Lies My Teacher Told Me

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES LOEWEN

James Loewen grew up in Illinois and attended Carleton College. As a junior, he spent a semester in Mississippi, an experience that inspired him to question the way that history textbooks perpetuate various forms of bias. Loewen earned a PhD in sociology from Harvard University studying Chinese Americans in Mississippi, and afterwards went to teach at Mississippi's historically black Tougaloo College. In 1974, he wrote a history textbook called *Mississippi: Conflict and Change*, and successfully sued the Mississippi school board after it refused to accept the textbook for classroom use because it was too "controversial." Loewen spent two years writing *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, studying dozens of history textbooks at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. When the book was published in 1995, it caused a stir, and made Loewen a minor celebrity. He's continued to expand on *Lies* since the 90s, adding additional chapters, and has also authored or co-authored books on the history of race and racism in America. He's currently working on a new book, *Surprises on the Landscape: Unexpected Places That Get History Right*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Lies My Teacher Told Me examines how historical events are presented in American high school text books, but at the same time it presents many historical events itself: ranging from Columbus's "discovery" of the New World, to the War of 1812 and the Civil War, to World Wars I and II and the Civil Rights Movement, to Vietnam, the Cold War, and the more recent events of 9/11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

One notable work of American history that may have influenced Loewen was Howard Zinn's monumental *A People's History of the United States*, published in 1980. Like Loewen, Zinn studies the history of the U.S. and finds a seemingly endless pattern of racism, discrimination, and sexism—a far cry from the myth of American exceptionalism. Loewen has also praised the writings of Noam Chomsky, another intellectual who writes about Americans' ignorance of their own country—perhaps most notably in *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, a study of how contemporary news, films, books, and textbooks cunningly create the illusion of liberty.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong
- **When Written:** 1993-1995
- **Where Written:** Washington, D.C.
- **When Published:** Fall 1995; revised edition published April 1, 2008
- **Genre:** Non-fiction, Revisionist history
- **Setting:** United States
- **Point of View:** First person/Non-fiction

EXTRA CREDIT

Controversy. *Lies My Teacher Told Me* was a great success when it was published in 1995, but it didn't please everyone. Many writers and journalists, especially on the conservative side of politics, criticized Loewen and his book for presenting what they interpreted to be a biased account of history. One conservative writer and activist, David Horowitz, called Loewen's book "an extreme and ill-informed polemic." Loewen, no doubt, was delighted.

Bestseller. In 2012, the New Press, the publishing house that released *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, announced that Loewen's book was their bestselling title of all time.

PLOT SUMMARY

In *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, James Loewen studies the biases of high school American history class. He begins by noting a strange problem: even though Americans love history (as evidenced by the popularity of historical novels and Hollywood movies), American students hate history *classes*. The source of the problem, he decides, is the history textbook itself: textbooks give a dull, culturally biased account of the past, often alienating readers (particularly Native American, African American, Latino, and female readers).

One of the key problems with textbooks is their willingness to gloss over unsavory details of historical figures' lives in order to paint a more optimistic picture. For example, textbooks usually portray President Woodrow Wilson as an idealistic leader who fought for democracy and peace. Almost no textbooks note that Wilson was an unqualified racist and an aggressive imperialist. Similarly, textbooks tend to skirt controversy of any kind when discussing an historical figure's life. For instance, textbooks always note that Helen Keller heroically learned how to read and write as a child, but no textbook mentions that for most of her life, she was a socialist activist.

Another important bias in textbooks is their tendency to glorify

the history of America's colonization—a history full of betrayal, theft, and genocide. In the process, history textbooks present a view of history that focuses on the role of white Europeans. When discussing the history of America's "discovery," for example, textbooks almost always argue that Christopher Columbus discovered the "New World," despite some evidence that Viking, Irish, and African explorers settled there first. Textbooks condescendingly suggest that the Native Americans—who had colonized America millennia before—stumbled upon the continent "accidentally." Textbooks also gloss over Columbus's genocidal colonial policies: they ignore the fact that he kidnapped and enslaved thousands of Native Americans, tortured them, and forced them to work in mines.

When discussing the English settlers who explored Virginia and New England in the 17th century, most textbooks ignore the fact that these settlers brought deadly diseases like influenza and smallpox, which destroyed the vast majority of the Native American population. Indeed, when discussing the history of New England, textbooks seem to be offering a "creation myth" rather than a clear, factual account of the past. Furthermore, textbooks omit the full history of the cultural exchange that took place between Native Americans and European settlers in the centuries leading up to the Revolutionary War. Despite the fact that Europeans learned a tremendous amount about cooking and hunting from the Native Americans, and may have borrowed some of their democratic ideals from native tribes, textbooks give the impression that Europeans changed Native American culture—but not the other way around. In all, history textbooks implicitly portray white Europeans as heroic, "fully formed" figures, while marginalizing the legitimate contributions of non-Europeans.

Perhaps the most unfortunate error in history textbooks is their omission of an honest discussion of the history of racism in the U.S. While textbooks are unanimous in their condemnation of slavery itself, they don't discuss the racial ideology that made slavery possible in the first place—an ideology that is still alive and well in America. In this way, textbooks give the impression that slavery was a quaint historical practice, with no real relevance to the present. Equally offensive is textbooks' rosy account of the Reconstruction era. While Reconstruction was undeniably an organizational failure, textbooks imply that it failed because newly appointed black leaders didn't know how to govern. The truth is that Reconstruction failed because of the racism of white Southerners, who continued to hold nearly all the power. Loewen suggests that, in part, the reason why African Americans in the 21st century continue to lag behind their white peers is that—thanks, in part, to their history classes—they've been taught to believe that they're weak, inferior, and incapable of governing themselves.

History textbooks spend little to no time talking about key American ideas, such as democracy, white supremacy, or socialism—instead, they present history as a random collection of people and dates. For example, when dealing with John Brown and Abraham Lincoln, textbooks present them as, respectively, a religious fanatic and a pragmatic politician, despite evidence that both Brown and Lincoln were two of America's greatest thinkers on race and equality. Similarly, textbooks refuse to have an honest discussion about class inequality in America. Instead, they peddle the myth that America is the "land of opportunity," where anyone can succeed with enough talent and drive. In perpetuating this illusion, textbooks encourage students to blame the poor for their own suffering—since, surely, in America, only lazy people could be poor.

Textbooks also omit an honest discussion of American government. Despite the fact that, during the 20th century, the federal government 1) practiced an aggressive foreign policy that involved toppling democratically elected governments and replacing them with dictatorships, and 2) tried to destroy the civil rights movement, textbooks suggest that the government is devoted to promoting peace, democracy, and equality. As a result of these omissions, today's students are shockingly ignorant of recent American history. When talking about the Vietnam War or the War in Iraq, students know little to nothing about the causes of these wars, and seem not to recognize the possibility that the government may have become involved in both wars for immoral reasons.

In the final chapters of the book, Loewen talks about the causes and effects of bad history textbooks. He shows that most history textbooks—despite supposedly being authored by renowned historians—are, in effect, written by ghostwriters, who may have relatively little knowledge of history. Publishing houses and teachers have their own reasons for releasing and using poor textbooks: doing so results in more revenue and fewer complaints from parents. Perhaps the most important reason why textbooks are so bad is that ordinary people are content to believe in a biased, ethnocentric view of history. After years of being conditioned to believe in history of this kind, most American students come to think of history as something beyond their control—something that just *happens*, thanks to a few heroic figures, or perhaps the actions of the benevolent government. Students seem blissfully unaware of the massive problems facing their society: in particular, nuclear proliferation and climate change. Textbooks need to do a better job of giving their readers a sense of engagement and activism, so that, in effect, students can become "their own historians." In doing so, textbooks could inspire young people to change the world, instead of subtly manipulating them to remain passive, ignorant, and bored.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Christopher Columbus – World-famous explorer and colonizer, who led a series of successful European expeditions to the Americas, and subsequently instituted a series of brutal, genocidal policies designed to dominate and enslave the Native Americans. Loewen acknowledges that Columbus was one of the most important figures in world history, but not for the reasons that most American history textbooks suggest: Columbus was so important not because he "discovered America" but because his expeditions to the Americas established a standard of brutality, theft, and genocide that would characterize the Europeans' relationship with the Native Americans for centuries to come.

J. Edgar Hoover – The first Director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover presided over the FBI for nearly fifty years, during which he built it into a highly powerful, largely autonomous organization. Hoover, contrary to what most history textbooks say about him, was a notorious racist, who conspired with white supremacists to thwart the civil rights movement, and may (Loewen suggests) have played a role in the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Helen Keller – Early 20th century writer, journalist, and activist, who learned how to read, write, and even talk in spite of being born deaf and dumb. Keller spent most of her adult life fighting for socialist causes—she supported the Soviet Union in its early days, and challenged the American government to provide fair compensation for its workers. Loewen cites Keller—whose childhood is familiar to most American students, but whose adult career is utterly foreign to most—as an example of how history textbooks gloss over the most controversial, and exciting, facts about the lives of historical figures.

President Abraham Lincoln – 16th president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln led the Union during the Civil War. Despite the fact that Lincoln was an articulate, eloquent writer, and an intelligent thinker, most American history textbooks give almost no account of his ideas or philosophy. Loewen argues that Lincoln, in spite of some racist views, grappled with his own racism throughout his life, so that by the time he began his second term as president he had largely "transcended" his own racism, and fought to free the slaves for moral as well as practical reasons. Loewen offers Lincoln as a prime example for the way that textbooks tend to ignore ideas and focus instead on people and events.

President Woodrow Wilson – 28th President of the United States and—in spite of the mostly positive treatment he gets in most mainstream history textbooks—an outspoken racist and an aggressive imperialist, who used military force to topple dozens of legitimately-elected democratic governments around the world. Loewen treats Wilson as an example of how history textbooks "heroify" historical figures who engaged in morally objectionable behavior, rather than giving an honest account of their lives.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Salvador Allende – Democratically elected president of Chile who, partly because of his socialist views, was assassinated—probably with the help of the CIA—and replaced with an anti-Communist, pro-U.S. dictator.

Osama Bin Laden – Founder and leader of al-Qaeda, the organization that orchestrated the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

John Brown – 19th century abolitionist and activist who led a raid on a military base at Harpers Ferry, and was later executed for his crimes. Although history textbooks often paint Brown as a religious fanatic, Loewen argues that Brown was a deeply thoughtful, rational man.

Fidel Castro – Leader of Cuba for most of the second half of the 20th century—in spite of the United States' dozens of attempts to assassinate him.

Jefferson Davis – President of the Confederacy during the Civil War.

Stephen Douglas – Illinois politician who, in the years leading up to the Civil War, participated in a series of famous debates on slavery with Abraham Lincoln.

Michael Frisch – History professor at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

Freddy Hampton – Black Panther leader who was murdered by the Chicago police department in the early hours of the morning, while he was asleep in his bed.

Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal – 15th century monarch who organized many of the key European expeditions to the Americas.

Carrie Highgate – Black woman who married Senator A.T. Morgan.

Saddam Hussein – Secular dictator of the country of Iraq, who had collaborated with the U.S. during the 1980s, but later refused to grant American companies access to Iraqi oil.

President Thomas Jefferson – Third president of the United States, and an eloquent advocate for the expansion and prolongation of the slave trade in America.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – Important civil rights leader whose assassination in 1968 may, Loewen argues, have been orchestrated by the FBI.

Henry Kissinger – Secretary of State under President Richard Nixon.

Bartolomé de Las Casas – 16th century Spanish historian and

priest, notable for being a member of the European elite who opposed Christopher Columbus's policies in the Americans on the grounds that they were barbaric.

Patrice Lumumba – Congolese politician, and the first democratically elected Prime Minister of the Congo. He was assassinated, probably with the help of the CIA.

A.T. Morgan – White Mississippi senator during the Reconstruction era who married a black woman named Carrie Highgate and was reelected.

Ho Chi Minh – Communist leader who served as the prime minister of North Vietnam during the Vietnam War.

Margaret Mitchell – Author of *Gone With the Wind*, one of the bestselling books of all-time, despite (or perhaps, because of) the fact that it wrongly characterizes the Reconstruction era as a time of rampant black corruption and incompetence.

Anaïs Nin – French-Cuban writer who wrote, "We see things as *we* are."

President Richard Nixon – 37th president of the United States, and leader of the country during the end of the Vietnam era, Nixon was the only U.S. president to resign from office, owing to his role in the Watergate scandal.

James Earl Ray – The man who assassinated Martin Luther King, Jr.

Betsy Ross – Revolutionary-era American woman who many students still believe to have sewed the first American flag, despite clear evidence that she didn't.

Harriet Beecher Stowe – Author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, one of the bestselling books of all time and a furious attack on the Southern slave trade.

Squanto – Native American who learned how to speak English after being kidnapped by European settlers and sold into slavery.

Harry Truman – 33rd president of the United States, who made the decision to drop an atomic bomb on Japan near the end of World War Two.

President George Washington – First president of the United States of America, and—contrary to what many American history textbooks imply—a slave owner.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

BIAS

In *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, James Loewen makes the provocative argument that most American high school history textbooks are not, contrary to what they claim, objective accounts of the past. Rather, history textbooks distort history—omitting certain details, exaggerating others, and occasionally offering factually incorrect information—in order to present a biased view of history. In particularly, history textbooks' view of the past tends to present white, wealthy, Christian groups in a favorable light while presenting other demographics as marginal or of secondary importance to history.

Throughout his book, Loewen tries to explain why history textbooks are biased toward certain cultures, religions, and classes, and offers several explanations. In part, history textbooks seem to be biased because they're mostly written by white, privileged historians who may be genuinely ignorant of the truth. However, Loewen also entertains the possibility that the white, privileged people who write and publish textbooks are well-aware of their privileged position in society, and are trying to maintain their position by keeping the general public ignorant of the past. Finally, Loewen hypothesizes that history textbooks are biased because their writers and publishers are afraid of creating controversy. For example, a history textbook that told the truth about the genocidal policies of Christopher Columbus might come under criticism for traumatizing children, meaning that, in effect, textbook publishers omit the truth about Columbus in order to keep parents satisfied and maximize their revenue. Loewen does not argue for any single explanation for textbook bias; instead, he suggests that history textbooks are biased against certain demographic groups because of a combination of all three factors.

The bulk of *Lies My Teacher Told Me* is spent analyzing the various subtle ways that history textbooks perpetuate different forms of cultural bias. One of the key ways that textbooks perpetuate bias is by omitting certain facts that paint a particular group in a bad light. For example, despite the fact that the American government orchestrated the overthrow of democratically-elected governments in Chile, the Congo, and many other countries, Loewen notes that history textbooks tend to omit almost any mention of American foreign policy—thereby preserving the illusion that the U.S. government is a benevolent, democratic force. Similarly, textbooks tend to focus on cherry-picked facts or examples that distort our view of a trend or historical process. Most history textbooks discuss the history of immigration, for instance, but they do so by focusing on the experiences of a few lucky immigrants who succeeded in becoming wealthy in America—ignoring the millions of immigrants who were penniless when they arrived in America and remained penniless until they died. In this way, textbooks preserve the illusion that America is a "Land of Opportunity"—and, more implicitly, that

the people who don't succeed in the U.S. must be weak or lazy. Another important trick that textbooks use to perpetuate bias is to offer a subjective interpretation of a particular event or era that neglects a marginalized group's experience. For example, dozens of history textbooks characterized the 1890s as a "gay," optimistic era in American history, in spite of the fact that the 1890s represented arguably one of the lowest points of African American history. It's crucial to recognize that, for the most part, Loewen isn't suggesting that history textbooks offer *factually incorrect* information. Rather, textbooks create a biased view of history by offering distortions of the truth, which are subtler and more difficult to identify, and therefore more difficult for readers to defend themselves against.

In addition to discussing why textbooks are so culturally biased, and how they exhibit their biases in practice, Loewen argues that the main effect of textbook bias is to condition American students to confuse bias with the truth: in other words, to believe (or suspect) that the American government is a benevolent force; that white people are superior to other races; and that poor people deserve to be poor. Whether accidentally or on purpose, textbooks are designed to convey an ethnocentric, classist, and nationalistic message to their readers, and after years of absorbing such a message, students may come to believe it. Even if students are conscious of believing that all races are equal, the government shouldn't be trusted all the time, etc., their time in history class may train them to act on their biases reflexively, even if they "know" better. Loewen's critique of the textbook industry caused a stir when *Lies My Teacher Told Me* appeared in 1995—so much so that, since that time, some textbook companies have made an effort to eliminate racial and cultural bias from their textbooks. Nevertheless, Loewen has continued to criticize textbook bias, suggesting that there's still a lot of work to be done before textbooks present a nuanced, unbiased account of history.

AMBIGUITY

Perhaps the single biggest criticism that Loewen makes of high school history textbooks is that they present the past as a series of clear, non-negotiable facts. Yet history, Loewen argues, isn't about memorizing lists of dates and names; it's about understanding the debate and controversy that go into *interpreting* the past. In a word, history textbooks leave out a concept that should accompany any discussion of the past: ambiguity.

Throughout *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, Loewen teaches American history by giving a sense for the ambiguity of history—contrasting the uncertainty surrounding each historical event with the narrow-minded certainty of the average high school history textbook. At times, he shows, it's difficult to interpret an historical event accurately because no evidence of the event has survived. For example, it's entirely possible that West African explorers sailed to the Americas long before the arrival of Christopher Columbus; however, there isn't enough evidence available to prove that such an event ever occurred. Instead of conveying the widespread uncertainty surrounding when and how humans first arrived in America, most history textbooks dogmatically insist that America was "discovered" in 1492 A.D. In addition to exposing the ambiguity inherent to long-ago historical events, Loewen conveys the ambiguity of individual people's behavior. Too often, history textbooks offer thin, one-dimensional portraits of historical figures, labeling them either "heroes" or "villains." By contrast, Loewen's studies of the lives of John Brown and Abraham Lincoln (to name only two examples) convey a sense of their conflicting thoughts and desires, and the ways that these men changed over time. Even when dealing with relatively recent events, such as the Vietnam War and the War in Iraq, Loewen shows that the "facts" are no clearer than they are for any other historical event: indeed, the economic, political, and cultural biases of the people who orchestrate such conflicts (many of whom are still alive) make it harder, not easier, for historians to reach any conclusions. In all, Loewen characterizes history as a continuous process of evidence-gathering and interpretation, in which even the most plausible conclusions are only approximations of the truth. A history textbook that doesn't convey the role of ambiguity isn't teaching real history at all.

Loewen acknowledges that some high school teachers are unwilling to introduce the concept of ambiguity in their history classes for fear of causing confusion, or giving their students the message that it's all right to "question everything." However, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* demonstrates that it's possible to study history in a lucid, organized way, while still conveying the message that some historical interpretations are more certain than others. While discussing the history of the United States, Loewen gives a realistic sense for the uncertainty surrounding historical events. However, he does *not* send the message that all interpretations of history are equally plausible. Instead, Loewen shows his readers how to weigh different hypotheses and strengthen them by using all available evidence. For instance, Loewen argues that there is some evidence suggesting a West African presence in America before the era of Columbus, while there is much less evidence for a Celtic presence in America. Similarly, when discussing the legacy of Columbus, Loewen rejects the hypothesis that Columbus was a benevolent hero, citing Columbus's own journal entries, among many other sources. At every step of the way, in short, Loewen shows that ambiguity and confusion are not the same. It is possible to be uncertain about the past, and yet have a reasonable, strong hypothesis, bolstered by evidence. Students, he argues, need to learn how to interpret history by weighing evidence and testing their hypotheses, rather than simply accepting the contents of their history textbooks as undeniable facts.

THE POWER OF THE INDIVIDUAL

James Loewen criticizes history textbooks for subtly implying that ordinary, individual people have almost no control over history. As textbooks describe it, history is just "one thing after another"—a series of random events, which often lack clearly defined causes. When textbooks do explore the causes of historical events, these causes are usually either the actions of an implausibly heroic historical figure or the magnanimity of a benevolent government. By presenting history in this way, textbooks create the illusion that history is a strange, foreign process, which readers can observe but never participate in.

When textbooks analyze the causes of important historical events, their analysis is likely to alienate students and give them the impression that ordinary, everyday people have no role in history. Textbooks frequently take the point of view that history is "made" by heroic figures, such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, or Woodrow Wilson. Instead of depicting these figures as realistic, flawed individuals, textbooks tend to "heroify" them, eliminating their flaws and playing up their strengths. For example, most history textbooks neglect to mention that Washington and Jefferson were slave owners, or that Wilson was an outspoken racist. As a result, high school history students get the impression that history is in the hands of virtuous, larger-than-life figures who are unlike them in every way. By contrast, American history textbooks rarely discuss populist movements—in other words, concrete, real-life examples of ordinary people changing the world—at great length. Textbooks largely omit information about the union and socialist movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. To the extent that they study the civil rights movement of the 1960s, textbooks are more inclined to credit the federal government with improving life for African Americans than the millions of everyday people who fought for freedom—despite the fact that, in many ways, the federal government tried to destroy the civil rights movement. The result is that high school history textbooks condition students to believe that they have little power to change society—when, in fact, most changes in American society resulted from ordinary, everyday people working together, rather than from the federal government or a few exceptional people.

Another strategy that history textbooks use to make high school students feel passive is to create a distance between the past, the present, and the future: in other words, they deemphasize the ways that the past brings about the present, and the ways that current events and trends will influence the future. In general, textbooks portray the historical events of the past as having little relevance to the present day. For example, textbooks depict slavery as a barbaric but now antiquated practice, rather than talking about the ideas—racism and white supremacy—that made slavery possible, and which survive in the 21st century. Similarly, history textbooks tend to end on a bland, optimistic note, arguing that America has always been the greatest country in the world, and will, hopefully, continue to be. Absent from the final pages of history textbooks, Loewen notes, is any discussion of the serious problems that face future generations—including climate change and nuclear proliferation—let alone a discussion of how to end these problems. The implication is that history has nothing of substance to teach today's students about how to solve the world's problems—in other words, the opposite of the lesson that students should be learning in history class.

Ultimately, the reason that students find history classes "boring" isn't because students are lazy, but rather because history classes are in some ways *designed* to be boring. As Loewen argues, history textbooks are designed to make readers feel powerless and insignificant, and to make them believe that nothing they do can have any broad effect on the world.

TEXTBOOK PRODUCTION

The bulk of *Lies My Teacher Told Me* examines the biases in contemporary textbooks' accounts of American history. However, some of the book is also about the ins and outs of the textbook industry. In order to understand why history textbooks are so naïve and uninteresting, Loewen looks at the financial incentives of major publishing houses, coming to the conclusion that, in no small part, textbooks are bad because publishing houses are businesses that need to maximize revenue.

Loewen begins with the premise that publishing houses, just like any other American business, have a strong incentive to make money. Conceived in this way, publishing houses are businesses, and their product is the textbook itself. Like good businesses, publishing houses try to appeal to as many customers as possible by making their "product" flashy, eye-catching, and fun—qualities that have very little relevance to, and may even interfere with, the historical accuracy of the textbook. In order to sell textbooks, publishing companies must appeal to school boards and selection committees, many of which are given only three months to choose a history textbook from a list of dozens. To stand out from other textbooks, publishers use gimmicks, such as visual aids, maps, reading outlines, and chapter summaries. Textbooks that include such features are most likely to appeal to selection committees, because they suggest that the textbook itself is easy to read and appealing to students. However, publishing gimmicks actually make the textbook harder to read and more alienating for high school students: as Loewen argues, excessive outlines and summaries make history seem like a chaotic jumble of facts and dates, rather than a strong, cohesive narrative. In short, publishing houses have become adept at fooling textbook selection committees into thinking that their textbooks are easier to read and more substantive when, in fact, they're just

flashier and more gimmicky than the competition.

While they spend millions of dollars making textbooks *seem* good, publishing companies often neglect the quality of the actual historical text. During the course of his research, Loewen learned that, despite advertising that their textbooks are written by famous historians, many publishing companies hire ghostwriters to write the content of their textbooks, and then "slap a famous historian's name" on the cover. Writing a thousand-page history textbook is extremely difficult, even for a great historian—thus, it's easier for both the historian and the publishing company to outsource the process to a team of ghostwriters. (Furthermore, the historian in question is unlike to face any consequences, since other professional historians pay little, if any, attention to high school textbooks.) The problem, however, is that these ghostwriters may not be experts on American history. In this way, history textbooks maintain the illusion of competence and authoritativeness, even though their true authors often lack any complex understanding of American history. In all, Loewen shows how the need to make money leads textbook publishers to focus their attention on "flash" and neglect content, resulting in brightly-colored but poorly written textbooks.

THE ROLE OF IDEAS IN HISTORY

As Loewen sees it, one of the most striking problems with history textbooks is that they largely exclude ideas. They present history as an endless series of events, figures, and dates, but give no sense for the religions, philosophies, and cultural trends that often motivate people's behavior. Loewen argues that it is critical that students of history have some sense for the role of ideas, for a number of reasons. First, ideas exert a profound influence over individual people's actions; second, ideas humanize the people of the past by showing that they were complex and changed their minds over time; third, ideas provide students of history with a sense for the "flow" of history, and show students that history is relevant in their own lives.

At the most basic level, Loewen argues, it is important for students to understand ideas when they study history, because ideas motivate the bulk of human behavior. Ideas can inspire human beings to act against their own rational interests, and even sacrifice their lives for a cause. During the Civil War, for instance, there were many idealistic young soldiers and activists who laid down their lives because they were passionate believers in the abolitionist cause. It is a mark of the absence of ideas from high school history textbooks that John Brown—the abolitionist activist who was executed for raiding Harpers Ferry—is almost always characterized as a religious fanatic or a madman, when there is considerable evidence that Brown was a deeply thoughtful man who *chose* to sacrifice himself in order to free as many slaves as possible. Because textbooks don't engage with Brown's writings and speeches, they have no way of understanding why he would endanger himself—and therefore, they have no choice but to characterize him as a mere "madman."

The life of John Brown raises an important point about the role of ideas in history: when students study historical figures' ideas, they begin to see that historical figures aren't so different from the people of the present. Studying the ideas of important historical figures, such as John Brown and Abraham Lincoln, it's clear that both men were deeply conflicted about their own beliefs, and spent their entire lives coming to terms with issues of race and citizenship. As Loewen argues, one of the major problems with textbooks is that they characterize historical figures as one-dimensional and larger-than-life. Thus, studying historical figures' ideas (rather than just their actions) provides some much-needed nuance. With the help of ideas, then, high school students can learn that the people of the past were just like the people of the present: they were flawed, deeply conflicted, and—crucially—they changed their minds over time. Furthermore, when students start to see historical figures as complex, three-dimensional human beings, they begin to feel a connection between their own lives and those of the historical figures, and history as a subject becomes less boring.

In the same sense that studying historical figures' ideas makes those figures seem more lifelike and complex, studying the role of ideas in history overall makes history seem like a coherent process, with great relevance to the present. As it's usually taught in high school classrooms, Loewen argues, history is just "one thing after another." However, when students think of history as the study of different ideas, it's easier for them to draw parallels between the past and the present. For instance, most history textbooks talk about slavery as a historical phenomenon, without addressing the racist ideas that legitimized slavery. Loewen argues that by using a discussion of racism—an ideology which is alive and well in the 21st century—to contextualize slavery, history textbooks would make the events of the antebellum South seem much more relevant to 21st century students' lives. In general, Loewen argues, when history textbooks address the role of ideas, history becomes a fascinating, relevant subject for students, rather than a mere catalogue of events that happened a long time ago.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE FIRST THANKSGIVING

There aren't many symbols in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, since it's a work of nonfiction (and, in a way, a work of meta-nonfiction, or nonfiction *about* nonfiction). One

exception to this rule is the first Thanksgiving, as Loewen describes it in Chapter 3. Most history textbooks treat the New England pilgrims' first Thanksgiving, during which they (supposedly) invited the local Native Americans to dine with them, as a literal historical event. Loewen argues that the first Thanksgiving was, in fact, nothing of the kind: it was a myth, invented by the pilgrims and their descendants to justify the European settlers' expansion into North America. Loewen argues that the first Thanksgiving is meant to symbolize the unequal exchange between European settlers and Native Americans—the Europeans invited the natives to *their* meal, not the other way around. In a broader sense, the first Thanksgiving is an apt symbol for the way that history textbooks distort the facts to create a comforting, ethnocentric myth.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Touchstone edition of *Lies My Teacher Told Me* published in 2007.

Introduction Quotes

Textbooks encourage students to believe that history is facts to be learned. "We have not avoided controversial issues," announces one set of textbook authors; "instead, we have tried to offer reasoned judgments" on them—thus removing the controversy! Because textbooks employ such a godlike tone, it never occurs to most students to question them.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

One of Loewen's most important criticisms of the modern American history textbook is that it gives no sense for the controversy or the ambiguity of interpreting history. Here, Loewen quotes from one popular American history textbook, which purports to have "simplified" controversial issues to make history more palatable for high school students. Loewen argues that textbooks shouldn't simplify information or eliminate controversy; rather, their role should be to convey these things to students.

As Loewen shows in his book, history is largely about interpreting and questioning different kinds of sources. There is, indeed, no such thing as a "godlike" source—every document should be questioned and tested for bias. A good student of history, then, will learn how to study different forms of bias in order to approximate the truth. Therefore, by presenting history as a certain succession of names, facts, and dates, rather than an ambiguous, controversial process, history textbooks don't truly teach history at all.

Chapter 1 Quotes

In the case of Woodrow Wilson, textbooks actually participate in creating the social archetype. Wilson is portrayed as "good," "idealist," "for self-determination, not colonial intervention," "foiled by an isolationist Senate," and "ahead of his time."

Related Characters: President Woodrow Wilson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Loewen studies the life of President Woodrow Wilson, who is often remembered for leading the U.S. during World War I, or for spearheading a series of progressive changes in American society. Wilson is, in short, remembered as one of America's greatest presidents. But, as Loewen points out, Wilson was also one of America's most actively racist presidents, and one of its most imperialist and interventionist presidents, regularly interfering with other countries' democratically elected governments.

Loewen's theory for why, exactly, Wilson is remembered as a hero, not a tyrannical racist, is that people *want* to believe the best of historical figures. Thus, people want to believe that Wilson was the archetypal good leader—a strong, idealistic, democratic president. Instead of challenging people's expectations about Wilson (and any number of other historical figures), textbooks seem to reinforce these expectations, painting a rosy picture of Wilson and his career. The passage is particularly important because it alludes to the fact that the general public—not just textbook publishers and writers—are complicit in preserving Americans' ignorance of the past: in other words, history textbooks are biased because ordinary people are biased, too.

Chapter 2 Quotes

We live with this arms race still. But the West's advantage in military technology over the rest of the world, jealously maintained from the 1400s on, remains very much contested. Just as the thirteen British colonies tried to outlaw the sale of guns to Native Americans, the United Sates now tries to outlaw the sale of nuclear technology to Third World countries. A key point of George W. Bush's foreign policy has been to deny nuclear weapons and other "weapons of mass destruction" to Iraq, Iran, and North Korea and keep them out of the hands of terrorists like al-Qaeda.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Loewen discusses the historical factors that led the Spanish government to send Christopher Columbus on an expedition to explore the Americas. While many textbooks argue that Columbus went to America because of a collective "burst of curiosity" in Europe, Loewen offers a much simpler and more believable explanation: 15th century European rulers were investing huge amounts of money in military technology (including ships, swords, and armor), and therefore had surplus equipment to send on expeditions.

Loewen goes even further in the passage, analogizing the strategy of 15th century European rulers to the foreign policy of modern leaders like George W. Bush. Bush's strategy was simple: stockpile military technology and prevent everyone else from doing the same. In this way, America has maintained its status as global superpower for more than a century. Loewen's comparison between 15th century monarchs and a 21st century, democratically elected president might surprise or even offend some readers. And yet Loewen argues that bold, century-spanning comparisons of the kind he makes here are vital to the study of history. Students need to learn how to compare the events of the past with those of the present—otherwise, history is just a collection of boring facts with no relevance to the modern world.

The textbooks concede that Columbus did not start from scratch. Every textbook account of the European exploration of the Americas begins with Prince Henry the Navigator, of Portugal, between 1415 and 1460. Henry is portrayed as discovering Madeira and the Azores and sending out ships to circumnavigate Africa for the first time. The textbook authors seem unaware that ancient Phoenicians and Egyptians sailed at least as far as Ireland and England.

Related Characters: Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal, Christopher Columbus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Loewen analyzes textbooks' treatment of the European exploration of the Americas. History textbooks make the mistake of saying that Europeans—such as Prince Henry the Navigator, an important Portuguese monarch and maritime pioneer—were the "first" people to undertake important maritime expeditions across the world, ignoring the achievements of the Phoenicians, the Egyptians, and many other ancient, non-Western societies.

The further implication of history textbooks' Eurocentric view of world exploration is that, absurd as it sounds, Europe "invented technology." Instead of celebrating other cultures for contributing to European science, mathematics, and technology, the average American history textbook implies that white, Western Europeans (including Americans, many of whom are descended from white Europeans) developed virtually all the key technologies of the modern world. By ignoring the non-Western predecessors to European exploration, textbooks reinforce the idea that Europe pioneered world exploration, and the technology to go with it, single-handedly.

Europe's fascination with the Americas was directly responsible, in fact, for a rise in European self-consciousness. From the beginning America was perceived as an "opposite" to Europe in ways that even Africa never had been. In a sense, there was no "Europe" before 1492. People were simply Tuscan, French, and the like. Now Europeans began to see similarities among themselves, at least as contrasted with Native Americans. For that matter, there were no "white" people in Europe before l492.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61-62

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Loewen discusses one of the most important legacies of the Europeans' "discovery" of America; the presence of Native Americans led Europeans to think of themselves *as* Europeans for the first time in history. In a similar sense, Europeans began to define themselves according to their race, deliberate contrasting themselves with the peoples of the "New World."

Loewen takes a dialectical view of identity: as he sees it, every group (whether it be racial, national, or cultural) is defined in contrast to its opposite. Thus, Europeans didn't think of themselves as the bearers of a single cultural or racial identity until they'd encountered a new group—Native Americans—against which to contrast themselves. The passage is particularly important because it supports the point that Europeans' discovery of the Americas was a two-way cultural exchange, contrary to what most textbooks assume. The passage also signals the importance of ideas and ideology in American history—a theme Loewen will return to in a later chapter.

Chapter 3 Quotes

The "navigation error" story lacks plausibility: the one parameter of ocean travel that sailors could and did measure accurately in that era was latitude—distance north or south from the equator. The "storms" excuse is perhaps still less plausible, for if a storm blew them off course, when the weather cleared they could have turned southward again, sailing out to sea to bypass any shoals. They had plenty of food and beer, after all. But storms and pilot error leave the Pilgrims pure of heart, which may explain why most textbooks choose one of the two.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

The passage analyzes some of the different explanations that history textbooks provide for how English pilgrims came to live in New England in 1620. It's an established fact that a group of pilgrims (along with many non-religious members) sailed for Virginia in 1620—however, their ship may have been swept north by a storm. It's also possible that some members of the ship led a mutiny and steered the ship away from Virginia, toward New England. As Loewen points out, textbooks ignore the legitimate possibility that the settlers may have turned on themselves during their voyage to America, for such an explanation would characterize the "pilgrims" as violent or unruly. Instead of advocating for the "mutiny theory"—or acknowledging any controversy or ambiguity—textbooks claim with certainty that the pilgrims ended up in New England because of storms or navigational errors.

Why would a textbook want to portray the pilgrims as orderly, calm, and generally non-mutinous? Because, Loewen speculates, history textbooks aren't just factual records of the past: when describing the New England pilgrims, history textbooks essentially provide students with an American "creation myth"—an idealized account of how America came to be. Textbooks want to present the country's founders in the best possible light; thus, they ignore historical ambiguity or the possibility of mutiny altogether.

The archetypes associated with Thanksgiving—God on our side, civilization wrested from wilderness, order from disorder, through hard work and good Pilgrim character—continue to radiate from our history textbooks.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Loewen offers the story of the "first Thanksgiving" as a classic example of a creation myth disguised as history. While history textbooks claim that there was a literal first Thanksgiving, during which the civilized pilgrims of New England invited the wild, half-naked Native Americans to dine with them, Loewen suggests that the truth was very different. If there was a first Thanksgiving at all, then the Native Americans would have hosted the pilgrims and provided them with food—not the other way around.

Loewen makes an important point about history: history textbooks don't necessarily offer *false* information about the pilgrims, but they distort and exaggerate the facts to paint a semi-mythical picture of the "first Americans." In theory, the only purpose of history should be to report on the past. However, Loewen shows that the purpose of the first Thanksgiving story is much broader and more abstract: to

reinforce certain ethnocentric ideas about the superiority of Western, European culture, and to celebrate, in an almost ritualistic sense, the colonization of America.

Chapter 4 Quotes

Textbook authors seem not to have encountered the trick question, "which came first, civilization or the wilderness?" The answer is civilization, for only the "civilized" mind could define the world of Native farmers, fishers, and gatherers and hunters, coexisting with forests, crops, and animals, as a "wilderness." Calling the area beyond secure European control frontier or wilderness makes it subtly alien. Such a viewpoint is intrinsically Eurocentric and marginalizes the actions of nonurban people, both Native and non-Native.

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, about the history of European Americans' perception of Native Americans, Loewen argues that contemporary history textbooks reflect the strong ethnocentric bias in American society. There are various small ways to measure the bias of history textbooks. For example, most textbooks un-ironically characterize America as European settlers found it as a "wilderness." As Loewen points out, the word "wilderness" connotes the existence of a "civilization," against which wilderness can be measured and understood. In such a sense, textbooks' use of the word "wilderness" confirms their assumption that Native Americans were somehow un-civilized or primitive.

The truth about the Native Americans, as Loewen takes great pains to point out, is that they weren't primitive in any sense of the word. The Native Americans had sophisticated navigational methods, stories, cooking methods, and music. While it's true that many Native Americans had no agriculture, and coexisted with the natural world, Loewen argues that non-agricultural societies are not necessarily any more "primitive" than agricultural societies (and they may even be less violent). Instead of blindly repeating the usual dogma about Native American inferiority, history textbooks need to challenge the idea that European settlers were innately superior to the Native Americans, or that they had the right to colonize the continent.

The answer to minimizing the Indian wars is not maximizing them. Telling Indian history as a parade of white villains might be feel-good history for those who want to wallow in the inference that America or whites are bad. What happened is more complex than that, however, so the history we tell must be more complex.

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Chapter Four, Loewen makes some important points about how history should be written. While it's true that European settlers conducted a series of treacherous and even genocidal policies that aimed to wipe out the Native American population, it would be wrong to characterize the European project of colonization as inherently "evil," just as current history textbooks are wrong to characterize the project as inherently good. There is much to criticize but also much to admire about Europeans' relations with Native Americans. A good history textbook should give some sense of the complexity of European-Native American relations, instead of glorifying *or* demonizing the European settlers.

What, exactly, does Loewen mean by "complexity?" In part, he suggests that history textbooks should give a better sense of the reciprocal relationship between European settlers and the Native Americans. For instance, Loewen shows how Europeans were inspired to fight for democracy and equality in part because of their admiration for the structure of Native American tribes. In some ways, there was a lengthy, fruitful cultural exchange between Europeans and Native Americans, which went on for many centuries. By studying this cultural exchange, history textbooks could give a more realistic, complex account of early American history.

Chapter 5 Quotes

U.S. territorial expansion between 1787 and 1855 was owed in large part to slavers' influence. The largest pressure group behind the War of 1812 was slaveholders who coveted Indian and Spanish land and wanted to drive Indian societies farther away from the slaveholding states to prevent slave escapes.

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

When textbooks discuss the history of slavery in America, they often portray it as an isolated, obsolete practice that wasn't really a major part of American culture—only of Southern culture, and even then, only for a relatively short time. But as the passage suggests, slavery and the ideology that justified it, white supremacy, played a major role in shaping the United States in its early years. Consider, for example, that almost all the early American presidents were slave owners, or, as the passage suggests, that the U.S. expanded westward because powerful slave owners influenced the government to support expansionist policies.

In short, slavery was not a trivial or incidental part of American history, contrary to what many textbooks claim—slavery profoundly impacted the history of the United States. It is characteristic of high school history class that it tries to marginalize the role of slavery, painting a cheerier view of the past.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Taking ideas seriously does not fit with the rhetorical style of textbooks, which presents events so as to make them seem foreordained along a line of constant progress. Including ideas would make history contingent: things could go either way, and have on occasion. The "right" people, armed with the "right" ideas, have not always won. When they didn't, the authors would be in the embarrassing position of having to disapprove of an outcome in the past. Including ideas would introduce uncertainty. This is not textbook style. Textbooks unfold history without real drama or suspense, only melodrama.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Six, Loewen argues that history textbooks need to do a better job of addressing the role of ideas in history. It's undeniable that ideas motivate humans to make big, historical decisions (for instance, the pilgrims might never have journeyed to America had it not been for their religious convictions). And yet, history textbooks rarely spend a lot of time talking about what historical figures believed; instead, all the emphasis lies on what historical figures *did*.

Why don't textbooks study historical ideas more thoroughly? Loewen argues that textbooks take a teleological view of history; in other words, they imply that history was "meant" to happen, and that the "right people" have always triumphed (perhaps unintentionally confirming the old saying that history is written by the winners). If they discussed ideas, textbooks would have to admit that history is *not* a predestined process; it is, on the contrary, an uncertain struggle in which opposing sides clash, exchanging and absorbing ideas. Another reason that textbooks ignore the role of ideas, which Loewen offers later on in the book, is that it's easier for teachers to present history as a series of facts and dates—introducing ideas into the mix would make history much subtler and thus, much harder to teach.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ In the most recent *American Pageant*, for example, social class goes unmentioned in the twentieth century. Many teachers compound the problem by avoiding talking about social class in the twenty-first. A study of history and social studies teachers "revealed that they had a much broader knowledge of the economy, both academically and experientially, than they admitted in class." Teachers "expressed fear that students might find out about the injustices and inadequacies of their economic and political institutions." By never blaming the system, American history courses thus present Republican history.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

Another glaring hole in American history textbooks, Loewen argues, is class. Class is undeniably a huge part of life—one's class largely determines one's options in life, one's culture, and more. Furthermore, American history is, to no small extent, a history of class conflict. In the late 19th century, for example, unions, made up of working-class laborers, fought for shorter workdays and better pay, often sacrificing their lives to do so. Amazingly, history textbooks omit most of the information about union history—or about class in general.

As Loewen argues in the passage, history textbooks—such as *The American Pageant*—are perpetuating an overly idealized view of American society, in which all people, regardless of their social standing, have the same opportunities for success and wealth. When he mentions "Republican history," Loewen doesn't *just* refer to the Republican Party of the United States (although he makes no secret of his distaste for Republicans); rather, he also

seems to mean "Republican history" in the sense of a version of history that is overly flattering to the federal government and the structure of American society (i.e., the "republic"). Textbooks should be bolder in criticizing "the system" of American society, which ensures that some Americans will be poor, regardless of their talent.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ High school American history textbooks do not, of course, adopt or even hint at the American colossus view. Unfortunately, they also omit the realpolitik approach. Instead, they take a strikingly different tack. They see our policies as part of a morality play in which the United States typically acts on behalf of human rights, democracy, and "the American way."

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter 8, Loewen discusses history textbooks' analysis of American foreign policy, and comes to some disturbing conclusions. He begins by looking at the way professional historians think of American foreign policy. For the most part, historians divide into two main camps: the school of thought that argues that America is an aggressive, self-interested country that exploits the rest of the world for its own benefit (the "colossus view"), and the school of thought that argues that America, while certainly flawed, has generally acted for the "greater good" of democracy and equality (even if this greater good necessitates some short-term human rights violations). Instead of adopting either one of these views (let alone leaving readers to choose between them), textbooks offer the naïve idea that America is a benevolent, democratic country that intervenes in the rest of the world only to promote peace and equality.

The only way that textbooks can endorse such an obviously untrue belief, Loewen goes on to say, is by deliberately omitting almost all discussion of the American government's specific foreign policy decisions. Textbooks don't get into the assassination of Salvador Allende and Patrice Lumumba, or the dozens of assassination attempts on Fidel Castro—all of which were partly or entirely engineered by the federal government of the United States.

❝ In telling of Watergate, textbooks blame Richard Nixon, as they should. But they go no deeper. Faced with this undeniable instance of governmental wrongdoing, they manage to retain their uniformly rosy view of the government.

Related Characters: President Richard Nixon

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 234

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Loewen discusses history textbooks' treatment of President Richard Nixon—one of the few figures in American history whom textbooks depict as a fairly unambiguous "villain." While it's undeniably true that Richard Nixon was a corrupt politician who violated his contract with the American people in many capacities (waging secret, illegal wars in other countries; breaking into the Watergate Hotel to interfere with prominent members of the Democratic party; attempting to sabotage various "enemies"), Loewen's point is that Nixon isn't *uniquely* corrupt or villainous. On the contrary, other politicians engaged in much of the same behavior as Nixon—Nixon's mistake was to "push the envelope" too far.

In effect, Loewen argues that history textbooks treat Richard Nixon as a scapegoat for the crimes of the federal government as a whole. The implication of textbooks' account of Nixon is that, after Nixon was forced to resign from the White House, all problems with federal corruption were permanently solved. But the truth, as Loewen shows elsewhere in *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, is that federal corruption neither began nor ended with Nixon—the federal government has betrayed its contract with the people for almost as long as it's been in existence.

❝ By taking the government's side, textbooks encourage students to conclude that criticism is incompatible with citizenship. And by presenting government actions in a vacuum, rather than as responses to such institutions as multinational corporations and civil rights organizations, textbooks mystify the creative tension between the people and their leaders. All this encourages students to throw up their hands in the belief that the government determines everything anyway, so why bother, especially if its actions are usually so benign.

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 243

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Chapter 8, Loewen studies some of the effects of textbooks' lackluster analyses of the federal government. By omitting almost all mentions of federal corruption or immorality (with the notable exception of Richard Nixon, whom textbooks treat as a scapegoat), textbooks imply that the American government has always acted in the best interests of its people. A further implication is that ordinary people need not worry themselves with fighting for their rights—since the benevolent American government will surely protect these rights.

In short, history textbooks teach the opposite of the lesson they should be teaching. As Loewen shows, American history is full of inspiring stories of ordinary citizens who worked together to fight for the right to vote, work, marry whomever they loved, etc. Lobbying the government and exercising one's rights to freedom, speech, press, and assembly, is a critical part of being an American citizen—but disturbingly, history textbooks fail to communicate such a point.

Chapter 10 Quotes

The contrast between the 1892 and 1992 celebrations of Columbus's first voyage again shows the effect of different vantage points. As Anaïs Nin put it, we see things as we are, and "we" changed between 1892 and 1992.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 263

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Loewen makes an important point about historiography, the study of how history has shifted and subtly changed over time. At different points in time, the public (and even or especially, professional historians) interpret the past in different ways, according to biases of class, race, gender, ethnicity, or religion. For example, Woodrow Wilson became a much more popular figure in the 1950s than he'd been even twenty years previously—in part because Americans in the 1950s were locked in a Cold War with the Soviet Union, and needed to believe in an idealistic, heroic leader who had "made the world safe for democracy." Or, as the passage mentions, we can look to the U.S.'s celebrations of Columbus's discovery of America in 1892 compared to 1992—the former was a more overtly jingoistic celebration of America's own power, while the latter was heavily influenced by political correctness and Native American protests.

In short, history is as much about the people writing history—with their unique biases—as it is about the historical facts themselves. By presenting history as a series of undeniable facts, textbooks utterly fail to give students a sense for the nuances of historical interpretation.

The initial U.S. response to 9/11 was to attack the Taliban government in Afghanistan in October 2001. Like Hussein, this fundamentalist Muslim regime had initially been supported by our CIA because they opposed the previous Communist regime in Afghanistan, which was backed by the Soviet Union.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 271

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of this chapter, Loewen discusses America's involvement in the Middle East following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. After 9/11, the Bush administration sent troops to both Afghanistan and Iraq, with the stated goals of protecting Americans from dangerous terrorists, and of installing democratic regimes in those nations. As Loewen points out, the Bush administration failed to mention that the U.S.'s opponents in both Afghanistan and Iraq (the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, respectively), had once been American allies, backed by the CIA. In the 1980s, the American government armed Hussein and the Taliban in order to strengthen its position in the Middle East against Soviet encroachment. Twenty years later, America's military strategy came back to haunt it, as its former allies turned against it.

Loewen's point is that that history textbooks have an obligation to write about the relationship between the Taliban, the American government, and the Cold War—in general, textbooks need to do a better job of conveying the connections between America's foreign policy decisions at different times in its history. However, because America's connection with the Taliban is embarrassing for the government (and, in the years since *Lies My Teacher Told Me* was published, many conservative figures have attacked Loewen for criticizing the government), textbooks omit the truth.

Chapter 11 Quotes

Even most textbooks that don't end with their titles close with the same vapid cheer. "The American spirit surged with vitality as the nation headed toward the close of the twentieth century," the authors of *The American Pageant* assured us in 1991, ignoring opinion polls that suggested the opposite.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 281

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter 11, Loewen studies the tone of optimism on which nearly all high school history textbooks end. For Loewen, this blind optimism is a sign of how out of touch textbooks are with the realities of American life. The simple fact is that America faces some serious problems as it moves through the 21st century; furthermore, the majority of Americans recognize that their country faces many challenges, as reflected by the opinion polls that suggest that most Americans look to the future with anxiety.

By conveying blind optimism instead of truth, Loewen argues, textbooks fail their most basic obligation to young students: to teach them how the study of the past can be used to solve the problems of the future. Instead, textbooks convey the idea that history "just happens"—in other words, that individual people can't do anything to alter America's inevitable greatness, and thus should remain passive.

Authors should have shown trends in the past that suggest we face catastrophe and other trends that suggest solutions. Doing so would encourage students to use evidence from history to reach their own conclusions. Instead, authors assured us that everything will come out right in the end, so we need not worry much about where we are going. Their endorsement of progress was as shallow as General Electric's, a company that claims, "Progress is our most important product," but whose ecological irresponsibility has repeatedly earned it a place on Fortune's list of the ten worst corporate environmental offenders. No longer do I suggest this evenhanded approach. Even though Simon is right and capitalism is supple, in at least two ways our current crisis is new and cannot be solved by capitalism alone.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 291

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Loewen discusses some potential ways to teach children about environmentalism. In earlier years (and earlier editions of the book), Loewen took a characteristically balanced view of environmental education. He believed that teachers should expose their students to two competing views, and encourage them to make up their minds: first, the view that America's energy consumption will bring about a global catastrophe; second, the view that Americans will be able to continue consuming energy because capitalism and technology will find ways of staving off global catastrophe. Writing in the new edition of *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, however, Loewen now insists that teachers must take a "harder" view of environmentalism; they must stress that capitalism and technology are not enough to solve the world's environmental problems. Loewen then proceeds to talk about why capitalism is insufficient for solving environmental problems—in part, because it encourages people and businesses to think in the short term, when environmental issues necessitate long-term thinking.

Throughout his book, Loewen has argued for an open-ended form of education, in which students are encouraged to choose between different interpretations of the past. But when it comes to the environment, Loewen concludes that open-endedness is not enough—the stakes of environmental degradation are so enormous that students *need* to be made aware of the problem, and must not be deluded into believing that "everything will be all right."

In that year, to take a small but symbolic example, A. T. Morgan, a white state senator from Hinds County, Mississippi, married Carrie Highgate, a black woman from New York, and was reelected. Today this probably could not happen, not in Hinds County, Mississippi, or in many counties throughout the United States. Nonetheless, the archetype of progress prompts many white Americans to conclude that black Americans have no legitimate claim on our attention today because the problem of race relations has surely been ameliorated.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 295

Explanation and Analysis

Loewen argues that the study of history at the high school level has brought about a powerful form of bias: bias against

the past. In other words, high school history students are trained to assume that things get better over time: wealthier, happier, more democratic, and more equitable. One need only read the final page of a high school history textbook to see how history classes create such a bias; textbooks always close with the message that life will continue to improve in America, as it has throughout the past.

To counter textbooks' bias, Loewen offers an obscure historical anecdote about a 19th century white politician in Mississippi who married a black woman, and yet was reelected (a situation that, per Loewen, would be unlikely to happen in Mississippi in the 21st century). The fact that such an anecdote seems untrue is a mark of our bias against the past: we've been trained to think that the 21st century is more tolerant and open-minded than the 19th, despite some strong evidence to the contrary. Studying history—real history, not the bland, neutered version of history that textbooks offer—must be the cure for Americans' bias against the past.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ It's not just these two books that suffer from anonymous writing. Editors tell me that recent chapters of American history textbooks are "typically" written by freelance writers.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 319

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter 12, Loewen studies the secret practices of textbook writing and publishing. In this passage, he discusses one of his most surprising discoveries: in the textbook world, it's common practice for publishing companies to hire huge teams of ghostwriters to compose a textbook, and then slap a famous historian's name on the final product. The result is that standard American history textbooks, supposedly written by famous historians but actually written by people without much knowledge of history at all, contain serious misinterpretations of the past, and even some factual misinformation.

How is it possible for publishing companies to get away with hiring ghostwriters? In part, Loewen shows, famous historians don't mind when publishing companies use their names on textbooks, because the historical community itself doesn't take textbooks seriously—for example, history journals never publish reviews of textbooks. Furthermore, writing a history textbook is a massive undertaking, even for an established historian—it's easier for all concerned if multiple ghostwriters compose the text. The result, however, is that the textbooks themselves con students out of a good history education.

❝ Since textbooks employ a rhetoric of certainty, it is hard for teachers to introduce either controversy or uncertainty into the classroom without deviating from the usual standards of discourse. Teachers rarely say "I don't know" in class and rarely discuss how one might then find the answer. "I don't know" violates a norm. The teacher, like the textbook, is supposed to know. Students, for their part, are supposed to learn what teachers and textbook authors already know. It is hard for teachers to teach open-endedly. They are afraid not to be in control of the answer, afraid of losing their authority over the class.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 328

Explanation and Analysis

Although Loewen argues that historians and publishing companies are largely to blame for the bad quality of history textbooks, he also argues that history teachers are partly to blame. It is easier for history teachers to teach history in a way that leaves no room for ambiguity or even discussion. One reason this is true is that high school students can be loud and unruly—by teaching history as a series of facts, teachers can maintain authority over their classes.

Loewen stresses that teachers shouldn't be demonized for failing to leave room for open-endedness and ambiguity in their history classes. For the most part, teachers are overworked and underpaid, meaning that they have precious few incentives to teach history in a more interesting fashion. Indeed, Loewen makes it clear that no single group of people—publishers, teachers, parents, etc.—can be blamed for the poor quality of textbooks; instead, everyone is at least partly to blame.

❝ After all, if the textbooks aren't true, they leave us with no grounds for defending the courses based on them when students charge that American history is a waste of time. Why should children believe what they learn in American history if their textbooks are full of distortions and lies? Why should they bother to learn it?

Related Themes:

Page Number: 339

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Loewen sums up the message of his entire book. Most people understand that there's something deeply wrong with history as it's taught in public high schools in the United States. Most people would like to blame high school students for the poor quality of history classes—supposedly, students are lazy, disaffected, cynical, foolish, and generally bad at being students. Loewen's response, however, is that students aren't the problem: the problem is that history *textbooks* are poorly written, full of misinformed opinions and biased interpretations. Who, for example, could blame an African American student for "failing" to be excited by a textbook's racially skewed interpretation of Reconstruction? As Loewen puts it, "Why should they bother to learn it?"

Chapter 13 Quotes

Allegiance and socialization, however, are intrinsic to the role of schooling in our society or any hierarchical society. […] Education … encourages students not to think about society but merely to trust that it is good.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 351

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter 13, Loewen studies some of the effects of bad history education on the American people. In this passage he argues that, in some ways, education makes American citizens less curious and free-thinking, not more so. When we study the demographics of Vietnam War support in the early 1970s, we notice a surprising trend: there is an *inverse* correlation between education and support for the war (in other words, the less education you had, the more likely you were to be against the war). Loewen's (controversial) explanation is that education—in no small part, history education—conditions people to trust the establishment, accept whatever the government does, and generally refrain from questioning the state of the world.

Loewen's conclusion might seem overgeneralized, but in a way, the entirety of *Lies My Teacher Told Me* is a support of his thesis. After years and years of studying biased versions of history, the average American student is subtly taught to trust the government and the establishment. Notice that Loewen is *not* saying that education necessarily dulls students' curiosity and distrust for society; in the right hands, real education *could* be used to encourage students to question society and bravely protest the government when it abuses its power.

Afterword Quotes

The answer is not to expand *Lies My Teacher Told Me* to cover every distortion and error in history as traditionally taught, to say nothing of the future lies yet to be developed. That approach would make me the arbitrator—I who surely still unknowingly accept all manner of hoary legends as historical fact.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 356

Explanation and Analysis

Loewen begins the Afterword to *Lies My Teacher Told Me* with an important clarification: even though his book contains a lot of good history, it's not a textbook. Loewen has no intention of making *Lies* into an authoritative history of the country. His intention is to offer short histories of race, colonization, and foreign policy in America as *examples* of how poor existing American history textbooks have become.

The other, perhaps even more interesting point that Loewen makes in this section is that, if *Lies My Teacher Told Me were* to become a history textbook, then one would need to question its content in the same way that Loewen questions the content of existing history textbooks. Loewen has spent many hundreds of pages questioning the biases of textbook authors—and here, in the final pages of the book, he implicitly encourages readers to question his *own* biases (as many of Loewen's detractors did, in fact). *Lies* frequently condemns the authoritative, "godlike" tone of the average history textbook—thus, by encouraging readers to question his own biases, Loewen avoids adopting the same godlike tone.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION: SOMETHING HAS GONE VERY WRONG

High school students hate history, Loewen says, and there are many reasons why. Many students say that history is dull or useless. Additionally, minorities (especially African Americans and Native Americans) tend to be worse at learning history than their white counterparts, perhaps because high school teachers' view of history is "too neat and rosy." Another mark of how bad high school history classes have become is that in college, professors regularly criticize K-12 history classes, and in some ways prefer that their incoming students *not* have taken history in high school at all.

In the opening section of the book, Loewen establishes the problem that he'll go on to analyze: the widespread unpopularity of history class in American high schools. Loewen conveys the extent of the problem by comparing history with other subjects, suggesting that there is something uniquely wrong with history—that is, something fundamentally wrong with the way it's taught in American schools.

The strange thing about history is that even though high school history classes are widely perceived as boring and poorly taught, history itself is widely perceived as fascinating. Historical books and films routinely become blockbusters, and most people would agree that U.S. history is full of gripping stories. So we must ask ourselves: what has gone wrong with high school history classes?

Even though "history" is an unpopular subject in schools, Loewen argues that there's nothing inherently boring or tedious about learning about the past—if there were, then nobody would go to a movie theater to watch a blockbuster historical epic.

To begin answering the question, Loewen says, it's important to notice that history *textbooks* dominate high school history classes to a greater degree than the textbooks for any other subject. History textbooks are huge, colorful, and expensive. Students now have access to free information on the Internet, and yet textbook companies continue printing enormous textbooks, even though they're growing obsolete.

Loewen proceeds in the manner of a sociologist (which he is), trying to determine what might be causing students to perceive history class as boring. In the age of the Internet, the history textbook is rapidly becoming obsolete—and yet publishers keep on printing them.

Students often complain that history textbooks are boring. In part, textbooks are boring because they rarely use the present to illuminate the past. For example, textbooks rarely ask students to think about the role of race in contemporary society as a way of studying the Civil Rights movement. Similarly, history textbooks tend to be overly optimistic and naïve in their view of society. They encourage students to "celebrate America's heritage"—a message that understandably alienates African Americans, women, Native Americans, etc.

Loewen's premise here is that a school subject is interesting largely because students can find some connection between the subject and their own lives. History becomes interesting, then, when students see a connection between their lives and the past. History textbooks are alienating for many American students, however, because they fail to address the darker aspects of America's history (and present).

A more general reason why history textbooks are bad is that they're influenced by nationalistic biases. History textbooks don't just describe American history; they glorify America. Furthermore, the people who write textbooks are rarely top-flight historians; the most gifted historians usually focus on their own research. Finally, textbooks rarely give a sense for the controversy of historical interpretation. Even when a textbook offers more than one side of an issue, it tends to adopt a "godlike tone" that shuts down further discussion of the issue.

In this section, Loewen offers three especially important reasons for the poor quality of textbooks: 1) nationalist biases; 2) mediocre writers; 3) an unambiguous tone that suggests history is a settled issue not open to interpretation. Loewen will examine all three of these reasons in depth later on in the book.

Lies My Teachers To Me is an alternative history textbook that aims to present history as interesting, exciting, and deeply controversial. It includes several chapters on the causes and effects of history textbook usage. It aims, in short, to make history, the most "irrelevant" subject we're taught, highly relevant.

For most of the book, Loewen will "lead by example," sketching out a nuanced, lucid history of the U.S. that implicitly critiques the dry, dull style of most American history textbooks. In the final three chapters, he'll look at some of the cultural and economic reasons for poor textbook quality.

CHAPTER 1: HANDICAPPED BY HISTORY

This chapter is about "heroification"—the process by which fascinating, controversial people are gradually transformed into boring, one-dimensional figures in history textbooks. Textbooks are full of details about the lives of famous people, but rarely do they give a sense for those people's flaws and inconsistencies—i.e., the very things that make them interesting.

One important reason why students don't "connect" with their history textbooks is that the human beings depicted in the textbooks are uninteresting—usually, they're either one-dimensional heroes or villains.

Loewen begins by looking at two familiar figures from history textbooks: Helen Keller and Woodrow Wilson. Almost every American student knows that Keller was deaf and blind, yet learned to read, write, and speak. But textbooks almost never discuss Helen Keller's adult life. In fact, Keller had a fascinating and consequential career as radical socialist. She praised the Soviet Union, supported unions, donated money to the NAACP, and even hung a red flag (a symbol of the Soviet Union, and of socialism) over her desk. Throughout her life, Keller was criticized for her "radical politics." Whether we agree with Keller's beliefs or not, Keller was a remarkable woman, whose legacy stretches far beyond her deaf-blindness—and yet almost no history textbooks say so.

In a few sentences, Loewen paints a vivid portrait of Helen Keller: she comes across as a vivacious, energetic woman who was deeply committed to social justice. Loewen's point is that nowhere in the average high school history textbook would one find a comparable account of Keller's life—as far as high school students are taught, Helen Keller's relevance to history ended in the instant that she learned how to read and write (when, in fact, it seems that Keller's contribution to history only began *with her learning to read and write).*

Woodrow Wilson, the U.S. president during World War I, was an equally controversial figure. During his time in office, the U.S. sent hundreds of thousands of troops to Latin America and the West Indies to install pro-American heads of state. In 1915, for instance, when the democratic government of Haiti refused to join the U.S. in declaring war on Germany, Wilson sent forces to dissolve the Haitian parliament and seize farmers' property. In the ensuing war, American troops murdered more than 3,000 Haitians who fighting for their rights to self-determination and private property.

Woodrow Wilson is best remembered for being the President of the United States during the Progressive era (often said to be when America became a much more liberal and inclusive society) and for leading the country through World War One, when he vowed to "make the world safe for democracy." Yet in spite of his supposed commitment to human rights and democracy, it would seem that Wilson wasn't sincerely committed to either value when they conflicted with US interests.

Amazingly, history textbooks either ignore Wilson's interventionist foreign policy, or characterize Wilson as a "reluctant warrior" who never wanted to send troops to the Americas. Such a characterization is "sheer invention." Many textbooks describe Wilson as a courageous advocate for self-determination who fought for democracy in Europe. The truth, however, is that Wilson regularly violated other countries' rights to self-determination in order to strengthen his own country. When Wilson was in France, supposedly negotiating for democracy and peace, he met with Ho Chi Minh, the future leader of North Vietnam. Wilson ignored Ho Chi Minh's pleas for Vietnamese self-determination, and agreed to allow France to retain control of Vietnam.

This passage is a good example of how history textbooks subtly omit and distort the truth without, technically speaking, lying. Instead of denying that Wilson did, in fact, approve sending troops abroad, textbooks merely argue that Wilson did so against his will, due to the influence of Congress. One particularly striking episode form Wilson's life was his encounter with Ho Chi Minh, when Wilson once again proved that he wasn't as committed to democracy and self-determination as some textbooks would suggest.

Wilson's dismissal of Ho Chi Minh brings up another point about his life that textbooks ignore: Wilson was one of America's most racist presidents. His recent predecessors appointed black Americans to relatively important offices; Wilson, however, did not, and even made a point of appointing "Southern whites to offices traditionally reserved for blacks." Wilson was the first president to segregate the navy, and routinely told offensive stories about "darkies" during his cabinet meetings. He was also a fan of *The Birth of a Nation*, one of the most racist major movies of all time, and his enthusiasm for the film, which glorifies the Ku Klux Klan, was probably a factor in encouraging the organization's growth in the 1920s.

Wilson seems to have perpetuated racism in this country to the full extent of his power: both by enforcing specific laws and executive orders, and by "leading by example," approving of The Birth of a Nation *and sending an implied message of support to the Ku Klux Klan. However, this passage doesn't address some of Wilson's more liberal, tolerant acts as president—for example, appointing the first Jewish justice to the Supreme Court, the influential social justice warrior Louis Brandeis.*

Textbooks rarely offer more than a sentence or two on Wilson's racism—an omission that is, itself, racist. African Americans couldn't possibly consider Wilson a hero, and yet textbooks routinely treat him as one. Textbooks also ignore some of Wilson's other bad decisions. For instance, during World War I, Wilson was known to have supported the Espionage and Sedition Acts, which limited Americans' rights to free speech and banned almost all public criticism of World War I. However, textbooks usually imply that Wilson just "went along" with Congress on the Espionage and Sedition Acts, even though there's no historical evidence for such an interpretation.

Again, textbooks don't lie about Wilson so much as they either omit information about his racism or offer distorted interpretations of his actions (for example, the interpretation that Wilson reluctantly went along with Congress in supporting bans on free speech).

For decades, Michael Frisch, a professor at the University of Buffalo, has asked his students to name the ten most important figures in America history before the Civil War; invariably, his students name Betsy Ross. Betsy Ross's continued fame is perplexing, since it's now known that Ross, contrary to popular belief, didn't sew the first American flag. Frisch posits that Betsy Ross remains famous because she fits Americans' need for a strong "archetype"—a "mother of our country" figure. Perhaps the continued popularity of Woodrow Wilson illustrates our need for another archetype: a strong, idealistic, clear-eyed leader. The problem is that, instead of complicating and challenging naïve archetypes, history textbooks reinforce them.

While Loewen doesn't necessarily agree with Frisch's theory about Betsy Ross in particular, he argues that Frisch brings up an important principle: people want to believe in a certain version of the past, so they voluntarily distort real-life historical figures into semi-mythical heroes. The passage is an early illustration of a point to which Loewen will return at the end of the book: in a sense, ordinary people are as much to blame for historical errors as the textbook companies that perpetuate them.

Why don't textbooks tell the truth about American "heroes?" Recently, a major textbook editor privately said that "sex, religion, and social class" are "taboo" in history textbooks. This is an astonishing statement, because sex, religion, and social class are vital aspects of history. By leaving out Keller's lifelong war against the American class system, for example, textbooks decontextualize Keller's life work and make her seem boring. Textbooks may likewise omit Wilson's racism because they want to be respectful or patriotic.

In part, textbooks gloss over the truth about history and historical figures because it's not always suitable for children. We'll study a good example of this principle in the next chapter, about the life and work of Christopher Columbus—who, for some reason, usually appears in textbooks as a brave, idealistic leader.

Ironically, by portraying Keller, Wilson, and other historical figures as unambiguously heroic, textbooks make student *less* impressed with these figures, not more so. Today's high school students, when asked who their historical heroes are, rarely choose figures such as Helen Keller, Woodrow Wilson, Washington, Abraham Lincoln, or Christopher Columbus. Indeed, some students tell cruel "Helen Keller jokes"—not necessarily because they hate disabled people, but because they want to make fun of the "goody goody" hero about whom their teachers have lectured. If students could learn the truth about Keller—the risks she took in her life, and the controversy that she aroused—they'd be more likely to treat her as a real role model, rather than a punch line.

Loewen's key insight in this section is that by heroifying historical figures, textbooks make those figures more palatable, but also less interesting. Also, notice that Loewen doesn't fault students for telling mean jokes about Helen Keller; as in the first chapter, Loewen blames the textbooks, not the students, for causing an epidemic of apathy. Loewen suggests that students are curious to learn about the past, but not when their textbooks offer up a dull, predictable, glorified version of the past.

CHAPTER 2: 1493

Every American schoolchild must learn a few facts about Christopher Columbus: he sailed to America in 1492, he had three ships, he was funded by the Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella, etc. While Columbus is often portrayed as a great hero, the truth about Columbus is, of course, much more complicated.

Christopher Columbus is perhaps the best example of the way that American history textbooks ignore historical figures' considerable flaws in order to make them seem more heroic to students. Even if Columbus's legacy is vast, he was certainly not the brave, idealistic hero he's said to be.

The first big mistake that history textbooks make with regard to Columbus's life is to ignore the achievements of of previous explorers. Europeans, such as the Vikings, had been traveling to America for centuries before Columbus—the difference is that Columbus arrived at a time when Europe was ideally positioned to take advantage of its new land holdings.

To begin with, it's wrong that students grow up believing that Columbus "discovered" America, considering that other Europeans—to say nothing of the Native Americans themselves—had traveled to America well before him.

While many textbooks talk about the factors that led Europe to explore the Americas in the 15th century, most misrepresent the facts. They suggest that Columbus sailed for America because Europeans were "bursting with curiosity about the world," because they needed spices to disguise the taste of bad meat, or because Turkish Muslims had cut off Europe's access to spice routes. From an historical perspective, such explanations are absurd. There is no way to measure European curiosity in the 1400s; Columbus didn't sail simply to improve the taste of his food; and there's no evidence that Muslims discriminated against Christians during trade. The last explanation for Columbus's voyages might suggest Western racism against Muslims.

Loewen concisely refutes some of the most common explanations for Columbus's voyages to America. Notice that, in refuting the second explanation listed here, he alludes to Western Islamophobia—another "idea" left out of most discussions of history. Loewen implies that, by teaching children that Columbus sailed to America to bypass the villainous Turks' attempts to control the spice market, Westerners perpetuate a biased interpretation of Muslims.

What *were* the cultural and economic factors that led Columbus to explore the Americas in 1492? First, military technology: around 1400, European monarchs commissioned bigger guns and better ships—the tools that they would use to dominate the planet. To this day, Western nations' foreign policy is, in many ways, designed to preserve their monopoly on military technology. Even in the 21st century, when the Bush administration lobbied to keep nuclear weapons out of Third World countries' hands, it was using the same basic policy that Spain used in the 15th century: build the best weapons, and prevent other countries from doing the same.

Throughout this chapter, and the entire book, Loewen draws parallels between history and the present day. Here, for instance, he makes an analogy between European foreign policy in the 15th century and American foreign policy under Bush—suggesting that the most powerful nations always climb to the top and then try to "pull up the ladder" behind them. Whether or not one thinks the analogy between the two eras is appropriate, it's important to recognize that making analogies and connections is a critical part of studying history.

Another key factor motivating Columbus's voyage was the buildup of social technology, such as bookkeeping and printing. A third factor was the cultural and even religious belief that becoming wealthy and controlling other people was a way of going to Heaven. In his writings, Columbus is very clear about why he wanted to explore to the Americas: he wanted to win glory for himself and be rewarded in Heaven. Oddly, many textbooks downplay explorers' economic motive, as if a desire for money were somehow "undignified." Another factor motivating Europe's world exploration was the proselytizing nature of Christianity: explorers felt it was their duty to spread news of Christ around the world. A fifth reason is that European nations had "practiced" dominating island societies earlier in the century. Finally, a major factor in the Europeans' successful exploration of the Americas was their immunity to diseases like smallpox and influenza—diseases that claimed huge numbers of Native American lives.

One implication of this passage is that Europeans were, in a word, lucky to be able to explore America in the late 15th century—it was only because the factors discussed in this section happened to occur around the same time that Europeans were able to harness their technology and send people across the Atlantic Ocean. By stressing the importance of coinciding cultural and economic factors, Loewen conveys the idea that Europe's conquest of America was anything but a historical inevitability—had Native Americans developed immunities to influenza and smallpox, they might have conquered the Europeans instead of the other way around.

Many take it for granted that Western, European countries are the most powerful in the world, but they rarely ask themselves why. The truth is that Europe came to rule the Americas for very specific reasons: the buildup of military technology, immunity to disease, careful organization, and religious justification for conquest.

By ignoring the precise historical factors that led their culture to dominate the world, Westerners are in danger of believing that their supremacy over the rest of the world was inevitable or even predestined. Loewen wants to make it clear that Europe's conquest of America was a product of geographic chance as much as anything else.

Another common textbook bias is the implicit belief that modern technology is a European invention. Thus, textbooks describe European explorers as being the first to round the Cape of Good Hope, when in fact, Phoenician explorers, using impressive maritime technology, did the same thing centuries before. This omission is particularly striking in light of the fact that Phoenicians' expeditions directly inspired 15th century Europeans, including Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal, who organized many important expeditions to the Americas. Instead of treating technology as the product of complex cultural diffusion, most textbooks characterize it as a European invention.

Though no textbook would ever come out and say that Europeans invented technology, textbooks do something much more insidious—they subtly imply *as much via the information they present and emphasize. Thus, textbooks ignore the achievements of the Phoenicians and the other non-Western civilizations that influenced European technological development.*

Even though there's been considerable historical evidence in recent years that other nations had "discovered" America before Columbus, textbooks emphasize the importance of Columbus and marginalize other explorers. Textbooks either omit mentions of the Vikings' expeditions to Newfoundland and Labrador, or argue that these expeditions were inconsequential. Even if such an interpretation were correct, it's important that textbooks acknowledge that Columbus wasn't the first European to sail to America—doing so paints a less "glorified" picture of European history. There is also noteworthy evidence that African explorers sailed to the Americas centuries before Columbus—and yet no history textbooks entertain such a possibility. If textbooks were at least to acknowledge this possibility, they could help to dispel the racist myth that Europeans are superior to all other civilizations.

Textbooks usually present Columbus as a heroic, "one of a kind" explorer, when, in fact, there were plenty of other explorers like him in the years leading up to 1492 A.D.—Vikings, for example. By noting that other people had journeyed to America before Columbus, Loewen emphasizes the point that Columbus wasn't a uniquely *brave or adventurous man (contrary to what many history textbooks imply about him)—he was just lucky to arrive in America at the perfect time; the era when Europe knew exactly what to do with its new colonial holdings.*

An interesting test of the Eurocentrism of history textbooks is to compare their accounts of Irish and West African voyages to the Americas. While there is robust evidence for a West African presence in the Americas prior to Columbus, there is relatively little evidence for Irish exploration—just a handful of legends. And yet almost half of American textbooks surveyed for Loewen's book mention the possibility of Irish exploration in the New World, and none mention West African exploration.

At various points in the text, Loewen offers comparative studies of textbooks—here, for example, he compares textbooks' accounts of African and Irish exploration of the Americas. Comparative studies are important because they give a fuller sense of real textbooks' biases and omissions—Loewen implies that textbooks ignore the possibility of African colonization because of Eurocentrism, or even just plain racism.

Textbooks portray Columbus as a hero who boldly explored the Americas. They say that he was the son of a poor family, or that he courageously ordered his mutinous crew to sail ahead, even though they thought the world was flat. There's no accepted conclusion about what kind of family Columbus came from, and it had been well accepted that the world was round long before 1492. Other textbooks describe Columbus's death melodramatically: supposedly, he died poor and lonely. In fact, Columbus died a famous man: his Spanish supporters immediately recognized the profitability of New World exploration, which is why they sent him on another voyage almost as soon as he'd returned to Europe. At every step of the way, textbooks distort and exaggerate the details of Columbus's life to create a more dramatic story.

This passage is an important example of how history textbooks offer the most dramatic, sentimental interpretation of the facts in order to make historical figures seem particularly glorious or heroic. Thus, even though there's some healthy debate over whether or not Columbus was born into a poor family, textbooks usually insist that he was, thereby reinforcing an image of Columbus as a hard-working, "rags to riches" figure.

Columbus's most lasting legacy was not his discovery of America, however; it was his exploitation and massacre of the indigenous peoples of the Western hemisphere, which utterly transformed the modern world. Columbus's earliest writings about the people he encountered in the Americas stress their agreeability, their docility, and the ease with which he could conquer them. Before returning from his first voyage, Columbus kidnapped several indigenous Americans and brought them back to Spain. On his second voyage, Columbus brought soldiers, who helped him search for gold, and killed and tortured indigenous people. To incentivize his troops, he encouraged them to rape native women. After failing to find any gold, he brought back more indigenous people and offered them to his Spanish masters as slaves. In the following decades, Spanish settlers in the Americas forced thousands of indigenous people to mine for gold and silver. Within a few generations, settlers had wiped out all but a small fraction of the indigenous peoples of Haiti, Mexico, and Peru. After colonialism had nearly wiped out the population of North America, Europeans began using African slaves.

Loewen includes what almost all history textbooks omit from an account of Columbus—excerpts from Columbus's journals and diaries. As Loewen shows, Columbus—far from being a starry-eyed idealist—was harshly realistic about the new continent he'd discovered: he wanted to enslave the native peoples and put them to work mining gold and silver. This passage is also a good example of how Loewen situates different historical episodes in a broader narrative: so, for example, he connects Columbus's exploitation of Native Americans with Europeans' later attempts to enslave Africans. In contrast to Loewen's approach, most high school textbooks either omit any discussion of Native American enslavement, or they treat it as an isolated historical phenomenon with no connection to subsequent historical events.

All the information Loewen has been discussing so far is readily available—there is no controversy about the fact that Columbus was a murderer and a racist. And yet history textbooks continue to praise him, or discuss his genocidal policies as "character flaws."

Previously, Loewen criticized textbooks for failing to characterize the ambiguity surrounding the history of America's "discovery." Here, his point is slightly different: he says that textbooks don't even suggest the possibility of ambiguity in Columbus's life because it's so unambiguous *that he was a murderer. Textbook authors, knowing full-well what they're doing, censor any mention of Columbus's genocidal policies.*

The impact of the discovery of America upon Europe was enormous, and not just in an economic sense. The existence of a place outside Europe, Africa, and Asia—the three continents that Europeans had known about since ancient times—arguably created the European "self-consciousness." Europeans began to see themselves as one unified group of people—a race of "Christian whites," in contrast to the "uncivilized races" of the Americas. Textbooks largely ignore the philosophical changes in European culture caused by the discovery of the Americas—perpetuating the idea that Europeans have always seen themselves as being at the "center of the world."

Another aspect of European colonization that textbooks largely ignore is the effect of American exploration on Europeans' image of themselves. Loewen takes a dialectical view of consciousness—in other words, he suggests that a group of people (here, the Europeans) can only understand themselves when they contrast their group with its opposite. Thus, Europeans only came to see themselves as "Europeans" (rather than Frenchmen, Italians, Englishmen, etc.) after they encountered Native Americans.

Columbus's decision to journey across the Atlantic Ocean was undeniably brave, and yet his conquest was undeniably racist. And while it's certainly true that Columbus was a "product of his time"—a time when slavery and conquest were far more accepted practices than they are today—there were also many notable figures, such as Bartolomé de Las Casas, who opposed Columbus's conquest. When textbooks present Columbus as an unambiguous hero, they not only offend African Americans (whose ancestors may have "discovered" America long before Columbus) and Native Americans (whose ancestors may have been wiped out by Columbus's conquest); they also present a "feel-good history that bores everyone."

Loewen's criticism of history textbooks here is two-pronged: first, he faults textbooks for omitting discussion of other explorers who opposed Columbus's genocide (although, thanks in part to Loewen's influence, some recent textbooks have *included a greater discussion of de Las Casas); second, and more generally, he criticizes textbooks for taking an overly optimistic and simplistic view of history, according to which Columbus's conquest was "for the best."*

CHAPTER 3: THE TRUTH ABOUT THE FIRST THANKSGIVING

When students are asked, "When was the country we now know as the United States first settled?" many answer, "1620"—the year when English pilgrims landed in North America. Such an answer ignores Native Americans (who had "settled" North America millennia ago), Dutch settlers, and Spanish explorers who explored present-day Florida, New Mexico, Texas, and California—perhaps betraying an Anglo-Saxon bias in history textbooks.

Loewen's investigations into textbook bias run deeper than the last chapter suggested: not only do textbooks betray a certain Eurocentric bias; they also exhibit a bias in favor of English explorers (and away from Spanish and Dutch settlers).

The usual "story" about the English pilgrims is that they left England because of religious persecution, settled in Holland, followed by North America, where they befriended the Native Americans and celebrated **Thanksgiving** together. Most students know nothing about the diseases that English fishermen brought with them from Europe in the years leading up to 1620. Because of their exposure to large-scale epidemics, and their regular contact with large mammals, many Europeans built up immunities to smallpox, influenza, and other illnesses. As a result, when English settlers came to New England in the early 17th century, they brought bacterial and viral diseases that wiped out more than 90 percent of the native population of New England. The impact of the Pilgrim's plague was enormous. For fifty years, the Pilgrims faced no challenge from the Native Americans. Long afterwards, European-originating diseases continued to devastate the Native American population, clearing a path for European conquest.

History textbooks rarely discuss the role of germs and bacteria in American exploration, but it is undeniable that Europeans had built up immunities to many diseases, with the result that when Europeans sailed for America, they passed on these diseases to the (non-immune) Native Americans. It is likely that European-borne diseases wiped out huge chunks of the Native American population. This wasn't really the Europeans' fault (at the time, they had no idea what a germ was), but because the history of disease disrupts the narrative that English explorers cooperated with the Native Americans, history textbooks often ignore it entirely.

There's been considerable controversy about the statistics of Native American population depletion. Some have argued that the impact of European disease has been overstated. One such historian argues that there weren't more than one million Native Americans in all of North America before Europeans arrived, meaning that disease didn't kill more than a third of the population. Loewen, however, argues that there were many tens of millions of Native Americans, the vast majority of which died from European-borne disease. He cites the accounts of the pilgrims themselves, who thought that some 95 percent of the Native Americans near their community had died. In contrast to the debate around issues of population depletion, most textbooks give no sense of a controversy; instead, they present conservative estimates of population depletion as facts.

Here, Loewen does what almost no history textbook does: gives a sense of the controversy and debate in the historical community. While Loewen clearly has his own point of view about the role of disease in American history (he thinks it wiped out more than 90 percent of the native population), he acknowledges that his interpretation isn't necessarily true. Ultimately, his point is not that history textbooks offer the wrong disease statistics; rather, he's arguing that textbooks give one set of statistics without giving a sense for the broad disagreement among historians.

Another controversial area of pilgrim history is the pilgrims' intentions. It's not clear if the pilgrims planned to settle in New England, if they had planned to settle further south and accidentally went off-course, or if some of the voyagers (most of whom, it's been established, were not actually religious pilgrims at all, but just ordinary people seeking their fortunes) hijacked the ship and steered it toward New England. Again, textbooks give no sense of historical uncertainty: they present the pilgrims' settling in New England as either an accident *or* a choice, but never a hijacking (perhaps because that would connote crime, and disorganization).

History textbooks continue to omit any sense of ambiguity in historical interpretation. Loewen speculates that their reason for doing so is to present English settlers in the most favorable light possible: a group that collectively decides to sail to New England might come across as more likable than a group that turns on itself and turns the ship around. Another clear example of bias is that textbooks call the English settlers in New England "pilgrims," when, in fact, only a fraction of the settlers were pilgrims—but the word "pilgrim" connotes bravery, idealism, and steadfastness.

Textbooks tend to devote more space to the pilgrims' New England colonies than to the settlements in Jamestown, Virginia. Perhaps the reason why is that pilgrims treated the Native Americans more kindly than their Virginian counterparts, thus painting a picture of European settlers as more moral people. In Virginia, the settlers enslaved and murdered hundreds of Native Americans. And although the pilgrims treated Native Americans better, they didn't always behave honorably; indeed, pilgrims sometimes robbed Native American homes and appropriated Native American cornfields.

Textbooks don't necessarily offer incorrect information; rather, they omit damaging information and present a one-sided account of the English colonization of North America.

It's instructive to look at the life of Squanto, the Native American man who, as almost every schoolchild knows, knew English and helped the pilgrims survive in New England. But how did Squanto know English? Historians are fairly certain that Squanto was kidnapped in the early 1600s and taken to England and then Spain, where he was sold into slavery. Squanto escaped from his owners and returned to England, where he was able to convince a captain to take him back to North America. When he retuned to his home, he found that every single person in his tribe had died in an epidemic. Astoundingly, textbooks almost never include the full information about Squanto's life.

Like Helen Keller, Squanto is a historical figure about whom every American schoolchild knows a few facts. But, just like Helen Keller, almost no American students know the truth about Squanto's life: textbooks offer only the most optimistic and positive details about Squanto, ignoring the fact that Europeans kidnapped and enslaved him.

Another aspect of American history that every schoolchild knows is the "**first Thanksgiving**." But the story of the first Thanksgiving is a creation myth, not a piece of history. Like all creation myths, it praises a group of "creators" (the pilgrims), it tells the story of how an institution came into existence (American society), and it involves a ritualistic reenactment of the past (eating foods like turkey and cranberries).

Loewen makes a nuanced point here. He isn't necessarily saying that there wasn't a literal first Thanksgiving. However, he argues that Americans have distorted the truth about Thanksgiving to make a "creation myth" that serves a clear social function: to justify the emergence of American society, and connect modern Americans with their ancestors.

The "Thanksgiving myth" is highly condescending, if not overtly racist, toward Native Americans. Schoolchildren are taught that the pilgrims kindly shared their food with a few Native Americans, whom they invited to dinner. Throughout their history, Americans have believed in semi-mythical stories of the same variety as the "**first Thanksgiving**" story, in which benevolent Americans provide shelter, food, and medicine for an "uncivilized" minority. The effect of such stories is to perpetuate the ethnocentric lie that Europeans are enlightened, while the other peoples of the world need to be "taught" how to behave.

As Loewen will discuss in more detail in the following chapter, American history conceives of European relations with the Native Americans as a "one way street"—Europeans introduced natives to some new ideas and technologies, but not vice versa. In fact, Native Americans and English settlers engaged in a lively cultural exchange in the years leading up to 1776—contrary to what the image of the first Thanksgiving would suggest.

There may not have been a literal "**first Thanksgiving**." However, the pilgrims' relationship with the Native Americans was, in some ways, worth celebrating. Even if the pilgrims sometimes took advantage of the Native Americans, there is also evidence that they cooperated with the Native Americans, traded fairly with them, and sympathized with them. In other words, it is possible to admire the pilgrims' settlement in New England without glorifying it. In general, students need to learn to admire historical figures and movements without skipping over their major flaws.

In this section, Loewen implicitly defends himself from the accusation that he's just presenting an overly negative, hostile account of European colonization. Loewen's reply is that, in fact, there is plenty to admire about Europeans' colonization. However, the only way to recognize European explorers' legitimate achievements in America (and the only way to make European settlers interesting to students) is to separate their flaws from their virtues and discuss both.

CHAPTER 4: RED EYES

Native Americans have been lied about more often than any portion of the American population. One major reason why this is true is that history textbooks depict them through "white eyes." To be fair, textbooks' accounts of Native American history have improved in recent decades; they include more biographies of specific Native Americans and more accounts of historical events from Native American perspectives. Nevertheless, textbooks continue to take a biased view of Europeans' relations with Native Americans. To correct such biases, Loewen says, we must look at history through "red eyes."

Building off of the point he made at the end of the last chapter, Loewen acknowledges that textbooks' depiction of Native Americans isn't entirely ethnocentric—in fact, textbooks have gotten better at writing about Native Americans in recent years. Yet despite this, there is always something inherently biased about writing only from a white perspective—as Loewen will demonstrate (albeit through the potentially offensive image of "red eyes").

The first mistake that textbooks make about Native American history is to adopt a tone of certainty about the origins of the Native Americans. There is tremendous controversy about when and how the earliest Americans arrived; some archaeologists believe the first Americans were herders who arrived about 70,000 years ago; others say they arrived much more recently. Some textbooks make the mistake of saying that the earliest Americans "accidentally" discovered two new continents, or "did not realize" what they'd discovered. The Native Americans were skilled navigators—they *must* have realized that they'd found a new, unexplored land mass.

The notion that a large group of people could have "accidentally" discovered America is pure ethnocentrism. The Native Americans were good navigators, so, if anything, their discovery of America was far less "accidental" than Columbus's (since, after all, Columbus believed he was sailing to India).

Textbooks also assume that the earliest Americans were not "civilized," because they had no agriculture and warred frequently. In truth, civilizations aren't necessarily peaceful *or* agricultural (and indeed, Western, agricultural societies have been some of the most violent in history). Native Americans had their own sophisticated civilizations, which were markedly different from those of the Europeans. But by representing the Native Americans as primitive and disorganized, textbooks create the impression that the Native Americans were "ripe for conquest" by the enlightened European powers.

While anthropology and history have become more politically correct and open-minded in recent decades, high school history textbooks still seem to be locked in a time when historians considered non-agricultural societies "primitive." There is no rule that agricultural societies are more advanced than non-agricultural societies—and anyone who says so is probably guilty of ethnocentric bias.

Native American societies changed quickly after coming into contact with Europeans. They adopted European technologies and foods, and built in the European style. European settlers deliberately played different Native American tribes against one another, using a "divide and conquer" strategy. Victorious tribes sometimes sold defeated tribesmen as slaves to Europeans in return for guns, kettles, and other goods. Too many history textbooks repeat the cliché that Native Americans "didn't make good slaves," but in fact, Native Americans worked as settlers' slaves for hundreds of years.

In the previous chapter, Loewen already established that European explorers enslaved Native Americans; here, he expands on this point, showing how, for centuries, European settlers used Native American slaves to further their ends, and traded slaves with other Native American tribes.

Another big mistake that textbooks make is to represent the American West as a "frontier" or a "wilderness." Both words imply that America was an uncivilized, wild place that needed to be developed by European settlers. European settlers were just as profoundly influenced by Native American culture as Native Americans were influenced by European culture. Indeed, there were thousands of European settlers in the early 18th century who chose to live as Native Americans, rather than spreading their own civilization across the "wilderness." Settlers praised Native Americans for their democracy and equality; indeed, settlers may have borrowed practices such as the town hall meeting from natives. When protesters at the famous Boston Tea Party sabotaged a British ship, they were dressed as Mohawks—not because the Mohawks were unruly, but because settlers admired the Mohawks' organization and democracy.

Paralleling Loewen's discussion of the European consciousness in Chapter Two, the concept of a "wilderness" necessarily implies the existence of some stable "civilization" to balance it out. However, contrary to the idea that most textbooks imply, many early settlers saw the Native Americans as organized, idealistic, and democratic, rather than disorganized or wild. Loewen's allusion to the Boston Tea Party is another good example of how he links together different historical episodes to reinforce an idea (and, also, a good example of how history textbooks misrepresent events like the Boston Tea Party).

For two hundred years, European settlers fought dozens of small and large wars with Native Americans. Some textbooks have taken the important step forward of admitting that European settlers were often the aggressors in such conflicts—for instance, at the Wounded Knee Massacre. But even such textbooks still give the impression that the natives were stubborn and unwilling to cooperate with reasonable Europeans. One textbook notes that the U.S. government offered land and money to the Native Americans, but the natives refused to accept it—perpetuating the fallacy that American land was the U.S. government's property to give away.

Although textbooks had made some progress toward representing Native Americans in a more fair, respectful way, too many textbooks repeat the standard line on Native American history; namely, that Native Americans refused to comply with European settlers (when, by all appearances, the reverse was true).

It's important that we recognize the "Indian-ness of some of our wars." In the 17th and early 18th centuries, Europe fought four major wars on American soil, all of which included huge numbers of native casualties. Significant numbers of natives fought in the War of 1812, as well as the Civil War and the Mexican American War. In all cases, natives mostly aligned with a European power against American colonies (and later, the U.S.), recognizing that Europe would be more likely to honor their human rights.

History textbooks don't talk about the Native Americans who fought in American wars, usually on the side of European powers and against settlers. One reason they might omit such information is that it would stress the clash between settlers and Native Americans, emphasizing the point that settlers, for all their talk of democracy and equality, weren't interested in protecting native rights.

One of the most dangerous fallacies in history textbooks is that Native Americans had a strange, pre-modern understanding of property. It's well-known that Dutch settlers bought Manhattan from Manhat natives for "a pile of beads"; the anecdote is usually interpreted to mean that the natives didn't understand the principle of ownership or the potential of their land. What the anecdote omits is that the Dutch accidentally paid the wrong tribe, the Canarsees, and that the Manhat spent the next decade fighting for control of their own land. Another well-known "fact" from history textbooks is that Thomas Jefferson doubled the size of the U.S by buying Louisiana from France. Textbooks ignore the fact that the land wasn't France's to sell; it had been stolen from Native Americans through a series of fraudulent transactions, and the U.S. continued to fight natives in Louisiana for control of the land for the next century.

Loewen argues that textbooks use the history of Manhattan's purchase as an example of Native American foolishness or ignorance of property laws, when, in fact, the episode suggests Dutch settlers' inability to honor contracts. (However, Loewen doesn't offer a thorough explanation of the Native Americans' understanding of property to counteract this—he doesn't give other examples of Native American property rights, or explain why the Native Americans accepted a relatively small amount for Manhattan.) By focusing on the controversy between America and France, textbooks obscure the real *controversy between settlers and Native Americans surrounding ownership of Louisiana.*

When discussing the War of 1812, many textbooks suggest that the main outcome of the war was "a feeling of pride as a nation," or even the composition of the "Star-Spangled Banner." In truth, the War of 1812 deprived Native Americans of most of their land in the Northeast. And culturally, the War of 1812 reduced natives to "savages" in the eyes of many European settlers, where previously, natives had been heroes and icons to many.

The War of 1812 is one of the least-understood wars in American history classes, and Loewen suggests that this might be because history textbooks are concealing the real impact of the fight. On a cultural level, the war caused most European-Americans to conceive of Native Americans as wild and contemptible.

By the middle of the 19th century, the United States government had made it its explicit mission to exterminate Native Americans—at the same time that European nations such as Britain and Germany were exterminating the native populations of Tasmania and Namibia. Adolf Hitler is known to have admired the prison camps in which U.S. troops kept Native Americans, and in some ways he modeled Nazi concentration camps on them.

Loewen's argument that the government aimed to wipe out Native Americans in the U.S. is shocking, in part because it differs so greatly from the anesthetized, "rosy" view of history that most textbooks convey. Textbooks do not, for instance, talk about the prison camps where soldiers kept Native Americas before executing them. (Conservative critics were particularly irritated with this passage from Lies My Teacher Told Me, *and singled it out in their negative book reviews.)*

Studying American history, one must confront a difficult question: could whites and natives have lived together in peace? From the beginning, there were major obstacles to peaceful coexistence: in Virginian legal courts, for instance, natives were denied all rights, and European settlers encroached on native land throughout North America. Nevertheless, there may have been cases in which natives and whites assimilated and formed one society. Students often learn about the Roanoke colony that mysteriously disappeared; Roanoke is often presented as an example of Native American treachery. But some historians believe that the Roanoke settlers simply joined the nearby Croatoan tribe and adopted their lifestyle. There were some cases of natives marrying European settlers—an important step towards peaceful coexistence—but in most English colonies, there were laws that prohibited intermarriage between whites and natives. It's also possible that natives could have survived as an autonomous state within the U.S. Instead of dealing with the ambiguities of white-native coexistence, textbooks present a far more simplistic narrative: Europeans tried to civilize the natives, failed, and then proceeded to "dispossess" them of their land.

It is difficult for historians to answer the question Loewen poses here, because it's an untestable hypothetical. However, Loewen offers many examples of cooperation and unification between Europeans and Native Americans (the possibility that the Roanoke settlers assimilated with the Native Americans is another good example of how textbooks omit ambiguity to create a simplified, ethnocentric account of the past). As before, Loewen's point isn't that Native Americans definitely could have lived in peace with European settlers; rather, he argues that textbooks should at least suggest such a possibility, rather than portraying the conquest of North America as a predestined, near-mythic event.

One reason why the standard history textbook narrative about white-native relations is wrong is that many natives *did* try to assimilate with white society and found that they weren't wanted. Some Cherokee natives joined white society in Virginia, learned English, purchased property, and went to church. But they were usually harassed by their neighbors. Native chiefs were often passionate advocates for equal protection under U.S. law: they wanted the same rights as U.S. citizens so that they couldn't be killed or intimidated. Without equal rights, however, natives could never be fully acculturated with white America.

Textbooks tend to put the blame on Native Americans for failing to get along with European settlers—not the other way around. In doing so, textbooks ignore the considerable evidence that many Native Americans did *try to assimilate with European colonies, and were rejected. Loewen's discussion of failed assimilation anticipates his analysis of racism in the following two chapters.*

How should textbooks present the history of Native Americans? To begin with, Loewen says, they *shouldn't* present Native American history as a history of evil white people versus saintly natives. There were many white people in American history—the Quakers, the Presbyterians, the Whigs—who strongly wanted to treat natives with respect and compassion. Furthermore, textbooks must convey the fact that natives and whites influenced *each other's* cultures in profound ways. In doing so, textbooks can dispel the racist myth that native cultures are uncivilized or backwards, and suggest that the United States can continue to learn from Native Americans.

Loewen wants to stress that textbooks shouldn't demonize white settlers and beatify Native Americans; such an account of history would be just as wrong as the version textbooks present now. Rather, history textbooks need to convey the sense of an equal exchange between European settlers and Native Americans—a reciprocal exchange of technology, food, religion, and even political ideals.

CHAPTER 5: GONE WITH THE WIND

Arguably the most important theme in American history is "the domination of black America by white America." In order to understand the way white America perceives the history of race relations in the U.S., it's instructive to examine the bestselling books of the 19th and 20th centuries: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe, and *Gone With the Wind*, by Margaret Mitchell, both of which take race as an important theme. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* presents slavery as a moral evil to be fought at all costs, while *Gone With the Wind* idealizes a society founded on slavery—the antebellum South. Modern history textbooks tend to side with Stowe, not Mitchell: they present slavery as an inhuman, evil institution.

In this chapter, Loewen will cover a lot of ground in a relatively few number of pages, and he suggests the scope of his project by discussing two books written nearly a century apart—Uncle Tom's Cabin *and* Gone With the Wind. *By bring up these two works of fiction, Loewen also implies that the chapter will not only examine the history of race in America; it will also study the way that Americans' perception of race and racism has changed over the centuries.*

Most history textbooks before the 1970s didn't emphasize the fact that the Civil War was, in many ways, a result of slavery. When, in 1860, South Carolina seceded from the Union, its politicians condemned the Northern States for refusing to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act: the legislation that allowed runaway slaves to be captured and returned to their masters, even when they'd left the state. South Carolina, along with the other ten states that seceded, stressed its people's rights to own slaves and protect their property, and listed these rights as a primary reason for their secession. Despite this, pre-1970 textbooks emphasize such causes as tariff disagreements and an idealistic commitment to states' rights. Surprisingly, many of the most recent textbooks have begun to re-emphasize tariffs and states' rights and downplay the role that slavery played in secession.

Loewen begins with the premise that the Civil War was waged due in large part because of slavery in the Southern states, and cites the reasons that the Southern states actually gave when they seceded. Even though it seems clear that Loewen believes that slavery was a primary cause of the Civil War, he also offers a meta-history of how textbooks have discussed the causes of the Civil War throughout the second half of the 20th century. In doing so, Loewen conveys the idea that history isn't a rigid, agreed-upon set of facts, but rather a constant process of interpretation, reflecting the biases of the historians themselves.

Partly because of their high school textbooks, Americans have many mistaken ideas about slavery. Most people would be surprised to learn that slaves were an important part of the Northern states' economies, not just their Southern counterparts—indeed, the first state to legalize slavery was Massachusetts. History textbooks present slavery as unambiguously evil, but they suggest that it was largely limited to the South. The reality is that slavery—and racism, the ideology that justifies slavery—was a fundamental part of the making of the United States. History textbooks do a poor job of studying the relationship between racism and slavery. They present slavery as an obsolete historical phenomenon. But even now that slavery has largely vanished from the U.S., the ideology of racism survives, encouraging people to believe that whites are superior to blacks.

As Loewen describes them, history textbooks use a series of strategies to portray slavery as an isolated, obsolete historical phenomenon that didn't play a major role in the economy of the United states as a whole (just some Southern states). The problem with presenting slavery in this light is that it doesn't do justice to the ideology that justified and celebrated slavery—white supremacy, which is alive and well in America in the 21st century—or portray how its economic effects continue today. Even though racism is in some ways the most lasting legacy of slavery, textbooks imply that slavery has no significant legacy in America.

Textbooks also ignore the racism in the thinking of figures as different as Thomas Jefferson, Christopher Columbus, and Woodrow Wilson. Many students would be surprised to learn that almost all the presidents before Abraham Lincoln owned slaves and believed that it was their right as whites to do so. One textbook notes that Thomas Jefferson was "shy" and refused to wear a wig, but never once mentions that he was a proud slave-owner and an eloquent advocate for the expansion of slavery in the United States.

Textbooks' unwillingness to discuss the racism of the Founding Fathers and presidents is another good example of their tendency to "heroify" historical figures instead of presenting them honestly. Loewen argues that textbook authors must know what they're doing when they omit a discussion of Jefferson's racism—textbooks mention almost everything about Jefferson's life except *that he owned slaves!*

Slavery was not an isolated historical phenomenon: the growth of slavery in the United States profoundly influenced America's society and foreign policy. For instance, George Washington, a lifelong slave-owner, gave huge loans to French planters in Haiti to help them suppress their slaves; a decade later, Jefferson did the same. The only early president who didn't fund Haitian planters was John Adams—not coincidentally, one of the only early presidents who owned no slaves. Furthermore, American territorial expansion until the Civil War was largely due to the influence of slavers who needed more land for their slaves to farm. In all, the importance of slavery to America's economy helped make America an expansionist, imperialist nation and encouraged America's leaders to abandon the supposed U.S. ideals of equality, democracy, and self-determination.

While most history textbooks present slavery as being limited to the Southern colonies both economically and culturally, Loewen shows that slavery influenced the way that all Americans—even American presidents—conceived of the world. Loewen's argument is that the existence of a normalized, large-scale system for the enslavement of human beings in the United States encouraged American politicians to enact more brutal, imperialist policies in other countries, such as Haiti: because American politicians were used to depriving human beings of freedom in the U.S., they were more comfortable doing so abroad as well.

Almost every history textbook devotes a lot of space to the debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas, the important Democratic Party leader of the 1850s and 60s. However, textbooks emphasize the spectacle of the debates and the eloquence of the speakers, rather than going into detail about their ideas. The truth is that both speakers had some white supremacist ideas and emphasized that whites must always remain socially superior to blacks. During the debates, Lincoln said, "I am not, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about the social and political equality of the white and black races." And yet, later in his life, Lincoln was a passionate advocate for equality between the races. Instead of conveying the complexity of Lincoln's views, textbooks paint him as a pragmatic politician. If they were to depict him as an imperfect figure who, in many ways, transcended his own racism toward the end of his career, textbooks could teach an important lesson: it's possible to overcome one's own prejudices.

In this section, Loewen shows how history textbooks present an oversimplified, one-dimensional view of complex historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln. As Loewen will continue to argue in the following chapter, Lincoln was an immensely complex thinker whose ideas on race and racism changed enormously over the course of his career as a politician. By simplifying Lincoln's career and beliefs, textbooks convey the false idea that Lincoln was a pragmatist who didn't spend a considerable amount of time thinking about race at all. More implicitly, Loewen argues, textbooks hide the idea that it's possible to overcome one's own racism, and portray racism as a deeply ingrained, unchangeable feeling (as well as one limited to villainous figures).

In the aftermath of the Civil War, Republicanism emerged as the dominant political party and imposed a series of racially egalitarian policies, known as Reconstruction, in the Southern states. There is still a myth that Reconstruction was a chaotic period in Southern history, in which newly elected or appointed black leaders "reigned corruptly," and thus had to be controlled by their former masters. The reality is that blacks never "reigned" during Reconstruction—the vast majority of elected officials remained white during this era. It is tragic that so many—including African Americans—believe the myths about Reconstruction, since such myths perpetuate the lie that blacks can't govern themselves and "need" whites to rule them.

History textbooks offer the biased interpretation that Reconstruction was a failure because newly appointed black leaders didn't know how to take care of themselves or their new constituents. The implicit message of the textbooks' interpretation is that African Americans need white leaders to "take care of them"—they're incapable of governing themselves.

Admittedly, contemporary history textbooks offer a more nuanced account of Reconstruction than their predecessors half a century ago. However, even these new textbooks largely ignore the major problem with Reconstruction: white violence against black people. In some parts of the South, for instance, white lynch mobs killed an average of one black person per day. White supremacists also sabotaged black schools and burned down schoolhouses for black children. Textbooks miss a key point about why Reconstruction failed: the problem wasn't that black people didn't know how to take care of themselves, but rather than white supremacists refused to be integrated into the new, post-slavery society.

As before, Loewen is quick to admit that textbooks, for all their problems, are at least improving in the way they depict Reconstruction. However, Loewen argues, textbooks still omit a realistic account of the intimidation, harassment, and terrorism that African Americans faced during the Reconstruction era, instead suggesting that African Americans had "all the power" and didn't know what to do with it—a condescending, racist notion that simply isn't supported by the facts.

By the 1890s, Reconstruction was largely broken: in the Southern states, politicians instituted policies that segregated black and white people, and the Supreme Court upheld the states' right to do so in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The 1890s were, in many ways, the low point of (post-slavery) black life in America: black people were bullied, harassed, and in some cases murdered, and they had few laws or rights they could cite to protect themselves. Minstrel shows, in which black people were caricatured, became hugely popular in the 1890s, and the Ku Klux Klan's membership boomed. One of the most glaring issues with history textbooks is that they largely omit any discussion of the late 19th century as the nadir (lowest point) of African American life—not just in the South, but throughout the United States.

History textbooks tend to focus their analysis of African American history around two eras—the mid-19th century and the mid-20th century. Few history textbooks give a thorough account of black life in the 1890s, even though this era arguably represents the collective low-point for African Americans. During the 1890s, African Americans' quality of life had regressed from where it was following the Civil War—they weren't slaves, but couldn't enjoy many of the rights that they'd been promised (the right to vote, to own property, etc.).

It is undeniable that race relations in the U.S. have improved in the last half century. But there continue to be massive racial disparities: there is a large income gap between the average white family and the average black family. As a group, black people live shorter lives, do worse on SAT tests, are more likely to be arrested, and have more health problems than white people. Perhaps even worse, there are many who believe, or secretly suspect, that these statistics reflect black people's innate inferiority. The best way for people to understand the obstacles that African Americans have faced, and continue to face, is to learn the uncensored, disturbing, facts of history.

Loewen closes with a poignant example of how Americans' ignorance of history colors their view of world. Without an understanding of the obstacles that black people have faced throughout American history, 21st century white people might be tempted to believe that African Americans really are inferior to white people. The achievement gap between black and white families, however, is the result of all the historical forces that most textbooks neglect to discuss.

CHAPTER 6: JOHN BROWN AND ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Another problem with history textbooks, Loewen says, is that they leave out ideas. American history is, in many ways, a history of the conflict between ideas: democracy versus monarchy; white supremacy versus egalitarianism; federalism versus states' rights. Textbooks underplay the importance of ideas, instead emphasizing specific dates and people.

The history of the United States may be more idea-centered than that of other countries: the people who made the choice to travel across the Atlantic Ocean often had strong ideological reasons for doing so, and the Founding Fathers had strong ideological motives for building a country.

For a good example of how textbooks omit ideas from of history, consider the life of the abolitionist John Brown. In different textbooks, Brown has been described as insane, perfectly sane, and everything in between. All history textbooks agree that Brown and his followers, who included white and black people, organized a raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, with the goal of arming slaves and starting an uprising. Textbooks sometimes criticize John Brown for being overly militant, and some treat him neutrally, but none depict him as a hero.

The depiction of John Brown found in most history textbooks stands out from depictions of other notable historical figures. Unlike, for example, Christopher Columbus or Woodrow Wilson, John Brown is never seen as an heroic figure—despite the fact that, in many ways, he was more overtly heroic than either Columbus or Wilson. Loewen will spend the first half of the chapter trying to understand why Brown is never heroified.

Was John Brown mentally ill? It's true that, after Brown was arrested, some of Brown's lawyers tried to plead insanity as a way of sparing his life. However, there's little evidence that Brown displayed insane behavior, and many regarded him as a clear-headed, rational man. Textbooks often presume Brown's madness, based on the far-fetched, even suicidal quality of his plan to raid Harpers Ferry. But based on the eloquent speech he delivered at his own trial, it seems that Brown was willing to sacrifice his own life for his abolitionist beliefs, and may have *wanted* to be executed to set an example for the abolitionist cause. In short, because textbooks don't make any effort to understand John Brown's beliefs, they assume that he must have been insane. As one writer put it, people refuse to accept that "a white person did *not* have to be crazy to die for black equality."

History textbooks often depict John Brown as a madman, Loewen theorizes, because they make no effort to understand his ideological motivations. Brown probably had a strong set of abolitionist beliefs that led him to lay down his life for the abolitionist cause; however, history textbooks focus on Brown's actions *(his raid on Harpers Ferry), neglecting the motives for his actions. Loewen even suggests the possibility that textbooks characterize Brown as a madman because of a racist bias against black equality, though Loewen doesn't necessarily agree with such a possibility.*

For many decades after his hanging, John Brown was treated as a hero. But following the failure of Reconstruction and the overall degradation of African American life at the end of the 19th century, historians began to depict Brown as a madman. Brown was, undeniably, a murderer: he killed several people at Harpers Ferry. But it's odd that textbooks don't glorify the murderous legacy of John Brown, considering that they *do* glorify the genocide of Christopher Columbus.

Loewen shows how perceptions of John Brown changed greatly in the years following his execution. Surely it's no coincidence that textbooks began to portray Brown as insane at the same time when life for African Americans was approaching its low point: in part because American society as a whole was disrespectful of black lives, history textbooks began demeaning an important hero to the black community.

Sometimes, contemporary textbooks portray Brown as a religious fanatic, who thought of himself as God's puppet—in other words, they suggest that Brown believed that God "ordered him" to raid Harpers Ferry. Brown was deeply religious, but it seems that he was also a deeply thoughtful person, who chose to raid Harpers Ferry because of his deep conviction, not simply because "God ordered it." In general, textbooks rarely treat religious belief as a legitimate motive for a historical figure's actions. Instead, textbooks either downplay the role of religion (for example, in the case of Martin Luther King, Jr.) or imply that historical figures were insane religious fanatics (as in the case of John Brown).

To the extent that history textbooks do discuss John Brown's ideas, they offer the most simplistic interpretation of his motives: namely, that he was a religious fanatic. But religious fanaticism doesn't do justice to the nuance and complexity of Brown's beliefs. Perhaps textbooks omit discussions of religious motivation from history because they're afraid of offending some readers (or, more likely, the readers' parents).

Loewen now switches from John Brown—one of the most controversial figures in American history—to Abraham Lincoln—one of the most beloved. As with Brown, textbooks downplay the role of ideology in Lincoln's life; they talk about what Lincoln did, but not what he believed. Lincoln, for much of his life, seems to have believed that whites were superior to blacks. Textbooks often argue that he supported the ending of slavery as a "strategy" for winning the Civil War. In this way, textbooks paint a picture of Lincoln as a pragmatic politician, not a committed abolitionist. However, there is considerable evidence that Lincoln strongly believed in the basic humanity of black people, and struggled with his own racist feelings. In his early days as a senator, Lincoln was one of the only politicians to oppose a bill condemning abolitionists, and when he ran for president, he was praised for his "rock-solid anti-slavery beliefs." Textbooks give little of Lincoln as a controversial, conflicted thinker, and suggest that his sole priority was preserving the Union.

History textbooks have, in recent years, begun to portray Abraham Lincoln as a pragmatic politician, rather than a racial idealist. In order to make such an interpretation of Lincoln's life, textbooks must omit analysis of Lincoln's beliefs on matters of race and racial equality, and focus instead on his actions. Loewen isn't saying that Lincoln was a committed abolitionist throughout his life; as he suggested in the previous chapter, Lincoln was a deeply conflicted thinker who grappled with his own beliefs and prejudices throughout his life. In short, history textbooks give a simplified, one-dimensional account of Lincoln's life instead of painting a nuanced, three-dimensional portrait of the man.

Consider how textbooks treat Lincoln's writings and orations—the best expressions of his ideas. Amazingly, most contemporary history textbooks don't mention the Gettysburg Address, the most famous speech Lincoln ever gave, and one of his most eloquent arguments for the connection between abolition and American ideals. Although many textbooks quote from Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address—in which he made it clear that the debate over slavery was a primary cause of the Civil War, and suggested that all Americans, not just Southerners, were complicit in the sins of slavery—none give a sense for the radicalism and originality of Lincoln's ideas.

It's remarkable that textbooks have begun omitting any discussion of the Gettysburg Address, one of the most famous speeches in American history. However, Loewen believes that such an omission is symptomatic of textbooks' unwillingness to grapple with the beliefs and values of historical figures. Thus, instead of giving a sense for the radicalism and controversy of Lincoln's career (what modern president would dare accuse the entire country of being complicit in sin?), textbooks try to portray him as a moderate.

In order to understand the Civil War in general, Loewen says, we must understand the role of ideas. The Southern states frequently invoked the concept of states' rights to justify their secession from the Union. And yet, under President Jefferson Davis, the Southern Confederacy also *criticized* the idea of states' rights as contradictory and self-destructive. Similarly, in the South it was often argued that slaves enjoyed their slavery. And yet, news of slave revolts and runaway slaves clearly demonstrated that many slaves did *not* enjoy their slavery. Frustrated with the contradictions of the Southern states' beliefs, many Southern soldiers joined the Union army. Seen in such terms, the Confederacy lost the Civil War in part because it collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions: the Civil War was a war of ideas, and in the end, the Union won because its ideas made more sense. Yet textbooks almost never study the South in ideological terms: instead, they have a tendency to present the Union and the Confederacy as equally idealistic.

Ideas aren't only a useful tool for studying the lives of notable historical figures; they're also important for analyzing historical events and processes. To counter the assumption that ideas are somehow irrelevant to "real" history, Loewen shows how, in many ways, the clash of ideas determined the result of the Civil War: the Confederacy had a weaker set of principles and beliefs than the Union, and so it may have failed to motivate its soldiers to fight. One further implication of this passage is that, in order to succeed, a country must construct an ideology that appeals to as many people as possible, without contradiction. A country without a strongly defined set of beliefs will be unable to mobilize its own people.

Textbooks portray Reconstruction as a corrupt process, perpetrated by "radical" politicians in order to control the South. One clear example of the Southern bias in contemporary textbooks is their tendency to use the terms "carpetbaggers" and "scalawags" to describe Northerners who came to the South after the war. Though this term was initially an insult, textbooks use it without any discussion of bias, normalizing the idea that Reconstruction was corrupt. In general, textbooks imply that Northern Republicans and blacks held all the power in the South during Reconstruction. Nothing could be further from the truth: it took tremendous courage for a Northerner to travel to the South to support equality between the race, because racist white supremacists exerted a lot of power.

Loewen has already talked about Reconstruction in the previous chapter, but he returns to the subject because it exemplifies the Confederate bias in modern history textbooks. Instead of questioning the propagandistic narrative that Northern politicians were corrupt, black leaders were incompetent, and white Southerners were heroic, textbooks perpetuate such a narrative, reusing biased terms such as "carpetbaggers" and "scalawags."

In sum, history textbooks distort the lives and thoughts of America's most notable racial idealists: they portray Brown as a fanatic and Lincoln as a pragmatist. Although Brown and Lincoln are still celebrated as idealistic heroes around the world, the people of their own country barely understand what they believed, and thus can't fully understand what they fought for.

Once again, Loewen shows how, in their effort to make history more palatable, moderate, and optimistic, textbooks deprive American students of real and human heroes, such as John Brown and Abraham Lincoln, who could inspire them to greatness.

CHAPTER 7: THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

History textbooks largely neglect the history of class relations in the United States. A couple textbooks talk about union strikes, but few give a real sense for the long history of economic exploitation and resistance in this country, or of the problems that American workers face today. Indeed, most textbooks don't even include the phrases "class structure," "social class," "lower class," or "inequality" in their indexes. In doing so, textbooks create the illusion that class struggles and labor disputes are old, meaningless historical phenomena.

In this short chapter, Loewen addresses the absence of class analysis from American history textbooks. Loewen's discussion of class doesn't follow organically from the events described in the previous chapter; however, Loewen isn't trying to write an American history textbook—his goal is to critique current textbooks.

To the extent that textbooks *do* talk about class in America, they give the impression that America has always been a land of upward social mobility, in stark contrast to the rigid class systems of Europe. Textbooks emphasize pieces of legislation such as the GI Bill, which promoted upward mobility through education, while downplaying bills that strengthened the wealthy at the poor's expense. Perhaps teachers and textbooks avoid discussing social class because they don't want to embarrass or antagonize their students. But it's of vital important that students of all economic backgrounds understand their society's class structure. When students are ignorant of class history, it's easier for them to grow up believing that poor people deserve to be poor—since, surely, in a "land of opportunity," only lazy people fail to be successful.

Loewen's discussion of class bias in American history textbooks mirrors his arguments in previous chapters. In the interest of mitigating controversy, textbooks offer a blandly optimistic account of the past, the gist of which is that anyone can become rich and successful in America. The implicit message here is that the poor people who haven't *succeeded in America must have done something wrong to deserve their poverty. In this sense, the myth of the "Land of Opportunity" could be considered a tool to encourage the working-class accept their poverty instead of trying to change the structure of society.*

One clear example of how textbooks downplay the rigidity of class in America is the way they talk about immigration. Textbooks devote many pages to discussing immigration, but they emphasize figures who rose from poverty to wealth, rather than the million of impoverished people who remained impoverished after arriving in the U.S. By omitting the full truth, high school textbooks reinforce the idea that America is the most equitable country in the world—an idea for which there isn't much evidence. By almost all material measures, America is a fairly average country for equality and social mobility when compared to other industrial nations. Historians debate over when inequality began to rise in the U.S., but instead of presenting such a controversy, textbooks gloss over inequality altogether.

Textbooks offer some general statistics about immigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but they rarely give much sense for the incredible squalor and misery of many immigrants' lives in the U.S. To the extent that textbooks do *discuss specific immigrants, these immigrants are almost always famous historical figures who rose from "rags to riches." Thus, textbooks further reinforce the illusion that America is a Land of Opportunity, where anyone, even a poor immigrant, can rise to become rich and successful.*

There are many reasons why textbooks gloss over inequality. One reason is that, until very recently, authors ran the risk of being labeled Marxists if they emphasized class issues. Another reason is that publishing boards—i.e., the institutions that control what students read—are often dominated by wealthy people who, because of their own experiences with class, genuinely believe that America is an equitable country where anyone with talent can be successful. A final reason is that textbook writers want to paint a generally optimistic picture of history, in which the "hero" is America itself—thus, they omit the hard, cold facts about class and inequality.

Notice that Loewen doesn't lay the blame on any one group of people: he suggests that class bias may *be the result of anticommunism, deliberate obfuscation, or a general desire to please, or some combination of all three factors. In other words, instead of offering up one explanation for the complex phenomenon of class bias, Loewen offers up several potential explanations and encourages readers to make up their own minds.*

If they were changed, history textbooks could serve an important social function: they could teach students "how they and their parents, their communities, and their society came to be as they are." But by omitting a thorough discussion of class, textbooks deprive students of the ability to understand themselves and their communities. More sinisterly, in doing so, textbooks prevent working class students from understanding how "the system is rigged" against them, and therefore from altering the system.

Regardless of the precise causes of class bias, textbooks commit a grave error when they omit a thorough of the history of class in America: they condition wealthy students to believe that they "deserve" their own privilege, and implicitly encourage working-class students to accept their position in society. Notice that Loewen himself hasn't offered a history of class in America, making this chapter very different (and much shorter) than its predecessors. Loewen is not writing a textbook; primarily, he's trying to expose the bias in existing textbooks.

CHAPTER 8: WATCHING BIG BROTHER

Recent textbooks emphasize the role of gender, race, and culture on history to a far greater degree than textbooks written fifty years ago. Yet recent textbooks have continued to offer the same "central narrative" about America's past: the growth of the federal government. One of the major ways that textbooks emphasize the importance of the federal government is by discussing presidential administrations at great length. Presidents are, of course, very important to American history, but it seems wrong that textbooks devote many pages to relatively unimportant presidents while largely ignoring America's greatest writers, painters, humanitarians, and scientists. Textbooks also tend to imply that the "state we live in today is the state created in 1789." The truth is that the state, as the Founding Fathers conceived of it, is radically different, both functionally and philosophically, from the state as it exists today.

Here Loewen examines one of the most important forms of bias in American history textbooks: the bias toward the federal government of the United States. Textbooks inflate the importance of relatively inconsequential American presidents, implying that a minor government figure is more worthy of discussion than a major writer, inventor, or union organizer. Furthermore, as we'll see, textbooks don't talk much about the changes in the organization of the federal government, suggesting that the federal government emerged in 1789,"fully formed." Loewen will expose and correct these forms of bias throughout the chapter.

One reason why textbooks treat the state as an unchanging, all-important entity is that they're inherently meant to flatter the state. To understand how, we can look to the history of U.S. foreign policy. Most prominent historians believe that America has always practiced a foreign policy designed to preserve its own interests, even when doing so necessitates violence or corruption. But high school textbooks argue nothing of the kind: they present the U.S. as a moral agent that has always prioritized peace and democracy around the world. Almost every textbook mentions the Peace Corps—an admirable, but relatively insignificant government program designed to promote peace abroad—as an example of American generosity. Textbooks rarely mention America's large corporations, which have sometimes influenced the federal government to destabilize other countries and install brutal pro-American dictators. Indeed, textbooks rarely mention the post-World War II rise of multinational corporations at all, even though such corporations have exerted a profound influence on the modern world, often promoting war and violence abroad in order to further their interests.

Among professional historians, it's not even remotely controversial to say that the United States has engaged in some morally objectionable foreign policy decisions, which interfered with democracy and human rights in other countries. However, high school history textbooks persist in offering a view of American foreign policy that is unrealistically cheerful, optimistic, and flattering to the federal government. As we've seen previously, one of textbooks' favorite strategies for "heroifying" figures or institutions is to focus on their small, relatively unimportant virtues and ignore their significant vices. Thus, textbooks spend a lot of time on the Peace Corps while neglecting some of the major damaging foreign policy decisions that Loewen will describe later on in the chapter.

Loewen considers six of America's most controversial foreign policy decisions: 1) installing a shah in Iran in 1953; 2) bringing down the Guatemalan government in 1954; 3) rigging the 1957 elections in Lebanon; 4) assassinating Patrice Lumumba in Zaire in 1961; 5) repeatedly attempting to murder Fidel Castro in Cuba; 6) bringing down the government of Chile in 1973. In all six cases, the U.S. government engaged in behavior that it would classify as "state-sponsored terrorism" when practiced by another country. So how do textbooks address these foreign policy decisions?

Loewen himself does not offer a thorough account of the six foreign policy decisions he mentions here. If Lies My Teacher Told Me *were a longer book, he might have time to do so; however, his main point is that information about the six decisions (all of which is easily accessible from other reputable sources)* should *appear in history textbooks, but does not.*

To begin with, the majority of U.S. history textbooks leave out all six of the foreign policy decisions listed above. When the textbooks *do* mention the decisions, they give nearly the same justification for America's actions: the U.S. government was afraid that the existing leadership abroad was Communist, and installed an anticommunist leader to prevent "all hell from breaking loose." While anticommunism has certainly been an important motive in American foreign policy, it's not the only motive. And in the case of American intervention in Lebanon, it's untrue that the U.S. intervened to fight Communism; indeed, the Eisenhower administration determined that there was no immediate Communist threat in the country. Not one high school textbook mentions America's dozens of attempts to murder Fidel Castro; Castro is always portrayed as a dangerous aggressor. In the case of intervention in Chile, it's an accepted fact that the CIA spent millions of dollars to destabilize the Chilean government led by the socialist Salvador Allende—a process that ended in Allende's murder.

Again and again, politicians and historians have claimed that the U.S. intervened in other countries (such as Lebanon and Guatemala) in order to prevent a democratically elected Communist from rising to power (as part of their rivalry with the Soviet Union). However, Loewen shows that such explanations fall short in many cases, such as the Lebanese elections of 1957. Furthermore, the fact that no history textbooks discuss all six of the foreign policy decisions Loewen lists might suggest a "guilty conscience"—textbooks are deliberately omitting information about U.S. interference in foreign countries because the information contradicts America's reputation as a supporter of democracy.

Loewen is *not* arguing that history textbooks need to record all instances of the U.S. meddling in other countries. However, textbooks need to stress the fact that the U.S. government has frequently intervened in other countries to destabilize democratically elected regimes and install dictatorships. The reason why textbooks omit a discussion of American foreign policy is clear enough: such a discussion would conflict with America's reputation as a democratic nation. This discussion would also show that the government has lied about its covert actions—for example, Henry Kissinger, the Secretary of State in the early 1970s, testified that the CIA had nothing to do with destabilizing Chile—a statement that was quickly proven to be false.

Loewen's point is not that every single American history textbook should talk about the six foreign policy decision he's mentioned. However, military intervention in foreign countries has been one of the dominant themes of modern American history, and therefore, textbooks have an obligation to give some *sense of America's military intervention. Perhaps textbooks fail to do so because they're frightened of portraying the U.S. government in a bad light—and thus risking a loss of funding or support from parents.*

The sole government crime that all history textbooks address is the Watergate Scandal. In the early 1970s, Congress and the American public learned that President Richard Nixon had helped cover up a series of crimes that included the burglary of the Democratic National Committee. All textbooks blame Nixon for supporting the Watergate break-in, but none go into detail about why Nixon did so. They treat Richard Nixon as a uniquely corrupt and irresponsible politician, instead of telling the truth—which is that almost all modern presidents have supported illegal covert actions.

Ultimately, textbooks treat Nixon as a scapegoat in order to cover up the broader, more systemic corruption of the federal government. Indeed, many historians have argued that Nixon—in spite of making some hugely immoral decisions, such as bombing Cambodia, prolonging the War in Vietnam, and breaking into Watergate—wasn't particularly *bad compared with other recent presidents.*

Because textbooks idealize the government, they also do a poor job of conveying the history of the civil rights movement. For more than a decade, J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the FBI, conducted illegal surveillance on important civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. Hoover, an avowed white supremacist, waged a secret campaign to destroy King and his followers: members of his staff sent King threatening messages telling him to kill himself, and, when they obtained recordings of King cheating on his wife, they sent the recordings to other white supremacists. On multiple occasions, when the FBI learned of a plot to assassinate King, they declined to alert him.

Few high school students are aware that the FBI was trying to end Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life—blackmailing him, urging him to commit suicide, and ignoring their moral obligation to keep him safe from assassins. Indeed, most students would probably assume that the FBI supported King, and that it would be unthinkable for a government organization to wage such a lengthy, personal war on a prominent civil rights leader.

The federal government's attempts to sabotage the civil rights movements extended far beyond tapping Martin Luther King, Jr.'s phones. In Chicago, the FBI spread false information about the behavior of the Black Panther Party, and encouraged the Chicago Police to raid the apartment of the Black Panther leader Freddy Hampton, a decision that resulted in Hampton being shot in his bed. It's even possible that the FBI or CIA was involved in the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr., given that the convicted killer, James Earl Ray, a penniless "country boy," had flown to Montreal, London, and Lisbon in the weeks leading up to the crime, and seems to have had aid from wealthy, powerful people. Hoover also supported a plan to investigate "all black college student organizations organized to project the demands of black students."

This is another passage that angered many conservative and mainstream critics when Lies My Teacher Told Me *was published in 1995: many said that Loewen was irresponsible to suggest that the FBI murdered King, or had anything to do with his death. However, as usual, Loewen deals in facts: as he says here, there is* some *evidence to suggest that the FBI was involved in killing civil rights leaders, including Hampton and King, and there is very strong evidence that the FBI at least* wanted *King dead. Readers are then free to make up their own minds.*

By and large, American history textbooks ignore the FBI's record on civil rights. In fact, they tend to credit the federal government with advancing the cause of civil rights almost single-handedly. In general, textbooks create the impression that the federal government imposed desegregation and other civil rights milestones upon the United States, when, in reality, the black community imposed these measures on the federal government.

By ignoring the truth about the FBI, history textbooks paint an unrealistically benign picture of the federal government, the result being that high school students get the idea that the government is a benign institution whose priority is keeping its citizens safe and protecting their rights—when in fact, the opposite is often true.

As a general rule, textbooks downplay progressive populism of all kinds and credit the federal government with most progressive achievements. As with so many of the implicit narratives that textbooks offer, the idea that the federal government always behaves virtuously is boring. Worse, it creates the impression that good citizens should trust their government to look out for their own interests—when, in fact, history clearly shows that citizens must lobby their government for change.

A further implication of this passage is that history textbooks present historical change as being out of the hands of ordinary people. Textbooks either give the credit for major historical changes to heroic, one-dimensional figures like Washington and Wilson, or to the benevolent federal government. The truth about history, however, is that ordinary, everyday people can and do change the world.

CHAPTER 9: SEE NO EVIL

Of all the gaps in high school students' knowledge, their ignorance of the Vietnam War is perhaps the most astonishing. On average, history textbooks devote the same amount of space to the Vietnam War and the War of 1812—even though Vietnam lasted twice as long, profoundly changed the U.S. in ways that are still apparent today, and happened far more recently.

For the next two chapters, Loewen will discuss history textbooks' accounts of recent historical events, such as the Vietnam War. Even though textbooks should probably devote a lot of space to Vietnam, they omit most of the relevant information.

Consider the way that textbooks portray the My Lai Massacre, one of the most infamous events of the Vietnam War, during which American soldiers murdered unarmed Vietnamese women and children. To the extent that textbooks mention the massacre, they treat it as an isolated incident—despite the considerable evidence that My Lai is indicative of "crimes committed on a day-to-day basis with the full awareness of officers at al levels of command." Furthermore, textbooks almost never quote from the opponents of Vietnamese intervention, including Martin Luther King, Jr.—indeed, the only people whom textbooks regularly quote on Vietnam are Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, two of the architects of the war.

One of the most insidious myths about Vietnam, Loewen argues, is that it was a chaotic, confused operation, in which soldiers couldn't tell the difference between enemy combatants and innocent civilians. But the evidence of My Lai and the testimony of many soldiers suggests that, in fact, American soldiers and generals knew exactly what they were doing when they murdered women and children—the "fog of war" myth is just an alibi for war crimes. Loewen also notes that textbooks omit any discussion of the massive antiwar movement in America, even though it played a decisive role in the era's history.

To engage with Vietnam, history textbooks need to ask at least six basic questions: 1) Why did the U.S. fight in Vietnam?; 2) What was the war like before and after the U.S. entered it?; 3) How did the war change America?; 4) What did the antiwar movement claim about Vietnam, and why did it become strong in the U.S.?; 5) Why did the U.S. lose the Vietnam War?; 6) What lessons should we learn from Vietnam? As it stands, most history textbooks fail to provide adequate answers for any of these questions.

It's characteristic of Loewen's book that he poses these six questions, but doesn't answer them (he only begins to answer the first one)—he's not writing an American history textbook; he's suggesting how history textbooks should *be written. The open-ended questions that Loewen poses here seem entirely uncontroversial—and thus, it seems particularly outrageous that ordinary American history textbooks don't answer them.*

With regard to the first question, some argue that the U.S. intervened in Vietnam to secure its access to the country's valuable natural resources. Others argue that the federal government didn't want to be accused to "losing Vietnam" to Communism. Similarly, others claim that the government intervened in Vietnam to prevent Communism from spreading throughout Asia and threatening the future of democracy. Still others insist that America intervened in order to strengthen its own business interests. Amazingly, most textbooks fail to give any sense of the controversy surrounding the roots of the Vietnam War, and a few fail to give *any* specific reason for American involvement in Vietnam whatsoever. America escalated its military support in Vietnam after a supposed naval conflict in the Gulf of Tonkin. Despite the fact that the "conflict" was almost immediately shown to be the result of sonar malfunctions, rather than actual Vietnamese aggression, and despite the fact that the American government presented the Gulf of Tonkin as evidence of Vietnamese aggression long after it knew about the sonar malfunctions, textbooks continue to list the Gulf of Tonkin as the most immediate "cause" of America's involvement in Vietnam.

Loewen argues that history textbooks should give a sense for the healthy debate among historians on the causes of the Vietnam War, and also the role of business interests, political ideology, and anticommunism in the war. Yet instead of offering a nuanced explanation for the causes of the Vietnam War, most history textbooks offer little to no explanation whatsoever. Equally outrageous, textbooks sometimes repeat the old story that the Vietnam War "began" after a Vietnamese ship on the Gulf of Tonkin fired on American troops—a story that was proven false decades ago, and which the U.S. government knew to be false from almost the very beginning. In no sense was the Gulf of Tonkin the "cause" of the Vietnam War—America had sent troops and military advisers to Vietnam for many years prior to Tonkin.

Because students don't fully understand Vietnam, they can't understand the parallels between Vietnam and more recent American military interventions—for example, the war in Iraq. To participate fully in the debate about foreign intervention, new generations of students must learn about Vietnam; however, by and large, their history textbooks don't offer the truth about Vietnam at all.

It's crucial to understand the failure of Vietnam in order to see the dangers of an aggressive, interventionist foreign policy. For example, during the War in Iraq in the 2000s, journalists and politicians frequently compared Iraq to Vietnam. But today's students can't really understand the comparison, because they don't know much about the Vietnam War.

CHAPTER 10: DOWN THE MEMORY HOLE

As a general rule, history textbooks devote little space to the most recent decades of American history, no matter how eventful they were. In the 1980s, for example, the average textbook devoted only 30 pages out of 1000 to the 1960s, easily one of the most consequential decades in American history. One reason why textbooks omit most of recent history is that publishers don't want to offend students' parents, and offering strong opinions about recent history is a surefire way to do so.

History textbooks are biased against recent history—partly because it's more difficult to find a compelling narrative about recent events, but partly because our understanding of recent history is more overtly biased by the existing power elite. And, as Loewen says here, textbooks want to avoid offending lots of people.

One lesson that history textbooks utterly fail to teach is that historical interpretations change over time, according to people's ideological needs. For example, Woodrow Wilson's reputation grew enormously during the Cold War because of his stated commitment to "make the world safe for democracy," a position that jived with the Cold War presidents' interventionist foreign policy. To quote the writer Anaïs Nin, "we see things as *we* are."

Throughout his book, Loewen tries to teach the lesson that people's religion, culture, gender, ethnicity, and class color the way they view the past, meaning that the collective view of history changes over time. There is, in short, no unbiased, "correct" way to view history—the best we can do is attempt to approximate the truth and minimize bias by examining and interpreting the evidence.

To understand how history is formed, Loewen will examine how textbooks analyze some of the major recent events of American history. For instance, it's remarkable how little time textbooks devote to *why*, exactly, terrorists attacked America on September 11, 2001. Only one textbook offers a clear explanation, claiming that Osama Bin Laden, motivated by his "murderous resentment" of America's foreign policy and its support for the Israeli state, engineered the attacks. Such an explanation is both "accurate and useful." However, most history textbooks offer a very different interpretation of the terrorist attacks, claiming that Bin Laden hated "American freedoms," such as democracy and freedom of speech, and resented the fact that America had, throughout the nineties, tried to "increase the peace and prosperity of the world." There is absolutely no evidence that Bin Laden or Al Qaeda acted out of resentment for democracy; they responded to specific American foreign policy decisions. And it's false that America's goal at the end of the 20th century was to foster world peace. By presenting the U.S. as a faultless nation, textbooks perpetuate blind nationalism and ethnocentrism.

Much as textbooks largely ignore the causes of the Vietnam War, 21st century textbooks largely ignore the causes of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. This omission is particularly striking because the causes of 9/11 aren't really disputed by either side: Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda explicitly stated that they attacked the World Trade Center in retaliation for America's aggressive foreign policy in the Middle East, especially with regard to Israel. It is characteristic of textbooks' naïve view of American foreign policy that they would censor any mention of American aggression in a foreign country (even coming from the mouth of a terrorist like Osama Bin Laden). While many critics have attacked Loewen for implying that America "deserved" 9/11 as punishment for its foreign policy, Loewen in fact says nothing of the kind—but he does argue that Americans need to be realistic about the flaws in their government's foreign policy.

To understand the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, we need to be realistic about American foreign policy in the Middle East. The U.S. military provided money and weapons to help Saddam Hussein seize power in Iraq, in return for which Hussein initially welcomed Western oil companies—a fact that no history textbooks acknowledge. Furthermore, the U.S. government had supported Israel's possession of nuclear weapons, despite criticizing Iran's attempts to gain the same weaponry.

Continuing his discussion in earlier chapters, Loewen argues that in the 21st century the U.S. has remained an aggressive imperialist power in much of the world. Even after the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, the federal government has practiced an often immoral foreign policy that involves collaborating with dictators like Saddam Hussein—the very opposite of its supposed commitment to peace and democracy.

Another question about 9/11 that textbooks refuse to ask, is "how did we allow it to happen?" Loewen argues that, throughout the nineties and early 2000s, the federal government did very little to improve America's security against terrorist attacks. In the months leading up to 9/11, German agents warned the CIA that Middle Eastern terrorists were planning to hijack airplanes and use them to "attack important symbols of American culture"—a warning that the CIA didn't even forward to airline companies.

It's indicative of a pro-government bias that most high school history textbooks don't mention that the federal government had been made aware of an impending terrorist attack in the months leading up to 9/11, and did little about it, due largely to poor organization and bureaucracy.

In response to 9/11, the U.S. government deployed troops to Afghanistan and later Iraq. Like Saddam Hussein, the Taliban had once been armed and funded by the CIA—a fact that most textbooks ignore. The Bush administration's rationale for invading Iraq was that Saddam Hussein had supported Bin Laden's terrorist attacks—a claim that made very little sense, given that Bin Laden had nothing but contempt for Hussein's secular regime. The Bush administration also claimed that Hussein was hiding weapons of mass destruction—a claim that turned out to be false. It later surfaced that Bush had ordered UN officials investigating Hussein's regime for weapons of massive to leave Iraq in the middle of their investigation. Bush had labeled Iraq, Iran, and North Korea the "axis of evil"—the three countries most likely to have nuclear weapons and use them against the U.S. However, it quickly became clear that the U.S. had invaded Iraq, rather than North Korea or Iran, because it was the easiest target, and also the country *least* likely to have nuclear weapons. Furthermore, the U.S.'s invasion may have incentivized the other two "axis of evil" nations to expand their nuclear arsenal in order to fight American troops.

It's difficult, if not impossible, to have an honest conversation about America's foreign policy without accepting the fact that the American government has collaborated with dangerous groups and dictators around the world. Indeed, in the 21st century, America spent billions of dollars fighting two opponents with whom it had collaborated in previous decades—the Taliban and Saddam Hussein. The interpretation of the Bush administration's military interventions in the Middle East that Loewen offers in this section is relatively uncontroversial—few historians or military strategists would dispute the fact that Bush antagonized North Korea and Iran by labeling them "evil" (although many historians continue to debate whether or not the Bush administration knew there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq). But instead of offering a fairly mainstream critique of Bush's mistakes, textbooks omit almost all the information about Iraq and Afghanistan.

Why did the Bush administration order the invasion of Iraq? Loewen argues that the Bush administration believed that America could benefit economically from a victory in Iraq by gaining access to Iraqi oil. Bush's vice president, Dick Cheney, personally benefitted from the invasion of Iraq: indeed, Cheney's former firm Halliburton was provided with enormous government contracts to rebuild Iraq, even after evidence of corruption and fraud surfaced. In return, Halliburton donated more than 500,000 dollars to the Republican Party. No textbooks even discuss the possibility that the Bush administration ordered the invasion of Iraq for any of the reasons discussed above.

Loewen makes no secret of the fact that he thinks that the U.S. invaded Iraq to gain access to the country's oil reserves (a possibility that seems plausible, considering that the U.S. had previously collaborated with Hussein to gain access to oil). However, his point is that, at the very least, history textbooks should offer such an interpretation of the War in Iraq as a possibility. *Instead, textbooks regurgitate the same explanations that the Bush administration offered at the time.*

The invasion of Iraq showed "incompetence of a high order." Instead of deposing high-ranking officials and using the local leadership to install order (as militaries have done in almost every successful invasion for the last 500 years), the Bush administration sent minimal numbers of troops to Iraq and declared the Iraqi army illegal. Unsurprisingly, many Iraqi soldiers joined Al Qaeda. Although these criticisms are easier to make in retrospect than they were in 2004, Loewen notes that *no* history textbooks bring them up, even as hypotheticals. Instead of offering any kind of point of view on the invasion of Iraq, contemporary textbooks characterize recent American history as "one damn thing after another," with little to no commentary. By effectively omitting recent history, textbooks "ensure that students will take away little from their history courses that they can apply to" their world.

The final chapters in high school history textbooks tend to be full full of scattered, unrelated facts and observations—usually there seems to be no broader narrative about recent history. Loewen argues that history textbooks end on a note of confusion, not because it's difficult to interpret recent history, but because textbooks are too sycophantic and loyal to the government to tell the truth. Loewen ends with the same point he's made throughout Lies My Teacher Told Me*: students' boredom with American history isn't a sign of their dullness—it's a sign of the dullness of American history textbooks.*

CHAPTER 11: PROGRESS IS OUR MOST IMPORTANT PRODUCT

The average history textbook ends with some version of "the same vapid cheer"—that America looks ahead to the future with great optimism. Such a message is precisely the opposite of the message that history textbooks *should* stress as they conclude: how can we use the lessons of the past to understand the present?

The purpose of history is arguably to use the lessons of the past to solve the problems of the future. Instead of making such a point, the average history textbook ends with a vaguely hopeful message that lacks any real substance.

Most history textbooks conclude with one simple idea: progress. They suggest that America has always been the best, and will continue to get even better. But such a philosophy is the opposite of what Americans increasingly believe: namely, that the future isn't bright, and won't necessarily be better at all.

In this chapter, Loewen will discuss one of the most common forms of bias in history textbooks—the belief that the present must be superior to the past, or that progress is the natural arc of history.

For more than one hundred years, the intellectual community has been challenging the idea that civilization inherently gets better over time. The events of the first half of the 20th century—two world wars, a worldwide depression, genocide, etc.—played a major role in disillusioning the world, Americans included. Another problem that challenges textbooks' promises of a bright future is the environmental crisis. America has become increasingly dependent on fossil fuels in the last century, and shows few signs of lessening its dependency. The energy crisis of 1973, in which the price of oil shot up for all Americans, acted as a reminder that energy consumption has a price. And yet, since 1973, Americans have consumed even more gasoline than before. Americans act as if their resources are infinite, when, in reality, oil, food, trees, and water are all finite resources.

Throughout the 20th century, there was a vigorous debate in the intellectual community about the "path of history." For much of the Cold War, intellectuals took a grim view of the future. After the Cold War, though, some thinkers, such as Francis Fukayama, argued that the world was approaching the "end of history"—a period in which there would be peace, democracy, and capitalism everywhere. However, as Loewen points out, the persisting problems of genocide, economic instability, and environment degradation suggest that the supposed "end of history" is just a myth.

Speaking broadly, there are two ways to think about the environment. The first idea is that humans are the exceptions to environmental rules: they will continue consuming more and more goods and develop ways to use technology and capitalism to feed their own consumption. The second philosophy is that humans are subject to the finitude of the Earth's resources, meaning that, inevitably, they will exhaust the globe's supply of water, oil, and other resources, and then go extinct. Loewen once argued that textbooks should present both ways of thinking about the environment and encourage students to think about them. Loewen now believes that consumption is a "lose-lose"—humans may go extinct when they exhaust the world's resources, but even if they don't, their use of oil and other fuels is ruining the environment and causing tremendous damage to the Earth's inhabitants; damage which technology and capitalism are powerless to undo.

In this passage, Loewen offers an uncharacteristically definitive interpretation of environmental issues. He claims that there is no genuine "debate" about how to respond to climate change—the only real solution to the problem is for humans to change their patterns of energy consumption. Most of the time, Loewen subscribes to the belief that his readers should keep an open mind and decide for themselves what to believe. However, Loewen argues that environmental degradation is such a serious issue that there's no time for people to "make up their minds"—humans need to act now *or risk going extinct.*

There are many other problems for which America is largely to blame. Nuclear proliferation continues to threaten the safety of people everywhere—just one nuclear missile in the hands of a terrorist group or rogue nation could inflict tremendous harm. It's very unlikely that humans will be able to solve these problems by following "the same old paths"—instead, we need new radical solutions, or else it's possible that humans could go extinct. Thus, it's not just lazy, but actively dangerous, for history textbooks to omit any discussion of environmental degradation or nuclear proliferation, as they do. But textbooks are so committed to a narrative of progress and improvement, it would seem, that they can't tolerate any clouds on the horizon.

The implicit question of this chapter is: what can history teach us about solving the problems of the future, particularly if these problems necessitate radical new solutions? Loewen implies, first, that history can teach students how previous generations have addressed nuclear and environmental issues (for example, how Richard Nixon supported the founding of the Environmental Protection Agency). Second, Loewen suggests that history textbooks need to end on more of a note of alarm and pessimism, rather than bland optimism, in order to alert students of future problems.

To get some sense for our infatuation with the concept of progress, consider that during the Reconstruction era, A.T. Morgan, a white state senator from Mississippi, married a black woman named Carrie Highgate, and was reelected. It's likely that a contemporary white Mississippi senator who did the same would lose in a landslide. And yet, people are so conditioned to believe that the present is always better than the past that it seems bizarre that such a marriage was ever possible. We need to un-think our bias toward the present; perhaps the best way to do so is to study real history. When we learn about history, we may also be able to undo some of our ethnocentrism and our tendency to think of our own society as "more advanced" than all others.

It's indicative of our collective bias against the past that Loewen's historical anecdote seems very strange—intuitively, most people would assume that the modern world is more tolerant and open-minded than the world of the past. But in fact, modern Americans can learn a lot from other people, including people of other cultures, and—as Loewen says here—people who lived in earlier periods in history.

By presenting the future in the blandest possible terms, history books leave students with the impression that history class isn't the proper place for a discussion of how to fix the world's problems. They also make students passive by creating the impression that the future is "a process over which they have no control." The reason why history textbooks end the way they do, however, is probably much simpler: publishers are afraid that if they end on an uncertain note, their textbooks will become less popular. By refusing to take any risks, and by presenting the present, the past, and the future as being entirely disconnected from each other, textbooks implicitly suggest that history is boring and irrelevant to people's lives.

History textbooks depict the past as dull and obsolete; they depict the present as a jumble of unrelated facts; and, finally, they depict the future as happy and hopeful. Loewen argues that textbooks need to show that past, present, and future are closely connected to one another: they need to stress the point that individual people have the power to change the future, and that individual people can also learn a lot from the people of the past.

CHAPTER 12: WHY IS HISTORY TAUGHT LIKE THIS?

In this book, Loewen has talked about some of the glaring errors and biases in history textbooks. Now, it's time to discuss a more general question: why, exactly, are textbooks so awful? Who are they satisfying?

For most of his book, Loewen has studied how textbooks distort history. Now, it's time for him to discuss why *they do so.*

It's possible that, at least in part, history textbooks are biased because historians are predominately male and white, and come from privileged families. It's also possible that, in part, textbooks are biased against minorities because of the constraints of time and space—with a limited page count, textbook writers default to the most familiar historical narrative they can think of; namely, an ethnocentric, racist, classist one. Furthermore, it's possible that the people who hold the power in our society—most of whom are white, male, and wealthy—deliberately create history textbooks that legitimate their own continued domination. While such an idea may seem far-fetched to some, consider that a few years ago, ExxonMobil, one of the world's largest oil companies, donated six million dollars to the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA); as a result, the NSTA refused to accept free copies of a documentary about global warming for fear that doing so would jeopardize their funding from ExxonMobil.

Loewen submits a series of explanations for the poor quality of contemporary history textbooks: 1) historians are biased and don't know it; 2) historians are biased, know it, and don't have enough time to correct their biases; 3) publishers are biased and do *know it. While possibility 3) might seem far-fetched to many readers, Loewen offers an example of the ways that businesses manipulate the educational system to sway young people toward their own interests. Loewen doesn't have time for a full-scale analysis of business manipulation (such an analysis would be beyond the scope of this book), but he simply suggests business interests as a* possible *explanation for some biases in textbooks.*

Even though there's a lot of truth in the idea that a "power elite" control society and intentionally make textbooks dull, there are some significant flaws in such an idea. For one, Americans are free to criticize their own country and its history—and regularly do so. Also, the "power elite hypothesis" is too easy: it is a way for ordinary people to absolve themselves of any complicity in society's problems—it's much easier to blame billionaires than it is to accept personal responsibility for the state of the world.

In this important passage, Loewen confronts some of his own biases. For much of his book, Loewen has criticized the "power elite" in America, accusing them of engineering wars to satisfy their own interests. Here, however, Loewen admits that blaming the power elite for America's problems is, itself, indicative of bias—blaming the power elite for everything acts as an alibi for ordinary people's ignorance and passivity.

One of the most basic reasons why textbooks are dull is that they're designed to be adopted by school boards and textbook committees. In many states, textbook committees take a few months to choose between a few dozen potential textbooks for a school district. There simply isn't enough time for committees to read all 1000 pages of each textbook, so publishers, recognizing the rules of the system, make their textbooks flashy and fill with them eye-catching visual aids and colorful pages. Increasingly, textbooks include a large number of sidebar sections, divided into categories such as "Terms to Learn," "multimedia activities," etc. As a result, the actual historical narrative of the textbook only takes up about half of the pages. In theory, sidebar sections are supposed to make the text more readable, but in fact, they make it far less so by distracting from the flow of history and creating the impression that history is a chaotic jumble.

One of the most interesting parts of this chapter is Loewen's analysis of the economics of textbook publishing. As he points out here, textbook companies are, at their most basic level, businesses. Like all successful businesses selling a product, publishing companies need to attract consumers—thus, they print flashy textbooks that appeal to overworked textbook selection committees because they seem to be easy to read. However, Loewen argues, by focusing so extensively on the more superficial qualities of the textbook (visual aids, chapter outlines, etc.), textbook companies neglect the real, historical "substance" of their books.

The selection process for a textbook censors much of its historical content. For many years, any high school textbooks used in the South were formally required to call the Civil War the "war between the States"; only after the civil rights movement did textbooks revert to the usual terminology. Loewen wrote a textbook on the history of Mississippi that won an award for nonfiction. But before it was published, school systems told Loewen that the book contained too much "black history" and focused too greatly on the recent past. Loewen successfully sued the school district on First Amendment grounds, and won. Loewen argues that textbooks aren't ethnocentric simply because textbook committees are ethnocentric, but also because textbook writers censor themselves—they're afraid that they'll be rejected for telling the truth, and so they stick to the standard narratives about Columbus, Lincoln, etc.

Textbook selection committees don't just receive textbooks passively—their own biases control the kinds of textbooks that publishing companies print, and therefore, the kinds of textbooks that students read. Loewen personally sued a school district for trying to enforce a biased, arguably racist view of history, and won. Therefore, he knows better than most that selection committees have their own cultural and political agenda. However, Loewen further argues that historians, not just committees, are to blame for the poor quality of textbooks—historians are so afraid of being rejected that they tailor their books to the biases of the textbook selection committee.

Who writes textbooks? Allegedly, textbooks are written by one or two historians—the people who get their names on the front cover. The reality, however, is that textbooks are written by dozens of people, many with no more education than an undergraduate English degree. There are occasions when the credited authors of new history textbooks have been retired or dead for years. For the most part, the "authors" of textbooks don't write every word; in theory, they just have the "final say" over what is written.

Loewen argues that the supposed "authors" of high school history textbooks have similar relationships to the contents of the textbooks that celebrities have to a clothing line or a perfume—they might serve in some advisory capacity, but their primary role is to allow a company to use their name to sell the product.

Loewen has found several identical or near-identical passages in two contemporary American history textbooks, each textbook with an entirely different set of credited authors. When Loewen asked one of the textbook authors about the passages, the author claimed to be "extremely distressed," and said he wasn't sure what had happened. Loewen suggests that the identical passages must have been written by some "nameless person" employed by Simon and Schuster, the company that published both textbooks. Often, Simon and Schuster reserves the right to edit and rephrase textbooks however it chooses, and in such cases it tasks clerks and interns with writing passages in textbooks. In this case, the same clerk must have written one passage and then reused it.

To prove that the "author" of a history textbook doesn't write all of the textbook, Loewen points out the amount of plagiarism in history textbooks. In this case, anonymous writers at Simon and Schuster are writing the same passages and placing them in different Simon and Schuster textbooks.

What's most disturbing about Loewen's anecdote is that the authors themselves didn't know about the identical passages; in other words, they didn't fully understand the information that was being passed off under their names. One ghostwriter told Loewen that it's common practice for textbooks to assign most or all of the textbook writing to freelancers and ghostwriters, and then "rent a name"—usually belonging to a real historian—to go on the cover. This would explain the embarrassing factual errors in many textbooks (one 1990s textbook claimed that President Harry Truman dropped an atomic bomb on Korea in the 1950s.)

Many publishing companies employ well-known historians to write history textbooks. However, it would appear that these historians end up writing little to none of the text that high school students read in class—ghostwriters do most of the work. The result is that textbook companies pass off shoddily written history textbooks as the work of renowned historians, when, in fact, they're nothing of the kind.

In addition to containing false or even plagiarized information, textbooks are bad at introducing controversy or uncertainty, even though these concepts are central to the study of history. For example, textbooks have an irritating tendency to provide "discussion questions," many of which are either vacuous or impossibly broad, while also providing teachers with prepared answers to these questions—suggesting that textbooks are meant to engineer a "fixed" conversation, instead of provoking a real discussion about how to interpret history.

As Loewen has already argued, history is a constant process of research and interpretation, in which there aren't always clear answers. However, history textbooks create the impression that history is the study of dates, facts, and historical figures, and that there can be little to no uncertainty in formal studies of the past.

Undeniably, one of the major reasons why history textbooks are so poor in quality is that high school teachers accept them instead of lobbying their superiors for better books. To be fair, high school teachers, who work long weeks for very little pay, have little incentive to work harder at educating their students. And high school history teachers may be afraid of "losing control" of their students: one of the reasons why history classes rarely leave any room for uncertainty. Ultimately, high school teachers accept dull textbooks because these textbooks make their jobs easier. Specifically, new textbooks often include prepared lists of main ideas, vocabulary terms, and dates, providing teachers with convenient exam material. The downside of prepared exam materials of this kind is that they make history seem like a jumble of facts, dates, and people, giving students little sense for the "flow" of history.

High school history teachers have a difficult job: they have to maintain control over their students while teaching the information in the history textbook. Thus, one of the major reasons why history classes are dull is that it's easier for teachers to teach history as a series of dates and facts than it is for them to give a sense of the controversies and nuances of history. To name only one example, it's much easier for teachers to grade multiple choice tests (in other words, tests with a factual right answer) than it is for them to grade essay exams (i.e., exams that give students the opportunity to write about historical ideas and historical ambiguities).

For the most part, history teachers do not "teach against their textbooks"; they teach their textbooks' information, no matter how incorrect or ethnocentric the information is. Teachers who teach from a textbook "can hide behind" the textbook when they need to defend their work. Teachers know full-well that they can be fired for introducing even vaguely controversial material in their classrooms—so unfortunately, they have every incentive to stick to the textbook.

As Loewen points out, it's often "safer" for teachers to stick to the curriculum, because they could be fired if angry parents accused them of teaching a controversial interpretation of history. Even if some teachers take risks and teach a more intellectually coherent, interesting version of history than the textbook provides, the majority of teachers do not—their economic and career incentives encourage them to teach the same biased history, year after year.

It's not enough to blame teachers, power elites, or bad writers for the poor quality of history textbooks. The truth is that *all* Americans help to perpetuate bad history. Consider, for example, the way that textbooks in the 1930s dealt with the history of black soldiers in the Civil War: not a single 1930s high school history textbook that Loewen can find mentions black Union soldiers. By and large, mainstream society in the 1930s did not celebrate or respect the achievements of African Americans, and so the textbooks of the era omitted some important historical information. What was true in 1930 is true today: textbooks mirror the beliefs and attitudes of American society as a whole.

History textbooks partly reflect (though they also influence) what mainstream society believes, and what mainstream society finds worthy of discussion. Therefore, while it's possible to blame one or more sectors of society (the textbook industry, historians, teachers, students), the truth is that all Americans are partly to blame for the poorness of history textbooks.

One of the most important ways through which society controls the content of history textbooks is by criticizing and in some cases suing teachers who expose children to controversial material. Thus, one of the reasons why children don't grow up learning about Columbus's genocide is that most people believe that children shouldn't see pictures of hangings and corpses. But there must be a way to treat children fairly and sensibly without lying or censoring the truth. In the 21st century, teachers' attempts to censor the truth are particularly unproductive, since children have access to media that often do a better job of telling the truth than teachers do. For example, children might learn about nice, friendly police officers in school, and then see footage of the Rodney King beating on television.

Loewen argues that history textbooks omit information and glorify historical figures because publishing companies are afraid of being sued by angry parents. While Loewen has some sympathy for the argument that children shouldn't be exposed to information about war or genocide, he argues that in the 21st century, children are exposed to this information, whether their parents like it or not (for instance, when a black man named Rodney King was brutally beaten by the LAPD in the early 1990s, news networks played footage of the beating repeatedly). Therefore, textbooks should teach children the truth, instead of trying to preserve a state of innocence that few children have anymore.

Why do adults want to keep children ignorant of history? Supposedly, adults do so because they want children to remain idealistic, but it seems more likely that they do so in order to prevent their children from *becoming* idealistic; they don't want their children to distrust authority and grow into committed, political crusaders. To this day, many, if not most, parents believe that learning to "respect history" is an important part of becoming a mature adult. The truth, Loewen argues, is that children need to learn how to question and challenge historical figures and events if they are to become mature, intelligent people.

Many parents want their children to be respectful and obedient; however, when children grow up being ordered to respect everyone in history—even murderers like Columbus—they become disillusioned and then simply bored with history. Furthermore, they become more passive and politically disengaged—hardly qualities that many parents would want in their children.

Teachers and parents often bemoan students' inability to "learn about history"—i.e., to memorize their history textbooks. But perhaps students' unwillingness to learn about history from a textbook is a sign that they want to learn the truth—an idea that Loewen will discuss in the next chapter.

Even though many different people are to blame for the poorness of history classes, the scapegoats are usually "lazy students." Loewen, by contrast, argues that students sincerely want to learn about history when it's taught right.

CHAPTER 13: WHAT IS THE RESULT OF TEACHING HISTORY LIKE THIS?

Children think of all kinds of ways to disobey their teachers. If the teacher assigns students to define a long list of terms, the students might look up the answers on the internet and then send them to their friends. Such actions could be termed "day-to-day resistance," a sociological term alluding to the way that slaves found small ways to disobey their masters.

Loewen compares students' pranks to slaves' acts of resistance in the antebellum South. While the comparison might seem odd, or even inappropriate, Loewen suggests that students, just like slaves, are being conditioned to believe a certain, biased point of view.

Many people would say that students' "day-to-day resistance" is just a form of laziness. But how can we fault students for their laziness when the history assignments themselves are so inane? Loewen theorizes that, because teachers and textbooks present students with a list of disconnected facts and dates, students "take refuge" in simple ignorance of American history. Thus, many students are embarrassingly ignorant of history *because* of their history classes, not in spite of them.

While it's all-too easy for parents and teachers to blame students for failing to learn history, students shouldn't be punished for their failure to learn when the history lessons in question are so racially and culturally biased. For instance, it would be utterly wrong to fault an African American student for showing no interest in a racially biased history of the 1890s.

The best way to teach history to young people, Loewen believes, is to convey some sense of emotion. For example, people remember where they were on September 11, 2001, because they have strong emotional associations with that day. History textbooks are overwhelmingly dry and convey no strong emotions other than a vague sense of optimism. Thus, it's unsurprising that students retain history textbooks' information for an alarmingly short time. Moreover, African American and Latino children retain less historical information than their white counterparts, perhaps reflecting the ethnocentric way that textbooks teach history.

History textbooks are boring because, in many ways, they're designed to be boring—as Loewen has argued, they're conceived as random collections of facts and dates, so that teachers can test their students more easily, and maintain control over their classes. To the extent that textbooks have any strong emotion, that emotion is a vague sense of nationalist pride, which—as we've seen—mostly excludes minorities.

A good way to understand the classist bias of society is to ask students to estimate the percentages of Americans, organized by education, who opposed the Vietnam War in the early 1970s. Most students assume that education correlates with a more pacifist attitude; in other words, the more education people received, the more likely they were to oppose the war in Vietnam. Exactly the opposite is true: while a majority of college-educated, high school-educated, and grade school-educated Americans opposed American involvement in Vietnam, education correlated *negatively* with opposition to the war (for example, 80 percent of grade school-educated people opposed the war, as compared with a mere 60 percent of college-educated people).

Most students would say that education correlates positively with compassion, knowledge of current affairs, and other qualities that might make people more likely to oppose a war. However, the evidence Loewen cites here points to the opposite conclusion: education correlates inversely *with certain kinds of compassion, meaning that the most educated (and, perhaps, affluent) people in society are the most likely to support a long, brutal war.*

The results of the Vietnam poll would imply that, contrary to what most people believe, educated people are more supportive of an aggressive foreign policy and have less goodwill for their fellow Americans than less educated people. One could argue that working-class people (without much education) were more likely to oppose Vietnam because they were the most likely to be enlisted. But this explanation doesn't hold up to close scrutiny. Controlling for education, younger people are more likely to support wars than older people—if people are just looking out for themselves, then why would young people be more likely to support a war than their grandparents?

It's indicative of the strong classist bias in America that, even after people learn about the negative correlation of education and support for the Vietnam War, they try to argue that poor, uneducated people opposed Vietnam simply because they didn't want to die in battle (an explanation that doesn't explain why young, working-class people were more likely to support the Vietnam War than their parents).

Loewen suggests one reason that educated people are more likely to support government policy than uneducated people: they've been socialized to trust the institutions of their society—a process partly facilitated by history textbooks. After more than a decade of being taught to trust the United States government, some "educated" people will do so for the rest of their lives, shifting their beliefs to mirror their government's policies. It's surprising that education correlates negatively with opposition to the Vietnam War, because most Americans think that being educated means being tolerant and well-informed about the world. In reality, intolerant and dogmatic people are sometimes affluent and well-educated.

In a way, Lies My Teacher Told Me *is all about denying the relationship between education and compassion. By reading history textbooks and spending time in history classes, students may become conditioned to believe textbooks' classist, racist narratives. Loewen thus argues that there's no real correlation between education and compassion—all sorts of dogmatic, intolerant people in American history have had first-rate educations.*

Americans' ignorance of their society has continued into the 21st century. In a recent poll, 62 percent of Republicans agreed with the statement that "poor people have it easy" because they can go on welfare. For the majority of a mainstream American political party to believe such an offensive, factually incorrect statement demonstrates Americans' lack of curiosity and sympathy for their fellow citizens. And in some ways, it's easier for powerful people to choose to believe that poor people are lazy and talentless, because such a belief mitigates some of powerful people's uneasiness with their own position in society.

There is abundant evidence that Americans have come to believe the classist, racist narratives they first learned in history textbooks. For instance, the Republicans who believe that poor people are lazy may have learned to think about poor people in this way after reading that America was the "Land of Opportunity," and, therefore, that poor people must have done something to deserve their poverty.

Too often, we blame students for being bad at history. But the truth is that students are "bad" at history because the history they're taught is classist, sexist, racist, and dull. When we finally begin teaching students the truth about the past, Loewen claims, they'll begin to find history interesting.

Loewen closes with the same point he's been making all along: when confronting the problem of dull history classes and uninformed students, we should blame history textbooks, not the students themselves.

AFTERWORD: THE FUTURE LIES AHEAD

Loewen admits that *Lies My Teacher Told Me* is an incomplete book. It doesn't address the experience of Latin Americans, Catholics, or many other key American minorities. The ultimate purpose of Loewen's book, however, isn't to provide an all-encompassing "alternative history" of the United States; its purpose is to expose the biases of traditional history textbooks. In this chapter, Loewen will offer a few recommendations for how to improve history education in the U.S.

As we've seen already, Loewen's book is an interesting work of history, but it's not primarily a textbook—there are significant gaps in its account of American history, meaning that, in many ways, Lies My Teacher Told Me *is primarily a "meta-study" of history textbooks and how they can be improved.*

Loewen argues that history classes need to address fewer topics and examine them more thoroughly. Instead of providing students with a massive list of historical figures and dates, teachers need to give their students a better sense of key historical ideas and the "larger picture." By focusing on fewer topics, classes will leave more space for students to voice their own opinions and debate over historical issues—a crucial part of any good history class.

In most public school history classes, there is little time for discussion or debate, because there's barely enough time for the teachers to cover all the material. By cutting down on dates, terms, and names, history classes would potentially reduce the amount of memorization but increase the amount of learning.

Even if teachers continue using bad textbooks, they can improve their classes by encouraging students to critique the textbook. Loewen remembers a sixth grade teacher who told her students that, contrary to the textbook's claims, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were slave owners. The teacher organized a project in which students conducted some of their own research on early presidents. Such assignments teach children another vital lesson: discussing, debating, and correcting history is part of the definition of history.

Students need to learn how to critique their textbook, instead of instinctively trusting that "the textbook is always right." In this section, Loewen shows that, contrary to what many teachers might assume, it is possible to teach an organized, informative history class in which the students also question their textbook.

Textbooks need to do a better job of teaching students how to analyze primary sources. Students should be able to read quotes from historical figures and analyze the quotes in terms of the figures' economic, political, religious, and racial biases. They should learn to compare different accounts of the same historical event. When textbooks and teachers show students how to analyze sources, students will cease to see history as a dull, inarguable list of "what happened" and begin to see it as a constant process of interpretation and reinterpretation.

In addition to critiquing their textbook, students need to learn how to interpret sources of all kinds. Students should be familiar with the concept of bias, and should be able to understand how people's religions, cultures, ethnicities, etc., inform their view of the world. In doing so, students will begin to see history as a dynamic process, *rather than a boring list of "some stuff that happened."*

Thomas Jefferson once wrote that American citizens must become "their own historians." After spending more than eleven years writing *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, Loewen has come to agree with Jefferson. Americans must study their history critically and carefully. Moreover, they must recognize—as Loewen has—that history is an ongoing process of learning about the truth.

It's interesting that Loewen closes the book by quoting Thomas Jefferson, a man whom he'd previously criticized for being a slave owner. One of Loewen's most important points has been that students shouldn't be trained to think of most historical figures as either heroes or villains—they need to respect historical figures' strengths and weaknesses. Thus, Loewen invokes Jefferson to make the point that being an historian is an important part of being an American: good citizens must take an active part in interpreting the past.

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