

Honesty in Textbooks

In U.S. classrooms jihad is defanged or oversimplified

Excerpt from a Report

[This article is excerpted from "Islam and the Textbooks" by Gilbert T. Sewall, a report by the American Textbook Council, in which seven secondary school world history textbooks are critically reviewed. The editors have chosen to use the section of the report dealing with the concept of jihad.]

The American Textbook Council review, "Islam and the Textbooks," was published in February 2003.¹

It drew abundant praise and also criticism that included vicious ad hominem attacks.

"Islam and the Textbooks" surveyed seven widely adopted world history textbooks used in grades seven through twelve. In particular it reviewed textbook coverage of *jihad*, *sharia*, slavery, and the status of women in Islamic countries, comparing textbook content to what has been written by leading historians and Middle East scholars. The report found repeated discrepancies between world history textbooks and exacting scholarship in the field. It explained how pressure groups, both Muslims and allied multiculturalists, manipulate nervous publishers who obey educational fashion and rely more heavily on diversity experts than on trustworthy scholarship.

How classrooms deal with Islamic aggression is an unresolved school-related question of great importance. It is complicated by pressure from educational groups which assume that geopolitical problems originate in U.S. policy and its exertion of power abroad. Textbook editors seem not to recognize that a school-related Islamic agenda in the U.S. uses multiculturalism as a device to guarantee a purely favorable and uncritical view of all things Muslim. At extremes, the report suggested,

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multiculturalism contributes to a form of peaceable cultural *jihad* meant to discredit or "problematize" European civilization in favor of non-Western cultures.

In understanding the history and nature of Islam, the concept of *jihad* is uniquely important. The term embodies an element of friction that exists between many Muslims and non-believers – Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist – enmity grounded in Islamic desire for political and territorial power. *Jihad* in its historical usage refers almost exclusively to armed warfare by Muslims against non-Muslims. Most editorial boards have no difficulty digesting this idea, nor do the nation's political

and military elites. On the other hand, many prominent academics deny any martial aspect of the Muslim faith, ignoring or dismissing violent Islamic *jihads* from Algeria to Indonesia and locating the problem in Western colonialism.

What is *jihad*? Bernard Lewis, writing in *The Middle East*, states:

The term jihad, conventionally translated "holy war," has the literal meaning of striving, more specifically, in the Qur'anic phrase "striving in the path of God" (Ji sabil Allah). Some Muslim theologians, particularly in more modern times, have interpreted the duty of "striving in the path of God" in a spiritual and moral sense. The overwhelming majority of early authorities, however, citing relevant passages in the Qur'an and in the tradition, discuss jihad in military terms. Virtually every manual of shari'a law has a chapter on jihad, which regulates in minute detail such matters as the opening, conduct, interruption and cessation of hostilities, and the allocation and division of booty. ...Even the Christian crusade, often compared with the Muslim jihad, was itself a delayed and limited response to the jihad and in part also an

imitation. But unlike the jihad it was concerned primarily with the defense or reconquest of threatened or lost Christian territory. ...The Muslim jihad, in contrast, was perceived as unlimited, as a religious obligation that would continue until all the world had either adopted the Muslim faith or submitted to Muslim rule. In the latter case, those who professed what Muslims recognized as a revealed religion were allowed to continue the practice of that religion, subject to the acceptance of certain fiscal and other disabilities. Those who did not, that is to say idolaters and polytheists, were given the choice of conversion, death or slavery.²

Lewis concludes this passage, saying: "The object of *jihad* is to bring the whole world under Islamic law." World history textbooks fail to make this simple but ultra-important point.

A 1999 Library of Congress report on global terrorism says of *jihad* in its glossary:

An Arabic verbal noun derived from jahada ("to struggle"). Although "holy war is not a literal translation, it summarizes the essential idea of jihad. In the course of the revival of Islamic fundamentalism, the doctrine of jihad has been invoked to justify resistance, including terrorist actions, to combat "un-Islamic" regimes, or perceived external enemies of Islam, such as Israel and the United States.³

In U.S. classrooms, *jihad* is defanged or oversimplified. World history textbook editors formulate definitions uncritically, using guides issued by Islamic advocacy groups as their road maps. According to a Council on Islamic Education subject guide intended for publishers, *jihad* means "'struggle' or 'exertion' and refers to any spiritual, moral or physical struggle," and "struggle in the cause of God, which can take many forms. In the personal sphere, efforts such as obtaining an education, trying to quit smoking, or controlling one's temper are forms of *jihad*." The term *holy war*, the Council says, is a misrepresentation. *Jihad* is transformed into an esoteric form of Muslim self-improvement.⁴

A widely adopted seventh-grade Houghton Mifflin world history, *Across the Centuries*,⁵ says that *jihad* is

merely a struggle "to do one's best to resist temptation and overcome evil." This interpretation has on its face an element of accuracy; anyone or anything not under Muslim rule and control may be characterized as evil. But this textbook is not in any way exceptional. One high-profile high school textbook, Houghton Mifflin's *Patterns of Interaction*,⁶ a world history textbook for high school students adopted in Texas in November 2002, does not even mention *jihad*, a lapse as noteworthy as

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any imaginable on the entire subject of Islam.

Prentice Hall's *Connections to Today*,⁷ which names the Council on Islamic Education as an editorial reviewer, is the nation's most widely used world history textbook, also adopted by Texas in 2002. The textbook says: "Some Muslims took on *jihad*, or effort in God's service as another duty. *Jihad* has often been mistakenly translated simply as 'holy war.* In fact, it may include acts of charity or an inner struggle to achieve spiritual peace, as well as any battle in defense of Islam" (254). Its glossary says: "*Jihad*: in Islam, an effort in God's service" (1017). It is inconceivable that a textbook writer would formulate this definition without external prompting from an Islamic source, given the peculiar and vague choice of words and language.

Not all textbook content is this misinformative. Yet other explanations remain opaque and puzzling. Holt, Rinehart and Winston's *Continuity and Change*,⁸ a third high school textbook, contains two definitions in one: "One important requirement [of faith] was *jihad*. Europeans, threatened by Muslim armies, later translated this term as 'holy war,* but a more accurate translation would be 'struggle for the faith.* In the early years of

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Muslim expansion, however, *jihad* did mean primarily fighting and dying for the faith. Muslims believed that a warrior who died in battle for the faith would immediately be admitted to paradise. The term also means the constant inner struggle people experience in their effort to obey God*s will or any effort in the cause of faith” (256).

Glencoe*s *The Human Experience*⁹ comes closer to the reality of *jihad* and its ambitions. “The Arab armies were successful for several reasons. First, they were united in the belief that they had a religious duty to spread Islam. The Islamic state, therefore, saw the conquests as a *jihad*, or holy struggle to bring Islam to other lands” (278). The glossary says: “*Jihad*: Muslim struggle to introduce Islam to other lands” (1035). Since this textbook also lists the Council on Islamic Education as an editorial reviewer, it may be concluded that some social studies editors take the Council on Islamic Education*s instructions more seriously than others.

Islamic organizations indignantly insist that Islam is a religion of peace. Historical evidence often points to a different conclusion. Much is made of the Koranic injunction against attacks on innocent, unarmed people. Less is made the fact that “enemies” and infidels do not fall under the protective umbrella. The annihilation of Israel and the U.S. may be the just vision and dream. For Muslims who are devoted to victory over the satanic West, this definition of *jihad* fits quite well.

Textbooks that are used in U.S. classrooms should explain the historically potent strain of Islam that promotes separatism and theocracy. Instead, they are trying to trim history to please Islamic pressure groups and allied ideologues. The implications for U. S. civic education are immense, especially if students are unaware of or even accept the idea that for politically esthetic reasons they are being lied to or emotionally manipulated. To become discerning and self-preserving

citizens, U.S. students must learn how consensual government, individual freedoms and rights, and religious toleration based on separation of church and state are their unusual birthrights. •

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NOTES

1. <http://www.historytextbooks.org/Islamreport.pdf>, prepared by the American Textbook Council, 475 Riverside Drive, Room 448, New York, NY, 10115, (212) 870-2760.
2. Lewis, Bernard, *The Middle East*, Touchstone, 1997.
3. Hudson, Rex A., et al., *The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism: Who Becomes a Terrorist and Why?*, Library of Congress, September 1999, www.loc.gov/rr/frd.
4. Council on Islamic Education, *Teaching About Islam and Muslims in the Public School Classroom*, 1998, 49. This compendium of useful information, arcana, and elision confines the subjects examined here to a few paragraphs, ignoring slavery.
5. Nash, Gary B., Beverly J. Armento, J. Jorge Klor de Alva, Christopher L. Salter, Louis E. Wilson, and Karen K. Wixson. *Across the Centuries*. Houghton Mifflin, 1994.
6. Beck, Roger B., Linda Black, Larry S. Krieger, Phillip C. Naylor, and Dahia Ibo Shabaka. *Patterns of Interaction*. McDougal Littell, 1999. (Texas Edition, 2003)
7. Ellis, Elisabeth Gaynor and Anthony Esler. *Connections to Today*. Prentice Hall, 2001. (Texas Edition, 2003). This textbook also implies that Arab treatment of conquered people was so enlightened as to constitute good fortune for the conquered (257). It covers the Crusades more evenly in a chapter on the European Middle Ages and Reconquest but fails to explain the source of the conflicts (215-219).
8. Hanes, William Travis, III. *Continuity and Change*. Holy, Rinehart and Winston, 1999.
9. Farah, Mounir A. and Andrea Berens Karls. *The Human Experience*. Glencoe, 1999.