



4-1-2008

Textbook Giants Face the Future: American Citizenship, the Study of History, and the Uncertain Years Ahead

Andrew J. Schiera

University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education, ajschiera@gmail.com

TEXTBOOK GIANTS FACE THE FUTURE: AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP, THE STUDY OF HISTORY, AND THE UNCERTAIN YEARS AHEAD

Andrew J. Schiera

By definition, American history textbooks have no business contemplating the years to come. A crude definition of history would limit the range of inquiry backwards in time, to the past. After all, is it not true that most history textbooks are simply a “miscellaneous collection of names, dates, and facts” about the past?¹ Further, many historians hold the study of “present history” in contempt because the assemblage of present “facts” is simply too disorderly to fashion a coherent thesis. We can interpret the importance of past events because we know their effects. We have no such knowledge in the present and certainly have even less authority to “interpret” the future. Perhaps it is reassuring that high school history classes rarely get to these pages about the future anyway—after all, it is by definition impossible for a history class to finish by studying the future, and it is not a well-kept secret that most classes fail to make it up to the present, Vietnam, World War II, or even the Roaring Twenties.

Even so, there does seem to be a general pattern that textbook authors follow. As they chronologically approach the present, their treatment of history becomes a scorecard of the achievements and (mostly) challenges that the American people have faced. From there, about two out of every three textbook authors in my study speculate as to how Americans will overcome these problems in the future. However, history textbook authors do have a compelling reason to address the present and the future which is grounded in the essential purpose of education in American society. Americans have always affirmed the responsibility of schools to produce citizens capable of furthering the public good through democratic means. Every student will one day be an adult, ideally taking an active role in solving the present and future problems in our democratic society. In their treatments of the future, and consonant with their effort to fashion students into well-informed citizens capable of functioning in a democracy, textbook giants employ two common themes: a common cultural heritage grounded in the timeless values of the American creed, and the confidence rooted in our ability to overcome grave problems based on past successes.

To select the most widely-used textbooks from the 1940s to the present, I adapted the methods used by Robert Lerner, Althea Kagai, and Stanley Rothman.² The result is a list of eighteen textbooks, composed by eleven textbook giants, that span from 1941 to 2007. In this essay, I use the term “textbook giants” not only to convey the enormous influence these particular authors had on students by virtue of their wide readership and numerous editions, but also to reflect just how influential and authoritative any textbook author is in the study of American history.

This authority has three components. To begin with, textbooks are the primary teaching tool in the contemporary history classroom. According to a 1983 study by Ravitch and Finn, 80% of students used textbooks two or more times per week, and 60% used textbooks every day.³ Fast-forwarding to the present, the advent of the internet has not supplanted the use of textbooks. Kyle Ward has asserted that problems of access, finance, and maintenance have rendered this new technology unreliable for day-to-day history classrooms. Even though the textbook was certainly not “the perfect solution” to the many difficulties teachers confront, Ward concluded that “the behemoth U.S. history textbook is arguably the most essential tool in the history classroom today—as it has been for nearly two centuries.”⁴ By the sheer weight of their numbers and frequency of their use, textbooks can disseminate the textbook author’s perspective about the past—and the future—quite widely.

Second, textbooks have a natural tone of authority. Past and present, most students have assumed them to be the final arbiter of American history. As Frances FitzGerald playfully noted when she reminisced about the textbooks she read in the 1950s:

[T]hose texts were the truth of things: they were American history.... [T]hey...had the demeanor and trappings of authority. They were weighty volumes. They spoke in measured cadences: imperturbable, humorless, and as distant as Chinese emperors.⁵

FitzGerald would go on to argue that the textbooks of the 1960s did not compare to those authoritative tomes of her school days. To some degree, however, all textbooks possess this aura of authority, which also lingers over the author’s serious contemplations of the uncertain future.

Finally, the tone of authority and the frequency of their use generally leads students to conclude that textbook content is itself authoritative. Mary Beth Norton captured the student attitude fostered by the authoritative nature of the texts: “*if it’s not in the textbook, it’s not important.*”⁶ This perspective stems from the fact that textbooks are productions of official culture. John Bodnar defined official culture as those productions of cultural leaders or elites that desire social unity, the perseverance of existing institutions, and the maintenance of the status quo.⁷ This definition stands in opposition to Joseph Moreau’s contention that textbooks have “symbolic value” insofar as they represent our shared, “popular understandings of the past” that have accumulated over time.⁸ It seems more likely that the authors of the text-

books are cultural elites that hold a position of prominence. Their works reach the vast majority of students, either shaping the students' views or imposing the author's own, depending on one's interpretation. The authors do not do employ this power recklessly, however. They have a particular agenda in mind, grounded in the official culture's purpose of the study of history in public schools.

HISTORY FOR AN EDUCATED CITIZENRY

Textbook studies often involve analyses of the debates of the agendas of various groups—the publishing industry, prevailing educational philosophies, interest group pressures, and state adoption boards—and how these agents changed textbook content. However, when Lerner, Kagai, and Rothman, themselves activists in the 1990s textbook war, acknowledged that the most controversial debates over education concern “moral education and education for citizenship,” they implicitly acknowledged that everyone agrees education has an essential civic component.⁹

The report of the 1987 Bradley Commission on History in Schools expounded on this attitude in detail. The Commission identified the “two foremost aims of American education” that would not be achieved without the study of history.¹⁰ The first aim is personal growth, “the preparation of all our people for private lives of personal integrity and fulfillment.”¹¹ Admittedly, this aim seems unrelated to the final passages about the future. The second aim, an “active and intelligent citizenship,” is more relevant. The Bradley Commission concisely emphasized that history

is vital for all citizens in a democracy, because it provides the only avenue we have to reach an understanding of ourselves and of our society, in relation to the human condition over time, and of how some things change and others continue.¹²

Here the commission succinctly identified how history serves citizenship: it reminds us of our identity as individuals in American society, and it shows how we have adapted to changes over time.

First, studying history in school allows students to discover their shared American heritage. Americans do not share a “common religion or a common ethnicity,” like other societies. Rather, the “democratic vision of liberty, equality, and justice” binds Americans together. The commission therefore concluded that in order to maintain this democratic vision and “bring it to daily practice,” it is “imperative” that all citizens understand what shaped our vision, what events helped or hindered the fulfillment of that vision, and how it evolved into what it is today.¹³ Whereas race and religion are passed down, the American heritage must be re-learned by each generation. The purpose of history in schools is to teach this vision.

Second, history, according to the Bradley Commission, is the “discipline that can best help [students] to understand and deal with change.”¹⁴ It fosters certain “habits of the mind” which not only encourage students to observe and explain change but also prepare students to “live with uncer-

tainties and exasperating, even perilous, unfinished business, realizing that not all problems have solutions.”¹⁵ In observing past changes—the human effects of “technological, economic, and cultural change”—history prepares us for the choices we must make today and tomorrow.¹⁶ History, in sum, illustrates how previous generations have dealt with change in the past, providing a model for future action.

These two broad purposes of history are present- and future-oriented. They are also publicly-oriented. This is the message the official culture wishes to convey: teaching history provides our students—our citizens-to-be—with the tools they need to maintain our democracy in an uncertain future. These textbook writers, who enjoy an authority often unquestioned by the student, transmit this message to the students through the text—especially in the last few pages concerning the present and future.

THE PROBLEM-LADEN PRESENT: “THE NATURAL DISASTER THEORY OF HISTORY”

Frances FitzGerald perceptively detected a switch of the locus of causation in history in 1930s textbooks. Before this time, textbooks focused on character and individual agency as the principal agents of change. Beginning in the 1930s, however, textbook publishers began to be bound by changing historical circumstances and an increasingly national textbook market. The changing nature of the textbook publishing industry compelled authors to construct a democratic history acceptable to everyone. As a result, authors and publishers refused to condemn any individuals as responsible for conflicts between one identifiable entity and another, instead citing vague “institutions and abstractions.” The result was a long list of “authorless crimes”—“‘problems’ created by no one”—that made history “just one damn thing after another.” FitzGerald termed this the “natural disaster theory of history.”¹⁷

As textbook authors wrote their concluding chapters describing the state of present-day America, they too composed tedious lists of “problems” and “challenges.” The ever-increasing pace of change confused all individuals, leaving a sense of helplessness in its wake. Americans seemingly could not identify the causes of the problems that plagued society, fostering a sense of anxiety about the future.

The simplest way to understand these chapters on the present is by observing the words that the authors chose to use. From the forties to the mid-sixties, the textbook authors’ word of choice was “problem.” Eugene Barker and Henry Steele Commager’s 1941 textbook *Our Nation* employs this word twenty-six times within the span of four pages. Even more revealing are the eight subheadings in this section, “Problems of the Present and Prospects for the Future,” namely:

The present situation is a grave one.
 Problems which must be solved.
 Economic problems must be solved.
 The problem of government finance is very complex.

Political problems must be faced.
 Social problems must be faced.
 Problems of foreign relations are urgent.
 What shall we say of the future?¹⁸

Consonant with FitzGerald's "natural disaster" theory, it is notable that the causes of these problems are shrouded behind the veil of passive voice. Even if one considers this example extreme—in 1941, America was still mired in the twelfth year of a Depression and on the verge of war—later textbooks still follow this pattern. Henry F. Graff and John A. Krout spoke of an America in 1959 that faced "difficult problems...in every part of the world" which make foreign policy "a matter of grave concern to all of us."¹⁹ Similarly, David Saville Muzzey captured the essence of problems to be solved with more macabre imagery: "sicknesses in the body of the nation, and, like illness in the human body, they must be realized to be remedied."²⁰

In the 1960s, textbook authors began to define the present day difficulties as "challenges" rather than "problems." In their appropriately-titled epilogue, "The Challenge of Liberty," Henry Bragdon and Samuel McCutchen paraphrased Arnold Toynbee's assertion that "the life best worth living...consists in responding intelligently and courageously to challenge."²¹ They then deflated this inspiring call by listing the formidable challenges the nation faced in 1964: nuclear weapons, threatened war, faulty distribution of goods, and racial conflict. Also, textbook authors often explicitly tied the notion of "challenges" to broader societal "changes." Lewis Paul Todd and Merle Curti spoke of "the speed with which every day life was being transformed" in 1964, "the rapid acceleration of change" in 1969, and "the increasingly swift rate of change" in 1982, which excitingly produced "opportunity and challenge!"²² The 1995 edition of *A History of the United States* introduced the last section by quoting President Clinton's inaugural. "He asked the American people to join him in meeting the challenges of a rapidly changing world," they wrote. But there was a degree of uncertainty lodged in this determination: Clinton "was to find that it was one thing to talk about change, another to put the old habits behind."²³

My sample size of textbooks is too small to suggest that the transition from labeling situations as "problems" to "challenges" has some definite explanation. One could certainly speculate how the social upheaval of the 1960s, as well as the efforts of publishers to produce more multicultural texts at that time, drove this change in phrasing.²⁴ In any case, a more extensive look at the textbooks of the sixties would be needed to make any meaningful claims. But emphatically, the change from indentifying "problems" to "challenges" might be a semantic one only. For example, both the earliest and most recent textbook of my study emphasized the word "problem" in the first paragraph of the last section.²⁵ Across the decades, the textbooks in this study not only spoke of "problems" and "challenges," but also "tensions," "threats," "questions," and "crises."

Textbook authors stressed that the various difficulties of the present produced anxiety and uncertainty about the future. In the 1969 edition of *Rise of the American Nation*, Todd and Curti described this fretfulness in a

way that could have applied to any decade of the twentieth century. “Faced with unrest throughout the world and increasingly difficult problems at home,” they intoned, “Americans began to share a growing sense of doubt and uncertainty. In the midst of prosperity, they were anxious and troubled.”²⁶ In a similarly concerned tone, Barker and Commager commented that their assessment did not describe “a cheerful picture” of the future, lamenting that the prospects for the future had never been “so confusing.”²⁷ Graff and Krout noted the effects of changes and trends up to 1959 remained “hidden behind the veil of the future,” and spoke of “a time for questions” in 1973.²⁸ Bragdon and McCutchen called the 1960s “an age of anxiety.”²⁹ Frank Freidel and Henry N. Drewry starkly titled the final chapter in their 1970 textbook “Reform, War—and an Uncertain Future.”³⁰ Todd and Curti observed in 1982 that the changes since World War II had “uprooted traditional values, beliefs, and behavior of Americans.”³¹ The many problems did not suggest a promising future.

Not only was the present doubtful, confusing, questioning, anxious, uncertain, but, as FitzGerald noted, the present was always portrayed as the most severe test to America’s existence in its history:

[T]he end pages of many current texts still exhort children to “face challenges” and “meet responsibilities.”... History can be of very little help to the student here since—according to all texts published since the turn of the century—this particular moment in history is the most dangerous, critical, or important period in the history of the United States.³²

Americans, according to these textbook giants, perpetually faced existential threats, and yet each generation’s crises were uniquely exceptional to the survival of the American experiment. In 1941, the present situation was a “grave one”³³; in 1964, America was “on trial as never before”³⁴; in 1973, Americans became “more self-conscious about its aims and purposes... than perhaps any other people has ever been”³⁵; in 1982, Americans faced the “urgent need to reexamine the nation’s goals”;³⁶ and in 2007, “grave problems continued to plague the republic.”³⁷ In an atmosphere where the problems could be fatal and their sources unidentifiable—where the student was charged with saving the American republic—what reassurance could these textbook authors give their young readers to guide them through the paralyzing uncertainties of the future?

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE: THE AMERICAN CREED AND AMERICAN ADAPTABILITY

As the nervous student absorbed the gravity of the present problems, their authoritative textbook giants had some recommendations and insights for the American future. Textbook authors commonly appeal to two central elements of our American experience that should guide future action. Some rehash the timeless American creed—the virtues of liberty, democracy, and individualism—which will secure our democratic traditions in the future.

This relates to the notion of studying history to appreciate and perpetuate our common heritage. Others remind the reader of the way Americans have adapted to and thus overcome past challenges—and thus studying history so that they may overcome the unforeseeable changes of the years ahead. Either way, textbook giants place the overall emphasis on the unifying thread of studying history for future civic participation and the maintenance of the American republic.

THE TIMELESS AMERICAN CREED: “FAITHFULNESS” AND THE STRENGTH OF AMERICA

Samuel Huntington dedicated the first few sentences of his notable tract “American Ideals versus American Institutions” to defining “The American Creed.”³⁸ “Throughout the history of the United States,” he proclaimed, “a broad consensus has existed among the American people in support of liberal, democratic, individualistic, and egalitarian values.” These core values of the American Creed formed “the core of American national identity since the eighteenth century.”³⁹ It follows that citizens should continue to uphold these core values that form the basis of our common heritage. For that reason, when textbook giants spoke of the future, they frequently extolled the values associated with the American Creed and implored the student to remain “faithful” to the American Creed in the future.

Authors often referenced the “liberal, democratic, individualistic, and egalitarian values” of the Creed, but often do so in their own words—or the words of others. The 1985 textbook *America: Its People and Values* concluded with the prose of William Tyler Page, also entitled “The American Creed.” It affirmed a belief that the United States was “a government of the people, by the people, for the people,” with powers “derived from the consent of the governed,” and established on the ideals of “freedom, equality, justice, and humanity, for which American patriots sacrificed their lives and their fortunes.”⁴⁰ Others describe an equally general “Spirit of Liberty”⁴¹ or the “golden yardstick” of the values embodied in the Declaration of Independence.⁴² Sometimes authors described specific principles that are manifestations of the American Creed. In 1941, Barker and Commager stated that our “precious heritage” included freedom of religion, of thought, of speech, and even the “freedom of the people to make their own laws and to elect their own officers without dictation from any superior authority!”⁴³ Muzzey, like many authors, attributed the Founding Fathers with the agency in creating those freedoms that reflect the American creed. In delineating those freedoms, he essentially reiterated the Bill of Rights, down to the insipid tenth amendment: students ought to thank our Founding Fathers for “expressly reserved to the people of the states the exercise of powers not specifically delegated to the central government.”⁴⁴

Authors stressed the importance of future citizens adhering to the American Creed with the same reverence that a practitioner of a religious group adheres to their theological beliefs. The use of the word “faith” is recurrent. Further, authors gave different bases for the importance of preserving these beliefs. On a functional level, a few authors suggested that

remaining faithful to our values alleviated the fear of an uncertain future by providing a comfortable basis for approaching future problems. For example, the 1959 and 1966 editions of *The Adventure of the American People* consoled apprehensive students by encouraging them to “turn with pride to our own stirring history for reassurance.”⁴⁵ However, most textbook giants warned their adolescent readers that one’s level of faithfulness (or unfaithfulness) to the American Creed directly predicted America’s success (or failure) in the future. Some put this relationship quite generally. For Wood, Gabriel, and Biller, the “strength” of America rested simply upon “a belief in freedom and democracy.”⁴⁶ Other authors defined the matter specifically in terms of foreign policy, referring to America’s mission as the “foremost champion of the free world”⁴⁷ or its role as “defenders of democracy.”⁴⁸ In these instances, success required “[recapturing] much of the driving faith” in democracy⁴⁹ or, in the second case, “an active faith in the superiority of our political system.”⁵⁰ Most extreme was David Muzzey’s urgent, accusing, and perhaps even threatening warning in 1943:

If our republic ever fails to fulfill the high hopes of the men who founded it and who sustained it in the days of weakness and trial, the fault will be with a generation that has lost the inspiration of their ideals.⁵¹

He continued, even more alarmingly:

If the coming generation is more faithful to the ideals of economy, industry, and honesty, of order, freedom, and disinterested service, than the present generation has been, than we shall be going forward toward the fulfillment of the destinies of the Republic. If the coming generation is *even a little less faithful to these ideals, then we shall be headed down the road to degeneracy, defeat, decay.*⁵²

Whether phrased beseechingly or threateningly, and whether it was meant to assuage anxieties about the future or ensure the perseverance of the American state, these textbook giants pontificated about the importance of remaining faithful to the American Creed to millions of high school students. Most certainly, this effort transmitted official culture to the reader, grounded in the “abstract basis of timelessness and sacredness” central to our American values. Students are to study history to adopt common American values, as the Bradley Commission suggested. The stentorian conclusions about the need to maintain our nation’s liberal, democratic, individualistic, and egalitarian values epitomized the larger purpose of studying history to project our common heritage into the future.

AMERICAN ADAPTABILITY: LIVING IN THE “WORLD’S GREATEST TREASURE HOUSE OF THE UNEXPECTED”

If some authors appealed to a fixed, unalterable American Creed to

be applied to the uncertain future, other authors spoke to an opposite element of the American character—our ability to adapt to and overcome challenges. Boorstin and Kelley employed this tactic most explicitly in the epilogue to their 1981 and 1995 textbooks, revealingly titled “The Mysterious Future.” They began by musing about hindsight, and how rendered our past successes and problems to seem like prophecy. After emphasizing the many problems of the past and present, they spoke about how the American character derived from centuries of surmounting daunting challenges and grappling with an uncertain future:

Americans have been planters in this faraway land, builders of cities in the wilderness, Go-Getters. Americans—makers of something out of nothing—have delivered a new way of life to far corners of the world. If the future is a mystery story, then, that does not frighten Americans. For we Americans have always lived in the world’s greatest treasure house of the unexpected.⁵³

Further, this version of the American character, rooted in the American past, suggests that Americans can relax and approach future challenges with confidence.

As Boorstin and Kelley’s example suggests, there are three elements to using American adaptability to address the uncertain future. One involves a definition of the American character as being adaptable to sweeping changes over long and short periods of time. Boorstin and Kelley brightly characterized this by noting that “even more than other people,” Americans “love the adventure of the unexpected.”⁵⁴ The fourth edition of the *American Pageant* suggested that while the “crisis” of the present might be “formidable,” so was the Republic.⁵⁵ Likewise, the thirteenth edition of the same text perceived a “resilience and resourcefulness” in the American spirit.

A second element of this formula often involves a reiteration of specific challenging problems resilient Americans have overcome in the past. Todd and Curti, in 1964, identified the settlement of Jamestown in 1607 as the first in a succession of situations where Americans “repeatedly demonstrated an amazing ability to adjust themselves to changing ways and changing times.”⁵⁶ They then referenced urbanization, industrialization, and the rise to world prominence as three major examples of the American transformation.⁵⁷ Boorstin and Kelley compiled a long list of moments where Americans overcame seemingly insurmountable odds—the “thirteen little colonies somehow united for independence,” the most “miscellaneous people on earth” becoming the “most powerful,” or “blazing the ever expanding frontier, from the West to the universe.”⁵⁸ In what could be a summary of all of American history, the 1973 edition of *The American Pageant* declared, “In generations past Americans resolutely confronted and conquered menaces as dangerous as those of today.”⁵⁹

The final element is to tie our American spirit of adaptability, grounded in our past ability to adjust to changing circumstances, to assure the reader that we will surmount the challenges of the future. Textbook au-

thors affected this through their depictions of how Americans should approach the future. On a basic level, Boorstin and Kelley resolutely maintained that the mysterious future “did not frighten Americans.”⁶⁰ Similarly, Bailey pointed out that Americans “need not yield to a wave of defeatism,” because with leadership and strength, we could “create events, rather than bow to them.”⁶¹ Others went further than merely assuaging the feeling of uncertainty. For example, Todd and Curti observed in the 1964 edition of *The Rise of the American Nation* that there was “reason to believe” Americans would “meet the challenge successfully.”⁶² They reworded this in 1982 to read that Americans were “certain...they would meet and overcome new problems and challenges,” noting that the “power to shape the future” laid in the hands of the American citizens.⁶³ Even Barker and Commager’s grim 1941 textbook mentioned our ability to solve problems in the past and therefore the future. While this was the section that used the word “problem” twenty-six times, the last usage—in the last sentence—reverses this mood quite abruptly: “We shall solve our problems as our forefathers solved theirs.”⁶⁴ By highlighting the way Americans have solved problems in the past and projecting a confidence in citizens to adapt and overcome the problems of the future, these textbook authors reinforced the other main tenet of studying history for citizenship: that of recognizing, appreciating, and adjusting to change.

AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP AND THE TEXTBOOK FUTURE

Textbook authors appropriated these two themes—the American Creed reinforces a common heritage, and American adaptability enables us to overcome change—to encourage students to become good citizens, confident that they could overcome future problems. These themes are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they are the complementary. The emphasis on the American Creed stresses a set of common ideals that should guide future action, while the attention to our flexibility suggests the American persona is characteristically capable of adjusting to future challenges. Some texts, therefore, stressed both. For example, on the one hand, the 2007 edition of *The American Pageant* observed our “tradition of resilience and resourcefulness,” suggesting adaptability. On the other hand, they noted that much remained of our “liberal democratic heritage,” reminding readers of the American Creed. It seems, however, that there was a rough tendency to switch from an emphasis on our common heritage to our ability to grapple with change beginning in the late 1960s. As with the transition from elucidating “problems” to “challenges,” the radical societal and political transformations of the 1960s might have fashioned a people who, by necessity, were reminded of the need to adjust to changing times. Again, I propose this hypothesis tentatively, acknowledging my small sample size of textbooks.⁶⁵ Regardless, the themes of common heritage and adaptability to change are easily blended.

Moreover, these themes are not mutually exhaustive of textbooks’ discussions of the future. Admittedly, some textbooks did not comment at all on the future. At the end of their chronological narratives, they simply

described the present as a desultory collection of problems. For example, Muzzey's 1955 edition of *A History of Our Country* concluded its last chapter, "The Eisenhower Administration," by describing the logistics of "Air-Age Diplomacy."⁶⁶ Other texts did not reference timeless American values or our ability to adjust to change, but spoke generally of the importance of citizenship and education. For example, the last section of *America: Its People and Values* declared that "our greatest resource" in meeting the challenges of the future "[continues] to be our citizens."⁶⁷ Graff and Krout regarded "the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men" as vital to national progress.⁶⁸ Todd and Curti matter-of-factly stated, America's future success depended on "an informed an enlightened citizenry" and "the material strength of our nation."⁶⁹ Combined, these passages indicate that the continued education of an informed citizenry is vital to future American success.

In some way or another, all of these texts directly or indirectly convey that the purpose of studying and learning American history is to mold students into publicly-minded citizens actively participating in the future. It comes through unmistakably. This message holds weight and authority commensurate to the deference given by the student to the textbook—and students have often a reverent regard for their texts.

CONCLUSION: PRESERVING THE "LAST, BEST HOPE ON EARTH"?

Speculating about the future in textbooks is not a post-World War II phenomenon. Back in 1825, when there was only enough American history to fill three hundred pages, Reverend Charles A. Goodrich speculated that the "blessings" of peace, tranquility, and prosperity would continue if the "spirit, practical wisdom, and *religious integrity*" prevailed among future generations.⁷⁰ He directly quoted Psalm 144:15 in his final sentence, writing "Yea, happy is that people whose God is the Lord."⁷¹ This elicits many questions: how was the teaching of history different in 1825, and how is this reflected in the textbook? Was the religious and moral function of schools deemed categorically more important than teaching history for citizenship? Looking more in depth at the early American textbooks and how they changed throughout the nineteenth century would yield fascinating findings. Further, in the twentieth century, an assessment grounded in the debate over multiculturalism in textbooks, originating in the sixties and resurfacing in the late eighties and early nineties, would offer another opportunity to determine how changing social contexts have affected textbook content—and authors' speculations about the future. Certainly, the extension of this study to a greater span of time should correspond with a deepening of this analysis by considering more textbooks.

Joseph Moreau has reemphasized a limit constraining how much a historian can glean from a textbook. Like any artifact, scholars can never know determine how individuals will interpret it. We simply cannot know precisely how much deference students give to their textbooks and how they make meaning of the messages the texts convey.⁷² For that reason, most textbook studies have focused on how they are produced or, in my case, what

messages they attempt to convey. In this vein, one further area to explore is the way that textbook endings reaffirm—or perhaps impose—American exceptionalism. As Seymour Martin Lipset discerned, American exceptionalism does not mean that the United States is objectively the best nation in existence. It does mean that the United States is “qualitatively different,” and, moreover, prone to be described in superlatives.⁷³

As I have argued, the textbook giants of the mid- to late-twentieth century often imposed a civic duty on their readers by reaffirming timeless American values and confidence in our ability to overcome future challenges. They added force to this message by emphasizing that civic participation was especially necessary to preserve the exceptional nature of the American experiment—to borrow Abraham Lincoln’s oft-quoted phrase, the “last best hope on earth.” In these passages about the future, they stressed the unparalleled sacredness of the American Creed, our unmatched ability to overcome the most arduous of problems facing mankind, and the exceptional nature of America’s success generally. This message of official culture pervaded these textbooks. Muzzey even wrote “a letter” to his high school readers urging them to recognize that “only the study of history” would really underscore the truly “precious inheritance” they received from our founders, and endow them with the “background of knowledge necessary for the wise preservation and improvement” of America.⁷⁴ These textbook authors urged millions of students of all nations, races, genders, and creeds to participate in furthering the great American experiment. However, despite all this enthusiastic motivation, the Americans of today can never know precisely how long this “last best hope on earth” will endure. That knowledge is solely possessed by the uncertain future.

ENDNOTES

¹ Mary Beth Norton, “Rethinking American History Textbooks,” in *Learning History in America: Schools, Cultures, and Politics*, edited by Lloyd Kramer, Donald Reid, and William L. Blarney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 26.

² Robert Lerner, Althea K. Kagai, and Stanley Rothman, *Molding the Good Citizen: The Politics of High School History Texts* (London: Praeger, 1995), 159-161, 163-164. Their procedure involved surveying states and local districts asking which texts were most widely used in their states since the 1940’s. I then used their final list and sought to obtain as many of the identical textbooks as possible. Where I could not get exactly the same edition, I sought to obtain the same work in earlier or later printings. Likewise, to extend my study to the present, I sought to obtain the same textbooks in their later editions.

³ Cited in Lerner, Kagai, and Rothman, 66.

⁴ Kyle Ward, *History in the Making: An Absorbing Look at How American History Has Changed in the Telling over the Last 200 Years* (New York: The New Press, 2006), xix-xx.

⁵ Frances FitzGerald, *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1979), 7.

⁶ Norton, 29.

⁷ John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in*

the Twentieth Century (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 13.

⁸ Joseph Moreau, *Schoolbook Nation: Conflicts over American History Textbooks from the Civil War to the Present* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 20.

⁹ Lerner, Kagai, and Rothman, 1.

¹⁰ The Bradley Commission on History in Schools, “Building a History Curriculum: Guidelines for Teaching History in Schools,” in *Historical Literacy: The Case for History in American Education*, edited by Paul Gagnon and the Bradley Commission on History in Schools (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 22.

¹¹ The Bradley Commission on History in Schools, 22.

¹² The Bradley Commission on History in Schools, 21.

¹³ The Bradley Commission on History in Schools, 17.

¹⁴ The Bradley Commission on History in Schools, 21.

¹⁵ The Bradley Commission on History in Schools, 25.

¹⁶ The Bradley Commission on History in Schools, 22.

¹⁷ FitzGerald, 158, 161.

¹⁸ Eugene C. Barker and Henry Steele Commager, *Our Nation* (Evanston, Ill.: Row, Peterson, and Company, 1941), 966-970.

¹⁹ Henry F. Graff and John A. Krout, *The Adventure of the American People: A History of the United States from 1876*, 1st ed., (Chicago: Rand McNally and Company, 1959), 671-672.

²⁰ David Saville Muzzey, *A History of Our Country: A Textbook for High-School Students* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1943), 893. This 1943 edition ended with four sections entitled “A Backward Glance o’er Traveled Roads,” “The Strength of America,” “The Foes of Our Own Household,” and “American Ideals.” Interestingly, the 1955 edition omitted all of these sections and merely narrated events up to the present.

²¹ Henry W. Bragdon and Samuel P. McCutchen, *History of a Free People*, 5th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 723.

²² Lewis Paul Todd and Merle Curti, *Rise of the American Nation* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1964) 813; Lewis Paul Todd and Merle Curti, *Rise of the American Nation* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1969) 794; Lewis Paul Todd and Merle Curti, *Rise of the American Nation* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982) 814.

²³ Boorstin and Kelley, 1995, 939.

²⁴ I would hypothesize that the social upheaval of the 1960’s—the civil rights movement, the counterculture, the sexual revolution, and Vietnam—naturally suggested societal change that could be positive, and therefore were not necessarily “problems” to be solved but rather “challenges” to be overcome. This might be related to the efforts of publishing groups to produce more multicultural texts. With more people to please, “problem” was bound to be too strong a word to apply to social movements themselves. Tying these two themes together, the fascination with the word “change,” which also appeared in the 1960’s, naturally associated with the word “challenge” better than “problem.” This, naturally, remains a hypothesis to be tested.

²⁵ Barker and Commager, 966, and David M. Kennedy, Lizabeth Cohen, and Thomas A. Bailey, *The American Pageant: A History of the Republic*, 13th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 1033. Barker and Commager observed, “Never before in our history have the problems of the present been so grave.” Kennedy, Cohen, and Bailey began their section by stating that “grave problems continued to plague the republic” at the outset of the twenty-first century.

²⁶ Todd and Curti, 1969, 808.

²⁷ Barker and Commager, 969, 966.

²⁸ Graff and Krout, 1959, 668; 1973, 505.

²⁹ Bragdon and McCutchen, 723.

³⁰ Frank Freidel and Henry N. Drewry, *America: A Modern History of the United States* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Company, 1970), 782.

³¹ Todd and Curti, 1982, 814.

³² FitzGerald, 160.

³³ Barker and Commager, 966.

³⁴ Bragdon and McCutchen, 723.

³⁵ Graff and Krout, 1973, 504.

³⁶ Todd and Curti, 1982, 813.

³⁷ Kennedy, Cohen, and Bailey, 1033.

³⁸ Samuel Huntington, "American Ideals versus American Institutions," in *Political Science Quarterly* 97, no. 1 (Spring 1982), 1. Huntington attributes the phrase "American Creed" to Gunner Myrdal.

³⁹ Huntington, 1.

⁴⁰ Leonard C. Wood, Ralph H. Gabriel, and Edward L. Biller, *America: Its People and Values* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 784-785.

⁴¹ Bragdon and McCutchen, 724.

⁴² Graff and Krout, 1973, 538.

⁴³ Barker and Commager, 970.

⁴⁴ Muzzey, 1943, 893-894.

⁴⁵ Graff and Krout, 1959, 672. Graff and Krout, 1966, 672.

⁴⁶ Wood, Gabriel, and Biller, 784.

⁴⁷ Thomas A. Bailey, *The American Pageant: A History of the Republic*, 4th ed. (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1971), 1067.

⁴⁸ Graff and Krout, 1959, 672.

⁴⁹ Bailey, 1067.

⁵⁰ Graff and Krout, 1959, 672.

⁵¹ Muzzey, 1943, 893.

⁵² Muzzey, 1943, 894, emphasis added.

⁵³ Boorstin and Kelley, 1981, 742.

⁵⁴ Boorstin and Kelley, 1981, 742.

⁵⁵ Bailey, 1067.

⁵⁶ Todd and Curti, 1964, 815.

⁵⁷ Todd and Curti, 1964, 815.

⁵⁸ Boorstin and Kelley, 1981, 741-742.

⁵⁹ Bailey, 1067.

⁶⁰ Boorstin and Kelley, 742.

⁶¹ Bailey, 1067.

⁶² Todd and Curti, 1964, 815.

⁶³ Todd and Curti, 1982, 830.

⁶⁴ Barker and Commager, 970.

⁶⁵ I also do not have a sufficient number of texts to determine whether the dominant theme was altered in the 1980's and 1990's, when conservatives and cultural nationalists renewed America's interest in the content of our history books.

⁶⁶ David Saville Muzzey, *A History of Our Country*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1955), 636-637.

⁶⁷ Wood, Gabriel, and Biller, 784.

⁶⁸ Graff and Krout, 1959, 644.

⁶⁹ Todd and Curti, 1969, 814.

⁷⁰ Rev. Charles A. Goodrich, *A History of the United States of America, On a Plan Adapted to the Capacity of Youth, and Designed to Aid the Memory by Systematic Arrangement and Interesting Associations*, 5th ed. (Bellows Falls, Vt.: Blake, Cutler, and Company, 1825), 296. Emphasis original.

⁷¹ Goodrich, 296.

⁷² Moreau, 22.

⁷³ Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996) 26. For example, on the one hand, Lipset suggests we are the most religious, optimistic, and patriotic nation today, and yet we also sport the highest crime rate, are the most litigious society, and one of the least egalitarian in terms of income distribution, welfare benefits, and taxes.

⁷⁴ Muzzey, 1943, xi.