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## DIVIDED WE REVISE

by Alice Grissom

In 1861, the United States of America experienced its most profound and most visceral divide, in both action and opinion, as 11 Southern states wrenched themselves away from the union, leaving behind a line of gaping wounds on the landscape – bloody battlefields, scorched cities, and farmlands in flames. In 2018, the nation experiences division anew that, while not threatening to physically rip apart the country, seems in the public mind to carry almost as great a weight as the ideological dissent that led to the Civil War. And perhaps that may be because the Civil War never really ended or diminished in the popular mind, though the fighting ended over a century and a half ago in 1865. Through textbooks and monuments, Americans have, in the intervening years since the Civil War, attempted to rewrite and revise history for the sake of subsequent generations, especially in the South. By forcing schools to use only State authorized textbooks, Virginia mandated to its students a Civil War narrative that overlooked the influence and atrocities of slavery and recast the war as “The War of Northern Aggression,” rather than acknowledging the racist responsibility of the South.<sup>1</sup>



*An example of a Confederate memorial statue on capitol hill Montgomery, AL. Courtesy of Library of Congress.*

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**BY INSERTING SUBTLE BIAS INTO RESOURCES GENERALLY ASSUMED TO BE IMPARTIAL, SUCH AS TEXTBOOKS OR PUBLIC SPACES, SOUTHERNERS ENSURE THAT THEIR PREDILECTIONS SURVIVE TO FOSTER INTER-RACIAL ENMITY IN ANOTHER GENERATION.**

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More pertinently, Virginia did not start to enact these measures until the Civil Rights movement in the mid-twentieth century began to gain ground and influence, challenging the status quo of white hegemony. A more modern textbook conflict transpired in Texas, where passionate parents and school board members rejected the AP U.S. History curriculum and, like Virginia, set their own standards for their textbooks. More visible to the rest of the public, though no less insidious, are the Confederate monuments dotting the map, liberally sprinkled across the South and lightly cropping up all across the country. If considered only with a surface-level analysis, these monuments calmly recognize the casualty and courage in the most devastating war on U.S. soil; if understood through their context and history, however, their darker purpose – to continually revive themes of white supremacy and African American oppression – becomes apparent. These examples demonstrate the power of perception that agenda-driven educators and memorializers know so well. By inserting subtle bias into resources generally assumed to be impartial, such as textbooks or public spaces, Southerners ensure that their predilections survive to foster inter-racial enmity in another

generation. The legacy of agenda-driven history still influences Americans to this day as the U.S. perpetually grapples with the contradictions inherent in its patriotic national identity when considered in tandem with its horrific and, on occasion hypocritical past. This legacy and habit of historical revisionism influences not just adults, but through our schools and textbooks, it embeds itself into the minds of children, ensuring that the long-held tendencies of American racism will endure.

## HISTORIOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND

However, these incidents are not isolated in the scope of Western historiography and teaching. In England's educated elite of the nineteenth century, a new ideology arose in historians: the particular brand of presentism known as "Whig History." Presentist history views the past through the lens of the present, instead of the context of its time, which leads to damaging anachronism, misattributing motivations to historical figures, and contrived master narratives enacting a political agenda. The presentist historian views the past as inexorably progressing toward the present, which he views as the inevitable zenith of humanity – a view well supporting nineteenth-century British imperialism. This is not a method of historiography condoned by any consensus of modern-day historians, however. As these Whig historians, such as Thomas Macauley and James Mackintosh wrote for both a highly educated and a public audience, their works were long considered to be the foundation of Western/British history and were taught as such in schools for generations.<sup>2</sup> Coined by Hubert Butterfield in his seminal and widely-acclaimed work, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, the term "Whig History" denotes this specific nineteenth-century British subset of presentist historians who, like Macauley, indirectly supported their political leanings through their historical writings. These works, such as Henry Hallam's *Constitutional History of England*, favored Anglo-centric causes and motivations, as well as results, when depicting the past, and did so by casting various historical figures

who opposed or supported the modern day goals and values of Great Britain as characters in a master narrative. If individuals unwittingly supported the 'progressive' ideals of Victorian England, historians touted them as heroes, or portrayed as villains those who opposed English beliefs and practices, whether militaristic, social, cultural, racial, or religious. In engaging historical figures as actors in the public consciousness, Whig historians shaped the popular narrative by ascribing to real (though deceased) people anachronistic and unrealistic motivations insofar as they supported modern thought or could be construed to lead to modern developments, thereby retroactively creating secular saints and devils in the historical record.<sup>4</sup> Whig histories entrenched within the public mind the ideology of British superiority and its destiny as an actor of imperial greatness.

Many of these themes were culturally and geographically transmitted to America as it began to develop its own academic and historiographic identity. Writers used presentist thinking to support Manifest Destiny or to justify the imperialistic conquering of the continent by their ancestors. Even the first U.S. history textbook, published in 1795, contained a "patriotic tone" and "national feeling," a trend that once established, has not been abolished.<sup>5</sup> As American historical writers progressed through the Industrial Revolution, their views maintained this nationalism and additionally began to accrue a common "theme of breathless progression" that characterizes Whig history.<sup>6</sup> As American historians developed competing national narratives in times of conflict and post-war recovery, presentism merged with revisionism, which redefines accepted history to include a new perspective. This can be done to the benefit of historiography, as when women and minority voices are included in the canon, or to its detriment, as when Southern writers, both popular and academic, promulgated the "Lost Cause" theory of the Civil War, which eventually found its way into textbooks.

## TEXTBOOK CONTROVERSIES

Virginia:

As the stronghold and capital of the Confederacy, Virginia has a long heritage of revisionist history concerning race and the Civil War itself in textbooks. In the second half of the nineteenth century, with Reconstruction in full swing and the social structure and economic power of the South threatening to collapse, Southern states needed to redefine their cultural narrative in a way that discredited accusations of the North and that protected their pride. To this end, Virginian textbook authors Susan Pendleton Lee and John Williams Jones wrote textbooks which cast slavery in a favorable light and employed reprehensible tactics, such as social Darwinism and racial determinism, to falsely justify the continued subjugation of African Americans by white Southerners.<sup>7</sup> They argue that African Americans could not support or govern themselves without white guidance, and that, rather than permanently harming millions of African Americans, slavery benefited them. To supplement their racist recasting of Southern social history, Lee and Jones both promoted the “Lost Cause” explanation of the Civil War, which paints the Confederacy as underdog heroes supporting the righteous virtues of antebellum South in the face of violent opposition from greedy and godless Northerners.<sup>8</sup> They lauded Confederate leaders, such as Jefferson Davies and Robert E. Lee, as paragons of virtue and moral role models for schoolchildren. These texts were implemented statewide by 1900 and were mandated for decades.<sup>9</sup> “By influencing how history would be taught ... the nationalism of racial inclusiveness and political egalitarianism ... which embraced people of color as national citizens, could be dismissed as a delusion” by textbooks such as Lee’s and Jones’.<sup>10</sup> Deliberately biased textbooks like Lee’s and Jones’ contributed significantly to the preservation of the fictitious “Lost Cause” version of the Civil War and ensuing structural racism.

As civil rights advocates began to be heard on a national stage in the first half of the twentieth century,

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**"THIS INSTRUCTION PREPARES WHITE STUDENTS TO FACE THE FUTURE WITH BITTERNESS TOWARDS OTHER RACES, CLASSES, AND REGIONS, FOR PERCEIVED, YET NONEXISTENT, GRIEVANCES AND PRESUPPOSES THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF FUTURE COOPERATION."**

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the Virginia State government sought a solution to preserve the racial status quo and indoctrinate young Virginians against thoughts of equality, as well as protect a positive view of the state’s heritage and its identity. Like many Southerners, influential Virginians saw themselves as the victims of cruel social progress, with their values, social stability and way of life needlessly and recklessly threatened.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the state established the Virginia History and Textbook Commission to enforce the transference of the state’s culture to future generations through the public-school system. The Commission requested new textbooks for 4th, 7th, and 11th grade social studies classes, and had specific requests for each. The covered everything from a "simple, entertaining, attractive and informative book for fourth-grade use on Virginia's history, with emphasis on the pioneer days," to "a new text on state history, government, and geography for the seventh grade," and "another new textbook developing fully the story of Virginia history and government for use in high school."<sup>12</sup> The publishers would only facilitate their plan if the committee guaranteed the books would be required in all Virginia schools, providing a guaranteed revenue stream for the publishing house, and the committee would only agree to work exclusively with a publisher if the publisher promised the committee full control

over all content, with the right to choose authors who would further their agenda and veto any information they did not think fit to include.

The resulting textbooks, as described in “Whoever Controls the Past, Controls the Future,” invoke an undeniably racist bias in discussing the aftereffects of the Civil War and Reconstruction upon white Southerners that intentionally promotes the social stratification and Jim Crow laws of the day:

Reconstruction finally ended when "the more broad-minded Northerners, after they came in close contact with the Negroes, came to understand Virginia's point of view. They realized that the Negroes had not been trained to rule themselves or to take part in governing the state." The book implied that African Americans still could not "take part in governing the state." Instead, "the government of Virginia" had to be in the "hands of native sons." These "native sons," the Redeemer Democrats, ended the "worst years of suffering and struggle" that Virginia had endured and corrected "the misrule, extravagance, and corruption" wrought by "carpetbaggers and scalawags."<sup>13</sup>

The texts victimize post-war Virginians and blame the North for the state's poverty, political turmoil, and social dysfunction, rather than explaining to students how Virginia's adherence to segregation and slavery was the root cause of many of these issues. Instead of encouraging Virginian students to understand the responsibility their ancestors had in starting the Civil War, they denied Virginia's responsibility in the atrocities perpetuated against African Americans in the South under slavery. Additionally, the texts wholly disregarded the necessity of restructuring the post-war South to accommodate the new economic pressures of a post-slavery industrializing region and the need for external intervention in social and civil rights affairs, a need still felt in the students' present day. This instruction prepares white students to face the future with bitterness towards other races, classes, and regions, for perceived, yet nonexistent, grievances and presupposes the impossibility of future cooperation.

When questioned about the representation of African Americans in the new textbooks, which were, appallingly, used in both white and African American schools, one author, Dr. Marvin V. Schlegel, said the following in reply:

The Negro, has no control over the preparation of the textbook ... his viewpoint can be safely discarded. Nevertheless, since the textbook is intended for the Negro schools as well as the white schools, it should be designed so far as possible to instill Virginia ideals in the colored race...When it is necessary to discuss the Negro, he should be praised for those qualities which are approved by the whites, his loyalty to his master, for example. When he must be criticized, as in Reconstruction days, his weaknesses can be excused on the grounds of his lack of training.<sup>14</sup>

Horrifyingly, these texts were constructed with the express purpose of educating African Americans in such a way as to reinforce the supposed historical and cultural validity of their continued oppression. Schlegel reiterated these themes in his depiction of African American involvement in the Civil War, which he characterized as thousands of African Americans fighting on behalf of their masters in the Confederate Army, a claim which historians have thoroughly debunked.<sup>15</sup>

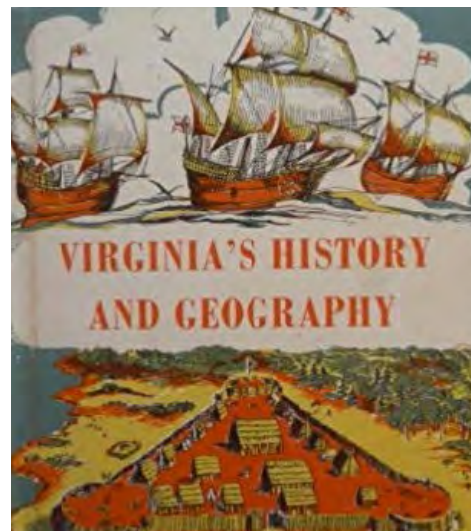
Fortunately, these textbooks are not immortal, and through the civil rights movement, African-American Virginian educators raised awareness about the misrepresentations and racist agenda inherent in the texts. The Virginia Council on Human Rights and the Southern Regional Council embarked in 1965 on a joint effort to eradicate from schools what they termed the "southern-version history textbooks," and reinstate notions of historical accuracy and unbiased education.<sup>16</sup> In the late sixties, the Civil Rights movement brought legitimate voting and civic power to African Americans, who now called on the state government to remove racist and revisionist history texts from public schools. After years of campaigning against the continued use of the texts and a national investigation into their accuracy, the Virginia Council

on Human Rights succeeded in officially ridding schools of the 1950 Virginia History and Textbook Commission's texts in 1972, thereby introducing a more equally representative curriculum which emphasized the South's true motivation in the Civil War.

Texas:

Within the last decade, a controversy rooted in similar complaints and conservative misgivings arose in the Texas public school system. Efforts of conservative Texas Board of Education members to "promote Christian fundamentalism, boost conservative political figures, and force-feed American "exceptionalism," while downplaying the historical contributions of "minorities" in social studies curricula across the state will have ramifications outside of Texas as publishers revise books to cater towards the large market.<sup>17</sup> As California is the only other state with a market value comparable to Texas's 48 million yearly textbook order, national publishers often widely distribute Texas-approved texts to reduce reprinting costs.<sup>18</sup> These attitudes, which counteract the current academic views on U.S. history, also seek to discredit the separation of church and state doctrine, the Enlightenment background of the nation's founding, and the predominance of slavery in the Civil War. To avoid offending or upsetting conservative voices clamoring for the "Lost Cause" interpretation, textbook publishers often frame the war as a battle over the validity of states' rights, rather than over the perpetuation of slavery.<sup>19</sup> This recasting of historical truth has measurable effects in the public memory of the Civil War; according to a 2011 study conducted by Pew Research Center, up to 48% of American adults believe the country fought the Civil War over states' rights rather than issues of slavery, and an additional 9% claim both states rights and slavery as equally important causes.<sup>20</sup> As 60% of the respondents promoting states' rights as the primary cause of the Civil War were under 30, there is an implication that this widespread opinion could be the result of skewed textbooks inadequately explaining the link

between slavery and the Civil War.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, textbooks "obscure the role of slave owners in the institution of slavery," a damaging mindset established through subtle grammatical manipulation that reduces the compensatory responsibility of white America toward African Americans, and eradicates the full understanding of the human rights abuses perpetrated by slaveholders on a daily basis.<sup>22</sup> New Texas U.S. history policies mitigate the hardships faced by both African-Americans and Hispanics in the state, an ironic choice considering that one of the reasons Texas fought for independence and to join the United States was for the purpose of practicing slavery, which Mexico prohibited.



*Example of a textbook used in postbellum Virginia.*

In addition to the textbook debate, Texas schools have also engaged combatively with redesigned AP U.S. History curriculum, which opponents, including the Republican National Committee, claim "emphasiz[e] negative aspects of U.S. history" at the expense of the nation's master narrative of expansion and "American exceptionalism."<sup>23</sup> The crux of this contention centers in neighboring Oklahoma, where Republican lawmakers advocate for a bill to introduce documents such as the Magna Carta and Ten Commandments

instead of College Board approved A.P. U.S. History documents and would undermine scholarship seeking to explore the racially-motivated nuance of American settlers, founders, and secessionists.<sup>24</sup> However, as impactful as the insinuations of textbooks may be, they are not the only highly visible public vehicle for propagating bias.

## MONUMENTS AND CONTROVERSY

In this millennium, presentist history has emerged from the depths of historiographical abandonment once more, but within a very different context: social justice. This moves presentist reasoning outside of academia and poses to historians (and the public) a controversial question: can we judge figures of the past by the values of the present if they, through remembrances, memorials, or intrusive visual presence, are still affecting the present? How thoroughly can we allow their cultural norms to infringe on or influence our own? Recently, controversy surrounded the persistence of Confederate monuments has developed into a national debate forcing Americans to confront their blood-red, white, and blue history. While many Americans can understand the horror of celebrating racist atrocities, that understanding becomes murky when those atrocities were committed by individuals previously considered to be national heroes. Those opposing the continued presence of these statues in public places claim that Americans should not venerate slaveholders and traitors, men who acted on racist principles to uphold a fundamentally flawed and despicable institution. However, advocates protecting the often prominent public position of Confederate statues' argue that we should not judge these men by the moral standards of our non-slaveholding society, and that simply because a social norm has shifted from accepted to abhorred does not mean we should condemn all those who practiced it or overlook their other contributions and actions. While this view may seem plausible, especially when one has been so strongly cautioned against accepting presentist arguments, it disregards a fundamental precept of anti-monument movement's grievance: by maintaining

and preserving these monuments, we implicitly acknowledge and accept – and, perhaps when patriotic fervor reaches a certain zenith even promote – the racist ideologies and the atrocities perpetuated by these individuals.

For many African-Americans, these statues are a daily reminder of oppression, whether they voice that emotion or not. Monuments symbolize power, and that reaches alike into the minds of those whom the power benefits, and those whom it leaves bereft.

Although some may imagine these monuments as a post-war expression of grief, “Confederate monuments were erected and dedicated by white southerners as an expression of their collective values—chief among them a commitment to white supremacy that secessionists were willing to die for,” rather the innocence of most memorials.<sup>25</sup> While some Confederate monuments ascended above Southern city skylines in the Reconstruction era, most appeared decades later, as Southerners and white supremacists reacted to perceived threats on their hegemony.<sup>26</sup> In the early twentieth century, the African-American diaspora and immigration policies permitting nationalities outside of very white Northern Europe prompted a backlash from American social conservatives that manifested in the first Red Scare of the 1920's, the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, and in erecting Confederate monuments to act as representatives of white superiority and maintain avenues of unspoken, but heavily present, oppression in public spaces. Monuments – and these monuments, specifically – are not passive structures. They are not calm art. Rather, they are eternally active, forcefully projecting a perspective, a status quo, a reminder.

## CONCLUSION

The harm imposed on minorities by implicitly (or explicitly) biased textbooks is now widely recognized and efforts are underway across the nation to speak out against maneuvers like those of the Texas and Virginia state governments. The debate engulfing Confederate monuments, while volatile and at times violent, opens the opportunity for a dialogue to

express the concerns surrounding the latent power imbalance and racist undertones of these statues. However, progress may not be permanent, and history is never solidified. Measures must be enacted to prevent subversive and discriminatory rhetoric from seeping into the textbooks of future Americans. As the "House Committee Studies Treatment of Minorities" writes at the close of the Virginia textbook controversy,

[I]n general, white-oriented textbooks tend to inoculate white Americans with the virus of racism ... the effect on black youth is equally disastrous ... because personal health depends to a great extent

on group self-esteem and because the spirit withers and dies if it is deprived of the opportunity to feed on the deeds of great men and the ideals of great movements.<sup>27</sup>

No one, of any race, benefits from grossly biased and inaccurate textbooks. No one, of any race, should die because of a statue. These matters are not insignificant and should not be treated as such. The content selected for textbooks, the faces displayed in public squares – these avenues of influence can either endorse a disempowering, dominating narrative, or reject it, and allow young people to live unencumbered by the prejudices of the past.

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