

From the Battlefield of the Texas History Wars

Contending with “American Exceptionalism”

Julio Noboa

It was in late May of 2010 that the Texas State Board of Education (SBOE) took their final vote on the curriculum standards that will have an impact on what millions of students in Texas as well as dozens of other states will learn about history and social studies for the next 10 years. These *Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills* (TEKS) standards serve as a foundation for textbooks, teaching, and high-stakes standardized testing as mandated by the federal *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) law.

Nine of the 15 members of SBOE voted as a bloc to overtly impose a decidedly Christian conservative bias on the TEKS curriculum standards for the history of Texas, the history of our nation, and the history of the world. Throughout this long process the local and national media focused well-deserved attention on the SBOE pronouncements, including the concepts and historical figures that the Board members sought to include and exclude, drawing from these an abundance of reports, interviews, and comedy news shows.

Yet, unlike all of these media reporters, I experienced this entire process from the inside. I served on the state standards writing committee for U.S. history, and from the eye of the storm I could see the inner workings of a system that although ostensibly open and honest was riddled with manipulation and pressure for us to conform to SBOE's version of history.

From the very beginning, I detected a sense of impending battle when one of our colleagues urged the writing committee members to be consistent with our use of the terms “capitalism,” “socialism,” and

“communism” throughout the writing of our standards so that students would better understand their meaning in various contexts. Months later, against our judgment and advice, the SBOE directed us to replace the word “capitalism” with “free enterprise,” because the former had too many negative connotations. Of course it does, and given the recent failures of the unfettered and unregulated market approach, many would say deservedly so. Yet, more importantly, the economic lessons inherent in exploring and examining the reasons for those negative connotations will be lost in Texas and beyond to millions of history students and future voting citizens.

This same intent to literally white-wash American history motivated the SBOE to also replace the word “imperialism” when referring to U.S. policy during the Spanish-American War with the term “expansionism.” By the same token, “slave trade” became the “Atlantic Triangular trade” and even the very concept of “democracy” itself was replaced with the term “constitutional republic.” The renown author of our *Declaration of Independence*, Thomas Jefferson, was deemed unworthy of being considered a revolutionary thinker, and was replaced by John Calvin, a religious revolutionary for sure, but one who burned at the stake as heretics those who disagreed with his views.

Much of this is based on “American exceptionalism,” a perspective which promotes jingoistic ideas about our history, the role of religion, the individuals worthy of mention, and the very definition of essential concepts such as “revolutionary.” Many speakers testifying before the SBOE during this process mentioned American exceptionalism, lauding it as one that has historical validity and should be included in the social studies and history TEKS as a concept that must be taught to our students.

However, in reality, this concept is a re-incarnation of that old “Manifest Destiny,” that “chosen people” delusion, which justified much conquest, slavery, and genocide “from sea to shining sea.” Being of Puerto Rican descent, and aware of our history of struggle, I take particular exception to American exceptionalism for several reasons, but most especially because the claims are unfounded.

American exceptionalists, for example, insist that the United States has *always* spread freedom throughout the world; and although it has on many occasions done just that, notably during World War II fighting against the Nazis and the Fascists, this country has not always been on the side of freedom and democracy. There are at least three specific examples that contradict this claim. Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954, Bosch in the Dominican Republic in 1963, and Allende in Chile in 1973, were all three democratically-elected national presidents, and in each case the C.I.A., with official State Department support, actually deposed their governments and allowed them to be replaced by brutal right-wing military dictatorships.

Numerous South American military dictators also received support for decades from the U.S., most notably in Argentina and Brazil. During the Reagan years, his administration supported neo-fascist military dictators in Central America, most notably in El Salvador and Guatemala, who killed hundreds of thousands of their own people, including students, teachers, labor leaders, indigenous villagers, and even priests, in the name of so-called “anti-communism.”

Throughout the Third World, democratically elected governments with outstanding and innovative leaders such as Mossadegh in Iraq and Lumumba in the Congo were effectively targeted for assassination by the C.I.A. This undeniable record

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of U.S. intervention clearly demolishes any credibility to the argument that our nation has *always* been on the side of freedom, liberty, and democracy.

Our students should be told the entire truth of our nation's travails as well as its triumphs, its perils as well as its promise. Only then can they be prepared to confront the global challenges of tomorrow, long after we are gone. Teaching students the bogus myth of "American exceptionalism" will not prepare them for the future.

One of the most controversial aspects of these Texas history wars, the battle over names, received the most media attention. Our committee, engaging with more contemporary times, was at the forefront of the effort to integrate names of significant women, Latinos, Blacks, and American Indians who had previously been excluded from the TEKS. We often made these efforts over the objections of the SBOE conservative bloc. There was a concerted effort by certain SBOE members to challenge the inclusion of more Latino names in the presentation of Texas and U.S. history. They claimed that there were already more names of Hispanics now than

ever before. On that fact, they are correct, but only because it is easy to demonstrate an increase when you're beginning from absolute zero.

During my previous investigation into the contents of the TEKS for U.S. history that have been in place for over 10 years, I had discovered that not one Latino name is mentioned at all in the standards covering two years of study. To add insult to injury, not once does the term "Latino," "Hispanic" "Mexican American," let alone "Chicano," ever appear in these previous history TEKS. Neither does "Puerto Rican" nor any other term designating a people of Latin American descent.

These exclusions and other distortions in the previous TEKS for U.S. history and for world history are documented in my book, *Leaving Latinos out of History* (Routledge, 2006). Thus, the claim made by the Christian conservative bloc on the SBOE that their manipulations of history are intended to correct some "liberal bias" in the existing TEKS is patently ridiculous.

At the end of these ideological battles, and despite the many credible voices of students, teachers, scholars, and advocates

for greater inclusion, the SBOE took and passed the final vote to impose its distorted version of history on future generations. Many prominent individuals, including Rod Paige, former U.S. Secretary of Education under President George W. Bush, and professional organizations, notably the *American Historical Association*, insisted that the implementation of their decision be delayed, and I agreed. But our concerns and objections were ignored.

Yet, throughout this convoluted political process I have made several significant discoveries. Foremost among them is that those who want to white-wash America's history to fit their own notions of patriotism are no more patriotic than those of us who see America's warts and wounds, and love her still.
