Historical Reconciliation and United States History Textbooks about Vietnam

James W. LOEWEN, Catholic University of America
and University of Illinois

The Journal of Northeast Asian History
Volume 7, Number 2 (Winter 2010), 37-59

Historical Reconciliation and United States History Textbooks about Vietnam

Huge textbooks averaging 1,152 pages dominate United States history courses in middle and high school. Unsure of their own expertise, most teachers hesitate to deviate from or critique these books. About the U.S. war with Vietnam, the textbooks are evasive. Most omit the voices of the era and the famous photographs that both recorded and influenced the war. This caution has unfortunate consequences for reconciliation between the United States and Vietnam and for the ability of Americans to take steps so that the U.S. might avoid such counter-productive adventures in the future.

Keywords: historical images, nationalism, reconciliation, teachers, textbooks, United States of America, Vietnam

Historical Reconciliation and United States History Textbooks about Vietnam

James W. LOEWEN, Catholic University of America
and University of Illinois

The Vietnam War ended in 1975. It is passing from the sasha (events in the lifespan of most living citizens) to the zamani (the more distant past, antedating readers' personal awareness). One might suppose that such passage of time might bring about greater historical perspective. This does not seem to have happened, however, at least not in United States history textbooks. This paper will explain the role of textbooks in public schools in the U.S., with special attention to U.S. history. Then it will suggest that most teachers are not ready to help their students critique or transcend these textbooks. It will evaluate the accounts of the Vietnam War that textbooks supply. In the interest of objectivity, the analysis focuses first on their visual images, because these are easily quantifiable. An available sample of older Americans was asked to recall the important photographs from the conflict. Consensus emerged. Most textbooks, however, included few or none of these images. Nor did they include adequate substitutes. Then the paper examines and finds wanting the words textbooks supply, particularly their unwillingness to quote songs, chants, speeches, poems, or other primary sources from the war itself. The written analyses of the war in recent textbooks have not

improved either. Students come away with little understanding as to why the U.S. fought in Vietnam and why it lost.

The paper closes by noting that most teachers are not likely to fill the resulting gap in students' understanding of the period. As a consequence, as adults they are open to manipulation by political leaders who misuse Vietnam in arguing for contemporary military interventions elsewhere. Although Americans agree overwhelmingly that the Vietnam War was both a strategic and a moral blunder, they have not reconciled with each other on the topic. Since the war therefore remains somewhat controversial, textbooks and teachers give it inadequate attention. In turn, this educational problem hinders reconciliation, which prevents the nation from addressing the structural problems that still allow the U.S. to engage in wars without ensuring that they are in the national interest and have adequate public support.

I. History Education in the United States

In its public schools, the United States has no prescribed curricula in history or any other field. Individual states make these decisions, and local districts often have considerable autonomy. Some schools and states teach U.S. history in the 11th grade, some in 10th. Some teach it twice, maybe in 5th and 11th grades. About half of the fifty states adopt textbooks statewide, but they adopt several books. Tennessee, for example, lists sixteen.

Two forces, however, do push the U.S. toward a uniform curriculum in U.S. history. First, the various books don't differ much. They even look alike. I studied six new textbooks, all published since the year 2000, for the second (and final) edition of *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. They all had the same external dimensions and similarly disjointed layouts. Four waved the flag on their covers; the other two featured the colors red, white, and blue.

Second, more and more states are adopting multiple-choice tests in

response to a national law, "No Child Left Behind," passed during the second Bush administration. Nothing in this law mandates any test in U.S. history, let alone a multiple-choice test. Nevertheless, many states turn to the same few test makers for so-called "standardized" or "objective" tests that can be graded by machine. These tend to be "twig tests." They do not examine whether students understand and can explain forests — major issues in U.S. history — nor even whether they know trees, but rather test their ability to repeat twigs. (My favorite is, "When did the War of 1812 start?") Thus they do not ask, "Did Columbus discover America?" which would lead to interesting essays, but "When did Columbus discover America?" which leads only to the nonthinking reply, "1492."[1]

Teachers could play an important role in helping students think critically about the past and about their textbooks. Unfortunately, all too many history teachers know too little history. A national survey in 1990 revealed that only 40% of high school history teachers had a B.A. or M.A. in history or in a related field like sociology or political science. 13% had never had a single college history course (Crabtree and O'Shea, 1991, pp. 4, 10)! Especially in the Midwest and South, many districts assign athletic coaches to teach history. These teachers know full well that they are not retained or fired based on how well they teach history but on the win/lose record of their sports teams. Therefore many do not care how they teach history. Unprepared teachers are unlikely to encourage students to go beyond the textbook, because the textbook is all the history they know. Neither are demoralized teachers.

---

1 1. In addition to these state-required tests, students across the nation who seek college credit for advanced high school courses take a private test, the "Advanced Placement Test in U.S. History." This test is not all multiple choice, however, and can prompt deeper learning.

II. Photographs of the War against Vietnam in U.S. History Textbooks

Accordingly, to learn what high school students are taught about the Vietnam War, we should start with their textbooks. I have now examined how twenty high school textbooks treat the Vietnam War, along with two middle school books. Unfortunately, textbooks in American history stand in sharp contrast to the educational materials used in other courses. Conflicting desires to promote inquiry and indoctrinate nationalism muddle their contents. Publishers stress nationalism in their advertisements for these books. For example, *Freedom's Trait* brags that its book provides "major emphasis on America's heroes, America's citizens, and the nation's achievements," so it "instills pride in America's heritage." "Take a look in your history book, and you'll see why we should be proud," goes an anthem often sung by high school glee clubs, but we need not even take a look inside. The difference begins with some of their titles: *The Great Republic*, *The American Pageant*, *The American Way*, *Land of the Free*, *Land of Promise*, *Triumph of the American Nation*. Such titles differ from those of textbooks in all other fields. Chemistry books are called *Chemistry*, not *Triumph of the Molecule*. Even literature collections are likely to be titled *Anthology of American Literature*. Not most history books. All six covers of the most recent books, all published after 2000, that I read for the second edition of *Lies My Teacher Told Me* feature American flags or the flag colors — red, white, and blue.

Inside, publishers likewise stress nationalism. The first words in the Teachers Edition of *America: Pathways to the Present*, for example, are "Inspire students with the rich story of America." The War in Vietnam is not inspiring. The U.S. lost. So how do these twenty textbooks handle the Vietnam War, given that publishers like to place "major emphasis ... on the nation's achievements?"

More than any other war in our history, the Vietnam War was

distinguished by a series of images that seared themselves into the public consciousness. I asked dozens of adults old enough to have lived during the war to tell me what they remember visually about it; they supplied a list of images showing remarkable overlap. A short list included these five specific images:

— the little girl running naked down Highway One, fleeing a napalm attack;
— a Buddhist monk sitting at a Saigon intersection immolating himself to protest the South Vietnamese government;
— the national police chief executing a man suspected of being in the Viet Cong, with a pistol shot to the side of his head;
— the bodies in the ditch after the My Lai massacre;
— Americans evacuating a building near the American embassy by helicopter while desperate Vietnamese try to climb aboard.

The list also included two generic images: B52's with bombs streaming below them into the pock-marked countryside of Vietnam, and a ruined city such as Hué, with nothing but rubble in view, as Americans and South Vietnam troops move in to retake it after the Tet offensive.

Merely reading these short descriptions prompts most older Americans to remember these images in sharp detail. Several remain "among the most well-known images in the world even now [1991]," according to Patrick Hagopian (1991, p. 14), the leading expert on how America memorialized the Vietnam War. The emotions that accompanied them come back vividly as well. Younger people, however, have little chance to see or recall them unless their history books provide them. Most don't. Of the twelve American history textbooks in my original sample, one book, *The American Pageant*, included one picture, the police chief shooting the terrified man. No other textbook included any.

Leaving these images out of history textbooks shortchanges today's students, for not only did these photos report the war, they also made

history, for they affected the way Americans — and Vietnamese — thought about the war. The Buddhist monk Quang Duc's self-immolation, for example, shocked South Vietnamese and American public opinion. Before the war ended, several other Vietnamese and at least one American followed his example. According to Michael Delli Carpini (1990, p. 142), an authority on media coverage of Vietnam, the "devastating" image of the police chief casually shooting the terrified young man on a Saigon street helped persuade Americans that their side was not morally superior to the Communists. The image is so haunting that 40 years later, I have only to cock my fingers like a gun, and people who were old enough to read newspapers or watch television in 1968 immediately recall it in some detail. After the Tet offensive, images of what United States bombs and shells had done to Ben Tre, Hué, and other cities in South Vietnam as our forces retook them persuaded many Americans to oppose the war. Images of the war in the twelve original textbooks I examined were much prettier. Not one showed any damage done by our side.

What about newer textbooks in American history? One did mark an improvement: *The American People* includes the little girl running naked down Highway One, the national police chief executing the man, and a photograph of an immolation. *Pathways to the Present* also included the latter and the evacuation scene near the embassy. The new version of *The American Pageant*, on the other hand, dropped its photo of the police chief shooting the terrified man. It now contains none of the important images, although it does include a confusing photograph of an American punching a Vietnamese, probably to keep him off a helicopter evacuating Vietnam. Another of the books in my new list quotes one of its putative authors, Daniel Boorstin, from another work saying, "The Vietnam War was the first American war which was a television experience," but his textbook contains none of the seven images.

The book that supplies the widest range of images of the war is not a high school textbook at all but Joy Hakim's *All the People*, intended for

fifth-graders. She includes the police chief shooting the terrified man, another image of a guard threatening a Vietnamese POW with a knife, a photograph of a town destroyed by "our side," and the most famous image of the My Lai massacre. Surprisingly, Hakim also gives her readers the image of the little girl running naked down Highway One. This is surprising because textbook publishers follow the rule of "no nudity" — as one editor told me, "in elementary books cows don't have udders." It is a disturbing image: a college student of mine wrote, "To show a photograph of one naked girl crying after she has been napalmed changes the entire meaning of that war to a high school student."

So, most textbooks omit all the important photographs of the Vietnam War. What images do they include? Uncontroversial shots, for the most part — servicemen on patrol, walking through swamps, or jumping from helicopters. Boorstin and Kelley include "a desperate refugee carrying household goods," and most older books similarly show refugees or damage caused by the other side, but since such damage was usually less extensive than that caused by our bombardment, the pictures, like this one, are not very dramatic. No wonder college students don't remember anything they learned about Vietnam in high school! Most textbooks have edited out every image older adults found memorable about the war.

Of course, the authors and editors of textbooks choose among thousands of images of the Vietnam War. They might make different selections and still do justice to the war. But at the very least they must show American atrocities against the Vietnamese civilian population, for these were a frequent and even inevitable part of this war without front lines. Including an illustration of inhumane methods used by the other side would be appropriate as well. However, the other side had the advantage of knowing which Vietnamese were on their side. Our armed forces had only the foggiest notion as to who was ally or opponent. Therefore, attacks on civilians became U.S. policy, as shown by Gen. William C. Westmoreland's characterization of civilian casualties: "It

does deprive the enemy of the population, doesn't it?" We evaluated our progress by body counts and drew free-fire zones within which we treated the entire civilian population as the enemy. Such a strategy inevitably led to war crimes. Indeed, such a strategy is itself a war crime.

Thus My Lai was not a minor event, unworthy of inclusion in a nation's history. It was important precisely because it was emblematic of much of what went wrong with the entire war in Vietnam. Any photograph of an American soldier setting fire to a Vietnamese house, a common sight during the war, would get this point across, but no textbook uses *any* photograph of *any* wrongdoing by an American. Indeed, most books include no photograph of any destruction, even of legitimate targets, caused by our side. Among other problems, leaving out these images makes the international antiwar movement incomprehensible.

Two high school textbook authors, James West Davidson and Mark H. Lytle, are on record as knowing of the importance of My Lai. "The American strategy had atrocity built into it," Lytle said to me. Davidson and Lytle devote most of a chapter to the My Lai massacre in their book *After the Fact.* There they tell how news of the massacre stunned the United States. "One thing was certain," they write, "the encounter became a defining moment in the public's perception of the war" (1992, p. 371). Plainly, they do not think high school students need to know about it, however, for their high school history textbook, *The United States—A History of the Republic,* like most textbooks in my sample, never mentions My Lai.

III. Words in Textbooks are Equally Evasive

Like the photographs textbooks provide, their words are equally bland. Throughout their huge tomes, textbook authors are reluctant to let the past speak. They avoid primary sources. On the Vietnam War, the only people whom most books quote are Presidents Johnson and Nixon. In a

typical passage in *The American Pageant*, Nixon says, "America cannot — and will not — conceive all the plans, design all the programs, execute all the decisions, and undertake all the defense of the free nations of the world." That passage hardly helps to clarify either the war or the opposition to it. Indeed, the entire antiwar movement becomes unintelligible because textbooks do not allow it to speak for itself. They exclude the antiwar songs, the chants — "Hell, no; we won't go!" and "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?" — and, above all, the emotions. Virtually the only people who get quoted are Presidents Johnson and Nixon.

Having excluded the sights, the sounds, and the feelings of the Vietnam era, textbook authors proceed to exclude the issues. They rarely ask why. Why did the United States put troops in Vietnam in the first place? According to *American Adventures:* "Later in the 1950's, war broke out in South Vietnam. This time the United States gave aid to the South Vietnamese government." "War broke out" — what could be simpler! Other basic questions that textbooks dodge include: Was the war morally justified? Why did an antiwar movement become so strong in the United States? What were its criticisms of the war? Were they right? Why did the United States lose the war? What lesson(s) should we take from the experience? Recall that publishers want to "Inspire students with the rich story of America." So, let's leave out why we intervened, obfuscate how we fought, and mystify why we lost.

Regarding Vietnam, the United States is not the only nation to do a poor job telling of its misadventures. *The New York Times* (French, 2004) reports that Chinese textbooks do not supply much treatment of China's 1979 war with Vietnam. Japan's shrines and museums do not discuss the Imperial Army troops who helped cause the death by starvation of approximately one million Vietnamese as World War II came to an end. South Korean textbooks say little about its participation in the U.S. war in Vietnam and omit completely any treatment of war crimes by its soldiers. Museums in Hanoi depict the war accurately, but then they gloss

over the first decade after the reunification of the country with the phrase, "Mistakes were made."

Textbooks avoid controversy. As a representative from publisher Holt, Rinehart, and Winston said to Professor Joan DelFattore (1992), "When you're publishing a book, if there's something that is controversial, it's better to take it out." Why America sent troops into Vietnam in the first place is still open to interpretation. That alone implies controversy. Moreover, the most important single consideration to American leaders was that none wished to be "the first president to lose a war," as Lyndon Johnson put it (Sidey, 1975). That reason is itself controversial. To some Americans, to admit that 58,000 Americans died for such a cause demeans their deaths. So let's not say that; let's just say it was to oppose Communism. Such a motive is defensible, given the anti-democratic structure and denial of the right to dissent exhibited by Communist regimes. And we were locked in Cold War conflict with the U.S.S.R. Choosing just the "nice" motive isn't accurate history, however. True, it does fit the overall storyline of U.S. history textbooks, which is unremitting progress: the United States started out great and has been getting better ever since, more or less automatically. But the American war with Vietnam cannot be made to fit the storyline of progress. The authors of *Pathways to the Present* face a similar problem in their two-page summary of military history headed "Fighting for Freedom and Democracy" — some wars just won't fit. They solve the problem simply by leaving out our Indian wars, the Mexico War, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

These processes of omission and mystification to fit the storyline sometimes seem to have mystified even the authors themselves. Right after chronicling the Communist victory in Vietnam, Boorstin and Kelley write,

> From the debacle in Indochina the United States emerged chastened, bewildered, and divided.... But it was clear to nearly everybody that the

> United States could not withdraw from the world to lick its wounds. Still a superpower, the United States could not avoid some responsibility for keeping peace in the world. Since the American Revolution, the nation had served as a beacon of hope for people who wanted to govern themselves.

What? We were "keeping peace in the world" by fighting in Vietnam? We were "a beacon of hope for people who wanted to govern themselves" in Vietnam?[2]

Such disconnects happen partly because United States high school history textbooks usually aren't written by the people whose names are on them as authors. In 1986, more than a decade after we lost the war in Vietnam, the publisher changed the title of *Rise of the American Nation* to *Triumph of the American Nation,* infuriating one of its authors, who was 89 years old and was not consulted or even informed and found out only after the fact; the other author was already dead. In 2006, I prompted a front-page *New York Times* story on the textbook authorship scandal when I showed that two major recent books, "by" different sets of distinguished authors, were nearly identical for page after page. In fact, neither set of authors plagiarized from the other. That's because neither set of authors wrote anything. Prentice Hall published both textbooks. Both new chapters were written by a nameless person known only to its editorial staff. As one of the "authors" said to me, "They hired somebody. I don't remember the man's name." To their chagrin, Prentice Hall saved a little money by using the same hired account for two different books. Neither set of authors even bothered to read what they

[2] For that matter, historian Robert Kagan points out that the American Revolution was not exactly for freedom, but because the colonies were "grasping imperialists" who "chafed especially at the British Proclamation of 1763, which checked trans-Appalachian settlement." In short, the biggest single reason for the American Revolution was the desire for Indian land. See Kennedy (2006, p. 7).

had "written" (Schemo, 2006; Kelley, personal communication, July 2006; Winkler, personal communication, July 2006).

Even when the authors whose names grace the covers of high school history textbooks do write them, they write only the basic narrative, which makes up less than 40% of the book. Consider *The Americans* "by" Gerald Danzer and others. This book introduces the Vietnam War in a box, "The War in Vietnam," attached to its treatment of the Johnson presidency. The box claims,

> In Vietnam, anti-Communist nationalists controlled South Vietnam while Communist leader Ho Chi Minh had taken over North Vietnam. The Geneva Accords had temporarily provided peace, dividing Vietnam ... into two distinct political regions. Despite this treaty, the North was supporting Communist rebels who were trying to take over the South.

So many errors and distortions plague that paragraph that it would take an entire essay to debunk them all. The dominant nationalist in Vietnam was Ho Chi Minh. As Stanley Karnow puts it, in his classic *Vietnam*, "reputable Vietnamese nationalists outside the ranks of the Viet Minh were scarce." Ngo Dinh Diem won backing from Vietnam's "emperor," Bao Dai, who now lived mostly in Paris. Like Bao Dai, Diem had been part of the French colonial government. The United States supported Diem, but his faction — mostly Catholics — hardly controlled South Vietnam. Its opponents included Communists but also most Buddhists and members of other religious and political sects. To claim that the North supported Communist rebels "despite" the Geneva Accords stands history on it head. That treaty provided for elections to reunify Vietnam. Indeed, that provision was why Ho had signed. Diem, with American support, refused to hold them. Instead, Diem launched attacks on supporters of Ho throughout South Vietnam.

Forty pages later, this textbook devotes a full chapter to "The War in Vietnam Years." It is more accurate. It tells how U.S. involvement in

Vietnam began in 1950, when we helped France try to re-establish its colonial rule over Vietnam. "Recognizing Ho Chi Minh's widespread popularity, South Vietnam's president, Ngo Dinh Diem, a strong anti-communist, refused to take part in the countrywide election of 1956," it admits. "The United States also sensed that a countrywide election might spell victory for Ho Chi Minh and supported canceling elections." This passage and the earlier box cannot possibly have been written by the same author. Unfortunately, neither passage may have been written by Danzer, the historian listed as primary author.

To summarize, different chapters get written by different people at different times. Nobody makes much effort to have the book cohere.

IV. Teachers Do a Poor Job Too

Most teachers handle the Vietnam War poorly too. Why? Well, we already saw that more than half are unprepared to help students challenge their textbooks or in other ways learn history on their own. Despite their lack of knowledge — or because of it — they come across as authority figures, presenting "right answers" rather than issues. Students are to "learn," not think. Taught that way, all history, even of the Vietnam War, becomes dull. Avoiding controversy means avoiding relevance to the present.

When teachers do venture beyond the book, most rely on what are called "ancillaries" supplied by the textbook publisher itself. These include lecture outlines, images, readings, and huge banks of "twig test" questions. "Prentice Hall is now making teachers' lives easier!" says the first page of *America: Pathways to the Present*, touting its CD-ROM. To avoid exposing gaps in their knowledge, too many teachers hide behind the textbooks and the ancillaries, making little use of other resources.

As well, like textbook publishers, most teachers do not appreciate controversy. A study some years ago found 92% of teachers said they didn't start discussions of controversial issues, 89% didn't discuss such

issues when students brought them up, and 79% didn't think they should (Black, 1967, pp. 91-95). Among the topics that teachers felt children wanted to discuss but that most teachers believed they should not discuss were politics, race relations, and the Vietnam War. As a result, some teachers simply never get to the Vietnam chapter. In the early 1980s, the average high school course in American history spent just four minutes on the Vietnam War, and I know no reason to believe that time has increased much (McNeil, 1983, pp. 116, 126-127)! This may explain the reaction I got when I asked advanced undergraduates taking "Lies My Teacher Told Me," a course I developed at the University of Vermont, this question: "The War in Vietnam was fought between blank and blank." 22% replied, "Between North and South Korea!"

There are still other reasons why teachers are reluctant to criticize U.S. behavior in Vietnam. Societies like to think well of themselves. Stratified societies especially valorize themselves. Doing so helps the powerful stay in power. To the degree that citizens believe that their society has done good things in the past, they are more likely to believe it is doing good things today. To the degree that citizens believe that their society is doing good things today, they grant allegiance to those in power. Therefore, those in power have an interest in presenting the past in such a way that people will think that their society does good things, and when it does not, its bad policies are merely honest mistakes, done with the best of intentions. Absorbing this view of the past then becomes part of what sociologists call "socialization," the process of learning the essentials required to participate as a member of society.

In 1899, the famous sociologist Thorstein Veblen described the process of emulation by which those below what he called "the leisure class" identify with those above them. In education, we see a particular form of this identification: many teachers — members of the lower middle class — identify with those in power and take on as their life's work passing on this boosterish portrait of the past. Teachers and textbook authors want to produce good citizens, by which they mean

nationalists — people who take pride in their country, no matter what. They worry that if young people do not believe that their society is good and has done good things, they may revolt or in other ways endanger themselves and society. In turn, this worry leads to a pleasant feeling of self-importance: one is somehow on the front lines, doing something important, helping the United States continue and grow strong. The War in Vietnam did not show the rulers of the United States making good decisions leading to good things. So, let's just leave out why they chose to intervene. Let's obfuscate why they escalated. Let's mystify the role of the American and Vietnamese people in ending the war.

V. Truth, Reconciliation, and the Future

Without honest history about Vietnam, textbook authors can feel free to end the way *The American Journey* ends. Aimed at middle school, this book is "by" three important and usually honest American historians, Joyce Appleby, Alan Brinkley, and James McPherson. Ironically, Appleby is co-author of *Telling the Truth about History*, while McPherson is our best living historian of the U.S. Civil War.[3] The last paragraph they supply to students begins, "The United States spent the last decade of the twentieth century trying to increase the peace and prosperity of the world." What a happy view! Then they quote President Clinton: "America must continue to be an unrelenting force for peace — from the Middle East to Haiti, from Northern Ireland to Africa." "Unrelenting force for peace" — how nice! I was born in 1942. The U.S. has been at war more than half of my life — all but nine years, if you count the Cold War. Final words like these mystify any students who take them seriously.

---

[3] In *The Confederate and Neo-Confederate Reader* (Loewen and Sebesta, 2010, pp. 9-10), I show that McPherson could not have written this textbook.

Publishers can surely do better. The Vietnam War is not even seriously controversial in the U.S. For at least 25 years, opinion polls show that 70% of adult Americans have considered it morally wrong as well as tactically inept. Certainly the war cannot be regarded as in the national interest, at least not as fought — the U.S. lost, after all. Moreover, historians have reached consensus on some aspects of the war. The U.S. military has also drawn various conclusions about tactics and strategies to avoid in the future. Thus for at least a quarter century, the Vietnam War hasn't been nearly as contentious as some other issues from the U.S. military past, such as why we are fighting in Iraq or — amazingly — why the Southern states seceded to prompt the U.S. Civil War. The failure is one of publisher nerve and imagination. It is not systemic.

Young Americans need to know about the Vietnam War, partly to see through textbook mystification itself. "The past is never dead," famously wrote novelist William Faulkner. "It's not even past." For certain, our Vietnam past is not dead. Across the political spectrum, politicians have invoked "the lessons of Vietnam" as they debated intervening in Angola, Lebanon, Kuwait, and Afghanistan. Bumper stickers reading "El Salvador is Spanish for Vietnam" helped block sending United States troops to that nation. More recently, some of the same people who supervised the U.S. debacle in Southeast Asia, including Henry Kissinger and Melvin Laird, have written articles titled "The Lessons of Vietnam" to persuade Americans to escalate further in Iraq (Kissinger, 2007; Laird, 2005). Kissinger still maintains that the lesson of Vietnam is, "stay the course," even though he did not stay the course. After his stint with Nixon, he has pretended to be shocked that the South Vietnam puppet government fell and blames its fall on Congress, for not appropriating enough money. In reality, he knew he had merely negotiated a "decent interval" after U.S. withdrawal before the Communist government of Vietnam took control. Hagopian (2009, pp. 31-32) points out, "There are no grounds for believing that additional

help at that stage would have done more than stave off defeat for a few days or weeks." Nevertheless, Kissinger now tries to pin the blame for South Vietnam's defeat on "weak-willed politicians in Washington." In the hands of people like Kissinger and Laird, the Vietnam War becomes a weapon, used to hoodwink those who did not live through it into agreement with our latest military adventure.

Surely high-school graduates have a right to enough knowledge about the Vietnam War to participate intelligently in debates that started there or invoke that conflict. After all, those debates are about policies that will shape their world and may affect their own biographies. Getting students to explore the War in Vietnam also arms them with critical reading and thinking skills. Then they will not be defenseless against those who seek to win their acquiescence for the next governmental folly.

The American War against Vietnam involved presidential deceit of Congress and the people, the support of a "corrupt, repressive, and unrepresentative government in South Vietnam," deliberate war crimes against civilians, and decision-making by a single individual with no real accountability, according to Hagopian (2009, p. 405). The United States has not fixed these problems. That's why at least three of these four problems plagued — and may yet plague — our wars against Iraq and Afghanistan. Teaching the history of the Vietnam War so as to avoid mention of them is therefore not in the best interest of the nation.

Pondering the best interest of the nation requires that we compare two terms: patriotism and nationalism. A nationalist cries, "My country, right or wrong!" Before we support that phrase, we must stop to consider whether we want citizens of other countries to display similar sentiments. Let us contrast patriotism. Defining "the duty of a true patriot," Frederick Douglass famously wrote: "He is a lover of his country who rebukes and does not excuse its sins." Teaching history the way that the Vietnam War is usually taught leaves high school graduates unable to apply logic and information to controversial issues in our society. After high school, five sixths of all Americans never take a course in American history. If they

don't learn how to do history in high school, they never will. Surely teachers want to produce patriots, not nationalists.

Around the U.S., an increasing number of teachers are not content to hide behind the textbook. They encourage their classes to explore the web, read the marvelous secondary literature in history, talk with nearby Vietnam veterans and war protestors, and use other resources. They challenge students not only to fill in what is missing from their textbooks but also to critique what they do include.[4] As one high school U.S. history teacher put it in 2009 on the discussion list for the Advanced Placement U.S. History test, "The war provides a great opportunity for students to critically analyze conflicting primary and secondary sources and draw their own conclusions."

Challenged by such teachers, students come to realize that everyone has a right to their own opinion, but not to their own facts. They learn to weigh conflicting arguments and compare contradictory information. They develop skills in locating, evaluating, and putting in context primary sources. In short, they learn to do history, not just "learn" it. Armed with these abilities, they will not easily be misled — about Vietnam, about other wars, about anything.

Reconciliation with Vietnam is not the key issue here. Business and tourism are already helping that come to pass. The reconciliation Americans need is with their own past. Americans need to take three steps to reconcile with the Vietnam War. First, we must admit what happened, war crimes and all. "We did this." Second, we must apologize. "We did this, and we're sorry." Third, we must say, "And we don't do it any more." That last statement will require structural and ideological

[4] I base this assertion on these facts: Many schools of education now use *Lies My Teacher Told Me* as part of their core curriculum in social studies education. Some school districts require social studies/history teachers to have read the book. Others bring me in to give workshops on how to go beyond the textbook. Large-scale teacher organizations, such as the National Council for the Social Studies and the National Association for Multiculture Education engage me as plenary speaker. Slowly, this approach seems to be winning favor nationally.

changes. Only after we make them will we be ready to play our role as a responsible world citizen.

REFERENCES

Black, Hillel. (1967). *The American Schoolbook.* NY: Morrow.

Crabtree, Charlotte, and O'Shea, David. (1991, November). Teachers' academic preparation in history. *National Center for History in the Schools Newsletter 1* (3).

Davidson, James, and Lytle, Mark H. (1992). *After the Fact*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

DelFattore, Joan. (1992). *What Johnny Shouldn't Read*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Delli Carpini, Michael. (1990). Vietnam and the press. In D. Michael Shafer (Ed.), *The Legacy*. Boston: Beacon.

French, Howard W. (2004, December 6). China's textbooks twist and omit history. *New York Times*. Retrieved June 2010, from http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9A00E5DD1431F935A35751C1A9629C8B63.

Hagopian, Patrick. (1991). Vietnam veterans and the right to the past. Lecture given at the 1991 annual meeting of the American Studies Association, Baltimore, U.S.A.

Hagopian, Patrick. (2009). *The Vietnam War in American Memory*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Kennedy, David M. (2006, October 29). Rogue state [Review of Robert Kagan's book *Dangerous Nation*]. *Washington Post Book World*. Retrieved November 2010, from http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=18828.

Kissinger, Henry. (2007, May 31). The lessons of Vietnam. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved May 2010, from http://latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-kissinger31may31,0,7527631.

Laird, Melvin. (2005, November). Iraq: Learning the lessons of Vietnam. *Foreign Affairs*. Retrieved June 2010, from http://foreignaffairs.com/articles/61195/melvin-r-laird/iraq-learning-the-lessons-of-vietnam

Loewen, James and Edward Sebesta. (2010). *The Confederate and Neo-Confederate Reader*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Loewen, James. (2000). The Vietnam War in high school American history. In Laura E. Hein & Mark Selden (Eds.), *Censoring History: Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany, and the United States*, Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Harpe.

McNeil, Linda. (1983). Defensive teaching and classroom control. In Michael W. Apple and Lois Weis (Ed.), *Ideology and Practice in Schooling*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Schemo, Diana. (2006, July 13). Schoolbooks are given F's in originality. *New York Times*.

Sidey, Hugh. (1975, May 12). The presidency: Ending a personal war. *Time*, Retrieved June 2010, from http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,917423,00.html#ixzz0zoHHGMcx.