

# Opinion: The Texas textbook war in historical context

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(ABP) — The latest skirmish in white Southern religion's war against history recently reached its climax in Texas. As has often been the case since the antebellum era, cultural religion won and American history lost.

Christian fundamentalists on the Texas State Board of Education [succeeded](#) in dismantling some key aspects of history as taught in the state's public schools, while rewriting others. Dismissed from the historical record is Baptists' greatest contribution to America — church-state separation. Gone is America's heritage as a secular nation, replaced with a requirement to teach that America's founding fathers were Christians. In turn, the standards elevate Christianity over other faiths.

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Board member Cynthia Dunbar, a graduate of Pat Robertson's Regent University Law School and author of [a book declaring](#) that America's founders created a theocratic government, opened the final board session with [a prayer](#) for "a Christian land governed by Christian principles." She explained the ideology driving curriculum changes: "[N]o one can read the history of our country without realizing that the Good Book and the spirit of the Savior have from the beginning been our guiding geniuses. Whether we look to the first charter of Virginia, or the charter of New England ... the same objective is present — a Christian land governed by Christian principles." No matter that those early colonial theocracies harshly persecuted dissenters.

The board also rewrote modern political history. Elevated is Joseph McCarthy, the disgraced anti-communist Republican senator of the 1950s.

Dismissed is the late Democratic Sen. Edward Kennedy, allowing more room to sing the praises of Ronald Reagan and Newt Gingrich. Collectively, Republicans and conservatives are portrayed as good Americans, while Democrats, liberals, and minorities are viewed in a negative, often unpatriotic, light. And students in Texas are instructed to refer to the U.S. government as a “constitutional republic,” rather than a “democratic” society.

Not surprisingly, many Baptists, thousands of historians, and untold minorities throughout America protested the curriculum changes. Citing a dislike of “liberalism,” Christian fundamentalists on the board disregarded their critics.

Observers of these developments might wonder: Why are Texas Christian fundamentalists messing with history?

Generations ago, post-Civil War white Southerners, empowered by cultural religion, re-crafted history and transformed what was essentially a conflict over slavery into a noble and just war for states’ rights. In turn, today’s dust-up is a testimony to the grip that Christian theocrats have upon contemporary Texas political life.

A recent election took place to determine who would represent Republicans in the race for a seat on the state's Supreme Court. One of the candidates was Rick Green, [a “constitutional speaker”](#) and advocate of David Barton’s [Wallbuilders](#), a revisionist historical organization that insists America’s founders wanted to create a theocracy, not a democracy.

Who is David Barton? Immensely popular in conservative Christian circles nationwide, Barton is a self-appointed historian whose education consists of a B.A. in religious education from Oral Roberts University. Pitching fabricated history to conservative Christians and politicians who want to believe America was founded as a Christian nation, he evolved into a

political star. A former vice chairman of the Texas Republican Party, Barton was appointed by the state as an “expert” to review the state’s school curriculum.

That a theocratic fake historian is considered a historical expert by the state of Texas goes a long way to explaining why fundamentalists control the State Board of Education.

Indeed, Texas is ground zero for Christian Reconstructionism, a political movement devoted to establishing a theocracy in America. Influential within state Republican circles, theocratic organizations in Texas (in addition to Wallbuilders) include the Institute for Christian Economics in Tyler; Southern Baptist Rick Scarborough’s [Vision America](#) in Lufkin; and Dominion Press in Fort Worth.

In the larger context, the Texas textbook saga represents a war over the shaping of national ideology. Leading the charge are theocrats — Christian nationalists who deny Baptists’ heritage of full religious liberty for all and separation of church and state. Rallying the troops is David Barton, a fraud idolized in conservative Christian circles.

While traditional Baptists lament the board’s dismissal of church-state separation, the board’s [rejection](#) of a “democratic” society in favor of a “constitutional republic” may be the most telling indication of Texas theocrats’ roadmap for rewriting history and dictating the future of America. Democracy is an obstacle on the road to theocracy, and thus must be manipulated, marginalized or trivialized to the point of irrelevance.

Finally, lest one dismiss the seriousness of the Texas textbook war, “Lost Cause” mythology and Jim Crow laws of an earlier era provide reminders of how white, Southern conservative Christians successfully forged the future with reconstructed history. The South eventually overcame the clutches of white supremacy, yet the legacy of racism remains. Likewise, pluralistic,

democratic America of the 21st century will ultimately restrain crusading fundamentalist Christians — but the taint of extremism will haunt Texas and America for many years to come.

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