

WHAT IS AMERICA TO ME?

By Michael R. Wenger

“The children in the playground

The faces that I see

All races and religions

That’s America to me.”¹

The recent racial unrest precipitated by the blatant killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, all unarmed African Americans engaged in non-threatening behavior, has dramatically revealed the racism that continues to infect our police departments, as well as the broader society. These killings have stirred widespread demands for change.

To a great degree this racism is a consequence of our ignorance of the past, a result of the “whitewashed” version of American history and American literature that is taught in our schools. If we are to respond effectively to persistent racism throughout our society, we must cure this ignorance by teaching a more complete and more accurate version of our history—both the parts that make us proud to be Americans and the parts that too many of us would rather forget.

The “whitewashed” version of American history that is taught in most schools ignores the oppressions that are an integral part of our past and that have left a legacy that continues to haunt us today. This robs our children of the ability to understand, contextualize and think critically about all aspects of our history. Without a full understanding of our past, how can we expect to solve the problems this past has created?

In teaching about race relations and institutional racism, which I did at George Washington University from 2003 to 2018, I was particularly struck by how little my students, both students of color and white students, knew about the most oppressive portions of our history--the genocide of Native Americans, the enslavement of Black Americans, the theft of land from Native Americans and Hispanic Americans. This ignorance creates a distorted view of our history, and it has led to much of the civil unrest we are experiencing today.

As Jim Loewen brilliantly illustrates in his best-selling book, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, most of us learn an inaccurate and incomplete version of American history and American literature. We learn, sometimes explicitly

¹ From the song “The House I Live In,” originally sung in the musical revue “Let Freedom Sing” in 1942

Music written by Earl Robinson, Lyrics written by Lewis Allan

and sometimes implicitly, that white people were brave and hard-working pioneers who built this country and that people of color not only had little to do with it, but were actually burdens on society. Many of us have been taught outrageous myths: that we treated Native Americans well, but that they were savages; that slave owners were kind and that enslaved people were better off under the control of the people who “owned” them; that all the great inventions, accomplishments, and literature were the products of white people.

When I was in elementary school, the books from which we learned to read contained nary a black face, except occasionally as servants. Native Americans were depicted as savages who we tamed and confined to reservations for their own good. Other people of color seemingly didn’t exist. Reading these books as young children propagandized us that white people were the only fully human people.

For example, we were not taught that enslaved people built our nation’s Capitol and the White House. We were not taught that black people invented the traffic light, the gas mask, and the mobile refrigeration used on long-haul trucks, among other items that are integral parts of our daily lives. We were not taught that black people developed our system of blood banks, and designed the layout of Washington, D.C. We were not taught that the concept of mandatory public education emerged from the policies of black-led governments in the South during Reconstruction.

Names of freedom fighters like Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Sitting Bull, and A. Philip Randolph, among many others, were mentioned, if at all, only in passing and often negatively. Rather, emphasis was placed on the philosophy of black educator Booker T. Washington, who was willing to accept the concept of white social superiority as the price of black economic survival. We read only white writers, implicitly conveying the erroneous belief that there were no writers of color worth reading.

The famous “heroes” of our nation’s creation, people like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, were presented as perfect people who could do no wrong. The fact that they and most of their peers built their wealth on the backs of countless dark-skinned, enslaved human beings was hardly, if ever, mentioned.

We have tried to correct for our omissions by creating a Black History Month. But this implies that somehow the history of black people and other people of color in the United States is divorced from and inferior to the “real history” of our country—the history of white people. And it furthers the myth of white supremacy.

Take a minute right now to honestly take stock of how many inventors, writers, and freedom fighters of color you’ve heard of, what you know about each of them, and how many of them you learned about in your high school American history and literature classes. I think most of us who are white will find that, when it comes to people of color, we don’t know much. This lack of knowledge embeds within many of us the negative racial stereotypes and the often unacknowledged sense of white superiority that drive much of the behavior of white people toward people of color.

Over the last few decades things have changed a bit for the better. My grandchildren, who are African American, have taken courses in African American studies in high school. But most of the students in these classes have been black. Unfortunately, most white students perceive no need to take such classes, and school administrators usually perceive no need to encourage white students to take such classes, or more to the point, to incorporate African American studies and the study of other people of color as an integral part of American studies.

Famed poet Maya Angelou has told us: "History, despite its wrenching pain cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage need not be lived again." If we want transform our society into one in which we embrace our common humanity and racism is a distant memory, we must have the courage to confront that part of our history that has caused such pain to so many and that has left a legacy of racism with which we still grapple today.

This essay is adapted from Mr. Wenger's forthcoming book *Racist? Not Me!: Transforming America Into The Society We Really, Really Want*