How Progressive Were the Progressives?
A New Look at the *Building America* Classroom Magazines.

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Introduction

In 1934, Paul Hanna, a professor at Teachers College, Columbia, proposed that the Society for Curriculum Study (SCS) publish a monthly magazine designed to help teachers lead classroom discussions of “social problems” and possible solutions. The Society claimed the series was a response to the "persistent and widespread demand by educators for a new type of classroom material that will give students a working knowledge of social and economic forces and institutions" (Society for Curriculum Study 1935a, 1). Christened *Building America*, the series lasted nearly ten years, first published by SCS, then by the National Education Association’s Department of Supervision and Curriculum Development. The series was widely popular and was used in military training and in the educational rehabilitation of Axis nations after World War II. The series eventually ran afoul of Red Scare mongers and curricular conservatives in the late 1940’s. Opponents raised objections both about the magazines’ content and the “social problems” pedagogical approach they encouraged. Before its demise, however, the series tackled subjects from housing, healthcare, and labor to gender, technology, and foreign relations. This study will contextualize *Building America* within the history of progressive educational and political thought and will compare the pedagogical methods of *Building America* to contemporary approaches in the social studies. It will investigate the magazine’s representation of Native Americans as an example of how it dealt with issues that are still the subject of discussion in schools and society.

Building America as a Product of Progressivism

Progressives advocate improvement or reform, as opposed to maintaining the status quo. Progressivism in education took many forms in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but few acted with the passion and urgency of the social reconstructionists during the economic and social crises of the Great Depression. Progressive ideas and practices in education had been in the ascendancy for decades, spawning curriculum elements focused on enlisting student interest in learning, project-based learning, and experiential teaching methods. Educators began to pay greater attention to children’s psychological and emotional development. The dislocations wrought by the Great Depression accelerated the adoption of progressive education in the schools as the public cast about for new solutions to economic and social devastation. The Depression also shifted the focus of progressive reforms in the schools away from the individual child to the child’s place in society. Social reconstructionist educator

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Henry Harap recalled that at that time, "Many people thought that we were on the brink of an economic disaster...It was a time of a terrific awakening of the schools to their educational responsibilities" (Harap 1970, 157).

This "awakening" took many educational forms. The Progressive Education Association (P.E.A.) suffered a split as social reconstructionists leveled heavy critiques at the organization. They accused the P.E.A. of passively clinging to its original focus on the child rather than more aggressively addressing the social and economic conditions in which the child grew and learned. No criticism was more strident than George Counts' "Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order?" delivered at the 1932 P.E.A. Convention. John Dewey was not as critical as some, but clearly lined up with the social reconstructionists in his 1934 article "Can Education Share in Social Reconstruction?" In that piece he asserted that schools alone could not change society, but that they could provide the "intellectual and moral" basis for citizens to do so (in Boydson 1986, 207).

Other organizations joined the conversation, as well. The American Historical Association had been reviewing the social studies curriculum for some time, and its Commission on the Social Studies published *A Charter for the Social Sciences in the Schools* in 1932 and *Conclusions and Recommendations of the Commission* in 1934. Both documents argued that the purpose of social studies in the schools was to describe "the conditioning elements, realities, forces and ideas of the modern world in which life must be lived" and in which citizenship must be exercised (American Historical Association 1932, 98). At its 1932 Annual Meeting, the National Education Association's (NEA) Department of Superintendence organized a committee to recommend "such adjustments in the social studies curricula in our junior and senior high schools as our present social and economic situation has made necessary and vital" (Kelley 1932, 208). The NEA's Department of Social Studies also focused on the need for "free and thoughtful discussion in the schools of the complex social and economic issues" (Newman 1960, 28).

Individuals and institutions responded to these calls in various ways. In 1934, William Heard Kilpatrick's "dinner-study" group began publication of *Social Frontier*, a periodical "to help teachers explore their responsibilities in the rapidly changing cultural milieu" (Newman 1960, 17). Meanwhile, Kilpatrick's colleague at Teachers College, Columbia, Herbert Bruner, produced a series of informational pamphlets for high schools on the national crisis, called the "Social Legislation Series" (Society for Curriculum Study 1933, 10). And, of course, Harold Rugg's *Man and His Changing Society* textbook series was in its heyday during these years. The books' depiction of American society, which many saw as overly critical, fit the educational spirit of the times. Not surprisingly, these figures formed a network of educators with common interests and often worked on projects together.

The Launch of *Building America*

Many in the network were also members of the Society for Curriculum Study. By 1934, the Society was one of the most influential forces in the American curriculum field. Its membership included curriculum directors, teachers, university professors, and those working with curriculum in non-school settings. For some years, the Society had been concerned about schools' roles in addressing the economic and social impact of the Great Depression, so its 1934 meeting in Cleveland was an ideal venue for Paul Hanna to propose the

Building America project. He did so in a meeting of the Society's Committee for the Collection and Construction of Curriculum Materials Treating Modern Problems. The committee, chaired by Herbert Bruner of Teachers College, Columbia, was an expression of the Society's "intention of constructing curriculum materials dealing specifically with the social, economic, and political phases of American Reconstruction for use in our schools and colleges" (Society for Curriculum Study 1934a, 39). Hanna displayed an impressive collection he had assembled of extant curriculum materials on the topic and "distributed a very carefully selected 27 page bibliography of current and supplementary materials on social, economic, and political problems" (ibid.). He then read a paper entitled "Building America" which he and James Mendenhall had written and earlier presented to the Society's Executive Committee. The paper decried the lack of effective classroom resources for discussing "social problems," especially because the curriculum materials failed to make good use of graphics to accompany text. They wrote,

> [with few exceptions] none of these materials uses what is known through research and practical experience concerning visual presentation. Photographs, graphs, charts, maps, etc. give a depth of meaning to a study of contemporary problems which can never be attained by the printed word alone (ibid., 40).

Hanna and Mendenhall called on the Society to cooperatively produce a series of "picture texts" on various topics,

> Each issue would attempt to present a comprehensive picture of the present status and future possibilities of American agriculture, industry, commerce, mining, transportation, communication, housing, social and governmental institutions, etc. (in Newman 1960, 38).

The authors conveniently suggested a list of possible topics for the texts, described as 'problems," which resonated with progressive views of the era. These topics included "Our Government in Business," "Conservation of Natural Resources," "Socially Useful Work by Children," "Financial Control," "Depressions (causes and effects)," and "Planning America" (Society for Curriculum Study 1934a, 43). The list also suggested an issue on "American Indians," which will be discussed in detail below.

At the conclusion of the meeting the membership voted to study the proposal, but the following week the Society's Executive Committee went ahead and launched the publication. It placed Paul Hanna in charge of the project and named an editorial board that included Hollis Caswell, Jesse Newlon, Harold Hand, and William S. Gray, all notable leaders in education. The Executive Committee was also careful to assert the ideological neutrality of the publication, affirming that "in controversial social and political areas the Society does not sponsor materials designed to further any particular program of social reconstruction" (Society for Curriculum Study 1934b, 2). But use of the word "particular" belies the firm roots the Society, and *Building America*, had in political progressivism. Those roots would ultimately contribute to the project's demise in the post-WWII era.

Building America's Pedagogy

Building America received a warm reception from the educational community. By its second year of publication, the Society for Curriculum Study was unable to accommodate the number of requests for

subscriptions and had to contract with a publisher better equipped to handle the large volume of printing and distribution. Testimonials from teachers and administrators across the country were used to promote the project. A high school teacher from Philadelphia stated, "Building America seems to me decidedly teachable material...I hope the series goes on and on" (Hanna 1936, 4). A junior high school teacher in Maine wrote, "I find it of great help in teaching Vocational Information" (ibid). A superintendent in Minnesota commented, "This material challenges the imagination" (ibid, 6). One in Arkansas claimed, "This publication is very unique and we think it will serve to 'Build America'" (ibid). An elementary school principal in Michigan wrote, "This looks like a real contribution to teaching. I hope to see it widely used in our system" (ibid). One in New York City predicted,

> Building America promises to be an excellent magazine for all grades from kindergarten up. Covering so many subjects it will assist in complete correlation. It solves the difficulty of securing suitable pictures and of course is highly educational as a visual aid (ibid, 7).

A junior high school principal thought that the series was so "beautiful and suggestive" that it "ought to be on the New York City supply list for Junior High Schools" (ibid). A curriculum director in Virginia thought, "The material is a most valuable tool for teaching. It deals with vital problems in an interesting and understandable way for girls and boys. It seems to be a splendid contribution to education" (ibid).

One reason for the acclaim *Building America* received is that it represented a confluence of many popular trends in pedagogy and curriculum. The magazines reflected the growing sophistication in use of visual materials and their combination with clear, concise textual descriptions. The presence on the editorial board of Edgar Dale, a leader in the use of audio-visual materials in classrooms, helped ensure that high quality graphics were used, and of William S. Gray, an authority in the field of children's reading, helped ensure the integrity of the textual components. Three-quarters of the space in each issue was devoted to pictorial representations with the text as a supporting feature, much more like textbooks today than the text-dense books of the time.

Building America was also deeply committed to problem-solving as a pedagogical method. Problem-based curricula already had a long heritage in progressive education, going back to John Dewey's experimentalism and William Heard Kilpatrick's Project method. The teacher's guide to the first issue included this introduction,

> Every issue of *Building America* is presented to the student as a problem to be solved. The facts and ideas presented in each number and the questions raised are all intended to challenge the student's thinking and help to him enter upon some constructive line of thought toward a solution to these problems (Society for Curriculum Study 1935b, 1).

A modern analog to the problems-based approach is inquiry-based instruction, as expressed in the Next Generation Science Standards and in the guiding principles of National Council for the Social Studies' College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework. *Building America* encouraged teachers to guide students along lines of inquiry. The guide to the "Housing" issue suggested that teachers frame instruction in

the topic with challenging questions such as, "How can young Americans help in building good homes? What can we do in our community to assist in bringing the problems of housing to the attention of the public?" (ibid). Like the C3 Framework, *Building America* went beyond simply conveying information and called learners to action, even if it derived from social critique. Paul Hanna called on teachers to accept "the challenge that our culture may be improved by the process of analyzing the culture's shortcomings, projecting solutions, and taking the necessary action to translate plans into achievement" (Hanna 1938, 144).

Interdisciplinarity is another trend of progressive education that was reflected in *Building America*. If education is a process of problem-solving, interdisciplinary approaches follow naturally because real life problems do not present themselves in discrete disciplinary packages. It made sense to teach subjects in relation to one another, or to eschew "subjects" altogether and teach topically, in the manner of *Building America*. In fact, the field of social studies was founded on the view that the social sciences and humanities were best taught in integrated ways and generations of materials have been formatted this way, from Hanna's 'expanding communities' design to teach about basic human activities to the highly integrated *Man: A Course of Study* curriculum. *Building America* was firmly in this line. Each teacher's guide contained a table of magazine topics cross-referenced with the variety of courses they could be used in, with most topics applicable to many courses. For instance, the teacher's guide to the "Housing" issue suggested that its topics could be used in almost all areas of the curriculum and recommended ways to use the issue in history, sociology, economics, geography, English, mathematics, science, home economics, and industrial arts (Society for Curriculum Study 1935b, 1). Perhaps because of this interdisciplinary approach, *Building America* was used in all grades, in colleges, adult study groups, and Civilian Conservation Corps camps.

Building America was intended to appeal to students' natural interests, one of the hallmarks of progressive education. A teacher's guide advised,

> One of the most important principles of psychology is that people *learn by doing* [emphasis theirs]. This principle applied to education means that the teacher should provide a wealth of activities in which students participate. These activities stimulate their interest in a problem, help them to acquire vital information, assist them in achieving habits of cooperative work, and finally bring them face to face with the world outside the school (Society for Curriculum Study 1935b, 2).

The suggestions for teaching with each issue are replete with ideas to engage students in interesting activities around the topic and not passive exposure to content. Recommended instructional activities included conducting community surveys, creating maps, presenting findings to community groups, and writing editorials. Even the rationale for producing heavily visual materials was based in a belief that pictorial depictions of life conditions engaged children's interest more effectively than textual explanations alone. Every issue included a "Note to the Teacher or Group Leader," which advised, "If a student is to gain most from his study, he must respond actively both to illustrations and text. In examining a photograph, he should be encouraged to inquire, and answer for himself, 'Does this portray a typical or an unusual condition?' In reading the text, he should ask himself, 'Does this check with other facts I have read?'" (Department of

Supervision and Curriculum Development, N.E.A. 1943, ix-x).

Finally, *Building America* also claimed high standards of scholarship. The Society claimed that, "The facts presented in the *Building America* series are the result of painstaking research into the most reliable sources available. In addition, these materials are carefully reviewed by a representative Editorial Board and by reputable authorities on the topics treated" (Society for Curriculum Study 1935a, 1). This scientific approach to curriculum appealed to many progressive educators who considered accurate information and expert analysis to be foundations of good civic education. For instance, Harold Rugg consulted a group of "frontier thinkers," including Charles A. Beard, Frederick Jackson Turner, Thorstein Veblen, and John R. Commons, to inform his textbook series (Rugg 1941, 200). This practice also shaped Paul Hanna's Scott, Foresman textbooks and no major textbook today lacks a long list of prestigious experts and educators on its editorial board.

Following the inaugural issue on housing, *Building America* was published each month, October through May, from 1935 until 1948. Each issue included many photographs and enough text to inform students and stimulate discussion. The project was an earnest attempt to employ the "social problems" approach to develop critical thinkers capable of taking informed action. Ultimately, though, *Building America* ran afoul of changing trends in education. The World War II and postwar eras saw a turn away from practices of educational progressivism such as social criticism and the problems method of instruction. The ultra-patriotic mood of the times caused some to look on social criticism with suspicion. Some politicians of the time chose to further their careers by attacking such practices. In California in 1947 this led to a legislative investigation of the ideological foundations of *Building America* and its founders. The negative publicity generated from this investigation resulted in canceled subscriptions and the magazine's ultimate demise.

Depictions of Native Culture in Textbooks

During the 1947 legislative investigation of *Building America*, Hanna defended the curriculum's problem-centered approach. In a lengthy public statement he assured readers that despite the accusations against it, "when people take the time to carefully read the *Building America* bulletins themselves rather than take a critic's word for it, the overwhelming majority will agree that these study units are strongly patriotic and American" (Hanna 1948). United States history curriculum has, since its earliest design, been first and foremost a vehicle for instilling a sense of American identity in schoolchildren. From their earliest iterations schools established, valued, and functioned as "pillars of the Republic," using U.S. history courses as opportunities to teach students the virtues and pride of living in, as Thomas Jefferson famously declared, an empire of liberty. It is not insignificant that Jefferson's first recorded use of the phrase in a 1780 letter to George Rogers Clark punctuated instructions for attacking "the British and Indian savages… preparing to invest our western frontier." Jefferson, like his predecessors and his successors, saw Native nations primarily as obstacles to American progress. Therefore, seizure of their lands was merely the opportunity to "add to the Empire of liberty an extensive and fertile Country..." (Jefferson 1780).

The contradiction inherent in Jefferson's phrase is the contradiction at the heart of the country's history. It allows a revolution for liberty to establish a country built through slavery, a Doctrine of

Discovery to authorize one people to violently drive others from their homeland and declare it had been unoccupied wilderness. To teach this history in a way that promotes the formation of a positive sense of American identity is fundamentally in competition with an honest examination of the historical past. As a result, United States history curriculum often misrepresents the stories of groups whose histories complicate that positive sense of identity. Because Native history is the context in which United States history occurs, its narratives are in starkest contradiction to the claims of American triumphalism. In order for schools to maintain the fiction of an empire of liberty, Native history is therefore the most dramatically misrepresented topic in U.S. history curriculum.

As events from Tippecanoe to Standing Rock have demonstrated, refusing to acknowledge Native sovereignty has long been the linchpin of establishing American legitimacy both in law and in popular imagination. As the power dynamics between Native nations and the U.S. state shifted over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, U.S. history curriculum reflected a narrative of events that favored increasing erasure of Native history in favor of the growth of the United States. As Ruth Miller Elson noted in *Guardians of Tradition*, nineteenth century textbook depictions of Native people were firmly rooted in racist theories of white supremacy, caught in the tension between mythologizing the violence and primitivity of Native people in order to justify colonization and heralding Native nations as exceptional both in their roles as the "first Americans" and to depict them as formidable obstacles in order to valorize westward expansion (Elson 1964, 71). The wars of westward expansion that followed the Civil War amplified the narrative that Native people were obstacles to American progress. Curriculum coalesced around the unifying theme that there would be "no dissent from the doctrine of the manifest destiny of the Americans to take land from the Indians," with textbooks offering the development of the U.S. West as proof it was a positive good (ibid., 76-7).

In the twentieth century textbook narratives hardened around the westward expansion narrative, following in Frederick Jackson Turner's footsteps to recast all U.S. history as a frontier experience. With open warfare waged by the U.S. Army against Native nations over, textbooks continued to center narratives of westward expansion as a form of nationalistic redemptive violence, if sometimes regrettable in its means. For the next hundred years, in textbook narratives Native people either became inspiration for the melting pot ideals of American society through Dawes-Act-fueled assimilation, or authors wrote their part as the "vanishing Indian," figures like Sitting Bull frozen in time in the glory days of the Old West, rarely mentioned at all after 1890. As Patricia Limerick writes, "with very few exceptions, the textbook treatment of the West follows a deeply-worn set of ruts" (Limerick 1992, 1382).

Although the Civil Rights Movement inspired some curricular change of Native depiction in textbooks that change was superficial, and in many cases that change reinforced stereotypes rather than challenging them. In their 1970 survey of over 300 textbooks, a team of scholars led by Rupert and Jeannette Costo's American Indian Historical Society found "not one could be approved as a dependable source of knowledge about the history and culture of the Indian people in America." Worse, they concluded, "most books were, in one way or another, derogatory to the Native Americans" (Costo 1970, 11). Over a decade later Frederick Hoxie, historian and director of the Newberry Library's D'Arcy

McNickle Center for American Indian and Indigenous Studies, conducted his own survey. Finding the same inadequacies Hoxie decried textbook authors' failure to incorporate even decades-old scholarship, saying "it is easier to add a brief biography of Geronimo to a chapter on the West than to surrender our self-image as tamers of the wilderness or settlers in a virgin land" (Hoxie 1984, 2). In 1941, however, *Building America* had attempted something different.

Native Culture in *Building America*

Part one of *Building America*'s series *Our Minority Groups*, *The American Indians* introduced students to challenges facing modern Native nations through the lens of Native history. Following the footsteps of Harold Rugg's ill-fated *Problems in American Democracy* curriculum, Hanna explained "To deny our youth a chance to study a balanced statement of the good and evil in our own nation and in the world is to render our future citizens weak and unprepared for the struggle of our time" (Hanna 1948). That dedication to asking students to wrestle with the moral inconsistencies of U.S. history led the issue's authors to craft a curriculum about Native history that radically departed from Limerick's well-worn ruts of U.S. West history in textbooks. But, dedicated as the curriculum was to the larger goals of social studies education to promote social cohesion and a sense of common American identity *Building America* also exhibited the difficulty of offering students an honest examination of the inherent contradiction of U.S. history narratives concerning Native people. Challenging stereotype and historical myth only to reinforce both under the assumption of normative whiteness, *Building America* took one step back for every two steps forward. Nevertheless, the unit offers a glimpse into the direction U.S. history curriculum could have taken, and a cautionary tale for would-be reformers prone to making similar errors.

Our Minority Groups: 1. The American Indians opens by subverting the erasure of Native people from modern U.S. history. Under the subheading "The Vanishing American?" the text begins with the legal challenge some Six Nations (the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois, Confederacy) members brought against the Selective Service Act of 1940. Introducing students to Native history by starting not with seventeenth century lithographs but a recent photo of Native men on the steps of a federal courthouse powerfully challenged the assumptions and stereotypes that students brought to the text (Department of Supervision and Curriculum Development, N.E.A.. 1941, 98). The section notes that while Six Nations members challenged the draft, they had proudly served in the U.S. military during World War I and their challenge was not rooted in unwillingness to serve, but rather the fact that compelling that service was a violation of their sovereignty guaranteed through the 1784 Treaty of Fort Stanwix. In addition, the section contrasts the Six Nations' response with the response from Navajo Nation, where young men arrived at draft registration centers eager to sign up. This opening vignette highlights the ways in which *The American Indians* represents uncharacteristically progressive perspectives on Native people in U.S. history curriculum. By acknowledging the modern existence of tribal nations and their members' active participation in national life, the diversity of experience, belief, and relationships among tribal nations, and emphasizing the struggle over sovereignty, *The American Indians* presented students with a new framework for thinking about Native history.

Like so much progressive social studies curricula, *Building America*'s instructional goals included offering

students pathways for thinking about how to live in a harmonious, diverse society. While comparable curriculum like Rugg's presented Native people in modern society, *The American Indians* made disrupting the myth of the vanishing Indian its central goal. To many people, the text reads, Native people "are more like a race that *once* lived, and died when the settlers crossed the Great Plains in wagons… there are few subjects on which the public holds so many mistaken ideas as it does about the Indians" (ibid., 99). The issue is therefore structured to present Native people as members of modern American society who face challenges that are directly related to the history of U.S. antagonism against Native nations.

The issue's modern focus on Native people transforms what would otherwise be a standard narrative of Native history from the pre-contact era through the late nineteenth century. Instead, the sections that focus on historical narrative reflect the understanding that what happened in the past continues to harm Native people in the present. With more frankness than leading textbooks published in the 1940s, *The American Indians* notes that colonization was rooted in injustice perpetuated against Native nations. The pre-contact period is likewise arranged to emphasize the diversity of Native nations and goes to lengths, extraordinary for textbooks of the era, to describe that diversity in detail and highlight the strengths of Native societies. However, that does not preclude the issue from falling into white supremacist narrative patterns. While the authors took care to highlight aspects of early Native society they found noteworthy, the section is marred by the racism that pervaded social studies curriculum of the time. The text offers descriptions of Native warfare as particularly violent (and scapegoating "the Sioux" in the process), claims "agriculture came late" to Native America, and heralds the technological contributions Europeans brought to Native nations while mentioning only canoes and snowshoes as technology Native people could offer in return (ibid., 100-3).

The sections detailing the history of U.S. relations with Native nations are more radical. Offering unusually nuanced descriptions of events and their contexts, these sections also introduced students to the issue of tribal sovereignty. In fact, the text's discussion of U.S.-Native relations begins with the 1789 Act of August which declared "their land and property shall never be taken from them without their consent" and outlined the inviolable authority of treaties with Native nations (ibid., 106). Although the text fails to discuss the problem of coercive and illegitimate treaties, this is another step forward. Explicitly linking sovereignty to land is not merely unusual for textbooks of the 1940s, it's unusual for textbooks today as well. The authors established this principle early in the issue in order to support their later discussion of land rights as "the most important Indian problem" and the chief barrier to self-sufficiency (ibid., 112).

The U.S. history sections of the issue also contain a surprising level of detail concerning the diversity of Native nations. The author notes in the issue's introduction "it is almost impossible to talk of "the" Indian," and the issue's coverage of complicated tribal interrelationships with the U.S. government bears that out, especially in places like Oklahoma with the complex and contradictory legacy of removal (ibid., 98, 106). Radically unlike other textbooks of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, rather than tout the Dawes Act of 1887 as a triumph of assimilationist policy, *The American Indians* outlines the ways in which allotment facilitated white settler theft of Native treaty land. The text also pulls no punches in explaining the harm white

supremacy has done to Native people. In "A Century and a Half of Trouble," the author argued that Native people were already deeply religious, democratically-minded, and virtuous in their dealings with each other and others. Rather than depicting assimilation as the salvation of a vanishing race as other textbooks did, *The American Indians* claimed assimilation was a violent attempt at dehumanization, events that America "would like to forget" (ibid., 108). Most important, the author noted, assimilation did not work. Native people persisted; "the dying race would not die" (ibid.).

From an analysis of the text and the works listed in the bibliography, it is clear that the author was heavily influenced by John Collier. Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs during the New Deal, Collier vigorously opposed federal attempts to use force of law to erase Native culture and promote assimilation. Collier's views did not amount to full self-determination and sovereignty, and his advocacy of Native cultural preservation was limited by his paternalist attitude toward Native people. Sometimes those views had disastrous results for Native nations, such as the destructive livestock reduction program in Navajo Nation, which *The American Indians* presents as a success in helping Navajo people move toward self-sufficiency. Nevertheless, Collier's advocacy for Native culture, religion, practice, and social structures shaped federal policy toward Native nations in ways that enabled tribes to claim greater sovereignty over their affairs even though that sovereignty was restricted by settler colonial claims to land and cultural superiority. *The American Indians* is a text equally torn by competing ideals, elevating Native people and parsing myths of American exceptionalism on the one hand, but limited by anti-Native prejudice and the larger goal of promoting a common narrative of U.S. history, one that fundamentally relies on the negation of Native claims to land and sovereignty, on the other.

It is in that final contradiction between Native sovereignty and the settler colonial history of the United States that *The American Indians* falls short of being truly revolutionary. The inclusion of an entire section on the Indian Arts and Crafts Board and Crow and Menominee land use initiatives offered students in the 1940s a more solid foundation for understanding Native people as dynamic, modern people than even the vague passing references to post-1890 Native history do in textbooks today. Yet for all its progressive achievement, the text never quite manages to challenge the underlying assumptions of white supremacy that lie at the core of injustice against Native people. As part of its problem-solving model of pedagogy, the issue concludes by asking students to judge whether the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (IRA) was successful in nullifying barriers to Native self-sufficiency. Presenting opposing views of the IRA, this inquiry rightly identifies white racism as the true barrier to self-sufficiency. However, the text concludes "the Indians can only become a true part of our democracy when they and the rest of the American people both really desire it" (ibid., 123). It does not ask students to consider whether becoming a true part of American democracy is the goal of Native people.

Presenting an extraordinarily progressive depiction of Native history as fully modern, diverse, and fundamentally driven by a struggle over sovereignty, *The American Indians* succeeded in asking students to wrestle with the injustice of the treatment of Native people under American democracy. But in failing to ask students to wrestle with the injustice embedded in the founding principles of that democracy itself,

The American Indians missed the opportunity to enact the deep change necessary to correct false narratives about Native history in U.S. history curriculum. How progressive is *Building America*'s *The American Indians*? The answer is two-fold. It is both surprisingly progressive, yet not nearly progressive enough to facilitate an honest examination of the historical past. The curriculum stands out dramatically among other progressive-produced material about Native history, yet falls prey to the same pressures of patriotism, assimilation, and American exceptionalism that continue to prevent students from reconciling with our complicated past in classrooms today.

Conclusion

Building America's format and methodology reflected the views of progressive educators of its day, many of which are still in use. Based on an analysis of *Our Minority Groups: 1. The American Indians*, the publication was also remarkably forward thinking in its socio-political positions. Unfortunately, it succumbed to the tension of serving two masters. The editorial board adopted the dual missions of presenting both a critical and an optimistic picture to American students. The two missions were not always compatible, as seen in *The American Indians*.

The tension may have been a result of the rapidly changing world in which *Building America* existed. The publication was born during the Great Depression, when many educators felt that the schools had failed America's youth and that they must do more to build informed citizens equipped with tools to take action and solve the multitude of social and economic problems the Depression revealed. A critical outlook was appropriate to that task, but by the time *The American Indians* was published in 1941 national needs had changed. The nation faced the prospect of total war and the need to unify the country for the coming storm. In fact, the issues that preceded *The American Indians* were entitled *Total Defense*, *Training for National Defense,* and *America's Outposts*, with special focus on U.S. territories that lay between North America and Imperial Japan. Clearly, the editorial board was preoccupied with preparation for war. As is often the case, national unification was predicated on the assumption that the dominant culture was normative, which meant subordination or assimilation for others. This assumption is at the heart of *The American Indians*. It is regrettable that *Building America* found itself caught between incompatible goals, because its role as a voice for social change was blunted by its assumption of how to achieve national unity. Like Billy Collins' history teacher in the poem below, the attempt to smooth over the historical record only perpetuates the damage.

Building America published more than 64 issues on topics ranging from gender and ethnic minorities to the criminal justice system, Social Security, and urban planning. Social critique is a cyclical, but persistent theme in social studies education that is enjoying a resurgence with the rise of the C3 Framework. Past experience may inform modern approaches to grappling with societal issues in the classroom and may help explain why we continue to address the same issues.

The History Teacher

Trying to protect his student's innocence
he told them the Ice Age was really just
the Chilly Age, a period of a million years
when everyone had to wear sweaters.

And the Stone Age became the Gravel Age,
named after the long driveways of the time.

The Spanish Inquisition was nothing more
than an outbreak of questions such as
"How far is it from here to Madrid?"
"What do you call the matador's hat?"

The War of the Roses took place in a garden,
and the Enola Gay dropped one tiny atom
on Japan.

The children would leave his classroom
for the playground and torment the weak
and the smart,
mussing up their hair and breaking their glasses,

while he gathered his notes and walked home
past flower beds and white picket fences,
wondering if they would believe that soldiers
in the Boer War told long, rambling stories
designed to make the enemy nod off (Collins 1999, 77-78).

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