

## NEWT GINGRICH: HISTORIAN?

*In 1995, after Newt Gingrich emerged as a figure of significance, having won the Speakership of the House of Representatives, I included the following material in one of the essays collected in my 1996 book, Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory (pages 292-5). Now that Newt has, improbably, emerged as a possible Republican presidential candidate, it seemed worth revisiting my earlier commentary. Given that neither he nor I have changed our minds on these issues in the intervening years (see the Afterword below), I offer the following slightly pruned but otherwise intact paras for inclusion in the conversation about Gingrich's bid for power. Mike Wallace (2011).*

In his 1993 book, *See, I Told You So*, Rush Limbaugh warned his fellow conservatives that "we have lost control of our major cultural institutions" to a "relatively small, angry group of anti-American radicals" -- the "sixties gang."

Of particular concern were those who "bullied their way into power positions in academia." These professors immediately set about demolishing traditional history, the sort which "was once routinely learned by every schoolchild in America." They promulgated instead "a primitive type of historical revisionism." The essential revisionist message -- the core of the "indoctrination taking place today in American academia" -- consisted of several propositions: "Our country is inherently evil. The whole idea of America is corrupt. The history of this nation is strewn with examples of oppression and genocide. The story of the United States is cultural

imperialism -- how a bunch of repressed white men imposed their will and values on peaceful indigenous people, black slaves from Africa, and women."

Up and down this new "politically correct" canon Rush roamed, succoring casualties of the onslaught. Poor Christopher Columbus, accused of wiping out savages (who were in any event "violent and brutal"), was the victim of a hoax perpetrated by the sixties gang, who routinely "ascribe fictitious misdeeds to people not alive to defend themselves". The Pilgrims and Puritans, another trashed group, are "vilified today as witch- burners and portrayed as simpletons" in order to cover up the importance of religion in "shaping our history and our nation's character." The early pioneers had singlehandedly "tamed a wilderness" -- "Nothing was handed to them" -- but now their anti-government vision and self-reliant accomplishments were being "turned upside down" in order to justify the reign of Big Government.

A full response to such falsehoods would take us too far afield, but let me briefly attend to the last two. Pace Limbaugh's portrait of the state of religious studies, scores -- hundreds -- of scholars have over the past thirty years produced a superb and respectful body of work on religion in American life; one could fill a small library with volumes on the seventeenth century alone. As for Limbaugh's sturdy pioneers, they were among the first to demand -- and receive -- governmental aid in the form of land grants, roads, canals, railroads and armies. This quasi-socialism passed to their twentieth century descendants, who vigorously sought agricultural subsidies, military contracts, and the giant irrigation and electrification projects that built up sunbelt/gunbelt states with tax dollars drained from their frostbelt cousins.

But pointing out Rush's errors -- a cottage industry these days -- is somewhat beside the

point. Myths can't be refuted by facts. And Limbaugh was out to launch a crusade, not an academic conference. "As we saw during the 1980s," he told his troops, "we can elect good people to high office and still lose ground in this Culture War. And, as we saw in 1992, the more ground we lose in the Culture War, the harder it is to win electoral victories. What we need to do is fight to reclaim and redeem our cultural institutions with all the intensity and enthusiasm that we use to fight to redeem our political institutions."

Happily a field marshal had appeared with exactly the credentials needed to wage such a war. Newton Leroy Gingrich had long since proven himself a master of the political arts, having battled his way to a leadership role in the House of Representatives. He was also an ex-professor of history, and eager to intervene in the battle against revisionism. In 1993, Gingrich began beaming a twenty-hour college course called "Renewing American Civilization" to over 130 classrooms across the country, and the ten million subscribers to National Empowerment Television.

Central to the course was an analysis of U.S. history, not a subject in which Gingrich had been rigorously trained. Though he had taken some courses in American history at Tulane, his major was in Modern European, and, at the behest of his adviser, he wrote his 1971 Ph.D. Dissertation on "Belgian Education Policy in the Congo, 1945-60." During his professorial time at West Georgia College (1970-1978) he spent only four years in the History Department -- teaching mainly Western Civilization and European subjects -- before moving over to the Geography Department and launching an Environmental Studies program. Most of his time at West Georgia was given over to repeated runs for Congress, leaving little time for scholarly

research. Indeed by 1975, having published nothing whatsoever, he realized he had no chance of getting tenure and abandoned the notion of applying for it. Had he not been elected to Congress he would have been out of a job. Yet Gingrich brushed aside questions about his expertise. "I'm not credentialed as a bureaucratic academic," he noted waspishly, "I haven't written 22 books that are meaningless."

In his 1994 lectures, especially one given February 12th on "The Lessons of American History," and in speeches and interviews throughout the year, Gingrich asserted the existence of an "American Exceptionalism," which he believed was rooted in distinctive "American Values". These included individualism, "the religious and social tenets of puritanism," the centrality of private property, freedom from government control, and the availability of opportunity (which left Americans "prepared to countenance very substantial economic inequalities"). He admitted past contradictions between profession and practice -- slavery, male-only suffrage -- but seemed to believe these had been overcome not by organized struggles, but by an ineluctable rippling out of the ideals themselves. Unlike his competent dissertation, or his 1984 *Window of Opportunity*, which advanced an ersatz-Marxist thesis about a contradiction between America's forces of production (a computer-driven information revolution) and its social relations of production (a putatively anti- technological welfare state and culture), Gingrich's more recent teaching conveyed little sense of agency, little awareness of how history happens.

Gingrich, in fact, said remarkably little about U.S. history, and a fair amount of what he did say was wrong. There was little sustained encounter with actual historians, though he occasionally waved books at his class (Daniel Boorstin's volumes were favorite wands), and he

was fascinated by Gordon Wood's suggestion that conservative Republicans should claim descent from Jefferson, not Hamilton. He did urge students to read biographies, but as sources of inspiration or for tips on problem solving. (He himself claimed to have been fortified during his repeated defeats in Georgia politics by reading lives of Lincoln, and accounts of Churchill's tribulations had buoyed him up while struggling singlehandedly to unseat Speaker Jim Wright). As had his hero Ronald Reagan, Gingrich reached back to late 1930s, early 1940s movies for his version of American history, citing *Boys' Town* on orphanages, or *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* on the great railsplitter -- though he also embraced more contemporary sources, such as Hollywood's recent version of *The Last of the Mohicans*.

Gingrich invoked classic American myths, the truth (or more often falsity) of which was of little concern compared to their serviceability as moral fables. The point of studying the past was not to discover how things changed but to ransack it for role models. Newt's was a "McGuffeyite history-of-America-by-edifying- anecdote," as Gary Wills has noted.

Gingrich's idealized U.S. past was also a static one. For centuries, nothing much happened. Then, in the 1960s, things lurched into sudden downward motion. From 1607 to 1965, as he put it in his somewhat discombobulated manner, "there is a core pattern to American history. Here's how we did it until the Great Society messed everything up: don't work, don't eat; your salvation is spiritual; the government by definition can't save you; governments are into maintenance and all good reforms are into transformation." Then, abruptly in the sixties, "the whole system began decaying." Why? Because the U.S. got beguiled by irresponsible, "self-indulgent, aristocratic values." And these led, apparently overnight, to the welfare state, drug use,

hippies, multipartner sex, and the pregnant poor. "From 1965 to 1994" -- an epoch that would seem to embrace the Age of Reagan as well as the Age of Johnson -- "we did strange and weird things as a country."

The culprits were the same ones Limbaugh had fingered -- counterculture elitists who despised traditional values. From the 1770s to the mid-1960s, there had been "an explicit long-term commitment to creating character," crucially by studying history. But secular left-wingers couldn't "afford to teach history because it would destroy the core vision of a hedonistic, existentialist America in which there is no past and there is no future, so you might as well let the bureaucrats decide." For Gingrich, properly taught history was a form of ideological inoculation; without it, we "get drowned in European socialist ideas, and we get drowned in oriental ideas of mandarin hierarchy". Once the booster shots stopped coming, the country swiftly succumbed to a host of moral maladies.

The solution was clear. It was time to return to "teaching the truth about American history, teaching about the Founding Fathers and how this country came to be the most extraordinary civilization in history." We should get back to Victorian basics, burnish up the old fables. "We spent a generation in the counterculture laughing at McGuffey Readers and laughing at Parson Weems's vision of Washington." Cherry tree and little hatchet, redivivus.

In truth, Gingrichian history bore little relation to America's complex and sprawling saga. What he had crafted, rather, was a secularized sacred narrative that flowed from an Edenic past through a fall from grace in the sinful Sixties into a degenerate present, and on, hopefully, to

future redemption through a return to prelapsarian values.

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### **REPRISE (2011)**

Gingrich's 1993 perspective seems to have survived more or less intact. As he put it in *Winning the Future: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Contract with America* (2005): "Most of us believe that America is a good and decent country created by heroes worth studying. But the schools that teach young Americans and American immigrants offer politically correct, multicultural drivel, fail to teach American history, and ridicule what little they are forced to teach." My conviction – that his characterization of what gets written and taught constitutes a deeply ignorant and ideologically driven maligning of the historical and teaching professions – is similarly unaltered

I'm concerned, however, that Gingrich has gotten more forceful in his prescriptions for how to fix the problem he sees by making sure that what he calls "patriotic history" gets taught. As he puts it in clause #3 of his updated Contract with America: "We must insist on patriotic immigration and patriotic education based on classic American history and the wisdom of the Founding Fathers and Abraham Lincoln." To put some muscle behind this insistence, he calls on trustees and alumni of private colleges to "insist that their schools require courses be taught without the usual extreme leftist bias of most professors, and that every one of their students graduates with a firm grounding in American history." More concretely still, he urges donors to " earmark [their contribution] for courses that teach patriotic history...." Of course intervening to

ensure that politically correct historical interpretations are the ones on offer is nothing new for Newt, who as Speaker helped force Smithsonian exhibitions to hew to his party line (a story also addressed in *Mickey Mouse History*.)

More troubling still is that Gingrich, in a bid to curry support from Christian conservatives, has upped the theocratic component of his “patriotic history,” by hitching his wagon to the likes of *David Barton* [LINK ITALS to <http://www.pfaw.org/rww-in-focus/barton-s-bunk-religious-right-historian-hits-the-big-time-tea-party-america>]. Barton (in *America’s Godly Heritage* [2009]) and Gingrich (in *Rediscovering God in America: Reflections on the Role of Faith in Our Nation’s History and Future* [2006]) – argue that the US was founded as a Christian nation, that the wall of separation between church of state was a latter day construction, one that, like the Berlin Wall, should be dismantled. They claim that the historical pedigree they have discovered justifies contemporary right wing cultural positions (allowing prayer back in schools, outlawing abortion) and economic ones (Barton says Jesus opposes the estate tax and minimum wage).

Barton’s “evidence” is accrued by cherry-picking congenial quotes from the Founders (and the Bible), and deploying them out of context – or if needs be, he makes up quotes that better serve his agenda. (His best known manufacture concerns Jefferson’s famous 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptist Association in which he approvingly declared the Constitution had built a “wall of separation between Church & State”; Barton has Jefferson adding that the wall was “one directional,” intended only to keep government from running the church, while ensuring that “Christian principles will always stay in government.”)

One way to sustain this mythic construction is to simply ignore the immense body of scholarly work that, while obviously recognizing the importance of religion in American history, easily refutes this particular assessment of the founders' intentions. A more aggressive way is to insist that the subversive sixties gang of historians has purposefully covered up the truth. "It is a lie," says Gingrich, "to teach American history as though this is a secular nation in which God did not reappear, again and again and again for every generation." It's not a long step from there to *Barton's recent efforts*, via a consulting position to the powerful Texas School Board, to rewrite textbooks and curricula. LINK ITALS TO:

<http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2010/1001.blake.html>

Ironically, tearing down this wall would be a truly bad idea for evangelicals; they should be careful of what they wish for. Keeping the state out of religious affairs has been a Godsend for faith-based organizations, allowing them to flourish mightily, in part by protecting them from one another. Should a Christian form of sharia ever be imposed, it would not only be a nightmare for Muslims, Jews, secular humanists, and most probably Catholics, but also for whichever Protestant sects didn't control the levers of power. Adding in the truly terrible possibility that it might be Newt Gingrich at the head of state and church should give evangelicals pause, for Gingrich is a truly unprincipled character, the sort whom the Founders would likely have branded a Catiline (see, anyone can do Founderology!).

To give Gingrich his due: he is correct in saying that the historical profession in the last fifty years has dramatically revised older paradigms and expanded the field's range of subjects.

The days when blacks, women, workers, gays, ethnics and, indeed, most religious movements were simply invisible in much historical scholarship are long gone, as is the uncritical McGuffeyite celebration of the national narrative. The results are clearly not to Newt's liking, but they are based on thousands and thousands of books, articles and dissertations, and mountains and mountains of research. The profession is open to alternative perspectives, and is full of contending voices and vigorous conversations – Gingrich should drop in on any OAH or AHA convention to see real historians at work. But decades of scholarship can't be countered by anything other than equally compelling scholarship. Unless of course they are simply ignored and supplanted by faith-based fables, or suppressed by bringing state or economic power to bear in the name of restoring "patriotic history." The likelihood that a President Gingrich would engage in either or both of these solutions is but one of the many reasons that handing Newt political power strikes me as both ludicrous and deeply disturbing.