

Examining the Presidential Libraries

Students Find Biases and Recommend a Multicultural Perspective

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An Educator's Question

The primary focus of research that we have undertaken at New Mexico State University for the past several years can be summed up with the question—are Presidential Libraries educational institutions or are they simply political monuments and messages?

We have conducted extensive investigations involving visitations to ten Presidential Libraries, telephone inquiries, email correspondences, searches of the presidential websites, and most recently a critical analysis of the Presidential series on C-SPAN and the published Presidential Timelines.

In all of this, we set out to gather some answers to the following questions. What if anything are the Presidential Libraries doing for education? Is the information being disseminated through the Libraries appropriately multicultural in its perspective, or is it more narrow and biased? What can be done to enhance the educational programs of our Presidential Libraries so that they are “more accountable to the diverse public” and “a fair equitable message about the Presidents of the United States” is sent out to students young and old (Baptiste, 2007, p. 167).

In establishing a focus for our research, we selected the following statement as an accurate approach to assure attention to all educational perspectives:

A substantive concept of education not only highlights the qualities of the educated person, but also implies the proper design of the educational process. There are essential minimal conditions for cultivating educated minds. These

entail modes of instruction that facilitate development of the standards, abilities, and traits of the educated person. (Paul & Elder, 2007)

Identifying the Political

For purposes of our research, we define political as being any act based on or motivated by partisan or self-serving objectives. We find that too often the Presidential Libraries are places where the men who have served in the office of the Presidency are being portrayed as individuals who did no wrong and made no mistakes.

Therefore the educational programs available through the Presidential Libraries are frequently conveying a “white-washed and glamorized portrait of each president” (Hufbauer, 2005, p. 140). This is consistent with more general concerns about our schools, where too often we are being academically socialized by our educational system, which is predominantly based on a monocultural curriculum (Boyer & Baptiste, 1996).

Rather than reflecting the perspectives of all groups involved in our nation's history to educate all students, the Presidential Libraries, like too many of our other educational programs, are perpetuating the myth that the Presidents of the United States were perfect leaders. Also ignored and overlooked is the fact that the decisions made by these men had an impact on all Americans, including cultural groups other than their own.

Larry Hackman, retired director of the Truman Presidential Library, says that some Presidential Library museums and collections are embarrassingly biased. Such observations and concerns lead to the question of whether taxpayers should be asked to support such institutions if the museums and library collections disregard historical objectivity (Hufbauer, 2005, p. 139).

Why Look at the Presidents through a Multicultural Lens?

“Presidents throughout our history have handled the complexities of diversity, education, and multiculturalism in different ways and the continuum of Presidential thought, philosophy, and action over more than two centuries has been and continues to be a contributing force in the current situation in America today” (Baptiste, p. 166, 2007). Given this reality, we suggest that it is critical to examine the legacy of American Presidents from a multicultural perspective.

There are many examples of how Presidents' actions throughout history have been a changing force for this nation. Consider Abraham Lincoln and the signing of the Proclamation of Emancipation. It is fact that President Lincoln did sign the Proclamation; however, Lincoln, in the wording of the Proclamation, freed slaves in the rebellious states of the South over which he had no control, but continued to hold slaves in captivity in the North where he did have control (Bennett, 1999; Sinkler, 1972).

As another example, President Harry S. Truman had a consistent way of handling racial issues. He would present a proactive picture initially and publicly, but then not push for implementing the action or goal presented (Gardner, 2002). Franklin D. Roosevelt was a “champion of the working poor and he offered a great deal of attention to their needs during the Great Depression” (McJimsey, 2000).

President Lyndon B. Johnson initiated the “Great Society” reforms, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Medicaid/Medicare, Federal Aid to Education, environmental protection, food stamps, Head-start, public radio and TV legislation, and consumer protection laws” (Baptiste, 2007). All of these examples are definite marks in our nation's history, marks that have in-

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evitably changed our nation. But it is also important to know that most of President Johnson's programs were curtailed because of the costs of American involvement in Vietnam during his Presidency.

An ultimate goal of multicultural education is for equity to become "a characteristic of American mentality so that the 'practices of discrimination' can be eliminated" (Boyer & Baptiste, 1996, p.1). The history of the racism and exploitation experienced by so many people in our nation is rarely taught. We need to reverse that pattern, and make the history of all groups in our society visible.

As educators it is imperative for us to look at all educational practices through a multicultural perspective, and to continuously acknowledge and validate all viewpoints and give an equal balance of information regardless of race, culture, sex, gender, religion, and orientation. Sonia Nieto states that "one of our primary roles as educators is to interrupt the cycle of inequality and oppression" (Nieto & Bode, 2008). If we are to accept this goal, then we must undertake a critical analysis of the praxis that is being put forth by our Presidential Libraries under the guise of education.

A Critical Analysis

Such a critical analysis of the educational components of our Presidential Libraries has been central to our research over the past several years. Some of that research initially appeared in a series of seven articles in issues of *Multicultural Education* during the years 2003 to 2005, and then was expanded in the book *The U.S. Presidency and Social Justice: Implications for Public Education*, edited by H. Prentice Baptiste and published by Caddo Gap Press in 2007.

"By viewing the Presidents through a multicultural lens, it enables us to better understand the impact of their legacies and how their decisions reflect upon our educational system and society with respect to issues of social justice" (Baptiste, 2007, p. 167) and we are then able to take a proactive stance to advocate that the educational programs of the Presidential Libraries incorporate critical perspectives and teach the history of our nation from multiple perspectives.

"Until we learn to embrace diversity through a multicultural lens, history will only continue to repeat itself. The actions, policies, and administrative decisions of the Presidents influence and determine the fate of the citizenry in terms of equal-

ity, racism, discrimination, and attitudes about groups" (Baptiste, 2007, p. 166).

Minimal Efforts

Our research has revealed that prior to the 1970s, the Presidential Libraries did not have formal educational programs for students or teachers. If "programs" existed at all, they consisted mainly of worksheets for students to complete when their class visited the Library's museum.

In the late 1980s, some Libraries began offering programs to encourage the use of historical documents in the classroom or during a class visit to the library. In the 1990s, several Presidential Libraries became district or state sponsors for the National History Day program (Potter, 2006).

Our investigations suggest that much more can and should be done. "It is very unfortunate that our Presidential Libraries have provided minimum resources to support their K-12 educational component" (Baptiste, 2007). It is also important to note that according to an educational specialist at one of the presidential libraries "...that it has only been in the last five years that the educational dimension at the Presidential Libraries has been given any real thought" (Baptiste, 2007).

Successful Attempts

More recently, however, the Libraries have attempted to develop broader and more sophisticated programs both on site and available at a distance (Potter, 2006). Successful attempts, while still limited, have been made to orient the Presidential Libraries toward a more objective educational phenomenon for all students. Among these new efforts are the Truman Library's White House Decision Center and the Five Star Leader Program at the Eisenhower Library.

The White House Decision Center Curriculum involves students in an analysis of the historical environment along with the Presidential decision-making processes. This curriculum meets state and national standards for social studies. "It sharpens students' skills involving cooperative group work, problem solving, communication, and leadership, while demanding that students gain access to knowledge of a historical crisis through copies of primary documents from the library's archive" (Hufbauer, 2005, p. 191). The program is described in the following:

During the WHDC curriculum students take on the roles of actual presidential advisors, recommending a course of action on a critical issue from the Truman Presidency. A Presidential briefing initiates the decision process and leads to group meetings where students are faced with a national or international dilemma. Students working in teams analyze primary documents and collectively advise their President. Decisions are prepared and presented at a press conference where the policy is announced by the President and questioned by student reporters. This curriculum includes four pre-visits and one post-visit, classroom modules, extensive materials and teacher training. (The White House Decision Center, 2001B, p. 2)

The WHDC provides students with an innovative, one of a kind learning experience.

The Five Star Leader Program is a leadership decision-making program "very much like the WHDC" (K. Barbieri, personal communication, March 20, 2007). It is described as follows:

Five Star Leaders is an experiential-learning leadership program which challenges students in grades 8-12, college students, and adults to work together to solve a problem, confront a crisis, or accomplish a mission. Armed with original documents and knowledge of history and leadership, students take on the same challenges as those experienced by historical figures. On site, students assume the roles of historical characters while immersed in an historic event. What they experience mirrors, as closely as possible, the authentic experience of the original history makers. At the conclusion of a challenging and exciting day, students depart with a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the requirements of democratic leadership and decision making. (K. Barbieri, personal communication, March 20, 2007)

Presidential Timeline on the Internet

Another effort that has been made to serve a nationwide audience is the Presidential Timeline, available on the Internet since February of 2007. This cooperative effort among the 12 Presidential Libraries has "the laudatory goal of creating constructive, objective, engaging interactive web pages on 'crisis events' and the Presidential decisions regarding these events" (Baptiste, 2007). The Timeline was designed to educate our country and others about the lives and events surrounding American Presidents.

A Critical Analysis of The Presidential Timeline

Critical thinking presupposes intellectual traits, dispositions, or virtues in addition to intellectual skills. Not only do critical thinkers, for example, gather accurate information and make sure it is relevant to the question at issue, but they also think fair-mindedly in interpreting the information. Critical thinkers not only consider all relevant viewpoints, but they enter each viewpoint using intellectual empathy so as to fully understand those viewpoints.

In other words, they think with intellectual humility, intellectual integrity, intellectual courage, and intellectual perseverance in reasoning through issues and problems, so as to ensure that they are thinking at the highest level of quality, that their thinking is reasonable, rational, just, in accordance with the issue, context, situation. Those who think critically typically engage in monitoring, reviewing, and assessing goals and purposes, the way issues and problems are formulated, the information and data presented, the interpretations of such information and data, the quality of reasoning presented or developed, the basic concepts or ideas inherent in thinking, the assumptions made, the implications and consequences that may or may not follow, and the points of view and frames of reference.

In monitoring, reviewing, and assessing these intellectual constructs, those who think critically characteristically strive for such intellectual criteria as clarity, precision, accuracy, relevance, depth, breadth, fairness, and logicalness. These modes of thinking help us accomplish the ends we are pursuing (Paul & Elder, 2007).

Critical Analysis in Practice

As part of a multicultural education course at our University, teacher candidates and in-service teachers are requested to become critical thinkers regarding the Presidential Timeline. The following themes emerged from our pooling of the analyses of the teacher candidates and in-service teachers as they examined the Presidential Timeline.

As we assembled the critiques of the teacher candidates and in-service teachers, we saw themes forming based on their concerns and what they thought should be happening within the Presidential Timeline. The themes we saw forming are presented below, with examples from the students' papers for each theme:

1. Selection of topics for the Timeline are not reflective of major contributions/events in the history of the Presidency.

- ◆ Lyndon B. Johnson's entries include "The Gulf of Tonkin" but not the Civil Rights Act of 1964 or the Voting Rights Act of 1965?
- ◆ Omission of major events and accomplishments during John F. Kennedy's lifetime and presidency.
- ◆ Other major events during recent decades are not mentioned.

2. There are many grandiose illusions about our Presidents, through which they are inaccurately described as "Great"!

- ◆ Herbert Hoover is credited with ending the stock market crash, while in fact Franklin D. Roosevelt's term in office is when the depression resulting from the crash was alleviated, not during Hoover's Presidency. Presenting Hoover to be the "hero" of this time only continues to give misinformation regarding the stock market crash.
- ◆ Gerald Ford is depicted as a strong, excellent president who faced "almost insuperable tasks" and "acted vigorously" to ensure the high status of the United States.
- ◆ Currently the website is designed to "exaggerate accomplishments and to downplay or omit Presidential shortcomings" (Baptiste, 2007).
- ◆ The Timeline seems to gloss over the ugly events that were happening in the country to show that President Eisenhower was perfect and did everything to help the whole nation to succeed, but in reality he was heavily influenced by his Southern friends and failed to provide leadership when it came to the Civil Rights Movement (Baptiste, 2007).
- ◆ The Timeline is constructed in such a way that only a positive light is shed on the presidency of Eisenhower and his accomplishments.
- ◆ The Timeline completely ignores issues involving oppression, people of color, women, and diversity, or their effects on the country during Eisenhower's Presidency.
- ◆ The Timeline glosses over Lyndon Johnson's role in the Vietnam conflict.
- ◆ What is the true purpose of the Timeline? Is it to educate potential learners on the history of the country and the role of the Presidents, or is it to bolster the institution of the Presidency and protect it from criticism? If it is to be the former, these critiques should be addressed.
- ◆ Perhaps it is human nature to glorify events as well as people, but in the process of doing this we miss out on opportunities to learn and opportunities to unite us all.
- ◆ The Timeline permits a President to be remembered not for what he may have actually done during his Presidency, but for the way in which he wishes to be perceived in an historical context. Rather, it could be used to recognize and correct biased information and show how perspectives of various historians may differ.

3. Alternative perspectives are missing.

- ◆ No information is provided that would make the viewer question the federal government.
- ◆ There is no information provided on the ill treatment of Japanese Americans, African Americans, or other minorities.
- ◆ The quality of the information presented about Gerald Ford is one dimensional, biased, and without detail.
- ◆ There is no mention of opposing viewpoints or unfavorable views about any Presidents.
- ◆ Taking the Vietnam War as an example, none of the sources included represent those who opposed the conflict, or the views from other countries involved, including Vietnam itself.
- ◆ A better representation is needed of what it has been like to live in the United States from many different perspectives other than the mainstream.
- ◆ The repercussions of the various Presidents' policies are not presented in a realistic and accurate way, as a history lesson for anyone who accesses this Timeline.
- ◆ A truly comprehensive timeline should include additional events and short detailed accounts with opposing viewpoints.
- ◆ The basics of Herbert Hoover's response to the stock market crash are presented, but there are important omissions that need to be included, such as the impact on minorities.
- ◆ There is a consistent bias in favor of each President, with no effort to offer other perspectives or the views of Presidential critics.
- ◆ For example, surely, an educationally oriented website would be expected to give some voice to Lyndon Johnson's critics, as well as critics of other Presidents.

4. Very limited as a statement of events and dates.

- ◆ The presentation is limited to positive events and actions that took place.

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- ◆ This limited approach does a poor job of pushing students to understand the relationship of the past to the present.

- ◆ Students will come away from the Timeline with the sense that history is only facts and dates, that things are safely sealed in the past and thus have no bearing on the problems of contemporary America.

5. The presentation of the events is not reflective of a multicultural perspective.

- ◆ To make this site a multicultural site, it would have to include documents on the thoughts/reflections of all segments of the American public, with moral discussions about various events.

- ◆ As with all histories, we are presented with information and must decide what to do with it. We can believe it and take it at face value, or we can dig further.

- ◆ A great deal of important information could be added to the Timeline, for instance, Japanese American racial profiling, racial segregation, and the treatment of Russian Americans.

- ◆ Adding information from other sources would provide a broader perspective, which is necessary for growth through multicultural education.

- ◆ When looking at the Timeline from the perspective of a critical multiculturalist, one realizes immediately that the viewer is limited to a single interpretation of each event.

- ◆ For example, the Timeline excludes a multicultural representation of meaningful information relevant to the development of the Peace Corps.

- ◆ In order to improve the Presidential Timeline from a multicultural education perspective, we need to remove the "cultural blinders" that exist.

- ◆ Rather than present information from only one point of view, the Timeline needs to reflect a diverse curriculum that offers a variety of learning opportunities.

In reviewing these and other responses about the Presidential Timeline from the preservice and in-service teachers, it is apparent that there are some major changes that need to be made for this website to be labeled as "educational." While most of the concrete facts presented for each of the Presidents are appropriate, the tapestry that appears as our nation's history is riddled with omissions, with over emphasis, and with misdirection, all resulting from those who controlled the information included in the Timeline.

Many would argue that although multiculturalism is praised throughout our country as a necessary part of education, it is actually within the political avenues of our country and the educational institutes and activities that are part of that political mainstream—such as Presidential Libraries and the Presidential Timeline—that racism, unfairness, and slanted views are often depicted.

What Can Be Done

By infusing a multicultural perspective, embracing diversity, building creative partnerships, clarifying program objectives, harnessing new technologies, and building support for existing efforts the Presidential Libraries will be able to provide exciting opportunities in the coming years to better serve a nationwide multicultural audience. Currently, as a

result of ignoring different perspectives on important historical events, potentially rich educational experiences are lost.

Because so much of our nation's history is impacted by the office of the President and the power that office entails, there should be a multitude of learning experiences about the Presidency for educators and students, and especially those who are devoted to teaching from a multicultural perspective. Rather than just the simple one-sided perspectives and views which now permeate the Presidential Libraries and Presidential Timeline, we need the perspectives and views of all groups that make up our nation.

In the current situation, "Cultural blinders and justifications influence our way of thinking, which hinders the possibilities or excludes other multiple perspectives" (Baptiste, 2007, p. 166). Given this observation, it is imperative that the educational programs available through the Presidential Libraries move to include all perspectives, beliefs, and opinions, and that such alternative perspectives are given significance. The primary resources housed in the Presidential Libraries hold a wealth of diverse history and information, which when viewed from multiple perspectives and opinions will be the foundation for multicultural education.

What we propose as an exceptional educational program for the Presidential Libraries is one where the students are

able to investigate, inquire, and explore in enriched activities and where they are able to develop their own feelings and their own ideas, and not be exposed once again to something that is glorified or that embellishes the decisions that were made by the various Presidents.

As educators, we need to teach that while the office of the President of the United States is undoubtedly an office to hold in great esteem, the men that have held this office are in fact just men, human beings who did make mistakes, and who did make decisions that differentially affected the citizens of our nation.

As things stand now, "The historical legacy and glorification of the same men in educational texts, and the failure to include the often devastating significance of their actions towards certain groups in historical accounts, has further distorted societal attitudes about multiculturalism in our country" (Baptiste & Sanchez, 2004; Ellis, 2000, 2004; Willis, 2003).

We, as educators need to be focused on creating interactions with our students that are respectful, intellectually challenging, and empowering for both them and us (Cummins, 1996). We want students to be able to have an experience directly from sources that present an objective history of our Presidents and our nation. "To be a teacher is to be a visionary, as we interact with our students, we envisage what contributions they will make in shaping a better society, and we orchestrate our classroom interactions to enable them to realize these possibilities" (Cummins, 1996).

Conclusion

In conclusion, what we have found is that the Presidential Libraries are in fact delivering a political educational experience to the public. As we investigated the Presidential Libraries, we found that the message that is being delivered reflects a one-sided, biased perspective. Similarly, each contribution of the Presidential Timeline lacks the perspectives of the many others in our country who were involved in the events being presented. This approach only continues to encourage students to believe that there was no one else involved in these important historical events.

While it is clear that the Presidential Libraries have come a long way in developing their educational components, from worksheets in the 1970s to the programs being implemented now in 2007. However, the focus of this study is to examine the social justice and critical issues within the

Personal Perspective

Presidential Libraries, and on that score many changes are needed. It is important that each and every Presidential Library really look inside the message they are delivering to ensure that what is being taught within the Presidential Libraries includes multiple perspectives and viewpoints of all of those involved in our history and our society today.

Note

We would also like to acknowledge the teacher candidates and in-service teacher students of the Summer and Fall 2007 semesters for their contributions to the critical analysis of the Presidential Timeline.

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We're seeking submissions of creative writing on topics including diversity, multiculturalism, equity, education, social justice, environmental justice, and more specific subtopics (race, gender/sex, sexual orientation, language, (dis)ability, etc.). Do you write poetry? Short stories or flash fiction? Creative nonfiction? We will consider any style or form, but we prefer prose that is no longer than 750 words and poetry that can fit comfortably onto a single page of text.

Submissions will be reviewed on a rolling basis.

And... If you're a teacher, Pre-K through lifelong learning, please encourage your students to submit to us! We would love submissions from the youngsters as well as the not-so-youngsters!

Where to Submit: Submissions may be sent electronically or by postal mail. Electronic submissions should be sent to Paul C. Gorski at pgorski1@gmu.edu with the subject line "ME Submission." Hard copy, mailed submissions should be addressed to: Paul C. Gorski, Integrative Studies, George Mason University, 4400 University Drive, Fairfax, VA 22030.

Format: All submissions should be double-spaced, including references and any other materials. Please send one copy of your submission with the title noted at the top of the page. The title of the manuscript, name(s) of author(s), academic title(s), institutional affiliation(s), and address, telephone number, and e-mail address of the author(s) should all be included on a cover sheet separate from the manuscript. If you are a student or if you are submitting work on behalf of a student, please include age, grade level, and school name.

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