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## Teaching Critically about the “Myth of War”

An Essay Review of *Whitewashing War: Historical Myth, Corporate Textbooks, and Possibilities for Democratic Education* by Christopher R. Leahey

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*Social studies textbooks give students no compelling reason to like or appreciate social studies.* (Loewen, 1996)

Social studies teacher Christopher R. Leahey presents a provocative study and trenchant critique of contemporary social studies (aka history) textbooks in *Whitewashing War: Historical Myth, Corporate Textbooks, and Possibilities for Democratic Education*. Similar to James W. Loewen's (1996) analysis of social studies textbooks *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, Leahey's book is based upon a study of history textbooks and their treatment of the Vietnam War. Leahey's book illustrates the stunning differences between the social studies textbooks and the complex world of historical research. Leahey contrasts the world of textbooks where the "rhetoric of certainty" promotes historical "truth" and discourages critical analysis of the events, facts, and issues to historical research where "conclusions are tentative, evidence is crucial, and history is continuously being questioned and rewritten" (p. 4).

*Whitewashing War* is based upon a study inspired by questions Leahey's high school students raised in the months leading up to the US invasion of Iraq. The book aims to spark discussion of how we teach about America's wars—specifically how social studies textbooks treat the topic of war—and to inform teachers and the pedagogy of teaching social studies in an era of standardization and war.

### **Adding a Diverse Voice to Social Studies**

Leahey opens the book with an extensive introduction that lays out three important assumptions he makes about social studies instruction:

1. Social studies instruction must assist students in developing the attitudes, skills, and intellect required to see the written word as something other than 'truth incarnate.' Students must be armed with the tools to identify political polemics and propaganda presented in textbooks, cable and broadcast news, newspapers, internet blogs, and political speeches.
2. Conventional forms of "official knowledge" dominate the mass media and serve to enculturate students into uncritically supporting conservative positions (e.g. pro-military, pro-business).
3. Teachers must assist students in a developing critical perspectives and examining the wealth of information they encounter...Powerful teaching provides students with the opportunity to examine ideology and offers methods, concepts, and evidence that challenge traditional hegemonic views. (pp. 4-5)

These assumptions provide a useful framework for Leahey's analysis. They help inform the reader about the positioning of the author and they inform us regarding the context in which the study has been completed. This kind of positioning is critical and reflects an honesty of purpose in the research. Leahey does not leave the reader guessing

about the his intent and this positioning recognizes that the perspective the researcher brings to the research is crucial and should be openly stated and interrogated. James Banks (1998) makes a strong case for foregrounding the perspective of the researcher when he argues that social scientists’ assumptions and values exert a great influence on research questions, findings, and theories. Banks states “intellectuals should be knowledgeable about the values that are exemplified in their research and be committed to supporting educational policies that foster democratic and educational equality” (p. 15). Leahey has clearly laid out the values and assumptions by which he conducts his study. This should be the standard by which more social science research is conducted and evaluated.

Leahey’s assumptions are, however, not without disagreement or controversy and are highly contested in the field of social studies. This is a good thing. There is and can be no singular agenda or set of assumptions about social studies instruction. Rather than trying to install a specific agenda for social studies, as happened with the history-centered curriculum at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Leahey’s assumptions reinforce the idea that there may be many ways to conceptualize the social studies. His assumptions encourage us to embrace diversity regarding what and how we teach. Curricular diversity should be a core value of social studies instruction. Rather than seeking the “best way” to teach, social studies educators need to examine how what we teach is different, and not simply (or inherently) better. Other than positioning ourselves to preserve a particular vision or tradition of the social studies curriculum, we need to discuss our positions openly, and learn from our differences (Marker, 2004). Leahey’s assumptions help us to remember that we should embrace the diversity that exists within the field, which we believe—or claim to believe—is essential to the education of citizens in our democracy.

### **Historical Memory, Selective Tradition, Corporate Textbooks**

In Chapter 1, Leahey begins by focusing on a political controversy that resulted in a reexamination of American perspectives on war, the Smithsonian “Crossroads: The End Of World War II: The Atomic Bomb, and The Origins Of The Cold War” exhibit commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II. The exhibit raised a furor about the rationale for the US decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the morality of bombing these civilian population centers. Leahey discusses the firestorm that erupted regarding the exhibit and how conservative factions, Congressional leaders from both parties, and the military community effectively forced the exhibit to be changed. Leahy argues that the changes made to the exhibit created a stark display of American military might, absent probing questions of the original exhibit regarding the events that led to the end of the war. Leahey uses the Smithsonian exhibit as an example of how we are reluctant to examine the impact of war. This reluctance is reflected in school textbooks that offer a selective tradition of war, which perpetuates and sanitizes battle rather than encouraging citizens to seriously question the moral tenets of war.

Leahey moves to an examination of how textbooks “remember” war. He has selected the Vietnam War because “it resists simplification and provides a series of narratives that contradict the basic tenets of the myth of war” (p. 18). Leahey discusses three fascinating perspectives on the war: the Orthodox, Revisionist, and Critical

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perspectives. The Orthodox view is that the Vietnam War was a quagmire that could not be won. By inappropriately applying a policy of containment to what was essentially a war for independence, the United States turned a local war for independence into a major international conflict. The Revisionist perspective suggests that the war was a noble effort to fight communist expansion, but that it was mishandled by military and civilian leaders and was ultimately undermined by the anti-war movement. The Critical perspective argues that the United States was blinded by a sense of communist paranoia and omnipotence and waged an immoral war. Leahey argues that studying these perspectives allows teachers to discuss differing points of view regarding the Vietnam War as a way of understanding how evidence, interpretation, and perspective shapes the historical narrative. By providing students with the opportunity to study these divergent perspectives—perspectives that are not included in most social studies textbooks—students can better understand the origins of war. More importantly, when students examine these different perspectives, they go beyond the limited and often inaccurate perspective of the textbook and have an opportunity to develop their own conclusions about how war is waged and perpetuated.

In the same chapter, Leahey discusses the impact US militarism has on schools and the curriculum. With our present day military involvement in wars on multiple fronts, militarism reaches far beyond foreign policy initiatives and the Pentagon. Militarism has become integral to our economy and deeply woven into our social fabric. Leahey cites RAND (Research and Development), a civilian corporation dedicated to research on how to effectively engage in and wage war. RAND has developed the “Rational Choice Theory”, which states, “all human behavior is motivated by self-interest” (p. 24). Leahey describes how RCT theory shapes all aspects of American society, and how RAND is now working with the federal government on educational policy issues. Leahey also documents how efforts such as Troops to Teachers and recruiting high school students for military service at school sites is part of continued efforts to militarize the schools and perpetuate the myth of war. In his conclusion to Chapter One, Leahey challenges social studies teachers to examine the shift toward militarism in our schools and society. He asserts that we must incorporate into the social studies curriculum an examination of militarism in the schools and its impact on how we interpret and teach about war. Leahey asks if we cannot reach consensus about the issues such as the use of nuclear weapons and the lessons of the Vietnam War, then what can we expect from our textbooks? Do textbooks present the historical narrative in ways that uncritically endorses war making? (p. 24).

In Chapter 2, Leahey addresses the “corporate textbook” and the four multinational publishing houses that dominate the market, publishing eighty percent of high school social studies textbooks. Leahey fears that this monopolistic situation raises serious issues of access to a wide range of textbooks that promote opportunities for critical thought. He also examines who is writing our textbooks. In interviews with several social studies textbook authors, Leahey reports that after a first edition is written, the role of authors in subsequent editions is reduced to “authentication” where publishers, *and not the authors*, retain the right to introduce new material. In this role authors simply “tweak” new information and have little say in what is included in the text itself. Leahey reports that authors have been pressured to revise the content of their textbooks in areas such as civil rights, slavery, and feminism to meet a more conservative political agenda.

Leahey discusses the highly political textbook adoption process where a few large states such as New York, California, Texas and Florida, have profound influence over the content of textbooks. Textbooks are being written by and for large states with huge markets. In the world of textbook publishing, what is good for Texas is good for the rest of America. Using Texas as an example, Leahey states that the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills treats history as a “static entity comprised of fragmented technical knowledge” (p. 38). This treatment of knowledge is then reflected in social studies textbooks and sold to the huge textbook market that is Texas, and then sold to other smaller states. Leahey also discusses how conservative special interest groups have fought to eliminate, revise and censor knowledge that is considered to be “unpatriotic, socialistic, communistic, humanistic, anti-creationist, and anti-family” in social studies textbooks.

For most social studies educators, this information is certainly not new. FitzGerald (1980) and Cornbleth and Waugh (1995) have written comprehensive analyses of history textbooks that have come to similar conclusions about the accuracy, inadequacies, and content of textbooks. However, Leahey’s work has updated this analysis of textbooks for the 21<sup>st</sup> standards-based education:

The entire system of standardized education relies on a culture of compliance where local officials and teachers are compelled to carry out an educational system where curricular content, pedagogical strategies and methods of evaluation are determined by external authorities. Textbooks serve as the primary reference point for delivering the state curriculum...The end result is the creation of learning environments where authentic learning, free inquiry, and creative expression are considered irresponsible activities... (p. 41)

Leahey makes the cogent points that the corporatization of textbooks has been heightened in recent years by: (1) fewer publishers in the business of production, (2) a market-driven production process that erodes an author’s autonomy over the content of a textbook, (3) marketing strategies that lead to the creation of non-controversial textbooks, driven by special interests and the political interests of large textbook markets, and (4) a restrictive and prescriptive standards movement that has negatively influenced the social studies curriculum.

### **Examining the Historical Narrative in Social Studies Textbooks**

In chapters 3 and 4 Leahey provides an extensive analysis of two significant historical events in the Vietnam War—The Gulf of Tonkin Crisis and The Tet Offensive—and how they are treated in history by examining twelve social studies textbooks. Leahey begins Chapter 3 by detailing the Gulf of Tonkin Crisis and how events prior to the crisis led to A US blueprint for expanding the war. Leahey provides specific detail from historical accounts about the events leading up to the crisis and examines how they are depicted in textbooks. He reports that only *one* of the twelve textbooks examined came close to accurately depicting events leading up to the Gulf of Tonkin crisis; events that were not North Vietnamese provocations, as the American public was being told by the government, rather, these events were acts of American

aggression that would later serve as a pretext for expanding and escalating the war. Leahey concludes that the historical narrative about the Gulf of Tonkin Crisis in textbooks is often incorrect, stifled, or ignored. When this happens, Leahey argues that critical thinking is limited and the falsehoods, incomplete information, and distortion of the historical record serves to reduce the historical account to historical myth.

Leahey opens Chapter 4 by examining the historical record of the events leading to the Tet Offensive. He details how intelligence failures such as severely underestimating the North Vietnamese army's strength led the US government to not see the signals that the North Vietnamese were preparing for a major—and possibly decisive—military offensive. Leahey points out that a consensus exists among historians, journalists, and military officials that the Tet Offensive was a “massive intelligence failure” (p. 73). However, Leahey reports that none of the twelve textbooks document these failures and the textbooks do not characterize these events as intelligence failures at all. In fact, the textbooks failed to mention that when the media reported these failures to the American public, the government falsely characterized media reports of intelligence failures as “subversive” acts that purposefully undermined the war effort. Leahey also documents issues such as racial tension, drug use among military personnel, and the decline of military morale as historical events that were significant contributors to the declining war effort, but these rarely appear in textbooks. And, with respect to the My Lai, and My Khe massacres, Leahey reports that textbook treatment of these events is, at best, inconsistent, with only *two* of the twelve textbooks reporting that there was a historically well-documented effort to cover-up the events surrounding the My Lai and My Khe massacres by the military *and* the civilian government. Leahey concludes Chapter 4 by stating that social studies textbooks all too often offer a patriotic description of the war. As a result, when textbooks do not report that the events leading up to the Gulf of Tonkin Crisis that were false, distorted and manipulated by the government, or that the Tet Offensive was the result of a total collapse of military intelligence, textbooks perpetuate the idea that the United States government made few missteps and that any issues related to declining public support and low morale among the military was the fault of the media.

Leahey's analysis of The Gulf of Tonkin and The Tet Offensive is riveting and incisive reading that any social studies teacher would find fascinating. Leahey offers a view of the events of the Vietnam War culled from the historical record that contradicts the historical narrative written in most textbooks. His insightful analysis of the details surrounding these significant events from the Vietnam War provides a new perspective with which to discuss and teach about the Vietnam War. Most importantly, Leahey's analysis lifts the veil of the myth of war and makes a compelling prologue to a discussion of how we can teach about the myth of war.

### **Critically Teaching the 'Myth of War'**

In his final chapter Leahey explores how classroom teachers can go beyond simply transmitting the historical myth that is presented in textbooks. Leahey presents an approach to teaching about the complexities of war that includes the following points:

1. War making is a human construction

2. International law provides a framework for analyzing war
3. The media play a role in building a consensus for war
4. Listening to voices of opposition is essential to understanding war
5. Political language is used to build a consensus for war
6. Deconstructing textbook narratives is a powerful way to examine war.

Leahey discusses in detail how each of these points can help social studies teachers reclaim their classes and their curriculum in an era that emphasizes standardization and the use of textbooks. Leahey insists that the study of history involves more than attention to the names, dates, places, events and the ideas presented in history textbooks. “The point is to teach children to develop competencies in asking questions, conducting research, analyzing information, and building knowledge about their world and their place in it” (p.112). Some might argue that asking questions and analyzing information are not particularly new, but what Leahey does offer that is new and compelling is a framework for helping students and teachers achieve these often stated but rarely achieved goals of critical thinking in social studies. Out of Leahey’s study emerges a critical pedagogy and perspective that involves a critical examination of media and the treatment of war as a concept that is solely created by humans; a perspective that asks students to examine the idea that war is wholly avoidable and filled with many consequences for our society and the world. Rather than relying on an incomplete, distorted or inaccurate textbook narratives, Leahey provides a framework that uses international law, political language, and voices of dissent and civil disobedience for focusing historical inquiry in the classroom.

Leahey’s perspective, while compelling, is not particularly popular or easily adopted. Teachers are understandably hesitant to move away from the textbook, whose narrative is sanctioned by the state, and vetted by a host of committees, special interest groups, politicians, and publishers. It takes courage, intelligence, and hard work to challenge the dominant culture; its myths, assumptions and interpretations. And, in this era of standardization and Obama’s “The Race to the Top,” resisting can be dangerous to one’s career. However, Leahey’s book offers a unique perspective toward the social studies curriculum and textbook that is intellectually honest, authentic, and rigorous. *Whitewashing War* is an important book, if just for its historical analysis of events of the Vietnam War that we all think we know, but really don’t *know*. It is exciting to speculate that history is filled with more such events that are ripe for discovery by students and teachers. What Leahey offers is a scaffold for students and teachers to develop their own critical analysis of events of their own choosing, events that have few predictable outcomes, that incorporate questions with no “right” answers and no “officially sanctioned” interpretations. Leahey challenges us to imagine a social studies curriculum that is exciting, engaging, innovative, and open to new possibilities for democratic education. Most importantly, *Whitewashing War* provides an unambiguous structure with which to begin this daunting and difficult but extremely important task.

### **Coda: The ongoing confusion between history and social studies**

*Whitewashing War* is an important addition that expands and elevates the discourse among social studies educators. Leahey's pedagogy and perspective cultivates an interdisciplinary approach to social studies and teaching the myth of war. It draws upon media studies, political science, and history in teaching the myth of war. *Whitewashing War* deserves to be read widely and by anyone who is a thoughtful social studies teacher.

Throughout his book Leahey uses the concepts of "social studies" and "history" interchangeably. Early in the book Leahey makes it clear that his analysis focuses on how "history" textbooks treat historical content, and how "social studies" instruction can be improved. Using these terms interchangeably seems to be the standard today among many scholars in the field. This practice is confusing and ignores the important distinctions between history and social studies. With most teachers focusing generally on history and using textbooks as their main instructional vehicle, there is precious little interdisciplinary teaching to be found in the social studies classroom. In most public school and university classrooms, virtually no attention is paid to the relationship between and among the social science disciplines. History is taught as though students were destined to be historians. This should not be a surprise. In the last century historians have held the curriculum hostage. For over 100 years, "history" has been taught in our schools without the interdisciplinary focus that social studies demands. Though the term "social studies" has been broadly used to describe the history-centered curriculum taught in elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, and universities, the interdisciplinary focus that is truly social studies is rarely taught.

History, *without a focus on social studies*, is bunk. No one social science discipline can capture the complexities of social education in a democratic society. An integration of the social sciences can help students to understand and navigate among the multitude of ideas that comprise a democratic society. If students are to be prepared for the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, then we need to provide inspired, interdisciplinary instruction that can provide the skills, values and knowledge to enable our future citizens with the possibility, promise, and perspective to transform their world. *Whitewashing War* provides that solid interdisciplinary framework for teachers and students to teach and learn about the myth of war.

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