

## Teaching *The American Promise*: The Academic Textbook Industry and the Thinning of American History

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THERE ARE CERTAIN RITUALS with which all college professors are familiar. Love them or dread them, commencements, department meetings, divisional holiday parties, all help structure the academic's professional life and keep track of the passing years. Among the more mundane of these rituals is the semesterly updating of syllabi. For me, this semi-annual task becomes especially painstaking every two years or so, with each arrival of a new edition of the textbook I use, James Roark et al.'s *The American Promise*, published by Bedford/St. Martin's since 1998, and now in its seventh edition.<sup>1</sup> I have been using this book for twenty years, and it has accompanied me from me one school to another, providing the backbone of my post-1865 survey course wherever I go. The relationship I have developed with this text is complicated, like any relationship of long standing. I started out feeling great enthusiasm for the book, and I continue to recommend it to graduate students about to enter the classroom. However, the book also displays certain weaknesses, especially in its more recent editions. These weaknesses include what I later refer to as a "thinning" of the text, as well as an ideological shift that set in with the third edition and became more

glaring with each new incarnation thereafter. These, along with changes determined by the academic textbook marketplace, are the subject of the second half of this article.

Let me begin, however, with the first flush of infatuation I felt for *The American Promise* when it arrived, unsolicited, on my desk in December 1997. By this point in my career—still at my first job—I had come to the conclusion that my overly ambitious effort to organize the survey non-chronologically, around a thematic approach, was not working. While the tactic resonated with the gifted few, the majority of my mainly working-class students seemed to need a more tightly structured and straightforward narrative, and *The American Promise*'s fortuitous arrival thus seemed like a stroke of luck. In fact, I chose to give the book a try almost by default, but I did also like what I saw. The layout and full-color illustrations were attractive and I liked the book's periodization—how it navigated the “long sixties,” for example, at which point the historical narrative defies chronological framing.<sup>2</sup>

I also sensed an ideological affinity with *The American Promise*'s consortium of authors—James L. Roark, Michael P. Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, Sarah Stage, Alan Lawson, and Susan M. Hartmann, all of whom remain associated with the book today except for Lawson, who dropped out after the fourth edition. As a product of graduate school in the late 1980s and early 1990s—a time when all courses seemed to be structured around the trinity of race, class, and gender—I had no problem with the authors' efforts to cast as wide and inclusive a web as possible. When, for example, in a sentence that has survived all seven editions of the text, they wrote that “One historian has noted, not entirely facetiously, that there were at least eight oppressed races in the West—Indians, Latinos, Chinese, Japanese, blacks, Mormons, strikers, and radicals,” I was pleased by the gesture.<sup>3</sup> Other scholars may find such efforts to acknowledge diversity obsequious nods to political correctness. “As the number of interest groups vying for attention in the contemporary world keeps growing,” historian Patrick Allitt complains, “so does the number of little passages in the textbooks that must be devoted to their predecessors.”<sup>4</sup> I, on the other hand, would have welcomed, if anything, an even more systematic follow-up to the authors' list (the first edition was heavy on the Mormons in its follow-up, but dispatched African Americans, Hispanics, and the Chinese in a

single paragraph). Indeed, I was pleased when, over the course of the next two editions, the authors devoted individual paragraphs (and in some cases, more) to each of the groups listed, culminating in the chapter's dramatic and far lengthier treatment of the Indian Wars and the redistribution of Native American lands.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, no thirty-page textbook chapter on the American West (or on any topic of such breadth) can hope to do its subject justice, but here, too, *The American Promise* had an answer: special boxed texts set off from the main narrative—I call them “sidebars”—that filled in the inevitable holes in the narrative with selections of primary source materials such as diary extracts and correspondence from “Young Women Homesteaders,” for example, in the Chapter on the West (as of the third edition)<sup>6</sup> and “Historical Questions” designed to “address specific historical questions . . . in greater detail than possible in the narrative” (according to the front matter in the first edition).<sup>7</sup> One of that first edition's “Historical Questions” sidebars—on scalping—illustrates the degree to which I was able to build fruitful classroom discussions around the text. Raising important issues and filled with memorable facts, this sidebar concludes with the intriguing detail that Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer (also a character in the main text, as well as in the supplementary readings I assign for that day) had escaped being scalped at Little Big Horn in 1876: “Although no soldier lived to describe the battle scene, Indian accounts are unanimous in their assertion that Custer's body was not mutilated, except for one fingertip.”<sup>8</sup> In an effort to account for this, the authors conclude this section as follows:

Why did the Indians not take his scalp for a trophy? In large part the answer has changed as Custer's fortunes with historians and the public have waxed and waned. At the time of his death, when Custer was viewed as a brave martyr, writers conjectured that his Indian foes respected his bravery and refused to mutilate the man they called Pahuska, or Long Hair. As Custer's reputation sank to low ebb in the mid-twentieth century, writers became more skeptical. One author guessed that Custer, who was balding by 1876 and had cut his hair, was spared because from a warrior's point of view his scalp made a poor trophy.<sup>9</sup>

This single paragraph yields several prompts of the verbal ping-pong variety sometimes necessary to initiate a broader, more interesting conversation within the classroom: (1) “What does the Native

American nickname for Custer, ‘Pahuska,’ mean in English?”; (2) “Native Americans did not scalp Custer, but they *did* take a trophy. What part of his body did they take?”; and (3) “The reading proposes two possible reasons why Custer was not scalped. Name one....Okay, good. Another?” Having thus paved the way, I can now get to the crux of the matter: which then is it? Did the Indians spare Custer’s scalp because they honored him in death, or was it because his receding hairline would have “made a poor trophy”? The above-listed shorter questions now pay dividends. “Okay, so now which of these is more likely to be the correct answer, do you think, and why?...Hold on. Remember what we said earlier: the Native Americans *did* take a trophy, right?...So they didn’t scalp him, but they did take a trophy. What does that tell you?” And so on.

Not only does the book’s presentation of different interpretations of Custer’s death encourage students to weigh contradictory information, its observation that these interpretations changed over time, “as Custer’s fortunes with historians and the public... waxed and waned,” explicitly invokes issues of historiography. A supplementary primary source of my own choosing, the sentimental poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox’s “Custer, an Epic Poem” (1896), assigned that same day alongside a few other primary documents (including a photograph of Custer, receding hairline in full view) tells the story as promulgated, in the textbook’s words, at a time “when Custer was viewed as a brave martyr.” In Wheeler Wilcox’s poem, Custer “shook his long locks in the face of death” and, dead soon thereafter, “As if asleep / He lay, so fair, that even hellish hate / Withheld its hand and dared not mutilate,” thus again promoting the claim that his body was not desecrated at the time of his defeat.<sup>10</sup> Having already laid to rest that basic question, I can now further raise the stakes of the discussion: “Taking some of our primary source material into account, Ella Wheeler Wilcox’s poem, for example, what evidence do you find of our textbook’s claim that views on Custer have ‘waxed and waned’ over time?...So what does the contemporary view of him appear to have been?...And today?... Why do you think late nineteenth-century views of Custer were more favorable than they are today?...So what has changed to bring about this shift in perception between then and now?” And just like that, students are engaging in a discussion on what Hayden White calls the “equally plausible, alternative, and even contradictory stories” told about the same events over time.<sup>11</sup>

Without ever using the term historiography, *The American Promise* repeatedly engages it in this manner. As of the first edition, for example, a Primary Source sidebar offering “Eyewitness Accounts” of the Spanish-American War self-consciously juxtaposed contrasting views: Theodore Roosevelt’s versus that of a rank and file Rough Rider, for instance, and, most striking, journalist Richard Harding Davis, who notes:

I have seen many illustrations and pictures of th[e] charge on the San Juan hills, but none of them seem to show it just as I remember it. In the picture-papers the men are running up a hill swiftly and gallantly [one such idealized image is featured in the text]...rank after rank, with flags flying, their eyes aflame, and their hair streaming, their bayonets fixed, in long, brilliant lines.<sup>12</sup>

In place of this heroic image, Harding Davis, who witnessed the charge, recalls “men, slipping and scrambling...moving forward with difficulty...many of them, as they advanced, sinking suddenly or pitching forward and disappearing in the high grass,” never to return: “It seemed as if someone had made an awful and terrible mistake.”<sup>13</sup> Such juxtapositions of contrasting texts (and/or texts and images) again invite historiographic analysis—opportunities my students have picked up on enthusiastically in class.

Interestingly, given the amount of space the book devotes to the Battle of San Juan Hill, *The American Promise* in its first edition made little of the well-documented role African American soldiers played in the actual charge, nor mentioned the fact that Roosevelt’s Rough Riders actually took nearby Kettle Hill, arriving at the heights of San Juan too late to make any significant contribution to that encounter.<sup>14</sup> The second edition actually improves upon the first on that count (although neither specifically mention the role of black soldiers in the Spanish-American War section) by specifically noting that, while Roosevelt “did charge..., it was Kettle Hill he took.” The first edition had been a little fuzzier on this.<sup>15</sup> Both, however, perpetuate the idea of Roosevelt having played a “role [never specified] in the decisive Battle of San Juan” and refer to him later, in the context of his presidency, as “the colorful hero of San Juan Hill”—a description that has survived intact in all seven editions.<sup>16</sup> And no edition makes substantial mention of the role of African American soldiers at San Juan Hill until much later, in an offhand comment in the chapter on World War I.

There, a description of General John J. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Force in France, included (in the first two editions) the detail that “Pershing had graduated from West Point in the 1880s and had seen combat in the Indian Wars on the plains and against the Spanish in Cuba, where his command of black troops had earned him the nickname of ‘Black Jack.’”<sup>17</sup> Better still, the third edition of *The American Promise*, published in 2005, specified in even greater detail (though still in the World War I chapter) that Pershing had “led a company of African American soldiers up San Juan Hill in 1898 (hence his nickname ‘Black Jack’)”<sup>18</sup>—a statement that, I recall, one student suggested “might have been more appropriately included in the chapter on the Spanish-American War.” Thus, the book in its third edition was still giving rise to historiographical inquiry, if, ironically, it was its own historiography that was now coming under scrutiny. We would often discuss this in class—“What is the effect of withholding this relevant piece of information for an entire [Progressive Era] chapter?”—and I have personally become convinced, having seen this strategy deployed elsewhere in the book, too, that it is a way for the authors to honor a liberal interpretation of history while simultaneously bending to the more conservative demands of the marketplace, on which I discuss more below. On the one hand, the authors can honestly claim to have told the “full story”: the text explicitly states that it was African American soldiers who went up San Juan Hill; yet it does so only after having perpetuated for two chapters that Roosevelt played a “role in the decisive battle of San Juan Hill” (in the chapter on the Spanish-American War) and was widely seen as “the colorful hero of San Juan Hill” (in the chapter on Progressivism). More than fifty pages later on, when those who actually fought the battle are identified (if only in a throwaway reference to another great white man, Pershing, in the context of an entirely different conflict, World War I) the relevance of who did what at San Juan has long been lost in the shuffle. Thus, a textbook can add an ostensibly liberal detail that nevertheless serves the dominant narrative.

### **“Thinning” of the Text**

By the third edition, then, my feelings for the book became conflicted. Each new edition had brought with it changes, and not

all for the better. Overall, I felt the authors were taking on a slightly more guarded, more conservative tone in the George W. Bush era. A very strong sidebar on “What Sank the *Maine*?” first introduced in the second edition,<sup>19</sup> has survived (slightly shortened) in every edition since, but saw its title change to “Did Terrorists Sink the *Maine*?” as of the third edition.<sup>20</sup> At the time, this struck me as a strangely ahistorical use of the term “terrorist” (the section retains this title to the present day).<sup>21</sup> The fact that this third edition, published in 2005, was the first to be written in the post-9/11 world suggested to me that the book was playing to the particular anxieties triggered by that event.

Elsewhere, certain sections simply disappeared. The previous “Historical Question” on scalping, for example, did not make it into the third edition, nor the contrasting eyewitness accounts of the Spanish-American War, although the sidebar on the *Maine* remained, now under its new title. These were big changes: entire sections deleted from the text. Being equally attuned to the book’s details, around which I self-consciously structured my class discussions, I was also sensitive to smaller alterations in the text. And it was here, at the micro-level, that the most significant changes occurred. Overall, there was what I characterize as a “thinning” of the text. The cumulative effect of the loss of many of its details resulted in a less nuanced and a less open-ended narrative. Increasingly, as of the third edition, *The American Promise* told its readers not only what had happened (if in less detail than before), but also what to think about what had happened. This was especially true of more recent events in history. While the authors remained willing to apply a critical lens to the distant past—by adding the previously mentioned paragraphs on the “eight oppressed races” in the American West, for example—they seemed less eager to do so when it came to the twentieth century, in particular for World War II.

The examples are many. References to the homefront Zoot Suit Riots, for example, which held on through five editions, disappeared in the sixth edition, published in 2015. References to the partisan politics surrounding the absentee ballot controversy in the 1944 presidential election survived intact for the first three editions, were shortened in the fourth, then deleted thereafter. A very strong “Historical Question” in the first edition—“Why Did the Allies Refuse to Bomb the Death Camps?”—made it only to the third



edition. Venturing into one of the murkier moral issues of the war, this sidebar minced no words as it cited “blackout and denial...[by] newspapers and journals relegat[ing] news of the Holocaust to the back pages,” and acknowledged elements of “moral indifference” among British and American “foreign service elites, which Jews had never penetrated.”<sup>22</sup> The section survived verbatim into the second edition, and was then slightly shortened for the third. In the fourth edition, however, the entire sidebar was removed, and some (but not all) of its content was farmed out into the main text, where, in ever sparser incarnations, it remains, with the Allies now emerging far less tarnished for their inaction on the Holocaust than in the first and second editions. In fact, even before this gradual phasing out, as early as the third edition, the concluding paragraphs to the World War II chapter stated that “the Allies [had] saved Asia and Europe from enslavement and finally *halted the Nazis’ genocidal campaign against Jews* and others whom the Nazis considered inferior.”<sup>23</sup> Just ten pages earlier, the “Historical Question” on the Allies’ decision *not* to bomb the camps (which still survived intact, if shortened, in this third edition) clearly contradicts such an interpretation, but the authors were apparently unfazed by their own contradictory claims.<sup>24</sup> By the next (fourth) edition, the section on the death camps had in any case been deleted, so all ambiguity and ambivalence was laid to rest: that the Allies had “halted the Nazis’ genocidal campaign against the Jews” now quite literally was (and remains in the current seventh edition, verbatim) the book’s final word on the Holocaust.<sup>25</sup>

An even more self-evident example of *The American Promise* losing the courage of its convictions is constituted by its changing treatment of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In near-identical words, both the first and second editions laid out the basic considerations and events that preceded the bombings in as much detail as anyone could ask of a survey text: they reviewed the Manhattan Project, the Trinity Test, the reservations felt by some of the scientists involved, and their suggestion that a demonstration bombing be staged to pressure Japan into surrendering. The first two editions also established Japan’s hopeless strategic situation post-Okinawa and the peace feelers it had already put out, but juxtaposed these to President Truman’s insistence on an unconditional surrender and “the sticking point...that the Japanese wanted to retain their emperor”—which to American hard-liners including Truman



represented an unacceptable condition.<sup>26</sup> The first two editions also established the geopolitical advantage the United States stood to gain by dropping the bomb: use of “the bomb made it unnecessary to call on the Russian promise to hasten victory by declaring war on Japan,” as Stalin had pledged at Tehran, and would thus deny the Soviets “a foothold in Korea and Manchuria,” which FDR had conceded at Yalta.<sup>27</sup> “Perhaps, also, the bomb’s devastation would convince the Soviets that they could not safely challenge American leadership after the war.” At the same time, the book acknowledges the “more basic motive...to save American lives” and dutifully establishes the Japanese fight-to-the-death/kamikaze mentality.<sup>28</sup> Despite this even-handedness, the first and second editions’ observations that Truman in the end ordered “the bomb [to] be dropped without warning on cities that had not already been heavily damaged” and that the Japanese did eventually surrender “with assurance that the emperor could retain his throne,” tip the authors’ interpretation towards a critical reading of the bombings.<sup>29</sup> Following their logic, the bombings were militarily unnecessary, but established the United States’ nuclear monopoly, denied the Soviets post-war concessions agreed upon at Tehran and Yalta, and allowed for bomb blast studies to be conducted on virgin targets as specified by Truman’s specific request above. All this was at least partially justified by Japan’s unacceptable “condition” that it wished to keep the emperor, whom in an ironic after-the-fact twist they did get to keep, if only after the loss of close to 200,000 civilian lives.<sup>30</sup>

None of this is spelled out. Indeed, undoubtedly aware of the then-recent controversy over the Smithsonian Institution’s aborted exhibition on the atomic bombing of Japan (called off in 1995 after the museum was criticized for being unpatriotic and overly critical of the bombings), the authors of *The American Promise*, although in apparent agreement with the overall tone of the canceled exhibit, resist taking sides.<sup>31</sup> “Whether allowing the Japanese to retain their emperor...would have been enough to induce surrender can never be known,” they cautioned in the first edition in 1998, with the Smithsonian controversy in very recent memory.<sup>32</sup> Yet the elegiac tone of their conclusion to the chapter on the war, which in that first edition juxtaposed the Holocaust as an example of “humankind’s capacity for unimaginable evil” with (next sentence) “the annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” suggests precisely the

more critical message the Smithsonian also had been striving for.<sup>33</sup> Though such a juxtaposition might be considered “tendentious and moralizing,” as Richard Kohn has written of the exhibition script for the Smithsonian’s *Enola Gay* show, I recall it sparking many memorable classroom discussions.<sup>34</sup>

Beginning with the third edition, the book became far less conducive to generating truly complex classroom conversation on this topic. First, the third edition introduced the triumphalist conclusion of the Allies halting the Nazi genocide and, for the first time, featured no specific reference to Hiroshima or Nagasaki in the chapter conclusion, much less any suggestion that the bombings may have shared a common denominator with the Holocaust. Second, although the third (and fourth) editions added some details to their narratives of the actual bombings—that the estimated number of American casualties in the event of a land invasion of Japan ran up to 250,000, for example—these details served only to present the bombings as more justifiable than in earlier editions.<sup>35</sup> And while adding the above information, both the third and fourth editions also withheld certain details that had been central to the more complex arguments offered in earlier versions. For example, while both editions still observed that, post-bombing, Japan surrendered “with American assurance that the emperor could retain his throne,” neither edition (nor any subsequent edition) established that Japan’s wish to keep the emperor in the first place had constituted a “sticking point”—a condition, as it were, whose violation of the American demand for an unconditional surrender helped justify the bombing.<sup>36</sup> To pronounce that Japan got to keep its emperor without first establishing Japan’s earlier insistence that it do so, nor establishing the United States’ initial rejection of this demand, is to fail to explain the relevance of the retention of the emperor, which, stripped of its context, becomes a meaningless detail that might as well have been omitted.

The third and fourth editions tempered their triumphalist chapter conclusions with the following figures embedded within a lengthy list of the horrifying, mainly Axis-inflicted death toll of World War II

The Allies killed more than 4 million Nazi soldiers and over 1.2 million Japanese combatants, as well as hundreds of thousands of civilians. But in the gruesome balance sheet of war, the Axis powers inflicted far more grief, misery, and destruction upon the victims of their aggression than they suffered in return.<sup>37</sup>

While the notion of a “balance sheet of war” strikes some historians as problematic,<sup>38</sup> few scholars would disagree with the larger thrust of this claim, nor its acknowledgement of the Allies, too, having inflicted “hundreds of thousands” of civilian casualties. In the subsequent fifth edition, however, this reference to civilian casualties among Axis populations was deleted, along with earlier references (in the main text of the chapter) to the Allied fire bombings of Berlin and Dresden “killing 60,000 civilians.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, by the fifth edition, the book’s treatment of the war, painstakingly even-handed in earlier editions and even guardedly critical of the Allies on various counts, had been sanitized: the death camp section was long gone, the once-ambivalent conclusion had been rendered triumphalist in tone, and all references to Allied-inflicted civilian casualties were deleted. The book’s handling of the atomic bombings, too, was far less ambivalent than before, with significant information re-shuffled or deleted. The fifth edition’s lone reminder of the more critically oriented original telling of the atomic bombing of Japan—that Truman explicitly “ordered...an atomic bomb [to] be dropped on a Japanese city *not already heavily damaged by American raids*”—did not survive into the subsequent sixth edition, which truncates the above sentence to state merely that “Truman ordered that an atomic bomb be dropped on a Japanese city.” Period.<sup>40</sup> And that is where the matter stands in the current, seventh edition.

### **Influences of the Textbook Industry**

Tempting though it is to attribute *The American Promise*’s gradual embrace of a more conservative interpretation of history to the United States’ own drift towards the political right over the past two decades, it is equally important to view the book’s various changes within the larger context of the American textbook industry. Ironically, at the same time that I adopted a textbook to improve my students’ experience in the American survey class, American students themselves were organizing in protest of the textbook industry. Student PIRGs, a consortium of college campus-based Public Interest Research Groups, has devoted over a decade to the study of the textbook industry and has published a series of reports, the most recent in 2016. Students’ principal complaints about textbooks focus on their pricing. Studies by Student PIRGs and

other organizations estimate that American undergraduates spend an average of \$600-\$1,200 on textbooks per year.<sup>41</sup> Those figures represent a modest decline from earlier this century, largely made possible by a flourishing used textbook market driven by Internet vendors such as Amazon.<sup>42</sup> But this is still a large sum of money for students, especially for those of modest means. In some instances, a textbook required for a course can add 25-50% of the cost of enrollment, and some students report opting out of courses because of the high expense of textbooks, or attempt to muddle through without buying the book—which, in my survey (which includes unannounced reading quizzes) would almost certainly lead to a poor grade.<sup>43</sup>

I recall being aghast one winter semester, when, upon being asked why she was doing poorly on her quizzes, a student stated that she was unable to afford the book—which I lent her for the balance of the term. I have since encountered multiple other students who find themselves in the same situation. For many of today's undergraduates, the price of a textbook confronts them with a "lose-lose choice: purchase the necessary textbook and add to their financial hardship, take time away from studying to work extra hours, or go without the book and accept the impact on their ability to learn and perform well."<sup>44</sup> With this in mind, I have been placing a copy of the current edition of *The American Promise* on two-hour reserve at the library, and I keep an eye on its cost. In keeping with the industry trend—the average price of a textbook has increased by 70-80% during the twenty-first century, and astonishingly over 800% since the late 1970s<sup>45</sup>—Volume Two of *The American Promise*, which debuted at around \$60 in 1998, has almost tripled in price since. The fourth edition retailed at \$91.95; the fifth (2012) for the first time broke the \$100 barrier, retailing at \$114; and the current seventh edition (2017) costs undergraduate students \$150.

While my students have become increasingly savvy about finding cheaper deals on Amazon and elsewhere (where they are able to purchase everything from used copies, to semester-long rentals, to digital access), the book's publisher, Bedford/St. Martin's, has responded to this challenge by offering its own equivalents (minus the used option; for obvious reasons, publishers do not support the resale of their books). In addition, Bedford/St. Martin's has in recent years begun offering the text in a sometimes bewildering number of variations: combined volumes, concise volumes, value editions

(on which, more below) and, most popular since the company was acquired by Macmillan (whose Macmillan Education logo has graced the spine of *The American Promise* since its sixth edition), LaunchPad's e-text version, which updates a digital format that Bedford/St. Martin's had begun offering one edition prior, as of 2012. Predictably, my students are drawn to the e-text, which has its benefits (it is significantly cheaper; for the seventh edition, the LaunchPad version on its own retails for only \$42.99), but also has downsides—the worst of which is that e-texts' "content typically expires at the end of the semester," according to economist James V. Koch, so students are left with no tangible reminder of their course reading, nor even the option to sell back the book.<sup>46</sup> Another problem is that e-texts are downloadable to any device, including smartphones. Bad enough that increasing numbers of students take notes on laptop computers, making it difficult to know when they are engaging with, or disengaging from, a course. Digital texts now justify their staring at computers or tablets—or, worse, fiddling with phones—for an entire class. While "we're still in the infancy of determining the impact of e-Books on students (and faculty)," according to Koch, it shouldn't take too many studies to establish that reading course materials on phones (some students now even compose their papers on their phones) is not likely a recipe for student success.<sup>47</sup>

A further problem with the e-text of *The American Promise* is that its page numbers and page breaks sometimes conflict with those of the hard copy (this at least was the case with its early versions; on one occasion, a student's e-text lacked page numbers altogether). Generally, the abundance of different versions of *The American Promise*, each with its own e-text, has led to a great deal of confusion among students as to which text to buy, and every semester, several students have to exchange the texts they have purchased for the one I actually assigned. Often, they are aware of the fact that they have purchased a text with an ISBN number different from the one I list on the syllabus, but do so anyway, drawn by a lower price tag. In a concession to their economic circumstances, I already switched to the cheapest possible version of the text, the so-called "Value Edition," in 2013—though not without misgivings. The Value Edition is a stripped down, smaller-format version of the book, missing approximately 75% of all illustrations, maps, and charts (those it does feature are reproduced in black and white, to

save costs). Also, despite the main text surviving intact, the Value Edition is missing all the many sidebars that had numbered among *The American Promise*'s most valuable features. The savings for the students are considerable; for the seventh edition, the Value Edition retails at \$52.99, compared to \$150 for the full edition. But the losses to the narrative overall are many, as these sidebars enriched the book by adding historiographical and other dimensions of meaning and detail, as demonstrated in the first half of this article.

Here, the attendant “thinning” of the text becomes quite literal. Whereas the main text of the first full edition of Volume II of *The American Promise* was 666 pages, today's seventh edition has only 470: a loss of almost 200 pages. Students are getting close to one-third less in content for almost three times the price. Likewise, Volume II of the Value Edition has shrunk in size from 516 pages since I first began using it in its fifth edition to 436 in its present seventh edition. Incongruously, most changes to the text are not where you would expect to find them in a history textbook—that is, at the back end, to accommodate historical events and developments that have occurred since the last edition. In fact, the last three editions of *The American Promise*, released in 2012, 2015, and 2017, have made hardly any changes at all to the concluding chapter. Instead, the bulk of the changes are in chapters on periods such as those reviewed for this essay: the American West, the Spanish-American War, World Wars I and II (and others)—periods long past, in other words, whose story has effectively remained the same. Aside from the assiduous pruning of detail from one edition to the next, and the deletion, replacement, or (less frequently) addition of sidebars, most of the changes—such as headings changed or moved around, illustrations replaced—are superficial, but just enough to justify what Student PIRGs identify as the publishers' main objective: “a slightly varied order [of information] or different page numbers, making it difficult for students to follow along in older editions.”<sup>48</sup>

In an earlier study conducted by Student PIRGs, 287 professors teaching in twenty-six fields (including history) were surveyed on their use of textbooks. Of these 287 faculty, 71% found that new editions of textbooks in their field were justified only “Sometimes” or “Rarely” (51% and 20%, respectively). In a comment, Student PIRGs acknowledged the existence of certain “fields of learning in which new developments *are* constantly occurring,” thus justifying

the regular publication of new editions in those fields, but did not include history among them, with the explanation that its “basic material has not changed for many years.”<sup>49</sup> Of course, momentous developments in American history have occurred in just the last two decades alone, yet it is precisely here that the *The American Promise* manifests its fewest changes. Had the new editions of the book been timed to follow major events, rather than pre-scheduled to justify a constant cycle of what Koch likens to planned obsolescence, there might be fewer new editions, along with more substantial additions on recent events.<sup>50</sup> Instead, *The American Promise*, with its rigorous publishing schedule of a new edition every two to three years, has suffered almost comic poor timing. Its second edition (which was copyrighted in 2002, though the book was available for sale by November of 2001, as post-dating of copyright is standard practice in the textbook industry) included the 2000 election, but missed out on the biggest event in American history in decades: the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The next, third edition, dated 2005, included 9/11 and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, but missed the Abu Ghraib torture scandal and 2004 election. Similarly, the fourth edition was dated 2009, yet included no mention of the economic crisis of 2008, nor that year’s historic election of Barack Obama. The subsequent fifth, sixth, and seventh editions do cover Obama, but offer only a very thin treatment of his presidency that has not changed much since he was first introduced to the book in 2012. The current seventh edition, dated 2017, includes no reference to the 2016 election of Donald J. Trump. The list goes on.

### Conclusion

In fact, *The American Promise*’s treatment of the twenty-first century to date is disappointing. If the third edition’s conservative turn was perhaps partially a function of its having been the first to be written in the post-9/11 era, there was no corresponding reverse orientation after the national mood swung back with the election of Obama. Treatment of the George W. Bush presidency remains restrained even in the seventh edition and has taken a long time to catch up with the historical record. The Bush administration’s justification for war against Iraq in 2003, for example, was summarized in the third edition (2005) as follows: “Claiming that



[Saddam] Hussein had links to Al Qaeda and harbored terrorists and that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, Bush insisted that the threat was immediate, and great enough to justify preemptive action.”<sup>51</sup> These “claims” were neither questioned nor qualified in the third edition. A slight revision for the subsequent fourth edition (2009) still held back, establishing only that the administration “ma[de] (now widely *disputed*) claims that Hussein had links to Al Qaeda...harbored terrorists, and...possessed weapons of mass destruction.” The fifth edition (2012) made reference to “claims (subsequently *refuted*),” as did the sixth (2015), which also released this long-suffering passage from its parentheses. But only the current, seventh edition (2017) finally states unequivocally that the administration’s “claims...later proved false.”<sup>52</sup>

Gratified though I am by the book actually stating this, I am disappointed by the length of time it has taken it to get there, especially as the administration’s counterfactual claims and statements during the lead-up to the war—numbering 935, according to a database accessible to the public since January 2008—were identified as part of “a carefully orchestrated campaign of misinformation” well in time for *The American Promise*’s fourth edition.<sup>53</sup> Yet it took the book eight more years to come out and identify these claims as false—the eight years of the Obama administration, to be exact, which, as previously stated, receive only the most perfunctory treatment in the book: five and a half pages in all. As evidence of the book’s continued thinning, consider also that its final chapter (which begins with the presidency of George Bush Sr. and covers the end of the Cold War through 9/11, the Gulf Wars, and beyond) once weighed in at thirty-six pages for the third edition, yet the current seventh edition claims only twenty-nine pages—despite the unfolding of a massive economic crisis and the eventful Obama presidency in the twelve intervening years since.<sup>54</sup>

All this matters to me not only because the general direction the book has chosen runs counter to my own inclination, obviously, but because course readings inevitably shape classroom discussions. Where once *The American Promise* invited critical examination of key aspects of American history and historiography, any effort to address the complexities surrounding the decision to drop atomic bombs on Japan, for example, now exceeds the parameters of discourse set by the book. Students generally accept what an assigned reading for a course tells them. The broader context for

the atomic bombing of Japan presented in earlier editions thus encouraged them to at least entertain the possibility of critical interpretations. Leading class, I did not have to load the deck one way or another, but could simply invite their thoughts and comments on the reading, which inevitably yielded a discussion rich in detail and perspectives. Given the deletion of relevant details in the editions since, and the book's attendant reframing of World War II as a "good war," such a discussion no longer develops organically. The book really offers only one interpretation now, and to elicit any wider debate, I myself have to force the issue. To my students, I suspect, and even to myself, I sound shrill as I do so.

So why am I still using *The American Promise*? Certainly, there are many other textbooks to choose from, several of which I am familiar with. Most, however, are no better than *The American Promise*, although a few have developed devoted followings.<sup>55</sup> All textbooks being more or less equal, then, why use one at all? For this, I return to my original point of departure: a tightly structured, well-written chronological narrative is helpful for undergraduate students taking the survey, many of whom are not even history majors. Plus, I—like most instructors teaching the U.S. survey, I suspect—supplement the textbook with sources of my own choosing.<sup>56</sup> Frequently, these texts and documents are specifically chosen to create a counter-narrative to the text. On numerous occasions, I have even reproduced sections from earlier editions of the book to have my students engage in precisely the kinds of close comparisons offered in this paper. In this way, *The American Promise* does double duty, serving both as the main text of my survey and, simultaneously, as an object of historiographical inquiry in its own right—an approach I have found helps students become more engaged and more critical readers. Finally, having entered into a long-term relationship with this book almost as complex as some of my personal relationships, I confess to having developed feelings of loyalty to it. And as in a personal relationship, having come to know this book as I do—warts and all—I also harbor hope that, having lost the courage of its liberal convictions around the third edition and thereafter, the book may yet, one of these editions, rediscover them. After all, with any luck, the next edition (scheduled for release in 2020) will include the Trump presidency. However the authors choose to handle that thorny subject, I am sure it will yield many more lively discussions.

## Notes

1. Originally published as James L. Roark, Michael P. Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, Sarah Stage, Alan Lawson, and Susan M. Hartmann, *The American Promise: A History of the United States, Volume II: From 1865* (Boston, MA: Bedford Books, 1998); the latest edition is James L. Roark, Michael P. Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, Sarah Stage, and Susan M. Hartmann, *The American Promise: A History of the United States, Volume II: From 1865*, seventh ed. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2017).

2. Another example: I like the way *The American Promise* positions the Spanish-American War *before* the Progressive Era. A recurring character in both of those chapters is Theodore Roosevelt, first introduced as a Dakota rancher (in the chapter on the West), then (in the context of the Spanish-American War) as Assistant Secretary of the Navy and Rough Rider, and finally as Progressive-era president of the United States, which sequence makes sense. On the other hand, James Henretta et al.'s *America's History* (1997), a rival Bedford/St. Martin's textbook (under the banner of Worth Publishers at the time), offers the following section outline for the chapter on "The Progressive Era": "The Making of a Progressive President [Roosevelt]"; "Regulating the Marketplace"; "The Fracturing of Republican Progressivism"; and "Woodrow Wilson and the New Freedom"—all *before* the subsequent chapter on "An Emerging World Power," which only then covers the Spanish-American War, a sequence that does not sit well with me at all. James Henretta, W. Elliot Brownlee, David Brody, Susan Ware, and Marilyn S. Johnson, *America's History, Volume 2: Since 1865*, third ed. (New York: Worth Publishers, 1997).

3. Roark et al., *The American Promise, Vol. II* (1998), 658. The authors are channeling Patricia Limerick's work here: see Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1987), 289.

4. Patrick Allitt, *I'm the Teacher, You're the Student: A Semester in the University Classroom* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 14.

5. See James L. Roark, Michael P. Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, Sarah Stage, Alan Lawson, and Susan M. Hartmann, *The American Promise: A History of the United States, Volume II: From 1865*, third ed. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), 654-657. This chapter has since been re-structured significantly—and not necessarily to its advantage: as of the fourth edition (2009), the Indian Wars have been treated prior to the "eight oppressed races" section. James L. Roark, Michael P. Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, Sarah Stage, Alan Lawson, and Susan M. Hartmann, *The American Promise: A History of the United States, Volume II: From 1865*, fourth ed. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009), see Chapter 17, 591-611.

6. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (2005), 646-647.

7. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (1998), xx.

8. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (1998), 665.

9. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (1998), 665.

10. Ella Wheeler Wilcox, "Custer, An Epic Poem" (1896), in *Major Problems in the History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Co., 1989), 448.
11. Hayden White, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation," in *The Politics of Interpretation*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 136.
12. Richard Harding Davis, as quoted in Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (1998), 793. An 1898 lithograph, "The Battle of San Juan Hill," is featured on the following page of *The American Promise: Vol. II* (1998), 794.
13. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (1998), 793.
14. See, for example, Peggy Samuels and Harold Samuels, *Teddy Roosevelt at San Juan: The Making of a President* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), 302-305.
15. James L. Roark, Michael P. Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, Sarah Stage, Alan Lawson, and Susan M. Hartmann, *The American Promise: A History of the United States, Volume II: From 1865*, second ed. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002), 716; in the analogous passage, which sets up Roosevelt's own eyewitness account, the first edition (1998) states, "after his troops had taken nearby Kettle Hill, he called the Rough Riders to charge the line of Spanish trenches on San Juan Hill," implying—as does Roosevelt's own first-person account—that they actually did. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (1998), 793.
16. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (1998), 795, 813.
17. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (1998), 855.
18. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (2005), 789.
19. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (2002), 712-714.
20. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (2005), 738-739.
21. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (2017), 580-581.
22. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (1998), 1006-1007.
23. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (2005), 946. Emphasis added.
24. While the Holocaust did technically end with Germany's defeat, of course, that is not equal to the Allies having "halted" it, as the book now claimed. Indeed, in their section on "Why...the Allies Refuse[d] to Bomb the Death Camps" (which, in this third edition only, co-existed with their new triumphalist conclusion), the authors establish clearly that, although the Allies had the intelligence and the resources to destroy the camps and "halt" the Holocaust, they chose not to. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (2005), 936-937; 946.
25. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (2009), 942; cf. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (2017), 742.
26. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (1998), 1015.
27. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (1998), 1015.
28. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (1998), 1014-1015.
29. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (1998), 1016.
30. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (1998), 1016.
31. See Richard H. Kohn, "History and the Culture Wars: The Case of the Smithsonian Institution's *Enola Gay* Exhibition," *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 3 (December 1995): 1036-1063. As described above, the textbook's line

of reasoning is almost identical to that proposed by the exhibition's curators, who planned "seven sidebar 'Historical Controversies'" to be displayed in the space of the exhibit dedicated to "The Decision to Drop the Bomb." The sidebars included: "Did the United States Ignore the Japanese Peace Initiative?"; "Would the War Have Ended Sooner if the United States had Guaranteed the Emperor's Position?"; "How Important was the Soviet Factor in the 'Decision to Drop the Bomb?"; "Was a Warning Demonstration Possible?"; "Was the Invasion Inevitable if the Atomic Bomb had not been Dropped?"; and "Was the Decision to Drop the Bomb Justified?" Kohn, "History and the Culture Wars," 1045.

32. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (1998), 1016.

33. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (1998), 1016.

34. Kohn, "History and the Culture Wars," 1044.

35. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (2005), 944.

36. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (1998), 1015; cf. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (2005), 945.

37. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (2005), 946.

38. Daqing Yang, for example, finds such comparisons "methodologically sterile" and "morally misguided." Daqing Yang, "The Challenges of the Nanjing Massacre: Reflections on Historical Inquiry," in *The Nanjing Massacre in History and Historiography*, ed. Joshua A. Fogel (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 161.

39. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (2005), 940; Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (2009), 935.

40. James L. Roark, Michael P. Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, Sarah Stage, and Susan M. Hartmann, *The American Promise: A History of the United States, Volume II: From 1865*, fifth ed. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012), 857; James L. Roark, Michael P. Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, Sarah Stage, Alan Lawson, and Susan M. Hartmann, *The American Promise: A History of the United States, Volume II: From 1865*, sixth ed. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2015), 737. Emphasis added.

41. The figure of \$600 is based on a student survey of close to 5,000 students at 132 unique institutions in twenty-five states, including my own, New York. See Ethan Senack and Robert Donoghue, "Covering the Cost: Why We Can No Longer Afford to Ignore High Textbook Prices," The Student PIRGs, February 2016, <<https://studentpirgs.org/2016/02/03/covering-cost/>>, 5-6. *The Atlantic* cites a then-recent College Board Report, according to which "university students typically spend as much as \$1,200 a year total on textbooks." Terrance F. Ross, "The Death of Textbooks?" *The Atlantic*, 6 March 2015, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/03/the-death-of-textbooks/387055/>>.

42. On this decline and its causes, see James V. Koch, "An Economic Analysis of the Market for Textbooks: Current Conditions, New Developments, and Policy Options," 11 December 2014, <[https://affordablelearninggeorgia.org/documents/Koch\\_Plenary1.pdf](https://affordablelearninggeorgia.org/documents/Koch_Plenary1.pdf)>.

43. Senack and Donoghue, "Covering the Cost," 7-8. James V. Koch reports 12% of the 230 students in his ECON 301 course "confessed they had not purchased any form of textbook." Koch, "An Economic Analysis."

44. Senack and Donoghue, "Covering the Cost," 8.

45. Koch, "An Economic Analysis"; Ross, "The Death of Textbooks?"; Senack and Donoghue, "Covering the Cost," 1.

46. Koch, "An Economic Analysis." See also, Ross, "The Death of Textbooks?" The Bedford/St. Martin's online catalog explicitly states that all LaunchPad versions of *The American Promise* offer only six or (for slightly more money) twelve months of access. See <<https://www.macmillanlearning.com/Catalog/discipline/History/USHistory>>.

47. Koch, "An Economic Analysis." Ross cites numerous reports and individual instructors' opinions that register skepticism about the claimed benefits of digital texts, while Senack and Donoghue point out that "for the publishers, the shift to digital represents an opportunity to drop the significant burden of printing and shipping costs and increase profit margins." Ross, "The Death of Textbooks?"; Senack and Donoghue, "Covering the Cost," 3.

48. Senack and Donoghue, "Covering the Cost," 2; see also, Ross, "The Death of Textbooks?"

49. Saffron Zomer, "Exposing the Textbook Industry: How Publishers' Pricing Tactics Drive Up the Cost of College Textbooks," February 2007, <<https://studentpirgs.org/2007/02/27/exposing-textbook-industry/>>, 15, 11. Emphasis added.

50. See Koch, "An Economic Analysis."

51. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (2005), 1173.

52. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (2009), 1173; Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (2012), 1066; Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (2015), 909; Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (2017), 913. Emphases added.

53. See Charles Lewis and Mark Reading-Smith, "False Pretenses," The Center for Public Integrity, 23 January 2008, <<https://www.publicintegrity.org/2008/01/23/5641/false-pretenses>>.

54. Cf. Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (2005), 1140-1175; Roark et al., *The American Promise: Vol. II* (2017), 891-920.

55. Among recent Ph.D.s teaching the survey, Eric Foner's *Give Me Liberty!*, which first came out in 2005 and is now in its fifth edition, is popular. I myself have long flirted with David Shi and George Tindall's *America: A Narrative History*, an old stand-by first published in 1984, which, among numerous assets including its affordability, boasts a slightly more nuanced reading of the bombing of Japan and, now in its tenth edition, a far superior chapter on George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty! An American History*, fifth ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2017); David Emory Shi and George Brown Tindall, *America: A Narrative History*, tenth ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2016). There are also new textbooks being published almost monthly, some at highly affordable prices in their effort to become immediately competitive in a crowded field. Finally, there now exist a number of open access e-texts, available free of charge, the most well-known of which, *The American Yawp*, is rich with potential. Joseph Locke and Ben Wright, eds., *The American Yawp: A Massively Collaborative Open U.S. History Textbook* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), <<https://www.americanyawp.com>>.



56. Source books are almost as common as textbooks themselves. Bedford/St. Martin's alone offers three for the American survey: *Going to the Source, America Firsthand*, and *Reading the American Past*. I personally have always chosen to select my own sources, but such sourcebooks can be helpful and are often carefully calibrated to work with a given textbook. *Reading the American Past*, for example, is edited by one of *The American Promise*'s authors, Michael P. Johnson, and is specifically recommended (by Macmillan) as a companion text. Victoria Bissell Brown and Timothy J. Shannon, *Going to the Source: The Bedford Reader in American History, Volume 2: Since 1865*, fourth ed. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2015); Anthony Marcus, John Michael Giggie, and David Burner, *America Firsthand, Volume 2: Readings from Reconstruction to the Present*, tenth ed. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016); and Michael P. Johnson, *Reading the American Past: Selected Historical Documents, Volume 2: From 1865*, fifth ed. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012).