Imagine that the items below are part of a true/false test. How would you respond to the following statements about American history?

T F “In daring to sail westward in 1492, hoping to reach the Indies, Christopher Columbus was challenging the prevailing belief of his day that the Earth was flat.”


T F “In Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Uncle Tom, the main character, was depicted as a meek, submissive, obsequious old slave.”

T F “After World War I, Henry Cabot Lodge led the fight in the U.S. Senate against Woodrow Wilson’s League of Nations primarily because he was an ‘isolationist’ who strongly opposed U.S. involvement in foreign wars.”

T F “Harry Truman was in obscurity when President Roosevelt picked him as his running mate in 1944.”

Although each of the above statements is false, many students come to history classes believing them to be true, and these concepts frequently show up as “facts” in textbooks. Such misinformation is only the tip of the iceberg. More serious issues involve the neglect of entire aspects of history, such as the story of the Spanish colonization of the American Southwest, or the distortion of past history to favor a group or nation, as when teachers fail to discuss the effects of American support for anti-Communist dictators such as the Shah of Iran. Indeed, to the extent that we as teachers allow students to be unquestioningly dependent upon textbooks, we may unwittingly perpetuate a version of history that has little relationship to reality.

**Criticisms of Textbooks**

Over the past several decades, individuals and groups representing a variety of organizations and perspectives have examined the textbooks used in high school history classes. Overwhelmingly, they have reached negative conclusions. Evaluating both American and British textbooks during the mid-1960s, a group of prominent historians led by Ray Allen Billington, distinguished scholar of the
American West, concluded: “The repetition of half-truths, and the consistent monopolization of credit for the author’s country, creates in the reader an impression of one invincible nation, forever right, forever triumphant, and forever superior to its neighbors.”

During the 1970s, an organization concerned with portrayal of ethnic groups concluded that “the perspective dominating textbooks has always been white, upper-class and male” and when including information about minorities, the books seldom present the “perspective of the people described.” Shortly thereafter, Frances FitzGerald, whose earlier work on the Vietnam War had won several prizes, observed in a widely read book that “the market sets limits to the publishers’ truth-giving powers.” Consequently, “What a textbook reflects is thus a compromise, an America sculpted and sanded down by the pressures of diverse constituents and interest groups.”

The emergence of the Religious Right in the 1980s created a new set of challenges for textbook publishers. Paul C. Vitz, professor of psychology at New York University, argued that a “liberal and secular mindset” had excluded “religion, traditional family values, and conservative political and economic positions . . . from children’s textbooks.” To cite specifics, he said that none of the books he examined “recognizes the continuity of the revival and evangelical movements throughout American history since the Colonial Period” and gave little serious attention to either Catholics or Jews. About the same time, Paul Gagnon, an education professor at the University of Massachusetts, researched history texts for the American Federation of Teachers. He observed that the texts were “at one and the same time over-detailed and under-detailed: the first because they try to mention something about everything: the second because they fail to develop major themes in depth.” Furthermore, “they are weak on economic and intellectual history, on our place in the larger world, and on the importance of individual actions and character.”

More recently, a representative of the “critical theory” approach to education has concluded that “the school history lessons of the past represent what those in power and their educational allies wish to have passed on to youth—all in the name of historical objectivity, critical thinking and civic literacy.”

One would think that after all of this criticism, the writers and publishers of textbooks would have fixed things, but in 1995, James Loewen, professor of history at the University of Vermont, observed, “Frances FitzGerald’s 1979 study, America Revised, was a bestseller, but it made no impact on the industry.” Much of the problem arises from the textbook production process. FitzGerald had observed: “Today, texts are written backward or inside out, as it were, beginning with public demand and ending with the historian.” More than 15 years later, Loewen found the same problems: “History textbooks stand in a very different relationship to the discipline of history than most textbooks do to their respective fields. ‘Society’ determines what goes into history textbooks.” As a result, textbooks distort history in several ways.

Although he was speaking about British and American textbooks, Billington’s categorizations remain useful: (1) “Bias by Inertia” presents outdated information and interpretations; (2) “Unconscious Falsification” emphasizes what is good about one’s country; (3) “Bias by Omission” tends to overlook unfavorable facts and interpretations; (4) “Bias in the Use of Language” uses words that favor one side over another; and (5) “Bias Through Cumulative Implication” suggests that one’s nation won all the wars and invented all the new technologies.” As Loewen points out, the problems with American history textbooks often begin with their grandiose titles: The Great Republic, The American Way, Land of Promise, Rise of the American Nation.

These problems are not limited to American portrayals of
The Necessity for Truth-Telling

The problem of truthful history should concern historians and Christians for at least two reasons. First, as Christians, we have a moral responsibility to speak the truth as best we can. Because those who came before us were also fellow creatures made in the image of God, they deserve to be represented as accurately as possible. Jesus’ words are instructive: “For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Matthew 7:2, NIV). Applying His words to history, we might say, “For in the same way you remember others, you will be remembered.” Christ’s statement, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39), offers guidance if we realize that our “neighbor” includes our predecessors as well as our contemporaries.

Second, since history makes a significant contribution to the civic education of young people, it is important that students gain an accurate understanding of the past. If their future decisions as citizens are based on myths, half-truths, and lies learned in history classes, those decisions are likely to be ill-formed and perhaps even dangerous. “Students need an honest, vigorous education,” Gagnon argues, “that allows them to penetrate Orwellian rhetoric and accurately compare the claims and realities of our own society and those of others.” Loewen makes a similar point: “For history is central to our ongoing understanding of ourselves and our society. We need to produce Americans of all social-class and racial backgrounds of both genders who command the power of history—the ability to use one’s understanding of the past to inspire and legitimize one’s actions in the present. Then the past will seriously inform Americans as individuals and as a nation, instead of serving as a source of weary clichés. Products of successful American history courses know basic social facts about the United States and understand the historical processes that have shaped these facts. They can locate themselves in the social structure, and they know some of the societal and ideological forces that have influenced their lives. Such Americans are ready to become citizens because they understand how to effect change in our society. They know how to check out historical assertions and are suspicious of archetypal ‘truths.’ They can rebut the charge that history is irrelevant, because they realize ways that the past influences the present, including their own present.”

Although both of these authors are writing specifically about American history, their arguments are no less applicable to the histories of other countries, world history, and church history. As Loewen’s statement implies, telling the truth about history requires not only factual accuracy but also attention to the experiences and perspectives of diverse peoples. No longer can we focus only on the social and political elite; a balanced history must include, among other things, the working classes, ethnic minorities, and women. The Christian teacher should add to this triumvirate (often called “class, race, and gender”) the frequently neglected subjects of religion and religious stereotyping of certain groups, such as Native Americans, is common in history textbooks.
requires effort. As Christians who are committed to teaching
effectively critique varying interpretations.18
people often disagree in their accounts of the past and how to
past. Our students need to understand why knowledgeable
rian’s or teacher’s values and beliefs in reconstructing the
thinking. Finally, honest history looks at the role of the histo-
stead of the “events” that tend to dominate most historical
systems) that help students understand ongoing processes in-
slowly changing structures (i.e., social, economic, and political
minorities. Truthful history further requires attention to
our students well, we must not be like those Indiana teachers
of whom a survey “revealed that fewer than one in five stay
current by reading books or articles in American history.”
We need to demonstrate to our classes that history is not a
cut-and-dried collection of facts, but a multi-faceted story
whose meaning is much contested and therefore open to con-
tinued discovery and critical scrutiny. Although the challenge
is great, the history teacher today has available a great many
resources that make it possible to move beyond textbooks
and conventional wisdom toward a broader and more accu-
rate understanding of the past. The work required to incorpo-

### General Resources for Truth-Telling

How do teachers arrive at the “truths” of history? How are
they to know whether the history presented in the text-
book, or even in their college classes, is accurate? History
courses cover such broad areas that it is impossible for the
teacher to keep up with the thousands of articles and books that appear
every year. But don’t despair, for there
are an increasing number of resources that will help you access the findings
of modern scholarship and apply them to your teaching.

A first step in the pursuit of truth-
ful teaching is simply to become more aware of the problem areas. Reading
one or more of the textbook studies
referred to above, even though most
of them are now rather old, can sug-
gest questions to ask about current
textbooks. Books such as Loewen’s
Lies My Teacher Told Me and Paul F.
Boller’s Not So! go beyond criticism by
providing substantive historical information that corrects common histori-
eral errors and improves our under-
standing of often-neglected topics. Critical evaluations of textbooks and
other materials, including videos and
CD-ROMs, appear in The History
Teacher, Teaching History, and the
World History Bulletin.21

Unfortunately, there are few re-
ources for teaching the history of
Christianity or Seventh-day Advent-
ism. One exception is Vincent Carroll
and David Shiflett’s Christianity on
Trial.21

Despite the lack of materials, how-
ever, we must commit ourselves to
truth-telling, for church history courses
should be as rigorous and honest as
other classes. Multiple perspectives,
geographical balance, and factual ac-
curacy are just as necessary for under-
standing the history of the church as
for addressing secular history. And
while they may be more difficult to ac-
access, primary sources are the best
means by which teachers can achieve
these objectives.

### OAH Magazine of History

Two American history resources
provide in-depth information and
practical teaching aids. First, the Or-
ganization of American Historians
publishes the quarterly Magazine of
History.22 Each issue of this journal fo-
cuses on a particular topic in Ameri-
can history, such as “The Great De-
pression,” “Science and Technology,”
or “Environmental History.” The
Spring 2002 issue on the “World War
II Homefront” is a good example of
the content of this publication. First,
after a general article surveying recent
research on the homefront, three arti-
cles briefly examine the experience of
women, African-Americans, and
Japanese-Americans. These easily
read essays offer a way for the busy
teacher to “catch up” with recent scholarship about previously ne-
eglected groups.

The heart of the magazine then
offers five lesson plans, including pri-
mary source material, on topics rang-
ing from “Rosie the Riveter Remem-
biers” to “Propaganda Posters” that
enable the teacher to readily translate
the scholarship into usable classroom
activities. These lesson plans are fol-
lowed by articles on ERIC/ChESS and
Internet resources on the World War
II Homefront. After articles suggest-
ing ways to introduce World War II
oral history into the classroom and use
the Internet to enhance student learn-
ing in history classes, the journal
closes with reviews of two books on
the teaching of history and social stud-
ies and a listing of seminars, confer-
ences, and new Web resources. Ac-
companying a review of James
Percoco’s Divided We Stand are materi-
als for teaching about gender, race,
and Anglo-American relations in a
manner that recognizes their complex-
ity.23

### National Center for History in the
Schools

A second major resource is the Na-
tional Center for History in the
Schools, which produces a variety of
materials for history teachers. In the
mid-1990s, the center stirred a storm
of controversy with its publication of
national standards for both United
States and world history.24 Responding
to the controversy, which largely re-
volved around the alleged lack of em-
phasis on “traditional” American her-
hoes such as George Washington in
favor of women and minorities, the
Center published a revised set of stan-
dards for both American and world
history.25 Teachers will find the stan-
dards an invaluable tool as they seek
themes to (1) help them organize and
select from the mass of information
that appears in textbooks and (2) give
attention to multiple perspectives and
minority experiences. In its section on
“The Emergence of Modern America
(1890-1930),” for example, under
rate these materials and ideas into our teaching will bring its own rewards—including more knowledgeable and, quite possibly, more interested students and a feeling of confidence that we are doing the best possible job of communicating the past to a new generation.

Dr. Gary Land is Chair of the Department of History and Political Science at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, and author of Teaching History: A Seventh-day Adventist Approach (Andrews University Press, 2000).

NOTES AND REFERENCES
1. Paul F. Boller, Jr., Not So! Popular Myths About America From Columbus to Clinton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 3, 35, 66, 86, 144. Boller analyzes the sources of these and other beliefs as well as the evidence that reveals their mythic character.
Political cartoons and other original documents help students understand differing points of view.

10. Loewen, Lies, p. 28, Both FitzGerald, America Revised, pages 20-47, and Loewen, Lies, pages 265-279, extensively explain the writing, editing, and adoption process of American history textbooks.
12. Loewen, Lies, p. 3.
14. “Pundits, Mullahs Will Decide What Is History,” Asian Age (December 4, 2001), p. 1. I wish to thank Beverly Rumble for bringing this article to my attention.
16. Ibid., p. 164.


How do teachers arrive at the “truths” of history? How are they to know whether the history presented in the textbook, or even in their college classes, is accurate?

First-person accounts written by minorities, women, and others whose stories rarely appear in textbooks can make history come alive for students.

It is a little-known fact that seven blacks served in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives between 1869 and 1873.