

# How textbooks taught white supremacy

A historian steps back to the 1700s and shares what's changed and what needs to change

Historian Donald Yacovone, an associate at the Hutchins Center for African & African American Research and a 2013 winner of the W.E.B. Du Bois medal, was researching a book on the legacy of the antislavery movement when he came across some old history school textbooks that stopped him cold — and led him to write a different book.

Yacovone, who co-authored “The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross” with Henry Louis Gates Jr. in 2013, is now writing “Teaching White Supremacy: The Textbook Battle Over Race in American History.”

The Gazette interviewed Yacovone about the origins of his research, his findings, and why he thinks it’s necessary to teach the difficult story of slavery and white supremacy and their legacies.

Q&A

Donald Yacovone

GAZETTE: How did you start examining history textbooks from the 19th and 20th centuries?

YACOVONE: I had begun a different book about the legacy of the antislavery movement and the rise of the Civil Rights era. I had spent several months at the Houghton Library before it closed down. When I was nearly finished with one particularly large collection, I wanted to take a break and find out how abolitionism had been taught in school textbooks. I thought this was going to be a quick enterprise: I'd go over to Gutman Library at the Graduate School of Education, take a look at a few textbooks, and keep going. Imagine my shock when I was confronted by a collection of about 3,000 textbooks. I started reviewing them, and I came across one 1832 book, "History of the United States" by Noah Webster, the gentleman who's responsible for our dictionary. I was astonished by what I was reading so I just kept reading some more.

In Webster's book there was next to nothing about the institution of slavery, despite the fact that it was a central American institution. There were no African Americans ever mentioned. When Webster wrote about Africans, it was extremely derogatory, which was shocking because those comments were in a textbook. What I realized from his book, and from the subsequent ones, was how they defined "American" as white and only as white. Anything that was less than an Anglo Saxon was not a true American. The further along I got in this process, the more intensely this sentiment came out, I realized that I was looking at, there's no other word for it, white supremacy. I came across one textbook that declared on its first page, "This is the White Man's History." At that point, you had to be a dunce not to see what these books were teaching.

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GAZETTE: What are the roots of white supremacy? How is white supremacy connected to the history of slavery?

YACOVONE: White supremacy precedes the origins of the United States. Every aspect of social interaction, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries, was

dominated by white identity, and white supremacy became an expression of American identity.

Americans tend to see racism as a result of Southern slavery, and this thinking has all kinds of problems. First of all, slavery was in the North as well as in the South, and the people who formed the idea of American identity were not Southern slave owners, they were Northerners. The father of white supremacy was not a Southerner; it was John H. Van Evrie, a Canadian who ended up settling in New York City. Van Evrie argued that if no slaves existed, the class-based structure of Europe would have been transferred, kept, and developed in the American colonies. But with the African presence, Van Evrie said, the descendants of white Europeans saw that the difference among white people was virtually insignificant compared to what they perceived as differences between themselves and African Americans. This allowed democracy, which was an unpopular idea in the 17th and 18th century, to flourish and develop.

We always forget that democracy was not an idealized form of government back then. In fact, it was considered an evil. Van Evrie's argument was that Americans had to reimagine a new kind of government and social order and they could do so because of the African presence. This can also explain why white supremacy has persisted for so long, because it is an identity of oneself in contrast to others, a sort of a self-fulfilling, reinforcing thought about one's self-perceived superiority. Even people who opposed slavery believed that African Americans could never be absorbed by white society. Samuel Sewall, who wrote the first antislavery pamphlet in 1700, condemned slavery, but he also characterized people of African descent as "a kind of extravasate Blood," always alien. His idea remained central to the American mind for the next 200 years.

**GAZETTE:** Some historians say that white supremacy ideology served to justify the enslavement of African Americans.

**YACOVONE:** The main feature of white supremacy is the assumption that people with Anglo Saxon backgrounds are the primacy, the first order of humanity. Van Evrie, however, saw people of African descent as essential to do "the white man's work," and were designed to do so "by nature and god." He wrote about six different books on the subject, and he used a racial hierarchy in which Caucasians were at the top and Africans at the bottom. You'd think that white supremacists were driven mostly by hate, but at the

core they were driven by their ideas of racial superiority, which of course were pure fiction and had nothing to do with reality. White supremacy wasn't developed to defend the institution of slavery, but in reaction to it, and it preceded the birth of the United States.

A lot of the white supremacists in the North didn't even want an African American presence there. Many Northerners advocated the American Colonization Society, which would export African Americans to Liberia. But there was no unanimity of ideas about white supremacy; the only thing they all agreed upon was the "superiority of the white race."

**"White supremacy is a toxin. The older history textbooks were like syringes that injected the toxin of white supremacy into the mind of many generations of Americans."**

**GAZETTE:** I once heard a Harvard historian say that the Founding Fathers were white supremacists. Is that a fair characterization?

**YACOVONE:** Of course. Exceptions existed, such as Massachusetts's James Otis, but most owned slaves and those who didn't, like Benjamin Franklin, preferred that people of African descent never existed in the American colonies. Thomas Jefferson is the classic example. He is the individual responsible for giving us the phrase that embodies the democratic promise — "All men are created equal" — and set the trend to exclude slavery from newly acquired territory. Yet, he refused to free his own slaves, considered people of African descent inherently inferior, and when he wrote those famous words in the Declaration of Independence he thought only of white men.

**GAZETTE:** What did the textbooks published in the 20th century teach about slavery in comparison to those written in the 19th century?

**YACOVONE:** For the most part, the textbooks from the pre-Civil War period through the end of the century followed a basic format: They would go from exploration to colonization to revolution to creation of the American republic, and then every succeeding presidential administration. Anything outside of the political narrative was not considered history and was not taught.

During the brief period of Reconstruction (1863-1877), the story emphasized the fulfillment of democracy, and the ideology of freedom suffused many books. This was a dramatic change. I even came across a couple of books that contained pictures of African Americans, and I was flabbergasted when I discovered one that had a picture of Frederick Douglass — that was unheard of. Prior to Reconstruction, textbooks had a few pictures, some engravings. But they disappear pretty quick once we get into the 20th century, because the “Lost Cause” mythology takes over academia and white supremacy reappears with full force.

**“We’re not teaching students the true American history because African American history is American history.”**

During the 1920s, the 1930s, and the 1940s, it was astonishing to see positive assessments of slavery in American history textbooks, which taught that the African American’s natural environment was the institution of slavery, where they were cared for from cradle to grave. There was a legacy of African American writing about freedom, but the white power structure simply wouldn’t accept it as legitimate. They dismissed the slave narratives as propaganda, downplayed the history of Africans before slavery, and ignored the work of African American scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois and others.

**GAZETTE:** A report by the Southern Poverty Law Center found that schools failed to teach the “hard history” of African enslavement. What role have the textbooks played in the miseducation of many generations of Americans?

**YACOVONE:** This is the problem. We’re not teaching students the true American history because African American history is American history. I’ve been lecturing about this project, and every time I ask students what they learn about the history of slavery, they all said, “Not much.” But even if there are textbooks that deal with those issues in a more accurate way, white teachers are so intimidated that they won’t teach it.

**GAZETTE:** You mentioned in an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that while doing your research, you found the history book you

read when you were a fifth grader. What did that book teach you about the history of slavery?

YACOVONE: That was one of the great revelations of this research. Like so many of these books, “Exploring the New World” by O. Stuart Hamer and others, which was published repeatedly between 1953 and 1965, said almost nothing. All these books, particularly from 1840 for the next 25 years, go out of their way to not discuss slavery. Some would say that slavery began in 1619, but most said it began in 1620 because those who are writing this narrative are New Englanders, and 1620 is when the Pilgrims sailed on the Mayflower. Half the books from this early period got the date wrong. If the textbooks wrote about slavery, it was only one sentence and would never discuss the nature of slavery or include any descriptions. When American politics became absorbed by the debate over slavery, they could not avoid that, and would mention the 1820 Compromise [that admitted Maine to the union as a free state and Missouri as a slave state] and the 1850 Compromise [that abolished the slave trade - but not slavery- in Washington, D.C.]. None of the textbooks published prior to the Civil War would ever talk about the abolitionist movement, which began in the late 1820s. It wasn’t until 1853, when the educator Emma Willard published her massive history of the United States, that she mentioned the abolitionists, but she didn’t say who they were or what they were about, except that they were tools of Great Britain dedicated to destroying the republic.

GAZETTE: What did the textbooks published after the 1960s teach about slavery? Has there been any progress over the past few years?

YACOVONE: In the mid 1960s, textbooks began noticeably to change because attitudes and scholarship were changing in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. Scholars such as Kenneth Stampp reimagined Reconstruction, and it had a dramatic effect. There was a gradual reintroduction of the African American element in history textbooks. And now, many history teachers don’t even use textbooks. They’re using online resources. Some of the best work is being produced by the Zinn Education Project, the Gilder-Lehrman Center, and the Southern Poverty Law Center.

But even when textbooks are accurate, teachers have to be willing to teach it. We know there are many white teachers who are afraid of doing it. And you have to have school systems, both public and private, committed to doing this work and not to punish teachers for doing so, which is happening. The resources are endless. But it’s complicated because in many

states there are institutionalized approval processes that determine what textbook will be used. And as far as the publishing industry is concerned, this is huge money. Texas and California dominate and they determine what gets published and what doesn't.

**GAZETTE:** What are the risks of not teaching the full story of slavery and its legacy?

**YACOVONE:** This is essential work that has to be done. If America is to be a nation that fulfills its democratic promise, the history of slavery and white supremacy have to be taught in schools across the country. We need to acknowledge that white supremacy remains an integral part of American society and we need to understand how we got to where we are. The consequences of not doing so are lethal. White supremacy is a toxin. The older history textbooks were like syringes that injected the toxin of white supremacy into the mind of many generations of Americans. What has to be done is teach the truth about slavery as a central institution in America's origins, as the cause of the Civil War, and about its legacy that still lives on. The consequences of not doing so, we're seeing every day.