

History Wars Exposed: Right-Wing Influence in APUSH Curriculum Update.



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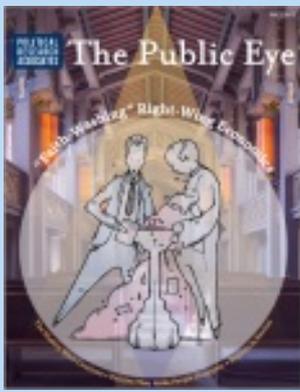
APUSH CURRICULUM UPDATE

By **Gabriel Joffe**, on October 19, 2015



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On July 30, 2015, the College Board, creators of college-level curricula and testing for high school students, released an update to its Advanced Placement U.S. History (APUSH) course.¹ The revision came after what had already been a two-year battle and was quickly criticized by all sides. Digital news outlet *Quartz* published an article detailing “All the ways the new AP U.S. history standards gloss over the country’s racist past,”² while conservative media sites like *The Daily Caller* quoted conservative “experts” who groused that the changes were merely cosmetic and still don’t adequately emphasize “American Exceptionalism.”³ But as to why the changes had been undertaken in the first place, the media consensus was, as *The Washington Post* put it, that “Conservatives convinced College Board to rewrite American history.”⁴ Were these headlines just clickbait or had there been mounting pressure on the College Board to appease right-wing critics?

Jeremy Stern, an independent historian who had consulted on the College Board overhaul,⁵ cast the revision in a more positive light, telling *The Christian Science Monitor*, “This is a major success for an unpolitical look at American history.”⁶ However, there was nothing “unpolitical” about the events preceding the revisions.



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The fight over APUSH had been simmering ever since the College Board released its new version of the framework in 2012; it boiled over in several states after the new curriculum was implemented for the 2014-2015 school year. The original redesign of the course—in the works since 2006—was intended to reflect an ongoing shift in history classrooms from rote memorization to critical thinking skills.⁷ As the authors of the new curriculum explained in *Education Week*,⁸ they'd been motivated by the concerns of AP teachers who felt the existing APUSH curriculum “prevented them and their students from exploring in any depth the main events and documents of U.S. history.” They sought greater opportunities for their students to “understand the ‘why’ of U.S. history,” and to “make its deeper meanings come alive to students.” The 2014 redesigned APUSH was greeted warmly by academic associations, including the American Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, the National Council for Social Studies, and the National Council for History Education.

But the College Board’s attempt to change *how* students learn U.S. history was greeted by conservatives as a revision of *what* U.S. history is.⁹

Education has long been a front in the U.S. culture wars. In particular, conservatives have argued for at least two decades that secular progressives have taken over history studies to inculcate students with a negative view of the American past and present.¹⁰ Thanks to a concerted effort from **members of the State Policy Network**,¹¹ such as the Boston-based Pioneer Institute¹² and the Chicago-based Heartland Institute, high school history has remained a controversial subject on a national level.

The APUSH controversy of the past several years is reported to have started when Larry Krieger, a retired high school history teacher who had started each year with the theme of American exceptionalism,¹³ slammed APUSH in numerous articles,¹⁴ including several written for the Heartland Institute,¹⁵ a conservative think tank known for its role in promoting climate-science denial. The Republican National Committee picked up the beat and condemned APUSH as “radically revisionist.” Peter Wood, President of the right-leaning National Association of Scholars and a critic of environmentalism and LGBTQ equality, penned an extensive piece criticizing the APUSH redesign last year,¹⁶ using the term “Bowdoin Syndrome” to describe what he called the “intellectual arrogance” fostered by that college as well as by AP examinations. Eventually, Tea Party hero Ben Carson, author of *One Nation: What We Can All Do to Save America’s Future*, went so far as to say that “most people” who complete the course would then be “ready to sign up for ISIS.”¹⁷

“Ben Carson said that ‘most people’ who complete the course would then be ‘ready to sign up for ISIS.’”

"LITTLE REBELS"

In 2014, the fight received national media attention when nearly 400 high school students in Jefferson County, Colorado, engaged in an unusual form of political theater. A newly elected school board was attempting to create a “curriculum committee”¹⁸ that could review any course’s instruction materials, starting with APUSH. Its review criteria held that “Materials should promote citizenship, patriotism, essentials and benefits of the free enterprise system, respect for authority and respect for individual rights. Materials should not encourage or condone civil disorder, social strife or disregard of the law.”¹⁹ A Colorado school board member, Julia Williams, summed up this sentiment in an interview with a local TV news station, saying, “I don’t think we should encourage our kids to be little rebels.”

In protest of the school board’s attempt to write civil *obedience* into the curriculum, the students dressed themselves up as historical figures, including Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and

sundry founding fathers, and staged a walk out. Some county schools were closed when too many teachers failed to show up for work in protest.²⁰ Jefferson County Board of Education President Ken Witt dismissed the students as “political pawns”²¹ for the teachers’ unions, but the walkout succeeded in stalling the school board’s plan to change the curriculum²² and helped garner support for the recall of three board members.²³

LOCAL BATTLES, NATIONAL STRATEGY

The Jefferson County history battle was colorful enough to capture national headlines. But it was just one in a string of conflicts over APUSH curricula taking place nationwide over the last few years, in Oklahoma, Georgia, Texas, and North and South Carolina.

While the vehement state battles appeared to be driven by local personalities and agendas, there was a larger, national strategy at work.

The opposition to APUSH occurred on two levels. The first, as in Colorado, concerned control of local school boards and school communities. A second prong of the attack focused on legislation at the state level, bolstered by a resolution passed by the Republican National Convention denouncing the course and urging Congress to withdraw funding to the College Board.²⁴ Policymakers in the Carolinas agitated to eliminate or doctor APUSH at the end of 2014. In Texas, a state that represents 10 percent of the College Board’s market,²⁵ the infamously right-wing State Board of Education passed a resolution in September 2014 to request that the College Board revise the APUSH framework.²⁶ In February 2015, Oklahoma state representative Dan Fisher introduced a bill that would bar funds from being used on AP History, although public outcry effectively killed the bill within a month.²⁷ And in March 2015 in Georgia, a lobbyist from the American Principles Project, a right-wing think tank based in Washington, D.C., reportedly showed up urging legislators to adopt anti-APUSH legislation, resulting in a bill that passed the state Senate in March²⁸ (but ultimately stalled in the House).

“In Texas, the infamously right-wing State Board of Education passed a resolution in September 2014 to request that the College Board revise the APUSH framework.”

The American Principles Project (APP), which has been advocating against APUSH since at least the Jefferson County protests, was founded in 2009 by Princeton University professor and Catholic neoconservative Robert P. George in order to ensure that the “dignity of the person” is reflected in local and national policies. Some of the APP’s best-known work has been produced in the fight against Common Core, but its leadership is invested in a broader slate of culture war issues. After the publication of the Manhattan Declaration in 2009, *The New York Times* called George “the country’s most influential conservative Christian thinker.”²⁹ George was the primary author of the Declaration—part of **an effort to unify conservative Catholics and evangelicals around a three-part agenda**, which they described as “life, marriage, and religious liberty”³⁰—but other APP figures are also proven culture warriors. APP chairman Sean Fieler also heads the Chiaroscuro Group, whose radio ads attacking a pro-choice politician once featured a talking fetus; the APP’s board president, Francis Cannon, coauthored a post-2012 report on “Building a Winning GOP Coalition”;³¹ and other board members include anti-marriage equality activist Maggie Gallagher and Luiz Tellez, cofounder of the anti-LGBTQ and anti-abortion legal advocacy group the Witherspoon Institute (which helped fund a thoroughly debunked 2012 study by conservative sociologist Mark Regnerus suggesting negative outcomes for children of same-sex couples³²).

In their 2015 lobbying document,³³ APP charged that APUSH “requires American History to be taught through a leftist, revisionist lens.” According to APP, the course gave “special attention to

the formation of gender, class, racial and ethnic identities” and “presents American business in a consistently negative light.”

This type of accusation is an old one, dating back to at least 1994, when Lynne Cheney, former head of the National Endowment for the Humanities (and wife of former Vice President Dick Cheney) condemned the National Standards for U.S. History as revisionist political correctness in her now-famous *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, “The End of History.”³⁴ Over twenty years later, Cheney, currently a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, resumed the attack in another *Journal* op-ed, “The End of History, Part II,” arguing, “The [APUSH] curriculum shouldn’t be farmed out, not to the federal government and not to private groups. It should stay in the hands of the people who are constitutionally responsible for it: the citizens of each state.”³⁵

WHOSE HISTORY?

At the core of this debate over “revisionist” versus “traditional” history is the question of whether U.S. history curriculum should be about facts or a primer on civic duty and citizenship. The College Board’s new curriculum already had to stand the test of certain state laws such as North Carolina’s Founding Principles Act, which since 2011 has required that high school students pass a course on the “Founding Principles” (because “the survival of the republic” depends on students being better “guardians of its heritage”).³⁶

A professor of history at the University of Oklahoma asserted that the 2014 “framework represents a shift from national *identity* to subcultural *identities*” and warned, “We will not be able to uphold our democracy unless we know our great stories, our national narratives, and the admirable deeds of our great men and women. The new AP U.S. History framework fails on that count, because it does not see the civic role of education as a central one.”³⁷ (Scholars of Native American history pushed back on this, arguing in *Indian Country Today* that, “American Indian history is part of the fabric of the state of Oklahoma and who we are today...therefore all of that history is American history.”³⁸)

In September 2014, the Board had responded to critics, writing in a memo, “At the root of current objections to this highly regarded process is a blatant disregard for the facts...the most vocal critics have prioritized their own agenda above the best interests of teachers, students, and their families.”³⁹ Nonetheless, the force of the pushback was enough to convince the Board to solicit public feedback on their course, which they did through their website from late 2014 through early 2015.⁴⁰

“At the root of current objections to this highly regarded process is a blatant disregard for the facts.”

In the end, with no sign of the debate relenting, the College Board agreed to another revision, which was released this July. News coverage pointed to the pressure the College Board had received using phrases such as “gives in” and “caves to.”

Zachary Goldberg, Director of Media Relations for the College Board, objected to these characterizations, saying that inaccurate media reports about the revision had misled many readers into thinking the Board had removed numerous mentions of slavery from the course. Not only was that incorrect, he wrote, but the revision was hailed as a success “by historians and teachers representing a range of political views [for] presenting a richer and more balanced view of American history. This was achieved not by reducing or minimizing the important narratives of underrepresented groups, but by adding to those narratives and including other important themes and concepts that the 2014 edition was rightly criticized for having minimized.”⁴¹

Whether or not the curriculum was rightly criticized, and the College Board was simply “responding to legitimate criticism while avoiding excessive overcompensation” (as consultant Jeremy Stern put it),⁴² the events preceding the revisions appear to suggest that APUSH, like much school curricula, has been politicized by a right-wing agenda.

The areas of the curriculum that the College Board noted had received the most criticism—the treatment of the founding fathers, founding documents, free enterprise, and America’s role in wartime victories—underwent the most significant changes and expansions.⁴³ And a side-by-side comparison of the two versions of the course shows concrete examples of right-wing influence—some blatant, and some more coded.

Analysis of White racial identity and power as an undercurrent of U.S. history is all but erased. Mention of “white superiority” as a component of Manifest Destiny was stripped from the 2015 revision, along with any mention of “white resistance” to desegregation. From 2014 to 2015, the coverage of Native American history under colonialism shifted from describing indigenous people’s attempts to “forge advantageous political alliances” in order to “maintain their tribal lands” to having “repeatedly evaluated and adjusted their alliances” in order to “maintain control of tribal lands and natural resources”—a subtle tweak that seems to speak more to contemporary conservative complaints about Native American control of natural resources on sovereign lands than an impartial reassessment of what happened during colonial times. Where the issue of White racial identity was added, it often seemed intended to mitigate injustices perpetuated against Blacks, by linking the experience of White indentured servants and poor White sharecroppers with the experience of enslaved Africans and impoverished African Americans in the Jim Crow South.

“Mention of ‘white superiority’ as a component of Manifest Destiny was stripped from the 2015 revision, along with any mention of “white resistance” to desegregation.”

While Goldberg argues that “The struggles and challenges experienced – and that continue to be experienced – by minorities as America seeks to live up to its ideals in no way are minimized in the new edition,” many complexities of those struggles seem to have been lost in the Board’s new revision. Quoted in a September article in *Indian Country Today*, K. Tsianina Lomawaima, a member of the Mvskoke/Creek Nation and a professor at Arizona State University, pointed to the consolidation of “Latino, American Indian, and Asian American movements” into one statement in the course as an example of how the newest curriculum is “once again erasing indigenous sovereignty and sliding American Indians in as just another piece of the so-called racial-ethnic mix.”⁴⁴

To *The National Review*, which was pleased with the revision, the changes amounted to “a good rewrite,” and “balanced handiwork.”⁴⁵ But the biggest question about teaching U.S. history remains: how can you balance coverage of a heritage that was never based on equity?

APUSH, Old and New

APUSH Thematic Learning Objective - Comparison	
2014 Edition	2015 Edition
<p>IDENTITY - "This theme focuses on the formation of both American national identity and group identities in U.S. history. Students should be able to explain how various identities, cultures, and values have been preserved or changed in different contexts of U.S. history, with special attention given to the formation of gender, class, racial, and ethnic identities. Students should be able to explain how these subidentities have interacted with each other and with larger conceptions of American national identity."</p>	<p>AMERICAN AND NATIONAL IDENTITY - "This theme focuses on how and why definitions of American and national identity and values have developed, as well as on related topics such as citizenship, constitutionalism, foreign policy, assimilation, and American exceptionalism."</p>
APUSH Concept Outline - Comparison on Native American History	
2014 Edition	2015 Edition
<p>P 42: "During and after the colonial war for independence, various tribes attempted to forge advantageous political alliances with one another and with European powers to protect their interests, limit migration of white settlers, and maintain their tribal lands."</p>	<p>P 41: "Various American Indian groups repeatedly evaluated and adjusted their alliances with Europeans, other tribes, and the U.S., seeking to limit migration of white settlers and maintain control of tribal lands and natural resources. British alliances with American Indians contributed to tensions between the U.S. and Britain."</p>
APUSH Concept Outline - Comparison of "Manifest Destiny"	
2014 Edition	2015 Edition
<p>P 55: "The idea of Manifest Destiny, which asserted U.S. power in the Western Hemisphere and supported U.S. expansion westward, was built on a belief in white racial superiority and a sense of American cultural superiority, and helped to shape the era's political debates."</p>	<p>P 53: "Advocates of annexing western lands argued that Manifest Destiny and the superiority of American institutions compelled the United States to expand its borders westward to the Pacific ocean."</p>

Information in this chart was compiled from the 2014 and 2015 edition of the College Board's AP U.S. History Course and Exam Description

Information in this chart was compiled from the 2014 and 2015 edition of the College Board's AP U.S. History Course and Exam Description

APUSH Concept Outline - PERIOD 1: 1491–1607 Comparison

2014 Edition	2015 Edition
<p>P 34: “With little experience dealing with people who were different from themselves, Spanish and Portuguese explorers poorly understood the native peoples they encountered in the Americas, leading to debates over how American Indians should be treated and how “civilized” these groups were compared to European standards.”</p>	<p>P 28: “Mutual misunderstandings between Europeans and Native Americans often defined the early years of interaction and trade as each group sought to make sense of the other over time, Europeans and Native Americans adopted some useful aspects of each other’s culture.”</p>
<p>P 34: “Many Europeans developed a belief in white superiority to justify their subjugation of Africans and American Indians, using several different rationales.”</p>	<p>P 28: “Extended contact with Native Americans and Africans fostered a debate among European religious and political leaders about how non-Europeans should be treated, as well as evolving religious, cultural, and racial justifications for the subjugation of Africans and Native Americans.”</p>

APUSH Concept Outline - PERIOD 4: 1800–1848 Comparison

2014 Edition	2015 Edition
<p>P 50: “Many white Americans in the South asserted their regional identity through pride in the institution of slavery, insisting that the federal government should defend that institution.”</p>	<p>P 44: “Regional interests often trumped national concerns as the basis for many political leaders’ positions on slavery and economic policy.”</p>

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Katherine Stewart has written for The Nation, The New York Times, and The Guardian. She is the author of The Good News Club: The Christian Right’s Stealth Assault on America’s Children (PublicAffairs, 2012).

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