

Handicapped by History

The Process of Hero-making

What passes for identity in America is a series of myths about one's heroic ancestors. —James Baldwin¹

One is astonished in the study of history at the recurrence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over. We must not remember that Daniel Webster got drunk but only remember that he was a splendid constitutional lawyer. We must forget that George Washington was a slave owner . . . and simply remember the things we regard as creditable and inspiring. The difficulty, of course, with this philosophy is that history loses its value as an incentive and example; it paints perfect men and noble nations, but it does not tell the truth. —W. E. B. Du Bois²

By idolizing those whom we honor, we do a disservice both to them and to ourselves. . . . We fail to recognize that we could go and do likewise.

—Charles V. Willie³

THIS CHAPTER IS ABOUT HEROIFICATION, a degenerative process (much like calcification) that makes people over into heroes. Through this process, our educational media turn flesh-and-blood individuals into pious, perfect creatures without conflicts, pain, credibility, or human interest.

Many American history textbooks are studded with biographical vignettes of the very famous (*Land of Promise* devotes a box to each president) and the famous (*The Challenge of Freedom* provides “Did You Know?” boxes about Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman to graduate from medical school in the United States, and Lorraine Hansberry, author of *A Raisin in the Sun*, among many others). In themselves, vignettes are not a bad idea. They instruct by human example. They show diverse ways that people can make a difference. They allow textbooks to give space to characters such as Blackwell and Hansberry, who relieve what would otherwise be a monolithic parade of white male political leaders. Biographical vignettes also provoke reflection as to our purpose in teaching history: Is Chester A. Arthur more deserving of space than, say, Frank Lloyd Wright? Who influences us more today—Wright, who invented the carport and transformed domestic architectural spaces, or Arthur, who, um, signed the first Civil Service Act? Whose rise to prominence provides more drama—Blackwell's or George Bush's (the latter born with a silver Senate seat in his mouth)?⁴ The choices are debatable, but surely textbooks should include *some* people based not only on what they achieved but also on the distance they traversed to achieve it.

We could go on to third- and fourth-guess the list of heroes in textbook pantheons. My concern here, however, is not who gets chosen, but rather what happens to the heroes when they are introduced into our history textbooks and our classrooms. Two twentieth-century Americans provide case studies of heroification: Woodrow Wilson and Helen Keller. Wilson was unarguably an important president, and he receives extensive textbook coverage. Keller, on the other hand, was a “little person” who pushed through no legislation, changed the course of no scientific discipline, declared no war. Only one of the twelve history textbooks I surveyed includes her photograph. But teachers love to talk about Keller

and often show audiovisual materials or recommend biographies that present her life as exemplary. All this attention ensures that students retain something about both of these historical figures, but they may be no better off for it. Heroification so distorts the lives of Keller and Wilson (and many others) that we cannot think straight about them.

Teachers have held up Helen Keller, the blind and deaf girl who overcame her physical handicaps, as an inspiration to generations of schoolchildren. Every fifth-grader knows the scene in which Anne Sullivan spells *water* into young Helen's hand at the pump. At least a dozen movies and filmstrips have been made on Keller's life. Each yields its version of the same cliché. A McGraw-Hill educational film concludes: "The gift of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan to the world is to constantly remind us of the wonder of the world around us and how much we owe those who taught us what it means, for there is no person that is unworthy or incapable of being helped, and the greatest service any person can make us is to help another reach true potential."⁵

To draw such a bland maxim from the life of Helen Keller, historians and filmmakers have disregarded her actual biography and left out the lessons she specifically asked us to learn from it. Keller, who struggled so valiantly to learn to speak, has been made mute by history. The result is that we really don't know much about her.

Over the past ten years, I have asked dozens of college students who Helen Keller was and what she did. They all know that she was a blind and deaf girl. Most of them know that she was befriended by a teacher, Anne Sullivan, and learned to read and write and even to speak. Some students can recall rather minute details of Keller's early life: that she lived in Alabama, that she was unruly and without manners before Sullivan came along, and so forth. A few know that Keller graduated from college. But about what happened next, about the whole of her adult life, they are ignorant. A few students venture that Keller became a "public figure" or a "humanitarian," perhaps on behalf of the blind or deaf. "She wrote, didn't she?" or "she spoke"—conjectures without content. Keller, who was born in 1880, graduated from Radcliffe in 1904 and died in 1968. To ignore the sixty-four years of her adult life or to encapsulate them with the single word *humanitarian* is to lie by omission.

The truth is that Helen Keller was a radical socialist. She joined the Socialist party of Massachusetts in 1909. She had become a social radical even before she graduated from Radcliffe, and *not*, she emphasized, because of any teachings available there. After the Russian Revolution, she sang the praises of the new communist nation: "In the East a new star is risen! With pain and anguish the old order has given birth to the



Always a voice for the voiceless, Helen Keller championed women's suffrage. Her position at the head of this 1912 demonstration shows her celebrity status as well as her commitment to the cause. The shields are all from Western states, where women were already voting.

new, and behold in the East a man-child is born! Onward, comrades, all together! Onward to the campfires of Russia! Onward to the coming dawn!"⁶ Keller hung a red flag over the desk in her study. Gradually she moved to the left of the Socialist party and became a Wobbly, a member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the syndicalist union persecuted by Woodrow Wilson.

Keller's commitment to socialism stemmed from her experience as a disabled person and from her sympathy for others with handicaps. She began by working to simplify the alphabet for the blind, but soon came to realize that to deal solely with blindness was to treat symptom, not cause. Through research she learned that blindness was not distributed randomly throughout the population but was concentrated in the lower class. Men who were poor might be blinded in industrial accidents or by inadequate medical care; poor women who became prostitutes faced the additional danger of syphilitic blindness. Thus Keller learned how the social class system controls people's opportunities in life, sometimes determining even whether they can see. Keller's research was not just book-learning: "I have visited sweatshops, factories, crowded slums. If I could not see it, I could smell it."⁷

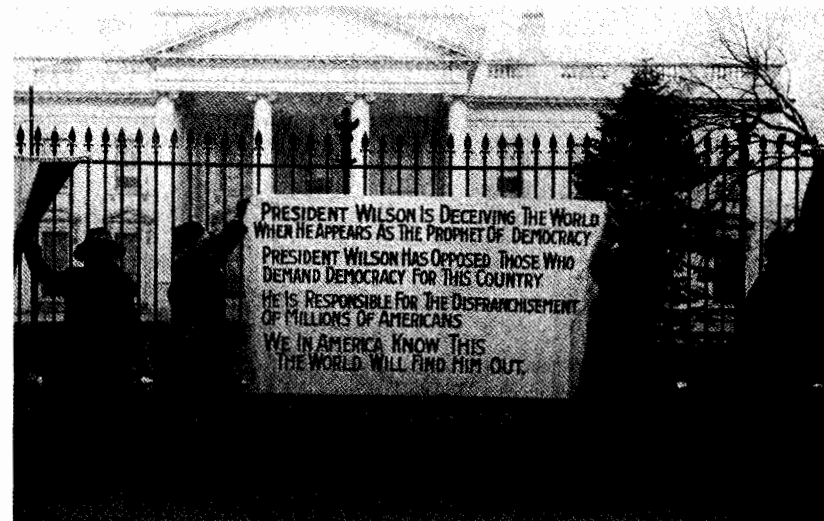
At the time Keller became a socialist, she was one of the most famous women on the planet. She soon became the most notorious. Her conversion to socialism caused a new storm of publicity—this time outraged. Newspapers that had extolled her courage and intelligence now emphasized her handicap. Columnists charged that she had no independent sensory input and was in thrall to those who fed her information. Typical was the editor of the Brooklyn *Eagle*, who wrote that Keller’s “mistakes spring out of the manifest limitations of her development.”

Keller recalled having met this editor: “At that time the compliments he paid me were so generous that I blush to remember them. But now that I have come out for socialism he reminds me and the public that I am blind and deaf and especially liable to error. I must have shrunk in intelligence during the years since I met him.” She went on, “Oh, ridiculous Brooklyn *Eagle*! Socially blind and deaf, it defends an intolerable system, a system that is the cause of much of the physical blindness and deafness which we are trying to prevent.”⁸

Keller, who devoted much of her later life to raising funds for the American Foundation for the Blind, never wavered in her belief that our society needed radical change. Having herself fought so hard to speak, she helped found the American Civil Liberties Union to fight for the free speech of others. She sent \$100 to the NAACP with a letter of support that appeared in its magazine *The Crisis*—a radical act for a white person from Alabama in the 1920s. She supported Eugene V. Debs, the Socialist candidate, in each of his campaigns for the presidency. She composed essays on the women’s movement, on politics, on economics. Near the end of her life, she wrote to Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, leader of the American Communist party, who was then languishing in jail, a victim of the McCarthy era: “Loving birthday greetings, dear Elizabeth Flynn! May the sense of serving mankind bring strength and peace into your brave heart!”⁹

One may not agree with Helen Keller’s positions. Her praise of the USSR now seems naïve, embarrassing, to some even treasonous. But she *was* a radical—a fact few Americans know, because our schooling and our mass media left it out.¹⁰

What we did not learn about Woodrow Wilson is even more remarkable. When I ask my college students to tell me what they recall about President Wilson, they respond with enthusiasm. They say that Wilson led our country reluctantly into World War I and after the war led the struggle nationally and internationally to establish the League of Nations. They associate Wilson with progressive causes like women’s suffrage. A handful of students recall the Wilson administration’s Palmer Raids against left-wing unions. But my students seldom know or speak



Among the progressive-era reforms with which students often credit Woodrow Wilson is women’s suffrage. Although women did receive the right to vote during Wilson’s administration, the president was at first unsympathetic. He had suffragists arrested; his wife detested them. Public pressure, aroused by hunger strikes and other actions of the movement, convinced Wilson that to oppose women’s suffrage was politically unwise. Textbooks typically fail to show the interrelationship between the hero and the people. By giving the credit to the hero, authors tell less than half of the story.

about two antidemocratic policies that Wilson carried out: his racial segregation of the federal government and his military interventions in foreign countries.

Under Wilson, the United States intervened in Latin America more often than at any other time in our history. We landed troops in Mexico in 1914, Haiti in 1915, the Dominican Republic in 1916, Mexico again in 1916 (and nine more times before the end of Wilson’s presidency), Cuba in 1917, and Panama in 1918. Throughout his administration Wilson maintained forces in Nicaragua, using them to determine Nicaragua’s president and to force passage of a treaty preferential to the United States.

In 1917 Woodrow Wilson took on a major power when he started sending secret monetary aid to the “White” side of the Russian civil war. In the summer of 1918 he authorized a naval blockade of the Soviet Union and sent expeditionary forces to Murmansk, Archangel, and Vladivostok to help overthrow the Russian Revolution. With the blessing of Britain and France, and in a joint command with Japanese sol-

diers, American forces penetrated westward from Vladivostok to Lake Baikal, supporting Czech and White Russian forces that had declared an anticommunist government headquartered at Omsk. After briefly maintaining front lines as far west as the Volga, the White Russian forces disintegrated by the end of 1919, and our troops finally left Vladivostok on April 1, 1920.¹¹

Few Americans who were not alive at the time know anything about our “unknown war with Russia,” to quote the title of Robert Maddox’s book on this fiasco. Not one of the twelve American history textbooks in my sample even mentions it. Russian history textbooks, on the other hand, give the episode considerable coverage. According to Maddox: “The immediate effect of the intervention was to prolong a bloody civil war, thereby costing thousands of additional lives and wreaking enormous destruction on an already battered society. And there were longer-range implications. Bolshevik leaders had clear proof . . . that the Western powers meant to destroy the Soviet government if given the chance.”¹²

This aggression fueled the suspicions that motivated the Soviets during the Cold War, and until its breakup the Soviet Union continued to claim damages for the invasion.

Wilson’s invasions of Latin America are better known than his Russian adventure. Textbooks do cover some of them, and it is fascinating to watch textbook authors attempt to justify these episodes. Any accurate portrayal of the invasions could not possibly show Wilson or the United States in a favorable light. With hindsight we know that Wilson’s interventions in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Nicaragua set the stage for the dictators Batista, Trujillo, the Duvaliers, and the Somozas, whose legacies still reverberate.¹³ Even in the 1910s, most of the invasions were unpopular in this country and provoked a torrent of criticism abroad. By the mid-1920s, Wilson’s successors reversed his policies in Latin America. The authors of history textbooks know this, for a chapter or two after Wilson they laud our “Good Neighbor Policy,” the renunciation of force in Latin America by Presidents Coolidge and Hoover, which was extended by Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Textbooks might (but don’t) call Wilson’s Latin American actions a “Bad Neighbor Policy” by comparison. Instead, faced with unpleasant-ries, textbooks wriggle to get the hero off the hook, as in this example from *The Challenge of Freedom*: “President Wilson wanted the United States to build friendships with the countries of Latin America. However, he found this difficult. . . .” Some textbooks blame the invasions on the countries invaded: “Necessity was the mother of armed Caribbean intervention,” states *The American Pageant*. *Land of Promise* is

vague as to who caused the invasions but seems certain they were not Wilson’s doing: “He soon discovered that because of forces he could not control, his ideas of morality and idealism had to give way to practical action.” *Promise* goes on to assert Wilson’s innocence: “Thus, though he believed it morally undesirable to send Marines into the Caribbean, he saw no way to avoid it.” This passage is sheer invention. Unlike his secretary of the navy, who later complained that what Wilson “forced [me] to do in Haiti was a bitter pill for me,” no documentary evidence suggests that Wilson suffered any such qualms about dispatching troops to the Caribbean.¹⁴

All twelve of the textbooks I surveyed mention Wilson’s 1914 invasion of Mexico, but they posit that the interventions were not Wilson’s fault. “President Wilson was urged to send military forces into Mexico to protect American investments and to restore law and order,” according to *Triumph of the American Nation*, whose authors emphasize that the president at first chose *not* to intervene. But “as the months passed, even President Wilson began to lose patience.” Walter Karp has shown that this version contradicts the facts—the invasion was Wilson’s idea from the start, and it outraged Congress as well as the American people.¹⁵ According to Karp, Wilson’s intervention was so outrageous that leaders of both sides of Mexico’s ongoing civil war demanded that the U.S. forces leave; the pressure of public opinion in the United States and around the world finally influenced Wilson to recall the troops.

Textbook authors commonly use another device when describing our Mexican adventures: they identify Wilson as ordering our forces to withdraw, but nobody is specified as having ordered them in! Imparting information in a passive voice helps to insulate historical figures from their own unheroic or unethical deeds.

Some books go beyond omitting the actor and leave out the act itself. Half of the twelve textbooks do not even mention Wilson’s takeover of Haiti. After U.S. marines invaded the country in 1915, they forced the Haitian legislature to select our preferred candidate as president. When Haiti refused to declare war on Germany after the United States did, we dissolved the Haitian legislature. Then the United States supervised a pseudo-referendum to approve a new Haitian constitution, less democratic than the constitution it replaced; the referendum passed by a hilarious 98,225 to 768. As Piero Gleijeses has noted, “It is not that Wilson failed in his earnest efforts to bring democracy to these little countries. He never tried. He intervened to impose hegemony, not democracy.”¹⁶ The United States also attacked Haiti’s proud tradition of individual ownership of small tracts of land, which dated back to the Haitian Revolution, in favor of the establishment of large plantations.

American troops forced peasants in shackles to work on road construction crews. In 1919 Haitian citizens rose up and resisted U.S. occupation troops in a guerrilla war that cost more than 3,000 lives, most of them Haitian. Students who read *Triumph of the American Nation* learn this about Wilson's intervention in Haiti: "Neither the treaty nor the continued presence of American troops restored order completely. During the next four or five years, nearly 2,000 Haitians were killed in riots and other outbreaks of violence." This passive construction veils the circumstances about which George Barnett, a U.S. marine general, complained to his commander in Haiti: "Practically indiscriminate killing of natives has gone on for some time." Barnett termed this violent episode "the most startling thing of its kind that has ever taken place in the Marine Corps."¹⁷

During the first two decades of this century, the United States effectively made colonies of Nicaragua, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and several other countries. Wilson's reaction to the Russian Revolution solidified the alignment of the United States with Europe's colonial powers. His was the first administration to be obsessed with the specter of communism, abroad and at home. Wilson was blunt about it. In Billings, Montana, stumping the West to seek support for the League of Nations, he warned, "There are apostles of Lenin in our own midst. I can not imagine what it means to be an apostle of Lenin. It means to be an apostle of the night, of chaos, of disorder."¹⁸ Even after the White Russian alternative collapsed, Wilson refused to extend diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union. He participated in barring Russia from the peace negotiations after World War I and helped oust Béla Kun, the communist leader who had risen to power in Hungary. Wilson's sentiment for self-determination and democracy never had a chance against his three bedrock "ism's": colonialism, racism, and anticommunism. A young Ho Chi Minh appealed to Woodrow Wilson at Versailles for self-determination for Vietnam, but Ho had all three strikes against him. Wilson refused to listen, and France retained control of Indochina.¹⁹ It seems that Wilson regarded self-determination as all right for, say, Belgium, but not for the likes of Latin America or Southeast Asia.

At home, Wilson's racial policies disgraced the office he held. His Republican predecessors had routinely appointed blacks to important offices, including those of port collector for New Orleans and the District of Columbia and register of the treasury. Presidents sometimes appointed African Americans as postmasters, particularly in southern towns with large black populations. African Americans took part in the Republican Party's national conventions and enjoyed some access to the White House. Woodrow Wilson, for whom many African Americans

voted in 1912, changed all that. A southerner, Wilson had been president of Princeton, the only major northern university that refused to admit blacks. He was an outspoken white supremacist—his wife was even worse—and told "darky" stories in cabinet meetings. His administration submitted a legislative program intended to curtail the civil rights of African Americans, but Congress would not pass it. Unfazed, Wilson used his power as chief executive to segregate the federal government. He appointed southern whites to offices traditionally reserved for blacks. Wilson personally vetoed a clause on racial equality in the Covenant of the League of Nations. The one occasion on which Wilson met with African American leaders in the White House ended in a fiasco as the president virtually threw the visitors out of his office. Wilson's legacy was extensive: he effectively closed the Democratic Party to African Americans for another two decades, and parts of the federal government remained segregated into the 1950s and beyond.²⁰ In 1916 the Colored Advisory Committee of the Republican National Committee issued a statement on Wilson that, though partisan, was accurate: "No sooner had the Democratic Administration come into power than Mr. Wilson and his advisors entered upon a policy to eliminate all colored citizens from representation in the Federal Government."²¹

Of the twelve history textbooks I reviewed, only four accurately describe Wilson's racial policies. *Land of Promise* does the best job:

Woodrow Wilson's administration was openly hostile to black people. Wilson was an outspoken white supremacist who believed that black people were inferior. During his campaign for the presidency, Wilson promised to press for civil rights. But once in office he forgot his promises. Instead, Wilson ordered that white and black workers in federal government jobs be segregated from one another. This was the first time such segregation had existed since Reconstruction! When black federal employees in Southern cities protested the order, Wilson had the protesters fired. In November, 1914, a black delegation asked the President to reverse his policies. Wilson was rude and hostile and refused their demands.

Unfortunately, except for one other textbook, *The United States—A History of the Republic, Promise* stands alone. Most of the textbooks that treat Wilson's racism give it only a sentence or two. Five of the books never even mention this "black mark" on Wilson's presidency. One that does, *The American Way*, does something even more astonishing: it invents a happy ending! "Those in favor of segregation finally lost support in the administration. Their policies gradually were ended." This is simply not true.

Omitting or absolving Wilson's racism goes beyond concealing a character blemish. It is overtly racist. No black person could ever consider Woodrow Wilson a hero. Textbooks that present him as a hero are written from a white perspective. The coverup denies all students the chance to learn something important about the interrelationship between the leader and the led. White Americans engaged in a new burst of racial violence during and immediately after Wilson's presidency. The tone set by the administration was one cause. Another was the release of America's first epic motion picture.²²

The filmmaker David W. Griffith quoted Wilson's two-volume history of the United States, now notorious for its racist view of Reconstruction, in his infamous masterpiece *The Clansman*, a paean to the Ku Klux Klan for its role in putting down "black-dominated" Republican state governments during Reconstruction. Griffith based the movie on a book by Wilson's former classmate, Thomas Dixon, whose obsession with race was "unrivaled until *Mein Kampf*." At a private White House showing, Wilson saw the movie, now retitled *Birth of a Nation*, and returned Griffith's compliment: "It is like writing history with lightning, and my only regret is that it is all so true." Griffith would go on to use this quotation in successfully defending his film against NAACP charges that it was racially inflammatory.²³

This landmark of American cinema was not only the best technical production of its time but also probably the most racist major movie of all time. Dixon intended "to revolutionize northern sentiment by a presentation of history that would transform every man in my audience into a good Democrat! . . . And make no mistake about it—we are doing just that."²⁴ Dixon did not overstate by much. Spurred by *Birth of a Nation*, William Simmons of Georgia reestablished the Ku Klux Klan. The racism seeping down from the White House encouraged this Klan, distinguishing it from its Reconstruction predecessor, which President Grant had succeeded in virtually eliminating in one state (South Carolina) and discouraging nationally for a time. The new KKK quickly became a national phenomenon. It grew to dominate the Democratic Party in many southern states, as well as in Indiana, Oklahoma, and Oregon. During Wilson's second term, a wave of antiblack race riots swept the country. Whites lynched blacks as far north as Duluth.²⁵

If Americans had learned from the Wilson era the connection between racist presidential leadership and like-minded public response, they might not have put up with a reprise on a far smaller scale during the Reagan-Bush years.²⁶ To accomplish such education, however, textbooks would have to make plain the relationship between cause and effect, between hero and followers. Instead, they reflexively ascribe noble inten-

tions to the hero and invoke "the people" to excuse questionable actions and policies. According to *Triumph of the American Nation*: "As President, Wilson seemed to agree with most white Americans that segregation was in the best interests of black as well as white Americans."

Wilson was not only antiblack; he was also far and away our most nativist president, repeatedly questioning the loyalty of those he called "hyphenated Americans." "Any man who carries a hyphen about with him," said Wilson, "carries a dagger that he is ready to plunge into the vitals of this Republic whenever he gets ready."²⁷ The American people responded to Wilson's lead with a wave of repression of white ethnic groups; again, most textbooks blame the people, not Wilson. *The American Tradition* admits that "President Wilson set up" the Creel Committee on Public Information, which saturated the United States with propaganda linking Germans to barbarism. But *Tradition* hastens to shield Wilson from the ensuing domestic fallout: "Although President Wilson had been careful in his war message to state that most Americans of German descent were 'true and loyal citizens,' the anti-German propaganda often caused them suffering."

Wilson displayed little regard for the rights of anyone whose opinions differed from his own. But textbooks take pains to insulate him from wrongdoing. "Congress," not Wilson, is credited with having passed the Espionage Act of June 1917 and the Sedition Act of the following year, probably the most serious attacks on the civil liberties of Americans since the short-lived Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. In fact, Wilson tried to strengthen the Espionage Act with a provision giving broad censorship powers directly to the president. Moreover, with Wilson's approval, his postmaster general used his new censorship powers to suppress all mail that was socialist, anti-British, pro-Irish, or that in any other way might, in his view, have threatened the war effort. Robert Goldstein served ten years in prison for producing *The Spirit of '76*, a film about the Revolutionary War that depicted the British, who were now our allies, unfavorably.²⁸ Textbook authors suggest that wartime pressures excuse Wilson's suppression of civil liberties, but in 1920, when World War I was long over, Wilson vetoed a bill that would have abolished the Espionage and Sedition acts.²⁹ Textbook authors blame the anticommunist and anti-labor union witch hunts of Wilson's second term on his illness and on an attorney general run amok. No evidence supports this view. Indeed, Attorney General Palmer asked Wilson in his last days as president to pardon Eugene V. Debs, who was serving time for a speech attributing World War I to economic interests and denouncing the Espionage Act as undemocratic.³⁰ The president replied, "Never!" and Debs languished in prison until Warren Harding pardoned



Spies and Lies

German agents are everywhere, eager to gather scraps of news about our men, our ships, our munitions. It is still possible to get such information through to Germany, where thousands of these fragments—often individually harmless—are patiently pieced together into a whole which spells death to American soldiers and danger to American homes.

But while the enemy is so industrious in trying to collect information, and his systems elaborate, he is not superhuman—indeed he is often very stupid, and would fail to get what he wants were it not deliberately handed to him by the carelessness of loyal Americans.

Do not discuss in public, or with strangers, any news of troop and transport movements, or bits of gossip as to our military preparations, which come into your possession.

Do not permit your friends in service to tell you, or write you—"inside" facts about where they are, what they are doing and seeing.

Do not become a tool of the Hun by passing on the malicious, disheartening rumors which he so eagerly sows. Remember he asks no better service than to have you spread his lies of disasters to our soldiers and sailors, gross scandals in the Red Cross, cruelties, neglect and wholesale executions in our camps, drunkenness and vice in the Expeditionary Force, and other tales certain to disturb American patriots and to bring anxiety and grief to American parents.

And do not wait until you catch someone putting a bomb under a factory. Report the man who spreads pessimistic stories, divulges—or seeks—confidential military information, cries for peace, or belittles our efforts to win the war.

Send the names of such persons, even if they are in uniform, to the Department of Justice, Washington. Give all the details you can, with names of witnesses if possible—show the Hun that we can beat him at his own game of collecting scattered information and putting it to work. The fact that you made the report will not become public.

You are in contact with the enemy's spies, just as truly as if you faced him across No Man's Land: in your hands are two powerful weapons with which to meet him—discretion and vigilance. Use them.

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LIES MY TEACHER TOLD ME

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him.³¹ *The American Way* adopts perhaps the most innovative approach to absolving Wilson of wrongdoing: *Way* simply moves the "red scare" to the 1920s, after Wilson had left office!

Because heroification prevents textbooks from showing Wilson's shortcomings, textbooks are hard pressed to explain the results of the 1920 election. James Cox, the Democratic candidate who was Wilson's would-be successor, was crushed by the nonentity Warren G. Harding, who never even campaigned. In the biggest landslide in the history of American presidential politics, Harding got almost 64 percent of the major-party votes. The people were "tired," textbooks suggest, and just wanted a "return to normalcy." The possibility that the electorate knew what it was doing in rejecting Wilson never occurs to our authors.³² It occurred to Helen Keller, however. She called Wilson "the greatest individual disappointment the world has ever known!"

It isn't only high school history courses that heroify Wilson. Textbooks such as *Land of Promise*, which discusses Wilson's racism, have to battle uphill, for they struggle against the archetypal Woodrow Wilson commemorated in so many history museums, public television documentaries, and historical novels.

For some years now, Michael Frisch has been conducting an experiment in social archetypes at the State University of New York at Buffalo. He asks his first-year college students for "the first ten names that you think of" in American history before the Civil War. When Frisch found that his students listed the same political and military figures year after year, replicating the privileged positions afforded them in high school textbooks, he added the proviso, "excluding presidents, generals, statesmen, etc." Frisch still gets a stable list, but one less predictable on the basis of history textbooks. Seven years out of eight, Betsy Ross has led the list. (Paul Revere usually comes in second.)

What is interesting about this choice is that Betsy Ross never did anything. Frisch notes that she played "no role whatsoever in the actual creation of any actual first flag." Ross came to prominence around 1876, when some of her descendants, seeking to create a tourist attraction in Philadelphia, largely invented the myth of the first flag. With justice, high school textbooks universally ignore Betsy Ross; not one of my twelve books lists her in its index. So how and why does her story get transmitted? Frisch offers a hilarious explanation: If George Washington is the Father of Our Country, then Betsy Ross is our Blessed Virgin Mary! Frisch describes the pageants reenacted (or did we only imagine them?) in our elementary school years: "Washington [the god] calls on the humble seamstress Betsy Ross in her tiny home and asks her if she will make the nation's flag, to his design. And Betsy promptly brings

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forth—from her lap!—the nation itself, and the promise of freedom and natural rights for all mankind.”³³

I think Frisch is onto something, but maybe he is merely on something. Whether or not one buys his explanation, Betsy Ross’s ranking among students surely proves the power of the social archetype. In the case of Woodrow Wilson, textbooks actually participate in creating the social archetype. Wilson is portrayed as “good,” “idealist,” “for self-determination, not colonial intervention,” “foiled by an isolationist Senate,” and “ahead of his time.” We name institutions after him, from the Woodrow Wilson Center at the Smithsonian Institution to Woodrow Wilson Junior High School in Decatur, Illinois, where I misspent my adolescence. If a fifth face were to be chiseled into Mount Rushmore, many Americans would propose that it should be Wilson’s.³⁴ Against such archetypal goodness, even the unusually forthright treatment of Wilson’s racism in *Land of Promise* cannot but fail to stick in students’ minds.

Curators of history museums know that their visitors bring archetypes in with them. Some curators consciously design exhibits to confront these archetypes when they are inaccurate. Textbook authors, teachers, and moviemakers would better fulfill their educational mission if they also taught against inaccurate archetypes. Surely Woodrow Wilson does not need their flattering omissions, after all. His progressive legislative accomplishments in just his first two years, including tariff reform, an income tax, the Federal Reserve Act, and the Workingmen’s Compensa-



This statue of George Washington, now in the Smithsonian Institution, exemplifies the manner in which textbooks would portray every American hero: ten feet tall, blemish-free, with the body of a Greek god.

tion Act, are almost unparalleled. Wilson’s speeches on behalf of self-determination stirred the world, even if his actions did not live up to his words.

Why do textbooks promote wartless stereotypes? The authors’ omissions and errors can hardly be accidental. The producers of the filmstrips, movies, and other educational materials on Helen Keller surely know she was a socialist; no one can read Keller’s writings without becoming aware of her political and social philosophy. At least one textbook author, Thomas Bailey, senior author of *The American Pageant*, clearly knew of the 1918 U.S. invasion of Russia, for he wrote in a different venue in 1973, “American troops shot it out with Russian armed forces on Russian soil in two theatres from 1918 to 1920.”³⁵ Probably several other authors knew of it, too. Wilson’s racism is also well known to professional historians. Why don’t they let the public in on these matters?

Heroification itself supplies a first answer. Socialism is repugnant to most Americans. So are racism and colonialism. Michael Kammen suggests that authors selectively omit blemishes in order to make certain historical figures sympathetic to as many people as possible.³⁶ The textbook critic Norma Gabler has testified that textbooks should “present our nation’s patriots in a way that would honor and respect them”; in her eyes, admitting Keller’s socialism and Wilson’s racism would hardly do that.³⁷ In the early 1920s the American Legion said that authors of textbooks “are at fault in placing before immature pupils the blunders, foibles and frailties of prominent heroes and patriots of our Nation.”³⁸ The Legion would hardly be able to fault today’s history textbooks on this count.

Perhaps we can go further. I began with Helen Keller because omitting the last sixty-four years of her life exemplifies the sort of culture-serving distortion that will be discussed later in this book. We teach Keller as an ideal, not a real person, to inspire our young people to emulate her. Keller becomes a mythic figure, the “woman who overcame”—but for *what*? There is no content! Just look what *she* accomplished, we’re exhorted—yet we haven’t a clue as to what that really was.

Keller did not want to be frozen in childhood. She herself stressed that the meaning of her life lay in what she did once she overcame her disability. In 1929, when she was nearing fifty, she wrote a second volume of autobiography, entitled *Midstream*, that described her social philosophy in some detail. Keller wrote about visiting mill towns, mining towns, and packing towns where workers were on strike. She intended that we learn of these experiences and of the conclusions to which they led her. Consistent with our American ideology of individu-

alism, the truncated version of Helen Keller's story sanitizes a hero, leaving only the virtues of self-help and hard work. Keller herself, while scarcely opposing hard work, explicitly rejected this ideology.

I had once believed that we were all masters of our fate—that we could mould our lives into any form we pleased. . . . I had overcome deafness and blindness sufficiently to be happy, and I supposed that anyone could come out victorious if he threw himself valiantly into life's struggle. But as I went more and more about the country I learned that I had spoken with assurance on a subject I knew little about. I forgot that I owed my success partly to the advantages of my birth and environment. . . . Now, however, I learned that the power to rise in the world is not within the reach of everyone.³⁹

Textbooks don't want to touch this idea. "There are three great taboos in textbook publishing," an editor at one of the biggest houses told me, "sex, religion, and social class." While I had been able to guess the first two, the third floored me. Sociologists know the importance of social class, after all. Reviewing American history textbooks convinced me that this editor was right, however. The notion that opportunity might be unequal in America, that not everyone has "the power to rise in the world," is anathema to textbook authors, and to many teachers as well. Educators would much rather present Keller as a bland source of encouragement and inspiration to our young—if she can do it, you can do it! So they leave out her adult life and make her entire existence over into a vague "up by the bootstraps" operation. In the process, they make this passionate fighter for the poor into something she never was in life: boring.

Woodrow Wilson gets similarly whitewashed. Although some history textbooks disclose more than others about the seamy underside of Wilson's presidency, all twelve books reviewed share a common tone: respectful, patriotic, even adulatory. Ironically, Wilson was widely despised in the 1920s, and it was only after World War II that he came to be viewed kindly by policymakers and historians. Our postwar bipartisan foreign policy, one of far-reaching interventions sheathed in humanitarian explanations, was "shaped decisively by the ideology and the international program developed by the Wilson Administration," according to N. Gordon Levin, Jr.⁴⁰ Textbook authors are thus motivated to underplay or excuse Wilson's foreign interventions, many of which were counterproductive blunders, as well as other unsatisfactory aspects of his administration.

A host of other reasons—pressure from the "ruling class," pressure

from textbook adoption committees, the wish to avoid ambiguities, a desire to shield children from harm or conflict, the perceived need to control children and avoid classroom disharmony, pressure to provide answers—may help explain why textbooks omit troublesome facts. A certain etiquette coerces us all into speaking in respectful tones about the past, especially when we're passing on Our Heritage to our young. Could it be that we don't *want* to think badly of Woodrow Wilson? We seem to feel that a person like Helen Keller can be an inspiration only so long as she remains uncontroversial, one-dimensional. We don't want complicated icons. "People do not like to think. If one thinks, one must reach conclusions," Helen Keller pointed out. "Conclusions are not always pleasant."⁴¹ Most of us automatically shy away from conflict, and understandably so. We particularly seek to avoid conflict in the classroom. One reason is habit: we are so accustomed to blandness that the textbook or teacher who brought real intellectual controversy into the classroom would strike us as a violation of polite rhetoric, of classroom norms. We are supposed to speak well of the deceased, after all. Probably we are supposed to maintain the same attitude of awe, reverence, and respect when we read about our national heroes as when we visit our National Cathedral and view the final resting places of Helen Keller and Woodrow Wilson, as close physically in death as they were distant ideologically in life.

Whatever the causes, the results of heroification are potentially crippling to students. Helen Keller is not the only person this approach treats like a child. Denying students the humanness of Keller, Wilson, and others keeps students in intellectual immaturity. It perpetuates what might be called a Disney version of history: The Hall of Presidents at Disneyland similarly presents our leaders as heroic statesmen, not imperfect human beings.⁴² Our children end up without realistic role models to inspire them. Students also develop no understanding of causality in history. Our nation's thirteen separate forays into Nicaragua, for instance, are surely worth knowing about as we attempt to understand why that country embraced a communist government in the 1980s. Textbooks should show history as contingent, affected by the power of ideas and individuals. Instead, they present history as a "done deal."

Do textbooks, filmstrips, and American history courses achieve the results they seek with regard to our heroes? Surely textbook authors want us to think well of the historical figures they treat with such sympathy. And, on a superficial level at least, we do. Almost no recent high school graduates have anything "bad" to say about either Keller or Wilson. But are these two considered heroes? I have asked hundreds of (mostly white) college students on the first day of class to tell me who their heroes in

American history are. As a rule, they do not pick Helen Keller, Woodrow Wilson, Christopher Columbus, Miles Standish or anyone else in Plymouth, John Smith or anyone else in Virginia, Abraham Lincoln, or indeed anyone else in American history whom the textbooks implore them to choose.⁴³ Our post-Watergate students view all such “establishment” heroes cynically. They’re bor-r-ring.

Some students choose “none”—that is, they say they have no heroes in American history. Other students display the characteristically American sympathy for the underdog by choosing African Americans: Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, perhaps Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, or Frederick Douglass. Or they choose men and women from other countries: Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, or (now fading fast) Mikhail Gorbachev or Boris Yeltsin.

In one sense this is a healthy development. Surely we want students to be skeptical. Probably we want them to challenge being told whom to believe in. But replying “none” is too glib, too nihilistic, for my taste. It is, however, an understandable response to heroification. For when textbook authors leave out the warts, the problems, the unfortunate character traits, and the mistaken ideas, they reduce heroes from dramatic men and women to melodramatic stick figures. Their inner struggles disappear and they become goody-goody, not merely good.

Students poke fun at the goody-goodiest of them all by passing on Helen Keller jokes. In so doing, schoolchildren are not poking cruel fun at a disabled person, they are deflating a pretentious symbol that is too good to be real. Nonetheless, our loss of Helen Keller as anything but a source of jokes is distressing. Knowing the reality of her quite amazing life might empower not only deaf or blind students, but any schoolgirl, and perhaps boys as well. For like other peoples around the world, we Americans need heroes. Statements such as “If Martin Luther King were alive, he’d . . .” suggest one function of historical figures in our contemporary society. Most of us tend to think well of ourselves when we have acted as we imagine our heroes might have done. Who our heroes are and whether they are presented in a way that makes them lifelike, hence usable as role models, could have a significant bearing on our conduct in the world.

We now turn to our first hero, Christopher Columbus. “Care should be taken to vindicate great names from pernicious erudition,” wrote Washington Irving, defending heroification.⁴⁴ Irving’s three-volume biography of Columbus, published in 1828, still influences what high school teachers and textbooks say about the Great Navigator. Therefore it will come as no surprise that heroification has stolen from us the important facets of his life, leaving only melodramatic minutiae.



The True Importance of Christopher Columbus

Columbus is above all the figure with whom the Modern Age—the age by which we may delineate these past 500 years—properly begins, and in his character as in his exploits we are given an extraordinary insight into the patterns that shaped the age at its start and still for the most part shape it today.

—Kirkpatrick Sale¹

As a subject for research, the possibility of African discovery of America has never been a tempting one for American historians. In a sense, we choose our own history, or more accurately, we select those vistas of history for our examinations which promise us the greatest satisfaction, and we have had little appetite to explore the possibility that our founding father was a black man.

—Samuel D. Marble²