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Marchers with signs at the March on Washington, 1963. (Library of Congress/Marion S. Trikosko/Public Domain)



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As students prepare to return to school, parents, teachers and politicians are arguing over the teaching of American history.

On one side are those who feel students should learn only the positive things about our nation. Those who push a positive presentation of our history believe that it promotes patriotism and love of country. Students who take pride in their country become good citizens, good workers and good soldiers. Inculcating students with a positive view of history promotes harmony and protects the status quo. Those who sacrifice themselves for the nation are considered heroes. Stress on the negative, in this view, breeds cynicism, disrespect for authority and civil unrest.

Traditionally, emphasizing the positive has been the pattern in national histories all over the world. A unified common story unites people of various economic, social, ethnic and religious backgrounds. Public schools are used not only to spread literacy but also to unite people in a common understanding of who they are.

In this approach to teaching history, every nation sees itself as exceptional, as better and more blessed than any other. Leaders are presented as always doing what is best for the country. In its worse form, such an approach casts others as enemies who threaten the country's very existence.

This positive framing of history has been undermined in modern times by a scientific approach to history that stressed historical facts over national myths. Even the

Catholic Church had to face this reality as historians wrote the truth about popes.

Revolutionaries also criticized the traditional approach to history where it supported a status quo that kept the rich in power and the common people complacent and subservient. And the nationalism promoted by traditional histories was seen as supporting wars that bled the citizenry and fed the military industrial complex.

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In America, the traditional approach to history lasted through the Second World War as the country was united to fight fascism. After the war, the country was united against godless Communism.

The national myth was broken by the Vietnam War. America could no longer be portrayed as all powerful. Leaders were not all wise. Soldiers were killed and wounded in a war that we lost. Political and military leaders lied to the public. Subsequent wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran followed the same pattern. On top of that we had Watergate and other scandals.

No historian could with a straight face present American history as the triumph of an intelligent and good people.

Slavery and the Jim Crow era could no longer be ignored. Genocide against Indigenous peoples was exposed. Corruption and graft in politics became part of the story. Sexism and racism were recognized to be interwoven in every chapter.

But if teachers only offer a negative view of American history, the result is cynical students who come out of school with no hope or idealism.

History also needs to include stories of Americans who struggled against racism, sexism and economic exploitation. These new heroes might be flawed but they could be admired for fighting for ideals we could cherish. This approach to history can present America as an unfinished project to which the students are invited to contribute.

The Bible is not a bad guide for thinking about American history.

The Bible does not gloss over the sins and failings of Jewish kings and leaders. They worshipped false gods, exploited the poor and got into stupid wars. Joseph's

brothers sold him into slavery. David had one of his generals killed because he wanted his wife. Even Abraham, out of fear, allowed the pharaoh to have sex with his wife, Sarah. And Moses so disappointed God that he was not allowed to enter the promised land.

The prophetic books of the Bible are filled with social criticism, with attacks on political and religious leaders. And the New Testament does not hide the failings of Peter and the Apostles.

The Bible teaches us not to put our leaders on pedestals, free from criticism. A nationalism that ignores the failings of leaders and people is not biblical. Only God is perfect, holy and just.