



The mend of history: A study of the revisions to the AP US History framework

Max Eden

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Key Points

- The College Board's 2014 curriculum framework for teaching Advanced Placement US History provoked a well-deserved firestorm, which led to a significant revision in 2015.
- The controversy over the AP US History framework was not truly between liberals and conservatives. Rather, it was between some in academia, who see the darker elements of America's past as what is truly worthy of emphasis, and most Americans, both liberals and conservatives, who also want our students to be taught about America's distinct virtues and what unites us.
- The 2014 framework evinced a preoccupation with race, gender, class, and exploitation. Division and oppression are part of the American story—but so is the progress we have made. The 2015 framework retains the darkness and the divisions while also emphasizing America's progress toward fulfilling its ideals.

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Executive Summary

The College Board's 2014 curriculum framework for teaching Advanced Placement US History, the gold standard for high school history, provoked a well-deserved firestorm, as the original, neutral five-page course outline had been replaced by an ideological 90-page script. Criticism of the framework was raised on blogs, and as political opposition swelled, state legislatures across the country considered legislative action. The College Board, though initially defensive, promised to review the 2014 framework extensively and release a more balanced one for 2015.

That newly revised 2015 framework was released this summer. Many of the strongest critics and defenders of the controversial 2014 framework agreed that the new one was not only scrupulously balanced but also presented a fuller and richer account of American history. While some criticism persists from the left and the right, the lack of controversy since its release has been striking.

Whereas the 2014 version reflected the view, prominent in today's universities, that the sins of America's past are what is most worthy of emphasis, the 2015 version strikes a balance between the darker elements of our history and the progress we have made toward fulfilling our nation's ideals. This paper compares similar passages from both standards to show how through careful revision the College Board has brought their AP US History framework further away from the preoccupations and prejudices of academia and closer to a mainstream American consensus, generally improving the overall quality of its content. Several thematic changes stand out.

Colonization and Settlement: The old framework strained to depict British colonists as uniquely racist (and dogmatic about gender roles) compared to their French and Spanish contemporaries. The new framework does not assert historically dubious moral judgments, but rather highlights that English colonists came in larger numbers seeking religious freedom and economic opportunity.

The American Founding: The old framework barely mentioned the Founding Fathers and treated the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution in passing. The new framework mentions the founders, treats their political debates at further length, and encourages teachers to spend a month on the founding documents and their influence on American history.

Slavery: Some critics accused the 2015 standards of "whitewashing" American history but provided little specific evidence to support that assertion. The 2015 version does nothing of the kind when it comes to slavery. By eschewing the anachronistic and substantively weak term "racist stereotyping" for the more morally charged and historically accurate term "racial doctrines," by emphasizing the cold economic forces shaping slavery, and by pointing out that much of Northern opposition to slavery was based more on economic self-interest than moral indignation, the 2015 framework puts the institution of slavery into more vivid moral relief.

Civil Society: The old framework made it appear that every instance of moral progress in American history was precipitated by government action. The new framework acknowledges that Americans formed voluntary associations outside of government to promote social welfare and champion moral reforms.

The Free Market: In the old framework, capitalism seemed to increase inequality and serve little to no good. In the new framework, the fruits of free market economic progress—that is, rising living standards and increased access to education and leisure—are given their due.

Pluribus and Unum: The old framework never let slip an opportunity to stratify Americans by race, class, ethnicity, or gender. The new framework is less eager to do so. The old framework's theme of "Identity" and its focus on group identities has been replaced by "American Identity." The old framework's theme of "Peopling" has been replaced by "Migration and Settlement," and the hopes of immigrants and the process of assimilation are now treated with respect.

20th Century Politics: The old framework portrayed the political history of the 20th century as a string of liberal triumphs followed by the unintended consequence of a conservative backlash. The new framework tempers its treatment of liberal policy victories and treats conservative arguments in a way that conservatives would recognize.

America's Role in the World: The old framework gave no indication that America has been a geopolitical force against tyranny and for democracy. It did not even mention the Nazis, and it treated communism in neutral terms. The new framework makes more clear what we have fought for—and what we have fought against.

No document of American history will ever command unanimous consent. Fair and valid critiques can be made of the 2015 framework from both the left and the right. But the revisions made to the AP US History framework reflected a conscientious and diligent attempt to create a document that should command an American consensus.

Introduction

The College Board's 2014 curriculum framework for teaching Advanced Placement US History provoked a well-deserved firestorm. AP US History is the gold standard for teaching high school American history. The first-ever attempt to provide a comprehensive guide for teaching the course, which is taken by a half-million students each year, yielded an unqualified mess. It replaced an anodyne five-page outline with an ideological, politicized 90-page script. Larry Krieger, a retired high school history teacher, was the first to flag the single-minded focus on American wrongdoing and racial division.[1] Stanley Kurtz penned an illuminating series of posts for *National Review* on the framework's politicization of history.[2]

Some problems were glaring. For example, whereas the new framework depicted Democratic icons Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Lyndon Baines Johnson in glowing terms, it reserved its only negative adjective for Republican Ronald Reagan, reducing his Cold War strategy to a tendency toward "bellicose rhetoric." When it came to World War II, the framework declared that the atomic bomb and Japanese internment camps caused Americans to question their values, but omitted any mention of the fascist and totalitarian regimes we were fighting.

Yet the ideological impression given by the whole was greater than the sum of its parts. When AEI's Frederick M. Hess and the Fordham Institute's Chester E. Finn Jr. reviewed the standards, they noted, "While identity is declared a major 'theme,' and the framework brims with references to ethnic and gender identity, there's no specific attention to the emergence of a distinct American 'identity.'" They observed that discussion of civic organizations was largely absent. There was "little about economic that doesn't feel caricatured or framed in terms of government efforts to combat injustice. Students are introduced to decade after decade of American racism and depravity, with little positive context for the nation's foreign engagements or its success creating shared prosperity for tens of millions." [3]

The College Board initially issued a prickly statement dismissing such criticism. It accused critics of "a blatant disregard for the facts" and of putting personal agendas "above the best interest of teachers, students, and their families." [4] The *New York Times* ran an op-ed by James Grossman, the executive director of the American Historical Association (AHA), accusing critics of being motivated by partisanship and asserting that their "accusations arise from belief born of assumption rather than careful reading." [5]

A groundswell of political opposition to the framework emerged. The Republican National Committee, in turn, passed a resolution deeming the standards "radically revisionist" and calling on Congress to insist on their further review. [6] States, including Georgia, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Nebraska, Tennessee, Colorado, and Texas, considered legislative action. The battle lines seemed drawn. Then, the College Board reversed its defensive course. It took a closer look at the framework, reached out to critics, solicited feedback from the public, promised that the framework would be reworked for 2015, and asked to be judged on the result.

When the new 2015 curriculum framework was released, Frederick Hess and I wrote that it was not only scrupulously nonpartisan but also “flat out good.”[7] *Wall Street Journal* columnist Daniel Henniger, who had previously written a column criticizing the 2014 standards as “Orwellian,” penned another titled “Hey, Conservatives, You Won.” He declared, “The College Board’s rewritten 2015 teaching guidelines are almost a model of political fair-mindedness. This isn’t just an about-face. It is an important political event.”[8] Though he had initially blasted critics, the AHA’s Grossman opined that the new framework was clearer than the last and that “one of the great strengths of this framework is that it enables teachers and students to explore issues and ideas that have united and divided Americans.”[9]

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Notes

1. Pema Levy, “What’s Driving Conservatives Mad about the New AP History Course,” *Newsweek*, August 14, 2014, www.newsweek.com/whats-driving-conservatives-mad-about-new-history-course-264592 (<http://www.newsweek.com/whats-driving-conservatives-mad-about-new-history-course-264592>).
2. Stanley Kurtz, “How the College Board Politicized U.S. History,” *National Review*, August 25, 2014, www.nationalreview.com/corner/386202/how-college-board-politicized-us-history-stanley-kurtz (<http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/386202/how-college-board-politicized-us-history-stanley-kurtz>).
3. Frederick M. Hess and Chester E. Finn, Jr, “Getting our History Right,” *National Review Online*, September 23, 2014, www.aei.org/publication/getting-our-history-right/ (<http://www.aei.org/publication/getting-our-history-right/>).
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5. James R. Grossman, “The New History Wars,” *New York Times*, September 1, 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/09/02/opinion/the-new-history-wars.html?_r=1 (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/02/opinion/the-new-history-wars.html?_r=1).
6. Republican National Committee, “Resolution Concerning Advanced Placement U.S. History (APUSH),” August 8, 2014, https://cdn.gop.com/docs/RESOLUTION_CONCERNING_ADVANCED_PLACEMENT_US_HISTORY_APUSH.pdf (https://cdn.gop.com/docs/RESOLUTION_CONCERNING_ADVANCED_PLACEMENT_US_HISTORY_APUSH.pdf).
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9. Colleen Flaherty, “Revisiting History,” *Inside Higher Ed*, July 31, 2015, www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/07/31/revised-ap-us-history-framework-seeks-calm-critics (<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/07/31/revised-ap-us-history-framework-seeks-calm-critics>).

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