

Rewriting History
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History is "our story." It can focus on certain parts while downplaying other parts. So much history in the past was written by and for rulers, who wanted glory and not blame. Today, good history writing covers inherent complexity. I am an avid history reader, particularly today when facts are being challenged by "alternate facts" (lies), and my focus this year has been on American Institutions---those that sustain our democracy.

The latest attempt at rewriting history is the campaign that forced Nike to remove basketball shoes with the nation's first flag, the Betsy Ross flag, "because there was slavery at that time."

Our Founding Fathers were brilliant, decent, and courageous; but some of them inherited the system of slavery that they had little ability to end. To condemn them all fails to understand the time and place where they lived. They created an extraordinary country with the ability to evolve and become better.

One upbeat book that I have reviewed already is Jared Cohen's Accidental Presidents, showing how indifferently we select vice presidents, minor players until something happens to the president. Cohen's history covers all of our "accidental presidents" from the first whose president died to those who replaced assassinated leaders. He gives us a fascinating history of these men, warts and all, but notes that we have been very surprised, and very lucky, that several became wonderful leaders. Theodore Roosevelt and Harry Truman became such presidents. But we also learn about the others, a couple of them disasters (Andrew Johnson and Calvin Coolidge), who did damage.

A more complex book about our presidents is Michael Beschloss's 22 Presidents of War. This hefty volume really gives us presidents in the midst of dangerous times, warts and all. Some, such as Lyndon Johnson, was perhaps the best prepared president for domestic reform, but terrible as a war president. President Woodrow Wilson was a reluctant war president during World War I, but he morphed from pacifist intellectual to proto fascist overnight. Lincoln, FDR, and Truman were our best wartime presidents, but even Truman was overwhelmed by the Korean war, which he handled decisively but badly, with no consent from Congress.

We tend to look back on historic figures as men bigger than life. They were human, subject to frailties of health (FDR), political manipulation to get the job done (Lincoln, FDR, and Lyndon Johnson) and personal behavior that we find obnoxious today womanizers: (Harding and John Kennedy), founding fathers who were slave owners (Jefferson, Washington, Madison), men with racial bias (Andrew Jackson and Woodrow Wilson).

The problem for today's political junkies is judging historic figures by current standards. Rather than accepting that even admired public figures of the past lived in a different time with different values, there is a rush to condemn such people wholesale. Removing paintings and statues that offend current values eliminates an opportunity to understand and explain history. Write a historic plaque instead.

A local Native American community in Santa Cruz removed a symbolic bell honoring the California Missions, notorious oppressors of Natives. These missions were an essential part of California's history, reflecting their time and values. The missionaries believed that all "savages" must be saved by conversion. Forcing them into labor saved them from "shiftlessness." Understanding the horrors and benefits of the mission system is what these missions offer today. They educate us.

Vice President Joe Biden is now victim to the rewriting history syndrome. His comments about working across the aisle with even obnoxious racists offended younger candidates, who do not remember that once the Democratic Party was a big tent of segregationists and liberals. To get anything done, liberals had to get powerful Southern committee chairmen on board with their ideas.

Quite a few of these segregationists were not true-believers in this appalling system, but they had to vote with their faction. Senator Fulbright was one of these, a man who was otherwise liberal.

Women, Black Americans, Asian immigrants, and Native Americans have been abused in history. Historic figures should be understood in context, not removed as Stalin did,

by "disappearing" them from group photographs. That\222s stupid.

682 words

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