

Textbook case: Whitewashed revisions

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In January, almost a year after its heated debate over the science curriculum, the Texas State Board of Education started meeting to revise the state's social studies program. The board's once-a-decade decisions on curriculum are nationally significant. As the nation's second-largest textbook market, Texas shapes the content of textbooks sold throughout the country.

On U.S. history, the Texas education board features a virtual standoff between two worldviews. One segment of the board adheres to the myth of the U.S. as a Christian nation. Worried that mainstream educators are indifferent to the nation's Christian identity, these members want textbooks to put more stress on the central role of Christianity and on the unique and even divinely ordained mission of the nation. The other segment of the board is not opposed to revising the history curriculum, but it wants revisions to reflect the best scholarship.

On the urging of conservative members, the board's review process has called on "experts" David Barton and Peter Marshall. These men are not scholars, but they do represent a certain evangelical Christian worldview, which includes the tendency to be reflexively suspicious of intellectual elites and detached from mainstream scholarly discussions.

Barton founded and leads an organization called WallBuilders, which aims to present "America's forgotten history and heroes"—by which he means its Christian heroes. Whereas most scholars have concluded that the nation's founders blended a rationalist version of Christianity with Enlightenment deism, Barton contends that the founders were evangelical Christians. Marshall is a pastor who objects to current textbooks' positive mentions of Thurgood Marshall, the first African-American U.S. Supreme Court justice, and labor leader César Chávez. According to Marshall, Chávez—who as a union organizer sought to improve conditions for immigrant farmworkers—is not a positive example of citizenship.

Julio Noboa, a University of El Paso history professor who has been part of the history standards committee, summarized the views of one education board member this way: “He wanted a nice whitewashed view of American history, with no pimples” (Noboa was quoted in the *Wall Street Journal*).

Self-serving or whitewashed versions of history do not serve citizens, nor do they serve Christians. Christians, being mindful of the pervasiveness of sin, should more than most people be ready not only to acknowledge national failures but to recognize the complex, multifaceted factors that drive events and decisions.

How a people or nation tells its history is rightly a contested matter. History is always being revised in light of new evidence, new concerns and new interpretations. But revisions should arise from a rigorous attention to evidence, not from ideological pressures; they should reflect an expansion, not a narrowing, of historical awareness and sympathy. That is not an “elite” approach to history; it is an approach that respects the truth.