Excerpt from *Lies My Teacher Told Me*

By James W. Loewen

Chapter 1
"Handicapped by History: The Process of Hero-making"

What passes for identity in America is a series of myths about one's heroic ancestors.
James Baldwin

One is astonished in the study of history at the recurrence of the idea that evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over. We must not remember that Daniel Webster got drunk but only remember that he was a splendid constitutional lawyer. We must forget that George Washington was a slave owner.., and simply remember the things we regard as creditable and inspiring. The difficulty, of course, with this philosophy is that history loses its value as an incentive and example; it paints perfect men and noble nations, but it does not tell the truth.
W. E. B. Du Bois

By idolizing those whom we honor, we do a disservice both to them and to ourselves....We fail to recognize that we could go and do likewise.
Charles V. Willies

This Chapter is about Heroification, a degenerative process (much like calcification) that makes people over into heroes. Through this process, our educational media turn fleshand-blood individuals into pious, perfect creatures without conflicts, pain, credibility, or human interest.

Many American history textbooks are studded with biographical vignettes of the very famous (Land of Promise devotes a box to each president) and the famous (The Challenge of Freedom provides "Did You Know?" boxes about Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman to graduate from medical school in the United States, and Lorraine Hansberry, author of A Raisin in theSun, among many others). In themselves, vignettes are not a bad idea. They instruct by human example. They show diverse ways that people can make a difference. They allow textbooks to give space to characters such as Blackwell and Hansberry, who relieve what would otherwise be a monolithic parade of white male political leaders. Biographical vignettes also provoke reflection as to our purpose in teaching history: Is Chester A. Arthur more deserving of space than, say, Frank Lloyd Wright? Who influences us more today -- Wright, who invented the carport and transformed domestic architectural spaces, or Arthur, who, urn, signed the first Civil Service Act? Whose rise to prominence provides more drama -- Blackwell's or George Bush's (the latter born with a silver Senate seat in his mouth)? The choices are debatable, but surely textbooks should include some people based not only on what they achieved but also on the distance they traversed to achieve it.

We could go on to third- and fourth-guess the list of heroes in textbook pantheons. My concern here, however, is not who gets chosen, but rather what happens to the heroes when they are introduced into our history textbooks and our classrooms. Two twentieth century Americans provide case studies of heroification: Woodrow Wilson and Helen

Keller. Wilson was unarguably an important president, and he receives extensive textbook coverage. Keller, on the other hand, was a "little person" who pushed through no legislation, changed the course of no scientific discipline, declared no war. Only one of the twelve history textbooks I surveyed includes her photograph. But teachers love to talk about Keller and often show audiovisual materials or recommend biographies that present her life as exemplary. All this attention ensures that students retain something about both of these historical figures, but they may be no better off for it. Heroification so distorts the lives of Keller and Wilson (and many others) that we cannot think straight about them.

Teachers have held up Helen Keller, the blind and deaf girl who overcame her physical handicaps, as an inspiration to generations of schoolchildren. Every fifth-grader knows the scene in which Anne Sullivan spells water into young Helen's hand at the pump. At least a dozen movies and filmstrips have been made on Keller's life. Each yields its version of the same clichE. A McGraw-Hill educational film concludes: "The gift of Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan to the world is to constantly remind us of the wonder of the world around us and how much we owe those who taught us what it means, for there is no person that is unworthy or incapable of being helped, and the greatest service any person can make us is to help another reach true potential."

To draw such a bland maxim from the life of Helen Keller, historians and filmmakers have disregarded her actual biography and left out the lessons she specifically asked us to learn from it. Keller, who struggled so valiantly to learn to speak, has been made mute by history. The result is that we really don't know much about her.

Over the past ten years, I have asked dozens of college students who Helen Keller was and what she did. They all know that she was a blind and deaf girl. Most of them know that she was befriended by a teacher, Anne Sullivan, and learned to read and write and even to speak. Some students can recall rather minute details of Keller's early life: that she lived in Alabama, that she was unruly and without manners before Sullivan came along, and so forth. A few know that Keller graduated from college. But about what happened next, about the whole of her adult life, they are ignorant. A few students venture that Keller became a "public figure" or a "humanitarian," perhaps on behalf of the blind or deaf. "She wrote, didn't she?" or "she spoke" -- conjectures without content. Keller, who was born in 1880, graduated from Radcliffe in 1904 and died in 1968. To ignore the sixty-four years of her adult life or to encapsulate them with the single word humanitarian is to lie by omission.

The truth is that Helen Keller was a radical socialist. She joined the Socialist party of Massachusetts in 1909. She had become a social radical even before she graduated from Radcliffe, and not, she emphasized, because of any teachings available there. After the Russian Revolution, she sang the praises of the new communist nation: "In the East a new star is risen! With pain and anguish the old order has given birth to the new, and behold in the East a man-child is born! Onward, comrades, all together! Onward to the campfires of Russia! Onward to the coming dawn!" Keller hung a red flag over the desk in her study. Gradually she moved to the left of the Socialist party and became a Wobbly, a member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the syndicalist union persecuted by Woodrow Wilson.

Keller's commitment to socialism stemmed from her experience as a disabled person

and from her sympathy for others with handicaps. She began by working to simplify the alphabet for the blind, but soon came to realize that to deal solely with blindness was to treat symptom, not cause. Through research she learned that blindness was not distributed randomly throughout the population but was concentrated in the lower class. Men who were poor might be blinded in industrial accidents or by inadequate medical care; poor women who became prostitutes faced the additional danger of syphilitic blindness. Thus Keller learned how the social class system controls people's opportunities in life, sometimes determining even whether they can see. Keller's research was not just book-learning: "I have visited sweatshops, factories, crowded slums. If I could not see it, I could smell it."

At the time Keller became a socialist, she was one of the most famous women on the planet. She soon became the most notorious. Her conversion to socialism caused a new storm of publicity -- this time outraged. Newspapers that had extolled her courage and intelligence now emphasized her handicap. Columnists charged that she had no independent sensory input and was in thrall to those who fed her information. Typical was the editor of the Brooklyn Eagle, who wrote that Keller's "mistakes spring out of the manifest limitations of her development."

Keller recalled having met this editor: "At that time the compliments he paid me were so generous that I blush to remember them. But now that I have come out for socialism he reminds me and the public that I am blind and deaf and especially liable to error. I must have shrunk in intelligence during the years since I met him."

Keller, who devoted much of her later life to raising funds for the American Foundation for the Blind, never wavered in her belief that our society needed radical change. Having herself fought so hard to speak, she helped found the American Civil Liberties Union to fight for the free speech of others. She sent $100 to the NAACP with a letter of support that appeared in its magazine The Crisis -- a radical act for a white person from Alabama in the 1920s. She supported Eugene V. Debs, the Socialist candidate, in each of his campaigns for the presidency. She composed essays on the women's movement, on politics, on economics. Near the end of her life, she wrote to Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, leader of the American Communist party, who was then languishing in jail, a victim of the McCarthy era: "Loving birthday greetings, dear Elizabeth Flynn! May the sense of serving mankind bring strength and peace into your brave heart!"

One may not agree with Helen Keller's positions. Her praise of the USSR now seems naïve, embarrassing, to some even treasonous. But she was a radical -- a fact few Americans know, because our schooling and our mass media left it out.

Why do textbooks promote wartless stereotypes? The authors' omissions and errors can hardly be accidental. The producers of the filmstrips, movies, and other educational materials on Helen Keller surely know she was a socialist; no one can read Keller's writings without becoming aware of her political and social philosophy.

Heroification itself supplies a first answer. Socialism is repugnant to most Americans. So are racism and colonialism. Michael Kammen suggests that authors selectively omit blemishes to make certain historical figures sympathetic to as many people as possible. The textbook critic Norma Gabler testified that textbooks should "present our nation's patriots in a way that would honor and respect them"; in her eyes, admitting Keller's socialism would hardly do that.

Perhaps we can go further. I began with Helen Keller because omitting the last 64 years of her life exemplifies the sort of culture-serving distortion that will be discussed later in the book. We teach Keller as an ideal, not a real person, to inspire our young people to emulate her. Keller becomes a mythic figure, the "woman who overcame" - but for what? There is no content! Just look what *she* accomplished, we're exhorted - yet we haven't a clue as to what that really was.

A host of other reasons - pressure from the "ruling class," pressure from textbook adoption committees, the wish to avoid ambiguities, a desire to shield children from harm or conflictm, the perceived need to control children and avoid classroom disharmony, pressure to provide answers - may help explain why textbooks omit troublesome facts...We seem to feel that a person like Helen Keller can be an inspiration only so long as she remains uncontroversial, one-dimensional. We don't want complicated icons. "People do not like to think. If one thinks, one must reach conclusions," Helen Keller pointed out. "Conclusions are not always pleasant."

Whatever the causes, the results of heroification are potentially crippling to students. Helen Keller is not the only person this approach treats like a child. Denying students the human-ness of Keller and others keeps students in intellectual immaturity. It perpetuates what might be called a Disney version of history: The Hall of Presidents at Disneyland similarly presents our leaders as heroic statesmen, not imperfect human beings. Our children end up without realistic role models to inspire them.

Do textbooks, educational videos, and American history courses achieve the results they seek with regard to our heroes? Surely textbook authors want us to think well of the historical figures they treat with such sympathy. I have asked hundreds of (mostly white) college students on the first day of class to tell me who their heroes in American history are. As a rule, they do not pick Helen Keller, Woodrow Wilson, Christopher Columbus, Miles Standish or anyone else in Plymouth, John Smith or anyone else in Virginia, Abraham Lincoln, or indeed anyone else in American history whom the textbooks implore them to choose. Our post-Watergate students view all such "establishment" heroes cynically. They're bor-r-ring.

Some students choose "none" - that is, they say they have no heroes in American history. Other students display the characteristically American sympathy for the underdog by choosing African Americans: Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, perhaps Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, or Frederick Douglass. Or they choose men and women from other countries: Gandhi, Mother Teresa, or Nelson Mandela.

In one sense, this is a healthy development. Surely we want students to be skeptical. Probably we want them to challenge being told whom to believe in. But replying "none" is too glib, too nihilistic, for my taste. It is, however, an understandable response to heroificiation. For when textbook authors leave out the warts, the problems, the unfortunate character traits, and the mistaken ideas, they reduce heroes from dramatic men and women to melodramatic stick figures. Their inner struggles disappear and they become goody-goody, not merely good.

Students poke fun at the goody-goodiest of them all by telling Helen Keller jokes. In so doing, schoolchildren are not poking cruel fun at a disabled person, they are deflating a pretentious

symbol that is too good to be real. Nonetheless, our loss of Helen Keller as anything but a source of jokes is distressing. Knowing the reality of her quite amazing life might empower not only deaf or blind students, but any schoolgirl, and perhaps boys as well. For like other peoples around the world, we Americans need heroes. Statements such as, "If Martin Luther King were alive, he'd..." suggest one function of historical figures in our contemporary society. Most of us tend to think well of ourselves when we have acted as we imagine our heroes might have done. Who our heroes are and whether they are presented in a way that makes them lifelike, hence usable as role models, could have a significant bearing on our conduct in the world.