

THE NATION

Who controls the



controls the future

by James W. Loewen

Who controls the past controls the future.

The epigraph above from George Orwell's prophetic novel, *1984*, highlights the hold that history has over our destiny as a nation and as individuals. Students, from the seventh grade through college, have begun to change the public history written on our campuses, city squares, and wayside historical markers.

In Springfield, Illinois, for example, two white sixth-grade girls wrote a paper for their middle-school teacher about the Springfield race riot of 1908. This white rampage shocked public opinion throughout the world, partly because it happened in Abraham Lincoln's home town, and helped lead to the formation of the NAACP. But it was largely forgotten in Springfield.

After writing their paper, the girls thought there should be something on the

landscape in Springfield to commemorate the event. They got 251 students at their middle school to sign a petition that they then presented to the City Council. The NAACP got on board, the mayor set up a committee, and the result was some eight markers that delineate a walking tour of the riot. The tour is at once an apology and an assurance that amnesia will not again afflict Springfield.

Minnesota recently passed a law requiring place names containing "squaw" to be changed because the term is offensive to Native Americans. This came about after two students in a high school American Indian culture class traced the derogatory meanings of the word.

College students finally got the University of Texas to erect a statue on campus for Martin Luther King Jr. last fall. To those who asked, what did Martin Luther King ever do

at the University of Texas, they replied, "What did Jefferson Davis? Robert E. Lee? Albert Sidney Johnston? The campus honors these Confederates too."

History cannot be avoided. Understandings of the past seep into popular movies and television programs and determine public policies. Understandings of our past race relations are especially powerful influences in our public and private lives. It matters what students learn about slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and especially about the reactionary period from about 1890 to 1925—"the nadir of race relations"—that still distorts race relations today.

In the 1940s and '50s, American history textbooks claimed that slavery was not such a bad thing. If bondage were a burden for African Americans, well, slaves were a burden on Ole Massa and Ole Missus, too.

Plantations were places of harmony and grace that did no real harm to anyone, white or black.

This is not what textbooks say today. Several quote the titles of spirituals like *Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen* and *All My Trials, Lord, Soon Be Over* to portray slavery as intolerable. Authors also show how in the 1850s, southern states and the federal government pushed the Indians out of Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, and slavery expanded. And textbooks now admit that slavery was the primary cause of the Civil War.

Today's textbooks give more attention to African Americans. In 1961, a best-selling textbook, *Triumph of the American Nation*, included African Americans in just six of 268 illustrations. Twenty-five years later black people appeared in 48 of 293. By giving more space to African Americans and by placing slavery center stage, today's textbooks have taken a giant stride forward.

Yet they still remain largely silent regarding the impact of slavery on white America, North or South. Slavery's twin legacies are the social and economic inferiority it confers on black people, and the burden of being supreme that it clamps on white people. A frank look at slavery's enduring legacy today in the nation's textbooks would be controversial. Unlike slavery, the legacy of racism is not over yet, and textbooks have trouble explaining any social problem that hasn't already been declared solved.

Nevertheless, to function adequately in civic life in our troubled times, students must learn what causes racism. To teach this relationship, history courses need to show students the dynamic interplay between slavery as a socioeconomic system and racism as an idea system. Slavery existed in many societies and periods. Made possible by Europe's advantages in military and social technology, the slavery started by Europeans in the fifteenth century was different because it became the enslavement of one race by another.

Increasingly whites viewed the enslavement of whites as illegitimate, while the enslavement of Africans was considered acceptable, maybe even good for them. Children of enslaved Africans in the land that became the United States of America were not allowed to achieve upward mobility through intermarriage with the owning class. The rationale for this was racism. As Montesquieu ironically observed in 1748: "It is impossible for us to suppose these creatures to be men, because, allowing them to be men, a suspicion would follow

that we ourselves are not Christian."

As more European nations joined the slave trade, Westerners came to characterize Africans as stupid, backward, and uncivilized. Amnesia set in. Europeans had known that Timbuktu was a center of learning, with a university and library. Now, forgetting Timbuktu, Europe and European Americans perceived Africa as the "dark continent." By the 1850s, many white Americans, including some northerners, claimed that black people were so hopelessly inferior that slavery was a proper form of "education" for them.

The very essence of what we have inherited from slavery is the idea that it is appropriate, even "natural," for whites to be on top, blacks on the bottom. In its core our culture tells us — tells all of us, including African Americans — that Europe's domination of the world came about because Europeans were smarter. In their core, many whites and some people of color believe this. Nevertheless, not one textbook discusses the origin of racism in slavery. Therefore students cannot think rationally

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about the matter.

Only two textbooks give any idea as to what might have caused racism. The closest any book comes to explaining the connection between slavery and racism is this single sentence from *The American Tradition*: "In defense of their 'peculiar institution,' southerners became more and more determined to maintain their own way of life." Such a statement hardly explains to today's students the origin of racism — it doesn't even use the word!

American Adventure offers a longer treatment: "[African Americans] looked different from members of white ethnic groups. The color of their skin made assimilation difficult. For this reason they remained outsiders." Here *Adventure* has gone from history to psychobabble of an "it's human nature" sort. Unfortunately for its argument, skin color in itself does not explain racism.

Jane Elliot's famous experiments in Iowa classrooms show that children can quickly develop discriminatory behavior and prejudiced beliefs based on eye color. Conversely, the leadership positions that

African Americans frequently reached among American Indian nations from Ecuador to the Arctic show that people do not automatically discriminate against others on the basis of skin color.

Events and processes in American history, from slavery to the present, do explain racism. Not one textbook connects history and racism, however. Half-formed and uninformed notions rush in to fill the analytic vacuum textbooks thus leave. *Adventure's* three sentences imply that it's "natural" to exclude people whose skin color is different. White students may conclude that all societies are racist, perhaps by nature, so racism is all right. Black students may conclude that all whites are racist, perhaps by nature, so to be anti-white is all right. The simplistic thinking in *Adventure's* three sentences is all too apparent. Yet this is the most substantial treatment of the causes of racism among all twelve books!

If textbooks were to explain why levels of racism have changed over time, they would give students some perspective about what

caused racism in the past, what perpetuates it today, and how it might be reduced in the future. But they can't, because they seem embarrassed to call anyone a racist. Consider Stephen A. Douglas, who defeated Abraham Lincoln for U. S. Senator from Illinois in 1858 with words like these:

I am opposed to taking any step that recognizes the Negro man or the Indian as the equal of the white man. I am opposed to giving him a voice in the administration of the government. I would extend to the Negro, and the Indian, and to all dependent races every right, every privilege, and every immunity consistent with the safety and welfare of the white races; but equality they never should have, either political or social, or in any other respect whatever.

Textbooks never quote Douglas. Instead, they summarize him as favoring "popular sovereignty." Thus they minimize the role that racism played in that election and many others.

THE CRISIS

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White racism decreased between 1862 and 1875, partly because blacks and whites fought in the same battles and for the same goals in the Union armies. Federal policies during Reconstruction were not just non-racist but even anti-racist. Unfortunately, white racism returned full-force between 1890 and 1925, the period historian Rayford Logan called "the Nadir of American Race Relations." During this time most white Americans, north and south, joined hands to restrict black civil and economic rights.

Eleven of the twelve textbooks I studied ignore the nadir, so they do not even attempt to explain the increase in white racism. Yet it can be explained. The "three I's" — Indian wars, immigration, and imperialism — caused the nadir. In turn, during the nadir, white racists won the battle for our nation's soul, with terrible consequences for our country then and now.

Before and during the nadir of race relations, from before 1890 until well beyond 1920, white supremacists had disfranchised African Americans outright and terrorized white Republicans into submission. They also deliberately obscured and mythologized the causes and conduct of the Confederacy.

Unfortunately, this was also the great period of monument building in the United States (and Europe), which helps explain why so many Confederate and neo-Confederate statues went up. In those decades, neo-Confederate organizations like the United Daughters of the Confederacy and Sons of Confederate Veterans revised the South's rationalization for secession, and made hash of Civil War history. To these groups, monuments were the continuation of the Civil War by other means.

As a result, to this day those who worked for civil rights in the nineteenth century, like ex-Confederate General James Longstreet, get far less recognition on the landscape than people who worked against civil rights, like ex-Confederate Albert Pike. During this American "dark ages," the nadir period, textbook publishers brought out separate high school history textbooks for the South. (Although white Southerners demanded the books, black schools also had to use them.) These books called the Civil War "the War Between the States," which it was never called in 1861-65. And they insisted that the war was fought over states' rights, not slavery.

Actually, as South Carolina made clear in its *Declaration of the Immediate*

Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union, white Southern slave owners were outraged about states' rights. Their first grievance was "that fourteen of the States have deliberately refused, for years past, to fulfill their constitutional obligations" under the fugitive slave clause of Article Four in the U. S. Constitution.

South Carolina was upset that "The States of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin and Iowa, have enacted laws which either nullify the Acts of Congress or render useless any attempt to execute them." Secessionists were also upset that northern states were denying "even the right of transit for a slave," and they denounced several northern states for letting African Americans be citizens.

Thus South Carolina claimed the right to determine whether New York could prohibit slavery within New York or Vermont could define citizenship in Vermont. Carolinians also contested the rights of residents of other states even to think differently about their "peculiar institution," giving as a reason for secession that Northerners "have denounced as sinful the institution of slavery."

Clearly, the only states' rights secessionists were interested in were their own rights to enslave other human beings on the whims of white supremacy. Nevertheless, almost all Americans today have been mis-educated to believe the Civil War was fought for states' rights, not for slavery. Their textbooks and the monuments on the landscape, North as well as South, still say so.

I suggest that students organize, research the history of their towns, schools, or colleges, create accurate historical markers, raise the money, and erect them through their states' historic preservation entities. Doing this helps students learn how to do history, empowers them to write it in stone or bronze, and prompts them to realize that all history books and monuments are the creations of people, not unfathomable gods, just people—like themselves.

James W. Loewen, a Washington, DC-based sociobiologist, has published two recent books: Lies Across America (The New Press, NY) and Lies My Teacher Told Me (Simon & Schuster), of which 300,000-plus copies have been sold.