

Politically Incorrect has a Paranoid Political Agenda

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From the onset, it is complicated to decipher whether Dr. Thomas McClanahan's book, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Founding Fathers* is a work of scholarship, or a political attack. McClanahan's book is quite cerebral in his attempt to debunk many of the unfounded myths that belittle our Founders. It is also quite abundant in evidence and research, and provides fantastic biographies on both the well known and "forgotten" Founding Fathers. However, while I found this book to be incredibly intelligent at times, it exudes McClanahan's political agenda. From the first sentence it becomes obvious that McClanahan has a bias towards those he refers to as "liberal" and to the "left". While I appreciate his arguments, and his strong references, I lose respect for him and the validity of his scholarship when he offensively intrudes his paranoid political agenda into his otherwise excellent research. It simply gets somewhat ridiculous and overdone after a while. McClanahan attempts to defend the founding fathers from many current day "myths" and speculations that are not backed by significant proof. However, at the same time McClanahan attempts to discredit many authors and scholars he refers to as "left wing" or "liberal", including current day educators, whom he feels are responsible for perpetrating said myths. While I admire the author's excellent defense of the founders being the greatest generation, I was not impressed the constant attack on his fellow experts, which often echoed of a hint of right wing paranoia. At times, McClanahan writes well, is amusing, and offers excellent research and data when he focuses on history. If only he could simply focus on history and leave his partisanship out of it. I found this book to be a challenging and controversial classroom source that really belongs in a college level political theory class. I would not share his political spin without incorporating an opposing view into the lesson; otherwise I would be perpetuating the ridiculous bias that already has become out of control in our country.

McClanahan's section that addresses many of the unfounded myths that circulate about the founders is an enjoyable read and is fascinating at the same time. In this section McClanahan appears totally evidence based, in that if there is no proof, then do not write that it happened. For example, McClanahan addresses certain myths such as Hamilton being gay, Franklin having an uncountable number of illegitimate children, Jefferson having a sex-slave and Washington having an affair. Many students have asked me about these rumors that they probably picked up on *Bill and Ted's Wicked Awesome website*. It makes me uncomfortable to think that there might be educators, or people who claim to be educators out there that share these stories without sharing the opposing research as well. None of these myths have significant proof, and while the myths are fascinating, McClanahan's explanation of the basis of said myths is far better researched and also gives excellent insight into the humanity of the founders. For example, when discussing the myth that Alexander Hamilton had a gay lover, McClanahan goes into significant detail about the language of the era, as well as the acceptable practice of signing a letter to a fellow soldier in an affectionate manner. He then discusses the absolute lack of proof that exists and that "Hamilton by no means should be the poster child for gay rights groups." (p. 23). McClanahan does an equally thorough job of debunking nine

other popular myths that circulate including the current day belief that Thomas Jefferson kept a concubine sex slave, or at least fathered some of Sally Hemings' children. To him, there is so much contrary evidence that if there is no solid proof, then let it go. McClanahan provides many sources that both prove and disprove this new trend in Jeffersonian history, but consistently makes the point that if we focus too much on the unfounded, that we will lose grasp of the extraordinary accomplishments of Jefferson, and that "the Sally Hemings story is a fine example of irresponsible scholarship based largely on contestable circumstantial evidence." (p. 22).

McClanahan's biographies of the "Big Six" (Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison, and Franklin) are an excellent supplemental reading to our textbooks which only brush the surface of the lives of these great men. For example, McClanahan discusses not only Franklin's contributions to America, but his interesting childhood, and few real life family stories that are bound to appeal to most seventeen year-olds. McClanahan also goes a step further and provides excellent biographies on the "forgotten founders" such as Patrick Henry, John Dickinson, George Mason, Sam Adams, and George Clinton. Again, these too often forgotten men, have wonderful stories to tell, of a human life that just might engage students to realize that the men who created our country were very human, and often likeable. I wish McClanahan would continue writing in this fashion.

Unfortunately, McClanahan often attempts to discredit many scholars he refers to as "politically correct", "left wing" or "liberal", sometimes to the point of appearing paranoid. This part is a shame, for without the political agenda, the book would be an excellent academic resource. For example, on almost every page, the reader will find blurbs titled "Books they don't want us to Read", which usually includes a very controversial anti-liberal essay or book. He makes the excellent point that the founding generation is by far the greatest generation that has ever existed in this country, but then attacks educators when he offensively states that the founders "deserve to be rescued from politically correct textbooks, teachers and professors, who want to dismiss the Founders as a cadre of dead, white sexist, slave-holding males." (p. 2).

Does McClanahan claim that all educators are liberals with an agenda? Do American teachers belittle the founders simply because the standards ignore them? I think McClanahan would irresponsibly answer yes. He states that modern day standards have destroyed our learning of the foundations of this country. He claims that the new national standards pushed forth by a left wing dominated legislature in 1995 have risked more than just content. He claims that the standards passed in 1995 "eliminated Washington and many other Founding Fathers from public school curricula and replaced them with more politically correct individuals and issues...and are light on men who established the United States and heavy on the issues concerning feminism, civil rights, immigration, and American Indians." (p. 3). McClanahan later states that this politically correct approach, which is perpetrated by "liberals" causes a result "that students learn little of the

sagacity of the Founders and their heroic deeds and instead are indoctrinated into a politically correct worldview, where the Founding Fathers and the nation they created are seen as nothing special.” (p.5). McClanahan also goes so far as to accuse scholars such as Howard Zinn, James Loewen and Annette Gordon Reed as having a huge part in this “dumbing down” of the founders.” (p.4). Unfortunately, McClanahan’s intelligent points are belittled by his political spin. While I agree that current day standards do not focus enough on the Founders, it is a far stretch that the “left” is responsible for this.

McClanahan insists that the Founders would be considered ultra-conservative by today’s standards. These points would be excellent for classroom debate, discussion and dissection. First, he insists that the Founders never wanted a true democracy, and gives hundreds of quotes supporting the idea. He also states that the founding fathers would never have approved of the “Living Constitution” or legislating “from the bench”, and current Supreme Court power “being used for partisan political purposes.” (p. 72). He provides an excellent topic for consideration: the Second Amendment. McClanahan provides the original wording of the Second Amendment, and discusses the Conscientious Objector Clause, which was created to appease Quakers. He also claims that the Founding Fathers never would have authorized the government to use the treasury for “pork”. He also provides excellent arguments in favor of this point, when he describes two very famous vetoes: Madison on the Bonus Bill of 1817, and Monroe on the Cumberland Road Bill of 1822. In this section, the reader will find true scholarship, and fascinating unbiased points to really make one think and ponder.

McClanahan’s book is a difficult one to share in the classroom. Perhaps I might carefully share the section titled “Myths, Realities, and the Issues of the Founding Generation” with my students. First off, the titles of the myths alone, such as “Myth: Benjamin Franklin fathered 17 to 80 Illegitimate Children” will get their attention. But as they read, they will be drawn to the human story of Franklin, and his evolution into a great leader. Not only does this section of the book do a fantastic job at debunking the ridiculous myths that circulate on the internet, it goes a step further to explain the basis of the rumors and allows for many teachable moments with respect to discussing social expectations, political schemes, and various lifestyles of the time. Not only will students enjoy reading the real life stories of these great people, they will also learn the human side of the Founders.

McClanahan completes his book with a section titled “What Would the Founding Fathers Do?” I think this section would be an excellent catalyst for encouraging students to learn current events and then analyze how the Founders would deal with said situations given knowledge of their backgrounds. For example, McClanahan attempts to answer how the Founders would deal with the Bail-Out, the War in Iraq, Terrorism, Immigration, The Fed, NATO, and State’s Rights. These topics would be an excellent starting ground for

assigning an essay using Writing Across the Curriculum and most definitely for class discussion. Again, other points of view would be absolutely necessary in order to provide well-rounded resources.

It is a very complicated and risky process when a teacher wants to use literature with a political spin in the classroom. From personal experience, I have found the greatest lessons to be the ones that portray both sides of the argument. In that manner, I would share some of McClanahan's political stances, but not without comparing him to another point of view. However, in a time of the standards based curriculum, I would not dedicate precious time comparing his point of view to that of Zinn or Loewen, for example, with respect to the goals of the current day educational system. Instead, I would focus on the actual scholarship of the works and use the information from a multitude of sources in an attempt to praise and humanize the founders at the same time. In all honesty, I hope that Dr. Thomas McClanahan will keep writing and researching. However, he truly needs leave the political extremism at home. It is hypocritical; it is exactly what he blames "the left", "liberals" and the "politically correct" of doing.

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