

WHOSE AMERICA?

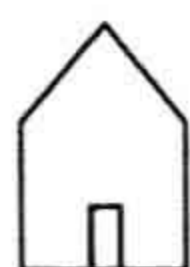
CULTURE WARS IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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J O N A T H A N Z I M M E R M A N

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H A R V A R D U N I V E R S I T Y P R E S S

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Designed by Gwen Nefsky Frankfeldt

For Sarah and Rebecca,
and Coming Home

WHOSE AMERICA?

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Beyond Dayton and Chicago

In 1928 America's foremost political journalist published a book on the perils of popular efforts to alter the public school curriculum. Walter Lippmann entitled the book *American Inquisitors* and focused most of his attention on recent campaigns against teaching about evolution and against so-called New History textbooks in the schools. Following a circus-like trial in Dayton, Tennessee, a local court had upheld the state's anti-evolution law and levied a small fine against the young teacher who challenged it, John T. Scopes. In Chicago, meanwhile, Mayor William H. Thompson—a.k.a. "Big Bill"—led a successful drive to stop the use of texts by Charles Beard, David Muzzey, and other leading scholars. There were key distinctions between these two movements: whereas anti-evolutionists were mainly old-stock evangelical Protestants, for example, the Chicago campaign drew most of its support from Irish and German immigrants. But both attacks stemmed from America's grassroots, raising the danger of a perpetual conflict in its schools. "You may feel that I am making too much of the spectacles at Dayton and Chicago," Lippmann noted,

and that I am wrong in taking them as symbols and portents of great significance. May I remind you, then, that the struggles for the control of

the schools are among the bitterest political struggles which now divide the nations? . . . It is inevitable that it should be so. Wherever two or more groups within a state differ in religion, or in language and in nationality, the immediate concern of each group is to use the schools to preserve its own faith and tradition. For it is in the school that the child is drawn towards or drawn away from the religion and the patriotism of its parents.¹

Lippmann's argument neatly foreshadowed much of our contemporary discussion of cultural politics in America. Especially in its schools and universities, we are told, the nation is "wracked" by "culture wars."² These conflicts typically concern "religion" or "patriotism," just as Lippmann predicted. The issue of evolution continues to divide countless school boards and communities, which now face a host of other religion-related controversies: prayer, sex education, drug education, and so on. In history and the social studies, critics allege that an emphasis on America's racial diversity—and particularly on its racist deeds—erodes students' reverence for their country. These battles reflect not just differences over specific educational policies, it often seems, but different ways of seeing the world. After two students gunned down thirteen of their peers at a Colorado high school in April 1999, some commentators were quick to blame the massacre on the lack of prayer or the teaching of evolution in the school. Other observers, pointing to the two students' racist statements, complained that the curriculum had failed to imbue the murderers with knowledge and appreciation of the diverse cultures surrounding them.³

In this book I tell the story of culture wars in twentieth-century American schools. I investigate how successive generations of Americans have addressed the thorny issues of religion and nation—and race—in the public school curriculum. Despite the huge outpouring of writings in social history during the past four decades, we know very little about how ordinary Americans conceived of—and engaged in—these conflicts. An able historian himself, Lippmann realized that he could not narrate the conflict about public school curriculum

without examining “the public.” Following his lead, I explore the myriad and mostly unknown Americans who have struggled over the school curriculum for the past hundred years.

In one significant respect, my work departs from Lippmann’s legacy. To Lippmann, the disparate conflicts over religion and patriotism in the schools—“Dayton and Chicago,” in his geographical shorthand—reflected a single phenomenon: the “wide conflict” between “scholarship and popular faith” in American political life.⁴ In our own day, likewise, commentators on the “culture wars” routinely collapse religious and patriotic controversies into a unitary, all-encompassing battle. But I will show that the two conflicts have two separate histories, belying the common frame that we use to analyze them. When I began to work on this book, I imagined mapping a single highway from Dayton and Chicago to the Colorado shootings—from the “culture wars” of Lippmann’s day into our own. Instead, I discovered a pair of roads, one from Dayton and the other from Chicago. Often intersecting but nevertheless distinct, the roads follow sharply different paths between the past and the present.

The road from Chicago—our conflict over patriotism and nationalism in the schools—is a fairly straight line, reflecting one constant theme: the progressive inclusion of more and more Americans in the grand national story. Lippmann cast a jaundiced eye on this development, because the immigrants he examined often ignored or even disdained modern canons of historical scholarship. My own view is more sympathetic, because I focus largely upon a group Lippmann ignored: African-Americans. Invoking the very standards of scholarship and objectivity that Lippmann prized, black citizens removed a vicious array of racist slurs from school textbooks. Most of all, they won a part—or, sometimes, a starring role—in the texts’ larger narrative. Thanks to several generations of grassroots black activists, students of every color now learn as much (if not more) about Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and Martin Luther King Jr. as they do about Andrew Jackson, Theodore Roosevelt, or John F. Kennedy. Given the neglect or outright denigration of African-Americans for

most of our history, this achievement must rank as one of the great triumphs of that same history.

To be sure, the victory has never been complete. Jealously guarding their own dominant position in the American narrative, old-stock white conservatives worked to block immigrant and black voices from school textbooks. Eventually most parties to the dispute reached a rough compromise: each racial and ethnic group could enter the story, provided that none of them questioned the story's larger themes of freedom, equality, and opportunity. For Americans who could not wait for or abide by such an accord, the nation's educational system offered a built-in safety valve: local control. Impatient with racist history textbooks, for example, blacks across the segregated South promoted and adopted their own books and courses. After World War II, when many history texts started to lose their bigoted cast, publishers continued to produce so-called mint julep editions—all-white books—for the white southern market. But these episodes were exceptions, proving the overall rule of increasing diversity in the standard history curriculum. By 1973 even Governor George C. Wallace of Alabama would proclaim the second week of February African-American History Week.⁵

By contrast, America's road out of Dayton—its struggle over religion in the public schools—has been marked by sharp bends and curves, not by a straight path. Countering Lippmann's prediction of a war between "religious fundamentalism" and secular values, the nation's diverse faiths reached a fairly harmonious *modus vivendi* with the public schools during the three decades after *Scopes*. The key once again was America's tradition of local discretion, which allowed communities as well as individual families to determine both the type and the amount of religious instruction that children would receive in the schools. Under the system known as "released time," students could select instruction in the faith of their choice—or, if they preferred, they could opt out of the subject entirely. This arrangement sparked a spirited competition between certain mainline religions and self-avowed "fundamentalist" groups, each aiming to lure as

many children as possible to its classes. Contrary to many historical accounts, the fundamentalists did not go “underground” after *Scopes*; instead, they fought tooth and nail to control religious instruction in the public schools. But they usually failed. Most religious instruction was controlled by liberal Christians, who used released-time classes to promote racial integration, poverty relief, and other progressive causes.⁶

In the early 1960s the Supreme Court’s bans on organized prayer and Bible reading brought the “choice” system—and its liberal character—to an abrupt halt. Rather than ceding religious exercises to local jurisdictions and families, states and school districts now issued flat prohibitions against all such practices. Liberals quickly retreated from the arena of religious education, fearful of eroding the Court’s authority on questions of race. But conservative and fundamentalist Christians continued to press their claims upon the schools. Across the country, advocates of school prayer revived older notions of a “Christian America”: since the nation was founded and sanctified “under God,” they argued, its public schools should respect the biblical injunction to worship God. Other Christian conservatives targeted sex education, which they saw as undermining the scriptural dictate of abstinence outside marriage. Born as a liberal effort to promote social justice for America’s diverse races and classes, religious instruction quickly became a conservative campaign to impose a single morality on all of them.

In the 1980s the road from Dayton took yet another sharp turn. Instead of asking schools to tailor curricula to their values, Christian conservatives began to demand “equal time” for their views. The switch was most clearly evident in the revived battle over evolution, where conservatives called upon science teachers to present biblical accounts of creation alongside Darwinian ones. Likewise, they said, schools should present “Christian” instruction about sexuality to complement the allegedly atheistic messages in regular sex education classes. Lest devout believers suffer “discrimination,” finally, conservatives pressed schools to restore organized prayer in the classroom.

In many ways these claims returned the debate over religion to its original, liberal roots: since Americans practiced a wide array of faiths, schools should provide the widest possible “choice” among them. Yet the new demands for religion in schools also echoed modern multiculturalism, with its emphasis on identifying and compensating the victims of social prejudice. Just as textbooks opened their pages to the distinct cultures of racial minorities, the argument went, so should classrooms open their doors to “oppressed” religions and *their* cultures—including the culture of prayer.

By the early 1990s, then, the roads from Chicago and Dayton seemed to merge into a single, unifying “culture war.” But a closer inspection dispels this impression, highlighting the huge differences that still separated the battles over religion and patriotism in the public schools. Despite shrill warnings by a wide range of polemicists, the inclusion of racial and ethnic minorities in textbooks did not dilute America’s majestic national narrative. Instead, these fresh voices were folded into the old story, echoing a century-long pattern of challenge, resistance, and co-option. On the religion front, compromise proved far more elusive. Reflecting Americans’ essential beliefs about God and the universe, religious principles simply could not be reconciled in an additive, come-one-come-all fashion. Conflicts over history textbooks generally occurred within a shared set of assumptions about American civic tradition. But religious disputes often lacked this common language, a lack that accounts for their vehemence as well as their persistence. More than a decade after George C. Wallace welcomed black history into Alabama schools, for example, he continued to press for prayer in those same schools. More to the point, he also endorsed a campaign to remove “humanistic” literature textbooks, contrasting their content to the God-centered, “Judeo-Christian” worldview of his constituents.⁷

This book is a work of history, not of contemporary social commentary. But I live in the present, and the book was very much motivated by my personal, modern-day concerns. As a public school history teacher in the 1980s, I was struck by the bland, hackneyed

quality of the textbooks that were issued to my students. Since then, many scholars have confirmed my initial impression: although texts have added welcome material about formerly neglected Americans, they have retained their mawkish and triumphal tone about “America” itself.⁸ All the while, strangely, a range of critics—mostly conservatives, but some liberals as well—have berated history instruction for *denigrating* the nation.⁹ In part, I wrote this book to discover how this loud, confusing debate had come about. Along the way, I hoped, I could also suggest some peace treaties—or at least a cease-fire—for the country’s “history wars.”

But what I found was that the history wars are vastly exaggerated. In the rarefied atmosphere of universities and think tanks, admittedly, theorists joust angrily over the proper balance of unity and diversity in the public school curriculum. Out in the schools themselves, however, this battle was settled long ago. Throughout the twentieth century, campaigns to diversify history instruction almost always served to enhance—not to erode—its “patriotic” quality. For blacks and immigrants, especially, the constant goal has been a place at the table—that is, a voice in the curriculum—rather than a new set of furniture. From our comfortable multicultural armchairs, it is easy to forget how much resistance these groups encountered to the simple proposition that every American belonged in American history. But we should also remember that these prior struggles concerned the roster of eligible patriots, not patriotism itself. “America” was a talisman, a sacred entity that none could sully or even contest. The only issue was whom it would include.

Here the contrast to religious “culture wars” could not be sharper. Several scholars have suggested that these religious conflicts are also exaggerated or even mythical: that in the educational arena, for example, staunchly conservative Christians evince far more interest in class size, school safety, and other prosaic matters than in red-flag cultural questions like prayer and sex education.¹⁰ The point is well taken, but we should not take it too far. The vast majority of present-day citizen complaints to school boards concern religious issues, not

racial or ethnic ones.¹¹ Inasmuch as these conflicts do divide America, moreover, they do not allow for easy truces. A citizen who views fornication as an abomination before the Lord may have little to share—or even to discuss—with a sex educator who wishes to teach children about contraception. “What have you been reading?” a flustered New Jersey resident asked her state school board in 1980, blasting sex education. “I don’t understand you. I can’t even hold a conversation with you.”¹²

Her comment highlights the central moral and intellectual dilemma portrayed in this book. As I began to study America’s history wars, I discovered that the combatants rarely subjected America itself to analysis: even as different groups struggled to insert their own heroes into the national story, they rarely challenged that narrative’s broader contours and themes. As I will argue, the infusion of “diversity” into American textbooks—however laudable in its own right—actually delayed rather than promoted the critical dialogue that a healthy democracy demands. Yet given the frequent *absence* of dialogue in America’s religious conflicts, readers might ask, shouldn’t we celebrate our consensus on history? All nations—not just the United States—construct narratives that are partly “untrue” or mythological.¹³ But these narratives provide a common discourse of understanding, something that has been sorely missing in America’s wars over religion in the schools. How can I denounce these shared assumptions when it comes to history, then decry the *lack* of such assumptions about religion?

These are difficult questions, and I do not pretend to have all the answers. But I do think that a close examination of America’s dual culture wars can clarify the origins of the conflicts, the nature of our current dilemma, and the decisions that lie ahead. In the end, that is probably all that any good history can do. I have done my best to map the roads from Dayton and Chicago to the present. Wherever they go next, I hope this book will help others navigate them.

HISTORY WARS

"I will never rest until the histories in use in the Chicago public schools are purged of their pro-British propaganda." The speaker was Chicago's mayor, William H. Thompson, who charged that textbooks maligned the American Revolution and its multi-ethnic heroes. Cartoonists and reporters linked Thompson's campaign to the 1925 *Scopes* trial surrounding the teaching of evolution in Dayton, Tennessee: in each case, they claimed, ignorant hordes had assaulted America's citadels of knowledge. But in the end, one publishing executive wrote, knowledge would win out: "The general current of historical writing cannot be swerved by such ridiculous charges. In Dayton and then Chicago, some little group gets out brooms and endeavors to sweep back the books they do not themselves like, but the current is too strong for them and science and art and history go on."¹

The executive badly misjudged the breadth and strength of both campaigns. The *Scopes* trial would cast a pall over American schools into the 1960s, sharply restricting instruction about the theory of evolution. The effect of Thompson's crusade was more complicated. On the one hand, his attacks led to the insertion of more and more ethnic groups—or at least of their leading figures—into the grand national narrative; on the other, he blocked any critical discussion or

evaluation of this same narrative. Over the next seventy years textbooks would open their pages to a diversity of races and ethnicities. But the texts did not question the overall principles of liberty, prosperity, and equality that supposedly bound Americans together. Books that contested these rosy themes rarely thrived. Waves of protest in the early 1940s swept away Harold Rugg's series of social studies texts, which emphasized America's economic inequality as well as its ethnic diversity. Weaned on the very gospel of private enterprise that Rugg denounced, Americans rejected any suggestion that poverty might prevent them from sharing in the nation's birthright of freedom.

Most of all, this birthright stopped at the color line. Even as history textbooks celebrated freedom and equality, they neglected or denigrated the nation's black citizens. Throughout the century blacks fought to remove these distortions and to insert their own achievements into general American history texts. At the same time, they demanded separate textbooks and courses about their distinctive past. Both campaigns would reach their zenith in the 1960s, exposing sharp tensions between them. Black activists and their white allies successfully "integrated" American textbooks, which continued to portray the nation as beacon of hope and liberty to the world. To a younger, more militant generation, however, only special "black studies" courses could expose the racism and oppression beneath this cheerful veneer. Nowhere were students of any color asked to decide how much liberty—or how much racism—characterized their shared history.

Perhaps it must always be so. Schools across the globe teach the glories of nationhood, linking children to a set of transcendent events and ideals. Yet our own triumphal narrative places a special emphasis on personal liberty: in America, we are told, individuals are uniquely free to decide their values, beliefs, and attitudes. If we applied that principle to instruction in history, we would encourage our children to develop their own interpretations instead of foisting a

single view upon them. Since William H. Thompson's textbook campaign in Chicago, the American ideal of equality has helped bring many racial and ethnic groups into a heroic national narrative. One day, we might hope, the American ideal of liberty will help each of us to narrate the nation on our own.