



Lies

MY TEACHER TOLD ME

Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong

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Watching Big Brother

What Textbooks Teach about the Federal Government

The historian must have no country.

—John Quincy Adams¹

What did you learn in school today, dear little boy of mine?

I learned our government must be strong.

It's always right and never wrong. . . .

That's what I learned in school.

—Song by Tom Paxton, 1963²

We have to face the unpleasant as well as the affirmative side of the human story, including our own story as a nation, our own stories of our peoples. We have got to have the ugly facts in order to protect us from the official view of reality.

—Bill Moyers³

As long as you are convinced you have never done anything, you can never do anything.

—Malcolm X⁴

To study foreign affairs without putting ourselves into others' shoes is to deal in illusion and to prepare students for a lifelong misunderstanding of our place in the world.

—Paul Gagnon⁵

SOME TRADITIONAL HISTORIANS, critics of the new emphasis on social and cultural history, believe that American history textbooks have been seduced from their central narrative, which they see as the story of the American state. Methinks they protest too much. The expanded treatments that textbooks now give to women, slavery, modes of transportation, developments in popular music, and other topics not directly related to the state have yet to produce a new core narrative. Therefore they appear as unnecessary diversions that only interrupt the basic narrative that the textbooks still tell: the history of the American government. Two of the twelve textbooks I studied were "inquiry" textbooks, assembled from primary sources. They no longer make the story of the state quite so central.⁶ The ten narrative textbooks in my sample continue to pay overwhelming attention to the actions of the executive branch of the federal government. They still demarcate U.S. history as a series of presidential administrations.

Thus, for instance, *Land of Promise* grants each president a biographical vignette, even William Henry Harrison (who served for one month), but never mentions arguably our greatest composer, Charles Ives; our most influential architect, Frank Lloyd Wright; or our most prominent non-Indian humanitarian on behalf of Indians, Helen Hunt Jackson. Although textbook authors include more social history than they used to, they still regard the actions and words of the state as incomparably more important than what the American people were doing, listening to, sleeping in, living through, or thinking about. Particularly for the centuries before the Woodrow Wilson administration, this stress on the state is inappropriate, because the federal executive was not nearly as important then as now.

What story do textbooks tell about our government? First, they imply that the state we live in today is the state created in 1789. Textbook

authors overlook the possibility that the balance of powers set forth in the Constitution, granting some power to each branch of the federal government, some to the states, and reserving some for individuals, has been decisively altered over the last two hundred years. The federal government they picture is still the people's servant, manageable and tractable. Paradoxically, textbooks then underplay the role of nongovernmental institutions or private citizens in bringing about improvements in the environment, race relations, education, and other social issues. In short, textbook authors portray a heroic state, and, like their other heroes, this one is pretty much without blemishes. Such an approach converts textbooks into anticitizenship manuals—handbooks for acquiescence.

Perhaps the best way to show textbooks' sycophancy is by examining how authors treat the government when its actions have been least defensible. Let us begin with considerations relating to U.S. foreign policy.

College courses in political science generally take one of two approaches when analyzing U.S. actions abroad. Some professors and textbooks are quite critical of what might be called the American colossus. In this "American century," the United States has been the most powerful nation on earth and has typically acted to maintain its hegemony. This view holds that we Americans abandoned our revolutionary ideology long ago, if indeed we ever held one, and now typically act to repress the legitimate attempts at self-determination of other nations and peoples.

More common is the *realpolitik* view. George Kennan, who for almost half a century has been an architect of and commentator on U.S. foreign policy, provided a succinct statement of this approach in 1948. As head of the Policy Planning Staff of the State Department, Kennan wrote in a now famous memorandum:

We have about 50% of the world's wealth but only 6.3% of its population. In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real test in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity. We need not deceive ourselves that we can afford today the luxury of altruism and world benefaction—unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of living standards, and democratization.⁷

Under this view, the historian or political scientist proceeds by identifying American national interests as articulated by policymakers in the past as well as by historians today. Then s/he analyzes our acts and policies to assess the degree to which they furthered these interests.

High school American history textbooks do not, of course, adopt or even hint at the American colossus view. Unfortunately, they also omit the realpolitik approach. Instead, they take a strikingly different tack. They see our policies as part of a morality play in which the United States typically acts on behalf of human rights, democracy, and "the American way." When Americans have done wrong, according to this view, it has been because others misunderstood us, or perhaps because we misunderstood the situation. But always our motives were good. This approach might be called the "international good guy" view.

Textbooks do not indulge in any direct discussion of what "good" is or might mean. In Frances FitzGerald's phrase, textbooks present the United States as "a kind of Salvation Army to the rest of the world."⁸ In so doing, they echo the nation our leaders like to present to its citizens: the supremely moral, disinterested peacekeeper, the supremely responsible world citizen. "Other countries look to their own interests," said Pres. John F. Kennedy in 1961, pridefully invoking what he termed our "obligations" around the globe. "Only the United States—and we are only six percent of the world's population—bears this kind of burden."⁹ Since at least the 1920s, textbook authors have claimed that the United States is more generous than any other nation in the world in providing foreign aid.¹⁰ The myth was untrue then; it is likewise untrue now. Today at least a dozen European and Arab nations devote much larger proportions of their gross domestic product (GDP) or total governmental expenditures to foreign aid than does the United States.¹¹

The desire to emphasize our humanitarian dealings with the world influences what textbook authors choose to include and omit. All but one of the twelve textbooks contain at least a paragraph on the Peace Corps. The tone of these treatments is adoring. "The Peace Corps made friends for America everywhere," gushes *Life and Liberty*. *Triumph of the American Nation* infers our larger purpose: "The Peace Corps symbolized America's desire to provide humane assistance as well as economic and military leadership in the non-Communist world." As a shaper of history, however, the Peace Corps has been insignificant. It does not disparage this fine institution to admit that its main impact has been on the intellectual development of its own volunteers.

More important and often less affable American exports are our multinational corporations. One multinational alone, International Telephone and Telegraph (ITT), which took the lead in prompting our government to destabilize the socialist government of Salvador Allende, had more impact on Chile than all the Peace Corps workers America ever sent there. The same might be said of Union Carbide in India and United Fruit in Guatemala. By influencing U.S. government policies,



Textbook authors select images to reinforce the idea that our country's main role in the world is to bring about good. This photograph from Life and Liberty shows "a Peace Corps volunteer teaching in Botswana."

other American-based multinationals have had even more profound effects on other nations.¹² At times the corporations' influence has been constructive. For example, when Pres. Gerald Ford was trying to persuade Congress to support U.S. military intervention on behalf of the UNITA rebels in Angola's civil war, Gulf Oil lobbied against intervention. Gulf was happily producing oil in partnership with Angola's Marxist government when it found its refineries coming under fire from American arms in the hands of UNITA. At other times, multinationals have persuaded our government to intervene when only their corporate interest, not our national interest, was at stake.

All this is a matter of grave potential concern to students, who after graduation may get drafted and then sent to fight in a foreign country, partly because U.S. policy has been unduly influenced by some Delaware corporation or New York bank. Or students may find their jobs eliminated by multinationals that move factories to Third World countries whose citizens must work for almost nothing.¹³ Social scientists used to describe the world as stratified into a wealthy industrialized center and a poor colonized periphery; some now hold that multinationals and faster modes of transportation and communication have made management the new center, workers at home and abroad the new periphery. Even if students are not personally affected, they will have to deal with the multinationalization of the world. As multinational corporations such as Exxon and Mitsubishi come to have budgets larger than those

of most governments, national economies are becoming obsolete. Robert Reich, secretary of labor in the Clinton administration, has pointed out, "The very idea of an American economy is becoming meaningless, as are the notions of an American corporation, American capital, American products, and American technology."¹⁴ Multinationals may represent a threat to national autonomy, affecting not only small nations but also the United States.

When Americans try to think through the issues raised by the complex interweaving of our economic and political interests, they will not be helped by what they learned in their American history courses. History textbooks do not even mention multinationals. The topic doesn't fit their "international good guy" approach. Only *American Adventures* even lists "multinationals" in its index, and its treatment consists of a single sentence: "These investments [in Europe after World War I] led to the development of multinational corporations—large companies with interests in several countries." Even this lone statement is inaccurate: European multinationals date back centuries, and American multinationals have played an important role in our history since at least 1900.

Textbooks might begin discussing the influence of multinational corporations on U.S. foreign policy with the administration of Woodrow Wilson. Pressure from First National Bank of New York helped prompt Wilson's intervention in Haiti. U.S. interests owned more of Mexico than interests from anywhere else, including Mexico itself, which helps explain Wilson's repeated invasions of that country. In Russia the new communist government nationalized all petroleum assets; as a consequence, Standard Oil of New Jersey was "the major impetus" behind American opposition to the Bolsheviks, according to historian Barry Weisberg.¹⁵

Textbooks mystify these circumstances, however. The closest they come to telling the story of economic influences on our foreign policy is in passages such as this, from *The Challenge of Freedom*, regarding Wilson's interventions in Mexico: "Many Americans were very interested in the outcome of these events in Mexico. This was because over 40,000 Americans lived in Mexico. Also, American businesses had invested about 1 billion dollars in Mexico." Here *Challenge* makes almost a pun of *interested*. In its ensuing analysis of Wilson's interventions, *Challenge* never again mentions American interests and instead takes Wilson's policies at face value. The treatment of Wilson's Haitian invasion in *The American Pageant* is still more naïve:

Hoping to head off trouble, Washington urged Wall Street bankers to pump dollars into the financial vacuums in Honduras and Haiti to keep

out foreign funds. The United States, under the Monroe Doctrine, would not permit foreign nations to intervene, and consequently it had some moral obligation to interfere financially to prevent economic and political chaos.

Evidently even our financial intervention was humanitarian! The authors of *Pageant* could use a shot of the realism supplied by former Marine Corps Gen. Smedley D. Butler, whose 1931 statement has become famous:

I helped make Mexico safe for American oil interests in 1914. I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenue in. I helped purify Nicaragua for the international banking house of Brown Brothers. . . . I brought light to the Dominican Republic for American sugar interests in 1916. I helped make Honduras "right" for American fruit companies in 1903. Looking back on it, I might have given Al Capone a few hints.¹⁶

Business influence on U.S. foreign policy did not start with Woodrow Wilson's administration, however. John A. Hobson, in his 1903 book *Imperialism*, described "a constantly growing tendency" of the wealthy class "to use their political power as citizens of this State to interfere with the political condition of those States where they have an industrial stake."¹⁷ Nor did such influence end with Wilson. Jonathan Kwitny's fine book *Endless Enemies* cites various distortions of U.S. foreign policy owing to specific economic interests of individual corporations and/or to misconceived ideological interests of U.S. foreign policy planners. Kwitny points out that during the entire period from 1953 to 1977, the people in charge of U.S. foreign policy were all on the Rockefeller family payroll. Dean Rusk and Henry Kissinger, who ran our foreign policy from 1961 to 1977, were dependent upon Rockefeller payments for their very solvency.¹⁸ Nonetheless, no textbook ever mentions the influence of multinationals on U.S. policy. This is the case not necessarily because textbook authors are afraid of offending multinationals, but because they never discuss *any* influence on U.S. policy. Rather, they present our governmental policies as rational humanitarian responses to trying situations, and they do not seek to penetrate the surface of the government's own explanations of its actions.

Having ignored *why* the federal government acts as it does, textbooks proceed to ignore much of *what* the government does. Textbook authors portray the U.S. government's actions as agreeable and nice, even when U.S. government officials have admitted motives and intentions of a

quite different nature. Among the less savory examples are various attempts by U.S. officials and agencies to assassinate leaders or bring down governments of other countries. The United States has indulged in activities of this sort at least since the Wilson administration, which hired two Japanese-Mexicans to try to poison Pancho Villa.¹⁹ I surveyed the twelve textbooks to see how they treated six more recent U.S. attempts to subvert foreign governments. To ensure that the events were adequately covered in the historical literature, I examined only incidents that occurred before 1973, well before any of these textbooks went to press. The episodes are:

1. our assistance to the shah's faction in Iran in deposing Prime Minister Mussadegh and returning the shah to the throne in 1953;
2. our role in bringing down the elected government of Guatemala in 1954;
3. our rigging of the 1957 election in Lebanon, which entrenched the Christians on top and led to the Muslim revolt and civil war the next year;
4. our involvement in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba of Zaïre in 1961;
5. our repeated attempts to murder Premier Fidel Castro of Cuba and bring down his government by terror and sabotage; and
6. our role in bringing down the elected government of Chile in 1973.

The U.S. government calls actions such as these "state-sponsored terrorism" when other countries do them to us. We would be indignant to learn of Cuban or Libyan attempts to influence our politics or destabilize our economy. Our government expressed outrage at Iraq's Saddam Hussein for trying to arrange the assassination of former President Bush when he visited Kuwait in 1993 and retaliated with a bombing attack on Baghdad, yet the United States has repeatedly orchestrated similar assassination attempts.

In 1990 Warren Cohen resigned from the historical committee that he headed at the State Department to protest the government's deletion from its official history of U.S. foreign relations of "all mention of the C.I.A. coup that put Shah Mohammed Riza Pahlevi in power in Iran in 1953."²⁰ Eight of the twelve textbooks I reviewed would side with the U.S. government against Cohen: they too say nothing about our overthrow of Mussadegh. *The American Pageant* and *Life and Liberty* stand out with far and away the most accurate accounts. Here is the paragraph from *Life and Liberty*:

The United States had been a long-time friend of the ruler of Iran, Shah Reza Pahlevi. In fact, the United States had helped him to his throne by overthrowing a democratically elected government in 1953, which the United States felt was too leftist. America supplied the shah with large numbers of arms, and also trained the shah's army and police. Unfortunately, the shah used the army and police to form a police state.

Triumph of the American Nation and *Land of Promise* mention that the United States deposed Mussadegh but justify the act as anticommunist. In the words of *Promise*, "In 1953, a Communist-backed political party seized control of the government and attempted to assert control over Iran's oil resources." This will not do: Mussadegh himself had led the drive to expel the Soviets from northern Iran after World War II. And his party did not "seize control" any more than parties do in other parliamentary democracies such as Canada or Great Britain. Indeed, the shah himself had appointed Mussadegh prime minister because of his immense popularity in parliament and among the people.

The other eight textbooks say nothing about our government's actions in prerevolutionary Iran. The only specific U.S. action in Iran that *A History of the Republic* reports, for example, is our assistance in wiping out malaria! When these textbooks' authors later describe the successful attempt in 1979 by the people of Iran to overthrow the shah, their accounts cannot explain why Iranians might be so upset with the United States. Of the twelve textbooks, only *Life and Liberty* and *The American Pageant* explain the shah's unpopularity as a ruler imposed from without and America's unpopularity owing to our identification with the shah and his policies. Thus only two books give students a basis for understanding why Iranians held Americans hostage for more than a year during the Carter administration.

In Guatemala in 1954, the CIA threatened the government of Jacobo Arbenz with an armed invasion. Arbenz had antagonized the United Fruit Company by proposing land reform and planning a highway and railroad that might break their trade monopoly. The United States chose an obscure army colonel as the new president, and when Arbenz panicked and sought asylum in the Mexican embassy, we flew our man to the capital aboard the U.S. ambassador's private plane. Only one textbook, *The American Tradition*, mentions the incident:

In the 1950's the United States, concerned with stopping the spread of communism, directed its attention to Latin America once again. In 1954 the CIA helped to overthrow the leftist government of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman in Guatemala. In following years, in order to prevent communist

takeovers, the United States continued to support unpopular conservative or military governments in Latin America.

Here, as with *Promise's* account of Iran, *Tradition* offers anticommunism as the sole motive for U.S. policies. Bear in mind that this incident took place at the height of McCarthyism, when, as Lewis Lapham has pointed out, the United States saw communism everywhere: "When the duly elected Guatemalan president, Jacobo Arbenz, began to talk too much like a democrat, the United States accused him of communism."²¹ Thirty years later *The American Tradition* maintains the U.S. government's McCarthyist rhetoric as fact.

Not one textbook includes a word about how the United States helped the Christians in Lebanon fix the 1957 parliamentary election in that then tenuously balanced country. The next year, denied a fair share of power by electoral means, the Muslims took to armed combat, and President Eisenhower sent in the marines on the Christians' behalf. Five books discuss that 1958 intervention. *Land of Promise* offers the fullest treatment:

Next, chaos broke out in Lebanon, and the Lebanese President, Camille Chamoun, fearing a leftist coup, asked for American help. Although reluctant to interfere, in July 1958 Eisenhower sent 15,000 United States marines into Lebanon. Order was soon restored, and the marines were withdrawn.

This is standard textbook rhetoric: chaos seems always to be breaking out or about to break out. Other than communism, "chaos" is what textbooks usually offer to explain the actions of the other side. Communism offers no real explanation either. Kwitny points out that the United States has often behaved so badly in the Third World that some governments and independence movements saw no alternative but to turn to the USSR.²² Since textbook authors are unwilling to criticize the U.S. government, they present opponents of the United States that are not intelligible. Only by disclosing our actions can textbooks provide readers with rational accounts of our adversaries.

Promise goes on to tell the happy results of our intervention: "Although there was no immediate Communist threat to Lebanon, Eisenhower demonstrated that the United States could react quickly. As a result, tensions in the region receded." In reality, the civil war in Lebanon broke out again in 1975, with mounting destruction in Beirut and throughout the nation. In 1983 a whole lot of chaos broke out, so President Reagan sent in our marines again. A truck bomb then killed

more than two hundred marines in their barracks, and three textbooks treat that intervention. Two of them say nothing about our involvement in either 1957 or 1958, and the remaining textbook, *The American Pageant*, tells of Eisenhower's 1958 intervention in even rosier terms than *Land of Promise*. So not one of twelve textbooks offers students anything of substance about the continuity of conflict in Lebanon or our role in causing it.

"Zaire" or "the Congo" appear in the index of just two textbooks, *The American Pageant* and *Triumph of the American Nation*. Neither book mentions that the CIA urged the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in 1961.²³ *Pageant* offers an accurate account of the beginning of the strife: "The African Congo received its independence from Belgium in 1960 and immediately exploded into violence. The United Nations sent in a peacekeeping force, to which Washington contributed much money but no manpower." There *Pageant* stops. The account in *Triumph of the American Nation* mentions Lumumba by name: "A new crisis developed in 1961 when Patrice Lumumba, leader of the pro-Communist faction, was assassinated." *Triumph* says nothing about U.S. involvement with the assassination, however, and concludes with the happiest of endings: "By the late 1960's, most scars of the civil war seemed healed. The Congo (Zaire) became one of the most prosperous African nations." Would that it were! The CIA helped bring to power Joseph Mobutu, a former army sergeant. By the end of the 1960s, *Triumph* to the contrary, Zaire under Mobutu had become one of the most wretched African nations, economically and politically. As of 1993, Mobutu had yet to hold an election, allow the free functioning of political parties, or condone a free press. The *New York Times* noted that starvation was growing in Zaire and called the problems "self-inflicted, the result of nearly 30 years of Government corruption."²⁴ While per capita income in Zaire fell by more than two-thirds, Mobutu himself became one of the richest persons on the planet and perhaps the most hated person in the country.²⁵ As I write in 1994, Zaire is ripe for a "new" crisis to "develop," quite possibly with anti-American overtones. If it does, we can be sure, textbooks will be just as surprised as our students when "chaos breaks out."

All twelve textbooks are silent about our repeated attempts to assassinate Premier Fidel Castro of Cuba. The federal government had tried to kill Castro eight times by 1965, according to testimony before the U.S. Senate; by 1975 Castro had thwarted twenty-four attempts, according to Cuba. These undertakings ranged from a botched effort to get Castro to light an exploding cigar to a contract with the Mafia to murder him. Since Pres. John F. Kennedy probably ordered several of the earlier

attempts on Castro's life personally, including the Mafia contract, Kennedy's own assassination might be explained as a revenge slaying. Because no textbook tells how Kennedy tried to kill Castro, however, none can logically suggest a Cuban or Mafia connection in discussing Kennedy's death.²⁶ The Kennedy administration also lied about its sponsorship of the Bay of Pigs invasion; immediately after that failed, Kennedy launched Operation Mongoose, "a vast covert program" to destabilize Cuba. Pierre Salinger, Kennedy's press secretary, has written that JFK even planned to invade Cuba with U.S. armed forces until forestalled by the Cuban missile crisis.²⁷ No textbook tells about Operation Mongoose.

Undaunted by its failures in Cuba, the CIA turned its attention farther south. Only three textbooks, *Life and Liberty*, *The American Adventure*, and *Triumph of the American Nation*, mention Chile. "President Nixon helped the Chilean army overthrow Chile's elected government because he did not like its radical socialist policies," *Life and Liberty* says bluntly. This single sentence, which is all that *Life and Liberty* offers, lies buried in a section about President Carter's human rights record, but it is far and away the best account in any of the textbooks. According to *Triumph*, Nixon approved "the secret use of funds by the CIA to try to prevent a socialist-communist election victory in Chile. The CIA later made it difficult for the Marxist government elected by these parties to govern." Since the "difficulties" President Allende faced included his own murder, perhaps this is the ultimate euphemism! *The American Adventure* offers a fuller account:

Some people, in the United States and abroad, said that the United States arranged the overthrow of Allende. Indeed, in 1974, Pres. Ford admitted that the United States CIA had given help to the opposition to Allende. However, he denied that the United States encouraged or knew of the revolutionary plan.

Why leave our involvement open to question? Historians know that the CIA had earlier joined with ITT to try to defeat Allende in the 1970 elections. Failing this, the United States sought to disrupt the Chilean economy and bring down Allende's government. The United States blocked international loans to Chile, subsidized opposition newspapers, labor unions, and political parties, denied spare parts to industries, paid for and fomented a nationwide truckers' strike that paralyzed the Chilean economy, and trained and financed the military that staged the bloody coup in 1973 in which Allende was killed. The next year, CIA Director William Colby testified that "a secret high-level intelligence

committee led by Kissinger himself had authorized CIA expenditures of over \$8,000,000 during the period 1970–73 to ‘destabilize’ the government of Pres. Allende.”²⁸ Secretary of State Kissinger himself later explained, “I don’t see why we have to let a country go Marxist just because its people are irresponsible.”²⁹ Since the Chilean people’s “irresponsibility” consisted of voting for Allende, here Kissinger openly says that the United States should not and will not respect the electoral process or sovereignty of another country if the results do not please us. With this attitude and policy in place in our government, whether the CIA or its Chilean allies pulled the trigger on Allende amounts to a nitpicking detail. *The American Adventure* at least mentions our action in Chile; however, nine books overlook it entirely.³⁰

Do textbooks need to include all government skulduggery? Certainly not. I am *not* arguing in favor of what Paul Gagnon calls “relentless mentioning.”³¹ Textbooks do need to analyze at least *one* of our interventions in depth, however, for they raise important issues. To defend these acts on moral grounds is not easy. The acts diminish U.S. foreign policy to the level of Mafia thuggery, strip the United States of its claim to lawful conduct, and reduce our prestige around the world. To be sure, covert violence may be defensible on realpolitik grounds as an appropriate way to deal with international problems. It can be argued that the United States *should be* destabilizing governments in other countries, assassinating leaders unfriendly to us, and fighting undeclared unpublicized wars. The six cloak-and-dagger operations recounted here do not support this view, however. In Cuba, for instance, the CIA’s “pointless sabotage operations,” in Rhodri words, “only increased Castro’s popularity.” Even when they succeed, these covert acts provide only a short-term fix, keeping people who worry us out of power for a time, but identifying the United States with repressive, undemocratic, unpopular regimes, hence undermining our long-term interests.³² The historian Ronald Kessler relates that a CIA officer responsible for engineering Arbenz’s downfall in Guatemala agreed later that overthrowing elected leaders is a short-sighted policy.³³ “Was it desirable to trade Mussadegh for the Ayatollah Khomeini?” asks the historian Charles Ameringer about our “success” in Iran. When covert attacks fail, like the Bay of Pigs landing in 1961, they leave the U.S. government with no viable next step short of embarrassed withdrawal or overt military intervention. If instead of covert action we had had a public debate about how to handle Mussadegh or Castro, we might have avoided Khomeini or the Bay of Pigs debacle. Unless we become more open to nationalist governments that embody the dreams of their people, Robert F. Smith believes we will face “crisis after crisis.”³⁴

This debate cannot take place in American history courses, however, because most textbooks do not let on about what our government has done. Half of the twelve textbooks I surveyed leave out all six incidents. Most of the other textbooks pretend, when treating the one or two incidents they include, that our actions were based on humanitarian motives. Thus textbook authors portray the United States basically as an idealistic actor, responding generously to other nations' social and economic woes. Robert Leckie has referred to "the myth of 'the most peace-loving nation in the world' " and noted that it persists "in American folklore." It also persists in our history textbooks.³⁵

These interventions raise another issue: are they compatible with democracy? Covert violent operations against foreign nations, individuals, and political parties violate the openness on which our own democracy relies. Inevitably, covert international interference leads to domestic lying. U.S. citizens cannot possibly critique government policies if they do not know of them. Thus covert violent actions usually flout the popular will. These actions also threaten our long-standing separation of powers, which textbooks so justly laud in their chapters on the Constitution. Covert actions are always undertaken by the executive branch, which typically lies to the legislative branch about what it has done and plans to do, thus preventing Congress from playing its constitutionally intended role.

The U.S. government lied about most of the six examples of foreign intervention just described. On the same day in 1961 that our Cuban exiles were landing at the Bay of Pigs in their hapless attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro, Secretary of State Dean Rusk said, "The American people are entitled to know whether we are intervening in Cuba or intend to do so in the future. The answer to that question is no." Among the dead three days later were four American pilots. When asked about Chile in his Senate confirmation hearings for U.S. Secretary of State in 1973, Henry Kissinger replied, "The CIA had nothing to do with the [Chilean] coup, to the best of my knowledge and belief, and I only put in that qualification in case some madman appears down there who, without instruction, talked to somebody." Of course, later statements by CIA Director William Colby and Kissinger himself directly contradicted this testimony. The U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee eventually denounced our campaign against the Allende government.³⁶

President Eisenhower used national security as his excuse when he was caught in an obvious lie: he denied that the United States was flying over Soviet airspace, only to have captured airman Gary Powers admit the truth on Russian television. Much later, the public learned that Powers had been just the tip of the iceberg: in the 1950s we had some

thirty-one flights downed over the USSR, with 170 men aboard. For decades our government lied to the families of the lost men and never made substantial representation to the USSR to get them back, because the flights were illegal and were supposed to be secret.³⁷ Similarly, during the Vietnam War the government kept our bombing of Laos secret for years, later citing national security as its excuse. This did not fool Laotians, who knew full well we were bombing them, but did fool Americans. Often presidents and their advisors keep actions covert not for reasons of tactics abroad, but because they suspect the actions would not be popular with Congress or with the American people.

Over and over, presidents have chosen not to risk their popularity by waging the campaign required to persuade Americans to support their secret military policies.³⁸ Our Constitution provides that Congress must declare war. Back in 1918 Woodrow Wilson tried to keep our intervention in Russia hidden from Congress and the American people. Helen Keller helped get out the truth: "Our governments are not honest. They do not openly declare war against Russia and proclaim the reasons," she wrote to a New York newspaper in 1919. "They are fighting the Russian people half-secretly and in the dark with the lie of democracy on their lips."³⁹ Ultimately, Wilson failed to keep his invasion secret, but he was able to keep it hidden from American history textbooks. Therein lies the problem: textbooks cannot report accurately on the six foreign interventions described in this chapter without mentioning that the U.S. government covered them up.

The sole piece of criminal government activity that most textbooks treat is the series of related scandals called Watergate. In its impact on the public, the Watergate break-in stood out. In the early 1970s Congress and the American people learned that President Nixon had helped cover up a string of illegal acts, including robberies of the Democratic National Committee and the office of Lewis Fielding, a psychiatrist. Nixon also tried with some success to use the Internal Revenue Service, the FBI, the CIA, and various regulatory agencies to inspire fear in the hearts of his "enemies list" of people who had dared to oppose his policies or his reelection. In telling of Watergate, textbooks blame Richard Nixon, as they should.⁴⁰ But they go no deeper. Faced with this undeniable instance of governmental wrongdoing, they manage to retain their uniformly rosy view of the government. In the representative words of *The United States—A History of the Republic*, "Although the Watergate crisis was a shock to the nation, it demonstrated the strength of the federal system of checks and balances. Congress and the Supreme Court had successfully checked the power of the President when he appeared to be abusing that power."

As Richard Rubenstein has pointed out, "the problem will not go away with the departure of Richard Nixon," because it is structural, stemming from the vastly increased power of the federal executive bureaucracy. Indeed, in some ways the Iran-Contra scandal of the Reagan-Bush administrations, a web of secret legal and illegal acts involving the president, vice-president, cabinet members, special operatives such as Oliver North, and government officials in Israel, Iran, Brunei, and elsewhere, shows an executive branch more out of control than Nixon's.⁴¹ Textbooks' failure to put Watergate into this perspective is part of their authors' apparent program to whitewash the federal government so that schoolchildren will respect it. Since the structural problem in the government has not gone away, it is likely that students will again, in their adult lives, face an out-of-control federal executive pursuing criminal foreign and domestic policies.⁴² To the extent that their understanding of the government comes from their American history courses, students will be shocked by these events and unprepared to think about them.

"Our country . . . may she always be in the right," toasted Stephen Decatur in 1816, "but our country, right or wrong!" Educators and textbook authors seem to want to inculcate the next generation into blind allegiance to our country. Going a step beyond Decatur, textbook analyses fail to assess our actions abroad according to either a standard of right and wrong *or* *realpolitik*. Instead, textbooks merely assume that the government tried to do the right thing. Citizens who embrace the textbook view would presumably support *any* intervention, armed or otherwise, and *any* policy, protective of our legitimate national interests or not, because they would be persuaded that all our policies and interventions are on behalf of humanitarian aims. They could never credit our enemies with equal humanity.

This "international good guy" approach is educationally dysfunctional if we seek citizens who are able to think rationally about American foreign policy.⁴³ To the citizen raised on textbook platitudes, George Kennan's *realpolitik* may be painful to contemplate. Under the thrall of the America-the-good archetype, we expect more from our country. But Kennan describes how nations actually behave. We would not risk the decline of democracy and the end of Western civilization if we simply let students see a realistic description and analysis of our foreign policies. Doing so would also help close the embarrassing gap between what high school textbooks say about American foreign policy and how their big brothers, college textbooks in political science courses, treat the subject.

When high school history textbooks turn to the internal affairs of the U.S. government, the books again part company with political scientists. A large chunk of introductory political science coursework is devoted to

analyzing the various forces that influence our government's domestic policies. High school American history textbooks simply credit the government for most of what gets done. This is not surprising, for when authors idealize the federal government, perforce they also distort the real dynamic between the governed and the government. It is particularly upsetting to watch this happen in the field of civil rights, where the courageous acts of thousands of citizens in the 1960s entreated and even forced the government to act.

Between 1960 and 1968 the civil rights movement repeatedly appealed to the federal government for protection and for implementation of federal law, including the Fourteenth Amendment and other laws passed during Reconstruction. Especially during the Kennedy administration, governmental response was woefully inadequate. In Mississippi, movement offices displayed this bitter rejoinder:

THERE'S A STREET IN ITTA BENA CALLED FREEDOM.
THERE'S A TOWN IN MISSISSIPPI CALLED LIBERTY.
THERE'S A DEPARTMENT IN WASHINGTON CALLED JUSTICE.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation's response to the movement's call was especially important, since the FBI is the premier national law enforcement agency. The bureau had a long and unfortunate history of antagonism toward African Americans. J. Edgar Hoover and the agency that became the FBI got their start investigating alleged communists during the Woodrow Wilson administration. Although the last four years of that administration saw more antiblack race riots than any other time in our history, Wilson had agents focus on gathering intelligence on African Americans, not on white Americans who were violating blacks' civil rights. Hoover explained the antiblack race riot of 1919 in Washington, D.C., as due to "the numerous assaults committed by Negroes upon white women." In that year the agency institutionalized its surveillance of black organizations, not white organizations like the Ku Klux Klan. In the bureau's early years there were a few black agents, but by the 1930s Hoover had weeded out all but two. By the early 1960s the FBI had not a single black officer, although Hoover tried to claim it did by counting his chauffeurs.⁴⁴ FBI agents in the South were mostly white Southerners who cared what their white Southern neighbors thought of them and were themselves white supremacists. And although this next complaint is reminiscent of the diner who protested that the soup was terrible and there wasn't enough of it, the bureau had far too few agents in the South. In Mississippi it had no office at all and relied for its initial reports on local sheriffs and police

chiefs, often precisely the people from whom the civil rights movement sought protection.

Even in the 1960s Hoover remained an avowed white supremacist who thought the 1954 Supreme Court decision outlawing racial segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education* was a terrible error. He helped Kentucky prosecute a Caucasian civil rights leader, Carl Braden, for selling a house in a white neighborhood to a black family. In August 1963 Hoover initiated a campaign to destroy Martin Luther King, Jr., and the civil rights movement. With the approval of Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, he tapped the telephones of King's associates, bugged King's hotel rooms, and made tape recordings of King's conversations with and about women. The FBI then passed on the lurid details, including photographs, transcripts, and tapes, to Sen. Strom Thurmond and other white supremacists, reporters, labor leaders, foundation administrators, and, of course, the president. In 1964 a high FBI administrator sent a tape recording of King having sex, along with an anonymous note suggesting that King kill himself, to the office of King's organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The FBI must have known that the incident might not actually persuade King to commit suicide; the bureau's intention was apparently to get Coretta Scott King to divorce her husband or to blackmail King into abandoning the civil rights movement.⁴⁵ The FBI tried to sabotage receptions in King's honor when he traveled to Europe to claim the Nobel Peace Prize. Hoover called King "the most notorious liar in the country" and tried to prove that the SCLC was infested with communists. King wasn't the only target: Hoover also passed on disinformation about the Mississippi Summer Project; other civil rights organizations such as CORE and SNCC; and other civil rights leaders, including Jesse Jackson.⁴⁶

At the same time the FBI refused to pass on to King information about death threats to him.⁴⁷ The FBI knew these threats were serious, for civil rights workers were indeed being killed. In Mississippi alone, civil rights workers endured more than a thousand arrests at the hands of local officials, thirty-five shooting incidents, and six murders. The FBI repeatedly claimed, however, that protecting civil rights workers from violence was not its job.⁴⁸ In 1962 SNCC sued Robert F. Kennedy and J. Edgar Hoover to force them to protect civil rights demonstrators. Desperate to get the federal government to enforce the law in the Deep South, Mississippi civil rights workers Amzie Moore and Robert Moses hit upon the 1964 "Freedom Summer" idea: bring 1,000 northern college students, most of them white, to Mississippi to work among blacks for civil rights. Even this helped little: white supremacists bombed

thirty homes and burned thirty-seven black churches in the summer of 1964 alone.⁴⁹ After the national outcry prompted by the murders of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner in Philadelphia, Mississippi, however, the FBI finally opened an office in Jackson. Later that summer, at the 1964 Democratic national convention in Atlantic City, the FBI tapped the phones of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party and Martin Luther King, Jr.; in so doing, the bureau was complying with a request from Pres. Lyndon Johnson.⁵⁰

Because I lived and did research in Mississippi, I have concentrated on acts of the federal government and the civil rights movement in that state, but the FBI's attack on black and interracial organizations was national in scope. For example, after Congress passed the 1964 Civil Rights Bill, a bowling alley in Orangeburg, South Carolina, refused to obey the law. Students from the nearby black state college demonstrated against the facility. State troopers fired on the demonstrators, killing three and wounding twenty-eight, many of them shot in the balls of their feet as they ran away and threw themselves on the ground to avoid the gunfire. The FBI responded not by helping to identify which officers fired in what became known as "the Orangeburg Massacre," but by falsifying information about the students to help the troopers with their defense.⁵¹ In California, Chicago, and elsewhere in the North, the bureau tried to eliminate the breakfast programs of the Black Panther organization, spread false rumors about venereal disease and encounters with prostitutes to break up Panther marriages, helped escalate conflict between other black groups and the Panthers, and helped Chicago police raid the apartment of Panther leader Fred Hampton and kill him in his bed in 1969.⁵² The FBI warned black leader Stokely Carmichael's mother of a fictitious Black Panther plot to murder her son, prompting Carmichael to flee the United States.⁵³ It is even possible that the FBI or the CIA was involved in the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. "Raoul" in Montreal, who supplied King's convicted killer, James Earl Ray, with the alias "Eric Gault," was apparently a CIA agent. Certainly Ray, a country boy with no income, could never have traveled to Montreal, arranged a false identity, and flown to London without help. Despite or because of these incongruities, the FBI has never shown any interest in uncovering the conspiracy that killed King. Instead, shortly after King's death in 1968, the FBI twice broke into SNCC offices. Years later the bureau tried to prevent King's birthday from becoming a national holiday.⁵⁴

The FBI investigated black faculty members at colleges and universities from Virginia to Montana to California. In 1970 Hoover approved the automatic investigation of "all black student unions and similar

organizations organized to project the demands of black students." The institution at which I taught, Tougaloo College, was a special target: at one point agents in Jackson even proposed to "neutralize" the entire college, in part because its students had sponsored "out-of-state militant Negro speakers, voter-registration drives, and African cultural seminars and lectures . . . [and] condemned various publicized injustices to the civil rights of Negroes in Mississippi." Obviously high crimes and misdemeanors!⁵⁵

The FBI's conduct and the federal leadership that tolerated it and sometimes requested it are part of the legacy of the 1960s, alongside such positive achievements as the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. As Kenneth O'Reilly put it, "when the FBI stood against black people, so did the government."⁵⁶ How do American history textbooks treat this legacy? They simply leave out everything bad the government ever did. They omit not only the FBI's campaign against the civil rights movement, but also its break-ins and undercover investigations of church groups, organizations promoting changes in U.S. policy in Latin America, and the U.S. Supreme Court.⁵⁷ Textbooks don't even want to say anything bad about *state* governments: all ten narrative textbooks in my sample include part of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, but nine of them censor out his negative comments about the governments of Alabama and Mississippi.

Not only do textbooks fail to blame the federal government for its opposition to the civil rights movement, many actually credit the government, almost single-handedly, for the advances made during the period. In so doing, textbooks follow what we might call the Hollywood approach to civil rights. To date Hollywood's main feature film on the movement is Alan Parker's *Mississippi Burning*. In that movie, the three civil rights workers get killed in the first five minutes; for the rest of its two hours the movie portrays not a single civil rights worker or black Mississippian over the age of twelve with whom the viewer could possibly identify. Instead, Parker concocts two fictional white FBI agents who play out the hoary "good cop/bad cop" formula and in the process double-handedly solve the murders. In reality—that is, in the real story on which the movie is based—supporters of the civil rights movement, including Michael Schwerner's widow, Rita, and every white northern friend the movement could muster, pressured Congress and the executive branch of the federal government to force the FBI to open a Mississippi office and make bringing the murderers to justice a priority. Meanwhile, Hoover tapped Schwerner's father's telephone to see if he might be a communist! Everyone in eastern Mississippi knew for weeks who had committed the murder and that the Neshoba County deputy

sheriff was involved. No innovative police work was required; the FBI finally apprehended the conspirators after bribing one of them with \$30,000 to testify against the others.⁵⁸

American history textbooks offer a Parkerlike analysis of the entire civil rights movement. Like the arrests of the Mississippi Klansmen, advances in civil rights are simply the result of good government. Federal initiative in itself "explains" such milestones as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. John F. Kennedy proposed them, Lyndon Baines Johnson passed them through Congress, and thus we have them today. Or, in the immortal passive voice of *American History*, "Another civil rights measure, the Voting Rights Act, was passed." Several textbooks even reverse the time order, putting the bills first, the civil rights movement later.⁵⁹ Only *American Adventures* and *Discovering American History* show the basic dynamics of the civil rights movement: African Americans, often with white allies, challenged an unjust law or practice in a nonviolent way, which then incited whites to respond barbarically to defend "civilization," in turn appalling the nation and convincing some people to change the law or practice. Only the same two books celebrate the courage of the civil rights volunteers. And only *Discovering American History* tells how the movement directly challenged the mores of segregation, with the result that some civil rights workers were killed or beaten by white racists simply for holding hands as an interracial couple or eating together in a restaurant. No book educates students about the dynamics that in a democracy should characterize the interrelationship between the people and their government.⁶⁰ Thus no book tells how citizens can and in fact have forced the government to respond to them.

Instead, textbooks tell us about the outstanding leadership of John F. Kennedy on civil rights. *The Challenge of Freedom* provides a typical treatment:

President Kennedy and his administration responded to the call for racial equality. In June 1963 the President asked for congressional action on far-reaching equal rights laws. Following the President's example, thousands of Americans became involved in the equal rights movement as well. In August 1963 more than 200,000 people took part in a march in Washington, D.C.

This account reverses leader and led. In reality, Kennedy initially tried to stop the march and sent his vice-president to Norway to keep him away from it because he felt Lyndon Johnson was too pro-civil rights. Even Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a Kennedy partisan, has dryly noted that

“the best spirit of Kennedy was largely absent from the racial deliberations of his presidency.”⁶¹

The damage is not localized to the unfounded boost textbooks give to Kennedy's reputation, however. When describing the attack on segregation that culminated in the 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Triumph of the American Nation* makes no mention that African Americans were the plaintiffs and attorneys in *Brown v. Board of Education* or that prior cases also brought by the NAACP prepared the way.⁶² Today many black students think that desegregation was something the federal government imposed on the black community. They have no idea it was something the black community forced on the federal government.⁶³ Meanwhile, young white Americans can reasonably infer that the federal government has been nice enough to blacks. Crediting the federal government for actions instigated by African Americans and their white allies surely disempowers African American students today, surely helps them feel that they “have never done anything,” as Malcolm X put it.

Textbooks treat the environmental movement similarly, telling how “Congress passed” the laws setting up the Environmental Protection Agency while giving little or no attention to the environmental crusade. Students are again left to infer that the government typically does the right thing on its own. Many teachers don't help; a study of twelve randomly selected teachers of twelfth-grade American government courses found that about the only way the teachers suggested that individuals could influence local or national governments was through voting.⁶⁴

Textbook authors seem to believe that Americans can be loyal to their government only so long as they believe it has never done anything bad. Textbooks therefore present a U.S. government that deserves students' allegiance, not their criticism. “We live in the greatest country in the world,” wrote James F. Delong, an associate of the right-wing textbook critic Mel Gabler, in his critique of *American Adventures*. “Any book billing itself as a story of this country should certainly get that heritage and pride across.” *American Adventures*, in conveying the basic dynamic of the civil rights movement, implies that the U.S. government was not doing all it should for civil rights. Perhaps as a result, *Adventures* failed Delong's patriotism test: “I will not, I can not endorse it for use in our schools.”⁶⁵

The textbooks' sycophantic presentations of the federal government may help win adoptions, but they don't win students' attention. It is boring to read about all the good things the government did on its own, with no dramatic struggles. Moreover, most adult Americans no longer trust the government as credulously as they did in the 1950s. Between

about 1960 and 1974 revelation after revelation of misconduct and deceit in the federal executive branch shattered the trust of the American people, as confirmed in poll after opinion poll. Textbook authors, since they are unwilling to say bad things about the government, come across as the last innocents in America. Their trust is poignant. They present students with a benign government whose statements should be believed. This is hardly the opinion of their parents, who, according to opinion polls, remain deeply skeptical of what leaders in the federal government tell them. To encounter so little material in school about the bad things the government has done, especially when parents and the daily newspaper tell a different story, "makes all education suspect," according to Donald Barr.⁶⁶

Nor can the textbook authors' servile approach to the government teach students to be effective citizens. Just as the story of Columbus-the-wise has as its flip side the archetype of the superstitious unruly crew, so the archetype of a wise and good government implies that the correct role for us citizens is to follow its leadership. Without pushing the point too far, it does seem that many twentieth-century nondemocratic states, from the Third Reich to the Central African Empire, have had citizens who gave their governments too much rather than too little allegiance. The United States, on the other hand, has been blessed with dissenters. Some of these dissenters have had to flee the country. Since 1776 Canada has provided a refuge for Americans who disagreed with policies of the U.S. government, from Tories who fled harassment during and after the Revolution, to free blacks who sought haven from the *Dred Scott* ruling, to young men of draftable age who opposed the Vietnam War. No textbook mentions this Canadian role, because no textbook portrays a U.S. government that might ever merit such principled opposition.⁶⁷

Certainly many political scientists and historians in the United States suggest that governmental actions are a greater threat to democracy than citizen disloyalty. Many worry that the dominance of the executive branch has eroded the checks and balances built into the Constitution. Some analysts also believe that the might of the federal government vis-à-vis state governments has made a mockery of federalism. From the Woodrow Wilson administration until now, the federal executive has grown ever stronger and now looms as by far our nation's largest employer. In the last thirty years, the power of the CIA, the National Security Council, and other covert agencies has grown to become, in some eyes, a fearsome fourth branch of government. Threats to democracy abound when officials in the FBI, the CIA, the State Department, and other institutions of government determine not only our policies but also what the people and the Congress need to know about them.⁶⁸

By downplaying covert and illegal acts by the government, textbook authors narcotize students from thinking about such issues as the increasing dominance of the executive branch. By taking the government's side, textbooks encourage students to conclude that criticism is incompatible with citizenship. And by presenting government actions in a vacuum, rather than as responses to such institutions as multinational corporations and civil rights organizations, textbooks mystify the creative tension between the people and their leaders. All this encourages students to throw up their hands in the belief that the government determines everything anyway, so why bother, especially if its actions are usually so benign. Thus our American history textbooks minimize the potential power of the people and, despite their best patriotic efforts, take a stance that is overtly antidemocratic.