

“We Are Not Enemies”: An Analysis of Textbook Depictions of Fort Sumter and the Beginning of the Civil War

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THE SUMMER OF 2017 saw a burgeoning public debate over the proposed removal, in a number of Southern states, of statues and memorials depicting figures from the Confederacy. The debate mirrored the larger national issue—what role should the Civil War play in our historical memory? As citizens of a nation born through violent struggle, Americans have perhaps a less contentious relationship than others with our own history of war. Americans often remember the wars they have fought as something more than just tragedy—often, our wars are recast, in our national memory, as regrettable but necessary, the product of outside provocation, and, ultimately, as events that brought a greater and more peaceful state to the world at large. This “national memory” is a legacy we attempt to recreate in our schools, and as a society, we ask social studies teachers to promulgate it. What, then, do we teach our students about war?

Teachers across the nation vary in their approach to historical instruction, and students vary in their interpretation of it as well. This study aims at the resources available to both parties in our schools, since they represent to many Americans a form of “settled

Selected U.S. History Textbook Samples			
Title	Lead Author	Publisher	Publication Date
<i>America: History of Our Nation</i>	J. W. Davidson	Pearson/ Prentice Hall	2009
<i>America: Pathways to the Present</i>	A. R. L. Cayton	Pearson/ Prentice Hall	2007
<i>The American Journey: A History of the United States</i>	D. Goldfield	Pearson/ Prentice Hall	2007
<i>The American Nation: A History of the United States</i>	M. C. Carnes	Pearson/ Prentice Hall	2008
<i>The American Pageant: A History of the Republic</i>	D. M. Kennedy	Houghton Mifflin	2006
<i>The Americans</i>	G. A. Danzer	McDougal Littell	2009
<i>The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People</i>	P. S. Boyer	Houghton Mifflin	2008
<i>Give Me Liberty!: An American History</i>	E. Foner	W. W. Norton & Co.	2008
<i>United States History</i>	E. J. Lapsansky- Werner	Pearson/ Prentice Hall	2010
<i>Visions of America: A History of the United States</i>	J. D. Keene	Pearson/ Prentice Hall	2010

Figure 1: Selected U.S. History Textbook Samples

history”—the version that we all can more or less accept. Textbook narratives, therefore, should be scrutinized for the manner in which they promote a hegemonic, uncontested account—in this case, regarding how the Civil War began. Our conception of how wars start is vital to understand, since it is in their beginnings that we most often assign blame or innocence in national conduct. This article examines the manner in which U.S. history textbooks depict the event that is universally remembered as the beginning of the Civil War—the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter on April 15, 1861.

The Importance of the Textbook

The textbook, despite predictions that more readily available technological resources will replace it, maintains a dominant presence in the classroom today.¹ Drew Chappell illustrates how textbooks create a framework for teacher selection of content and student performance,² while Linda Levstik and Keith Barton describe how textbooks form a *de facto* curriculum in the classroom by influencing teacher perspectives on their own performance.³ Though many educators have asserted that textbooks will begin to fade in importance as modern technology becomes more readily available, we have seen that, rather than being replaced, textbooks are going from bound copies students must carry to and fro to more high-tech delivery devices—more adaptable, more interactive, but still, ultimately, a compendium of historical information that we consider reliable, valued, and valuable.⁴ And worse still, teachers still must overcome significant roadblocks to using the technology that *is* available effectively, including constant demands on time, a lack of training in such technology, and a general unwillingness to learn an entire new skill-set in departing from the “tried and true.”⁵ Whatever form a textbook takes, it still has enormous sway over teachers, primarily because they are reluctant to discard it until they are presented with something better.

This article focuses on ten U.S. history textbooks, all in common use across the nation (see **Figure 1**). Textbook analyses often focus on omissions or distortions of content, with the antidote to revise existing narratives or add more detail, only compounding one of the chief complaints of textbooks: that they are already overloaded with facts and dry prose. Another major issue with most such studies is that, essentially, they are comprised of suggested revisions according to the researcher’s agenda or biases.⁶ In order to maintain a degree of validity, therefore, textbook analyses need external frameworks to facilitate such criticism.

This study adopts a historical narrative analysis, which aims to determine the manner in which textbook narratives may promote “*de facto* national mandates.”⁷ This method allows for the comparison of textbook narratives to historical works, looking for alternative interpretations, omissions, distortions, and the presence of historical “myth.” It is important with this approach to incorporate relevant

and substantial historiography in order to mitigate the inherent subjectivity of this methodology.⁸ With that in mind, I rely on include James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988), Christopher Olsen's *The American Civil War: A Hands-On History* (2006), and David Williams' *A People's History of the Civil War* (2005). Primarily, the focus of this analysis is on how wars start: What do textbooks say about the beginning of the Civil War? Why did the attack at Fort Sumter happen? And was it sufficient provocation to begin the bloodiest war in U.S. history?

What Historians Say About Fort Sumter

South Carolina seceded from the Union on December 20, 1860, followed by seven more states over the "secession winter." By the time Abraham Lincoln took office in March 1861, Confederates had seized U.S. forts, installations, post offices, and arsenals throughout the South. By April 1861, there were only two federal outposts left of note in the South—Fort Pickens in Florida and Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor.

Practically all major historiographical works on the era initiate the story of the war's beginning with Lincoln's inaugural address. Most historians focus on the "conciliatory" nature of Lincoln's speech and his efforts to win over Southern moderates. His lyrical admonition—"We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies"—is regularly quoted as evidence that Lincoln sought to avoid war. The exact degree to which he was willing to cede federal authority in order to have peace, though, is a matter of some dispute among historians. Christopher Olsen contrasts Lincoln's inaugural vow that "The Government will not assail" the South with his equally solemn promise to "hold, occupy, and possess" federal property in the South.⁹ Olsen notes that "despite his great efforts to appear conciliatory, however, Lincoln steadfastly insisted that the Union was sacred and absolute, and that secession could not be tolerated."¹⁰ James McPherson holds that Lincoln wished to avoid provocation of the South, and that his intent really was peaceful: "Lincoln had hoped to cool passions and buy time with his inaugural address—time to organize his administration, to prove his pacific intent, to allow the seeds of voluntary reconstruction to sprout."¹¹ David Williams disputes this, holding instead that Lincoln had long

expected and hoped for a chance to end the secession movement in the South “against the popular will”—but the difficulty lay in having too small a standing army, and too divided a population, to justify direct intervention. Williams claims, rather ominously, that “Lincoln needed an incident.”¹²

That crisis arrived the morning of his inauguration, as Major Robert Anderson, the U.S. commander inside Fort Sumter, sent the President a letter stating they were running out of supplies. While many textbooks start the discussion of Fort Sumter at this point, most historiographical works note a detail that is important, yet often ignored in textbook narratives. Prior to Lincoln’s inauguration, President James Buchanan—who is universally derided as weak and ineffectual during this period—approved a plan to resupply Fort Sumter in January 1861. The plan was intended, in McPherson’s terms, to “minimize publicity and provocation” in that it entailed sending an unarmed merchant ship, the *Star of the West*, carrying soldiers and supplies to South Carolina.¹³ The operation failed, however, as poor execution allowed word of the enterprise to get out prior to its beginning; worse still, Anderson was given no word of the mission, “so that the garrison at Sumter was about the only interested party that lacked advance knowledge” of the resupply effort.¹⁴ The important point here is what transpired after the *Star of the West* arrived in Charleston Harbor—Confederate artillery fired upon her, and even hit the ship once, before she turned and departed. McPherson claims this could have been the start of the Civil War, but was not, if only because Major Anderson, lacking orders, did not return fire from Fort Sumter. Still, the first aggressive act between the Confederacy and the Union occurred in January 1861, not in April.

Olsen focuses on the impact of the *Star of the West*’s mission on Southern politics—Jefferson Davis, alarmed at the prospect of allowing South Carolina’s civilians to decide when and how the South would enter a war, entered the fray more directly and issued orders to the Confederate forces outside the fort, to force the issue and demand the garrison’s surrender. Whether or not the attack on the *Star of the West* was a sufficiently aggressive act to justify a Northern response—and, thus, whether or not Lincoln’s attempt to resupply the fort in April was moderated in light of that attack—is an unexplored topic in major historiographical works.¹⁵

Lincoln's decision to resupply the fort is often cast as a canny political decision that tried to split the difference between open hostility and meek deference to the South. Olsen points out that Lincoln was not unaware of the impact of this decision, in that resupply "would probably lead to violence."¹⁶ Lincoln tried to blunt that possibility by informing South Carolina's governor of the mission and telling him that the relief mission had no reinforcements, only food, and that they had been ordered not to fire unless fired upon. This was less an issue of humanity, according to Olsen, and more a practical necessity; Lincoln was in a position where open provocation would have caused a thunderous public reaction, as he "faced greater dissent" among "wavering Northerners" than did Jefferson Davis.¹⁷

In considering Lincoln's motivation for sending a relief mission to Fort Sumter, historians have largely fallen into one of three camps. McPherson describes the three positions: first, that Lincoln deliberately maneuvered the South into firing on Fort Sumter in order to provoke a war under the heading of a just cause; second, that Lincoln, wanting to maintain the status quo, came up with the idea of resupply in order to give the South the choice between peace and war; and third, that Lincoln wanted peace but expected the South to fire on the fort, so that, in McPherson's words, "either way he won."¹⁸ Of the three historians referenced here, McPherson gives Lincoln the most credit, pointing out that the President on April 12 held a meeting with John Baldwin, a Virginia unionist, possibly to explore some sort of resolution to the issue. After the meeting, Lincoln issued the order to resupply Fort Sumter, presumably having a newly pessimistic view of his attempts to mollify the pro-Union South, what there was of it. The resulting plan—to bring "food for hungry men" rather than reinforcements—is hailed by McPherson as a "stroke of genius" and "the first sign of the mastery that would mark Lincoln's presidency."¹⁹

Historians also spend considerable time and effort considering the Southern position prior to the resupply mission to Fort Sumter. Olsen examines the issues facing Jefferson Davis, the President of the Confederacy, in much the same way he does for Lincoln; Olsen points out that Davis was facing increasing pressure from his own people to address the matter of Fort Sumter, as it was being viewed as "an insult to their honor and a direct challenge to Confederate independence."²⁰ Additionally, a delay might be seen by the Upper South as vacillation, a fear reflected in the North as well. Many

Selected Textbook Quotations on Lincoln’s Inaugural Address
“In his inaugural address, delivered on March 4, 1861, Lincoln tried to be conciliatory.” (Foner, <i>Give Me Liberty!</i> , p. 498)
“In his inaugural address on March 4, 1861, Abraham Lincoln denounced secession and vowed to uphold Federal law, but tempered his firmness with a conciliatory conclusion.” (Goldfield et al., <i>The American Journey</i> , p. 411)
“Lincoln’s inaugural address was conciliatory but firm.” (Carnes et al., <i>The American Nation</i> , p. 376)
“Lincoln’s inaugural address was firm yet conciliatory—there would be no conflict unless the South provoked it.” (Kennedy et al., <i>The American Pageant</i> , p. 434)
“In his inaugural address, [Lincoln] took a firm but conciliatory tone toward the South...there would be no war, he pledged, unless the South started it.” (Lapsansky-Werner et al., <i>United States History</i> , p. 352)

Figure 2: Selected Textbook Quotations on Lincoln’s Inaugural Address

Southerners felt that waiting on action at Fort Sumter was inviting the conclusion that the Confederacy was unwilling to fight. McPherson, too, asserts that the clamor was growing in the South for a change from the “do-nothing policy” of Davis, as fire-eaters warned that the policy of voluntary reconstruction advocated by William Seward was becoming more likely with the passage of time. Given the demands of his own people and the fear of losing the Upper South, Davis’ decision to order an attack on Fort Sumter seems like inevitability.

Textbook Depictions of Fort Sumter

All the textbooks in this sample address Fort Sumter, some in significant detail, some less so. In describing the strategic situation with the Fort, none of the textbook narratives offer much detail beyond a bare minimum. Davidson and Stoff’s *America: History of Our Nation* is fairly typical in its narrative, which alludes to the Confederate absorption of federal installations after secession: “The seceding states took over post offices, forts, and other federal property within their borders. The new President had to decide how to respond.”²¹

Similar to historiographical works, most textbook narratives begin with Lincoln's inaugural address. The selected quote below from *America: History of Our Nation* can be found to some degree in every textbook from this sample:

In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of...war. The government will not assail [attack] you....We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection.²²

In describing the substance of the inaugural address, textbook authors often rely on a single adjective: *conciliatory*. **Figure 2** includes examples drawn from the various narratives in this study. In all of these selections, the tone is unmistakable—the Union's goal was to stave off war, and, thus, any provocation would be entirely on the part of the Confederacy. While this interpretation is certainly valid and supported by a substantial number of historians, it also circumvents any moral ambiguity and presents a singular view of the beginning of the Civil War—what happened after Lincoln's inaugural at Fort Sumter was the South's fault.

There *had* been attempts to avoid the prospect of war, after the inauguration. What happened after Lincoln's inaugural is often shortened in textbook narratives, shrinking several weeks into a few sentences. That being the case, the degree to which textbooks incorporate the issue of possible compromises, which may have averted the war, tends to vary. The major compromise effort was led by Senator John J. Crittenden of Kentucky with a set of proposed amendments that ultimately were termed the "Crittenden Compromise." These amendments included a guarantee of slavery without future interference by the federal government, a prohibition against slavery north of the 36°30' line (effectively, a return to the boundaries set by the 1820 Missouri Compromise), and a promise that these amendments would never be removed from the Constitution. It is uncertain the degree to which this compromise might have saved the Union. McPherson believed that "no compromise could have stopped the event that triggered disunion: Lincoln's election by a solid North."²³ Still, Lincoln was adamantly against the Crittenden plan, and the measure went down to defeat along straight party-line votes.

Textbooks are mixed in their depiction of the Crittenden Compromise. Cayton et al.'s *America: Pathways to the Present*

engages in the traditional “mentioning” tactic with its description of Senator Crittenden’s plan:

Some politicians proposed compromises with the South. Senator John J. Crittenden of Kentucky, for example, introduced a plan that would recognize slavery in territories south of the 36°30’ line. President-elect Lincoln opposed the plan, however, and convinced the Senate to reject it.²⁴

The text is placed under the heading, “Last-Minute Compromises Fail,” and there is no mention of Lincoln’s motivation in rejecting the plan, nor any mention of the party partisanship reflected in the Senate’s vote.

Foner’s *Give Me Liberty!* gives one of the best descriptions of the Crittenden Compromise and Lincoln’s motivation for opposing it:

Willing to conciliate the South on issues like the return of fugitive slaves, Lincoln took an unyielding stand against the expansion of slavery. Here, he informed one Republican leader, he intended to “hold firm, as with a chain of steel.” A fundamental principle of democracy, Lincoln believed, was at stake. “We have just carried an election,” he wrote, “on principles fairly stated to the people. Now we are told in advance that the government shall be broken up unless we surrender to those we have beaten, before we take the offices... If we surrender, it is the end of us and the end of the government.”²⁵

No other textbook addresses Lincoln’s motive for rejecting the Crittenden Compromise quite so thoroughly, though Carnes and Garraty’s *The American Nation* does describe the President’s philosophical belief in a similar fashion, albeit without explicit connection to the Compromise itself.²⁶ Beyond this, none of the ten textbooks in this study devote any considerable attention to the Crittenden Compromise. In general, these topics are muted in coverage, a limitation which in turn creates a dismissive tone to their description. The “conciliation” to which the textbook authors refer is thus largely rhetorical, drawn from Lincoln’s inaugural, but not supported by actual initiatives to avoid a war.

The tone of inevitability to the war is similarly reflected in textbook depictions of the attack on Fort Sumter itself. *America: History of Our Nation* gives a succinct account of the issue, Lincoln’s decision, and the Southern reaction:

Lincoln did not want to give up the fort. But he feared that sending troops might cause other states to secede. Therefore, he announced

that he would send food to the fort, but that the supply ships would carry no troops or guns...Confederate leaders decided to capture the fort while it was **isolated** [*sic*]...On April 12, Confederate artillery opened fire on the fort. After 34 hours, with the fort on fire, the U.S. troops surrendered.²⁷

The word “isolated” is highlighted in bold print and a definition provided in the page’s margin under the heading “Vocabulary Builder” reads, “to set apart; to separate.”²⁸ This selection, while brief, is effectively identical to the descriptions of the attack itself across the sample of textbooks in this study.

What is most striking about textbook depictions of Fort Sumter is what is omitted. For example, the January 1861 mission of the *Star of the West* is largely ignored, only featured in two books in this sample. *America: Pathways to the Present* includes this line: “A federal ship sent to supply the fort in January had been forced to turn back when Confederate forces fired on it.”²⁹ Lapsansky-Werner et al.’s *United States History* is more explicit in its reference to this mission, though it does not include any follow-up analysis or conclusion: “In January 1861, President Buchanan tried to send troops and supplies to the fort, but the unarmed supply ship sailed away when Confederate guns fired on it.”³⁰ There is no other reference to the *Star of the West* throughout the remainder of the samples.

Instead of acknowledging the attempt made by the Buchanan administration, most of the books describe Buchanan himself as weak and dilatory, unable or unwilling to prevent secession. In fact, the only references are oblique and passing, as with this comment from *United States History*:

President Buchanan, in his last few weeks in office, told Congress that he had no authority to prevent secession. He lamented the breakup of the Union and he sympathized with the South’s concerns, but he made no serious effort to resolve the crisis. Other pacifying attempts also failed.³¹

In similar fashion, Keene et al.’s *Visions of America* presents only a bland account of the lame-duck administration’s attempt to resupply the fort: “Even as the new Confederate government took shape, President James Buchanan, a weak and timid leader with Southern sympathies, did little to avert the crisis, claiming that he lacked constitutional authority to do anything.”³² The “little” that Buchanan did attempt, the failed mission of the *Star of the West*, is not described.

The decision to resupply Fort Sumter with food, rather than reinforcements, is a central issue for historiographical works, and many textbooks are reflective of that. Lincoln's strategy is often cast as a nuanced, shrewd ploy that the onus for actually starting a war directly on the Confederacy, but there is little analysis of the prospect that such resupply may have constituted an aggressive act. Danzer et al.'s *The Americans*, for example, describes the strategy thus: "Lincoln executed a clever political maneuver."³³ In *America: Pathways to the Present*, the text's authors mark out the dilemma facing Lincoln and then portray his decision as the only ethically consistent one:

Lincoln struggled to come to a decision. He had pledged to Southerners in his Inaugural Address that "the government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors." Yet he had also taken an oath to defend government property. Fort Sumter stood as a vital symbol of the Union he had sworn to preserve. To fight to keep the fort, or even to send new troops there, might make him responsible for starting a war. Yet to abandon the fort would mean acknowledging the authority of the Confederate government....Remaining true to both of his pledges, on April 6 Lincoln told the governor of South Carolina that he was sending food, but no soldiers or arms, to Fort Sumter.³⁴

In *The American Nation*, there is a similar method—describe the position Lincoln was in, and then conclude that his strategy to resupply was the only sensible one:

While denying the legality of secession, Lincoln had taken a temporizing position. The Confederates had seized most federal property in the Deep South. Lincoln admitted frankly that he would not attempt to reclaim this property...Most Republicans did not want to surrender them without a show of resistance...Yet to reinforce the forts might mean bloodshed that would make reconciliation impossible. After weeks of indecision, Lincoln took the moderate step of sending a naval expedition to supply the beleaguered Sumter garrison with food.³⁵

Kennedy et al.'s *The American Pageant* includes a section outlining Lincoln's situation in April 1861 that concludes that the President's decision was only reasonable:

Ominously, the choices presented to Lincoln by Fort Sumter were all bad. This stronghold had provisions that would last only a few weeks—until the middle of April 1861. If no supplies were

forthcoming, its commander would have to surrender without firing a shot. Lincoln, quite understandably, did not feel that such a weak-kneed course squared with his obligation to protect federal property. But if he sent reinforcements, the South Carolinians would undoubtedly fight back....After agonizing indecision, Lincoln adopted a middle-of-the-road solution.³⁶

In the same light, some textbook accounts implicitly validate the position that war was inevitable, given the situation. Sometimes these inferences are quite subtle, as with *Visions of America*, which hints that Lincoln's decision to resupply was the result of a logical progression: "With food and other necessities running low at Fort Sumter, Lincoln informed the South Carolina government of his intention to send a ship with non-military supplies."³⁷ Other textbooks are more explicit in their portrayal of Lincoln's decision. Boyer et al.'s *The Enduring Vision* outlines Lincoln's pledge to "hold, occupy, and possess" federal property in the South, and then claims that such an assertion had "committed him to the defense" of Fort Pickens and Fort Sumter.³⁸ *United States History* points out that, "as President, [Lincoln] was sworn to defend the property of the United States."³⁹

Firing on Fort Sumter

Textbooks spend little time on Southern motivations prior to the opening of hostilities at Fort Sumter. *America: Pathways to the Present* is fairly typical, giving only the most cursory examination of Southern motivation prior to the attack. In fact, the textbook's authors spend considerably more time sketching out Lincoln's strategy and his reluctance to provoke hostilities, before ending its section with this:

On April 10, before supplies could arrive, Confederate President Davis ordered General P. G. T. Beauregard to demand that Fort Sumter surrender. If Anderson refused, Beauregard was to take it by force...Anderson did refuse, and on April 12, 1861, Beauregard opened fire on the fort. After a 34-hour bombardment, Anderson surrendered Fort Sumter to Confederate troops.⁴⁰

There is no description of why Southerners might view the fort itself as a threat, or the fact that the Union had tried to resupply the fort in January (an event to which *America: Pathways to the Present*

alludes in the section prior to this one). In this conceptualization, the South attacks more or less without cause.

Goldfield et al.'s *The American Journey* combines Southern positions through Davis to describe the tactical and strategic implications of the fort's presence:

President Davis wanted to take Sumter before the provisions arrived to avoid fighting Anderson and the reinforcements at the same time. He also realized that the outbreak of fighting could compel the Upper South to join the Confederacy. But his impatience to force the issue placed the Confederacy in the position of firing, unprovoked, on the American flag and at Major Anderson, who had become a national hero.⁴¹

The description above makes it as clear as textbooks are likely to manage—the blame for the war lies on the South. *The American Pageant* takes a comparable tack, presenting the assault as a collision between the Union's constraint and the South's belligerence. In the selection below, the authors contrast Lincoln's moderation with Confederate suspicion:

After agonizing indecision, Lincoln adopted a middle-of-the-road solution. He notified the South Carolinians that an expedition would be sent to *provision* the garrison, though not to *reinforce* it. He promised "no effort to throw in men, arms, and ammunition." But to Southern eyes "provision" still spelled "reinforcement."...A Union naval force was next started on its way to Fort Sumter—a move that the South regarded as an act of aggression. On April 12, 1861, the cannon of the Carolinians opened fire on the fort, while crowds in Charleston applauded and waved handkerchiefs. After a thirty-four hour bombardment, which took no lives, the dazed garrison surrendered.⁴²

The celebratory mood of South Carolina's citizenry is set against the condition of the "dazed" Union soldiers, while the description of the attack follows Lincoln's distinction between "provision" and "reinforcement," a point itself formalized by its inclusion in the text's main narrative. And the impact of the attack is made clear in other textbooks, like *America: Pathways to the Present*:

By firing on federal property, the Confederate states had committed an act of open rebellion. As the defender of the Constitution, Lincoln had no choice but to respond. When he called for volunteers to fight the seceding states, Southerners saw his action as an act of war against them.⁴³

And this “act of open rebellion” leads, in *The American Nation*, to musings about why the South might take such action, in light of how little threat the North really posed:

Why were white Southerners willing to wreck the Union their grandfathers had put together with so much love and labor? No simple explanation is possible. The danger that the expanding North would overwhelm them was for neither today nor tomorrow. Lincoln had assured them that he would respect slavery where it existed. The Democrats had retained control of Congress in the election; the Supreme Court was firmly in their hands as well.⁴⁴

Textbook-Provided Student Activities

Textbooks may be associated primarily with narrative—the “story” of history—but they also include a surfeit of activities that generally span from basic information recall to (ostensibly) opportunities for critical thinking. Student activities vary from textbook to textbook regarding Fort Sumter. *America: History of Our Nation* asks only two questions about the incident in its chapter activities, one very bland and informational (“What happened at Fort Sumter?”), and one more philosophical and critical (“Do you think Southerners were justified in seceding despite Lincoln’s assurances? Explain.”)⁴⁵ The latter prompt gives students a chance to consider the Southern perspective prior to the attack, which is a valuable concept. In similar fashion, the authors of *United States History* pair a strictly informational prompt (“Outline an answer to this question: Was secession the only option for the South?”) with a more conceptual question (“What caused Lincoln to call for troops to fight against the Confederacy?”)⁴⁶

Some books encourage varying points of view on the issue of Fort Sumter, while others tend to encourage a dominant, implicitly hegemonic view of the attack. *America: Pathways to the Present* allows students to take on the views of Southerners in the run-up to the Civil War, asking at one point for multiple perspectives that varied across the regions of the South (“Describe how the Lower South, Upper South, and Border States responded differently to Lincoln’s election and the attack on Fort Sumter.”)⁴⁷ Additionally, this text provides activities that encourage students to both reconstruct and compare differing viewpoints on the war, including this “Critical

Thinking and Writing” prompt: “Making Comparisons: Many Southerners called the Civil War the Second War for Independence. Many Northerners called it the War of the Rebellion. Explain how each name reflects the point of view of the people who used it.”⁴⁸

Contrary to this, *The Americans* infers a specific moral orientation in its prompts. Under a heading entitled “Main Idea: Analyzing Causes,” the textbook authors place the blame for the Civil War squarely on the President of the Confederacy: “Why did Jefferson Davis choose to go to war?”⁴⁹ The inference here—that the war was entirely of the South’s choosing—may be historically valid or not, but the prompt implies a moral stature on the part of the authors.

In sum, then, these textbooks tend to adopt the tone of major historiographical works on the issue of Lincoln’s first inaugural, especially the emphasis on conciliation. Textbooks do not, however, detail to any great degree the conciliatory efforts that did occur or were proposed (such as the Crittenden Compromise), and they generally do not address efforts that might have led to an outbreak of hostilities prior to Fort Sumter (such as the failed mission of the *Star of the West*). Textbook authors emulate many historians in their admiration for Lincoln’s political acumen in his “food for the hungry” strategy at Fort Sumter; and as will be evident in the categorical analysis that follows, textbook authors also are generally dismissive of the Southern position at Fort Sumter in 1861.

The Problem with Textbooks

On December 7, 1941, forces of the Empire of Japan attacked the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, killing over 2,400 Americans in the process. The next day, the United States, at President Franklin Roosevelt’s request, declared war on Japan. This is a fact that practically any American knows (though the number that remember it happening at the time grows depressingly fewer every year), and social studies educators can rely on their students to know it as well.

But what do our students know about it? If you ask an average high school student, they will probably identify the date of the attack on Pearl Harbor, and if you ask them what happened next, they will often say something along the lines of, “World War II started.” This may be essentially true, but it carries with it a lack of agency that ought to be alarming to teachers. Because *wars* don’t start; *humans*

start wars. This goes beyond the merely semantic; it represents an epistemological perspective that divorces us from responsibility for our actions. By portraying American wars as inevitabilities, the product of forces beyond our control, we conceptually allow ourselves forgiveness for the calamities that follow. Wars are, of course, great disasters—but, often, we forget to characterize them as *failures*, breakdowns of the normal social machinery that is expected to keep us from such conflicts.

This is especially problematic when, in our view of American history, we cast wars as something less than ruinous. Wars such as World War II are often classified, as Studs Terkel did (though, somewhat ironically) as “good wars.”⁵⁰ We often portray such conflicts as essential, something instrumental to the creation of an American identity. Such is the case with the Civil War. More than nearly any other conflict, most Americans consider the Civil War as close to a “necessary” war as is possible, essential to forging a new, truly *American* nation.

But in teaching the necessity of the Civil War, we as educators create a moral judgment that is as unsettling as it is pervasive. The Civil War, like all wars, was the result of the inability of Americans to avoid an event that cost over 600,000 dead, left even more grievously wounded, and caused entire communities to be destroyed and generations of American families rent apart. It is difficult to square the assumption that the conflict *had* to happen with the devastation it caused. By teaching wars as outside human control, unaffected by human choice or decision, we encourage our students to passively accept our national story and the events that form it.

Possibly the most contentious part of this phenomenon is how we address the beginning of wars. In most social studies classes, the formal beginning of the Revolutionary War, the publication of the Declaration of Independence, is depicted as following a lengthy series of provocations on the part of the British empire—unfair taxation, military occupation, and armed assault upon American citizens. The attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 is portrayed much as it was experienced contemporaneously—as a sneak attack, a cowardly assault unprovoked by Americans, but repaid in full by the use of the atomic bomb four years later. In both cases, the declaration of war is portrayed as something almost natural, a logical evolution of the events that preceded it. This contributes

to the perception that when Americans fight wars, it is because all other alternatives have been exhausted.

Though textbooks are subtle forces of influence on teachers and students, they still bear examination and revision to challenge assumptions like this. Criticizing textbooks is an easy thing to do—they are as maligned as they are ubiquitous. While many of these criticisms are valid and should be addressed, it bears repeating that very few of these faults can be considered intentional. The construction of a textbook is a collaborative process that often includes dozens of direct contributors, created in light of a varying number of motivations (academic interests and the prospect of publication chief among them). It is little wonder that moral content—in fact, *any* content—is disparate throughout any textbook. In an effort to avoid the public backlash brought on by the possibility of controversial topics or language, textbook content is often made passive and vague to avoid giving offense and to avoid the possibility of commercial reprisals. This avoidance of confrontation over content is understandable, and pervasive.

But textbooks are, ultimately, tools, for student use. And their utility can only be measured by the degree to which they offer teachers the opportunity to build student-centered inquiry. It is incomplete to consider the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter without considering the policies that led to it. While textbooks often praise Abraham Lincoln for his sober and measured approach to the issue of secession, little is made of James Buchanan's attempt, with the *Star of the West* mission, to resupply the fort and avoid war. With the value of hindsight, it is easy enough to criticize this plan, but while Lincoln's reluctance to provoke the South is portrayed as thoughtful moderation, Buchanan's policies are derided as dilatory (if they are mentioned at all). Textbooks should give students the opportunity to face the same choices Buchanan did—Should he resupply the fort? Would he have weakened the authority of the executive if he did not? Was it moral to risk American lives and peace for the federal installation in Charleston Harbor—and if not there, where?

Textbooks, by eliding attempts at conciliation and by framing the decisions by leaders on both sides as political maneuvers, help promote a singular view of the beginning of the Civil War—that the South acted at best rashly, at worst criminally, in the attack on Fort Sumter. This may well be so; historians have differing opinions, but

there is little doubt that the shots fired on Fort Sumter comprised an act of war by the nascent Confederacy. What is concerning is the degree to which the narratives presented here promote not only a singular perspective, but also an uncritical one.

It is probably hopeless to expect radical change in textbooks. However, teachers are ultimately the final arbiter of how such resources are used in the classroom.⁵¹ The ability to successfully articulate a complex event is determined in large part by the teacher's ability to move beyond the limited narrative capabilities of the standard textbook, and to infuse the subject with the complexity and detail necessary to achieve our ends. This indicates that further research is necessary into how and where preservice teachers acquire not only content knowledge, but also an understanding of how such knowledge is formed. With such an understanding, we can empower teachers (and, thus, their students) to use their textbooks, rather than being used by them.

Notes

This article has been adapted from portions of Mark Percy, "'We Have Never Known What Death Was Before'—A Just War Doctrine Critique of U.S. History Textbooks" (Ph.D. diss., University of South Florida, 2011).

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