more class time with their textbooks in history—reading the books in class, discussing them,

answering the 60 questions at the end of each chapter—than in any other subject in the curriculum. This finding staggered me. I had thought the winner (or rather, loser) would be something very different—perhaps geometry. After all, students can hardly interview their parents about geometry. They can hardly use the web, or the library, the census, and so on, to learn about geometry. But all these resources, and many more besides, are perfectly relevant to the study of history.

When I studied the textbooks that so dominated these courses, my concern deepened. Although American history is full of gripping and important stories, these books were dull. Their basic storyline was: the United States started out great and has been getting better ever since! Only without the exclamation point. They failed to let voices from the past speak; instead, they told everything themselves, in a boring monotone.

Few of the teachers I watched supplemented the textbooks, despite their soporific impact. In many cases, I came to learn, teachers didn't go beyond the book because they didn't know how. History has more teachers teaching out of field than any other subject. According to a national survey, 13% never took a single college history course; only 40% had majored in history or a history-relevant discipline like American Studies, sociology, or political science.<sup>13</sup> Such a travesty cannot be imagined in math, science, or English. Such woefully underprepared teachers use textbooks as crutches. I do not mean to slur all history teachers, not at all. Many teach history because they love it and think it is important. Unfortunately, some teachers who would love to go beyond the textbook with their students feel they cannot, because their students have to take "standardized" multiple-choice tests at the end of the year based on the factoids with which textbooks abound.

As a result of this textbook-centric approach, many high school students come to hate history. In survey after national survey, when they list their favorite subject, history always comes in last. Students consider it "irrelevant," "borr-r-ring." When they can, they avoid it. Not every class, not every district, of course. Hopefully, yours is the exception. But across the nation, history/social studies does not fare well. As it is usually taught, I believe students are right to dislike it.

Students from out-groups hate history with a special passion and do especially poorly in it. But even affluent young white males are bored by most American history courses in high school.

## **WHY HISTORY IS IMPORTANT TO STUDENTS**

Yet history is crucial. It should be taught in high school, partly because five-sixths of all Americans never take a course in American history after

they leave high school. What our citizens learn there forms the core of what they know of our past.

The first thing that students do *not* learn about American history is why studying it is important. Teachers must go beyond the old saw by the philosopher George Santayana, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”<sup>14</sup> This cliché won’t do. Indeed, it is a mystification. The phrase itself is wrong, implying that knowing about the past somehow automatically makes us smarter. Consider the equal and opposite saying by the philosopher Georg Hegel, “People and governments have never learned anything from history.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Santayana’s saying sweeps conflict under the rug. My Tougaloo students—and their white counterparts at Ole Miss—were not repeating Mississippi’s history of white supremacy because they could not remember the past. They were repeating it because they *did* remember the past—as it had been misrepresented to them in school. To put this another way, who wrote the history students are asked to recall, and who did not—and for what purpose—can make a world of difference to how it influences the present.

There are much better reasons for learning about history. Once we come to some agreement—not necessarily total—as to why the field is important, that agreement can inform how we should go about teaching it. I submit that the course is gravely important, because its purpose is to help students prepare to do their job *as Americans*. Students may grow up to be school bus drivers, computer programmers, or CEOs, but what is their job as Americans? Surely it is to bring into being the America of the future.

What does that task entail? Some vision of a good society is required: a society that allows and encourages its members to be all they can be.<sup>16</sup> A society enough in harmony with the planet that it can maintain itself over the long run. A society enough at peace with other countries that it does not live in fear of attack. Students might go beyond these basics, perhaps to some vision of the “beloved community.” Their job as Americans—and ours—then consists of figuring out what policies help us move toward that community. What should the United States do about global warming? What should our policy be toward gay marriage? Regarding the next issue—the debate that is sure to engulf us next year, whatever it may be—what position should we take, and what concrete steps to implement it?

Every issue, every suggestion, every element of the America of the future entails an assertion of causation. “We must do X to achieve goal Y.” Of course history is full of causation—and arguments about causation.

Even when an event seems to be new, the causes of the acts and feelings are deeply embedded in the past. Thus, to understand an event—an election, an act of terror, a policy decision about the environment, whatever—we must start in the past.

Unfortunately, high school textbooks in American history present the past as one damn thing after another. Few of the facts are memorable, because they are not shown as related. Therefore, most high school graduates have no inkling of causation in history. Consequently, they cannot use the past to illuminate the present—cannot think coherently about social life.

Why are textbooks compendiums of fact rather than arguments about causation? I don't think it's due to an upper-class conspiracy to keep us stupid, although it might be. One problem is precisely that there *are* arguments about causation. There are far fewer arguments about facts. So let's just stick with the facts. Another problem is that causation continues to the present, and arguments about the present are by definition controversial. Moreover, as the second edition of *Lies My Teacher Told Me* shows, high school history textbooks often aren't really written by the people whose names are on their title pages, especially after their first editions. The gnomes in the bowels of the publishing companies who write them aren't hired to interpret the past or sort out causation in the past and don't have the credentials for that task.

For all these reasons, textbooks downplay what causes what. Nevertheless, learning what causes what is crucial for our job as Americans.

So is critical thinking. Again, history textbooks—and courses centered on “learning” history textbooks—downplay critical thinking. Almost never does a textbook suggest more than one possible answer and invite students to assess evidence for each. Instead, they tell the right answers, over and over, in their sleep-inducing godlike monotone. We shall see (Chapter 5) that sometimes no one knows the right answer, yet history textbooks present one anyway!

A crucial ingredient of critical thinking is historiography. Earlier, talking about Mississippi, we noted that who wrote history, who did not, and for what purpose can make all the difference. That assertion comes from historiography—the study of the writing of history—and every high school graduate should know both the term and how to “do” it. (See Chapter 3.)

Perhaps the most basic reason why students need to take history/social studies is this: history is power. That I saw firsthand in Mississippi. History can be a weapon. Students who do *not* know their own history or how to think critically about historical assertions will be ignorant and helpless before someone who does claim to know it. Students need to be able to fight back. This line of thought is a strong motivator, especially for “have-not” students,<sup>17</sup> but all students enjoy “wielding” history.

There are still other reasons to learn history. The past supplies models for our behavior, for example. From the sagas of Lewis and Clark, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Helen Keller, Rachel Carson, and a thousand others, stu-



dents can draw inspiration, courage, and sometimes still-relevant causes. We're not talking hero worship here, however, and all of the individuals named above have their imperfections. Present them whole. Instead of suggesting heroes as models, suggest heroic actions. Typically people perform heroically at a key moment, not so heroically at other moments. Students need to do accurate history, coupled with historiography, to sort out in which ways their role models are worth following. Recognizing both the good and not so good element within historical individuals can also make it easier to accept that societies also contain the good and not so good.<sup>18</sup>

History can (and should) also make us less ethnocentric. Ethnocentrism is the belief that one's own culture is the best and that other societies and cultures should be ranked highly only to the degree that they resemble ours. Every successful society manifests ethnocentrism. Swedes, for example, think their nation is the best, and with reason: Sweden has a slightly higher standard of living than the United States, and on at least one survey of happiness Swedes scored happier than the American average. But Swedes can never convince themselves that theirs is the dominant culture, dominant military, or dominant economy. Americans can—and without even being ethnocentric. After all, our GNP is the largest, Americans spend more on our military than all other nations combined, and for years athletes in countries around the world have high-fived each other after a really good dive, or dunk, or bobsled run. They didn't learn that from their home culture, or from Sweden, but from us, the dominant culture on the planet.<sup>19</sup> It is but a small step to conclude that ours is the *best* country on the planet. Hence, the United States leads the world in ethnocentrism.

Unfortunately, ethnocentrism is, among other things, a form of ignorance. An ethnocentric person finds it hard to learn from another culture, already knowing it to be inferior. Ethnocentrism also has a Siamese twin, arrogance; the combination has repeatedly hampered U.S. foreign policy.

History *can* make us less ethnocentric, but as usually taught in middle and high school, it has the opposite effect. That's because our textbooks are shot through with the ideology called "American exceptionalism." In 2007, Wikipedia offered a fine definition:

the perception that the United States differs qualitatively from other developed nations, because of its unique origins, national credo, historical evolution, or distinctive political and religious institutions.<sup>20</sup>

Wikipedia went on to note that superiority, not just difference, is almost always implied, although not necessarily.

Of course, every national story is unique. Consider Portugal: no other nation “discovered” half the globe, as Portugal’s tourism board puts it. Or Namibia: no other nation in the twentieth century had three-fourths of its largest ethnic group (the Hereros) wiped out by a foreign power (Germany). But by American exceptionalism, authors of U.S. history textbooks mean not just unique, but uniquely wonderful. Consider the first paragraph of *A History of the United States* by Daniel Boorstin and Brooks Mather Kelley:

American history is the story of a magic transformation. How did people from everywhere join the American family? How did men and women from a tired Old World, where people thought they knew what to expect, become wide-eyed explorers of a New World?<sup>21</sup>

Surely that passage is meant to impart that the United States is truly special—and in a positive way. Presumably Boorstin and Kelley want students to be wide-eyed themselves as they learn more about the “magic transformation” that is American history.

I suggest that teachers want students to be clear-eyed, not wide-eyed, as they learn American history. American exceptionalism promotes ethnocentrism. Still worse, it fosters bad history. To get across the claim that Americans have always been exceptionally good, authors leave out the bad parts. Woodrow Wilson involved us in a secret war against the U.S.S.R., for example. Let’s leave that out. Americans committed war crimes as a matter of policy in our war against the Philippines. Let’s suppress that. Ultimately, writing a past sanitized of wrongdoing means developing a book or a course that is both unbelievable and boring.

Our national past is not so bad that teachers must protect students from it. “We do not need a bodyguard of lies,” points out historian Paul Gagnon. “We can afford to present ourselves in the totality of our acts.”<sup>22</sup> Textbook authors seem not to share Gagnon’s confidence. But sugarcoating the past does not work anyway. It does not convince students that the U.S. has done no wrong; it only persuades them that American history is not a course worth taking seriously.

Thus far we have noted four reasons why history is an important course.

- History helps students be better citizens by enabling them to understand what causes what in society.
- History helps students become critical thinkers. Doing historiography (and learning that word) is part of that process.

- History helps students muster countervailing power against those who would persuade them of false ideologies. This is the “history as weapon” point.
- History helps students become less ethnocentric.

All four relate to history’s effects upon students, which make sense, since this is a book for teachers. But history—what we say about the past—also has effects upon our society as a whole.

### WHY HISTORY IS IMPORTANT TO SOCIETY

There is a reciprocal relationship between justice in the present and honesty about the past. When the United States has achieved justice in the present regarding some past act, then Americans can face it and talk about it more openly, because we have made it right. It has become a success story. Conversely, when we find a topic that our textbooks hide or distort, probably that signifies a continuing injustice in the present. Telling the truth about the past can help us make it right from here on.

This insight hit me between the eyes as I compared American history textbooks of the 1960s and 1990s in their handling of the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. In 1961, Thomas Bailey’s *The American Pageant*, for example, made no mention of the internment. Five years later, it got a paragraph, telling that “this brutal precaution turned out to be unnecessary,” for their loyalty “proved to be admirable.” The paragraph ends, “Partial financial adjustment after the war did something to recompense these uprooted citizens. . . .”

In 1988, Congress passed the Civil Liberties Act, apologizing for the “grave injustice” and paying \$20,000 to each survivor of the camps. This amount hardly sufficed to recompense more than three years of life and labor lost behind barbed wire, as well as the loss of homes and businesses, but it was more than a token. Around that time, textbooks expanded their coverage of the incident. By 2006, *Pageant* had more than doubled its paragraph, added an ironic photograph of two Japanese Americans in Boy Scout uniforms posting a notice that read “To Aliens of Enemy Nationalities,” and included a boxed quote from a young Japanese American woman that told her angry reaction to the order. It also devoted the next two pages to the Japanese as “Makers of America,” providing a summary of the group’s entire history in the United States, including a photograph of deportees getting into a truck and another of Manzanar Camp, with lengthy captions. The last sentence in the main text treats our 1988 apology and payment of \$20,000.<sup>23</sup>

Because textbooks began to increase their treatment of the incarceration before 1988, historian Mark Selden suggests they may have helped to cause the 1988 apology and reparations payment. I suspect the textbooks merely reflected the change in the spirit of the times. But either way, there seems to have been an interrelationship between truth about the incarceration and justice toward its victims.

Evidence shows that our society is ready to look at many past atrocities without flinching. In 2000, for example, the exhibit of lynching photos, *Without Sanctuary*, broke all attendance records at the New York Historical Society.<sup>24</sup> To be sure, lynchings are over. Americans don't do that anymore.<sup>25</sup> So the lack of lynchings has become a success story and the topic is thus easier to face. Nevertheless, many visitors to the museum were surprised to learn that lynchings were not the work of a few hooded men late at night. The open daytime photos showing a white community proud to be photographed in the act startled them. Most Americans have not seen such images. Not one high school textbook on American history includes a lynching photo. Presented here is an example of the lynching photographs that are available but never included in U.S. history textbooks. Surely publishers' caution is mistaken. After all, in 2003 Duluth faced this event, dedicating a memorial to the victims after decades of silence.



On June 15, 1920, a mob took Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Isaac McGhie, three black circus workers, from the Duluth, Minnesota, jail and lynched them.

Images like the Duluth mob can help students understand that racism in the United States has not typically been the province of the few, but of the many; not just the South, but also the North. Today, too, the discrimination facing African Americans (and to a degree, other groups, such as Native Americans and Mexican Americans) does not come from a handful of extremist outcasts late at night. Leaving out lynchings, sundown towns,<sup>26</sup> and other acts of collective discrimination impoverishes students and hurts their ability to understand the present, not just the past.

History is important—even crucial. Helping students understand what happened in the past empowers them to use history as a weapon to argue for better policies in the present. Our society needs engaged citizens, including students. The rest of this book will suggest ways to teach this important topic importantly.

It begins with four general chapters about teaching history/social studies. First, teachers must free themselves from the straitjacket of the textbook—the message of Chapter 1. Then they need to address why the achievement gap between white students and black, Anglos and Native Americans, rich compared to poor, is larger in history than in any other discipline. Chapter 2 shows that teacher expectations play a role, which means, on the positive side, that changed expectations can narrow the gap. Historiography is the most important single gift that a history course can give to a student. Chapter 3 explains it and suggests ways to help students grasp and use the idea. Chapter 4 shows how to help students *do* history, not merely learn it.

The final six chapters treat six specific topics, arranged chronologically from prehistory through secession to the Nadir of race relations. Each has proven to be problematic. Teachers in my workshops have told me that they worry about these areas and have shown me that they do not teach them well. Yet these six topics have important implications for our time, so each should be taught. With added information and new ways to introduce them, these topics can become high points rather than pitfalls of the course.

I've found that learning new things about our American past is exciting, for me as well as for students and other teachers. So will you.

### FOCUSED BIBLIOGRAPHY

I know how busy most teachers are, so each chapter will list only sources that are crucial for teachers to read. The following five books (choose either book by Percoco) are key preparation for any social studies or U.S. history teacher.

Either James A. Percoco's *A Passion for the Past* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998) or *Divided We Stand* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001) supplies a daunting list of innovations for history classes, from visiting cemeteries to getting students talking about controversial historic photographs. It's daunting because Percoco lays out so *many* ideas; but if a teacher chooses just two or three and makes them work, his book will have done its job.

In *Beyond the Textbook*, David Kobrin (NYC: Heinemann, 1996) suggests only a handful of innovations, but he explores each in depth, showing pitfalls to avoid.

Note Bill Bigelow's how-to accounts of several innovative classroom exercises in Wayne Au, Bigelow, and Stan Karp, eds., *Rethinking Our Classrooms* (Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools, 2007).

*After the Fact*, by two college professors, James Davidson and Mark Lytle (NYC: McGraw-Hill, 1992), intended for college history majors, covers about twenty topics, providing examples of how treat a topic at some length.

Do read Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (NYC: Simon & Schuster, 2007).

## Why Did Europe Win?

IT IS NOT ETHNOCENTRISM—chronological or any other kind—to teach that European societies (and their extensions, like the United States and Australia) became powerful and effective. If one looks over the Earth in, say, 1892, every country except perhaps three was dominated by the West.<sup>1</sup> Surely the most significant development in world history during the last millennium is Europe’s dominance over the planet.

### THE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

Why did Europe win? This is perhaps the most important question a world history course might address. Yet it usually goes unanswered, because it goes unasked. In a U.S. history course, the related question is, Why did the United States become the dominant country on Earth? It, too, usually goes unasked.

Perhaps history teachers and textbook authors don’t ask these questions because they don’t see them as problems. They take the importance of the West for granted, and the rightness and growth of Christianity, and within that dominion, the supremacy of the United States. In particular, teachers may feel reluctant to discuss why Christianity spread so widely, because the answers they might give would be secular.<sup>2</sup> Giving secular answers to what some will view as a religious question may strike some parents as irreligious. Teachers know this and don’t want to get into an argument about religion.<sup>3</sup> Whatever the reason, since they were never asked these questions, teachers can think it odd—almost a violation of some unspoken norm—to bring them up at all.

Teachers must ask them, however. Otherwise, their courses are not competent. Not asking these questions makes the present dominance of the West seem foreordained and natural. That is a classic case of Whig history, as defined in the last chapter. Not asking these questions leaves a vacuum at the center of the story. Like nature, minds abhor a vacuum. Racism sneaks in to fill it. The unspoken answers that emerge in response

to these unasked questions are: Europe won “because whites are better.” Christianity is winning “because it is right.” The United States is dominant “because we’re the best.” If teachers ignore these questions, then these answers go unchallenged, even though wrong, with harmful consequences for society.<sup>4</sup>

Students can address these questions historically. Doing so becomes a way to decrease ethnocentrism, which, as pointed out in the introduction to this book, is higher in the U.S. than anywhere else.

### LOOKING AROUND THE WORLD

One way to get students to ask the question themselves is to invite them to participate in a mental experiment. Imagine they are visiting Earth from a distant planet in 2000 BC. Obviously, having developed space travel, they come from a society with advanced technology. Like space travelers of yore, they want to land and say, “Take me to your leaders.” Where should they land?

Looking around the world in 2000 BC, our visitors would probably choose Egypt. At that time, Egypt had agriculture, writing, a large population, and a unified government. Even more obvious were its immense public structures, including the pyramids. Mesopotamia—modern Iraq—also had agriculture, writing, and a fairly large population. A bit later, Hammurabi would have his famous system of laws chiseled in stone. In the Indus River Valley in Pakistan and western India, people had built cities, some laid out in rectangular grids. They had also developed writing, agriculture, and mathematics, complete with a zero. All three of these civilizations had mastered the art of making objects from bronze. All had trading networks stretching for hundreds and even thousands of miles. Nothing in Europe compared. As historian R. R. Palmer summarizes,

Europeans were by no means the pioneers of human civilization. Half of man’s recorded history had passed before anyone in Europe could read or write. The priests of Egypt began to keep written records between 4000 and 3000 BC, but more than 2000 years later the poems of Homer were still being circulated in the Greek city-states by word of mouth.<sup>5</sup>

Now imagine a landing in 1000 BC. Egypt was still paramount. India was in decline. Various kingdoms vied for power in Mesopotamia. Again, nothing in Europe compared.



If the space travelers returned in 1 BC, they would find the Roman Empire dominant over Egypt. The civilizations of Persia and Greece had already risen to impressive heights and then descended, though they were still important culturally. Clearly the spacecraft would want to touch down in Rome, the center of the Mediterranean, or perhaps in China, now unified under the Han dynasty.

Half a millennium later, around 500 AD, a new claimant had arisen, the Mayas. They mastered agriculture and probably aquaculture, lived in cities, and built pyramids larger in volume than those in Egypt, though not as high. The Eastern Roman Empire, its capital at the city now known as Istanbul, was the largest nation in Europe and western Asia. Another civilization had arisen in India, this time in the east, but was already in decline, about to be sacked by the Mongols.

By 1000 AD, the Holy Roman Empire, amounting mainly to modern-day Germany, eastern France, and northern Italy, might have received a visit from our space aliens, even though Voltaire famously derided it as “neither Holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire.” More likely, they would have landed in China, now divided into two competing kingdoms that got along without much conflict. Probably, however, our visitors would have chosen Mecca. As British historian Felipe Fernandez-Armesto put it, in 1000 AD,

A continuous band of territory under Muslim rule stretched from the Duero [a river in Spain] and the Atlantic, across North Africa and the western Mediterranean, to the Indus, the Jaxartes [Syr Darya River, in Kazakhstan], and the Arabian Sea.<sup>6</sup>

Not only was this “the biggest . . . civilization the world had ever seen,” it was still expanding in 1000. Meanwhile, the inhabitants of Britain were about to be conquered by Normandy.

In 1500 AD, the world was in rapid flux. Several empires had arisen and already declined or were about to decline: the Aztecs and Incas in the Western Hemisphere, Ghana and Mali in West Africa, and Great Zimbabwe. The Ottoman Empire in Turkey and Mogul empire in India had just got under way. “In 1500 Europe . . . was still but one civilization among many,” writes British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, who mentions the Ottomans, the Moguls, and the Chinese.<sup>7</sup> If our space visitors had any inkling of what was to come, however, they would have landed in Spain. For Europe—first Italy, then Iberia, and later, as new crops from the Americas altered population patterns, northern nations like Britain, France, Germany, and Russia—would dominate the next 500 years.

The purpose of this exercise is not to summarize the history of the world. Rather, this thought experiment can teach humility: even the longest-lived civilizations are transitory. Ours has been going on for a far shorter period of time than ancient Egypt, but Egyptian dominance is long over. Ours, too, will end. Realizing this may prove useful, delaying our fall and humanizing our dominance.

The exercise also seeks to get students asking why these societies were so successful, if only for a while. None of these civilizations was inevitable, least of all ours. What does explain them? As soon as students ask this question seriously, any genetic explanation fails. Civilization can hardly relate to some innate capacity for progress that some people have while others don't, because very different people inhabited the various landing sites listed above. Some of Egypt's founding ideas—as well as some of its pharaohs—came downstream from the black societies living along the Upper Nile. Mayans are neither genetically nor geographically related to Arab Muslims. Nor are Chinese close to Romans.

Thinking across time shows even more dramatically than thinking across space the absurdity of the notion that differences among people might cause differences among societies and cultures. The western and northern Europeans who now dominate the world were mostly not part of any of the civilizations mentioned above, before 1500 AD. Quite the contrary: Romans considered them barbarians. Lingering in our speech today is the fear civilized people felt of such groups as Vandals, Goths, and Huns. Writing about the peoples and nations that surrounded the Roman Empire, Palmer notes:

Throughout its long life the Empire had been surrounded on almost all sides by barbarians, wild Celts in Wales and Scotland, Germans in the heart of Europe, Persians or Parthians in the East. . . . These barbarians, always with the exception of Persia, had never been brought within the pale of ancient civilization. They remained illiterate, unsettled, townless, more or less nomadic, and frequently bellicose.<sup>8</sup>

If Celts or Britons were backward in 2000 BC for “innate” reasons, how could they have subdued much of the world by 1892? Obviously, genetics had nothing to do with it. Evolutionary theory does not hold that innate human intellectual ability can change rapidly within what is, in evolutionary terms, the twinkling of an eye. Nor does evidence suggest a drastic winnowing of barbarian babies to produce some marvelous eugenics transformation. On the contrary, the causes of the hegemony of northern and western Europe are historical, not psychological or biological.

## EXPLAINING CIVILIZATION

At this point, it may be useful to help students uncover why civilization—defined as a complex division of labor—arose in the first place. Absent an answer to this question, it is easy to slip into the inference that civilized people were (and are) smarter. Jared Diamond opens his bestseller *Guns, Germs, and Steel* with exactly this issue. Diamond was a biologist, studying bird evolution in New Guinea. A Papuan asked him, “Why is it that you white people developed so much cargo [modern technology], . . . but we black people had little cargo of our own?” Diamond noted, “He and I both knew perfectly well that New Guineans are on the average at least as smart as Europeans.” Indeed, Diamond presents reasons for concluding that Papuans may be smarter. Yet we—and they—consider their culture to be backward.<sup>9</sup> So Diamond started thinking about why civilization arose in some places and not in others. Eventually he identified several critical factors, including domesticatable plants for crops, domesticatable animals for livestock, nearby societies to borrow ideas from, and the absence of certain debilitating diseases. Most important is not his specific list, but his approach. He correctly notes that a complex division of labor requires some antecedent conditions. They, and not some innate characteristics of the people, are crucial.

Sociologists, anthropologists, and historians have devoted much thought and research time to explaining the rise of civilization. The change from food gathering to rudimentary horticulture seems easy to explain. Someone notices that a given plant that is good to eat likes a certain kind of habitat. So the person helps enlarge this habitat, to get more of the plant. It works. Maybe a blackberry vine likes the edge between underbrush and meadow to the south. Our “primitive” person girdles a tree to the southwest, thus extending the meadow. Voila!—more blackberries. Now people are not just living off the world but are manipulating it to get it to produce more. It’s only a small additional step to dig up a blackberry vine and plant it on the north edge of a meadow closer to one’s village.

Other steps are not so obvious. Did cities come after the full-fledged invention of agriculture? Perhaps, but some anthropologists think sizable numbers of people may have lived together first. Does irrigation play a role? Sociologists have theorized that the benefits of irrigation would have been obvious alongside rivers in dry lands like Egypt and Iraq. In turn, irrigation, at least large-scale irrigation, requires coordination. People have to keep doing their share of maintenance. People have to take their share of the water, but not more than that. There has to be a system for dealing with disputes. So irrigation may have led to the invention of some kind

of government, which in turn helped lead to a complex division of labor. Perhaps, but evidence suggests that government may have preceded irrigation.

A U.S. history course is not the place to discuss the likely causes of civilization at length. The point is that civilization is caused. Therefore, students should not infer that civilization shows anything about a people, other than that various causes came together. To label some *people* as less civilized or more primitive won't do.

### MAKING THE EARTH ROUND

The four voyages of Christopher Columbus are both a result and a cause of Europe's growing dominance over the rest of the world. Hence, their discussions of Columbus provide textbook authors with a natural place to address the why question. Instead of helping students think about the sweeping changes that Columbus's journeys caused in our world, however, most courses in U.S. history squander the opportunity. Textbooks focus on minutiae, like the name of the sailor who cried, "Land, ho!" When not flatly wrong, most of what Americans conventionally learn about Columbus is a diversion from the important questions that his voyages ought to raise.

Many textbooks used to tell this whopper about Christopher Columbus: that one of his key contributions was that he proved Earth was round. Some teachers still say this. Columbus did no such thing, and no competent historian who ever wrote about him ever claimed he did. Nevertheless, students learn it. Consider this item from the first edition of the new writing portion of the SAT in 2005:

We must seriously question the idea of majority rule. The majority grinned and jeered when Columbus said the world was round. The majority threw him into a dungeon for his discoveries. Where is the logic in the notion that the opinion held by a majority of people should have the power to influence our decisions?<sup>10</sup>

The lackeys who formulate items at Educational Testing Service used this quote, from a 1926 speech by U.S. Senator James A. Reed, "Majority Rule," without correction. Their purpose was to trigger a student essay about majority rule. In fact, neither of the two sentences that treat Columbus contains a shred of truth. "The majority" already *knew* the world was round and did not jail him "for his discoveries." Queen Isabella jailed Columbus for his inhumane and incompetent administration of Hispaniola,

including enslaving 1,500 Arawak Indians. Unfortunately, about 300,000 high school juniors read the paragraph and wrote essays in response. Thus, the flat Earth myth got passed to the next generation.

The world became “flat” around 1830, not 1491, when Washington Irving, the novelist who invented Rip Van Winkle, included the flat Earth fable in a biography of Christopher Columbus. It went on to become the most popular biography of the entire nineteenth century and stayed in print throughout the century.<sup>11</sup> As the controversy over how people first got here provides a hook to get students to challenge textbook certainty, so the flat Earth myth provides a way to help them see how popular culture



The flat Earth myth has become part of our shared understanding of the world, which writers then use as a basis for everything from Mother's Day cards to comic strips. This everyday usage further embeds it in Americans' minds. Notions that we take for granted can be the last to change, precisely because we take them for granted.

can intrude on what should be a scholarly topic. In short, students need accurate history to rid themselves of the wrong information that is presented to them all the time in our culture.

A good way to start is by having each student list Columbus's accomplishments and then amassing a class inventory. Usually some students include "proved Earth round." If no one does, teachers can elicit it from the class in discussion. "Before 1492, almost everyone but Columbus thought the world was \_\_\_\_." If they have not heard the legend, salute them for their ignorance, which puts them ahead of most Americans, who believe this groundless story.

Students can find many examples of the flat Earth myth in our culture, like the Mother's Day card presented on the previous page.<sup>12</sup> Students can also interview their parents to see if they have heard the flat Earth myth. Except for recent immigrants, most have. (Again, students whose parents are ignorant can feel proud of their ignorance.) Students can also ask their parents if they believe it, and if they do, they can then disabuse their parents of the myth. To do so, they need to know some information.

Students who live near an ocean or Great Lake can watch a ship disappear over the horizon: hull first, then sails or superstructure, and finally the little flag on top, as the roundness of the Earth gets in the way. If they live in the Midwest or Great Plains, they can see the same thing as an eighteen-wheeler disappears: wheels first, then body, and finally the little flapper on top of the diesel exhaust. If the Earth were flat, a boat or truck would simply get smaller and smaller, become a dot, and then disappear. Everyone understood that, especially sailors. Earth casts a round shadow on the moon during each lunar eclipse, and everyone understood that as well.<sup>13</sup> The Catholic Church, at the time the most important institution in Europe, said the world was round. So did philosophers at least as far back as the Greeks. My poster book, *Lies My Teacher Told Me About Christopher Columbus*, includes a photo of a globe of the Earth made in Europe in 1492. Columbus did not get back until March 1493.<sup>14</sup>

Once students understand that people already knew that the world was round, they can be nudged to think about why so many people believe the flat Earth myth today. It's a profound question: since no evidence exists for the claim that Columbus proved Earth to be round, why do teachers still teach and students still learn this curious story? As students address this question, they will uncover some of the influences on our thinking that do *not* derive from evidence.

One important part of the answer is because our culture takes it for granted. Consider this example. In *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home*, Captain Kirk and his crew travel backward in time to our era. Explaining this feat to a present-day earthling, Spock (I think) refers to Columbus, whom he

says added another dimension to travel when he proved the world was not flat. In 1986, when this movie was made, its director, Leonard Nimoy, either believed the myth himself or thought most Americans would not question it. Columbus's alleged feat is not important to the plot; it's just a throwaway line used to help explain time travel, which *is* important to the plot.

Another reason why the flat Earth myth gets passed on is sheer educational inertia. Many teachers learned the tale in their youth, and their later schooling never challenged it. To break this dreary cycle, middle-school teachers need to challenge the flat Earth story that their pupils may have learned in elementary grades, and high school teachers must remove any residue that is still stuck in students' synapses. Students enjoy taking on this responsibility for their younger brothers and sisters.

Perhaps many teachers never questioned the flat Earth myth because it's such a good story. This raises the question, good for what? Tied to the flat Earth myth is the tale of the near-mutiny that Columbus's crew mounted, fearful of sailing off its edge. This story fits in with emphasizing how great Columbus was, triumphing over every adversary, even his own sorry crew. It makes him smarter and more courageous than those under him. So the world is as it should be: those on top of our enterprises deserve to be there, because they're smarter than the rest of us.

The flat Earth myth is only one of the legends that cling like barnacles to the history of the admiral. Now students can return to their inventory of Columbus's accomplishments and question other items that may also be problematic.<sup>15</sup>

### WHY DID COLUMBUS WIN?

Columbus's voyages showed the growing power of Europe compared to the rest of the world. The second chapter of *Lies My Teacher Told Me* is entitled "1493: The True Importance of Christopher Columbus." It points out that Columbus was hardly the first non-Native to get to the Western Hemisphere. People from other continents had reached the Americas many times. Columbus's voyage was epoch-making precisely because Europe was now poised to react differently. Thus, Columbus's importance owes to changes in Europe, not to his getting to a "new" continent. Other Europeans would have reached the Americas soon after 1492 if Columbus had not.

Moreover, in 1492 Columbus did little that the Vikings had not accomplished around 1000 AD. The next year, however, owing to developments in Europe, Spain found it possible to equip Columbus with 1,200 to 1,500

men, 17 ships, cannons, crossbows, guns, horses, and attack dogs. Now Columbus proceeded to make history. He and the Spanish took over the island of Haiti, an ocean away from Spain, renamed it Hispaniola (“little Spain”), and threw its inhabitants into serfdom and slavery. This was new.<sup>16</sup> It was followed by even more stupendous feats: Spaniards subduing Peru and Mexico, Portugal taking Brazil, and eventually Britain taking the Atlantic coast of what is now the United States and Canada.

What had happened to give European nations this capability?

Coming near the beginning of a course in U.S. history, this question provides an ideal hook to get students thinking deeply about some of the most important issues they will face in their high school careers. Five crucial factors explain Europe’s growing dominance: arms, social technology, greed, religion, and practice in colonizing islands.<sup>17</sup> A critical element of social technology was the nation-state. Societies organized on the village or even the tribal level could not protect themselves against nation-states. A biological factor—resistance to diseases—also helped make possible the conquest of the Americas, Australia, and the islands of the Pacific.

Underlying the development of most of these factors is Europe’s borrowing of ideas from other cultures. This is hardly surprising: cultural diffusion and syncretism underlie the flowering of most civilizations. Syncretism means combining elements from two different cultures to form something new. A good example is Christmas, which joins elements from Jewish religion such as like monotheism and the idea of a Messiah, and Northern European “pagan” observances, like the winter solstice date and the emphasis on lights and plants that are green in winter.

Syncretism is critical to understanding the triumph of Western and Northern Europe. For example, superior military technology was the most important single reason why Europe won. But Europeans did not concoct this new technology from scratch. Cannons and gunpowder came from China. Ships with lateen sails that could sail against the wind probably reached Europe from the Arabs. Other military ideas came from the massed cavalry forces from the east that repeatedly threatened European farmers and cities. European nations refined these concepts further, added their own advances in archery, drill, and siege warfare, came up with grape-shot and eventually rifling, and cast bigger cannons and learned to mount them on ships. Eventually they became world-class military powers.

Unfortunately, U.S. history textbooks do not talk about syncretism. Nor do they credit the Muslims for preserving Greek wisdom, adding ideas from China, India, and Africa, and then teaching the resulting knowledge to Europe via Spain. Instead, they show Prince Henry of Portugal inventing navigation more or less from scratch. So students can critique their textbooks for overlooking obvious syncretism.



The same processes of borrowing and syncretism gave Europe advantages in social technology that proved at least as important as its military superiority. “Arabic” numerals came into Europe from the Arabs, who called them “Indian numerals,” because they came from India. Zero and the decimal system also developed in India, as well as China, Peru, and probably elsewhere. These advances made mathematics available to everyone. Italians then invented double-entry bookkeeping. Bureaucracy has a bad name today, but actually it, too, is a powerful social invention. If one person supervises ten subordinates, each of whom supervises ten subordinates, with just a few levels one individual can supervise millions. Add in a few rules, measures of performance, and the idea that information flows up while decisions flow down. Now rulers and merchants can manage far-flung enterprises efficiently. The printing press and the widespread literacy it facilitated also played a key role.

The foregoing paragraphs hardly suffice to explain the triumph of the West.<sup>18</sup> Teachers need not become expert on why Europe won, however. They can set their students forth on a quest. The class might brainstorm the question. Each student might then pick one factor, research its impact, and present to the class its role. Merely getting the class to brainstorm the question for a few minutes may be all that a teacher has time to do, especially in a U.S. history course, but even that simple activity prods students to realize that here is a historical question that has historical answers.

In the Americas, three cultures—Western Europe, West Africa, and Native America—increasingly interacted after 1492. More syncretism resulted from these encounters. Textbooks present the “frontier” as a border between civilization and the wilderness. In reality, it was a wide band. Within this band, interculturalism was the rule. From medical remedies to trails to canoes to crops to style of warfare to relations between the sexes, European and African Americans learned from Native Americans.

However, Native cultures changed even more. The transformation of the Plains cultures was only the tip of a cultural change iceberg. Natives traded for many elements of European technology, supplying slaves, deer-skins, and beaver pelts in exchange. In the long run, they lost important elements of their own cultures. American Indians and non-Indians began to conclude that Native cultures were inferior.

## THE COLUMBIAN EXCHANGE

The first edition of *Lies My Teacher Told Me* attacked textbooks for leaving out the Columbian exchange. After 1492, crops, animals, gold and silver, diseases, and ideas began to cross the oceans regularly. One result was

syncretism everywhere—in what people ate, for example. Imagine Szechuan cuisine without its “heat”—chile peppers. Or spaghetti and pizza with no tomato sauce. Or Irish meals with no potatoes. Contact with the Americas made all this possible.

The introduction of diseases new to the Western Hemisphere also helps explain why Europe was able not only to subdue Native Americans, but also largely to displace them. Although he only started the process, the Columbian exchange is the key reason why Columbus was so important—why, in fact, archaeologists and historians of the Americas consider BC (“Before Columbus,” usually written “pre-Columbian”) as a milepost for dividing time almost as useful as BC (“Before Christ”).

Astonishingly, most textbooks published before 2000 did not treat the Columbian exchange. Now most do. This improvement, long overdue, means that teachers must retool to keep up. Again, teachers can set their class loose on the point. Each student can choose a topic from this list:

cows	racially based slavery
pigs	capitalism
sheep	democracy
horses	hierarchy
chickens	corn
goats, other animals	potato
gold	cotton
silver	rice
syphilis	beans
the poxes	tomato
bubonic plague	chiles, other spices
anthrax, tuberculosis, cholera	wheat
guns	“wilderness” as a concept
the Bible, Christianity	steel tools

Then the student learns where the item probably came from, how it affected trade, and its impact on the hemisphere to which it was new.<sup>19</sup>

Some of the items that went each way were ideas. Our textbooks, improved as they are, still omit ideas from their treatments of the Columbian exchange, especially ideas that flowed from Native to European cultures. Perhaps some lingering white supremacy makes it hard for authors to credit American Indians with much influence on our civilization. Nevertheless, impact they did have. The relative lack of hierarchy in many American Indian societies shook European philosophers and helped lead to democracy, for example. Students can find short quotes from Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and other philosophers about the liberty Ameri-

can Indians enjoyed, how they governed themselves, and how the philosophers were affected by seeing American Indians in Europe.

The conquest of the Americas in turn helps explain why Europe beat the Muslims and Chinese and achieved world dominance. Again, the Columbus chapter in *Lies My Teacher Told Me* explains these matters. Gold and silver from the Americas helped European nations to outdo Islamic countries economically. Crops from the Americas prompted a population explosion, helping northern European nations to outdo the southern nations that had been dominant. More important yet were the changes in how Europeans thought about the world that stemmed from their encounters with Americans.

Syncretism is a crucial concept for Native Americans. Workshops with American Indian groups have convinced me that most Natives don't know the word or the idea (which they might understand without knowing the term itself). Therefore, many Native Americans mistakenly conclude that their main alternatives today are acculturation to the dominant (non-Indian) culture or reversion to Native American culture as it was before cultural imperialism damaged it. They know the latter is impossible: We cannot turn the clock back to 1890, let alone 1491. Therefore, many American Indians have a sense of futility, which contributes to problems of alcoholism, drug abuse, and suicide among the young.

Young Native Americans need not choose "Indian" culture or "non-Indian" culture. Instead, they can—and should—choose syncretism. All cultures—Native American cultures, too—move forward (or die). Abenaki students in Vermont, for example, may not speak Abenaki, but other aspects of Abenaki culture are still available to them, including values and aesthetic ideas. For that matter, several American Indian tribes in the U.S. and Canada are now making heroic efforts to preserve and revive their languages. Ireland, Israel, and other places show that even "dead" languages can be revived.<sup>20</sup> Abenakis can select which ideas from "non-Indian" culture to adopt and adapt, and which elements from Abenaki culture to retain and adapt. They can then develop new ideas and forms. Native Americans need to realize that the dominant culture is syncretic as well, not completely non-Indian. From place names to foodstuffs to basic values, American culture differs from European cultures partly owing to its incorporation of ideas from American Indian cultures.<sup>21</sup>

Native Americans cannot easily convince themselves that they still have important roles to play in American culture if non-Natives poo-poo the idea. When students understand the important influences that Native American cultures have had in the past, they can more readily believe that Natives still have important contributions to make to the larger society. For that reason, and because it's accurate history as well,

all students need to understand the role of syncretism in U.S. history. Students can end their study of Native American history by finding ways that Native Americans are making syncretic contributions to our society today. Each student can identify and learn about one living distinguished Native person—in the arts, education, sciences, whatever. Most non-Natives have never heard music by Indigenous or Robert Tree Cody, seen sculptures by Alan Houser or Nalenik Temela, or watched a movie by Sherman Alexie. When they do, some become fans.

October and November are the two worst months to be Native American in our schools, thanks to Columbus Day and Thanksgiving. Teachers can transform these holidays into opportunities to learn new perspectives about Native American history. On Columbus Day 2003, a 7th grader in Connecticut, having read the Columbus chapter in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, was moved to gather several of his friends and get them to try to break into their middle school and hold class! Teachers who are unwilling to incite such lawlessness can plant a seed by pondering, on the day before Columbus Day weekend, “Why hasn’t the United States renamed Columbus Day ‘Native American Day,’ as South Dakota has done?” This question can lead students to a passionate debate, prompting them to study how Columbus Day got to be a holiday, the pros and cons of Columbus’s voyages, and the various ways Native Americans have affected American society. The day after Columbus Day would then be a fine occasion to host a Native American as guest speaker.

### IDEOLOGICAL RESULTS OF EUROPE’S VICTORY

Europe’s unprecedented power—and the global dominance to which it led—had to be rationalized, or else cognitive dissonance would have set in. Columbus provides the first example. Initially he is full of praise for the Arawaks—“well built” and “of quick intelligence.”

They have very good customs, and the king maintains a very marvelous state, of a style so orderly that it is a pleasure to see it, and they have good memories and they wish to see everything and ask what it is and for what it is used.

Later, when Columbus was justifying his enslavement of them, the Indians were “cruel” and “stupid,” “a people warlike and numerous, whose customs and religion are very different from ours.”

Europeans did the same thing in their assessment of African cultures. At one point, they had known that Timbuktu was a center of learning, with a university and a library. Later, as European nations proceeded

to take over all of Africa except Ethiopia, Europeans (and Americans) perceived Africa as backward. Timbuktu lay forgotten. Ethnocentrism had set in.

Eurocentrism is a special case of ethnocentrism. Indeed, imagining Europe as a continent itself exemplifies Eurocentrism. A continent is a “large land mass, mostly surrounded by water.” By any consistent definition, Asia is the continent, of which Europe is only a peninsula, or perhaps a series of peninsulas (Scandinavia, Iberia, Italy, the Balkans). Europe has no justifiable eastern boundary; the Urals are a modest mountain range that does not come within 2,000 miles of the southern edge of Asia. Yet Europe not only is “a continent,” to many Americans, it is “*the* continent,” as in “continental cuisine.”

Europe became the point of reference for our terms for much of the rest of the world. Americans usually write “Near East” for Iraq, Jordan, Israel, and so on, and “Far East” for China and Japan. This makes sense to an Italian, for Baghdad lies fewer than 2,000 miles from Rome, while Beijing is more than 5,000 miles away. From San Francisco, however, Baghdad is 7,500 miles, and that’s only by flying over the North Pole; no commercial airplane flies this route. Reaching Baghdad by normal means requires a journey of almost 9,000 miles. Beijing, on the other hand, is less than 6,000 miles. Why should China and Japan be known by how far they are from Europe? Why not call them “East Asia”? Iraq, Israel, and their vicinity might be called “Southwest Asia.” Europe itself might better be known as “Far West Asia.”

“New World” is another Eurocentric term, of course—new to Europe, not to American Indians. Other Eurocentric terms include “discover,” “savages,” and “settlers.”

## CULTURAL DIFFUSION AND SYNCRETISM CONTINUE

It is vital for today’s students to learn the terms “ethnocentrism” and “Eurocentrism” and reduce their own levels of these maladies. Air travel, radio and television, and now the web have multiplied the rate of borrowing that cultures do from one another. Any society that fails to learn from its planetary neighbors is destined to become a cultural backwater. The United States needs to reduce ethnocentrism so our society can continue to adopt and adapt ideas from other cultures. Yet in the introduction to this chapter, I pointed out that the U.S. is more ethnocentric than other nations.

A good way to combat ethnocentrism is to learn a lot about one other society. In a world history course or in middle-school social studies,

teachers can invite each student to choose a favorite country they might fantasize about visiting. Where would they go? Why? What is most interesting about the country? Then, when the next issue arises—health care, women’s rights, pollution—students can find out how their country handles it. What does their country think about our policies in the Middle East? (Oops! I should have written “Southwest Asia!”) About our young people?

Another interesting exercise is to use the term “American exceptionalism,” discussed in the introduction, in its unbiased form. Each student can find two ways that the U.S. is exceptional—one positive, one negative. Positive and negative as categories are a bit too simple, but putting the assignment that way helps students grasp that “exceptional” need not always be good. These examples might be characterized as “negative,” though that might also be too simple:

The U.S. wound up with the smallest proportion of Native people in the Americas (except possibly Uruguay).

The U.S. is the only nation to have fought a Civil War over slavery.<sup>22</sup>

The U.S. remains the only nation ever to have used nuclear weapons on another nation.

The U.S. spends about as much for military expenses as all other nations combined.<sup>23</sup>

As that last item implies, some exceptional characteristics can be statistical. Another way to combat ethnocentrism is to ask students to locate current figures on such measures of social progress as life expectancy, infant mortality, “most livable countries,”<sup>24</sup> and proportion of the national legislature that is female. In many cases, the United States is no longer first and is falling in the ratings.

For example, the U.S. ranks 139th out of 172 nations in the proportion of its voting-age population who actually vote—not dead last, but probably lowest among industrialized nations.<sup>25</sup> How do other nations do so much better? Maybe tactics as simple as moving election dates to weekends or opening polling places near work places would help. If we look at other countries with eyes that are not clouded by ethnocentrism, we can emulate their effective practices.<sup>26</sup>

Students will also find that Americans use more energy per capita than residents of any other nation. We also consume more calories per capita. As a result of this combination, we lead the world in obesity.<sup>27</sup> Maybe we have things to learn about diet and exercise from Taiwanese, Dutch, Kenyans, or others. The U.S. also has the highest murder rate of any Western industrialized nation. Meanwhile, Americans incarcer-

ate more of our citizens, proportionately, than any other country except North Korea.<sup>28</sup> Maybe we can learn from other nations that either have far lower rates of criminal behavior or incarcerate wrongdoers for much shorter periods.

The U.S. spends more money per capita on health care than any other country. More than 15% of our gross domestic product goes to health care. Yet according to David Wallechinsky, journalist and coauthor of *The Book of Lists*,

43 countries have more doctors per capita, including France, Switzerland, Mongolia, and Lebanon. 49 have more hospital beds per capita than the U.S.—the United Kingdom, Italy, and Ireland, for example. 33 nations, including Cuba, have a lower infant death rate than the U.S., and 28 have a lower maternal death rate. We rank 30th in life expectancy for women and 28th for men.<sup>29</sup>

Health care surely offers an area where Americans might glean ideas from other societies.

When students understand the historical reasons why nations won, they become less likely to fall for half-baked psychological reasons. At the other end of the academic year, students can usefully be asked, “Based on your knowledge of the U.S. and other nations over time, how long will Western dominance endure?” This question reminds them that Egypt, the Mayans, and Rome, the Indus River Valley civilization—all the earlier civilizations that dominated the globe—no longer do so. Their declines, like their ascensions, were historically caused. Students who have thought about such matters become more thoughtful citizens—not only of their own country but of the world.

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