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JOHN BROWN AND ABRAHAM LINCOLN

THE INVISIBILITY OF ANTIRACISM IN AMERICAN HISTORY TEXTBOOKS

It is not only radical or currently unfashionable ideas that the texts leave out—it is all ideas, including those of their heroes.

—FRANCES FITZGERALD¹

You may dispose of me very easily. I am nearly disposed of now. But this question is still to be settled—this Negro question, I mean; the end of that is not yet.

—JOHN BROWN. 1859²

I am here to plead his cause with you. I plead not for his life, but for his character—his immortal life; and so it becomes your cause wholly, and is not his in the least.

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU, "A PLEA FOR
CAPTAIN JOHN BROWN," 1859³

We shall need all the anti-slavery feeling in the country, and more; you can go home and try to bring the people to your views, and you may say anything you like about me, if that will help. . . . When the hour comes for dealing with slavery, I trust I will be willing to do my duty though it cost my life.

—ABRAHAM LINCOLN TO ABOLITIONIST
UNITARIAN MINISTERS, 1862⁴

P ERHAPS THE MOST telling criticism Frances FitzGerald made in her 1979 survey of American history textbooks, *America Revised*, was that they leave out ideas. As presented by textbooks of the 1970s, "American political life was completely mindless," she observed.⁵

Why would textbook authors avoid even those ideas with which they agree?

Taking ideas seriously does not fit with the rhetorical style of textbooks, which presents events so as to make them seem foreordained along a line of constant progress. Including ideas would make history contingent: things could go either way, and have on occasion. The "right" people, armed with the "right" ideas, have not always won. When they didn't, the authors would be in the embarrassing position of having to disapprove of an outcome in the past. Including ideas would introduce uncertainty. This is not textbook style. Textbooks unfold history without real drama or suspense, only melodrama.

On the subject of race relations, John Brown's statement that "this question is still to be settled" seems almost as relevant today, and almost as ominous, as when he spoke in 1859. The opposite of racism is antiracism, of course, or what we might call racial idealism or equalitarianism, and it is still not clear whether it will prevail. In this struggle, our history textbooks offer little help. Just as they underplay white racism, they also neglect racial idealism. In so doing, they deprive students of potential role models to call upon as they try to bridge the new fault lines that will spread out in the future from the great rift in our past.

Since ideas and ideologies played an especially important role in the Civil War era, American history textbooks give a singularly inchoate view of that struggle. Just as textbooks treat slavery without racism, they treat abolitionism without much idealism.⁶ Consider the most radical white abolitionist of them all, John Brown.

The treatment of Brown, like the treatment of slavery and Reconstruction, has changed in American history textbooks. From 1890 to about 1970, John Brown was insane. Before 1890 he was perfectly sane, and after 1970 he has slowly been regaining his sanity. Before reviewing six more textbooks in 2006–07, I had imagined that they would maintain this trend, portraying Brown's actions so as to render them at least intelligible if not intelligent. In their treatment of Brown, however, the new textbooks don't differ much from those of the 1980s, so I shall discuss them all together. Since Brown himself did not change after his death—except to molder more—his mental health in our textbooks provides an inadvertent index of the level of white racism in our society. Perhaps our new textbooks suggest that race relations circa 2007 are not much better than circa 1987.

In the eighteen textbooks I reviewed, Brown makes two appearances: Pottawatomie, Kansas, and Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Recall that the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act tried to resolve the question of slavery through "popular sovereignty." The practical result of leaving the slavery decision to whoever set-

tled in Kansas was an ideologically motivated settlement craze. Northerners rushed to live and farm in Kansas Territory and make it "free soil." Fewer Southern planters moved to Kansas with their slaves, but slave owners from Missouri repeatedly crossed the Missouri River to vote in territorial elections and to establish a reign of terror to drive out the free-soil farmers. In May 1856 hundreds of pro-slavery "border ruffians," as they came to be called, raided the free-soil town of Lawrence, Kansas, killing two people, burning down the hotel, and destroying two printing presses. An older textbook, *The American Tradition*, describes Brown's action at Pottawatomie flatly: "In retaliation, a militant abolitionist named John Brown led a midnight attack on the proslavery settlement of Pottawatomie. Five people were killed by Brown and his followers." The 2006 edition of *The American Pageant* provides a much fuller account, but one that is far from neutral.

The fanatical figure of John Brown now stalked upon the Kansas battlefield. Spare, gray-bearded, and iron-willed, he was obsessively dedicated to the abolitionist cause. The power of his glittering gray eyes was such, so he claimed, that his stare could force a dog or cat to slink out of a room. Becoming involved in dubious dealings, including horse stealing, he moved to Kansas from Ohio with a part of his large family. Brooding over the recent attack on Lawrence, "Old Brown" of Osawatomie led a band of his followers to Pottawatomie Creek in May 1856. There they literally hacked to pieces five surprised men, presumed to be proslaveryites. This fiendish butchery besmirched the free-soil cause and brought vicious retaliation from the proslavery forces.

Pageant's prose is typical of books written during the nadir of race relations, 1890–1940 (when most white Americans, including historians, felt that blacks should not have equal rights), and comes as something of a shock at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In this rendering, those who fought for black equality had to be wrongheaded.

Indeed, the first edition of this textbook came out in 1956, long before the changes wrought by the civil rights movement had any chance to percolate through our culture and influence the writing of our history textbooks. The choice of language—from "fanatical figure" and "dubious dealings" to "fiendish butchery"—is hardly objective. One man's "stalk" is another's "walk." Bias is also evident in the choice of details included and omitted. The account

throughout makes Northerners the initial aggressors, omitting mention of the earlier murders by pro-slavery Southerners. Actually, free-staters, being in the majority, had tried to win Kansas democratically and legally; it was pro-slavery forces who had used terror and threats to try to control the state. No reader of *Pageant* would guess that pro-slavery men had recently killed five free-state settlers, including the two slain in the Lawrence raid. Nor had Brown moved to Kansas "with his large family"; rather, he had moved to the Adirondacks, hoping his sons would join him there, but five sons and their families instead went to Kansas, hoping to farm in peace. They then asked their father for aid when threatened by their pro-slavery neighbors. Other errors include "presumed to be proslaveryites" (they were), and "literally hacked to pieces" (they weren't).⁷

Of all eighteen textbooks, another of the new books, *Pathways to the Present*, is the most sympathetic to Brown but never goes beyond neutrality. It compactly describes Brown's Harpers Ferry raid:

On October 16, 1859, the former Kansas raider John Brown and a small group of men attacked the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. . . . Brown and his followers hoped to seize the weapons and give them to enslaved people to start a slave uprising.

United States troops under the command of Colonel Robert E. Lee cornered and defeated Brown's men. Convicted of treason, Brown was sentenced to be hanged. Just before his execution, he wrote a note that would prove to be all too accurate: "I John Brown am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away, but with blood."

Eight other books, new and older, are negative, although they don't imply that he was crazy. The other nine are openly hostile. Several textbooks, including four of the six recent ones, emphasize the claim that no slaves actually joined Brown. Boorstin and Kelley makes the point at length: "The party forcibly 'freed' about 30 slaves. Taking these reluctant people with them, Brown and his men retreated to the arsenal. Ironically, the first person to die in the affair—killed by John Brown and his men—was an already-free black gunned down by these 'liberators.' "

The United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) would love these accounts, because they can be taken to imply that African Americans had no interest in freedom. The UDC erected a monument in Harpers Ferry to Haywood

Shepherd, the free black man referred to by Boorstin and Kelley. At its dedication in 1931, they claimed he was "representative of Negroes of the neighborhood, who would not take part." But this is bad history. Hannah Geffert and Jean Libby have shown that Brown drew considerable support from enslaved African Americans around Harpers Ferry. His men armed the thirty mentioned by Boorstin and Kelley, including some who came from nearby plantations that the raiders never visited.⁸ These newly freed men then stopped the eastbound passenger train, guarded it, helped the raiders find other slave owners, and probably killed an armed white resident of the town who refused to halt when challenged. (After the raid the state indicted eleven of them for these actions.) Well after the raid, local African Americans continued the resistance to slavery that Brown's raid had triggered: Libby notes that many slaves from the area were listed as "fugitive" in the 1860 census, and "the barns of all of the jurors of John Brown's trial were burned—a time-honored signal of revolution."⁹ Thus, the UDC interpretation that textbooks supply, implying that the slaves themselves were not sympathetic to the cause of abolition, is simply inaccurate.

Four textbooks still linger in the former era when Brown's actions proved him mad. "John Brown was almost certainly insane," opines *American History*. *The American Way* tells a whopper: "[L]ater Brown was proved to be mentally ill." The 2006 *American Pageant*, like its predecessor, characterizes Brown as "deranged," "gaunt," "grim," and "terrible," says that "thirteen of his near relatives were regarded as insane, including his mother and grandmother," and terms the Harpers Ferry raid a "mad exploit." Other books finesse the sanity issue by calling Brown merely "fanatical." Not one author, old or new, has any sympathy for the man or takes any pleasure in his ideals and actions.

For the benefit of readers who, like me, grew up reading that Brown was at least fanatic if not crazed, let's consider the evidence. To be sure, some of Brown's lawyers and relatives, hoping to save his neck, suggested an insanity defense. But no one who knew Brown thought him crazy. He favorably impressed people who spoke with him after his capture, including his jailer and even reporters writing for Democratic newspapers, which supported slavery. Governor Wise of Virginia called him "a man of clear head" after Brown got the better of him in an informal interview. "They are themselves mistaken who take him to be a madman," Governor Wise said. In his message to the Virginia legislature he said Brown showed "quick and clear perception," "rational premises and consecutive reasoning," "composure and self-possession."¹⁰

After 1890, textbook authors inferred Brown's madness from his plan,



At left is John Brown as he appeared in 1858. He looked like a middle-aged businessman—which he was. He grew a beard later that year, partly as a modest attempt to disguise himself after becoming wanted for helping eleven African Americans escape slavery in Missouri. Few Americans recognize this portrait. At right is John Brown as he looked in 1937 to John Steuart Curry, who painted a version of his portrait on the walls of the Kansas State Capitol. This Brown is gaunt and deranged, which he had become in our culture by 1937. Astoundingly, at the start of the new millennium, *American Journey* chose a variant of this painting as its only portrait of Brown. Many Americans can name this man.

which admittedly was far-fetched. Never mind that John Brown himself preciously told Frederick Douglass that the venture would make a stunning impact even if it failed. Nor that his twenty-odd followers can hardly all be considered crazed, too.¹¹ Rather, we must recognize that the insanity with which historians have charged John Brown was never psychological. It was ideological. Brown's actions made no sense to textbook writers between 1890 and about 1970. To make no sense is to be crazy.

Clearly, Brown's contemporaries did not consider him insane. Brown's ideological influence in the month before his hanging, and continuing after his death, was immense. He moved the boundary of acceptable thoughts and deeds regarding slavery. Before Harpers Ferry, to be an abolitionist was not quite acceptable, even in the North. Just talking about freeing slaves—advocating immediate emancipation—was behavior at the outer limit of the ideological continuum. By engaging in armed action, including murder, John Brown made mere verbal abolitionism seem much less radical.

After an initial shock wave of revulsion against Brown, in the North as well

as in the South, Americans were fascinated to hear what he had to say. In his 1859 trial John Brown captured the attention of the nation like no other abolitionist or slave owner before or since. He knew it: "My whole life before had not afforded me one half the opportunity to plead for the right."¹² In his speech to the court on November 2, just before the judge sentenced him to die, Brown argued, "Had I so interfered in behalf of the rich, the powerful, it would have been all right." He referred to the Bible, which he saw in the courtroom, "which teaches me that all things whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them. It teaches me further, to remember them that are in bonds as bound with them. I endeavored to act up to that instruction." Brown went on to claim the high moral ground: "I believe that to have interfered as I have done, as I have always freely admitted I have done, in behalf of His despised poor, I did no wrong but right." Although he objected that his impending death penalty was unjust, he accepted it and pointed to graver injustices: "Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children and with the blood of millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I say, let it be done."¹³

Brown's willingness to go to the gallows for what he thought was right had a moral force of its own. "It seems as if no man had ever died in America before, for in order to die you must first have lived," Henry David Thoreau observed in a eulogy in Boston. "These men, in teaching us how to die, have at the same time taught us how to live." Thoreau went on to compare Brown with Jesus of Nazareth, who had faced a similar death at the hands of the state.¹⁴

During the rest of November, Brown provided the nation graceful instruction in how to face death. In Larchmont, New York, George Templeton Strong wrote in his diary, "One's faith in anything is terribly shaken by anybody who is ready to go to the gallows condemning and denouncing it."¹⁵ Brown's letters to his family and friends softened his image, showed his human side, and prompted an outpouring of sympathy for his children and soon-to-be widow, if not for Brown himself. His letters to supporters and remarks to journalists, widely circulated, formed a continuing indictment of slavery. We see his charisma in this letter from "a conservative Christian"—so the author signed it—written to Brown in jail: "While I cannot approve of all your acts, I stand in awe of your position since your capture, and dare not oppose you lest I be found fighting against God; for you speak as one having authority, and seem to be strengthened from on high."¹⁶ When Virginia executed John Brown on December 2,

making him the first American since the founding of the nation to be hanged as a traitor, church bells mourned in cities throughout the North. Louisa May Alcott, William Dean Howells, Herman Melville, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Walt Whitman were among the poets who responded to the event. "The gaze of Europe is fixed at this moment on America," wrote Victor Hugo from France. Hanging Brown, Hugo predicted, "will open a latent fissure that will finally split the Union asunder. The punishment of John Brown may consolidate slavery in Virginia, but it will certainly shatter the American Democracy. You preserve your shame but you kill your glory."¹⁷

Brown remained controversial after his death. Republican congressmen kept their distance from his felonious acts. Nevertheless, Southern slave owners were appalled at the show of Northern sympathy for Brown and resolved to maintain slavery by any means necessary, including quitting the Union if they lost the next election. Brown's charisma in the North, meanwhile, was not spent but only increased owing to what many came to view as his martyrdom. As the war came, as thousands of Americans found themselves making the same commitment to face death that John Brown had made, the force of his example took on new relevance. That's why soldiers marched into battle singing "John Brown's Body." Two years later, church congregations sang Julia Ward Howe's new words to the song: "As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free"—and the identification of John Brown and Jesus Christ took another turn. The next year saw the 54th Massachusetts Colored Regiment parading through Boston to the tune, en route to its heroic destiny with death in South Carolina, while William Lloyd Garrison surveyed the cheering bystanders from a balcony, his hand resting on a bust of John Brown. In February 1865 another Massachusetts colored regiment marched to the tune through the streets of Charleston, South Carolina.¹⁸

That was the high point of old John Brown. At the turn of the century, as Southern and border states disfranchised African Americans, as lynchings proliferated, as blackface minstrel shows came to dominate American popular culture, white America abandoned the last shards of its racial idealism. A history published in 1923 makes plain the connection to Brown's insanity: "The farther we get away from the excitement of 1859 the more we are disposed to consider this extraordinary man the victim of mental delusions."¹⁹ Not until the civil rights movement of the 1960s was white America freed from enough of its racism to accept that a white person did not have to be crazy to die for black equality. In a sense, the murders of Mickey Schwerner and Andrew

Goodman in Mississippi, James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo in Alabama, and various other white civil rights workers in various other Southern states during the 1960s liberated textbook writers to see sanity again in John Brown. *Rise of the American Nation*, written in 1961, calls the Harpers Ferry plan "a wild idea, certain to fail," while in *Triumph of the American Nation*, published in 1986, the plan becomes "a bold idea, but almost certain to fail."²⁰

Frequently in American history the ideological needs of white racists and black nationalists coincide. So it was with their views of John Brown. During the heyday of the Black Power movement, I listened to speaker after speaker in a Mississippi forum denounce whites. "They are your enemies," thundered one black militant. "Not one white person has ever had the best interests of black people at heart." John Brown sprang to my mind, but the speaker anticipated my objection: "You might say John Brown did, but remember, he was crazy." John Brown might provide a defense against such global attacks on whites, but, unfortunately, American history textbooks have erased him as a usable character.

No black person who met John Brown thought him crazy. Many black leaders of the day—Martin Delaney, Henry Highland Garnet, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and others—knew and respected Brown. Only illness kept Tubman from joining him at Harpers Ferry. The day of his execution black-owned businesses closed in mourning across the North. Frederick Douglass called Brown "one of the greatest heroes known to American fame."²¹ A black college deliberately chose to locate at Harpers Ferry, and in 1918 its alumni dedicated a memorial stone to Brown and his men "to commemorate their heroism." The stone stated, in part, "That this nation might have a new birth of freedom, that slavery should be removed forever from American soil, John Brown and his 21 men gave their lives."

Quite possibly textbooks should not portray this murderer as a hero, although other murderers, from Christopher Columbus to Nat Turner, get the heroic treatment. However, the flat prose that textbooks use for Brown is not really neutral. Textbook authors' withdrawal of sympathy from Brown is perceptible; their tone in presenting him is different from the tone they employ for almost everyone else. We see this, for instance, in their treatment of his religious beliefs. John Brown was a serious Christian, well read in the Bible, who took its moral commands to heart. Yet every recent textbook except *Pathways to the Present* does not credit Brown with religiosity but instead blames him for it.²² "Brown believed that God had called on him to fight slavery," *The Americans* says twice.

But Brown never believed God commanded him in the sense of giving him instructions; rather, he thought deeply about the moral meaning of Christianity and decided that slavery was incompatible with it. Boorstin and Kelley calls Brown "the self-proclaimed antislavery messiah." But Brown never thought of himself as a messiah. On the contrary, he tried to get Frederick Douglass or Harriet Tubman to join him, believing enslaved African Americans would be much more likely to follow them than him.

By way of comparison, consider Nat Turner, who in 1831 led the most important slave revolt since the United States became a nation. John Brown and Nat Turner both killed whites in cold blood. Both were religious, but, unlike Brown, Turner did see visions and hear voices. In most textbooks, Turner has become something of a hero. Several textbooks call Turner "deeply religious" or "a gifted preacher." None calls him "a religious fanatic." They reserve that term for Brown. The closest any textbook comes to suggesting that Turner might have been crazy is this passage from *American History*: "Historians still argue about whether or not Turner was insane." But the author immediately goes on to qualify: "The point is that nearly every slave hated bondage. Nearly all were eager to see something done to destroy the system." Thus even *American History* emphasizes the political and social meaning of Turner's act, not its psychological genesis in an allegedly questionable mind.

The textbooks' withdrawal of sympathy from Brown is also apparent in what they include and exclude about his life before Harpers Ferry. "In the 1840s he somehow got interested in helping black slaves," according to *American Adventures*. Brown's interest is no mystery: he learned it from his father, who was a trustee of Oberlin College, a center of abolitionist sentiment. If *Adventures* wanted, it could have related the well-known story about how young John made friends with a black boy during the War of 1812, which convinced him that blacks were not inferior. Instead, its sentence reads like a slur. Textbook authors make Brown's Pottawatomie killings seem equally unmotivated by neglecting to tell that the violence in Kansas had hitherto been perpetrated primarily by the pro-slavery side. Indeed, slavery sympathizers had previously killed six free-soil settlers. Several months after Pottawatomie, at Osawatomie, Kansas, Brown had helped thirty-five free-soil men defend themselves against several hundred marauding pro-slavery men from Missouri, thereby earning the nickname "Osawatomie John Brown." Not one textbook mentions what Brown did at Osawatomie, where he was the defender, but fourteen of eighteen tell what he did at Pottawatomie, where he was the attacker.²³

Our textbooks also handicap Brown by not letting him speak for himself. Even his jailer let Brown put pen to paper! Twelve of the eighteen textbooks I studied do not provide even a phrase he spoke or wrote. Brown's words, which moved a nation, therefore cannot move most students today.

Textbook authors may avoid Brown's ideas because they are tinged with Christianity. Religion has been one of the great inspirations and explanations of human enterprise in this country. Yet textbooks, while they may mention religious organizations such as the Shakers or Christian Science, never treat religious ideas in any period seriously.²⁴ An in-depth portrayal of Mormonism, Christian Science, or the Methodism of the Great Awakening would be controversial. Mentioning atheism or Deism would be even worse. "Are you going to tell kids that Thomas Jefferson didn't believe in Jesus? Not me!" a textbook editor exclaimed to me. Treating religious ideas neutrally, nonreligiously, simply as factors in society, won't do, either, for that would likely offend some adherents. The textbooks' solution is to leave out religious ideas entirely.²⁵ Quoting John Brown's courtroom paraphrase of the Golden Rule—"whatsoever I would that men should do to me, I should do even so to them"—would violate the taboo.

Ideological contradiction is terribly important in history. Ideas have power. The ideas that motivated John Brown and the example he set lived on long after his body lay a-moldering in the grave. Yet American history textbooks give us no way to understand the role of ideas in our past.

Conceivably, textbook authors ignore John Brown's ideas because in their eyes his violent acts make him ineligible for sympathetic consideration. When we turn from Brown to Abraham Lincoln, we shift from one of the most controversial to one of the most venerated figures in American history. Textbooks describe Abraham Lincoln with sympathy, of course. Nonetheless, they also minimize his ideas, especially on the subject of race. In life Abraham Lincoln wrestled with the race question more openly than any other president except perhaps Thomas Jefferson, and, unlike Jefferson, Lincoln's actions sometimes matched his words. Most of our textbooks say nothing about Lincoln's internal debate. If they did show it, what teaching devices they would become! Students would see that speakers modify their ideas to appease and appeal to different audiences, so we cannot simply take their statements literally. If textbooks recognized Lincoln's racism, students would learn that racism not only affects Ku Klux Klan extremists but has been "normal" throughout our history. And as they watched Lincoln struggle with himself to apply America's democratic principles across the color line, students would see how ideas can develop and a person can grow.

In conversation, Lincoln, like most whites of his century, referred to blacks as "niggers." In the Lincoln-Douglas debates, he sometimes descended into explicit white supremacy, as we saw in the last chapter. Lincoln's ideas about race were more complicated than Douglas's, however. The day after Douglas declared for white supremacy in Chicago, saying the issues were "distinctly drawn," Lincoln replied and indeed drew the issue distinctly:

I should like to know if taking this old Declaration of Independence, which declares that all men are equal upon principle, and making exceptions to it—where will it stop? If one man says it does not mean a Negro, why does not another say it does not mean some other man? If that Declaration is not . . . true, let us tear it out! [Cries of "no, no!"] Let us stick to it then, let us stand firmly by it then.²⁶

No textbook quotes this passage, and every book but one leaves out Lincoln's thundering summation of what his debates with Douglas were really about: "That is the issue that will continue in this country when these poor tongues of Judge Douglas and myself shall be silent. It is the eternal struggle between these two principles—right and wrong—throughout the world."²⁷

Lincoln's realization of the basic humanity of African Americans may have derived from his father, who moved the family to Indiana partly because he disliked the racial slavery that was sanctioned in Kentucky. Or it may stem from an experience Lincoln had on a steamboat trip in 1841, which he recalled years later when writing to his friend Josh Speed: "You may remember, as I well do, that from Louisville to the mouth of the Ohio there were on board ten or twelve slaves, shackled together with irons. That sight was continual torment to me, and I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio, or any other slave-border." Lincoln concluded that the memory still had "the power of making me miserable."²⁸ No textbook quotes this letter or anything like it.

As early as 1835, in his first term in the Illinois House of Representatives, Lincoln cast one of only five votes opposing a resolution that condemned abolitionists. Textbooks imply that Lincoln was nominated for president in 1860 because he was a moderate on slavery, but, in fact, Republicans chose Lincoln over front-runner William H. Seward partly because of Lincoln's "rock-solid antislavery beliefs," while Seward was considered a compromiser.²⁹

As president, Lincoln understood the importance of symbolic leadership in improving race relations. For the first time the United States exchanged dip-

lomatics with Haiti and Liberia. In 1863 Lincoln desegregated the White House staff, which initiated a desegregation of the federal government that lasted until Woodrow Wilson. Lincoln opened the White House to black callers, notably Frederick Douglass. He also continued to wrestle with his own racism, asking aides to investigate the feasibility of deporting (euphemistically termed *colonizing*) African Americans to Africa or Latin America.

Most of the textbooks mention that Lincoln "personally" opposed slavery. Two even quote his 1864 letter: "If slavery isn't wrong, then nothing is wrong."³⁰ However, most textbook authors take pains to separate Lincoln from undue idealism about slavery. They venerate Lincoln mainly because he "saved the Union." By far their favorite statement of Lincoln's, quoted or paraphrased by fifteen of the eighteen books, is his letter of August 22, 1862, to Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*:

My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that. What I do about slavery and the colored race I do because I believe it helps to save this Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union. . . .

By emphasizing this quote, most textbooks present a Lincoln who was morally indifferent to slavery and certainly did not care about black people. As *Pathways to the Present* puts it, "Lincoln came to regard ending slavery as one more strategy for ending the war." Ironically, this is also the Lincoln whom black nationalists present to African Americans to persuade them to stop thinking well of him.³¹

To present such a Lincoln, the textbooks have to remove all context. The very first thing they omit is the next point Lincoln made: ". . . I have here stated my purpose according to my view of official duty, and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed personal wish that all men, everywhere could be free." That says something quite different about slavery, of course. So all but three textbooks leave that part out.

Next, they remove the political context. Every historian knows that the fragment of Lincoln's letter to Greeley that most textbooks quote does not simply represent his intent regarding slavery. Lincoln wrote the letter to seek support for the war from residents of New York City, one of the most Demo-

cratic (and therefore white supremacist) cities in the North. He could never hope to win that support by claiming the war would end slavery. They would be against it on that ground. So he made the only appeal he could: support the war and it will hold the nation together. He was speaking not to Greeley, who wanted slavery to end, but to antiwar Democrats and antiblack Irish Americans, as well as to governors of the border states and the many other Northerners who opposed emancipating the slaves. Saving the Union had *never* been Lincoln's sole concern, as shown by his 1860 rejection of the eleventh-hour Crittenden Compromise, a constitutional amendment intended to preserve the Union by preserving slavery forever.³² Not one author explains the political context or the intended audience for the Greeley letter. Nor does a single textbook quote Lincoln's encouragement that same summer to Unitarian ministers to "go home and try to bring the people to your views," because "we shall need all the anti-slavery feeling in the country, and more." If they did, students would understand that Lincoln's response to the issue of slavery in America was hardly indifference.

When textbooks discuss the Emancipation Proclamation, they explain Lincoln's actions in realpolitik terms. "By September 1862," says *Triumph of the American Nation*, "Lincoln had reluctantly decided that a war fought at least partly to free the slaves would win European support and lessen the danger of foreign intervention on the side of the Confederacy." To be sure, international and domestic political concerns did impinge on Abraham Lincoln, master politician that he was. But so did considerations of right and wrong. Political analysts then and now believe that Lincoln's September 1862 announcement of emancipation cost Republicans the control of Congress the following November, because Northern white public opinion would not evolve to favor black freedom for another year.³³ Textbook authors suppress the possibility that Lincoln acted at least in part because he thought it was right. From Indian wars to slavery to Vietnam, textbook authors not only sidestep putting questions of right and wrong to our past actions but even avoid acknowledging that Americans of the time did so.

Abraham Lincoln was one of the great masters of the English language. Perhaps more than any other president he invoked and manipulated powerful symbols in his speeches to move public opinion, often on the subject of race relations and slavery. Textbooks, in keeping with their habit of telling everything in the authorial monotone, dribble out Lincoln's words three and four at a time. The only complete speech or letter any of them provide is the Gettysburg Ad-

dress, and only six of the eighteen textbooks dispense even that. Lincoln's three paragraphs at Gettysburg comprise one of the most important speeches ever given in America and take up only a fourth of a page in the textbooks that include them. Nonetheless, five books do not even mention the speech, while five others provide only the last sentence or phrase from it: "government of the people, by the people, for the people." Silliest of all is the new edition of *The American Pageant*, which devotes an entire page to the address but uses most of it to show the manuscript in Lincoln's handwriting, so much reduced to fit on the page that it is rendered illegible!³⁴ *Pageant* provides more words *about* the Address than are in the original—and fails to include a single phrase that Lincoln wrote.

The words, however, are important, and it is important to get students to think about them. Lincoln understood that fighting a war for freedom was ideologically more satisfying than fighting simply to preserve a morally neutral Union. To save the Union, it was necessary to find rationales for the war other than "to save the Union." At Gettysburg he provided one.

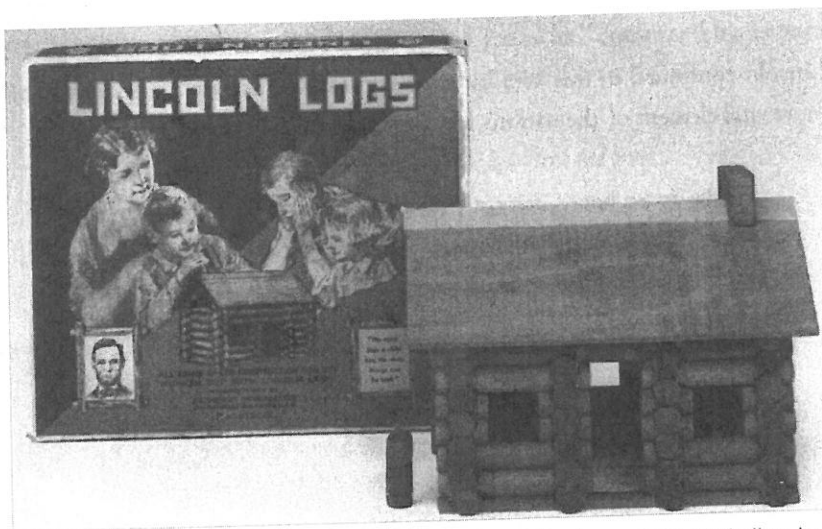
Lincoln was a fine lawyer who knew full well that the United States was conceived in slavery, for the Constitution specifically treats slavery in at least five places. Nevertheless he began, "Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Thus Lincoln wrapped the Union cause in the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence, which emphasized freedom even while many of its signers were slave owners.³⁵ In so doing, Lincoln was at the same time using the Declaration to redefine the Union cause, suggesting that it ultimately implied equal rights for all Americans, regardless of race.

"Now we are engaged in a great civil war," Lincoln continued, "testing whether that nation or any nation, so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure." Again, Lincoln knew better: by 1863 other nations had joined us in democracy. For that matter, every European nation and most American nations had outlawed slavery. How did our Civil War test whether *they* could endure? Here Lincoln was wrapping the Union cause in the old "last best hope of mankind" cloak, a secular version of the idea of a special covenant between the United States and God.³⁶ Although bad history, such rhetoric makes for great speeches. The president thus appealed to the antiwar Democrats of the North to support the war effort for the good of all mankind.

After invoking a third powerful symbol—"the brave men, living and dead, who struggled here"—Lincoln closed by identifying the cause for which so

many had died: "that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom." To what freedom did he refer? Black freedom, of course. As Lincoln well knew, the war itself was undermining slavery, for what began as a war to save the Union increasingly had become a war for black freedom. Citizens at the time understood Lincoln perfectly. Indeed, throughout this period Americans purchased copies of political speeches, read them, discussed issues, and voted at rates that now seem impossibly high. The *Chicago Times*, a Democratic newspaper, denounced the address precisely because of "the proposition that all men are created equal." The Union dead, claimed the *Times*, "were men possessing too much self-respect to declare that Negroes were their equals, or were entitled to equal privileges."³⁷

Textbooks need not explain Lincoln's words at Gettysburg as I have done. The Gettysburg Address is rich enough to survive various analyses.³⁸ But of the six books that do reprint the speech, four merely put it in a box by itself in a



The strange career of the log cabin in which Abraham Lincoln was born symbolizes in a way what textbooks have done to Lincoln. The actual cabin fell into disrepair probably before Lincoln became president. According to research by D. T. Pitcaithley, the new cabin, a hoax built in 1894, was leased to two amusement park owners, went to Coney Island, where it got commingled with the birthplace cabin of Jefferson Davis (another hoax), and was finally shrunk to fit inside a marble pantheon in Kentucky, where, reassembled, it still stands. The cabin also became a children's toy: Lincoln Logs, invented by Frank Lloyd Wright's son John in 1920, came with instructions on how to build both Lincoln's log cabin and Uncle Tom's cabin! The cabin still makes its archetypal appearance in our textbooks, signifying the rags-to-riches legend of Abraham Lincoln's upward mobility. No wonder one college student could only say of him, in a much-repeated blooper, "He was born in a log cabin which he built with his own hands."

corner of the page. *Pathways to the Present* offers a rather empty summation afterward. Only *Life and Liberty* asks intelligent questions about it.³⁹ As a result, I have yet to meet a high school graduate who has devoted any time to thinking about the Gettysburg Address.

Even worse is textbook treatment of Lincoln's Second Inaugural. In this towering speech, one of the masterpieces of American oratory, Lincoln specifically identified differences over slavery as the primary cause of the Civil War, then in its fourth bloody year.⁴⁰

If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through his appointed time, he now wills to remove, and that he gives to both North and South this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to him?

Lincoln continued in this vein by invoking the doctrine of predestination, a more vital element of the nation's idea system then than now:

Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

This last is an astonishing sentence. Its length alone astounds. Politicians don't talk like that nowadays. When students read this passage aloud, slowly and deliberately, they do not fail to perceive it as a searing indictment of America's sins against black people. The Civil War was by far the most devastating experience in our nation's history. Yet we had it coming, Lincoln says here. And in his rhetorical context, sin or crime, not mere tragedy, is the fitting and proper term. Indeed, this indictment of U.S. race relations echoes John Brown's last note: "I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away, but with Blood."⁴¹

Lincoln's Second Inaugural made such an impact on Americans that when

the president was shot, a month later, farmers in New York and Ohio greeted his funeral train with placards bearing its phrases. But only *The United States—A History of the Republic* includes any of the material quoted above.⁴² Seven other textbooks restrict their quotation to the speech's final phrase, about binding up the nation's wounds "with malice toward none." Ten ignore the speech altogether.

Like Helen Keller's concern about the injustice of social class, Lincoln's concern about the crime of racism may appear unseemly to textbook authors. Must we remember Lincoln for *that*? Let's leave it out! Such an approach to Lincoln might be called the Walt Disney interpretation: Disney's exhibit at the 1964 New York World's Fair featured an animated sculpture of Lincoln that spoke for several minutes, choosing his words carefully to say nothing about slavery.

Having disconnected Abraham Lincoln from considerations of right and wrong, several textbooks present the Civil War the same way. In reality, U.S. soldiers, who began fighting to save the Union and not much more, ended by fighting for all the vague but portentous ideas in the Gettysburg Address. From 1862 on, Union armies sang "Battle Cry of Freedom," composed by George Root in the summer of that year:

*We will welcome to our numbers the loyal true and brave,
Shouting the battle cry of freedom.
And although he may be poor, not a man shall be a slave,
Shouting the battle cry of freedom.*⁴³



Triumph of the American Nation includes this evocative photograph of the crew of the USS *Hunchback* in the Civil War. Such racial integration disappeared during the nadir of race relations in the United States, from 1890–1940.

Surely no one can sing these lines even today without perceiving that both freedom *and* the preservation of the Union were war aims of the United States and without feeling some of the power of that potent combination. This power is what textbooks omit: they give students no inkling that ideas *matter*.

The actions of African Americans played a big role in challenging white racism. Slaves fled to Union lines. After they were allowed to fight, the contributions of black troops to the war effort made it harder for whites to deny that blacks were fully human.⁴⁴ A Union captain wrote to his wife, "A great many [whites] have the idea that the entire Negro race are vastly their inferiors—a few weeks of calm unprejudiced life here would disabuse them, I think—I have a more elevated opinion of their abilities than I ever had before."⁴⁵ Unlike historians of a few decades ago, today's textbook authors realize that trying to present the war without the actions of African Americans makes for bad history. All eighteen textbooks at least mention that more than 180,000 blacks fought in the Union army and navy. Several of the textbooks include an illustration of African American soldiers and describe the unequal pay they received until late in the war.⁴⁶ *Discovering American History* mentions that Union soldiers trapped behind Confederate lines found slaves to be "of invaluable assistance." Only *The United States—A History of the Republic*, however, takes the next step by pointing out how the existence and success of black troops decreased white racism.⁴⁷

The antiracist repercussions of the Civil War were particularly apparent in the border states. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation applied only to the Confederacy. It left slavery untouched in Unionist Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri. But the war did not. The status of planters became ambiguous: owning black people was no longer what a young white man aspired to do or what a young white woman aspired to accomplish by marriage. Maryland was a slave state with considerable support for the Confederacy at the onset of the war. But Maryland held for the Union and sent thousands of soldiers to defend Washington. What happened next provides a "positive" example of the effects of cognitive dissonance: for Maryland whites to fight a war against slave owners while allowing slavery within their own state created a tension that de-

Opposite: This is the October 15, 1864, centerfold of *Harper's* magazine, which throughout the nineteenth century was the mouthpiece of the Republican Party. The words are from the Democratic platform. The illustrations, by young Thomas Nast, show shortcomings in the Democratic plan. One could hardly imagine a political party today seeking white votes on the basis of such racial idealism.



The Democratic platform began innocuously enough: "We will adhere with unswerving fidelity to the UNION under the CONSTITUTION as the ONLY solid foundation of our STRENGTH, SECURITY, and HAPPINESS as a PEOPLE." But Nast's illustration was a knockout: he shows slave catchers and dogs pursuing hapless runaways into a swamp. He jolts the reader to exclaim, What about them? These are people, too!

mandated resolution. In 1864 the increasingly persuasive abolitionists in Maryland brought the issue to a vote. The tally went narrowly against emancipation until the large number of absentee ballots were counted. By an enormous margin, these ballots were for freedom. Who cast most absentee ballots in 1864 in Maryland? Soldiers and sailors, of course. Just as these soldiers marched into battle with "John Brown's Body" upon their lips, so their minds had changed to favor the freedom that their actions were forging.⁴⁸

As noted in the previous chapter, songs such as "Nigger Doodle Dandy" reflect the racist tone of the Democrats' presidential campaign in 1864. How did Republicans counter? In part, they sought white votes by being antiracist. The Republican campaign, boosted by military victories in the fall of 1864, proved effective. The Democrats' overt appeals to racism failed, and antiracist Republicans triumphed almost everywhere. One New York Republican wrote, "The change of opinion on this slavery question . . . is a great and historic fact. Who could have predicted . . . this great and blessed revolution?"⁴⁹ People around the world supported the Union because of its ideology. Forty thousand Canadians alone, some of them black, came south to volunteer for the Union cause. "Ideas are more important than battles," said abolitionist senator Charles Sumner, speaking as the war wound down.⁵⁰



Illustrating "PUBLIC LIBERTY and PRIVATE RIGHT," Nast shows the New York City draft riot of 1863: white thugs are exercising their "right" to beat and kill African Americans, including a child held upside down.

Ideas made the opposite impact in the Confederacy. Ideological contradictions afflicted the slave system even before the war began. John Brown knew that masters secretly feared that their slaves might revolt, even as they assured abolitionists that slaves really liked slavery. One reason his Harpers Ferry raid prompted such an outcry in the South was that slave owners feared their slaves might join him. Yet their condemnations of Brown and the "Black Republicans" who financed him did not persuade Northern moderates but only pushed them toward the abolitionist camp. After all, if Brown was truly dangerous, as slave owners claimed, then slavery was truly unjust. Happy slaves would never revolt.

White Southerners founded the Confederacy on the ideology of white supremacy. According to Alexander Stephens, vice president of the Confederacy: "Our new government's foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the Negro is not equal to the white man, that slavery—subordination to the superior race—is his natural and normal condition." Confederate soldiers on their way to Antietam and Gettysburg, their two main forays into Union states, put this ideology into practice: they seized scores of free black people in Maryland and Pennsylvania and sent them south into slavery. Confederates maltreated black Union troops when they captured them.⁵¹ Throughout the war, points out historian Paul Escott, "the protection of slav-

ery had been and still remained the central core of Confederate purpose.”⁵² Textbooks downplay all this, probably because they do not want to offend white Southerners today.

The last chapter showed that concern for states' rights did not motivate secession. Moreover, as the war continued, the Confederacy began to deny states' rights within the new nation. As early as December 1862, President Jefferson Davis denounced states' rights as destructive to the Confederacy. The mountainous counties in western Virginia bolted to the Union. Confederate troops had to occupy east Tennessee to keep it from emulating West Virginia. Winn Parish, Louisiana, refused to secede from the Union. Winston County, Alabama, declared itself the Free State of Winston. Unionist farmers and woodsmen in Jones County, Mississippi, declared the Free State of Jones. Every Confederate state except South Carolina supplied a regiment or at least a company of white soldiers to the Union army, as well as many black recruits. Armed guerrilla actions plagued every Confederate state. (With the exception of Missouri, and the 1863 New York City draft riots, few Union states were afflicted with such problems.) It became dangerous for Confederates to travel in parts of Alabama, Florida, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas. The war was fought not just between North and South but between Unionists and Confederates within the Confederacy (and Missouri).⁵³ By February 1864, President Davis despaired: “Public meetings of treasonable character, in the name of state sovereignty, are being held.” Thus states' rights as an ideology was contradictory and could not mobilize the white South for the long haul.

Every recent textbook tells how the issue of states' rights interfered with the Confederate cause. Otherwise, however, they ignore the role of ideas in the South. The racial ideas of the Confederacy proved even less serviceable to the war effort. According to Confederate ideology, blacks liked slavery; nevertheless, to avert revolts and runaways, the Confederate states passed the “twenty nigger law,” exempting from military conscription one white man as overseer for every twenty slaves. Throughout the war, Confederates withheld as much as a third of their fighting forces from the front lines and scattered them throughout areas with large slave populations to prevent slave uprisings.⁵⁴ When the United States allowed African Americans to enlist, Confederates were forced by their ideology to assert that it would not work—blacks would hardly fight like white men. The undeniable bravery of the 54th Massachusetts and other black regiments disproved the idea of black inferiority. Then came the incongruity of truly beastly behavior by Southern whites toward captured black soldiers, such

as the infamous Fort Pillow massacre by troops under Nathan Bedford Forrest, who crucified black prisoners on tent frames and then burned them alive, all in the name of preserving white civilization.⁵⁵

After the fall of Vicksburg, President Davis proposed to arm slaves to fight for the Confederacy, promising them freedom to win their cooperation. But if servitude was the best condition for the slave, protested supporters of slavery, how could freedom be a reward? Black behavior proved that slaves *did* value freedom: several textbooks show how slavery broke down when Union armies came near. But authors miss the ideological confusion that slaves' defections caused among their former owners. Contradiction piled upon contradiction. To win foreign recognition, other Confederate leaders proposed to abolish slavery altogether. Some newspaper editors concurred. "Although slavery is one of the principles that we started to fight for," said the *Jackson Mississippian*, if it must be jettisoned to achieve our "separate nationality, away with it!" A month before Appomattox, the Confederate Congress passed a measure to enroll black troops, showing how the war had elevated even slave owners' estimations of black abilities and also revealing complete ideological disarray. What, after all, would the new black soldiers be fighting for? Slavery? Secession? What, for that matter, would white Southern troops be fighting for, once blacks were also armed? As Howell Cobb of Georgia said, "If slaves will make good soldiers our whole theory of slavery is wrong."⁵⁶

In part, owing to these contradictions, some Confederate soldiers switched sides, beginning as early as 1862. When Sherman made his famous march to the sea from Atlanta to Savannah, his army actually grew in number, because thousands of white Southerners volunteered along the way. Meanwhile, almost two-thirds of the Confederate army opposing Sherman disappeared through desertion.⁵⁷ Eighteen thousand slaves also joined Sherman, so many that the army had to turn some away. Compare these facts with the portrait common in our textbooks of Sherman's marauders looting their way through a united South.

The increasing ideological confusion in the Confederate states, coupled with the increasing ideological strength of the United States, helps explain the Union victory. "Even with all the hardships," Carleton Beals has noted, "the South up to the very end still had great resources and manpower." Many nations and people have continued to fight with far inferior means and weapons. Beals thinks that the Confederacy's ideological contradictions were its gravest liabilities, ultimately causing its defeat. He shows how the Confederate army

was disbanding by the spring of 1865 in Texas and other states, even in the absence of Union approaches. On the home front, too, as Jefferson Davis put it, "The zeal of the people is failing."⁵⁸

Why are textbooks silent regarding ideas or ideologies as a weakness of the Confederacy?⁵⁹ The Civil War was about something, after all, and that something even influenced its outcome. Textbooks should tell us what it was.⁶⁰

This silence has a history. Throughout the twentieth century, textbooks presented the Civil War as a struggle between "virtually identical peoples." This is all part of the unspoken agreement, reached during the nadir of race relations in the United States (1890–1940), that whites in the South were as American as whites in the North.⁶¹ White Northerners and white Southerners reconciled on the backs of African Americans in those years, while the abolitionists became the bad guys.

As the nadir set in, Confederate Col. John S. Mosby, "Gray Ghost of the Confederacy," grew frustrated at the obfuscation that historians were throwing up as to what the war had been about. "The South went to war on account of slavery," he wrote in 1907, seeking historical accuracy. He cited South Carolina's secession proclamation and noted scornfully, "South Carolina ought to know what was the cause for her seceding." By the 1920s the Grand Army of the Republic, the organization of Union veterans, complained that American history textbooks presented the Civil War with "no suggestion" that the Union cause was right. Apparently the United Daughters of the Confederacy carried more weight with publishers.⁶² Beyond influencing the tone of textbooks to portray the Confederate cause sympathetically, the UDC was even able to erect a statue to the Confederate dead in *Wisconsin*, claiming they "died to repel unconstitutional invasion, to protect the rights reserved to the people, to perpetuate the sovereignty of the states."⁶³ Not a word about slavery or even disunion.

To this day, history textbooks still present Union and Confederate sympathizers as equally idealistic. The North fought to hold the Union together, while the Southern states fought, according to *The American Way*, "for the preservation of their rights and freedom to decide for themselves." Nobody fought to preserve racial slavery; nobody fought to end it. As one result, unlike the Nazi swastika, which lies disgraced, even in the North whites still proudly display the Stars and Bars of the Confederacy on den walls, license plates, T-shirts, and high school logos. Even some (white) Northerners vaguely regret the defeat of

the "lost cause." It is as if racism against blacks could be remembered with nostalgia.⁶⁴ In this sense, long after Appomattox, the Confederacy finally won.

Five days after Appomattox, President Lincoln was murdered. His martyrdom pushed Union ideology one step further. Even whites who had opposed emancipation now joined to call Lincoln the great emancipator.⁶⁵ Under Republican leadership, the nation entered Reconstruction, a period of continuing ideological conflict.

At first Confederates tried to maintain prewar conditions through new laws, modeled after their slave codes and antebellum restrictions on free blacks. Mississippi was the first state to pass these draconian "Black Codes." They did not work, however. The Civil War had changed American ideology. The new antiracism forged in its flames would dominate Northern thinking for a decade. The *Chicago Tribune*, the most important organ of the Republican Party in the Midwest, responded angrily: "We tell the white men of Mississippi that the men of the North will convert the state of Mississippi into a frog pond before they will allow any such laws to disgrace one foot of soil in which the bones of our soldiers sleep and over which the flag of freedom waves."⁶⁶ Thus black civil rights again became the central issue in the congressional elections of 1866. "Support Congress and You Support the Negro," said the Democrats in a campaign broadside featuring a disgusting caricature of an African American. "Sustain the President and You Protect the White Man."⁶⁷ Northern voters did not buy it. They returned "radical" Republicans to Congress in a thunderous repudiation of President Andrew Johnson's accommodation of the ex-Confederates. Even more than in 1864, when Republicans swept Congress in 1866, antiracism became the policy of the nation, agreed to by most of its voters. Despite Johnson's opposition, Congress and the states passed the Fourteenth Amendment, making all persons citizens and guaranteeing them "the equal protection of the laws." The passage, on behalf of blacks, of this shining jewel of our Constitution shows how idealistic were the officeholders of the Republican Party, particularly when we consider that similar legislation on behalf of women cannot be passed today.⁶⁸

During Reconstruction a surprising variety of people went to the new civilian "front lines" and worked among the newly freed African Americans in the South. Many were black Northerners, including several graduates of Oberlin College. This passage from a letter by Edmonia Highgate, a black woman who went south to teach school, describes her life in Lafayette Parish, Louisiana.

The majority of my pupils come from plantations, three, four and even eight miles distant. So anxious are they to learn that they walk these distances so early in the morning as never to be tardy.

There has been much opposition to the School. Twice I have been shot at in my room. My night school scholars have been shot but none killed. A week ago an aged freedman just across the way was shot so badly as to break his arm and leg. The rebels here threatened to burn down the school and house in which I board yet they have not materially harmed us. The nearest military protection is 200 miles distant at New Orleans.⁶⁹

Some Union soldiers stayed in the South when they were demobilized. Some Northern Republican would-be politicians moved south to organize their party in a region where it had not been a factor before the war. Some went



The white woman at left, whom textbooks would call a "carpetbagger," could hardly expect to grow rich teaching school near Vicksburg, where this illustration was done. This woman risked her life to bring basic literacy to African American children and adults during Reconstruction.

hoping to win office by election or appointment. Many abolitionists continued their commitment by working in the Freedman's Bureau and private organizations to help blacks obtain full civil and political rights. In terms of party affiliation, almost all of these persons were Republicans; otherwise, they were a diverse group. Still, all but one of the eighteen textbooks routinely use the disgraceful old tag *carpetbaggers*, without quotation marks and often without noting its bias, to describe Northern white Republicans who lived in the South during Reconstruction.⁷⁰

Many whites who were born in the South supported Reconstruction. Every Southern state boasted Unionists, some of whom had volunteered for the Union army. Most of them now became Republicans. Some former Confederates, including even Gen. James Longstreet, second in command under Lee at Gettysburg, also became Republicans because they had grown convinced that equality for blacks was morally right. Robert Flournoy, a Mississippi planter, had raised a company of Confederate soldiers but then resigned his commission and returned home because "there was a conflict in my conscience." During the war he was once arrested for encouraging blacks to flee to Union lines. During Reconstruction he helped organize the Republican Party, published a newspaper, *Equal Rights*, and argued for desegregating the University of Mississippi and the new state's public school system.⁷¹ Republican policies, including free public education, never before available in the South to children of either race, convinced some poor whites to vote for the party. Many former Whigs became Republicans rather than join their old nemesis, the Democrats. Some white Southerners became Republicans because they were convinced that black suffrage was an accomplished fact; they preferred winning political power with blacks on their side to losing. Others became Republicans to make connections or win contracts from the new Republican state governments. Of the 113 white Republican congressmen from the South during Reconstruction, 53 were Southerners, many of them from wealthy families.⁷² In sum, this is another diverse group, amounting to between one-fourth and one-third of the white population and in some counties a majority. Nevertheless, all but one textbook still routinely apply the disgraceful old tag *scalawags* to Southern white Republicans.⁷³

Carpetbaggers and *scalawags* are terms coined by white Southern Democrats to defame their opponents as illegitimate. At the time, newspapers in Mississippi, at least, used *Republicans* far more often than *carpetbaggers* or *scalawags*. *Carpetbagger* implies that the dregs of Northern society, carrying all their belongings in a

carpetbag, had come down to make their fortunes off the "prostrate [white] south." *Scalawag* means "scoundrel." They became the terms of choice long after Reconstruction, during the nadir of race relations, when white Americans, North as well as South, found it hard to believe that white Northerners would have gone south to help blacks without ulterior motives. If authors explained when and why the terms became popular, students would learn something important about Reconstruction, the nadir, and the writing of history. The closest they come is this sentence from *The Americans*: "Although the terms *scalawag* and *carpetbagger* were negative labels imposed by political enemies, historians still use the terms when referring to the two groups." Like all the other books, *The Americans* then uses the words as if they were proper historical labels, with no quotation marks.

Consider this phrase from *Pathways to the Present* listing the victims of Klan violence: "carpetbaggers, scalawags, freedmen who had become prosperous—even those who had merely learned to read." Why not simply say "Republicans—black and white"? Or this from *The American Tradition*: "Despite southern white claims to the contrary, the Radical regimes were not dominated by blacks, but by scalawags and carpetbaggers." In reality, "scalawags" were Southern whites, of course, but this sentence writes them out of the white South, just as die-hard Confederates were wont to do. Moreover, referring to perfectly legal governments as "regimes" is a way of delegitimizing them, a technique *Tradition* applies to no other administration, not even the 1836 Republic of Texas or the 1893 Dole pineapple takeover in Hawaii.

To be sure, newer editions of American history textbooks no longer denounce Northerners who participated in Southern politics and society as "dishonest adventurers whose only thought was to feather their own nests at the expense of their fellows," as *Rise of the American Nation* put it in 1961. Again, the civil rights movement has allowed us to rethink our history. Having watched Northerners, black and white, go south to help blacks win civil rights in the 1960s, today's textbook authors display more sympathy for Northerners who worked with Southern blacks during Reconstruction.⁷⁴ Here is the paragraph on "carpetbaggers" from *Rise's* successor, *Holt American Nation*, published in 2003:

The arrival of northern Republicans—both whites and African Americans—eager to participate in the state conventions increased resentment among many white southerners. They called these northern Republicans

carpetbaggers. The newcomers, they joked, were “needy adventurers” of the “lowest class” who could carry everything they owned in a carpet-bag—a type of cheap suitcase.

And here is the paragraph on “scalawags”:

Former Confederates heaped even greater scorn on southern whites who had backed the Union cause and now supported Reconstruction. They called these whites **scalawags**, or scoundrels. They viewed them as “southern renegades, betrayers of their race and country.”

The new treatment distances the author from the derogatory terms, putting them in the mouths of “many white southerners,” but the terms themselves are never discredited. Instead, they are to be learned, which is why they are bolded. And textbooks still invoke greed to “explain” whites who believed blacks should have civil and political rights. Of course, authors might use the notion of private gain to disparage every textbook hero from Christopher Columbus and the Pilgrims through George Washington to Jackie Robinson. They don’t, though. Textbooks attribute selfish motives only to characters with whom they have little sympathy, such as the idealists in Reconstruction. The negatives then stick in the mind, cemented by the catchy pejoratives *carpetbaggers* and *scalawags*, while the qualifying phrases—*many white southerners*—are likely to be forgotten.

Everyone who supported black rights in the South during Reconstruction did so at personal risk. At the beginning of Reconstruction, simply to walk to school to teach could be life-threatening. Toward the end of the era, there were communities in which simply to vote Republican was life-threatening. While some Reconstructionists undoubtedly achieved economic gain, it was a dangerous way to make a buck. Textbooks need to show the risk, and the racial idealism that prompted most of the people who took it.⁷⁵

Instead, most textbooks deprive us of our racial idealists, from Highgate and Flournoy, whom they omit, through Brown, whom they make fanatic, to Lincoln, whose idealism they flatten. In the course of events, Lincoln would come to accomplish on a national scale what Brown tried to accomplish at Harpers Ferry: helping African Americans mobilize to fight slavery. Finally, like John Brown, Abraham Lincoln became a martyr and a hero. Seven million Americans, almost one-third of the entire Union population, stood to watch his funeral train pass.⁷⁶ African Americans mourned with particular intensity.



In Vicksburg, Mississippi, these African Americans gathered at the courthouse to hear the news of Lincoln's death confirmed, to express their grief, and perhaps to seek protection in the face of an uncertain future.

Gideon Welles, secretary of the navy, walked the streets of Washington at dawn an hour before the president breathed his last and described the scene: "The colored people especially—and there were at this time more of them, perhaps, than of whites—were overwhelmed with grief." Welles went on to tell how all day long "on the avenue in front of the White House were several hundred black people, mostly women and children, weeping for their loss," a crowd that "did not appear to diminish through the whole of that cold, wet day." In their grief African Americans were neither misguided nor childlike. When the hour came for dealing with slavery, as Lincoln had surmised, he had done his duty and it had cost his life.⁷⁷ Abraham Lincoln, racism and all, was the blacks' legitimate hero, as earlier John Brown had been. In a sense, Brown and Lincoln were even killed for the same deed: arming black people for their own liberation. People around the world mourned the passing of both men.

But when I ask my (white) college students on the first day of class who their heroes are in American history, only one or two in a hundred pick Lincoln.⁷⁸ Even those who choose Lincoln know only that he was "really great"—they don't know why. Their ignorance makes sense—after all, textbooks present Abraham Lincoln almost devoid of content. No students choose John Brown. Not one has ever named a white abolitionist, a Reconstruction Republican, or a white civil rights martyr. Yet these same students feel sympathy with America's struggle to improve race relations. Among their more popular choices are Afri-

can Americans, from Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass to Rosa Parks and Malcolm X.

While John Brown was on trial, the abolitionist Wendell Phillips spoke of Brown's place in history. Phillips foresaw that slavery was a cause whose time was passing, and he asked "the American people" of the future, when slavery was long dead in "the civilization of the twentieth century," this question: "When that day comes, what will be thought of these first martyrs, who teach us how to live and how to die?"⁷⁹ Phillips meant the question rhetorically. He never dreamed that Americans would take no pleasure in those who had helped lead the nation to abolish slavery, or that textbooks would label Brown's small band misguided if not fanatic and Brown himself possibly mad.⁸⁰

Antiracism is one of America's great gifts to the world. Its relevance extends far beyond race relations. Antiracism led to "a new birth of freedom" after the Civil War, and not only for African Americans. Twice, once in each century, the movement for black rights triggered the movement for women's rights. Twice it reinvigorated our democratic spirit, which had been atrophying. Throughout the world, from South Africa to Northern Ireland, movements of oppressed people continue to use tactics and words borrowed from our abolitionist and civil rights movements. The clandestine early meetings of anticomunists in East Germany were marked by singing "We Shall Overcome." Iranians used nonviolent methods borrowed from Thoreau and Martin Luther King Jr., to overthrow their hated shah. On Ho Chi Minh's desk in Hanoi on the day he died lay a biography of John Brown. Among the heroes whose ideas inspired the students in Tiananmen Square and whose words spilled from their lips was Abraham Lincoln.⁸¹ Yet we in America, whose antiracist idealists are admired around the globe, seem to have lost these men and women as heroes. Our textbooks need to present them in such a way that we might again value our own idealism.