

The Civil War and Its Uncivil Impact in the Current Struggle for Civil Rights

By Barbara R. Arnwine

A recent line in the *Denver Post* on the subject of revisionist history was striking—although the saying follows that “winners write history,” “when it comes to the civil war, losers write the history.” This is a poignant example about how people are subjected to those who distort the past and, hence, shape the future of the country in a way that hinders progress.

These distortions are particularly dangerous when reflecting upon the 150th anniversary of the Civil War. Somehow, “anniversary” does not seem the appropriate word for this indelible mark on the nation’s history. Anniversaries are generally events to commemorate, cherish, and, in fact, celebrate. True, lessons of the Civil War should be remembered for what it was, but not celebrated with distorted history of what it was not. This nation cannot move forward with a civil future without an honest discussion of slavery and other issues that mark an uncivil past. There are many key ways in which a distorted history of the Civil War negatively informs present status and limits future progress, as highlighted below.

Misinformation included in school textbooks serves as an egregious example of how distorting the past negatively affects the future. This is illustrated by an overt example in Virginia, where a fourth-grade social studies textbook alleged that thousands of blacks fought for the Confederacy during the American Civil War; many historians, of course, dispute this claim. This is yet another attempt to downplay the role of slavery in the Civil War and focus on misrepresented notions of black complicity in what these texts might have children believe was simply a “states’ rights” movement in the South.

Texas provides another lowlight in the fight against misinformation in schools. The Texas School Board recently approved texts that exalt the so-called positive aspects of slavery and perpetuate a watered-down version of the civil rights movement. The NAACP and the Texas League of United Latin American Citizens re-

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cently filed a complaint noting these texts as not only inaccurate, but also discriminatory. The complaint is important because it is a reminder of the stigmatizing effects such falsehoods have on African-American youth and the disservice it does for youth of all races, who will hopefully improve upon the mistakes of the past rather than subvert them.

The consequences of such subversion are witnessed in the manifestation of the complete mishandling and outright disregard of race by many prominent legislators. Some in the Tea Party, for example, prey upon the ignorance of others to perpetuate inaccuracies that hurt political discourse. Their fervent resistance to the Obama administration along with their cries to take “their” country back reek of ignorance at best, racism at worst. Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-Minn.) recently went so far as to

say, in reference to people arriving in America, “it didn’t matter the color of their skin . . . their language . . . their economic status . . . once you got here, we were all the same.”

What it ultimately points to is misinformation and miseducation on fundamental staples of civics and politics. Like many who reflect upon the Civil War as a states’ rights issue when blood of slaves dictates otherwise, many justify the current movement as one based on those same states’ rights, while their actions and rhetoric make one second-guess their forthrightness. The recent reading of the Constitution at the swearing-in of the 112th Congress illustrates another example. Again, history was distorted by reciting the amended version, which bypasses the issue of slavery and citizenship for African Americans. While learning and improving upon history are great, simply editing it as necessary does the country a disservice.

Finally, the perpetuation of racial jokes and stereotypes should be noted. Sometimes it is not just school boards and politicians that make mistakes; it’s peers and friends who might be allowed to pass on offensive jokes and stereotyping. Revisionist history of the past might make such jokes seem alright because of the thinking by some that African Americans did not suffer as much as originally thought. Hence, this represents the danger in revising the Civil War. Slavery is not only disregarded, as it was then, but the years of damage it did to African Americans and the nation as a whole in perpetuity also are ignored. If the importance of slavery is mitigated, the importance of the civil rights movement and the continued fight for desegregation and against insti-

tutional bias are also mitigated. If history is simply to be celebrated in part and reflected upon only jokingly, does society really learn?

Celebrations of the Civil War should not be taken as simply benign accounts of the past. As reported by the *Charleston County Herald* during an observance in Charleston, South Carolina, in December 2010, Mayor Joe Riley remarked in a speech that “the cause of this disastrous

secession was an expressed need to protect the inhumane and immoral institution of slavery.”

He was interrupted by a person in the audience who yelled, “You’re a liar!” The irony in this response is palpably emblematic of the struggle faced today. The past must be acknowledged for all its imperfections and transgressions. Those who don’t learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

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