

Throckmorton challenges Barton's 'revisionist history'

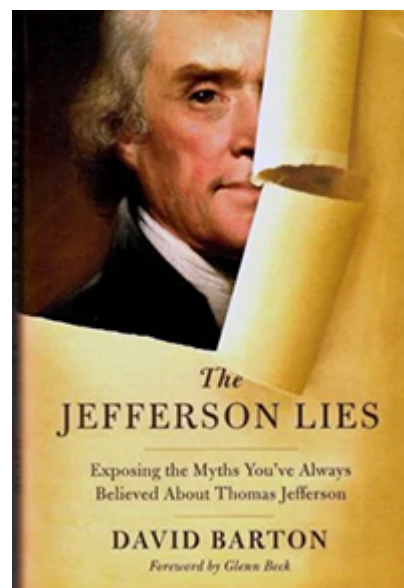
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WASHINGTON (RNS)—In the early 2000s, psychology professor Warren Throckmorton spent much of his spare time blogging about his academic work—especially his move in 2005 from supporting so-called reparative therapy and the ex-gay movement to believing attempts to change people's sexuality were wrong.

Then David Barton changed his life.

Beginning in 2011, Throckmorton began critiquing Barton's work—especially the popular writer, speaker and political operative's attempts to turn Founding Fathers like Thomas Jefferson into modern-day evangelicals.

Throckmorton—who taught for years at Grove City College—would become one of Barton's most influential conservative critics and played a key role in the downfall of *The Jefferson Lies*, Barton's bestselling reimagining of Thomas Jefferson as a man on fire for Jesus.



The book was filled with so many mistakes—many of them detailed in *Getting Jefferson Right*, a booklong critique by Throckmorton and fellow

Grove City College professor Michael Coulter published in 2012—that Barton’s publisher, Thomas Nelson, retracted the book, despite its appearance on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

Casey Francis Harrell, a spokesman for Thomas Nelson, told the *Tennessean* and other media outlets in 2012 conservative historians and critics had pointed out errors in the book.

“Because of these deficiencies, we decided that it was in the best interest of our readers to cease its publication and distribution,” Harrell said.

Had Barton—the founder of Wallbuilders, an Aledo-based nonprofit that promotes “education regarding the Christian history of our nation”—been an academic or trained historian, his career likely would have been over, said Throckmorton.

David Barton’s influence endures

But Barton, a longtime GOP activist, is more political operative than historian, argues Throckmorton, and is more concerned with telling stories about America’s past than in recounting the truth.

“Political operatives take a licking and keep on ticking,” said Throckmorton, who recently retired from Grove City, where he taught psychology for decades.

Despite the controversy of *The Jefferson Lies*, Barton’s influence has endured, finding an eager audience with the rise of Christian nationalism in the age of Trump.

Most recently, Barton has made national headlines because of his ties to Speaker of the House Mike Johnson, who shares many of his views about America as a Christian nation.

The rise of Christian nationalism—the idea that America belongs to Christians and Christians have a God-given right to rule—prompted Throckmorton and his co-author to go ahead with an updated version of *Getting Jefferson Right*.

The book takes on Barton, as well as other conservative authors like Eric Metaxas and Stephen Wolfe—all of whom promote what Throckmorton calls “Christian nationalists’ revisionist history.”

“It’s the attempt to create a usable past—a past that fits your ideology in the present,” Throckmorton said.

In the second edition of their book, published last month, Throckmorton and his co-author assert Christian nationalists want to reinterpret Jefferson to suit their own goals.

The book is needed, he said, because of Barton’s ongoing influence, built on what Throckmorton called bad facts and a faulty narrative.

Barton did not respond to a request for comment.

‘Getting the Founders on your side’

Robert Tracy McKenzie, professor of history at Wheaton College and author of *We the Fallen People: The Founders and the Future of American Democracy*, said Barton has used the criticism against him to his advantage.

McKenzie said Barton is telling two stories at once—one about America’s past, the other about America in the present. In that second story, Barton accuses academics of distorting the religious nature of America’s past and paints himself as a hero for rediscovering it.

“For at least some evangelicals, then, the more the academy challenges

Barton, the more they rally around him,” McKenzie said. “It strengthens rather than weakens his brand.”

Messiah College historian John Fea, who endorsed the new edition of *Getting Jefferson Right*, said Throckmorton has done important work in pointing out Barton’s factual errors. He also said along with getting facts wrong, Barton lacks a historian’s perspective when interpreting America’s founding—acting as if nothing has changed between 1776 and 2023.

“He has no ability to think about the relationship between the past and the present in responsible ways,” Fea said.

Fea also said Barton is a marketing genius—using the criticism against him to build his brand and using his connections to corner the home-schooling market, where his ideas are often embraced by parents.

The fight over Jefferson also reflects the larger culture war that has raged in the United States for decades—a war in which retelling America’s founding plays a key role.

“The entire culture war in the United States is based upon getting the Founders on your side, and Barton is able to do that,” he said.

Along with the new book, Throckmorton is working on a podcast recounting the downfall of *The Jefferson Lies*. Both projects were driven in part by his concerns about the rise of Christian nationalism.

Throckmorton—whose blog also played a key role in the fall of Mark Driscoll and Mars Hill Church by publicizing Driscoll’s plagiarism and the church’s toxic culture—first began investigating Christian nationalism long before the rise of MAGA.

He’d been blogging for years when he began to read about a proposed 2009 law in Uganda that would have outlawed homosexuality and jailed

LGBTQ people. The law was backed by Christian groups in Uganda, many of whom had ties to American evangelicals.

Throckmorton began to work with other American bloggers and journalists to oppose the law and investigate the Christians working in Uganda, whom he described as Christian nationalists.

If Christian nationalist ideas—like imposing biblical laws on secular society—were growing in places like Uganda, he wondered where else they might be taking root. That led him to investigate groups in the United States with Christian nationalist leanings.

“All roads led to David Barton,” he said.

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