

Story of the American Nation ¹

By Winthrop D. Jordan ²

While the treatment of Negroes in this eighth grade American history textbook may be faulted at almost every turn, virtually all the myriad failings derive from four interrelated presuppositions.

The most pervasive and insidious (because least conscious) assumption is that Negroes are not American; they do not share in the *Story of the American Nation* because, evidently, they are not part of the "American people." This assumption colors every mention and non-mention of Negroes in the book. It is responsible for the failure to describe the African cultural background (though the civilizations of China and Japan are fulsomely portrayed, pages 508-9) and for the absence of any discussion of Negro acculturation. (There were "Jewish people" and Roman Catholics, but "most people of the English colonies were Protestants," page 87.) It is responsible for the implicit exclusion of Negroes from the "people of many countries"—the French, Scotch, Irish, Scotch-Irish and Germans are mentioned—who "move[d] to America's communities, seeking freedom and land" and who, "living together, beg[a]n to create American ways of life" partly through "marriage between people of different nationalities" (pages 92-4). Thus, "the melting pot" is endorsed while the most important element in the process is ignored and, thereby, implicitly disapproved. Similarly, during Reconstruction "the people of the South found themselves opposing the governments of their own states" (page 426); this assertion is the more striking because the authors are usually careful to qualify, as in the unexceptionable assertion on the same page that Southern Republican Congressmen "did not truly represent the majority of the Southern people." One of the most unfortunate reflections of this exclusion of Negroes from the body national is the necessary and drastic depersonalization of Negroes. In the colonial period, while they are described as raising crops, working "as butlers, cooks, and gardeners" and "in shops," they are first introduced as one of "two different kinds of workers [who] were found [in order] to solve the labor shortage" (pages 72-3). After Eli Whitney invents the cotton gin, "slaves" are "owned" and "slave labor" is "depended upon" and "needed," but the slaves don't do anything (page 343). There is

¹ Mabel B. Casner, Ralph H. Gabriel, Edward L. Biller, and William H. Hartley, *Story of the American Nation*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962. This is a basic textbook for grade eight.

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