

CHAPTER ONE

Handicapped by History: The Process of Hero-making

This chapter is about heroification, a degenerative process (much like calcification) that makes people over into heroes. Through this process, our educational media turn flesh-and-blood individuals into pious, perfect creatures without conflicts, pain, credibility, or human interest.

5 Many American history textbooks are studded with biographical vignettes of the very famous (Land of Promise devotes a box to each president) and the famous (The Challenge of Freedom provides "Did You Know?" boxes about Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman to graduate from medical school in the United States, and Lorraine Hansberry, author of *A Raisin in the Sun*, among many others). In themselves, vignettes are not a bad idea. They instruct by human example. They show diverse ways that people can make a difference. They allow textbooks
10 to give space to characters such as Blackwell and Hansberry, who relieve what would otherwise be a monolithic parade of white male political leaders. Biographical vignettes also provoke reflection as to our purpose in teaching history: Is Chester A. Arthur more deserving of space than, say, Frank Lloyd Wright? Who influences us more today—Wright, who invented the carport and transformed domestic architectural spaces, or Arthur, who, um, signed the first Civil Service Act? Whose rise to prominence provides more drama— Blackwell's or George
15 Bush's (the latter born with a silver Senate seat in his mouth)? The choices are debatable, but surely textbooks should include some people based not only on what they achieved but also on the distance they traversed to achieve it.

We could go on to third- and fourth-guess the list of heroes in textbook pantheons. My concern here, however, is not who gets chosen, but rather what happens to the heroes when they are introduced into our history
20 textbooks and our classrooms. Two twentieth-century Americans provide case studies of heroification: Woodrow Wilson and Helen Keller. Wilson was unarguably an important president, and he receives extensive textbook coverage. Keller, on the other hand, was a "little person" who pushed through no legislation, changed the course of no scientific discipline, declared no war. Only one of the twelve history textbooks I surveyed includes her photograph. But teachers love to talk about Keller and often show audiovisual materials or
25 recommend biographies that present her life as exemplary. All this attention ensures that students retain something about both of these historical figures, but they may be no better off for it. Heroification so distorts the lives of Keller and Wilson (and many others) that we cannot think straight about them. Teachers have held up Helen Keller, the blind and deaf girl who overcame her physical handicaps, as an inspiration to generations of schoolchildren. Every fifth-grader knows the scene in which Anne Sullivan spells water into young Helen's hand
30 at the pump. At least a dozen movies and filmstrips have been made on Keller's life. Each yields its version of the same cliché.

[...]

This statue of George Washington, now in the Smithsonian Institution, exemplifies the manner in which textbooks would
35 portray every American hero; ten feet tall, blemish-free, with the body of a Greek god. At least one textbook author, Thomas Bailey, senior author of *The American Pageant*, clearly knew of the 1918 U.S. invasion of Russia, for he wrote in a different venue in 1973, "American troops shot it out with Russian armed forces on Russian
40 soil in two theatres from 1918 to 1920."¹* Probably several other authors knew of it, too. Wilson's racism is also well known to professional historians. Why don't they let the public in on these matters? Heroification itself supplies a first answer. Socialism is repugnant to most Americans. So are racism and colonialism.
45 Michael Kammen suggests that authors selectively omit blemishes in order to make certain historical figures sympathetic to as many people as possible. The textbook critic Norma Gabler has testified that textbooks should



"present our nation's patriots in a way that would honor and respect them"; in her eyes, admitting Keller's socialism and Wilson's racism would hardly do that".

[...]

50 A host of other reasons—pressure from the "ruling class," pressure from textbook adoption committees, the wish to avoid ambiguities, a desire to shield children from harm or conflict, the perceived need to control children and avoid classroom disharmony, pressure to provide answers—may help explain why textbooks omit troublesome facts. A certain etiquette coerces us all into speaking in respectful tones about the past, especially when we're passing on Our Heritage to our young. Could it be that we don't wait to think badly of Woodrow
55 Wilson? We seem to feel that a person like Helen Keller can be an inspiration only so long as she remains uncontroversial, one-dimensional. We don't want complicated icons. "People do not like to think. If one thinks, one must reach conclusions," Helen Keller pointed out. "Conclusions are not always pleasant," "Most of us automatically shy away from conflict, and understandably so. We particularly seek to avoid conflict in the classroom. One reason is habit: we are so accustomed to blandness that the textbook or teacher who brought
60 real intellectual controversy into the classroom would strike us as a violation of polite rhetoric, of classroom norms. We are supposed to speak well of the deceased, after all. Probably we are supposed to maintain the same attitude of awe, reverence, and respect when we read about our national heroes as when we visit our National Cathedral and view the final resting places of Helen Keller and Woodrow Wilson, as close physically in death as they were distant ideologically in life.

65 Whatever the causes, the results of Heroification are potentially crippling to students. Helen Keller is not the only person this approach treats like a child. Denying students the humanness of Keller, Wilson, and others keeps students in intellectual immaturity. It perpetuates what might be called a Disney version of history: The Hall of Presidents at Disneyland similarly presents our leaders as heroic statesmen, not imperfect human beings. Our children end up without realistic role models to inspire them. Students also develop no understanding of
70 causality in history. Our nation's thirteen separate forays into Nicaragua, for instance, are surely worth knowing about as we attempt to understand why that country embraced a communist government in the 1980s. Textbooks should show history as contingent, affected by the power of ideas and individuals. Instead, they present history as a "done deal."

Do textbooks, filmstrips, and American history courses achieve the results they seek with regard to our heroes?
75 Surely textbook authors want us to think well of the historical figures they treat with such sympathy. And, on a superficial level at least, we do. Almost no recent high school graduates have anything "bad" to say about either Keller or Wilson. But are these two considered heroes? I have asked hundreds of (mostly white) college students on the first day of class to tell me who their heroes in American history are. As a rule, they do not pick Helen Keller, Woodrow Wilson, Christopher Columbus, Miles Standish or anyone else in Plymouth, John Smith or
80 anyone else in Virginia, Abraham Lincoln, or indeed anyone else in American history whom the textbooks implore them to choose.⁴² Our post-Watergate students view all such "establishment" heroes cynically. They're boring.

Some students choose "none"—that is, they say they have no heroes in American history. Other students display the characteristically American sympathy for the underdog by choosing African Americans: Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, perhaps Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, or Frederick Douglass. Or they choose men and women from other countries: Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, or (now fading fast) Mikhail Gorbachev or Boris Yeltsin. In one sense this is a healthy development. Surely we want students to be skeptical.

Probably we want them to challenge being told whom to believe in. But replying "none" is too glib, too nihilistic, for my taste. It is, however, an understandable response to heroification. For when textbook authors leave out the warts, the problems, the unfortunate character traits, and the mistaken ideas, they reduce heroes from dramatic men and women to melodramatic stick figures. Their inner struggles disappear and they become goody-goody, not merely good.

[...]

For like other peoples around the world, **we Americans need heroes**. Statements such as "If Martin Luther King were alive, he'd . . ." suggest one function of historical figures in our contemporary society. Most of us tend to
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think well of ourselves when we have acted as we imagine our heroes might have done. Who our heroes are and whether they are presented in a way that makes them lifelike, hence usable as role models, could have a significant bearing on our conduct in the world. We now turn to our first hero, Christopher Columbus. "Care should be taken to vindicate great names from pernicious erudition," wrote Washington Irving, defending heroification. ' Irving's three-volume biography of Columbus, published in 1828, still influences what high school teachers and textbooks say about the Great Navigator. Therefore it will come as no surprise that heroification has stolen from us the important facets of his life, leaving only melodramatic minutiae.

JAMES W. LOEWEN, LIES MY TEACHER TOLD ME, 1995.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

JAMES W. LOEWEN is a professor emeritus of sociology at the University of Vermont and the author of **LIES ACROSS AMERICA** and **SUNDOWN TOWNS**. He lives in Washington DC.

A bestseller since its first publication in 1995, **LIES MY TEACHER TOLD ME** has gone on to win an American Book Award and the Oliver Cromwell Cox Award for Distinguished Anti-Racist Scholarship, and to sell more than one million copies in various editions.