

## Some textbooks still parrot Donald Trump's skewed version of U.S. history

Covid-19 might make the situation worse

By **Amy Fallas**

Amy Fallas is a writer and PhD Student in History at UC Santa Barbara.

September 24, 2020 at 3:00 a.m. PDT



President Trump has vociferously objected to historical projects that are in any way critical of the United States or that seek to spread new scholarship that challenges past hagiography to broader audiences. Last week, he even held a conference on U.S. history assailing “decades of left-wing indoctrination in our schools” and intending to launch a commission to promote “pro-American curriculum that celebrates the truth about our nation’s great history.”

While Trump’s rhetoric on U.S. history is often impenetrable to his critics, the appeal to his base may be its familiarity to Americans who were educated either at home or in evangelical Christian schools where his myopic, racist and fundamentalist nationalist view of U.S. history is part of the standard curriculum. He parrots a vision of the past that was once mainstream but more recently has been found mainly in textbooks marketed to home-schoolers and Christian schools. The history of their development reveals how such messages, once considered unobjectionable, have more recently become associated with this particular market, helping explain today’s political chasm in the U.S.

In 1954, Southern Baptists Arlin and Rebekah Horton founded a small Christian school in Pensacola, Fla., that would become the hub for one the most popular suppliers of K-12 curriculum in Christian education.

The couple had met at Bob Jones University (BJU), an institution founded in 1927 by evangelist Bob Jones Sr. as a haven for fundamentalist Christian students in the aftermath of the sensational Scopes Trial over teaching evolution in schools in Tennessee. The founding of BJU was part of a growing schism among American Protestants over the authority of the Bible, interpretation of history and the relationship between scientific and theological knowledge. Known as the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, this intellectual, cultural and religious divide motivated conservative evangelicals to establish institutions like BJU to offer alternatives to both public schools and liberal Protestant education, which they viewed as increasingly worldly and godless.

Such fundamentalist institutions grew incrementally over four decades, thanks to the efforts of people like the Hortons. The 1960s witnessed an explosion of traditional schools known as the “Christian day school” movement. Protestant fundamentalists established private schools to counter social, cultural and legal transformations in American public education. The federal courts had deemed Bible reading in publicly funded schools unconstitutional and enforced racial integration of schools in the South, convincing evangelicals public education was becoming hostile to their worldview.

The proliferation of private conservative evangelical schools across the country left a need for a unified education philosophy, and a curriculum from a “Christian American tradition” had to be built. According to their biography “Builders of the Dream: The Education Ministry of Arlin and Beka Horton in Pensacola, Florida,” after starting their school, the Hortons ventured into publishing in 1972 because of frustrations over having to “teach around” “secular textbooks” that “were becoming less usable in a traditional Christian school.”

The surge in new schools and home-schooled students from the 1960s and into the '70s created demand for the materials their company, Abeka, crafted. Ironically, this material initially came from old, secular textbooks to which the Hortons bought the copyrights, and the ideas of secular educational conservatives such as Max Rafferty, the former California superintendent of schools. This produced some blowback from rivals in the 1970s and 1980s, who accused Abeka books of being too similar to secular publishers.

Despite these charges, Abeka’s teaching materials relied on an authoritarian model that demanded students unequivocally accept the information in textbooks and humbly submit to teachers. Abeka’s leadership, along with other fundamentalist colleagues, grew more adamant in this approach as they viewed other evangelical schools and leaders as influenced by “liberal” ideas — even accusing notable figures such as Billy Graham and, somewhat amazingly, the conservative Jerry Falwell Sr., founder of Moral Majority, of being too accommodating to progressive Christianity. In a letter to Graham in 1966, Arlin Horton accused the preacher of “making common cause with liberals [and apostates] across our land.”

What started as a small, couple-led initiative grew into a multimillion-dollar company that today generates more than 1,000 educational resources “from a Christian Perspective.” While Abeka’s creationist science curriculum has come under criticism and is the focus of several lawsuits, the content of its history education also presents cause for concern.

Abeka’s history curriculum touts its distinctive approach as “a realistic view of time, government, geography and economics based on eternal truths.” But instead, the publisher, which did not respond to a request for comment, doles out a slanted take that fuses Christianity with conservative political beliefs and a hagiographic tale of America’s past.

As early as first grade, students are trained to learn “the benefits of free-enterprise economics ... in contrast with the dangers of Communism, socialism, and liberalism.” These ideological, political and economic commitments reflect the long-standing alliance between corporate capitalism and conservative evangelicals that dates back to the Great Depression. During that period, evangelical business executives forged connections with Protestant religious practices and institutions that would remain throughout the 20th century thanks to the preaching of a gospel of wealth. This interwar alliance inculcated distrust of government services and regulations that were perceived as restricting God’s blessing *and* interfering in religious education.

Abeka history textbooks for grades 1 through 8 prime young students to shirk a critical approach to learning by focusing on nostalgic, heroic and triumphant vignettes of “Western civilization” and Christian prosperity. The high school material then pivots easily to advancing its vision of U.S. power, governance and purpose.

The second edition of Abeka’s 11th grade textbook, “United States History: Heritage of Freedom,” sets the tone for its secondary school history curriculum: “From the perilous beginnings on the shores of a wilderness continent, the United States of America has become a leader of nations and the bastion of freedom for the world ... it has given birth to the highest civilization the world has ever known.” This origin story of the United States casts its settlers, founders

and leaders as morally above reproach, despite the removal and dispossession of Indigenous peoples, the proliferation of chattel slavery and systemic racism and the adoption of anti-immigrant legislation. The distortions go even further: The textbook's Civil War section describes the Ku Klux Klan as a secret society that sought to improve the livelihoods of Southern Whites during Reconstruction and only occasionally "resorted to violence" — rather than an instrument of White supremacy and terrorism that crushed Black people's access to the vote and eroded democracy.

Shifting focus to contemporary issues such as affordable housing and the inner-city, the textbook considers poverty the result of a "lack of homeowner's pride" that "led to vandalized and neglected housing." This description denies entirely the well-documented reality of racially based segregation as rooted in laws and policies, from redlining to zoning ordinances.

And "United States History" attempts to keep students from considering other perspectives, warning them of "false philosophies" and framing other historical interpretations as untrue.

Yet ironically, this interpretation drew on older mainstream textbooks. The narratives embedded in Abeka's books centering the experiences of White enslavers and ignoring the lived reality of slavery in the United States came straight from how history was taught to generations of schoolchildren before them. Today, educators have widely recognized that these narratives are false and unsupported by the historical record, but remnants remain in mainstream textbooks. And they still dominate the curriculum put out by Abeka and other publishers.

Earlier this summer, Trump parroted "United States History's" demonization of other historical approaches, deriding current approaches to history as "a web of lies" where "all perspective is removed, every virtue is obscured, every motive is twisted, every fact is distorted, and every flaw is magnified until the history is purged and the record is disfigured beyond all recognition." Students and parents used to reading fundamentalist textbooks and materials — and older Americans — may be likely to agree with him.

The commonality between Trump's twisted take on the past and that found in Abeka's textbooks is even more worrisome in our current covid-19 moment, when many families are looking for alternatives to in-person education for their children. Abeka and other providers of fundamentalist curriculum like Bob Jones University Press and Accelerated Christian Education are promoting their offerings, especially digital and video-based instruction, to at-home educators and religious schools.

A good understanding of history is crucial to understanding covid-19, the uprisings of 2020 and the divisions roiling our country. Yet by teaching that our interpretations of the past need never change, Abeka's texts instead fuel these divisions and distort the past in ways that will do little to improve our future.

### **Your profile is incomplete**

Before you can contribute to our community, please visit your Profile page in order to complete your profile.