

Why Don't We Tell Children the Truth About America?

BY KIM MARSHALL

Pulitzer Prize-winner Frances FitzGerald takes a hard look at textbooks and censorship.

Frances FitzGerald's *America Revised* (Atlantic/Little Brown, 1979) is a compact, devastating critique of American social studies and history curricula.

The heart of FitzGerald's analysis is her awesome thoroughness: her reading of just about every major social studies and history textbook published in this century; her interviews with people inside the \$800-million textbook industry; her charting of virtually every ebb and flow of the various reform movements that have washed over American education and publishing. What emerges is not a simple diatribe against textbooks, but a thoughtful look at a complex curricular process in which the truth occupies a discouragingly low priority.

In her discussion of publishing, FitzGerald points out what she calls the "essential ambiguity" of the role played by textbook editors sitting in their office towers. On the one hand, they serve as a Ministry of Truth for millions of American students; they decide what the children will learn and when the children will learn it. On the other hand, these editors are businesspeople; they must cater to the changing tastes of school boards and a variety of pressure groups. Textbook editors make decisions knowing that adoption criteria are often highly political and relate less to truth in history than to the ideologies of influential lobbies. Students, the editors' ultimate clients, have almost no voice in the process, and in many states and cities, neither do teachers.

In 1939, a well-known American history text was destroyed by right-wing pressure groups. After that, texts avoided the word "imperialist" and showed a morbid fear of Communism and most other topics deemed controversial. Still, the drumbeat of criticism continued from a variety of groups: the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Ku Klux Klan, the John Birch Society, fundamentalists, the National Electric Light Association, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the liquor interests, and many more.

In the mid-1960s, a whole new set of forces was brought to bear on publishers. The opening wedge came from the Detroit Board of Education, which applied effective pressure to have black people treated better in textbooks. (One text had actually depicted slavery in a positive light.) Other Northern cities with large black populations soon joined Detroit in lobbying for an accurate portrayal of blacks in America. More pressure followed from Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Asian Americans and other groups eager to have a distorted record set straight. The political realities of publishing textbooks changed drastically, and editors could hardly keep up with events. FitzGerald observes that

no sooner had the editors begun to paste in pictures of Ralph Bunche and write reports on the civil rights movement than along came the women's movement,

sending them quite literally back to the drawing board—this time to change their representation of half the human species.

Militant Dullness

Ironically, militance doesn't always produce excitement. FitzGerald forcefully points out that, in spite of all this new relevance and the inclusion of various once-excluded groups, most textbooks are *dull*. The new guidelines emanating from school boards and state departments of education have made it impossible for an individual stylist or historian to write a textbook. Texts are now "developed," not written, and the content is more a marketing decision than a matter of writing or history. The emphasis on expediency gives rise to such questions as, "Does this math text have enough Polish-sounding people buying oranges? Does that third-grade reader show a woman fireperson? What will play in New York that will not offend the sensibilities of Peoria?" FitzGerald points out that replacing the search for historical accuracy with the search for the most salable bias has drawbacks for publishers as well as for readers:

The textbook companies and beyond them the school boards simply do not permit authors the freedom to write their own books in their own way. Today, texts are written backward or inside out, as it were, beginning with public demand and ending with the historian. This system gives the publishers a certain security, since their books cannot be too far out of the mainstream. But, having minimized one kind of risk, they have created another, of a different order. By casting away scholarly claims to authority, they have set themselves adrift on the uncertain seas of public opinion. The voyage can be uncomfortable at times. It is difficult when opinions are divided or are changing rapidly, and it is just as difficult when, as happens quite frequently, people do not really know what they want to hear. For the past ten years, the publishers have suffered from both of these conditions.

Waves of Pressure

FitzGerald is at her most brilliant in tracing the large movements that have shaped public opinion—and therefore textbooks—in American educational history. Before the twentieth century, American history textbooks were generally academic; they told about the past without trying to change the culture or mold kids' characters. Then the first wave of progressives, led by John Dewey, turned American schools and textbooks around in the 1920s. Believing deeply in the perfectability of people—especially the new waves of immigrants—through education, these reformers pushed for an egalitarian society. Another wave

(continued on page 52)

TRUTH ABOUT AMERICA

(continued from page 46)

of progressives in the 1960s turned its reforming zeal toward poor inner-city students and minority groups.

Between the two waves of progressives and since the 1960s, there have been various reactions from the fundamentalists (whom FitzGerald describes as believing in God, not people, and thinking Americans can survive only by obeying one permanent set of laws and values) and mandarins (her term for academics), who try vainly to return history textbooks to academic status.

FitzGerald takes pains to show how the progressives and fundamentalists, for all their ideological differences, both believe that schools should educate kids according to *their* point of view. Both, therefore, contain an anti-intellectual strain that puts a damper on free inquiry and prevents a broad liberal education. (One of her most scathing pages takes Jonathan Kozol to task for opposing an innovative program that allowed students to reach the "wrong" conclusion in their study of urban crises and racial turmoil.) FitzGerald feels that, in the end, both progressives and fundamentalists want history to be "propaganda for their version of the social good." And she feels that both movements have produced boring, poor-quality texts that stifle intellectual growth, censor reality and turn kids off.

More than that, these propagandistic textbooks create generations of cynics. She thinks it naive to believe that children "only see what they are told to see in school" or that they can be swayed from their parents' and the community's values by textbooks. She deplores the fundamentalist idea that "the psyches of children are so frail that if the schools present them with any exception to what the community defines as correct behavior they will plunge into a moral abyss from which nothing can save them."

The latest swing of the pendulum is, of course, the back-to-basics movement. FitzGerald agrees that students should learn to read and to write in school, but she flatly disagrees that children acquire these skills better through rote learning than through other teaching methods:

... the Back to Basics argument is not a theory at all but, rather, a mood that sweeps the country from time to time. It is not even a specific reaction to progressive education, since it is far, far older than that. Complaints about the decline of education due to modern permissiveness go back at least to the mid-nineteenth century. As a national mood, it often coincides with the end of wars and with periods of economic downturn. Conservative, pessimistic, nostalgic, it seems to be some kind of quest for certainty in an uncertain world. The argument itself is not racist or anti-democratic, but it always seems to appear in the wake of efforts to democratize the school system, and its proponents always insist on the importance of maintaining middle-class standards and values. . . . Then, too, the Back to Basics theorists are clearly warning teachers against any ambitions they might have to teach critical thinking or the uses of the imagination. The "basics" are to them grammatical rules, facts, dates—also, instruction in patriotism and filiiopieté.

Tattered Product

What is the quality of the history textbooks that have come out of this political process in the past two decades? FitzGerald, herself a historian, heaps scorn on them. She blames university historians for not taking seriously their jobs as consultants for publishers of elementary and secondary textbooks. New ideas in the universities, she contends, take 15 years to trickle down to texts, making the texts hopelessly outdated at any given moment. Furthermore, academic journals don't review new texts on a regu-

lar basis; so there is no real scholarly check on their intellectual quality and factual accuracy.

FitzGerald notes that, along with shoddy and outdated scholarship, pressure groups have a decidedly detrimental effect on the substance of history texts. In the "good old days," history texts used to be written from the U.S. government's point of view. This imposed an obvious bias but at least kept things relatively simple—history consisted of official facts, dates, presidents and such. Pressures more recently brought to bear on the textbook industry have produced something different: a product that reflects "a compromise, an America sculpted and sanded down by the pressures of diverse constituents and interest groups. . . . the lowest common denominator of American tastes." The trend, FitzGerald feels, is toward either unreadable mish-mashes or different textbooks for different groups. Either way, she says, the message seems to be that "the center cannot, and should not, hold." That, of course, is a message repugnant to local school boards.

Some new texts attempt to solve this problem by pretending that in spite of the nation's polyglot, pluralistic character, Americans are still all alike, no matter what their color or background. FitzGerald finds the "textbook doctrine of American homogeneity" ridiculous and criticizes even the pictures in new textbooks for their unreality: "Indeed, everyone is smiling so hard you would think that all non-white people in the United States took happy pills." Only a very few texts, she finds, open up the obvious conflicts and problems for discussion.

In general, FitzGerald is impressed with the concept of the newer inquiry, or case-study, textbooks that present historical issues from all sides and get students involved in thinking about issues on their own. Although she criticizes the quality of some "new social studies" works, she bemoans the fact that such textbooks make up only 15 percent of the textbook market; the rest of the books are from the "civics-as-history" mold.

She summarizes the consequences of teaching with distorted history texts in the final, and strongest, paragraph of *America Revised*:

The censorship of schoolbooks is simply the negative face of the demand that the books portray the world as a utopia of the eternal present—a place without conflicts, without malice or stupidity, where Dick (black or white) comes home with a smiling Jane to a nice house in the suburbs. To the extent that young people actually believe them, these bland fictions, propagated for the purpose of creating good citizens, may actually achieve the opposite; they give young people no warning of the real dangers ahead, and later they may well make these young people feel that their own experience of conflict or suffering is unique in history and perhaps un-American. To the extent that children can see the contrast between these fictions and the world around them, this kind of instruction can only make them cynical. The textbooks' naiveté about child psychology is matched only by their lack of respect for history. Indeed, to insist that children do as we say, not as we do, is to assert that the past has no influence over the future and that today peels away from yesterday like a decal. . . . To teach history with the assumption that students have the psychology of laboratory pigeons is not only to close off the avenues for thinking about the future; it is to deprive American children of their birthright. ■

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