150 years later, battle lingers over how textbooks explain Civil War

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Students in Texas will begin using new social studies textbooks this fall that barely speak about racism.

The state's guidelines for teaching American history do not mention the Ku Klux Klan, the white supremacist group that burned churches in the South. They ignore the Jim Crow laws that prevented black children from going to school with whites.

And when it comes to the Civil War, they say slavery is not the main reason the war began.

Slavery was a "side issue to the Civil War," said Pat Hardy, who was on the state education board when it passed the standards in 2010. "There would be those who would say the reason for the Civil War was over slavery. No. It was over states' rights."
Church Killings Raise New Questions

Last month, the killings of nine black people in a South Carolina church sparked a discussion of the Confederate battle flag. To some, the flag is a symbol of Southern history, while to others it is a sign of slavery and racism.

There has also been a call to reexamine another controversial aspect of the Civil War. The question centers on how the war, so important to our nation’s understanding of itself, is presented in public school classrooms and textbooks.

"It’s the obvious question, it seems to me. Not only are we worried about the flags and statues and all that, but what the hell are kids learning?” said Dan Quinn of the Texas Freedom Network. The organization has been critical of the state’s academic standards in social studies.

No other state has rejected slavery’s central role more obviously than Texas. In 2010, the State Board of Education changed the social studies standards because it said they were too liberal on issues, such as slavery and race.

Views Of Texas Officials Criticized

Rod Paige, a Republican who served as federal education secretary, was among those who criticized the Texas board.

"I'm of the view that the history of slavery and civil rights are dominant elements of our history and have shaped who we are today," Paige said. "We may not like our history, but it's history."

Historians acknowledge that disagreements over states' rights played a role in the Civil War. But the states’ rights and slavery were basically the same thing, they say. The right that states in the South were seeking to protect, after all, was the right to buy and sell people.

Southern states made that clear in their declarations of independence from the country, said James Grossman. He is the executive director of the American Historical Association. Historians agree that slavery caused the Civil War, he said.

"The War happened only because of the determination of the leadership of 11 states to defend the right of their residents to own other human beings," Grossman wrote in an e-mail. "The Civil War was fought over the issue of slavery."

Social Studies Affected By Politics

Social studies standards are more political in Texas than in any other state, said historian Jeremy A. Stern. He gave the Texas standards a grade of D. He wrote that the education board was molding "the past to justify its current views."
Stern said that South Carolina deserves an A. The state honestly addresses slavery’s role in the conflict while also acknowledging states' rights as an important issue at the time, Stern said. South Carolina is where the Civil War began and where the churchgoers were killed in June.

Nearly half of Americans — 48 percent — believe that states' rights was the main cause of the war. In comparison, 38 percent said the main cause was slavery, according to a 2011 survey by the Pew Research Center.

History Of Slavery Seen As Important

Raul Cevallos, a Texan who started a group to raise awareness, found that many young people are ignorant about history.

Some students did not know who won the Civil War, but they were able to name Brad Pitt's wife, Angelina Jolie.

People who don't know about the Civil War and slavery will not understand why America is the way it is, Cevallos said.

Stephen Wright is an eighth-grade teacher in Nacogdoches, a small East Texas town. He said some Texas students leave their classrooms believing that slavery was not the primary cause of the Civil War. But not his students.

Wright said he has his students read what Southern leaders themselves said to learn what the war was about.

"Man, it's all about slavery," he said. "The students know that."
Quiz

1. Which of the following statements contain a central idea of the article?

1. The use of new textbooks in Texas that minimize the unfair treatment of blacks in the South have prompted a debate about the state's controversial social studies standards.
2. Historical scholars have determined that the Civil War was unquestionably caused by the South's desire to continue slavery.
3. Almost half of all Americans believe that states' rights were the main cause of the Civil War, while fewer people said the main cause was slavery.
4. Educators and politicians are concerned with how history is taught in public schools because it shapes the way students come to understand not just the country's past, but also its present.

(A) 1 and 3  
(B) 1 and 4  
(C) 2 and 3  
(D) 2 and 4

2. Which of the following details from the section "Church Killings Raise New Questions" BEST supports the central idea of the article?

(A) Last month, the killings of nine black people in a South Carolina church sparked a discussion of the Confederate battle flag.

(B) There has also been a call to reexamine another controversial aspect of the Civil War.

(C) "It's the obvious question, it seems to me. Not only are we worried about the flags and statues and all that, but what the hell are kids learning?" said Dan Quinn of the Texas Freedom Network.

(D) In 2010, the State Board of Education changed the social studies standards because it said they were too liberal on issues, such as slavery and race.
Social studies standards are more political in Texas than in any other state, said historian Jeremy A. Stern. He gave the Texas standards a grade of D. He wrote that the education board was molding "the past to justify its current views."

Which of the following BEST describes Stern's point of view as reflected in the selection above?

(A) supportive of Rod Paige's argument that history, good and bad, shapes who we are as a country today

(B) sympathetic to Dan Quinn's concerns that the standards are shaping the history taught in schools by ignoring certain perspectives

(C) critical of Stephen Wright because his example suggests teachers are free to determine what is taught in their classroom

(D) in agreement with the State Board of Education's concern that prior to their revision, the social studies standards taught students a liberal view of history

4 Read the first three paragraphs of the section "History Of Slavery Seen As Important."

What is the purpose of including Cevallos' perspective in the article?

(A) to highlight the impact the standards have on what students learn

(B) to support the Texas State Board of Education's argument that the social studies standards needed to be revised

(C) to illustrate that an additional layer to the problem is students' lack of historical knowledge

(D) to provide background information on the general academic knowledge of students in Texas