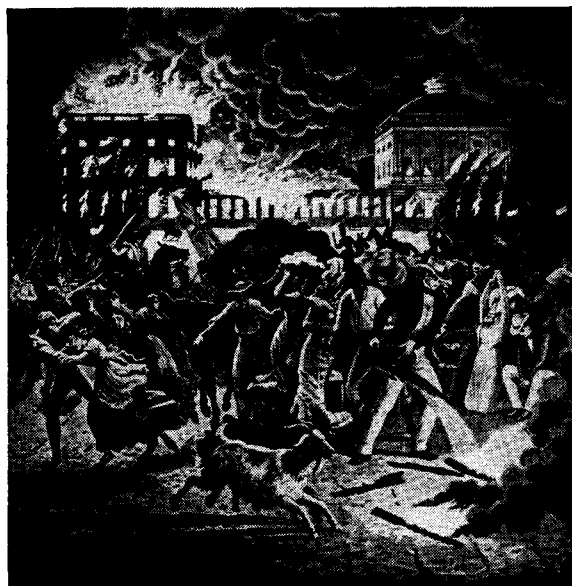


# HISTORY IS A DANGEROUS SUBJECT

**The British burn Washington in 1812—"Not a single junior high school textbook tells of the American burning of the Canadian city of York that led to England's retaliation."**



—Bettmann Archive.

*For the past three years a team of British and American historians—two British and three Americans—have engaged in a study of national bias in the secondary school history textbooks of the two nations. All five of the investigators read a total of thirty-six books—fourteen of them published in the United States and twenty-two in England or Wales—focusing on three episodes that seemed most likely to engender nationalistic passions: the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and World War I. A report of the study is being published in the U.S. this month by Hobbs, Dorman Company under the title "The Historians' Contribution to Anglo-American Misunderstanding." The study was sponsored by historical associations in Britain and the U.S. and was financed by the Ford Foundation and the Nuffield Trust. The author of this article, which summarizes the findings of the study, has long been one of America's foremost historians. He served as chairman of the British-American investigating team, and is Senior Research Associate at the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.*

By RAY ALLEN BILLINGTON

SOME OF HIS FRIENDS say Franklin Delano Roosevelt inclined toward an anti-British attitude near the end of World War II because as a schoolboy he had read the wrong history textbooks. That youthful experience had permanently prejudiced his attitudes toward England and the English, for he could never completely erase the belief that George III was an insane tyrant bent on crushing liberty in the colonies, that hired mercenaries won the Revolution for Britain, and that the War of 1812 allowed English armies to burn the city of Washington in an unprovoked riot of senseless carnage.

Patriotic bias born of such distortions dies slowly.

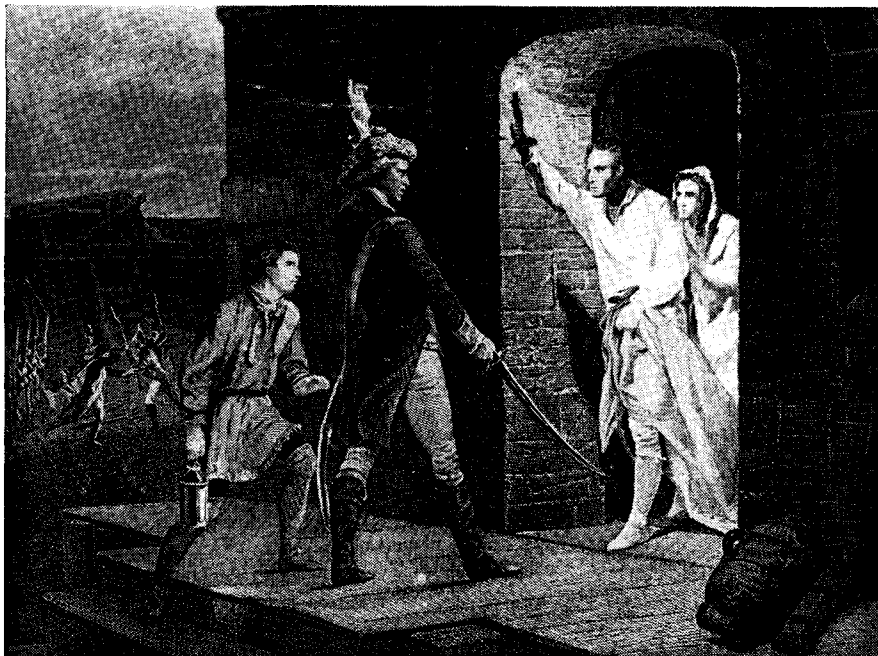
Fortunately the fiery nationalism that marred American history textbooks a half-century ago has largely disappeared, but enough remains to alter the viewpoint of future statesmen and hinder the international cooperation essential to peace in a contracting world. This is the conclusion of a team of British and American historians who have just completed a survey of the secondary school textbooks most widely used in the history courses of the two nations today.

Nationalistic bias, they find, exists as it did in the nineteenth century, but in a less blatant form. Gone is the day, happily, when an author could write that "it is impossible for the imagination to conceive of characters more selfish, profligate, and vile, than the line of English kings." Gone is the era when English schoolboys were taught that George Washington was a black-hearted villain who engineered an unjustified revolution for personal aggrandizement. Modern youths on both sides of the Atlantic are too sophisticated to accept such patently one-sided untruths.

Yet nationalistic bias persists, and in somewhat more dangerous form than the monstrous distortions of a past generation. Today's bias is more subtle, more persuasive, and far less easy to detect, partly because it often mirrors subconscious prejudices of which the textbook author himself is unaware. Today's textbooks plant in the minds of their readers a belief in the overall superiority of their own countries, not simply an exaggerated image of the virtues of past leaders. The misconceptions accepted unquestioningly by the students of this generation may warp their judgment no less seriously than the misstatements forced on Franklin D. Roosevelt at an earlier time.

The team of five British and American historians reached the conclusion that proper care and training can produce objective judgments suitable to the taste of both nations. But they also found that remarkably few textbook authors in either the United States or Great Britain have achieved that degree of objectivity. Every single volume surveyed contains some indications of national bias; only seven of the twenty-two English books and only two or three of the fourteen American could be graded as even relatively free from prejudice. If these discouraging results can be drawn from the reading of texts used in two countries that have been traditionally friendly and usually allied in world conflict, what would be revealed by a study of German and American textbooks, or of those used in the United States and Russia? Clearly national bias is a besetting sin of today's authors, and equally clearly it should be eliminated in the interest of world harmony.

MANY are guilty of what might be called "bias by inertia." They have shown a regrettable disinclination to keep abreast of the findings of modern historical scholarship, relying instead on discredited legends and outworn viewpoints that more often than not perpetuate the nationalistic prejudices of a bygone day. Thus current research students picture George III as a sincere and moderately competent ruler bent on achieving administrative reforms amidst an impossible political situation. Yet a disgracefully large number of authors (some in England) still paint him as a power-hungry monarch, buying votes and manipulating ministers to achieve absolutism. Historians know that most of the acts for which he is blamed by textbook writers were the common practice of his day, on both sides of the Atlantic;



—Bettman Archive.

**Ethan Allen and volunteers raid Fort Ticonderoga—“Scholars have long since proven that the heroic remarks ascribed to Ethan Allen were invented by nineteenth-century writers.”**

“bribery” is a word that must be defined within the context of its times to become meaningful. Yet the findings of recent scholarship have seeped down to only a few authors of secondary schoolbooks.

To make matters worse, the uncritical use of fact and fancy handed down from past generations allows writers to perpetuate legends that have long since been relegated to the ashcan by careful students of history. Many American textbooks, particularly those used in the junior high schools, repeat the tired clichés that inspired our grandfathers: that Patrick Henry rocked the Virginia House of Burgesses with his cry of “If this be

treason, make the most of it;” that the British fired the first shot at Lexington; that Ethan Allen demanded the surrender of Fort Ticonderoga by shouting “I demand your surrender in the name of the Great Jehovah and the Continental Congress;” that Captain Hamilton at Fort Detroit was a “hair buyer” who drove Indians against the outlying settlements; that the Hessian troops were bloodthirsty mercenaries bent on ravaging the nation’s countryside. Scholars have long since proven that the heroic remarks ascribed to Patrick Henry and Ethan Allen were invented by nineteenth-century writers, that no one

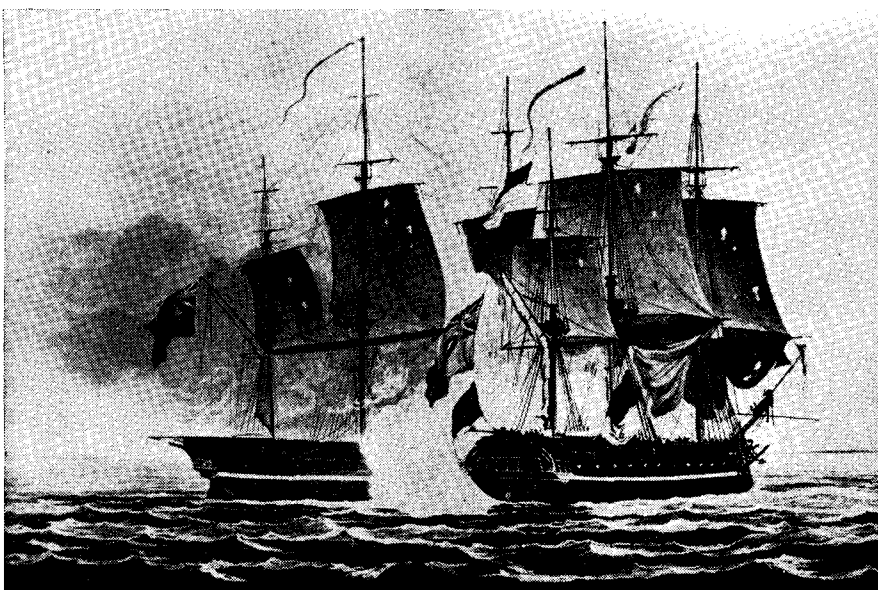
knows who fired the first shot at Lexington, that Captain Hamilton followed the practice of his fellow officers by discouraging the savagery of Indian warfare, and that the Hessians were simply professional soldiers who had somewhat less stomach for fighting than the red-coats they supported.

Nor do textbook writers in the United States alleviate their sins by using, as several do, the dubious evasion of “such-and-such was *said* to have happened.” To say, as does one, that Patrick Henry was “*said to have*” denounced British tyranny in his oft-quoted words, or to state, as does another, that Ethan Allen “was understood to” have relied on the Great Jehovah and the Continental Congress in demanding the surrender of Ticonderoga, is to risk the charge of deliberate distortion. The schoolboy who reads their pages still retains the impression that the Americans were supersaints and the British supersinners. Actually the statesmen and soldiers of both sides in the Revolution acquitted themselves with a distinction that needs no gilding. Until the authors of textbooks discard hoary legend and rely on the findings of up-to-date historians they will be guilty of planting prejudice in the minds of their readers.

If text writers on both sides of the Atlantic can be charged with foisting disproven myths on their readers, they also stand indicted for manipulating facts in a manner designed—consciously or unconsciously—to glorify their own nations at the expense of others. An almost universal sin among them is what can be labeled “bias by omission.” Every historian has as a principal duty the selection of facts and interpretations that will most accurately portray the event he is describing. When an author chooses *only* information that will reflect credit on his personal heroes, he is violating the canons of sound historical writing no less than the writer who openly distorts the truth.

Such is the practice of a disgracefully large number of authors in both England and the United States. American writers time and time again recite the impressive record of General George Washington’s military victories during the Revolutionary War, while barely mentioning his defeats. Readers emerge from such accounts with the impression that the patriots (itself a biased word) lost only the Battle of Bunker Hill, and that because they ran out of powder. English writers dwell with equal affection on the triumphs of their generals, leaving the student bewildered that such a series of victories could have lost a war.

The War of 1812 offers textbook writers an even more tempting parade-ground for one-sided distortions that tell less than half the truth. Every text read by junior high school students in the



—Bettman Archive.

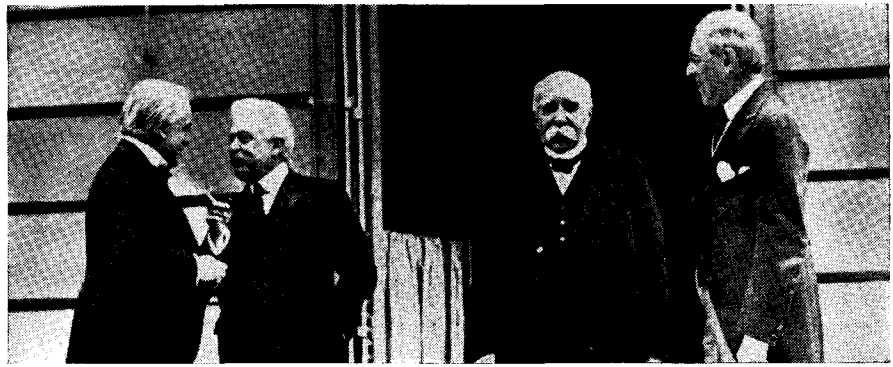
**Capture of the Chesapeake, June 1, 1813—“Every British textbook dwells on the victory of the Shannon over the Chesapeake, omitting any mention of the Constitution’s conquest of the Guerrière.”**



United States describes in some detail the victory of the *Constitution* over the *Guerrière*, but only one mentions the triumph of the *Shannon* over the *Chesapeake*, and then apparently only as an excuse to repeat the command of the American commander: "Don't give up the ship." Every British textbook that mentions the sea battles of the War of 1812 dwells on the victory of the *Shannon* over the *Chesapeake*, omitting any mention whatsoever of the *Constitution's* conquest of the *Guerrière*. Not a single junior high school textbook used in the United States fails to describe the burning of Washington by British troops during the war, and not one tells of the American burning of the Canadian city of York that led to England's retaliation. This is not objective history, and certainly conjures up visions of blood-stirring triumphs in the youth of each nation that are not sustained by the facts.

**T**HE most flagrant example of bias by omission can be found in the treatment—or lack of treatment—of the War of 1812 in English textbooks. Admittedly, this was not a major conflict in Britain's long history. Yet this war set the stage for the future as did few conflicts of the nineteenth century; from it stemmed a series of agreements that underlay the long period of cooperative friendship between Britain and the United States; to it can be traced the century-long era of internal development that allowed America to emerge as a major power. These are crucial developments, and well worth the telling to English audiences at a time when world events are driving the two nations ever more closely together. Yet in several British texts no mention whatsoever is made of the war; in the remainder it usually appears as a minor distraction engineered by former rebels bent on hampering Britain's major effort against Napoleon. To say of this conflict *only* that Wellington was handicapped because "the best of his veterans had been sent to fight in a war that had broken out between Britain and the United States of America" (as does one book), or that "this led to a short, ignominious war (1812-1814) between England and the United States, which as a neutral country objected to Britain's claim to board and search her ships" (as does another), is to surrender to national bias almost as flagrant as that of a flag-waving superpatriot.

If a subjective selection of materials to be included reveals the nationalistic bias of nearly all textbook writers, so does the sense of group superiority that permeates the writing of many of them. They write unabashedly as Americans or Englishmen, standing squarely with feet planted in Boston or Washington or London. The result is distortion, often subconscious, but nonetheless dangerous.



—Bettmann Archive.

**The Big Four at Versailles**—"Nearly all American textbooks depict the peace negotiations as a struggle between the forces of Good represented by the saintly Woodrow Wilson and the forces of Evil played by the Allied diplomats."

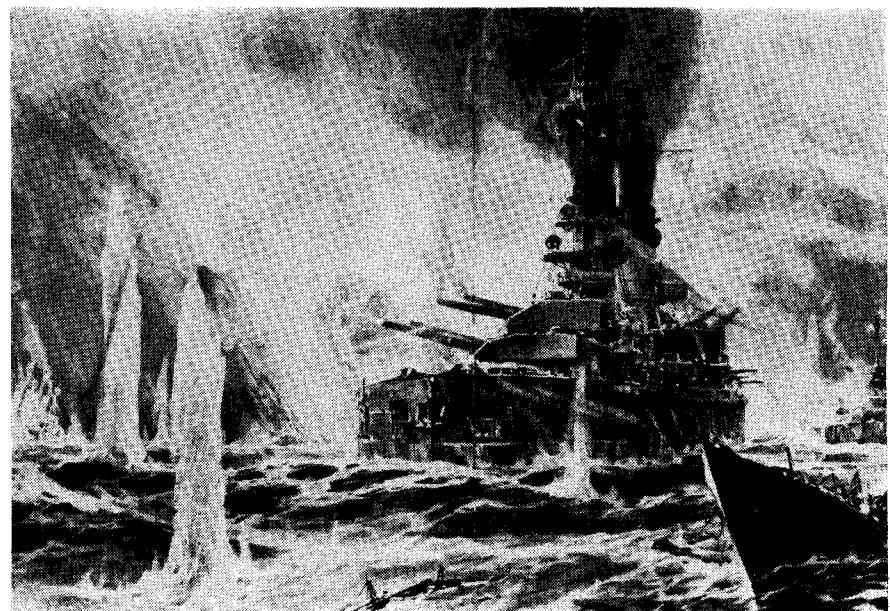
To write sound history an author must make every effort to view the total picture, not only the half nearest him. He must strive to see events through the eyes of both George Grenville and Samuel Adams; he must sound the prejudices of George Washington no less than those of George III. Only then will he fully understand the national problems and viewpoints that determine history's events. Admittedly this is a difficult task, but it is not impossible. Intelligent reading of the sources and secondary works originating in *all* nations concerned with any one event, and constant awareness of the inherited prejudices that are part of every national culture, allows the writing of unbiased history, as a few textbooks prove. Eternal vigilance is the price of good history, no less than of liberty.

Instead a subconscious sense of group superiority leads textbooks authors to glorify their own nation at the expense of all others, and blinds them to the motives and purposes of rival powers. British writers especially are inclined to use

"our armies" or "our people," encouraging the schoolboy to associate himself with a superior in-group that is sharply distinguished from an inferior out-group. Many mirror belief in English superiority when they consistently cast their leaders in the role of heroes and repeatedly suggest the invincibility of their armies. One only exaggerates this tendency by declaring that the British regulars during the Revolution "could be relied upon to beat the irregular levies of rebels whenever they fought on anything like equal terms." This may be a subconscious manifestation of national bias, but it is no less destructive of international understanding.

Even English textbooks that lean over backward, as a few do, to heap praise on the generalship of George Washington violate the canons of sound historical presentation. To these authors, who are motivated by a strong Whig prejudice, George III is the villain and George Washington the hero of the Revolution. He is praised as a "heroic leader," a

(Continued on page 80)



—Bettmann Archive.

**The Battle of Jutland, May 31, 1916**—"British youths are left with the false impression that England cleared the seas singlehanded."

# NEW DEMANDS, SAME OLD RESPONSE

## 1. The Immutable Ph.D.

By EVERETT WALTERS, *Vice President for Academic Affairs, Boston University, and editor of "Graduate Education Today," recently published by the American Council on Education.*

**D**ESPITE A CENTURY of criticism, and of dramatic change in other facets of education, little change has been made in the Ph.D. pattern since 1861 when Yale awarded the first academic doctorates in the United States. American graduate schools still hold to the traditional requirements for the degree in the face of new demands for doctors as research scientists, college teachers, business leaders, government officials, and continued criticism of the programs that lead to the degree.

Critics of the degree appeared only a few years after it became established at the leading universities. Soon after 1900 prominent educators decried its very existence. William James, in his famous essay, "The Ph.D. Octopus," took the degree to task in an urbane but savage fashion. President A. Lawrence Lowell of Harvard attacked it as stifling original thinking and leading to mediocrity in

college teaching. In 1912 Andrew West, graduate dean at Princeton, denounced the Ph.D. as becoming like a "union card" for college teachers. University presidents and graduate deans of the prestigious Association of American Universities regularly criticized the degree at their annual meetings from 1900 to the 1930s. The Association of American Colleges in these years also criticized the doctorate as not preparing persons for college teaching. One persistent criticism during the early decades of the century was the cry that there were too many Ph.D.s—what would they find to do?

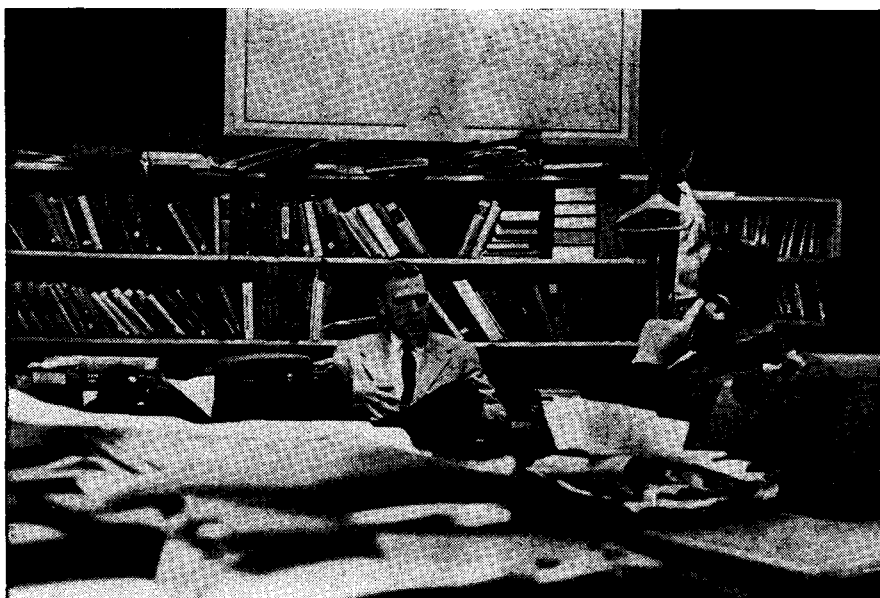
Renewal of general criticism came in the late 1940s as the critical shortage of Ph.D.s for college teaching and research became apparent. Censure began in the 1947 report of the President's Commission on Higher Education and was taken up in the spate of conferences, national and regional, that were held to discuss the problems of college teaching. Quite by chance, the 1957 report of four graduate deans, made to the Association of Graduate Schools (by then a division of the Association of American Universities), received national attention. It was newsworthy because of the

Association's resistance to change, because of the recent launching of Sputnik, and because of the direct thrust of its criticism. The deans acknowledged that "current pressures force us to examine our myth-enveloped Ph.D. with candor," and led them "ruefully [to] conclude that the Ph.D. is tortuously slow and riddled with needless uncertainties. . . . The basic flaw is: we have never clearly defined this protean degree."

**T**HE criticism continued. In 1959 Earl J. McGrath, former U.S. Commissioner of Education and now of Teachers College, Columbia University, denounced the graduate schools for their failure to give proper training to future college teachers and for their heavy emphasis on research. One year later, Dr. Bernard Berelson published the results of an extensive survey of graduate education and reviewed thoroughly the half century of criticism of the Ph.D. pattern. In 1961 Dr. Oliver C. Carmichael, formerly of the Carnegie Foundation, published his analysis of graduate education, which he found to be an area of confusion. Criticism was voiced, too, in the meetings of the various associations of graduate deans.

Yet, despite the years of criticism, few changes were accepted—only minor alterations in the foreign language requirement and in the requirement for publication of dissertation. Other segments of higher education had changed but not graduate education. It remained essentially as it had 100 years earlier, when the Ph.D. was created, in the words of Professor James D. Dana of Yale, "to prevent our youth from seeking in the atmosphere of Germany the knowledge for which they yearn."

The basic flaw is, as the four graduate deans pointed out, the complete failure of the leaders in graduate education to define the purpose of the Ph.D. Simply put: is it for college teachers or is it for research persons? Most graduate deans have maintained that it is a research degree that is appropriate for the future college teacher. As they see it, the Ph.D. pattern *does* prepare young men and women for college teaching. The critics over the years have contended that it does not. Although never as specific as



—George Zimbel (Monkmeyer)

"Graduate faculty members are strong advocates of established ways, too often clinging to the notion that what was good for them is good for the young people."