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All history is 'revisionist'

A Florida law banning relativism in classes ignores reality and 75 years of academic tradition.

By Jonathan Zimmerman

June 7, 2006

JUST WHEN YOU thought it was safe to study American history again ... the revisionists are back!

You know, those relativists who distort or simply fabricate the past to make it fit their present-day biases. For instance, shortly after the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003, President Bush attacked "revisionist historians" who questioned his justifications for using force against Saddam Hussein. He did it again on Veterans Day in 2005. "It is deeply irresponsible," he declared, "to rewrite the history of how the war began."

FOR THE RECORD:

History: A June 7 article about interpreting history said Florida passed a law banning the teaching of "revisionist" and "postmodernist" history in public schools. Those words appeared in a draft of the bill, not in the final version. —

And just last week, in an unprecedented move, the president's brother approved a law barring revisionist history in Florida public schools. "The history of the United States shall be taught as genuine history and shall not follow the revisionist or postmodernist viewpoints of relative truth," declares Florida's Education Omnibus Bill, signed by Gov. Jeb Bush. "American history shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed."

Ironically, the Florida law is itself revisionist history. Once upon a time, it theorizes, history — especially about the founding of the country — was based on facts. But sometime during the 1960s, all that changed. American historians supposedly started embracing newfangled theories of moral relativism and French postmodernism, abandoning their traditional quest for facts, truth and certainty.

The result was a flurry of new interpretations, casting doubt on the entire past as we had previously understood it. Because one theory was as good as another, then nothing could be true or false. God, nation, family and school: It was all up for grabs.

There's just one problem with this history-of-our-history: It's wrong.

Hardly a brainchild of the flower-power '60s, the concept of historical interpretation has been at the heart of our profession from the 1920s onward. Before that time, to be sure, some historians believed that they could render a purely factual and objective account of the past. But most of them had given up on what historian Charles Beard called the "noble dream" by the interwar period, when scholars came to realize that the

very selection of facts was an act of interpretation.

That's why Cornell's Carl Becker chose the title "Everyman His Own Historian" for his 1931 address to the American Historical Assn., probably the most famous short piece of writing in our profession. In it, Becker explained why "Everyman" — that is, the average layperson — inevitably interpreted the facts of his or her own life, remembering certain elements and forgetting (or distorting) others.

For instance, try to recount everything you did yesterday. Not just a few things, like going to work or eating dinner or reading the newspaper, but *everything*. You can't. Even if you kept a diary and recorded what you did each minute, you would inevitably omit some detail: a sound in your ear, a twitch in your nose, a passing glance of your eyes. A 24-hour video camera might pick up these physical actions, but it could never record your thoughts.

So when somebody asks what you did yesterday, you select a certain few facts about your day and spin a story around them.

As do professional historians. They may draw on a wider array of facts and theories but, just like "Everyman," they choose certain data points and omit others, as well they must.

Becker was an optimist. Although historians could never determine the capital-T "Truth," he wrote, they could get progressively closer to it by asking new questions, collecting new facts and constructing new interpretations.

Nevertheless, he concluded his 1931 address on a pessimistic note: Unless the profession engaged lay readers — unless, that is, we taught the public about what we actually do — Americans would reject history itself, taking comfort in banal pieties and sugarcoated myths.

And surely one of the biggest myths of all is that history is simply about "facts." This year marks the 75th anniversary of Becker's famous speech, yet Americans appear no nearer to understanding that all pasts are "constructed," that all facts require interpretation and that all history is "revisionist" history.

Demagogic politicians are certainly at fault for this situation, but historians bear a good deal of blame too. Unlike Becker's generation of scholars, who worked hard to cultivate a lay readership, most of us write only for each other. Is it any wonder that the public has no idea about how we go about choosing topics, identifying sources and arriving at conclusions?

"It should be a relief to us to renounce omniscience," Becker wrote 75 years ago, "to recognize that every generation, our own included, will, must inevitably, understand the past and anticipate the future in the light of its own restricted experience."

Yet this recognition also comes with a responsibility, which most historians have, unfortunately, renounced as well.

If more of us wrote *for* the people instead of simply *about* them, perhaps they would turn a deaf ear to specious charges of "revisionism," "constructivism" and the like. People construct their own stories every day, just like we historians do. And may the best story win.

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