

Feel Free to Agree: Promoting American Exceptionalism as Educational Ideology in the Texas Education Knowledge Standards

Rebekah L. Fox*
Ann E. Burnette⁺

*In 2010, the Texas State School Board revised the Texas Essential Knowledge Standards (TEKS) that determine textbook content for Texas's public schools for the next ten years, and immediately drew criticism for their deliberate attempt to inject a "Christian" ideology into the TEKS. At the time, this effort drew nationwide attention because the textbooks that Texas schools decide to use also determines the textbook choices for 48 other states. Most of the criticism leveled against the Board focused on problems associated with privileging Christianity in the classroom. However, through a more in-depth rhetorical analysis of the changes made to the TEKS, we argue that the dominant ideology being forwarded is instead "American Exceptionalism." The TEKS adopted in 2010 are in the process of being revised, and at this 10-year mark, we have a chance to reflect on the relationship between the values taught in the classrooms and the manifestations of those values in society. We argue that this is crucial research, because if Cynthia Dunbar, former Texas SBOE member, and author of *One Nation, Under God* is right in supporting the claim that the philosophy of the classroom in one generation will be the philosophy of the government in the next, we should be concerned about what happens in those classrooms.*

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The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has received both enthusiastic praise and biting criticism for its role in shaping America's public schools. The ACLU has worked to influence curricular content (e.g. *The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes, 1925*), equal access to education for all students (e.g. *Brown v. Board of Education, 1954*), and the protection of students' free speech rights (e.g. *Tinker v. Des Moines, 1969*). Even though the ACLU can point to these landmark cases as successful efforts to protect civil liberties, the struggle to defend these liberties continues. In their critique of the 2010 revisions to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), the ACLU argued:

Both federal and state law, including Texas' Religious Freedom Restoration Act, assure that Texans have the freedom to worship as they choose. Putting public school curriculum decisions in the hands of religious ideologues represents an impermissible delegation of state power to unqualified, sectarian community members¹.

* Rebekah L. Fox (Ph.D., Purdue University) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Texas State University. The author can be reached at rf24@txstate.edu.

⁺ Ann E. Burnette (Ph.D., Northwestern University) is a Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Texas State University. The author can be reached by email at ab11@txstate.edu.

¹ Frank Knaack "The Texas State Board of Education: A Case of Abuse of Power," ACLU Texas, May 13, 2010, 11. <http://aclutx.org/>.

The ACLU has followed the activities of the Texas School Board for years. They argue that beginning in the 1980s, the Board launched a “concerted effort” to “inject their ideological agendas into classrooms across Texas” and that “By the mid- 1990s, these activists began to realize their goal, and thus began the Board’s now long-running abuse of power.”²

They support their claim about this abuse of power by citing changes that support a Christian ideology. For example, in 1994 the Texas School Board had a breast self-exam illustration removed from the health textbooks because they found it “embarrassing” and “objectionable,” they provided medically inaccurate information about how to use a condom, and they had a photo of a woman with a briefcase removed because it “undermined the proper role of women.”³ Especially important to First Amendment scholars, HB 1287 passed in 2007 and stated that public schools may offer an elective course on the Bible, but that, just like all other essential knowledge and skills, it must be approved by the attorney general. The Board ignored the mandate and sneaked the course in as an Independent Study in English. The ACLU argues that this move “effectively left local school districts to determine the standards and content for these courses, making it more likely that such classes will be taught in a manner that violates the Establishment Clause rights of students and parents.”⁴

The ACLU criticizes the 2010 changes as “Going from Bad to Worse”⁵ by presenting an ideologically driven historical narrative, stigmatizing Muslims, presenting a misleading picture of “deviance” in society that conforms to stereotypes about drug use and crime in African American communities but not to actual statistics about crime and drug use, and consistently addressing the “obligations of the people to the state, but fail[ing] to address any corresponding state obligation to the people.”⁶

While we agree with the general criticism by the ACLU that the TEKS have been shaped to reflect religious interests, we also believe that by using the broad label of “Christianity” we, a) may feel like we understand the values that are being espoused without having a thorough understanding of the building blocks of the ideology itself as they are articulated in the TEKS and, b) may only be focusing on one portion of a larger ideological structure. Because of this we conducted an in-depth textual analysis of the 2010-2020 TEKS that reveals American exceptionalism as the larger ideological structure with religion, or at least divine anointment, as a portion of that larger structure. By repositioning religion as one but not the only ideological commitment, we can better understand the historical and social power of the larger ideological system at work.

The TEKS controversy⁷ provides us a chance to reflect on how the values taught in the classroom are inextricably linked to the type of society we are shaping. We do this by connecting the TEKS values to contemporary examples of their manifestation in political and social arenas. We do not try to make a causal connection between the TEKS and these contemporary manifestations, but we submit that if the values of the TEKS were adopted, these are the ways those values are understood on a larger scale.

² Knaack, “Abuse of Power,” 11.

³ Knaack, “Abuse of Power,” 13.

⁴ Knaack, “Abuse of Power,” 13-14.

⁵ Knaack, “Abuse of Power,” 2.

⁶ Knaack, “Abuse of Power,” 17.

⁷ The TEKS were streamlined in 2019 and the new guidelines were amended August 1st of 2020, 45 TexReg 4180. Some of the content has been updated, but the main change was to the process of creating and approving the guidelines. We have not performed a full rhetorical analysis of the streamlined 2020 TEKS, however our essay provides a thorough analysis of the 2010 revisions as a starting point for those interested in the still-unfolding controversy.

The Showdown in Texas

On May 21, 2010, the Texas State Board of Education (SBOE) voted to approve the final guidelines for Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for Social Studies for Texas elementary, middle, and high schools.⁸ The TEKS guidelines determine the curriculum for public school students and thus dictate what subject matter teachers and textbooks will cover. The board implemented this TEKS curriculum in the 2011-2012 academic year and it was in effect for the next ten years.

The debate surrounding the proposed revision to the TEKS curriculum, which had last been revised in 1997, drew state-wide and national attention. The board voted to tentatively approve the TEKS guidelines on March 12, 2010, and then scheduled a second reading and final vote for May. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) posted the proposed revisions on their website (<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index2.aspx?id=3643>). The public had the opportunity to comment on the proposed revisions during a three-day hearing in March prior to the first vote. The board also heard testimony prior to their final vote in May. As the board convened to hear testimony and vote in March and in May, SBOE members, politicians, educators, and media pundits expressed strong concerns about the perceived political bias of the proposed TEKS guidelines. Many of these activists and observers argued that the new guidelines expressed a clear conservative bias; others declined to identify a specific bias, but expressed dismay about the political nature of the process itself.

The debate started at the local level and created ripples that ultimately influenced the national conversation. Initially, some of the most heated debate came from members of the SBOE, whose fifteen members are elected from state districts. At the time, ten of the members were Republican; the other five were Democrats. A *Houston Chronicle* article covered the debate between the board members and reported that board member Mary Helen Berlanga (D-Corpus Christi) criticized the TEKS standards for not including, among other things, the history of the Ku Klux Klan in Texas or the names of Tejanos who died defending the Alamo. She summed up her view of the standards by saying, “Until we are ready to tell the truth about history, we don’t have a good history or a good social studies curriculum for Texas.”⁹ Republican board member Ken Mercer from San Antonio countered that the TEKS standards emphasized “personal responsibility and accountability” and honored “our Founding Fathers, and the military.”¹⁰ Mavis Knight, a Democratic board member from Dallas, declared, “We are perpetrating a fraud on the students of this state.”¹¹

⁸ The TEKS high school curriculum is 80 pages long and consists of nine units of study: United States History Studies Since 1877; World History Studies; World Geography Studies; United States Government; Psychology; Sociology; Special Topics in Social Studies; Social Studies Research Methods; and Economics with Emphasis on the Free Enterprise System and Its Benefits. The in-text citation of the high school guidelines will be (High School, p. #). The TEKS elementary curriculum guidelines are 46 pages long and cover the topics history, geography, economics, government, citizenship, culture, science, technology and society, social studies skills deemed appropriate for each grade. The in-text citation of the elementary guidelines will be (Elementary, p. #). The middle school guidelines are 33 pages long and cover the same topics as the elementary guidelines. The in-text citation of the middle school guidelines will be (Middle, p. #).

⁹ Gary Scharrer, “New standards in history class: Texas board endorses conservative-backed curriculum,” *Houston Chronicle*. March 12, 2010. <https://www.chron.com/>.

¹⁰ Scharrer, “New Standards,” 2010.

¹¹ Scharrer, “New Standards,” 2010.

Leading figures in politics and education also weighed in on the TEKS revisions. Texas House Representative Mike Villareal (D-San Antonio), said, “We don’t want liberal textbooks or conservative textbooks. We want excellent textbooks, written by historians instead of activists.”¹² Then-U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan warned, “We do a disservice to children when we shield them from the truth, just because some people think it is painful or doesn’t fit with their particular views.”¹³ He added, “Parents should be very wary of politicians designing curriculum.”¹⁴ Former Houston school superintendent and U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige testified, “We Texans have allowed ourselves to get into a position where we’ve allowed ideology to drive and define the standards of our Texas curriculum.”¹⁵ He explained, “We’ve swung from liberal to conservative with members of the board. It’s unreasonable to expect you to make decisions without some reference to your ideology, but we’ve swung way too far from one way to the next, and I’m asking you to narrow the swing.”¹⁶ Then-NAACP president Ben Jealous testified, “State board of education members are entitled to their own opinions, but they’re not entitled to their own facts.”¹⁷

Finally, national pundits and reporters put their spin on the debate. After the board’s final vote, CBS news reported, “The Texas State Board of Education adopted a social studies and history curriculum . . . that amends or waters down the teaching of the civil rights movement, religious freedoms, America’s relationship with the U.N. and hundreds of other items.”¹⁸ In the *New York Times*, Sam Tanenhaus observed, “The social studies curriculum recently approved by the Texas Board of Education, which will put a conservative stamp on textbooks, was received less as a pedagogical document than as the latest provocation in America’s seemingly endless culture wars.”¹⁹ Eric Foner, writing in *The Nation*, noted, “Judging from the updated social studies curriculum, conservatives want students to come away from a Texas education with a favorable impression of: women who adhere to traditional gender roles, the Confederacy, some parts of the Constitution, capitalism, the military and religion.”²⁰

Why was there such fervour over one state’s education curriculum? Texas is the second largest textbook market in the nation; only California is larger.²¹ Jeanne Ballantine and Joan Spade note, “As a result the selection process in California and Texas shapes textbooks for the other 48 states.”²² Although smaller states, which represent smaller markets, often find that their textbooks are determined by those used in Texas, even one California legislator took a stand against the TEKS guidelines. California State Senator Leland Yee (D-San Francisco) proposed a bill that

¹² April Castro, “Texas Board Adopts New Social Studies Curriculum,” May 21, 2010. <https://www.boston.com>.

¹³ “Texas Board Adopts Conservative Curriculum: New Social Studies Guidelines Have Made State a Lightning Rod for Ideological Debate,” *CBSNews*, May 21, 2010. <https://www.cbsnews.com/>.

¹⁴ “Texas Board Adopts” 2010.

¹⁵ Brian Thevenot, “Rod Paige Address State Board of Education.” *Texas Tribune*, May 19, 2010. <https://www.texastribune.org/>.

¹⁶ Thevenot, 2010.

¹⁷ Cord Jefferson., “Texas Poised to Whitewash History for Kids,” *The Root*. May 20, 2010. <http://www.theroot.com/>.

¹⁸ “Texas Board Adopts,” 2010.

¹⁹ Sam Tanenhaus, “In Texas Curriculum Fight, Identity Politics Leans Right,” *New York Times*, March 19, 2010. <https://www.nytimes.com/>

²⁰ Eric Foner. (2010). “Twisting History in Texas.” *The Nation*. March 18, 2010. <https://www.thenation.com/>.

²¹ Valerie Strauss. (2010). “California Bill Takes Aim at New Texas Standards,” *Washington Post*, May 22, 2010. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

²² Jeanne Ballantine and Joan Spade, “Social Construction of Knowledge,” in *Schools and Society: A Sociological Approach to Education*, Ed. Jeanne Ballantine and Joan Spade, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008), 181.

would prevent the Texas standards from being used in California.²³ These public comments illustrate the tenor and gravity of the debate.

A Texas high school graduate, regardless of when she or he enters the Texas school system, must demonstrate proficiency according to these guidelines to constitute what the state designates as a complete education. The elementary, middle, and high school guidelines function as the SBOE's terministic screen, that when read together, reveal an ideology of American Exceptionalism.

Terministic Screens: Language Choices and Ideology

As rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke argues, our language choices reveal our worldview: as a result, language cannot be objective or impartial. Burke explains, "Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality."²⁴ Burke calls these reflections, selections, and deflections of reality terministic screens and stresses that they are unavoidable. He argues, "We *must* use terministic screens, since we can't say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another."²⁵ Rhetorical scholars have built upon Burke's definition and demonstrated that terministic screens direct audiences' attention in specific ways. Paul Stob notes that the terms rhetors choose "help us notice certain parts of our experience while encouraging us to neglect others."²⁶ Naomi Rockler argues, "Terministic screens are vocabularies that are particular to members of socio-economic, cultural, professional, or other kinds of groups."²⁷ In the same way, the TEKS guidelines reveal the perspectives of the SBOE's terministic screen. Although the conservative members of the SBOE claim to be simply reflecting reality, the changes made to the guidelines by the SBOE to reflect, select, and deflect reality like any terministic screen.

Since all rhetors choose symbols to construct arguments, terministic screens are at work in all rhetorical forms. Rhetorical critics have analyzed how terministic screens function in rhetorical texts as diverse as public policy debate, organizational research methods, popular comics, debates over television commercials, and the translation of novels to film²⁸. Terministic screens are at once the lens through which audiences "see" reality; terministic screens also constitute the worldview

²³ Strauss, "California Bill Takes Aim," 2010

²⁴ Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 1966), 45.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 50

²⁶ Paul Stob, "'Terministic Screens,' Social Constructionism, and the Language of Experience: Kenneth Burke's Utilization of William James," *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 41 (2008): 137.

²⁷ Naomi Rockler, "Race, Whiteness, 'Lightness,' and Relevance: African American and European American Interpretations of *Jump Start* and *The Boondocks*," *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 19 (2002): 398-418.

²⁸ See Edward Schiappa, "The Rhetoric of Nukespeak." *Communication Monographs*, 56 (1989): 253-272; Catherine Fox, "Beyond the 'Tyranny of the Real': Revisiting Burke's Pentad as Research Method for Professional Communication." *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 11 (2002): 365-388; Naomi Rockler. "Race, Whiteness, 'Lightness,' and Relevance: African American and European American Interpretations of *Jump Start* and *The Boondocks*." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 19 (2002) 398-418.; Naomi Rockler, "Entertainment, the Personal, and the Political: Therapeutic Rhetoric and Popular Culture Controversies." *The Communication Review*, 6 (2003): 97-115; Wayne McMullen and Martha Solomon. "The Politics of Adaptation: Steven Spielberg's Appropriation of *The Color Purple*." *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 14 (1994): 158-174.

an audience derives through symbol choices. Terministic screens cause “group members [to] understand aspects of ‘reality’ in different ways because each terministic vocabulary encourages members to ‘select’ portions of ‘reality’ while ‘deflecting’ others.”²⁹ As audiences interpret and construct their realities through these screens, different “realities” emerge. In this way, notes Fox, “language is a site of struggle for competing representations of reality and subjectivity.”³⁰ Because language is a site of this kind of struggle, rhetors can influence how audiences perceive “reality” by recognizing and taking advantage of the transformative capacity of language.

These various and competing interpretations of reality influence political debates. Rockler notes, “Terministic screens are ideological in that the vocabularies of terministic screens can promote or challenge cultural norms or power structures.”³¹ Terministic screens determine how political leaders and citizens understand, frame, and talk about issues. Murray Edelman and David Zarefsky have analyzed the ways in which political language determines reality.³² Recognizing the hegemonic function of language, Edward Schiappa argues, “those having considerable influence over the choice of symbols used to define ‘reality’ have significant power to control not only what is understood as ‘real’ to much of the polity, but also what attitudes and actions towards different aspects of ‘reality’ are appropriate.”³³

The TEKS guidelines function as terministic screens for the teachers who must follow the guidelines, the students whose education is explicitly framed by the guidelines, and the citizens of Texas who are observers, supporters, or critics of the guidelines. The TEKS guidelines accomplish laying the groundwork for American exceptionalism by adding and deleting subject matter in several prevalent areas including social studies, civics, economics, history and studies of human communities.

American Exceptionalism: A Familiar Concept and Common Themes

In their edited book, *American Exceptionalism: Champions and Challengers*, David Weiss and Jason A. Edwards argue “American exceptionalism is the distinct belief that the United States is unique, if not superior, when compared to other nations.”³⁴ They analyze the work of those who evoke American exceptionalism strategically, and those who critique it actively. They trace the rhetoric of American exceptionalism to as early as 1630 in the colonies, and follow it through the works of authors such as Thomas Paine, Alexis de Tocqueville, Herman Melville, as well as more contemporary expressions. They argue that champions of American exceptionalism typically believe that:

the United States continues to move in a constant upward pattern, remaining the beacon of light in the darkness and the defender of the rights of man as long as the nation exists. Moreover, America and Americans are exceptional because they are charged with saving the world from itself; at the same time, America and Americans must maintain a high level of devotion to this destiny.³⁵

²⁹ Stob, “Terministic Screens,” 137.

³⁰ Fox, “Beyond the ‘Tyranny of the Real,’” 368.

³¹ Rockler, “Race, Whiteness,” 400.

³² See Murray Edelman, *Political Language: Words That Succeed and Policies that Fail* (New York: Academic Press, 1977); and David Zarefsky, *President Johnson’s War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1986).

³³ Schiappa. “The Rhetoric of Nukespeak,” 254.

³⁴ Weiss and Edwards, 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

On the other hand, Weiss and Edwards identify those who challenge the “desirability, relevance, and even the validity of its continuing existence” based on negative experiences related to the Vietnam war, the accumulation of debt, feelings of entitlement, and a “penchant for empire.”³⁶ They cite Andrew Bacevich’s work on American exceptionalism:

*In our pursuit of freedom, we have grown a penchant for empire. Americans, believing that our values are universal, have pursued the global projection of those values at the cost of our domestic well-being. We have tried to shape the world in our image but have only imperilled our own existence with growing debt. Moreover, Americans have grown complacent feeling entitled to things, where once they had to work.*³⁷

Other critiques include continuing domestic problems around socio-cultural issues, the isolation that stems from pursuing wars without the endorsement of other countries, and disconnection from larger global movements. Weiss and Edwards argue “American exceptionalism does not allow us to be truly part of the solution to global problems; rather, we come up with a patchwork of solutions that merely forestall but do not prevent or solve greater problems down the road.”³⁸

Overall, their book explores American exceptionalism in political discourse, where it receives the most attention in academic scholarship, but they also locate it in religious rhetoric, literature, newspaper editorials, sports, television, and other texts. They write:

we aim not only to extend the body of American exceptionalism literature but also to broaden its scope, showing how the rhetorics of American exceptionalism, as offered by both challenges and champions, have become woven into the fabric of the social, cultural, recreational, and spiritual pursuits—that is to say, the daily lives—of a wide variety of Americans.³⁹

Our current analysis suggests we should add elementary, middle, and high school textbook guidelines to this list as sites to explore expressions of this ideology in the daily lives of young Americans. We think this is important because much of the work that explores American exceptionalism has focused on artifacts that would typically be read or viewed by adults, but less so for young adults, and even less for children.

Common American exceptionalism themes

Although there are many definitions of American exceptionalism, we have identified salient dimensions of the concept for the purpose of this analysis. These common themes include a *unique society* (both people and land⁴⁰) that is the *result of a divine design or an orderly and progressive*

³⁶ Ibid., 3.

³⁷ Andrew Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC) in *Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism: Critical Essays*, ed. Jason Edwards and David Weiss (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011).

³⁸ Weiss and Edwards, 4.

³⁹ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁰ Although the land of the United States is a common feature of American exceptionalism mostly absent from the TEKS. Surprisingly, the TEKS seem to deflect attention from the natural resources that are commonly understood as strongly shaping our national identity. The TEKS mainly focus attention on how humans have had and can have

historical destiny. Below, we provide more detail about what kinds of characterizations make up each of these themes.

A Unique Society

The notion of a unique society can be broken into two dimensions: the people and the land itself. A powerful part of American exceptionalism is the characterization of Americans as having a can-do spirit, common sense, know-how, and ingenuity that sets them apart from other peoples. In addition to these personal characteristics, the American people and American institutions are also characterized as the apotheosis of civilization. Part of the unique nature of the American people is the notion of a wide diversity of people who are united (through proclamation or experience) under one banner. This dimension speaks to the power of the mythos of American exceptionalism, which is the flexibility and ambiguity of the concept that allow a variety of applications. American exceptionalism can be true and false at the same time depending on who is articulating it and for what purposes.

America's institutions fall into this category. They include democracy as it is understood through founding documents, the free market, an independent judiciary with an extensive court system, public education, and even social structuration including institutions such as slavery.

Divine Design or Orderly and Progressive Historical Destiny

The unique people in a unique place did not arise based on chance; rather, America is the result of divine design or historical destiny. This idea suggests that the American people are not necessarily choosing to act in certain ways, but that they are called to act in certain ways. The religious dimensions of this concept suggest that even if Americans falter, through the process of sin and salvation, they are able to regain their footing. They are able to emerge, through all trials, the chosen people, because that is their path. As long as the people are pious, the divine will be pleased and allow prosperity to continue. Put another way, "Piety permits the expression of national pride."⁴¹ This national pride is what lays the groundwork for interventionist activity on a global scale, or as Lindsay Calhoun describes it, "America, once a colony, became a colonizer."⁴² In the next section, these themes will be used as a framework to organize and present the relevant sections of the TEKS.

American Exceptionalism in the TEKS

The TEKS shape important social studies issues such as what the significant events in American history are, who has contributed substantially to the development of American society, and what it means to be an American. Politically conservative members of the SBOE explained that they

positive effects on the land. One change to the area of studies of human communities requires students to move beyond recognizing the "consequences" of human modification to the environment to recognizing the "positive and negative consequences" of "human modification of the physical environment" (Elementary, 16, 32).

⁴¹ Karen Walker, "Resolving Rhetorical Tensions" in *Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism: Critical Essays*, ed. Jason Edwards and David Weiss (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 42.

⁴² Lindsay Calhoun, "The Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site: Challenge to and Reification of American Exceptionalism" in *Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism: Critical Essays*, ed. Jason Edwards and David Weiss (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 157.

were answering these questions in ways that would “balance” the writing of such historical accounts within a liberal education system in order to reflect a more accurate reality. Republican board member Don McLeroy argued, “There is a bias,” adding, “I think the left has a real problem seeing their own bias.”⁴³

In each of the subjects covered in the guidelines (history, human communities, economics, psychology, etc.) the TEKS function as terministic screens that call students’ attention to certain aspects of reality while diverting attention from other aspects. Of course, as Kenneth Burke argues, the presentation of a topic, such as history or social studies is necessarily the selection and forwarding of one possible worldview among many. In fact, the very naming of these topics directs attention and suggests importance. Kenneth Burke reminds us “the nature of our terms affects the nature of our observations, in the sense that the terms direct attention to one field rather than to another.”⁴⁴

Via critical tools such as the agon method, or observation of the paradox of substance, we’ve determined that in some instances, it is clearer to point to what the guidelines suggest we do NOT value, rather than what we do value. This is likely because many of the significant changes to the 2010 version of the TEKS were actually *deletions*, which serve to deflect the student’s attention but by doing so, attracted ours.

However, we begin this analysis by featuring a prominent addition to the TEKS: a requirement to the section on citizenship that recommended students understand “the concept of American Exceptionalism” itself.⁴⁵ Because they explicitly define and characterize American exceptionalism, we begin this section by analyzing this framing. However, we argue that the bulk of the common themes associated with American exceptionalism emerge in sections *not* explicitly devoted to the topic, and their exploration reveal how the ideology manifests in seemingly unsuspecting topic areas.

The SBOE Defines American Exceptionalism

To support American exceptionalism, the TEKS document lists “Alexis de Tocqueville’s five values crucial to America’s success as a constitutional republic: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire.”⁴⁶ These values that the Board identifies as essentially American also reinforce the SBOE’s interpretation of a constitutional republic. In addition, these values support the version of the “American dream” expressed elsewhere in the TEKS guideline where the SBOE requires students to “discuss the role of American entrepreneurs such as Bill Gates, Sam Walton, Estee Lauder, Robert Johnson, Lionel Sosa, and millions of small business entrepreneurs who have achieved the American dream.”⁴⁷ Underpinned by de Tocqueville’s value of laissez-faire, the American dream is exclusively economic.

The TEKS guidelines also require students to be able to “describe how the American values identified by Alexis de Tocqueville are different and unique from those of other nations.”⁴⁸ In this way the SBOE reinforces the assumption that the exceptionalism of the United States rests in part on its uniqueness. The document completes its definition of American exceptionalism by holding

⁴³ James McKinley, “Texas Conservatives Seek Deeper Stamp on Texts.” *New York Times*, March 11, 2010. www.nytimes.com/.

⁴⁴ Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, 46.

⁴⁵ “High School,” p. 11.

⁴⁶ “High School,” 11.

⁴⁷ “High School,” 10.

⁴⁸ “High School,” 12.

that students should be able to “describe U.S. citizens as people from numerous places throughout the world who hold a common bond in standing for certain self-evident truths.”⁴⁹ American exceptionalism is thus based on “self-evident truths.” The fact that these “truths” are “self-evident” deflects the need to examine critically or even articulate the nature of these “truths.” In addition, the suggestion is that Americans, no matter their background, recognize these truths and feel the same way about them. This recognition therefore constitutes an important national bond. Also, this definition suggests that anyone who wishes to be American harbours an automatic appreciation for these qualities.

The SBOE added another requirement in the history section that reflects the nature of American exceptionalism. It recommended that students be able to “describe the optimism of the many immigrants who sought a better life in America.”⁵⁰ While this may characterize one dimension of people who seek to repatriate in the United States, it also obfuscates other issues related to immigration to the U.S. The TEKS language directs attention away from any hardships, including war, genocide, political oppression, natural disaster, or economic difficulty, which immigrants to America might be seeking to escape. This statement also presumes that the most salient characteristic of immigrants is “optimism,” as opposed to, for instance, determination, ambition, desperation, or the willingness to sacrifice a higher standard of living for an opportunity to participate in the American dream. Finally, this statement raises pedagogical concerns about how students might observe and operationalize “optimism.” What do optimistic immigrants look like? And how should students recognize, process, and articulate the “optimism” of immigrants?

The Rest of the TEKS Reveal American Exceptionalism Themes

By examining the explicit coverage of American exceptionalism in the TEKS we can gain a very deliberately created frame of the topic that primarily focuses on positive qualities, while ignoring the potential negative ones. In this section, we examine the guidelines that do not explicitly discuss American exceptionalism, but forward its values nonetheless, through articulating a unique people, in a unique place, on a chosen path.

Who are the Unique People?

While the SBOE mostly added material to the topic of history, they, for the most part, deleted material from the study of human communities. The deletions within the studies of human communities of the elementary and middle school guidelines tend to focus attention on ethnocentric and egocentric standards, further reifying the notion of a chosen people.

The deletions in the area of cultural studies narrow the scope of what students were required to know about other countries and customs. Students were required to “understand ethnic and/or cultural celebrations of the local community and other communities” but the SBOE chose to delete the phrase “in other nations.”⁵¹ Selecting to use the phrase “other communities” instead of “other nations” or “other world communities” trains students to think locally instead of globally. Students were required to “explain the significance of various ethnic and/or cultural celebrations in the local community and other communities” but no longer “St. Patrick’s Day, Cinco de Mayo and

⁴⁹ “High School,” 12.

⁵⁰ “High School,” 4.

⁵¹ “Elementary,” 24.

Kwanzaa.”⁵² Further, students were required to “Identify ways in which people in the local community and other communities meet their needs for government, education, communication, transportation, and recreation,” again deleting the phrase “around the world” that would encourage a global perspective.⁵³ It is not until the middle school guidelines when students are asked to “understand the similarities and differences within and among cultures in various world societies” and the word “world” is only used once in this way.⁵⁴ Although the word “community” can simply mean any body of unified individuals, it is more often used to denote a smaller unit of unified individuals than a nation or world region. This language choice, therefore, works to focus attention on American only, or at least more localized communities.

Another notable deletion in the area of geography functions in a similar way. Students were required to “locate places of significance, including the local community, Texas, the state capital, the U.S. capital, major cities in Texas, the coast of Texas, Canada, Mexico and the United States on maps on globes” but no longer “and selected countries.”⁵⁵ Again, the requirements deflect a global perspective.

Another addition made to the area of citizenship focuses attention on the promotion of America as an individualistic culture. It specifies that students must be able to “Identify how selected customs, symbols, and celebrations reflect an American *love of* individualism, inventiveness, and freedom.”⁵⁶ The addition of the term “love” to this guideline is a bold, emotionally charged language choice that speaks loudly concerning what Americans should value. If love of individualism is the selected value it necessarily deflects attention from collective values or collective responsibility.

This value is further emphasized by another deletion made by the SBOE when they defined characteristics of good citizenship. The guidelines require students to “identify characteristics of good citizenship including truthfulness, justice, equality, respect for oneself and others, responsibility in daily life, and participation in government by educating oneself about the issues, respectfully holding public officials to their word and voting.”⁵⁷ The SBOE chose to delete “respect and responsibility for the common good” further focusing attention on individualistic values.⁵⁸

The SBOE also made an interesting deletion when identifying how citizens should participate in government. The guideline requires students to “Identify how citizens participate in their own governance through staying informed of what public officials are doing, providing input to them and volunteering to participate in government functions.”⁵⁹ The phrases “holding them accountable” and “voting” were deleted from this list, which promotes deference to government officials and emphasizes that citizens who attempt to hold government officials accountable are acting inappropriately.

Another notable change about citizenship asks students to understand what kind of person is regarded as an American historical figure. This guideline reads, “The student understands how historical figures, patriots and good citizens helped shape the community, state, and nation.”⁶⁰ Previously this list did not include the language “patriots and good citizens” but indicated that

⁵² “Elementary” 25.

⁵³ “Elementary” 22.

⁵⁴ “Middle,” 8.

⁵⁵ “Elementary,” 15.

⁵⁶ “Elementary,” 17.

⁵⁷ “Elementary,” 10, 17, 24.

⁵⁸ “Elementary,” 10, 17, 24.

⁵⁹ “Elementary,” 17.

⁶⁰ “Elementary,” 3, 8.

“ordinary people” could make worthy contributions.⁶¹ This change suggests that those individuals who were responsible for shaping America did not just accomplish extraordinary things, but were themselves extraordinary, further contributing to the idea that America’s development was accomplished by exceptional individuals, not just anyone.

The American People/American Institutions

While American exceptionalism presumes that the U.S. acts from pure motives, it often selects the view that other actors on the international stage act from impure or even evil motives and that their behavior may well undermine U.S. interests. Correspondingly, the SBOE changed language within the history section to characterize other parties’ behavior more harshly. According to the TEKS document, students are expected to identify “Italian, German, and Japanese dictatorships and their aggression” as “reasons for U.S. involvement in World War II.”⁶² Similarly, in the guideline for students’ knowledge of the Cold War, the SBOE changed the phrase “Soviet expansion” to “Soviet aggression.”⁶³ The board added another requirement that students be able to “evaluate efforts by global organizations to undermine U.S. sovereignty through the use of treaties.”⁶⁴ The SBOE also voted to delete a requirement to have students “explain the origins and impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on global politics.”⁶⁵ Instead, the TEKS requirement includes “Palestinian terrorism” and “the growth of al Qaeda” as examples of “radical Islamic fundamentalism” students must be able to summarize. The TEKS language symbolically deflects Israel as a possible contributor to Middle East conflict and identifies Palestinian interests solely in terms of “terrorism,” on par with al Qaeda.

In many cases, the State Board of Education requires elementary and middle school students to be able to identify and discuss the motives of historical figures. On the face of it, the requirement that students be able to identify such motives may seem like an opportunity to explore competing goods or narratives. However, these motives, when articulated, are consistent with a view of human civilization that privileges free enterprise and simplistic piety. Elementary school students must be able to “summarize the motivations for European exploration and settlement of Texas, including economic opportunity, competition, and the desire for expansion.”⁶⁶ They must also be able to explain the “economic motivations” of empresarios such as Stephen F. Austin and Martin de Leon.⁶⁷ The elementary school guidelines select motives related to capitalism and deflect any other types of motives. Similarly, grade school students must be able to “explain when, where, and why groups of people explored, colonized, and settled in the United States, including the search for religious freedom and economic gain.”⁶⁸ By middle school, the requirements also select religious beliefs as motives for historical figures. The board added “religious” in the requirement that middle school students must be able to “compare political, economic, religious, and social reasons

⁶¹ Elementary,” 3, 8.

⁶² “High School,” 5.

⁶³ “High School,” 6.

⁶⁴ “High School,” 8.

⁶⁵ “High School,” 23.

⁶⁶ “Elementary,” 29.

⁶⁷ “Elementary,” 29.

⁶⁸ “Elementary,” 39.

for the establishment of the 13 English colonies.”⁶⁹ Moreover, the board added “virtue” to “religion” in stating that middle school students must be able to “describe how religion and virtue contributed to the growth of representative government in the American colonies.”⁷⁰

In outlining the requirements for American history between 1898 and 1920, the SBOE recast American “imperialism” as “expansionism” to describe American activity in the early 20th century as well as to characterize U.S. acquisition of Guam, Hawaii, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico.⁷¹ The SBOE also removed “propaganda” as one of the “reasons for U.S. entry” into World War I.⁷² These language choices are consistent with the assumption that, because it is exceptional, America’s motives in world affairs need not be questioned.

Despite the suggestion that there may be other narratives that could contribute to U.S. and Texas history, there is one topic in which those possible narratives are utterly dismissed: slavery. Slavery is a subject in its own right in only one place. In the middle school requirements for Economics students must be able to “explain reasons for the development of the plantation system, the transatlantic slave trade, and the spread of slavery.”⁷³ All the other mentions of slavery in the requirements for History, Social Studies, and Culture, are limited to slavery as one of several causal agents in historical events. The document selects slavery as a contributing factor to events, but deflects an examination of slavery as an institution or practice. Thus, in elementary school, students are required to identify “sectionalism, states’ rights, and slavery” as causes of the Civil War.⁷⁴ They must also be able to “explain the reasons for the involvement of Texas in the Civil War, such as states’ rights, slavery, sectionalism, and tariffs.”⁷⁵ Middle school students are also required to “explain the causes of the Civil War, including, sectionalism, states’ rights, and slavery.”⁷⁶ The document rigorously circumscribes the subject of slavery, which is thereby contained as a discreet historical chapter whose horrors are not even mentioned, much less explored.

The TEKS further define America through other common institutions, one of the most important being a reframing of capitalism. The requirement that students “identify the role of the U.S. free enterprise system within the parameters of this course and understand that this system may also be referenced as capitalism or the free market system” is found in six of the nine required units of study, with the exceptions of Psychology, Special Topics in Social Studies, and Social Studies Research Methods.⁷⁷ The wording of the requirement suggests that the reader may encounter “capitalism” or “free market system” in the guidelines, although almost every use of the terms “capitalism” or “free market system” has been eliminated within the guidelines and replaced by “free enterprise system.” The decision to equivocate these terms arguably conflates the conditions for competition (free enterprise) with competition itself (capitalism); however, the positive framing of free enterprise, in each instance of its use, reveals the deflection of criticism of the system itself. For example, within the U.S. History since 1877 unit, students had been required to “analyze the scientific discoveries and technological innovations including those in transportation and communication, have changed the standard of living in the United States.”⁷⁸ Within the new guidelines,

⁶⁹ “Middle,” 24.

⁷⁰ “Middle,” 24.

⁷¹ “High School,” 4.

⁷² “High School,” 4.

⁷³ “Middle,” 27.

⁷⁴ “Elementary,” 40.

⁷⁵ “Elementary,” 15.

⁷⁶ “Middle,” 26.

⁷⁷ “High School,” 2.

⁷⁸ “High School,” 13.

students must “analyze how scientific discoveries, technological innovations *and the application of these by the free enterprise system* [emphasis added], including those in transportation and communication *improve* [emphasis added] the standard of living in the United States.”⁷⁹ Although many technological innovations could have been included, in what seems like a move to persuade the high school audience, the guidelines also require students to “understand how the free enterprise system drives technological innovation and its application in the marketplace such as cell phones, inexpensive personal computers, and global positioning products.”⁸⁰ In the context of the new guidelines, the free market system has not only been responsible for U.S. economic success, never mind the imbalance of power and chasm between rich and poor it creates, students must also recognize the “historical origins of contemporary economic systems and *the benefits of free enterprise in world history* [emphasis added].”⁸¹

Just as students are not required to discuss or analyze the drawbacks of the free enterprise system in comparison to other economic models, they are required only to “describe Ronald Reagan’s leadership in domestic and international policies including Reaganomics and Peace Through Strength,” but in a surprising critical turn, students must “compare the New Deal policies *and its opponents’ approaches* [emphasis added] to resolving the economic effects of the Great Depression.”⁸² To support the benefits of free enterprise, the guidelines also suggest that economic success has been historically linked to a reduction in taxation and a decrease in government involvement in economics.”⁸³ For example, within the unit “United States Government” students must “understand how government taxation and regulation can serve as restrictions to private enterprise,” but not how taxation for the public good provides for schools and roads, or how government restrictions can serve to protect the citizenry against unfair pricing, or damaging monopolies.⁸⁴

The removal of “capitalism” and insertion of “free enterprise” within the TEKS guidelines could suggest a simple correction of an inaccurate term, or an ideological move to avoid the negative criticism the word capitalism has acquired over time. Either way, this sensitive linguistic move is reserved for the description of U. S. economic systems while alternative economic systems are described in historically fixed terms. For example, within World History Studies, students are required to “formulate generalizations on how economic freedom improved the human condition, based on students’ knowledge of the benefits of free enterprise in Europe’s Commercial Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and 20th century free-market economies, *compared to communist command communities* [emphasis added],” and to “explain why communist command economies collapsed in competition with free-market economies at the end of the 20th century.”⁸⁵

The TEKS articulate the kinds of personal qualities that Americans should embrace and how Americans, as a people, are to be characterized, in the past, present, and future. Based on the TEKS, students should narrow their focus to learn about their local community, but not those “around the world” nor should they worry about identifying “selected countries” on a globe. They should also cultivate a love for individualism and define good citizenship as part of that individualism instead of something that is “for the common good.” Good citizens should show deference to government officials, not by “holding them accountable,” but by simply staying informed. The final theme in

⁷⁹ “High School,” 13.

⁸⁰ “High School,” 14.

⁸¹ “High School,” 24.

⁸² “High School,” 10.

⁸³ “High School,” 9.

⁸⁴ “High School,” 43.

⁸⁵ “High School,” 25.

this section, that American historical figures were “patriots” rather than “ordinary people” powerfully suggest a form of American exceptionalism wherein historical figures are elevated, and praised without critique.

The American people are characterized as *moving* rather than *acting*, particularly in discussions of relations with Native peoples. This characterization functions hegemonically to naturalize events and actions in ways that erase American choices and agency. The inclusion of selected women and people of color and the enthymematic conclusion that slavery is behind us selects the interpretation that history is an orderly progression of events that has resulted in improved situations for Texans and Americans. While the TEKS committee did expand the list of topics and people to be covered in relation to historical events and periods, these additions in the TEKS underscored a narrative that history is orderly and melioristic. These selections and deflections paradoxically suggest that Americans, as individuals and as a people, are unique and exceptional in their contributions, and yet when the topic turns to something that sheds a negative light on American, the people and their powerful choices are all but erased.

Divine Design or Orderly, Progressive, Historical Destiny

Although they SBOE members were unapologetically clear in the discourse surrounding the revisions to the TEKS about their goal to insert a Christian ideology, the document downplays any explicit mention of Christianity or divine design. As such, we have to look below the surface language of the TEKS to understand the values they associate with “Christianity.”

Definitional Interpretation of the U.S. Constitution

The SBOE made changes throughout the high school curriculum that express a definitional view of the U.S. Constitution, which contributes to the notion that history is not malleable and up for interpretation but destined on a path even through its documents. In this view, the Constitution is a foundational document that forms the basis for all laws and judicial rulings. Of course, many, if not most, Americans view the Constitution as a fundamental text. In the SBOE view, however, the Constitution is not a living document that Americans might interpret differently, particularly as society changes. Rather, the Constitution is an unerring precept that must be followed and upheld. The TEKS guidelines present interpretation of the Constitution as a deviation from its meaning, and thus a failure to uphold it. In this way the guidelines deflect the history and value of contested readings of the Constitution, which further solidifies the idea that history has a clear and orderly unfolding.

In the United States history unit, the TEKS guidelines require that students be able to “analyze and evaluate the text, intent, meaning, and importance of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, including the Bill of Rights.”⁸⁶ This language deflects the rhetorical exigences that influenced these documents and thus divorces them from historical considerations. These documents exist as definitional texts, whose “intent, meaning, and importance” *can* be identified.

In every pedagogical unit of the TEKS guidelines, the SBOE changed the description of the United States from a “democratic society” to a “constitutional republic.” Moreover, in each of these units, the TEKS guidelines require students to “understand that a constitutional republic is a representative form of government whose representatives derive their authority from the consent

⁸⁶ “High School,” 3.

of the governed, serve for an established tenure, and are sworn to uphold the constitution.”⁸⁷ This definition appears, verbatim, in all nine units of the high school TEKS guidelines. Each time this definition appears, the guidelines also require students to “identify and discuss how the actions of U.S. citizens and the local, state, and federal governments have either met or failed to meet the ideals espoused in the founding documents.”⁸⁸ These passages emphasize that the highest duty for American citizens and their elected representatives is to uphold, rather than to interpret or amend, the Constitution. The TEKS guidelines set forth a binary possibility for responses to the Constitution: one can either meet or fail to meet its ideals. Selecting language based on idealism locks the Constitution into one preferred reading, which further affirms the idea of a destined historical trajectory.

This binary framework is also evident in the unit “U.S. History Studies Since 1877,” which requires students to “evaluate constitutional change in terms of strict construction vs. judicial interpretation.”⁸⁹ Again, there are only two ways of reading the Constitution: upholding it or interpreting it. By setting “strict construction” in opposition to “judicial interpretation,” the document deflects the idea that “strict construction” is, in fact, a school of Constitutional interpretation. Later in the section on United States Government, the SBOE added the requirement that students “analyze selected issues raised by judicial activism and judicial restraint.”⁹⁰ Once again, Americans can either follow (through “judicial restraint”) or interpret (through “judicial activism”) the Constitution. Moreover, the language of the TEKS requirements posits that “judicial restraint,” unlike “judicial activism,” does not involve any assumptions or claims.

The assumption that the Constitution is a document that Americans can either uphold or interpret is more than a general civics lesson. This assumption affects how the TEKS document invites students to understand specific events and legislative efforts. The guidelines require students to understand the Great Society, affirmative action, and Title IX, and the “unintended consequences of each.”⁹¹ The document does not enumerate what these “unintended consequences” are. This linguistic construction, however, suggests that these unintended consequences are negative and that no American would intentionally “misinterpret” the Constitution to bring about unintended or negative results. On the surface, an “unintended consequence” seems to disrupt the idea of an orderly, progressive historical destiny, but part of the ethos of the American People, as laid out in the themes of American exceptionalism, is the idea that Americans are able to recognize when they have erred and right their wrongs. The SBOE positions themselves as ushering this process along to return order.

Reductionist Reframing of the Struggle for Civil Rights

Although it seems clear that the authors of the TEKS guidelines felt the need to include the social, political, and economic contributions of women and minorities, the framing of these contributions often diminishes their importance or undercuts the need for the contributions, suggesting that the struggle for equality was simple and is behind us. For example, within the unit “United States

⁸⁷ “High School,” 3, 17, 31, 41, 49, 56, 64, 67, 72.

⁸⁸ “High School,” 3, 17, 32, 41, 49, 56, 64, 67, 72.

⁸⁹ “High School,” 11.

⁹⁰ “High School,” 44.

⁹¹ “High School,” 10.

History since 1877” students had been required to “explain actions taken to expand economic opportunities and political rights in American society.”⁹² The guidelines were amended to read “explain actions taken *by people from racial, ethnic, gender and religious groups* [emphasis added] to expand economic opportunities and political rights in American society.”⁹³ But in the final draft, the guideline was amended to read “explain actions taken by people to expand economic opportunities and political rights, including those for racial, ethnic, and religious minorities as well as women, in American society.”⁹⁴ The final guideline completely erases the notion that the expansion of opportunities was made by racial, ethnic, gender, and religious minorities themselves.

Some of the guidelines express a need to include the contributions of “all races and genders” but include examples of only men or in some cases, only Caucasian men. For example, students are required to “discuss the importance of congressional Medal of Honor recipients, including individuals of all races and genders such as Vernon J. Baker, Alvin York and Roy Benavidez.”⁹⁵ Conspicuously left off of this list is the only female recipient of the medal, Mary Edwards Walker. The criticism being levelled at this type of guideline structure is not that the list is incomplete; it’s that the introductory phrase “including individuals of all races and genders” seems to suggest inclusion, while the actual individuals listed do not represent a diverse group. In fact, the list includes Alvin York, a Caucasian male from Pall Mall, Tennessee, whose contributions should be honored, but not in a list framed to honor racial and gender diversity.

Within the unit “United States History Since 1877” one particular guideline requires students to explain the significance of certain years as turning points in American History. With the exception of “U.S. lands on moon” and “Cold War Ends” everything else on the list is considered tragic—“World War I,” “The Great Depression Begins,” “Terrorist Attacks on World Trade Center and the Pentagon,” “Spanish-American War,” etc.—except the “election of the first black president, Barack Obama.”⁹⁶ The inclusion of Obama’s election within the TEKS guidelines appears to move in the direction of equality, but because it appears on a list of mostly American tragedies, it is hard to determine what message to take. Further, although many Americans would agree that the election of the first African American President is symbolically important, to call it a turning point subtly reinforces tokenism, and suggests that we have turned in a direction where racism is behind us.

We see a similar change to one of the “Sociology” guidelines concerning institutional racism. Students are now asked to “explain instances of institutional racism in American society,” as opposed to “explain institutional racism in American society.”⁹⁷ The former guideline positioned institutional racism as a force still at work in American society, whereas the requirement to explain instances of institutional racism seems to suggest that these instances are discrete and in the past.

The selection and framing of civil rights leaders include a description of the “role of individuals such as governors George Wallace, Orval Faubus, and Lester Maddox and groups, including the congressional bloc of southern Democrats, that sought to maintain the status quo.”⁹⁸ This guideline glosses over differences between conservative southern Democrats of the time, and their more

⁹² “High School,” 13.

⁹³ “High School,” 13.

⁹⁴ “High School,” 13.

⁹⁵ “High School,” 13.

⁹⁶ “High School,” 4.

⁹⁷ “High School,” 60.

⁹⁸ “High School,” 7.

liberal counterparts, and it is the only mention of either major political party by name in the guidelines. Moreover, this passage deflects that the “status quo” the congressional bloc sought to defend was de jure racial segregation.

Students are required only to describe the contributions of certain individuals and groups, whereas students are required to describe and critique others. The guidelines require students to be able to “describe the causes, key organizations, and individuals of the conservative resurgence of the late 1980s and 1990s, including Phyllis Schlafly, the Contract with America, the Heritage Foundation, the Moral Majority, and the National Rifle Association,” without the requirement to offer criticism. Conversely, when students are required to offer critique, it is when they are asked to “identify actions of government and the private sector such as the Great Society, affirmative action, and Title IX to create economic opportunities for citizens and *analyze the unintended consequences of each* [emphasis added]”⁹⁹ or to “discuss the solvency of long-term entitlement programs such as Social Security and Medicare.”¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, although students must be able to describe Phyllis Schlafly’s “key” contributions, there is no guideline that requires students to describe or critique any of the feminist movement(s) or the Equal Rights Amendment that Schlafly’s STOP-ERA group fought.

By de-emphasizing struggle and dissent, diversity and difference, interdependence, nuance, and uncertainty, the TEKS forward a view of America as having a clean and orderly past. The TEKS guidelines in this section convey some specific perceptions of American exceptionalism. First, students must only concern themselves with whether or not they are “upholding” the U.S. Constitution; they don’t need to engage in critical analysis of the document or the intent of its authors. Second, students can consider the history of civil rights in the United States as a melioristic and inevitable story that has resulted in a state of equality for all. Third, students can assume that capitalism is synonymous with free enterprise and that capitalism naturally and freely creates equal economic opportunity for all. The terministic screens of the TEKS guidelines do not create a space for debating these contentions. In this way, the TEKS guidelines, while ostensibly seeking to celebrate American culture, close off the kind of critical analysis and debate that have historically challenged and strengthened American institutions.

Discussion and Conclusion

Former SBOE chairman Don McLeroy freely admitted in an interview given during the initial development of the 2010 TEKS revisions that he is a “Christian Fundamentalist” working to bring Christianity into the coverage of American History. He argued:

Textbooks are mostly the product of the liberal establishment, and they’re written with the idea that our religion and our liberty are in conflict. But Christianity has had a deep impact on our system. The men who wrote the Constitution were Christians who knew the Bible. Our idea of individual rights comes from the Bible. The Western development of the free-market system owes a lot to biblical principles.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ “High School,” 10.

¹⁰⁰ “High School,” 8.

¹⁰¹ Russell Shorto, “How Christian Were the Founders?” *New York Times*, February 14, 2010. <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

Then SBOE chairwoman Cynthia Dunbar revealed her religious priorities during an invocation turned persuasive speech delivered on May 21, 2010 to begin the Texas Board of Education meeting:

I believe that no one can read the history of our country without realizing that the good book and the spirit of our savior have from the beginning been our guiding geniuses . . . a Christian land governed by Christian principles. I like to believe we are living today in the spirit of the Christian religion. I like also to believe that as long as we do so, no great harm can come to our country.¹⁰²

Because of some of the SBOE members' explicit associations with Christianity, we expected to see an emphasis on religion in the guidelines. However, the TEKS guidelines rarely addressed religion explicitly. Therefore, to have a better understanding of the SBOE members' religious worldviews, we had to focus attention on other themes within their terministic screens.

Through textual analysis, this study found that the SBOE made significant additions and deletions to the areas of history, sociology, psychology, the study of human communities, economics, and civics that provide the foundation for the theme of American exceptionalism to emerge from the TEKS. As children learn what the state deems as significant events in American history, significant contributors to that history, and what it means to be American, they will be invited to adopt these terministic screens. As children learn what the state identifies as their responsibilities to their community, their country, and their environment, again the students will be invited to internalize these terministic screens. Taken together the terministic screens reveal a scaffolding for the worldview of American exceptionalism, with little to no criticism of it. Rather than teaching students to be critical thinkers, the TEKS guidelines encourage students to reify that the American people are unique (and better) than other people in the world, and that there is no way to question this idea because it is part of a larger historical destiny.

Although the 2010 guidelines were in effect for 10 years, the changes made to the guidelines, the process that enabled the changes, and the individuals responsible for the changes are still at the center of debate. At this point in time, we have a chance to reflect on the relationship between the classroom and society writ large. We argue that this is crucial research, because if Dunbar is right, "The philosophy of the classroom in one generation will be the philosophy of the government in the next."¹⁰³

As rhetorical critics we know the power of language choices to select and deflect realities. The language choices in the TEKS documents select themes such as individualism, and deflects themes such as American responsibility in global decisions. This is especially significant because they frame an overall educational model that creates an uncritical worldview.

When an emphasis is placed on individualistic thinking that focuses on local rather than global participation, by those who diminish the struggle that has shaped America, and praise patriots as heroes instead of ordinary citizens, and deflect agency and responsibility for both the successes and horrible atrocities committed on American soil and abroad, it is hard to view this as a well-rounded educational experience. But it doesn't stop there. If the TEKS are successful at promoting American exceptionalism in the classroom, this type of thinking will also influence discourse on climate change, border security, international treaties (TPP), tariffs, wars, and a host of other topics on the world stage.

¹⁰² Cynthia Dunbar, "A Christian Land Governed by Christian Principles," *Texas Freedom Network*, May 21, 2010. *Texas Freedom Network*. <https://tfn.org/>.

¹⁰³ Shorto, "How Christian Were the Founders?"

We don't argue that we should deflect attention from American exceptionalism, or pretend it doesn't exist. Writing in 2018 about a similar debate on educational standards in Nebraska, Tim Royers argued, "The reality is that there is a fundamental duality underlying American political history, and until we fully acknowledge this duality in current public school curriculums, our classrooms will continue to offer only a partial glimpse into the past. This is not an either/or proposition — *America is exceptional* — but just in ways that have done both good and bad."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ Tim Royers, "Let's Teach American Exceptionalism for What it is: There Have Always Been Two Americas. Kids Need to Realize That." *Medium*, September 10, 2018, <https://medium.com/>.