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Teaching the First Half of the US Survey from a Global Perspective

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In this report, I explain how and why I changed my lectures using the materials from my sabbatical.

Lecture. New Worlds:

The entire first half of the lecture is new (slides 2-6). In this lecture, I discuss the reasons why the European powers began to build empires. I explain to the students the importance of the modern nation state and of the various intellectual movements (Renaissance, Enlightenment/Scientific Revolution, Protestant Reformation) to expansion.

I then discuss the Spanish, French, and Dutch empire, their development, and their interactions with Native Americans.

From there, I take a closer look at the Iroquois Nation and how it was able to maintain its power.

Why did I include this new information?:

Often, students think of big, historical events like empires as preordained or inevitable. And they don't think about the preconditions or societal developments or changes that led to those big events. So, I talk about the rise of the modern nation state in order to emphasize the importance of growing governmental centralization and a recognized national leader in empire building. I talk about the various intellectual movements to show how ideas and the advancements that came from those ideas (the general sense of curiosity that all of these movements generated, for example. Or, more specifically, the improvements to navigation and shipbuilding that the scientific revolution yielded, or, from the Reformation, the Protestant desire to stop the spread of Catholicism) fed into the quest for empires.

I include information about the other European powers in the Americas because I want to stress to the students that England was not the only presence there, nor, for much of its colonial period, the most powerful. And I include the material on the Iroquois and the Aztecs as a way to discuss in more detail two important Native American cultures and to disabuse the students of the notion, still too widely held even now, that Native American cultures were "savage," or "primitive." I also include all this material on the European empires in the Americas and Native American cultures in order that the students understand the complexity of the environment in which the English colonists found themselves. This was no "errand into the wilderness." It was a meeting of cultures, all of which had to make adjustments in order to co-exist.

Lecture. Early Colonies:

The first part of this lecture (which is really two lectures in a single unit), slides 2-7, is new. I first go into more detail about the Protestant Reformation and then I discuss how the Reformation unfolded in England and the three-way contest among Catholics, Anglicans, and Dissenters. I also explain to the students how these religious changes were connected to political and economic developments that contributed to a growing importance of elected government (Parliament) and an end to absolutism.

The second part of the lecture, which looks at life in the early English colonies, is a mixture of old and new material. The new material includes the slides on the Caribbean colonies (slide 9), the middle colonies (slide 15), and relations with Native Americans in New England (slide 19).

Why did I include this new information?:

Similarly to why I included the material about Europe in my first lecture, I include this more focused discussion of England and the Reformation in order that students better understand what was fostering this impulse to empire. I also want the students to have a better understanding of who the Puritans were and what their role was in English politics. Additionally, I include it to explain to students in order to complicate the traditional narrative of dissatisfaction between the American colonies and Great Britain. There was no clear “good guy” and “bad guy” in the conflict and a lot of the “new ideas” often credited as American really originated in the “Old World.”

I include the material on the Caribbean colonies as an entryway to the discussion of slavery and also to reiterate the point that the original 13 colonies were not alone in the Americas, were not the only colonies in the British Empire and were, in fact, not even the most important, from the British standpoint. Finally, the Caribbean allows me to talk about pirates and their exploits, which both my students and I enjoy.

My slide on the middle colonies corrects a slight on my part that, frankly, I should have corrected a long time ago. The middle colonies, given their greater diversity of purpose and population, are more difficult to categorize than the New England colonies (Puritanism!) or the southern colonies (plantations and slavery!). Until this sabbatical, I did not give the middle colonies their due. But now I use them to explore the importance of the Dutch empire in the Americas and to reiterate the idea of diverse cultures and peoples finding ways to co-exist.

The final slide on “Relations with Indians” is my effort to incorporate the reality that Native Americans were a fixture of everyday life in the colonies and were a primary force in shaping that life. I use this slide to explain how both positive interactions (trade) and negative interactions (war) between Native Americans and colonists created—to borrow a term from historian Colin Calloway—“new worlds for all” in the Americas.

Lecture. The Later Colonies

The last slide on the “Age of Reason” is the only new slide in this lecture.

Why did I include this new information?

To bring the threads of the previous lectures forward. And to add a little detail to my broader statements of the intellectual revolutions in Europe from the New Worlds lecture. To again emphasize the interconnectedness of the American colonies and Europe, particularly in the realm of ideas. To discuss the importance of European Enlightenment thought on the development of American ideas of democracy and rights. And to introduce John Locke and begin to discuss his importance to the foundations of American political thought.

Lecture. The Divided Revolution

Slides two through six are new. The new material examines the ways that different groups either reacted to the Revolution or have been portrayed in popular and professional histories.

The quote that I begin this lecture with is important, I believe, because I want students to understand that our idea that Americans were unified in favor of revolution is a fabrication.

Using the slide on the Minutemen, I look at who really fought the Revolution. It was not the “citizen-farmer” of popular history, but largely a conglomeration of immigrants, slaves and free black men, and poor white men.

I then look at “Radical Pennsylvania,” in order to examine a state that really did hand the power to the people in very real ways.

Using the slide “Slavery,” I talk about African Americans’ contributions to the Revolution and the ways that they used this war for freedom to challenge their own enslaved condition.

The final new part of this lecture covers Native American actions during the Revolution.

Why did I include this new information?:

I refer back to the statement I made at the beginning of this section: that I want to emphasize that the story we know about an “all for one” type spirit toward the Revolution was just that: a story. That there were many different sides to the Revolution and many different reasons for why people acted the way they did.

With the information on Native Americans and African Americans, I stress that not everyone caught up in this conflict equated the patriot side of it with greater freedom. Both Native Americans and African Americans sided with the British in greater numbers than they did with the patriots, and both did so because they feared—correctly on both counts—that an American victory would mean diminished freedoms for them.

Using the information on the minutemen and Pennsylvania, I can get at the ideals of the Revolution. What did the Revolution mean to the men who were actually doing the fighting? Men who, in peace time, were the forgotten or even despised men of society—poor men, immigrant men, free black men. Why were they fighting? Were their revolutionary ideals the same as those men who would become the “faces” of the Revolution (Jefferson, Washington, Adams, etc.)?. The clashes in Pennsylvania between wealthy and working class over where and with who political power should reside in this new country also lend themselves to this discussion. This was a war of ideals, but whose ideals?

The material on women’s involvement is not new, although I would be happy to discuss it if anyone is interested.

Lecture. The Global American Revolution

This is an entirely new lecture. In it, I look at how the American Revolution touched off an age of revolutions. The lecture focuses on the French, Haitian, and Latin American revolutions and ties each of these revolutions had to the United States.

Why did I include this new information?:

The American Revolution was not just important in the United States. It reverberated around the world, and as these new revolutions broke out, the US in turn had to decide how they were going to react. Further, these revolutions all played a part in the development of American political or diplomatic policy. Divisions in the United States over the French Revolution, for example, fostered the first two-party political system in the country and led to a policy of neutrality that the US adhered to—although

sometimes only in spirit—for most of the nineteenth century. The Haitian Revolution is a way to examine the ways in which the US failed to live up to its promises of equality and freedom. The Latin American revolutions, although mostly inspired by events unfolding in Spain, nevertheless were deeply influenced by the successful example of their northern neighbors gaining independence from Great Britain.

Lecture. Slavery in the Atlantic World

Slides six, seven, eight, eleven, and fourteen are new. This lecture used to just examine the three slave systems in the US: the rice/indigo system in the Carolinas, the tobacco system in the Chesapeake, and the polyglot system in the northern colonies. The new slides situate these systems in the global network of slavery and capitalism.

Why did I include this new information?: Slavery can be a difficult topic to discuss in a history class. Students acknowledge that slavery was bad, but too often rationalize it as “that’s just the way it was back then,” and don’t interrogate the ways that the slave system was created and maintained. The new slides present American slavery in a more global context as well as emphasizes the connection between a developing world capitalism and “new world” slavery. I discuss how these empires that I have discussed in previous lectures were sustained largely through cash crops like sugar, tobacco, cotton, and etc. and how these cash crops—and therefore these empires—were made profitable through slave labor. I also discuss the intellectual and religious arguments that white Europeans and colonists used to justify slavery. I want the students to understand that the slave systems that developed at this time were not relics of another, less enlightened time, but in fact, were part and parcel to this new, more interconnected and capitalist world in both Europe and the Americas.

Next I talk about the slave trade in Africa. I mostly discuss the creole societies that developed on Africa’s west coast—that is, the societies of Europeans, Africans, and their mixed-race offspring that lived at the trading posts. I also discuss the brutality of the Middle Passage—the trip via ship to the Americas that Africans were forced to take. I have started to discuss the impact of trade with Europe on various African nations, but as I learned on my sabbatical, this is not a straightforward question to African historians. Some argue that it had a profoundly negative affect, directly contributing to many of Africa’s present day problems, namely militarization and impoverishment. But other scholars argue that this view infantilizes an Africa that, during the years of the slave trade, was far more technologically advanced than westerners give it credit for and was certainly no unwitting pawn of the European powers. So more than any other part of these lectures, I see this slide changing, possibly completely and definitely soon (the rather scattered nature of this last paragraph probably demonstrates my uncertainty on this subject as much as my actual words do) as I continue my readings and become more familiar with African historiography. I strongly believe students need to know how the decision to enslave millions of people in the Americas reverberated across the globe.

I include a slide on the sugar societies of the Caribbean because they were among the earliest slave societies in the Americas and they set the tone—and provided the legal basis—for slavery in the continental United States.

I include the slide on Louisiana, even though at the time it was part of the French empire, first and foremost because it is interesting. As a French colony, it was a failed slave society and as such was rather unique in the Americas. It’s failure as well as the French tendency to be more open to interracial

relationships, allowed mixed-race women, especially, a chance to wield real power in the colony, perhaps the only place in the Americas where that was true. Additionally, it provides a way to discuss resistance in many different forms as enslaved people fought for their freedom on many different fronts: outright rebellion, military service, interracial marriages and so forth.

The final new slide on slavery and the Revolution takes a look at the ways in which slaves used the Revolution to advance their own cause of freedom. Again, including slaves in a discussion of the Revolution complicates it because many slaves sought their freedom from the British side rather than the American side and the British were more willing to grant freedom for military service than the American side. I also discuss how the Revolution changed the slave system.

Taken together, I want these slides, together with the preexisting slides, to convey several things: first, that slavery was a global system that developed deliberately. It was not an accident or “just the way it was back then.” Enslaving Africans was done deliberately and was done at a time when new ideas about “unalienable rights” were catching on in both Europe and the Americas. What do we do with that paradox? Second, that choices made in Europe and the Americas had a profound impact on Africa as well. And third, that enslaved people fought their enslavement in a variety of ways. It is important that students know this part of American history and the ways that the slaves themselves, through their constant resistance to their oppression, contributed to the end of slavery in America.

Lecture. The West

This is an entirely new lecture.

Previously, I had interspersed my discussion about westward migration in other lectures about the market revolution or Jacksonian democracy. So this is my first attempt at looking at “The West” as a separate unit of study. Slide one looks at whaling and the Pacific. Slide two discusses some of the early travelers into the west, such as Lewis and Clark and fur traders. Slides four and five discuss the importance of the Second Great Awakening to the move west. Slides six and seven look at some of the communities that developed in the West, such as Mormons and the gold rush towns. Slide eight examines the Comanche nation and the final slide focuses on Texas.

Why did I include this new information?: What I hope to convey in this lecture is that the West was far more complex than covered wagon trains and westward trails. I begin this lecture with New England whaling in order to show that this idea that the United States’ entry into the west was a straight march overland from the East is incorrect. New England whalers had reached the Pacific by the 1790s and were instrumental in mapping that ocean for the US government. I use the material on the Comanche and the California Gold Rush to look at some of the cultures that were already there—namely, Native Americans and Mexicans—and the interactions they had with Americans arriving from the United States. I also included the material on the Comanche—rather than say, other powerful Plains Native American nations like the Sioux or the Apaches—because of a new monograph on them argues that the Comanche were the most powerful imperial power in the West and played a critical role in the Mexican-American war.

With this lecture, I want to push against the older narrative of manifest destiny and an “empty” West waiting to be filled with white Americans. The real West was one of the most racially and ethnically

diverse regions on the North American continent, and the way to get to that truth is to look at the West from as many different angles as a fifty minute lecture can reasonably hold.

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