America the Unbelievable
A History Textbook Becomes a National Bestseller — Ha-Ha!

America (The Book): A Citizen’s Guide to Democracy Inaction

by the writers of The Daily Show, with Jon Stewart. With a foreword by Thomas Jefferson.


Reviewed by Diane Ravitch

Textbooks prepared for students of American history have a predictable format, one that has been shaped and honed by years of experience. They are of similar size (8 inches by 11 inches); a similar number of pages (about a thousand); and a similar weight (about seven pounds). Their titles are vaguely nationalistic but not patriotic (United States History, The Rise of the American Nation, American Odyssey, The American Journey). The text has an authoritative tone. Sentences are short and declarative. Most pages are cluttered with visual materials. In most of the books, graphics and blank space take up as much as 40 percent of the pages. In addition to the customary photographs and representations of important (and little-known) people, events, and objects, there are many sidebars, which are usually distracting and often irrelevant to the test. The sidebars may ask questions or suggest activities, although they are often a vehicle for introducing multicultural and female figures into (or alongside) the main narrative.

As this format has hardened over the years into a formula, the books have become more and more beautiful while the text has become more and more banal. So utterly predictable is the formula that the textbooks are now like peas in a pod. All are written to win adoption in California, Texas, Florida, and the other states that buy textbooks en masse. All have been cleansed of anything that might offend any interest group. Most are “prepared” or assembled in development houses by teams of anonymous writers and editors; the ultimate product has only a tenuous connection to the authors whose names are on the title page.

So predictable is the formula for high-school history textbooks that it is ripe for parody. And who better to parody it than the writers of the funniest
fake news show on television, Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*? Their book *America (The Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inaction* looks just like any other textbook (though it is only 227 pages long and thus not nearly as heavy as the real thing). It has a pseudo-patriotic cover, with Stewart sitting in front of a huge American flag, glancing fearfully at a fierce-looking American eagle. It has the feel and appearance of other textbooks, with the requisite balance of text and graphics.

But there the similarity ends—or, rather, the faux similarity begins. The *Daily Show*’s *America* is a wildly irreverent, politically incorrect, bawdy, obscene, outrageous presentation (and misrepresentation) of American history and government—and, unlike other textbooks, this is a national best-seller. Why? Perhaps it is sweet revenge for years of having staid and wearisome texts thrust on past and present high-school students of American history and government. By flouting every rule and convention about propriety and deflating every sacred cow, Stewart's book is guaranteed to give heartburn to every textbook watchdog and anyone who ever sat on a bias and sensitivity review committee.

The parody begins with the book’s foreword, allegedly written by Thomas Jefferson, described as “a young hot-shot tobacco executive from Virginia.” The opening page displays a full-page photo of Socrates, with the following exchange. Pericles: “It is true that we are called a democracy, for the administration is in the hands of the many and not the few.” Socrates: “Yes, Pericles, but have you gotten a load of the many?”

One says, “The fact that the Magna Carta was written in 1215 is, by law, the only thing you are required to know about it.” Another sidebar is an “Insta-Poll” that asks, “Do these constant distractions from the actual text have you considering returning this book for… Cash? Store credit?” That, of course, is the biggest joke of all because the students (unlike the readers of Stewart's book) are not consumers and do not have the option of returning their textbook for cash or credit.

The book contains epigraphs and four-letter words that will never be found in any respectable textbook—meant, of course, to mock the squeaky-clean version of history that actual textbooks portray. Wal-Mart banned the book from its stores because of a two-page “activity” called “Dress the Supreme Court,” which portrays the current justices as stark naked, across from a page of cut-out robes.

The book revels in political incorrectness—which mocks the drabness of real textbooks. An example is the illustration of a tombstone for the Dixiecrat Party that reads, “This Ain’t a Colored Cemetery, Is It?” How about a presidential campaign poster? “Catch the Dukakis Magic—Then, let us know where you found it.” Or try the C-SPAN Drinking Game, where players imbibe “every time Congress appropriates an additional quarter-billion dollars” or whenever the camera cuts away to a shot of Senator Edward Kennedy napping.

Stewart's raffish history cuts close to the bone and suggests to this reader that today's textbooks may be approaching the end of their run. They are not especially good teaching tools, due to their vapidity; they are incapable of inspiring intellectual curiosity or awakening genuine interest. The editorial compromises that the publishers must make to sell their product to the big states have rendered the books toothless, spineless, and boring. They try but inevitably fail to compete with television and the Internet, which will always be more exciting, more vivid, more comprehensive, and more up-to-date than any textbook. In the new age of electronic publishing, the textbook has become a dinosaur. Surely some smart entrepreneur will figure out how to build a better way to open young minds to important ideas. But meanwhile the dinosaur reigns supreme. This is the secret that Jon Stewart and his witty team have so rudely exposed to public laughter.

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