

Vol. 13, No. 3,161 - The American Reporter - May 14, 2007

www.american-reporter.com

American Essay

A FALSE HISTORY FOR A NEW AGE*

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HOLLYWOOD, Calif., May 14, 2007—Four hundred years ago today the British captain Christopher Newport sighted what would become Jamestown, on the bank of what would be called the James River, to honor King James.

Soon enough it was more embarrassment than honor—a bungled, non-productive, near-collapsing colony for its first five years until things got rolling with a new sweet tobacco, indentured servants and slavery.

After only a few years, less than a quarter of the original 214 settlers (half described as "gentleman" by Capt. John Smith) had survived. As William Strachey (later a secretary for Jamestown) put it, the colonists were largely military men who knew little of agriculture and spent much of their days in a futile search for gold. As Smith explained, "There was no talke, no hope, no worke, but dig gold... all necessary business neglected."

In the enlightened 17th Century age of navigation and discovery, the Jamestown colonists, unable to feed themselves without bartering or stealing from the Indians, understood even less about the environment—in this instance, the unforgiving American wilderness—that the newly translated King James Bible instructed them to "subdue" and "have dominion over."

As Kirkpatrick Sale, author of "After Eden: The Evolution of Human Domination" noted Saturday in the *Los Angeles Times*, Strachey spoke of "... 'cruell diseases', most likely from the mosquitoes and typhoid bacteria in the swampy water of the marshland where the colonists, in their hygienic ignorance, chose to settle."

Quite a story, America's first permanent English colony. Yet the full story of Jamestown has hardly made it into the schoolbooks to this day—not in Britain and surely less so in the U.S. So much for the accuracy of history books. False history is the order of the day, almost universally.

Thus a recent British government study funded by the Department for Education and Skills reveals, journalist Laura Clark wrote in the *Daily Mail* recently, that "some teachers are dropping courses covering the Holocaust at the earliest opportunity over fears Muslim pupils might express anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli reactions in class."

The report concluded, Clark noted, "In particular settings, teachers of history are unwilling to challenge highly contentious or charged versions of history in which pupils are steeped at home, in their community or in a place of worship."

Says Chris McGovern, history education adviser to the former Tory government: "History is not a vehicle for promoting political correctness. Children must have access to knowledge of these controversial subjects, whether palatable or unpalatable."

Yet denying the obvious seems a popular remedy worldwide. Consider Turkey's persistent denials and domestic crackdown on free speech over its role in Armenia from 1908 to 1915, the first genocide of the 20th Century. Admittedly, not everyone on the other side is clearly innocent, but that doesn't make the genocide go away.

There are many impressive, darkly comical instances of myopic national history. Consider the Royal Museum for Central Africa, in Belgium, funded by King Leopold from the millions of dollars accumulated in his vast ivory and rubber fortune—earned by despicable means. As author-historian Adam Hochschild noted in the *New York Review of Books* several years back, the museum holds "one of the world's finest collections of African art and other materials (some of which toured the United States during 1997-1980) including 70,000 maps, 8,000 African musical instruments, six million insect specimens, 600,000 photographs, and tens of thousands of other human artifacts."

Impressive, indeed. Yet "until a few years ago," Hochschild explained, "Nothing on display gave any indication that millions of Congolese died unnatural deaths while these riches were being brought back to Europe. It was as if there were a huge museum of Jewish art and culture in Berlin that made no mention of the Holocaust."

Consider U.S. "science" textbooks expunged of information on Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Consider that despite many decades of "Never again"—Europe and the United States for four years in the 1990s gave little but lip service to the ethnic cleansing of Muslims in Bosnia. "Never again?" Actually, it happens over and over again, and it's happening now, especially with Sudanese direction and tolerance in Darfur.

Ethnic cleansing has clearly been occurring in Iraq, especially in Baghdad, yet doesn't even get a mention—at least not in the mainstream American media. Yet reportedly, the ratio of Sunnis in Baghdad under the new mostly Shiite-controlled government has dropped from about 70 percent to some 40 percent, and perhaps less now. Pretty soon, helped along by death squads and militias, the Sunnis will be gone from Baghdad and the local government and President Bush can declare democratization an Iraqi "success."

Nor have we yet heard even serious mainstream mention about the religious fanaticism of many Sunnis and Shiites that has fueled hatreds and violence in Iraq and elsewhere for centuries.

Call it "diplomatic" history when the lessons are sanitized, but denying reality in the teaching of young students doesn't even serve some grand purpose. That might have been the case for nearly a half century after World War II, when American history textbooks depicted the Emperor of Japan—whom we needed as a cold war ally against the Russians—as an innocent victim of Japanese militarists. Ah, history! No wonder Voltaire called it "A bag of tricks played against the dead."

A nation's citizenry should have a good sense of what is missing in its own history lessons or what's off kilter; and some action, you'd think, ought to be taken to help set the record straight.

And so it was that my mind conceived a whole new approach to teaching history. It's a foreign-exchange plan, except that textbooks, not students, are exchanged. Then, given that the laugh's on someone else, not us, we might take an interest in real history.

Since undoubtedly the schooling of many nations (on their own history) is all-too-often rife with gaps, myopias, misconceptions, delusions, distortions, evasions and no small number of outright lies, perhaps the best way a student might fully grasp history is to study how other countries watered down *their* key historical events.

Reading about other countries' histories, we'd not only be aware of the black comedy but less inclined to run from history. If it's not Japanese whaling for "research," we might chuckle, snicker, guffaw, sadly shake our heads at its near-comical denials of the Rape of Nanking or its euphemistic descriptions of its World War II use of mostly Korean sex slaves as "comfort women." Undoubtedly you could find similar examples in dozens of countries.

Take Turkey. With a new style of history teaching we could laugh or sigh at Turkey's continued denials of the Armenian Holocaust. Or we could roar with laughter over Old Europe's pious talk about "the white man's burden" of civilizing the indigenous natives, especially

as England spread its Empire in earlier days. This might even suggest, delicately, that we have a few history gaps of our own, say, such as on our white man's faith in the Westward Movement as our Manifest Destiny in America

As well as focusing on the indiscretions of other countries, we might laugh at global industries functioning for decades without even a pretext of government control. We could giggle or groan over the tobacco industry's machinations, manipulations, distortions and evasions regarding its promotion and distribution of unhealthy and addictive tobacco.

Given sufficient distance, there are a thousand entertaining and wiggling denials or rationalizations over which we could be amused by the perspective of those with little doubt as to the real history; imagine reading honest textbooks about "reeducation" under Chairman Mao, about Pol Pot or North Vietnam's post-war brainwashing of millions of South Vietnamese, the campaigns for "virtue" and "modesty" under the Taliban, or England's '50s-era gulag in Kenya, or Israel's forcible taking of homes and lands from Palestinians.

So maybe we should forget about learning American history, especially in the younger grades; our own skeletons aren't likely to walk out of the closet. Instead, we could simply ship over a bunch of "foreign" text material and translate some of this watered-down, scandalous history into American English. And the Other countries could do the same in their own languages. With each nation's students reading foreign history through the eyes of the foreigners involved, we might begin to recognize at least the more blatant absurdities, and eventually, as the lesson seeps in, some of it might begin to sound familiar.

Seeing various styles of self-deception or rationalization, by studying apartheid from the white South African perspective, or the Untouchables as seen by upper-caste Brahmin historians in India, we might not so easily remain in denial here by insisting that *ours* is a "classless society" even though the income disparity among our "classes" puts most every other country in the world to shame. We might consider that not only President Bush but millions of us have long been in denial about global warming, about the U.S. consuming an extra large portion of the world's resources, and about our generating an embarrassing share of the world's pollution.

On the dark side, it's a time of ethnic cleansing, of refugees, of migrations, of massive disruptions, of lost resources, of "brain drains." Already more than a million professional, middle-class individuals have moved out of Iraq. And it would be instructive to see how even European leaders have remained

in denial about "free trade," as we call it, that is causing widespread bankruptcy and hunger in many developing nations.

Potentially, we could learn a great deal by osmosis, so to speak, studying some of the dark comedies of foreign history and how it's whitewashed elsewhere. With a clear picture—at least elsewhere—of oversights, rationalizations, denials, manipulations, distortions, laughable propaganda—we might better grasp some of our own limitations and whitewashed history.

That is quite the reverse of learning how history is taught elsewhere—something new and ominous seems to be on the horizon: a less controversial, more accommodating history. Far from gaining a more objective look at the foibles of other nations as they sometimes comically explain themselves, one can see developing now a more diplomatic, non-controversial, inoffensive history.

This is something new entirely – history that's not even about us. We're not talking now about my "foreign exchange" approach for teaching the whitewashed history of other nations. This latest style of history looks to be really gracious and innocuous Guest History! Given today's ethnic mix and an increasingly globalized world, perhaps watered-down history that's always nice to everybody is all that can be expected.

In the U.S., especially, accommodating all of us—a nation of immigrants not so different than those who struggled in Jamestown 400 years ago – will require a lot of rewrites. Or not.

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***First printed in the American Reporter. Bold faced emphasis and a few minor edits added.**