

OPTING OUT OF AMERICAN HISTORY:
AN ATTEMPT TO HOLD ONTO AMERICAN PATRIOTISM

Student Name

History 190: Introduction to the Study of History

Reginald Jayne

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The American education system has worked tirelessly to teach some of the most important and relevant subjects to the nation's youth. This has led to the creation of nationwide standards within its core classes, with the subject of History being no different. History has multiple interpretations and can still technically be taught while avoiding sections of the past. A student could learn all about the American Revolution without technically learning about any key battles, or a teacher could teach about the American Civil War, focusing only on its economic and diplomatic aspects, without properly acknowledging the different connections they have to slavery. While the former isn't typically seen, the latter is becoming more acceptable within certain standards. American Historical standards for teaching history have worked to specifically cut out certain parts of its history in the name of American patriotism. America's youth is now being taught a less accurate version of history because the creators of the standards are working to make America more patriotic by omitting specific atrocities committed by the United States.

The events of 1994 encapsulate how the American Council for Basic Education started to cut out specific parts of its history by omitting specific pieces within the standards. The United States worked ferociously to change around the nation's standards for how it taught history—the standards were greeted by a large amount of criticism and opposition from Right-Wing Conservatives because they “did not display ‘a decent respect for [the] United States[’s] Historical roots in Western Civilization.”¹ This led to a massive amount of revision in the newly created standards. The first reason, of six points, listed and a major reason for the Council's rejection was the new standards “presented a negative view of American history.”² Out of the

¹ Clair W. Keller, “Comparing the Original and Revised Standards for History,” *The History Teacher*, no. 3 (May 1997): 306, doi:10.2307/494835.

² Clair W. Keller, “Comparing the Original and Revised Standards for History,” 310.

three hundred ninety-five “original ‘elaborated standards’” two hundred three, fifty-one percent, were changed; of these, forty-four were specifically due to criticism, while the other one hundred fifty-nine were adjusted for accuracy & clarity or removed altogether.³ Within those two hundred three, fifty-three “either add[ed] or omit[ed] specific historical content[s]” with the intention to “present better history.”⁴ By the end of the revision, Right-Wing Conservatives were pleased with the outcome and were satisfied with the Standards they had created to teach History. At the same time, these newly minted standards had carved out some of the less enjoyable pieces of America’s past, which left an incomplete and inaccurate story of the United States.

While the word *patriotism* did not make it into the six specific points as to why the standards were originally rejected, the Council for Basic Education was worried about the American patriotic spirit if the un-revisited standards would have been implemented. Patriotism is a powerful ideal because, “to feel like an ‘American,’ to identify with the ‘United States of America,’ is to feel at once safe and connected.”⁵ America has harnessed this ideal in an effort to, “establish a ‘we’ that satisfies the longing for connectedness and affiliation.”⁶ The desire to feel a part of something and connect with others is universal and Patriotism can help answer that desire.⁷ The United States works to establish this feeling of connection and belonging by boosting patriotic ideals across the nation. With all of this in mind, the Council decided that they could not risk using the original version of the proposed 1994 standards because they believed that the concerns being raised within the six points listed would lead to the nation being less

³ Clair W. Keller, “Comparing the Original and Revised Standards for History,” 313.

⁴ Clair W. Keller, “Comparing the Original and Revised Standards for History,” 315.

⁵ Michael J. Bader, “The Psychology of Patriotism,” *The Phi Delta Kappan* 87, no. 8 (April 2006): 582, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20442088>.

⁶ Michael J. Bader, “The Psychology of Patriotism,” 582.

⁷ Michael J. Bader, “The Psychology of Patriotism,” 584.

patriotic.⁸ The problem with this is that some of the points listed were working towards omitting American History.

When done correctly, the teaching of patriotism can be beneficial for the nation, “if we teach it narrowly as jingoistic, uncritical self-praise of our nation, then such instruction is wrong... it would be indoctrination rather than education.”⁹ While the idea of teaching Patriotism has grown and changed over the years, its main principle has always been to encourage students to be more active within America and its ideals.¹⁰ While America doesn’t have to cut out pieces of its history from its standards, this has become the easiest way to increase national pride and overall patriotism. It’s impossible to foster real patriotism without learning about the previous generations and the sacrifices made, “students must learn too about the failings of our democracy, about the denials of freedom and justice that blight out history.”¹¹ People who want to increase patriotism within the nation recognize this, “to love one’s country does not require one to ignore its faults.”¹² The American patriot has to look at the nation with a critical eye, with a desire to see the nation changed for the better.

As the standards work to specifically cut out certain parts of American History, there is a very distinct pattern in whose stories remain, but the most recent revision of the standards saw many connections between race, ethnicity, and diversity whittled down.¹³ There cannot be a discussion about Historical standards without talking about the races that are discriminated

⁸ Clair W. Keller, “Comparing the Original and Revised Standards for History,” 310.

⁹ Diane Ravitch, “Should We Teach Patriotism?” *The Phi Delta Kappan* 87, no. 8 (April 2006): 579, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20442086>.

¹⁰ Diane Ravitch, “Should We Teach Patriotism?” 579.

¹¹ Diane Ravitch, “Should We Teach Patriotism?” 581.

¹² Diane Ravitch, “Should We Teach Patriotism?” 581.

¹³ Mary V. Bicouvaris, “National Standards for History: The Struggles Behind the Scenes,” *The Clearing House* 69, no. 3 (1996): 137, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30189143>.

against and ignored within America. Race is a subject that is often ignored within classrooms.¹⁴ Even when the standards permit the open teaching of such sensitive subjects, like slavery and lynching, teachers often shy away from direct conversations because they're worried about conflicting values within the classroom held by students.¹⁵ The History of Native Americans is also specifically targeted by the standards because currently, "American Indians histories reveal education in motion and under duress."¹⁶ The way in which educators teach the History of Native Americans is so limited that few Americans have a real idea of what happened to the Native Americans—their history usually starts in the seventeenth century and then just has the more colorful pieces of history peppered throughout.¹⁷ All these ideas must come together if there's going to be a genuine discussion about the American Historical standards and the History it ignores within the United States.

By omitting specific parts of American history from the History standards and classrooms, American students aren't learning enough about their nation's past. Currently, the standards that surround Native Americans work to legitimize the conquest of the Americas instead of teaching about Native American's achievements and history.¹⁸ The United States has, "idealized prominent American Indians, such as Sacagawea and Pocahontas, who satisfy

¹⁴ Ayanna F. Brown et al., "Classroom Conversations in the Study of Race and the Disruption of Social and Educational Inequalities: A Review of Research," *Review of Research in Education* 41, (March 2017): 454, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44668703>.

¹⁵ Laura J. Dull, "Teaching African Enslavement: A Pluralistic Approach," *The History Teacher* 51, no. 2 (February 2018): 191, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44817446>.

¹⁶ Donald Warren, "American Indian Histories as Education History," *History of Education Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (August 2014): 282, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24482179>.

¹⁷ Donald Warren, "American Indian Histories as Education History," 282.

¹⁸ Sally McBeth, "Memory, History, and Contested Pasts: Re-imagining Sacagawea/Sacajawea," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 27, no. 1 (January 2003), <https://doi.org/10.17953/aicr.27.1.8177101855376563>, quoted in Carl B. Anderson, "Misplaced Multiculturalism: Representations of American Indians in U.S. History Academic Content Standards," *Curriculum Inquiry* 42, no. 4 (September 2012): 498, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23324014>.

multicultural infusion concerns... [who] sustain a master narrative of racial reconciliation.”¹⁹ while also “Vaporiz[ing] resistance leaders like Tecumseh and Chief Sitting Bull who can be appropriated as symbols of tragic nobility in the face of the inevitable march of European American Westward settlement and technological progress.”²⁰ America is not teaching an accurate History of Native Americans living within the nation— doing that would risk the American youth’s patriotic ideologies. Even though the American History curriculum and standards have partly worked to do a better job at incorporating Native Americans into their work, a full, clear, and honest picture still hasn’t been painted.

Washington and Arizona are two of the states that have the most comprehensive standards which work to directly incorporate Native Americans into their standards, but both still fall short of anything truly meaningful.²¹ Arizona’s standards, “focus[ed] on the historic[al] contributions of American Indians individuals and groups as... [they] fit into a progressive master narrative of national development.”²² This meant that specific achievements made by Native American’s made it into a teacher's lesson, while the tragic parts of their past and the atrocities committed by America against the Native Peoples were swept under the rug.²³ They still wanted students to know that America had never been perfect, but “the country is

¹⁹ Sally McBeth, “Memory, History, and Contested Pasts: Re-imagining Sacagawea/Sacajawea,” quoted in Carl B. Anderson, “Misplaced Multiculturalism: Representations of American Indians in U.S. History Academic Content Standards,” 42.

²⁰ Gordon M. Sayre, *The Indian Chief as Tragic Hero: Native Resistance and the Literatures of America, from Moctezuma to Tecumseh*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), quoted in Carl B. Anderson, “Misplaced Multiculturalism: Representations of American Indians in U.S. History Academic Content Standards,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 42, no. 4 (September 2012): 498, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23324014>.

²¹ Carl B. Anderson, “Misplaced Multiculturalism: Representations of American Indians in U.S. History Academic Content Standards,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 42, no. 4 (September 2012): 497, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23324014>.

²² Carl B. Anderson, “Misplaced Multiculturalism: Representations of American Indians in U.S. History Academic Content Standards,” 502-503.

²³ Carl B. Anderson, “Misplaced Multiculturalism: Representations of American Indians in U.S. History Academic Content Standards,” 503.

perpetually trending toward...perfection.”²⁴ The word perfection can easily be replaced by patriotic and the idea would still stand just the same. Arizona’s standards for third graders have lumped Native American segregation into a way to see how the modern world is shaped, without talking about what led to that segregation.²⁵ Only teaching the achievements of a group to make the standards seem more inclusive will boost someone’s patriotic ideals about their nation if they don’t also know or understand the wrongs committed. By cutting out certain pieces of Native History from the standards, America can look like a more favorable nation all around.

Washington took a different approach— they wanted to focus in on many of the local tribes in the area. Many of the content standards revolved around local case studies, which were meant to help students explore larger conflicts and ideals.²⁶ While this can truly boost local knowledge of Native American struggles and ideologies, “by focusing so intently on the details of the ‘case,’ students will be unable to connect the details to the larger American political, economic, social, and cultural context that shaped these events.”²⁷ These kinds of standards allow students to learn about their local history, which can bring up unpatriotic feelings, while also causing a disconnect between the larger and more significant Historical narrative that students must learn so they can have the clearest picture of American History. The specific standards state that fourth graders will be able to “explain how the events of Washington state history contributed to the different perspectives between native and non-native people.”²⁸

²⁴ Carl B. Anderson, “Misplaced Multiculturalism: Representations of American Indians in U.S. History Academic Content Standards,” 503.

²⁵ Arizona History and Social Science Standards, “History and Social Science Standards: Third Grade-Fifth Grade,” Arizona Department of Education, (October 2018): 14.

²⁶ Carl B. Anderson, “Misplaced Multiculturalism: Representations of American Indians in U.S. History Academic Content Standards,” 505.

²⁷ Carl B. Anderson, “Misplaced Multiculturalism: Representations of American Indians in U.S. History Academic Content Standards,” 505.

²⁸ Washington State Learning Standards, “Social Studies Learning Standards,” Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, (September 2019): 45.

Causing this disconnect ensures that even if a full and comprehensive story is told about America and its poor treatment of Native Americans for most of history, the full effect will not be felt by most students—which allows for patriotic ideals to remain easier. At this point, the standards in both states are letting down the youth living there because they are not “promoting critical thinking about American Indian-European American relations in U.S. history” which makes for a less honest and truthful version of America’s history.²⁹

In its attempt to increase patriotism, the standards for American History have also targeted the history of Africans and African Americans. Specifically, the subject of slavery is usually watered down as much as possible considering it’s one of America’s most horrific blemishes. The nation was born with the idea “that all men are created equal” while standing on the backs of enslaved Africans. The standards watered down the suffering and horrors of slavery, as they worked to turn the American colonies into a heroic struggle for white colonizers.³⁰ In many cases, this just ends with Africans being seen as victims in the slave trade while “black students experience embarrassment and shame.”³¹ When this single ideal is presented to students, misunderstandings about history can thrive and patriotism has the chance to increase. Students who don’t learn that race is a construct within our society, one that was created to justify the enslavement of Africans, will only ever see these people as victims or even traitors for selling out their own people.³² A majority of the current Historical standards don’t allow teachers to teach the diverse and important details, for instance, “people’s identities were connected to kin or ethnic groups, not to an overarching connection of being part of one big

²⁹ Carl B. Anderson, “Misplaced Multiculturalism: Representations of American Indians in U.S. History Academic Content Standards,” 506.

³⁰ Clair W. Keller, “Comparing the Original and Revised Standards for History,” 311.

³¹ Laura J. Dull, “Teaching African Enslavement: A Pluralistic Approach,” 191.

³² Laura J. Dull, “Teaching African Enslavement: A Pluralistic Approach,” 190-201.

African family.”³³ A detail like this can help students realize that Africans were never selling out their kin because the idea of race simply didn’t exist— this can also help any African American students in the room feel less like an overarching victim.³⁴ In turn, this would also allow for a more diverse and open conversation about what it means to be an American in modern times—it can make understanding the actions of their ancestors easier— but not necessarily forgivable.³⁵

While America’s standards currently lack on many levels, they don’t have to stay that way; there are ways to incorporate some of the most horrific parts of American history into the ideas of American patriotism. If the standards are altered and loosened, then classrooms can have more protrusive and honest conversations about American History. For instance, a teacher can “facilitate classroom conversations on race that deepen academic curriculum,” while talking about something as horrific as the slave trade.³⁶ This situation could allow an invaluable chance for students to see the pitfalls of America, to talk about how things have changed while discussing what can be done to ensure a brighter future. Conversations like this help disrupt inequalities and work to build a better nation, it’s easier for someone to love their country when they don’t feel like it’s against them.³⁷

One of the other outcomes of the standards not being true to American History is that it makes the subject of History as a whole, into a less important and less valued topic. Teachers struggle to get the same kind of attention that math and reading classes get, even when they continue to point out how fewer students are coming in prepared for more advanced History

³³ Laura J. Dull, “Teaching African Enslavement: A Pluralistic Approach,” 199.

³⁴ Laura J. Dull, “Teaching African Enslavement: A Pluralistic Approach,” 199.

³⁵ Ayanna F. Brown et al., “Classroom Conversations in the Study of Race and the Disruption of Social and Educational Inequalities: A Review of Research,” 472.

³⁶ Ayanna F. Brown et al., “Classroom Conversations in the Study of Race and the Disruption of Social and Educational Inequalities: A Review of Research,” 472.

³⁷ Ayanna F. Brown et al., “Classroom Conversations in the Study of Race and the Disruption of Social and Educational Inequalities: A Review of Research,” 472.

classes.³⁸ The History standards are meant to prepare students as they move up in the grades: instead, it's working to create a false narrative, which makes it harder to teach a subject truthfully.³⁹ If the standards' intended goal was to cut out large portions of America's History so Patriotism could be increased, then it backfired when it comes to respect & believability. As people come to learn the truth about the United States' past, they will come to distrust what they learned in their history classes. Students need to understand the "value of history" but cutting out specific sections of America's History won't allow them to truly gain an understanding of that value.⁴⁰

Ultimately, the thing holding back American patriotism is its unwillingness to talk about America's hard often problematic past. There doesn't need to be a specific class, dedicated to increasing the patriotic ideals of the nation, there just needs to be an open, honest, and, most importantly, critical conversation about its history.⁴¹ The History standards have dug in though and believe that the best way to handle the problem, is to simply bury the problem.

³⁸ Luciana C. De Oliveira, "History Doesn't Count": Challenges of Teaching History in California Schools," *The History Teacher* 41, no. 3 (2008): 367, doi:10.2307/30036917.

³⁹ Luciana C. De Oliveira, "History Doesn't Count": Challenges of Teaching History in California Schools," 368.

⁴⁰ Luciana C. De Oliveira, "History Doesn't Count": Challenges of Teaching History in California Schools," 374.

⁴¹ Diane Ravitch, "Should We Teach Patriotism?" 581.

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