

How the Understanding of U.S. History Changes

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Historian Kyle Ward speaks with Steve Inskeep about his book, History in the Making. It chronicles the ways that U.S. history textbooks change over time in their portrayal of events like the Mexican-American War. This is the first in a series of conversations about history.

RENEE MONTAGNE, host:

This is the week that many Americans settled in for Thanksgiving. This traditional holiday may be a good time to remember that American history is not as settled as it seems. For the rest of this week, we're exploring the history behind many of our public political debates. Our understanding of that history changes over time.

STEVE INSKEEP, host:

And today, we'll hear the changing interpretations of how America once went to war. The interpretations come in more than a century of history textbooks studied by different generations of American students. Kyle Ward collected these different versions of America's past for a book called "History in the Making."

Professor KYLE WARD (History, Vincennes University; Author, *History in the Making*): What I've kind of come to understand is that our history textbooks are mostly socially agreed upon stories. And what I mean by that is that when they are written, the historian who's writing them - or more likely, the editorial staff who's writing them - they are being impacted by the current social, political, economic issues that are going on at that point in time.

INSKEEP: Well, let's go through one specific example that you explore in your book. It's the way that the beginning of the Mexican War is treated in different eras. And let's lay out the very bare facts here. The United States and Mexico fought a war; it was in the late 1840s. The United States won and took over what is now the Southwestern United States. Those are the basic facts. How is that treated in the first history text that you came across?

Prof. WARD: The first history textbook - I was really lucky to come across the textbook that was written in 1849, so just on the heels of this war coming to a conclusion. And what is interesting is that at that point in time, the focus is on how the Mexicans basically caused this war, how they're the ones who started it, and the Americans were drug into fighting a war against them.

INSKEEP: So it's the Mexicans fault in 1849.

Prof. WARD: In 1849, there was just no question. Mexico started this. So in 1849, the argument is we have to go in and defend Texas from being reconquered by Mexicans.

INSKEEP: Then we jump up ahead to 1880, and I'm looking at the passage you've selected here. May I read just a little bit of this?

Prof. WARD: Please do.

INSKEEP: Because the language is remarkable. You point out that this time around, in 1880, a few decades after the war, it's described as a racial conflict, a conflict between two races. And the language is amazing.

(Reading) *How came the Northman and Moorish Celt here to meet and here to battle in this North American valley. Look at it. Inquire.*

Prof. WARD: The strong belief - and you see this throughout the 1800s - there is a definite distinction that there are certain races. All these other people with these different languages and these odd religions are a lower race. And the thing I like to point out, too - in the 1880s, this is a test question that a teacher is going to give. And if you don't put down that the Mexicans are a different race and an inferior race, it's the wrong answer.

INSKEEP: So in the textbook from 1849, the Mexican War is started by Mexico. In a textbook from 1880, it's an inevitable conflict between the races. What happens in your next textbook from 1911?

Prof. WARD: By 1911, you start to see a little bit of a change, not a great deal here. But this time, the biggest change is that the U.S. has to go in for a preemptive strike. The U.S. has to go into Mexico and start this war because the Mexicans are obviously coming. They've been itching for a fight here.

INSKEEP: And then what happens in 1966?

Prof. WARD: In 1966, it's the first time you start to really see the historians - or the people who are putting the textbooks together - are going to start to question how this war started. And you also start getting the names of certain individuals who at that time actually questioned the war. And probably the most significant one is going to be a young congressman from Illinois by the name of Abraham Lincoln.

INSKEEP: So they're going back through the same facts and finding that there was actually opposition to the war at the time it happened. And they're quoting that?
Prof. WARD: Yes.

INSKEEP: What happened in the textbook that you found from 1995?

Prof. WARD: In 1995, the story basically changes to the fact that it says that general - or President Polk ordered General Zachary Taylor to the Mexican border with the knowledge in his head that having troops that close - it would definitely probably spark a war. And that under this concept of Manifest Destiny, Polk wanted a war.

INSKEEP: What does it say that over more than a century of history, about the same event, it begins as something that Mexico started - it goes through several other explanations, and at the end, it ends exactly the opposite - America started it?

Prof. WARD: One thing it tells us is that after 1960 and 1970, the shift comes in - on the one hand because of the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, I think Watergate had a hand in this, too - where people started to question more things. And going back to the fact most of our history textbooks were written for young, white men who were going off to college or the military or something like that. And in the 1800s, you really don't want anybody sitting there questioning why the United States got into a war if you're going to send these young men off to fight in the military at some point in time.

INSKEEP: This particular example we've gone through, the Mexican War, why is that example particularly relevant to our lives today?

Prof. WARD: The current war that we're fighting, there is the question about Iraq. The argument was that weapons of mass destruction was the reason why we're going in there, and now there's been some debate. The think I'd like to point out to my students is President Polk, in the 1840s, was a Democrat. He was for Manifest Destiny. He wanted more territory. Then there was the Whig Party. And the Whigs said absolutely, positively not. They didn't want to get involved in this war, and there were people that were protesting it.

So I think it's a better understanding than just saying that we were egged on by the Mexicans into this war, we fought this war, and we get all this territory - end of story. Rather, I like to try to make some comparisons as to what's going on in the

Iraq War and compare it to - we've been down this road before. What have we learned? What can we do with it?

INSKEEP: I suppose you're not surprised, then, that the interpretations of the Iraq War have changed just in a few years.

Prof. WARD: No, not in the least bit. The one thing that I have found really interesting about the Iraq War and use of history with it is if you go back and listen to the very beginning of it, those people who are in favor of this war -listen to how they talked about the war and the terms they use to put it in. There's always references to World War II. There is the axis of evil. I think President Bush at one point in time made a comment about this being a World War III. There are talks about no more Munichs. We're comparing Hitler to Saddam Hussein. Then listen to those people who are against it. And the use of history at this point in time is you hear a lot of commentary about Vietnam. We don't want another Vietnam, not since Vietnam, or compared to Vietnam. This war has done this, that or the other thing.

INSKEEP: Do we construct our future by selecting which history we want to follow?

Prof. WARD: I definitely think so. I think history is one of the best tools you can use if you want to try to make your point at any point in time by saying, you know, look back. This is what we've done. This is who we are, or maybe who we think we are.

INSKEEP: Is it also a dangerous tool?

Prof. WARD: It definitely can be. We were in Germany doing some research, and we discovered over there that was one of the first things that the Nazis did, is they went into the high school history classes and wanted the history textbooks rewritten. They wanted to show a specific course in history that made more sense with their ideology at the time.

INSKEEP: Kyle Ward is the author of *History in the Making*.

Thanks very much.