Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools
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Conclusion: Where Are We Now?
pp. 235–257

In November 2016, a few days after Donald Trump was elected president, historian Daniel K. Williams predicted that Trump would "end the culture wars." A leading scholar of conservative Christianity, Williams noted that Trump had maintained "libertarian views on abortion and gay rights" and "evinced little interest in the religious right's agenda." Under President Trump, Williams anticipated, the United States would continue its shift away from "national moral regulation." The culture wars were pretty much over, in short, and the liberal side had won.[1]

Williams was half-right. Although abortion continued to divide the body politic, most other religion-inflected conflicts cooled. After years of trying to amend the Constitution to allow school-led prayer, the Christian Right gave up. The controversies over sex education and evolution instruction waned as well, in part because opponents increasingly opted out of public schools altogether. And conservatives lost the battle on same-sex marriage, too, as every demographic except elderly Republicans came to accept it. Even transgender rights showed a steady increase in support, which was unimaginable a few years earlier.

But Trump's election also unleashed new forms of cultural conflict centered on racial differences and resentments. Slurring Muslims as terrorists, Trump sought to ban them from the United States. He fought to erect a wall on America's southern border, lest "Mexican rapists come across it. He denounced football players who knelt during the national anthem,—most of whom were Black,—as "sons of bitches." And he told four congresswomen of color—three them born in the United States—to "go back to where [they] came from." Meanwhile, evidence mounted that Trump's heavily white working-class supporters believed their nation—not their religion—to be under threat from nonwhites and from liberal enemies in government and the news media.[2] So the culture wars lived on, configured around race and class rather than faith. Even wearing a mask during the coronavirus pandemic of 2020–21 became a touchstone for cultural controversy.

Inevitably, schools became a site of that struggle as well. The chief lightning rod for the conflict was the *New York Times'* 1619 Project. Readers lined up to purchase paper copies of the August 2019 issue introducing the project, something New Yorkers hadn't witnessed since the release of a "historic presidency edition" to commemorate Barack Obama's election in 2008. But the 1619 Project explicitly challenged Obama's much-repeated aphorism that the arc of the moral universe and, by extension, of American history—bent toward justice. Instead, the project insisted, racial inequity was baked into America's past and present alike. By October of that year, one journalist observed, the 1619 Project had emerged as "one of the hottest culture-war battlefields" in the United States.[3]

To be sure, history instruction had sparked loud controversies before. But as the first part of this book demonstrated, history wars usually surrounded the issue of inclusion—who gets

written into national narrative, and who does not—rather than the structure of narrative itself: each race would have its heroes sung, as the Times put it in 1927, but no group could question the melody of peace, freedom, economic opportunity that unites them all. Dissidents were sometimes silenced, as the decline of Harold Rugg's textbooks in the 1940s reminds us. More commonly, though, they simply developed separate texts and courses—think of white neo-Confederates in the early 1900s or Black radicals in the 196os—until their stories could be reconciled with the cheerful national vision. The price of diversity in American history has been banality in its narrative, a singular and often suffocating optimism that blots out most traces of misery, tragedy, and especially self-doubt. Careful to note America's departures from its civic creed, our history curricula and textbooks have generally remained confident that the country—like the creed—will continue on an upward trajectory of liberty and justice for all.

Not so for the 1619 Project, which placed the creed itself under question. So did *A People's History of the United States*, by left-wing historian Howard Zinn, which enjoyed a vogue in a handful of school districts. Despite America's soaring egalitarian rhetoric, Zinn insisted, its political system had served the interests of rich white men rather than of "the People" in the broadest sense. Zinn's book drew attacks from liberal scholars, who charged him with downplaying America's progress toward freedom; similarly, they said, the 1619 Project exaggerated the role of slavery in the country's founding. To conservatives, by contrast, these initiatives threatened nothing less than the dissolution of the nation itself. "The self-loathing anti-Americanism is infecting even high schools now," warned Laura Ingraham on Fox News. "Their aim is to pull down our whole culture, the American founding, Western civilization, and everything that sprang from it."[4] In a campaign without precedent in America's culture wars, Republican legislators in twenty states introduced bills during the first half of 2021 to restrict how teachers could discuss race and racism in public schools. Four measures specifically targeted the 1619 Project; others barred instruction of Critical Race Theory, which likewise maintained that racism was endemic to the historical and contemporary United States. This wasn't just an effort to revise one textbook or replace another, as per the long-standing pattern around history instruction. Conservative lawmakers instead aimed to purge a critical perspective from classrooms, lest it draw children away from the conventional story.

The Unvarnished Truth?

In reply, defenders of the 1619 Project insisted that they did not aim to impose their outlook on American schoolchildren; they simply wished to provoke debate and discussion about American history. But they also promised to replace flawed versions of the past with a more accurate one, which suggested a different set of motives. Consider the headline of the sixteen-page newsprint section that the *New York Times* released alongside the magazine issue: "'We've Got to Tell the Unvarnished Truth.'" Not a different or contrasting truth but *the* truth, which assumedly would enlighten students about the real story of America. Asked to explain why her school district had adopted materials from the 1619 Project, an Arizona educator gave a similar reply: because it was true, and the truth would set us free. "If we want to create a better society of young people and problem solvers and future leaders, they do have to understand and know America's truth and what it was built on," she explained.[5]

But all truths require interpretation, which is a basic premise of history itself. The *Times'* "unvarnished truth" headline was actually a quote from John Hope Franklin, perhaps the foremost postwar scholar of African-American history. It is engraved on a wall at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., where Franklin served as the founding chairman of its Scholarly Advisory Committee. He was also a co-author of Land of the Free (1966), which triggered the movement for "desegregated" high-school textbooks during the civil-rights era. As we saw in Chapter 5, Franklin's book forthrightly depicted the struggles and achievements of Blacks, Native Americans, and other minorities who been either denigrated or ignored in most schoolbooks before that time. Conservative parents argued that material about slavery and discrimination would make white children feel "guilty" and encourage all students to "hate America," prefiguring many contemporary objections to the 1619 Project. Yet Franklin's book maintained a patriotic tone, folding the new groups into a triumphal story of struggle toward freedom. Despite frequent deviation from its ideals, the country was consistently moving closer to fulfilling them.

For the past several decades, American historians have debated that proposition: Indeed, the question of whether America was born in freedom—and what that means—is possibly the most contested issue in the discipline.[6] The 1619 Project brought that controversy into the wider public sphere and, eventually, into some of our public schools. But can we subject the nation's deepest assumptions and myths to sustained critique in its classrooms? In 1962, amid the white-hot tensions of the Cold War, a young philosopher named Richard Rorty gave a curt answer: no. Analyzing recent efforts to "teach about Communism" in the schools, Rorty noted that an "objective" analysis of it would have to concede that the Soviet Union had made "enormous economic and technological achievements"; even more, schools would have to admit that much of the world's wealth is "stolen from the poor by the rich," exactly as communists claimed. As Chapter 4 showed, Cold War classrooms eschewed any such analysis; instead, they presented communism as an unalloyed evil and the antithesis of the American Way of Life. "It is impossible for the public schools of a democratic country to educate youth in areas in which education would call into question beliefs which are central to the general tenor of adult opinion," concluded Rorty, who would become one of the leading philosophers of his generation. "This fact is one of the built-in disadvantages of democracy, part of the price paid for its advantages."[7]

But in a country as diverse as the United States, "adult opinion" is always a moving target. Indeed, as this book has demonstrated, people of enormously different opinions have continuously pressed them upon our schools. From the Knights of Columbus and the Ku Klux Klan in the early twentieth century to the Moral Majority and the Black Lives Matter movement in more recent years, a wide range of Americans have sought to alter the curriculum. They typically seek victory and vindication, not dialogue and discussion. On that score, at least, Rorty was right: people enter this arena to instill their beliefs in American classrooms and—they hope—in American children. And they generally don't want schools to call those beliefs into question.

Yet the very diversity of America creates the potential for multiple perspectives in our schools, whether activists envision that or not. "We are too diverse of a school, of a community, of a country, to just sit here and say that there is one story of U.S. history," an Iowa teacher declared in February 2020, explaining his school's decision to adopt materials from the 1619 Project.[8] But Republicans in his state legislature wanted a single story, and—most of all—they wanted to insulate it from challenge. A few weeks earlier, they had proposed a measure that would bar schools from teaching the 1619 Project or any "similarly developed" curricula. Clearly, they were in no mood to debate what Rorty might have called "central" beliefs about the United States.

History Becomes a Religion

Nor was it clear who really wanted such a discussion, or how it could take place in a nation where citizens clung to their partisan identities as articles of faith. By some accounts, indeed, politics was replacing religion as the source of Americans' fundamental beliefs about the world and their role in it. Between 1937 and 1998, the fraction of Americans who belonged to churches remained close to 70 percent. Over just the next two decades, it dropped to less than 50 percent. Long suspicious of religion for fostering prejudice and division, secularists imagined that less faith-centered activity would mean more tolerance and unity. But the opposite happened. "As Christianity's hold, in part, has weakened, ideological intensity and fragmentation have risen," scholar Shadi Hamid wrote in 2021. "American faith, it turns out, is as fervent as ever; it's just that what was once *religious* belief has now been channeled into *political* belief." So "debates over what it means to be an American have become suffused with a fervor," Hamid added. Acting more like sects than parties, both sides claimed that they were defending the true faith against those who would betray it. Most of all, they became less able to compromise—or even to converse—with each other.[9]

In this light, the shift from religion wars to history wars looks more like a transformation of history into religion. Denouncing the 1619 Project, Republicans made no secret about their wish to defend the gospel of American virtue and exceptionalism. But there was a quasi religious element to the new history initiatives, too, which often aim to proselytize about the past rather than to interrogate it. Officials the Pulitzer Center—which distributed materials from the 1619 Project to schools—insisted that the project encouraged students to think and debate, not to "believe certain ideas," Yet when asked about scholars' critiques of the 1619 Project, one Buffalo school leader dismissed them as "just another form of oppression"; she also warned that teachers who wished to question the project in class would need official permission before doing so. Meanwhile, ostensibly "critical" assignments around the 1619 Project often pointed to a single right answer. One student reading guide asked how nineteenth-century efforts to enslave African-Americans "manifest in contemporary political parties"; another asked for "examples of hypocrisy in the founding of the United States," which took for granted that the founders were indeed hypocrites. Still another asked students why such information was absent from their textbooks. "You get the idea," replied one critic. "Susan or Johnny are supposed to respond, 'because the history books from which I've learned about U.S. history were written by systemic racists.'"[10]

As we saw in Part I of this book, many American history textbooks were written by racists. But schoolbooks were heavily revised in the civil-rights era and thereafter by liberal historians, who registered their own sharp objections to the 1619 Project. To Civil War expert James Oakes, the problem with the project was not that it stressed slavery—a central focus of his own scholarship—but rather that it blamed all of America's woes on it, imagining slavery as "part of the very DNA" (to quote Nikole Hannah-Jones) of the nation. "The function of these tropes is to deny change over time," Oakes told an interviewer. "If it's in the DNA, there's nothing you can do. What can you do? Alter your DNA?" Oakes's comments appeared on the World Socialist website, signaling a very different kind of critique than the one heard in GOP circles: instead of making students "hate America," as Republicans alleged, the 1619 Project made them less likely to engage in the hard work of improving it. "Black people made 400 years of history in British North America, and all we hear about is racism and slavery," African-American historian Daryl Michael Scott wrote, in his own attack on the project. "Racism from Day One, racism till now. That's culture-war stuff."[11]

And while culture warriors wanted singular explanations, Scott added, historians bridled at them. Did the Declaration of Independence's ringing affirmation that "all men are created equal" exclude African-Americans, as the 1619 Project asserted? That's what Stephen Douglas argued, in his famous 1858 debate with Abraham Lincoln. But Lincoln insisted that the Founding Fathers meant what they said: slavery would end, and the Declaration would apply to all. Was the Constitution drafted to protect slavery? The 1619 Project said so as did a young Frederick Douglass. But Douglass eventually changed his mind, claiming that the Constitution had "noble purposes" and could be "wielded on behalf of emancipation." These debates burst onto the Pages of the *Times*, which published a pointed critique of the 1619 Project in December 2019 by five prominent historians and a spirited rejoinder by its editor.[12] That's the stuff of scholarship: framing questions, gathering evidence, and weighing competing interpretations. It is a dialogue, not a diktat. And there is never a final answer.

But "culture-war stuff"—as Daryl Scott called it—is different. It seeks to defeat enemies, not to engage them; its goal is victory, not inquiry. Some people will be enlightened, but others are too far gone to be redeemed. "I'm not writing to convert Trump supporters," Hannah-Jones acknowledged, in an October 2019 address. "I write to try to get liberal white people to do what they say they believe in. I'm making a moral argument. My method is guilt." Indeed, Hannah-Jones said elsewhere, the entire 1619 Project aimed to make a case for reparations to Black people, "a societal debt owed because of the racial apartheid that has been practiced." That's a defensible goal with a distinguished intellectual lineage going back to the abolitionist era and taken up most prominently in recent years by the African-American author Ta-Nehisi Coates. But if you write history with that purpose, you will inevitably highlight certain parts of the past—and downplay other parts—depending on whether they fit your goal. That's "history as propaganda," Daryl Scott warned, not history as a quest for knowledge. And it can indeed resemble a religious-style campaign, calling on us to confess our sins and to seek redemption in the one true faith.[13]

The Conservative Backlash

Meanwhile, the GOP response to the 1619 Project and related curricula reflected its own religious refrain: sinful forces are menacing the nation, so we must rise up to protect it. The result was an unprecedented explosion of state legislative proposals in early 2021, all aimed at squashing the alleged threat. Several Republican-sponsored measures explicitly prohibited the 1619 Project; more commonly, they barred teaching that one race is superior to another, that members of a given race are inherently oppressive, that the United States is a racist nation, or that students should feel discomfort or guilt because of their race. That language borrowed directly from Donald Trump's rhetoric in the last months of his presidency, particularly from his order barring federal dollars for diversity trainings that included these practices. Lawmakers especially took aim at Critical Race Theory, which became an all-purpose signifier for GOP fears and resentments around history in the schools. In the guise of fighting racism, Republicans charged, CRT reinforced it. "Stop Racism. Stop Hate. Stop Critical Race Theory," declared a picket sign produced by Freedom Works, one of several conservative groups that mobilized to rebut this supposed peril.[14]

Nobody knew how many classrooms were influenced by CRT, an academic movement that started in law schools in the late 1970s to explain ongoing racial inequities in the wake of the civil rights movement. Measures barring discrimination had failed to change America in a substantive way, critical race theorists argued, because racism was embedded in the country's legal, political, and educational institutions. Few Americans had heard of CRT before 2020, when a classic modern-style media campaign brought it into the right-wing purview. On June 5, conservative journalist Christopher Rufo appeared on Fox News to warn that CRT was permeating every level of American government. Luckily for Rufo, the Fox-obsessed president of the United States was watching. Donald Trump instructed his chief of staff to contact Rufo the following morning. Three weeks later, Trump signed his executive order banning CRT from federally sponsored activities. Although Joseph Biden would rescind that order on the first day of his own presidency, fears of CRT continued to circulate in the GOP media bloodstream. Fox News used the term in at least 150 broadcasts following its initial interview with Rufo, who also provided analysis or testimony in a half-dozen states that were considering bills to stamp out CRT. The *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Post*, and other conservative standard-bearers took up the cudgel against it. And in February 2021, the right-wing Legal Insurrection Foundation unveiled a website allowing parents and students to search whether their school was teaching CRT.[15]

But CRT was always in the eye of the beholder. And if that eye watched a lot of Fox News and its friends, it would see CRT whether it was there or not. "There is not one agency in this state that has compelled a teacher to teach Critical Race Theory," insisted a Democratic lawmaker in Texas after the state legislature passed a bill barring schools from teaching that anyone was "inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously." Although the measure did not mention CRT by name, everyone knew what it was targeting; indeed, GOP lieutenant governor and longtime culture warrior Dan Patrick praised the law for prohibiting "Critical Race Theory and 1619 Myths in Texas schools." In interviews, academic scholars of CRT

insisted that they did not believe white people were inherently racist or oppressive; their theory focused on institutions, not on individuals. But the distinction was lost on CRT's critics, who took their case to school boards as well as state legislatures. In suburban Philadelphia, a candidate for a town school board shared a Fox News video clip on her Facebook page of former Trump housing secretary Ben Carson claiming that CRT taught "white kids they're bad people" and "Black kids they're victims." Back in Texas, meanwhile, right-wing talk-show host Dana Loesch appeared on Fox to denounce "far-left Marxist activists" for pushing CRT in her hometown of Southlake, a Dallas–Fort Worth suburb. Her main target was the local school board's "Cultural Competence Action Plan," which it instituted after a racist incident in the schools. For some critics, it seemed, any mention of race or racism conjured the dangerous specter of Critical Race Theory.[16]

Such concerns reached a crescendo—and an even wider audience—in April 2021, when Republicans on Capitol Hill joined the anti-CRT crusade. Selected to give the GOP response after Joe Biden's first State of the Union address, South Carolina senator Tim Scott, the chamber's lone Black Republican-delivered a broadside against "divisive" instruction in schools. "Today, kids again are being taught that the color of their skin defines them, and if they look a certain way, they're an oppressor," Scott warned. "You know this stuff is wrong. Hear me clearly: America is not a racist country." The following day, Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell sent a letter to Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona decrying proposed rules for a grant program to enhance teaching about racial and cultural diversity. The rules mentioned "the *New York Times'* landmark 1619 Project" as an example of instruction about slavery and African-American history; they also praised schools that drew on scholarship by historian Ibram X. Kendi to "incorporate anti-racist practices into teaching and learning." That was catnip for GOP critics in Washington, who pounced eagerly on the relatively small ($5.3 million) grant program. "Families did not ask for this divisive nonsense," declared McConnell's letter, which was signed by three dozen Republican senators. "Americans never decided our children should be taught that our country is inherently evil." The letter specifically noted the proposal's support for the 1619 Project, which supposedly confirmed that the grant program "would not focus on critical thinking or accurate history, but on spoon-feeding students a slanted stor."[17]

From Critical Race Theory to Cancel Culture

Of course, the GOP's favored story had its own unmistakable slant: America was the greatest country in human history, a beacon of freedom and a lodestar for the world. Yet conservatives continued to signal their commitment to "critical thinking," as McConnell called it, even as they sought to ban critical perspectives from the schools. Echoing a well-worn culture war motif, they cast themselves as the party of reason, dialogue, and deliberation; by contrast, their enemies allegedly aimed to foist propaganda on innocent minds. Forming a task force dedicated to "exposing indoctrination in the classroom," North Carolina's GOP lieutenant governor asked parents to report biased lessons from their children's schools. So did his counterpart in Idaho, who warned that a wide array of radical theories had infected the state's classrooms. "If you, your child, or someone close to you has information regarding problematic teachings on social justice, critical race theory, socialism, communism, or Marxism, please

provide us with as much information as you are comfortable sharing," she pleaded. Clearly, this was no longer a campaign against CRT alone. It was an effort to rebut a supposed scourge of leftist indoctrination, organized by right-wingers who were eager to indoctrinate on their own.[18]

Conservatives also invoked free speech, claiming these dangerous new curricula threatened to muzzle dissent. That was the essence of the right-wing campaign against "cancel culture," which joined CRT as a favorite bogeyman in conservative media. "We will reject Critical Race Theory in our schools and public institutions, and we will CANCEL Cancel culture wherever it arises!" tweeted former vice president Mike Pence in early 2021. Here, too, Republicans engaged in the same activity that they claimed to resist: laws against CRT represented their own obvious threat to free speech and risked canceling students and teachers who wished to engage such ideas. To be sure, a few conservatives opposed these measures on First Amendment grounds. While New Hampshire considered a bill to bar "race or sex scapegoating" in schools—along with any suggestion that the state or nation were "fundamentally racist"—Republican governor Chris Sununu suggested the measure might be unconstitutional. "I personally don't think there's any place for [CRT] in the schools," Sununu said, "but when you start turning down the path of the government banning things, I think that's a very slippery slope." Likewise, an official from the Koch Foundation—probably the most powerful conservative force in state legislatures—blasted such measures as "overly broad" infringements on political expression. "In the guise of free speech, these are simply speech codes by another name," he wrote.[19]

Worst of all, critics worried, the new laws could discourage or even prohibit any discussion of race and racism in schools. After Oklahoma passed a measure barring schools from using lessons that make anyone "feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex," teachers wondered if they could address the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921, especially during commemorations surrounding its centennial anniversary. "If I teach that, am I going to cause a student to feel discomfort, guilt, or anguish?" one history teacher asked in May 2021. The Oklahoma law specified that none of its restrictions should be interpreted to bar the teaching of the state's academic standards, which included instruction about the Tulsa massacre. But teachers still wondered whether—and how—they could explore such difficult and emotion-laden topics without running afoul of the new measure. After GOP governor Kevin Stitt signed the law, the Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission took the extraordinary step of removing him from its membership; no matter how the law was interpreted, commissioners argued, it would surely inhibit a full and free examination of the massacre. A second Oklahoma history teacher feared that she could no longer share interviews with ex-slaves recorded in the 1930s by the Federal Writers Project, as she had done in her classroom for many years. Students often cried when they heard these accounts, she noted. "If a kid comes home and says they're uncomfortable, now you're breaking the law," the teacher warned.[20]

Most of all, teachers worried that the new measures might block consideration of systematic racism: that is, of the ways that discriminatory practices across time had harmed the education,

safety, and mobility of racial minorities. In Tennessee, for example, a new law withheld public funding from districts that taught about "white privilege." Would that prevent teachers from addressing police brutality against African-Americans, one teacher asked, or the history of racism in mortgage lending? No one could be sure, which meant that some teachers would surely bite their tongues. Many of them probably eschewed any mention of the 1619 Project, and with good reason. In Utah, for example, a teacher who assigned readings from it was denounced by a member of the state board of education for allegedly promoting "communism" in her classroom. "She has never taught an alternative point of view other than left-leaning material," the state board member charged. "This is unacceptable and full-blown indoctrination." Others came to the teacher's defense, insisting that she had framed the 1619 Project as just one perspective on the past. She was providing multiple views of history, they said, so students could sort out these ideas on their own.[21]

That was also the spirit of a lesson plan posted in early 2021 by New American History, a clearinghouse for resources in the field. It presented materials from the 1619 Project as well as from 1776 Unites, a group of mostly African-American scholars and educators who came together in February 2020 to "celebrate the progress America has made on delivering its promise of equality and opportunity." The lesson plan included a link to an essay by Black political scientist Wilfred Reilly, who rejected the 1619 Project's premise that slavery and racism have been the key roadblocks to African-American equality. Reilly argued that many contemporary Black problems—including out-of-wedlock childbirths—began well after Emancipation. He also worried that harping upon racial discrimination could hold Black students back, all in the guise of lifting them up. "If the REAL reason young brothers struggle with the SAT is 'the subtle institutional structural racism of the white gaze,' and not the fact that we study a bit less for the exam, then why ever bother to study more?" Reilly wrote. The lesson plan also linked to a televised debate about the 1619 Project between three African-Americans, featuring supportive remarks by Princeton scholar Eddie Glaude Jr., and critical ones from Chicago journalist and 1776 Unites contributor Clarence Page. "How should we tell the story of America's beginnings?" the lesson plan asked. "History education is complicated. How much of that complexity should students learn about in school?"[22]

Reality Check: History Teachers in America

Sadly, across the history of the United States, the answer to that question has been the same: not much. Americans have argued vehemently over how we should teach the nation, but most of that debate has occurred outside of our public schools. The biggest reason for that is the public itself, which has never expressed a deep or enduring desire for controversy in the classroom; as one of my students quipped, many years ago, "You'll never see a parents' group called 'Americans in Favor of Debating the Other Side in Our Schools.'" Especially during the polarized fury of the Trump years, teachers were often afraid to broach delicate racial issues in their classrooms. For many instructors, indeed, the kind of questioning envisioned in the New American History lesson plan was impossible. "I see this real terror that they're going to say or do something that will upset parents and end their careers, so they don't want to talk about race," an Iowa education professor observed.[23]

Many teachers also lack sufficient education on these issues, she added, pointing to a perennial problem in American history instruction: instructors don't learn enough history. A majority of high school history teachers in the United States do not have a major or minor in the discipline; as late as 2013, a history teacher in New Jersey could be certified in the subject by taking just one college course in it. No other core subject demands less academic preparation for the classroom than history does. Though most states require history teachers to pass the Praxis examination—a short multiple-choice affair that is significantly less rigorous than high-school Advanced Placement history tests—most prospective teachers do not receive in-depth training in historical thinking skills: interpreting primary documents, comparing secondary sources, and so on. Millions of teachers have downloaded lesson plans created by the Stanford History Education Group, founded in 2002 by psychologist Sam Wineburg to promote historical thinking in classrooms. But none of those lessons will work—or work well—in the hands of a poorly prepared teacher, as Wineburg recently cautioned. "[W]e don't delude ourselves that curricular materials, alone, lead to good teaching," he wrote. That requires the kind of historical thinking skills that many history teachers simply do not possess.[24]

By 2016, Wineburg's colleague Larry Cuban estimated, just 15 to 25 percent of history teachers engaged weekly in primary-source analysis or other methods associated with historical thinking. History teachers lectured for more than half of each class period, more than instructors in any other subject. Many of them did not believe students could debate—or even understand—different perspectives on history. So teachers typically presented a singular "happy endings" story, one scholar observed, which they justified with a mix of patriotism and psychology: it would make students feel good, both about the nation and about themselves. But the students told a different story. They found history boring and irrelevant, as a wide array of surveys confirmed. And they certainly didn't learn very much from it, as best we can measure. In 2018, only 15 percent of American eighth-graders were ranked "proficient" in history by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, down from 18 percent in 2014. High-school students were woefully ignorant as well, particularly when it came to issues surrounding race. According to a 2018 study, just 8 percent of seniors could identify slavery as the central cause of the Civil War; meanwhile, over two-thirds did not know slavery was eliminated by a constitutional amendment. Not surprisingly, nearly half of surveyed teachers did not feel equipped to teach about the topic. Many of the textbooks they used were inadequate: despite excising racist passages and adding new material about minorities, books still gave short shrift to slavery. Teachers reported that students, too, were reluctant to discuss the issue: white students were afraid of offending Black peers, who in turn worried about how others would view them when slavery came up in class.[25]

Finally, even for teachers who possessed both the will and the skill to debate difficult issues in their classrooms, the overall conditions of schooling in the United States often made it difficult—if not impossible—for them to do so. According to a 2016 survey, American teachers of core subjects in grades 7–12 instructed an average of 121 students at any given time. They worked an average of fifty-four hours per week for an annual salary of $56,290; over one-fifth of them reported taking a second job to make ends meet. Under those constraints, many if not

most teachers could not find the space to plan or deliver content-rich, deliberative lessons on a complex topic like the role of racism in America. In the elementary grades, meanwhile, pressures to prepare students for tests in reading and math—mandated by the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act—have reduced the time that teachers devote to non-tested subjects, including history and social studies. When they did address history, harried teachers reported focusing more on "the facts" and less on pedagogically rich exercises like simulations and debates. All told, as one scholar has surmised, "the picture of history instruction is bleak."[26]

Teaching the Conflict

Yet some teachers did engage in critical discussions of our past, which should give us hope for the future. Robert Cohen and Sonia Murrow recently showed how teachers have used Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* to spark controversy in their classrooms. Teachers handed out photocopies of Zinn's most provocative chapters—especially his account of Christopher Columbus—and asked students to compare them to their "regular" history textbook. The result was not left-wing indoctrination—as critics of Zinn's book feared—but real historical thinking, where students debated different interpretations as well as the meaning of history itself. Using Zinn's book in two conservative-leaning high schools, Oregon teacher Bill Patterson told his students not to "believe it's the gospels"; instead, Patterson said, they should analyze the book next to other sources and figure out what they thought. In letters they sent to Zinn, Patterson's students critiqued the historian for describing Columbus's actions as genocide, for linking the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II to Nazi concentration camps, and for claiming that the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were unnecessary. But they also praised Zinn—and their own teacher—for introducing them to a different style of history, which was focused on critique and debate rather than on factual recall. "Until I read one of your writings I never even stopped to think about the fact that our History books were only giving us one viewpoint on all the issues," a student told Zinn.[27]

Likewise, skilled and motivated teachers have used the 1619 Project to raise vital historical questions in their classrooms. Condemning a GOP-sponsored bill in Missouri to restrict discussions of racism in public schools, a St. Louis student explained how his own A.P. U.S. History teacher presented the 1619 Project as "an alternative view" rather than as the "correct" one. "We students were not taught exclusively by it; we were not indoctrinated; but we were captivated," he wrote. "The 1619 Project is no different from any passage from a history textbook, any historic speech, or any historical documentary. It presents a viewpoint of history." In Boise, Idaho, similarly, a teacher assigned the report by Donald Trump's 1776 Commission and an editorial from the right-wing *National Review* alongside excerpts from the 1619 Project and Ibram X. Kendi. "The curriculum I teach is designed to confront biases in everything we read," he emphasized. "We must trust [that] the students of our country can hold two or more conflicting thoughts in their head at once [and] can weigh the arguments that abound in our society and in our time." The student in St. Louis concurred, adding his own fervent plea for dialogue in schools. "It is appalling to many students like me that something so valuable, something so critical of traditional teaching should be banned simply because it paints an unpleasant picture of the past," he argued, in reference to the 1619 Project. "Students

aren't sheep, and lawmakers should never assume that [they] absorb the information they are fed without critical analysis, questioning, and discussion. This is the purpose of education."[28]

But how many Americans—inside the schools or outside of them—actually endorsed that purpose? If Idaho passed its own proposed measure restricting instruction around race, the Boise teacher warned, his analysis of the 1619 Project might be prohibited. Nor was it clear whether Bill Patterson's lessons comparing Howard Zinn to the regular history textbook would be allowed, either. When he started teaching that exercise in the 1980s, Patterson recalled, Republicans were friendlier to dialogue and discussion. But by 2010, when Zinn died, Indiana GOP governor Mitch Daniels suggested that his book should be banned from the schools. "A guy like Ronald Reagan would be a puppy dog compared to a guy like Ted Cruz," Patterson said, referring to the fiery GOP senator from Texas. "So back then conservatives were a little more receptive . . . I could talk to them about Zinn, and they would go 'Hmm,' whereas today it would be 'Grrr.'" But surely the same went for many people on the Left, who were hardly eager to have their own assumptions challenged. "It is really about wrestling over who can control the narrative of the country that we live in," Nikole Hannah-Jones explained in an interview. As the battle over the 1619 Project revealed, Americans told different stories about their nation. The only question was whose story would win.[29]

Yet there was also evidence that the wider public preferred a multiple-perspectives approach, even if activists on each side did not. Consider a 2021 survey of citizens in Illinois, who were asked to choose between two policy statements:

> *K–12 teachers should work to expose students to a variety of perspectives about the country's founding and history, and to equip them to think critically about its successes and failures.*
>
> *K–12 teachers should embrace progressive viewpoints and perspectives when teaching U.S. history, to encourage students to advocate for social-justice causes.*

Respondents favored the first prescription by a strong majority, 62 percent to 23 percent. Even among self-identified liberals, 52 percent preferred exposing children to different views while just 35 percent chose the "progressive" option. Among African-Americans, meanwhile, 44 percent favored multiple perspectives and 29 percent supported the progressive approach. Such polls are notoriously imprecise, of course, because respondents attach different meanings to the terms under question. But the data show more preference for dialogue and discussion than many media accounts of the culture wars would suggest. Most Americans do not want the 1619 Project, Critical Race Theory, or Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* banned from the public schools; neither do they want these perspectives presented as undisputed truths that decent people must embrace for the sake of justice and progress. "This can be part of a curriculum, but NOT its core," wrote journalist Damon Linker, urging educators to reject the "one-sided and dogmatic style of history" in the 1619 Project. "Please, don't do this. We will all regret it."[30]

Who Are We Now?

Perhaps so. From another perspective, however, the new history wars demonstrated the vibrancy of American democracy and—most of all the country's ongoing commitment to public schooling. Even GOP activists seeking to purge the 1619 Project and Critical Race Theory from the schools acknowledged—at least implicitly—that the schools mattered and were worthy of public attention and support. So when former Trump cabinet member Ben Carson and South Dakota GOP governor Kristi Noem joined hands in May 2021 to condemn "anti-American indoctrination" in public schools, they also reaffirmed the value of those institutions. "Patriotic Americans at the state and local level must lead the way," they wrote. "That means pressuring candidates and elected officials to clarify their positions, making patriotic education a defining issue up and down the ballot this year and beyond." They concluded by urging Americans to sign a pledge affirming the need to promote "a profound love of country" and opposing instruction "that pits students against one another on the basis of race or sex." Its name told the whole story: the 1776 Pledge to Save Our Schools.[31]

That impulse stood in stark contrast to America's religion wars, which helped spawn a widespread rejection of public education over the past four decades. The exodus of conservative Christians from public schools lessened the pressure on schools in matters like prayer and Bible reading, which largely disappeared as public issues. For families who continued to patronize the schools, meanwhile, wider "choice" options—including vouchers and charter schools—allowed them to select institutions that reflected their beliefs. "Public schooling has always to some extent been a matter of imposing someone's values on someone else's children," wrote a Virginia school-choice advocate in 2016. "It is time to remove the education of the young from the battlefield." Once families could pick their own schools, the argument went, culture wars would go away.[32]

In the religion wars, that's mostly what happened. But overall support for public education dwindled as well, a casualty of the same cultural conflict that "choice" promised to alleviate. Starting in the late 1970s, dissatisfaction with sex education and other perceived liberal excesses led many Americans to reject bond issues and tax hikes for schools.[33] By the early 2000s, some conservatives were envisioning the end of traditional public education altogether and its replacement by a set of market mechanisms. But when families get to select their own schools, the schools become echo chambers; like so much else in our splintered nation, they segregate us into ideological enclaves instead of requiring us to interact and deliberate across our differences.[34] Hence we should take some comfort in our recent history wars, which have engaged a wide swath of Americans in the endless quest of defining America.

That was the spirit of a bracing poem by Nikky Finney, "A New Day Dawns," which was reproduced in many publications following America's massive racial protests in 2020. She wrote it in the early-morning hours of July 9, 2015, after legislators voted to remove the Confederate flag from the statehouse in her native South Carolina:

It is the pearl-blue peep of day.
All night the palmetto sky
Was seized with the aurora
And alchemy of the remarkable.
A blazing canopy of newly minted
Light fluttered in while we slept.
We are not free to go on as if
Nothing happened yesterday.
Not free to cheer as if all our
Prayers have finally been answered
Today. We are free only to search
The yonder of each other's faces,
As we pass by, tip our hat, hold a
Door ajar, asking silently,
Who are we now? ...

Soon, it will be just us
Again, alone, beneath the swirling
Indigo sky of South Carolina. Alone &
Working on the answer to our great
Day's question: Who are we now?
What new human cosmos can be made
Of this tempest of tears, this upland
Of inconsolable jubilation? In all our
Lifetimes, finally, this towering
Undulating moment is here.[35]

Finney's poem reminds us of the responsibility we all share at this undulating, unprecedented moment in American history. We are not free to go on as if nothing happened. Soon it will be just us, again, left to answer the great day's question: Who we are now? And what do we want to become? Battered and beleaguered, public schools remain our central institution for working on the answers. The next step is to bring our future citizens into the conversation, by welcoming our most fervent differences into the classroom. In the end, debating those differences might be the only thing that holds us together.