

Answers a **Fifth Grader** Should Know

Thomas Woods' answer to the historical illiteracy permeating the land is his latest work entitled *33 Questions About American History You're Not Supposed to Ask*.

by Michael J. Thompson

33 Questions About American History You're Not Supposed to Ask, by Thomas E. Woods, Jr., New York: Crown Forum, 2007, 307 pages, hardcover, \$25.95.

Recent polls offer a somber assessment of the state of the knowledge of our nation's populace in the area of American history: more Americans can name the main characters in the long-running television cartoon *The Simpsons* than can name the amendments that comprise the Bill of Rights. But the problem is not just limited to how little the American people as a whole know about our heritage; it extends to the "history" many of us think we know that is distorted if not false.

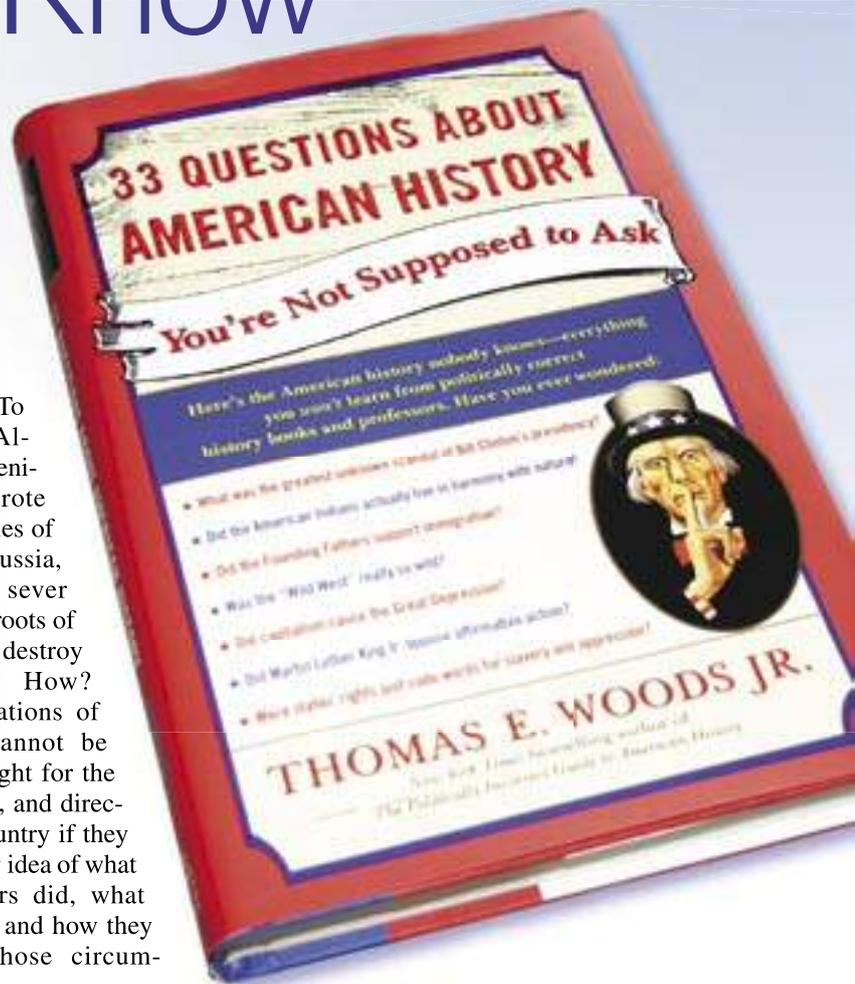
In fact, it wouldn't be prudent to try to enumerate the many historical untruths, distortions, and outright lies that are listed in textbooks, for that list would require the entire magazine's editorial pages for a few issues. Suffice to say, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and the other Founders of our nation have been reduced to slaveholding racists; great men such as Andrew Jackson and John Calhoun are no longer mentioned at all; and in these gentlemen's stead are stories of oppression and persecution by the "intolerant, white, Christian majority," both real and imagined.

This lack of knowledge about what literature teachers call "dead white men" may not alarm the average American —

but it should. To paraphrase Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who wrote of the brutalities of communist Russia, "When you sever the historical roots of a people you destroy the nation." How? Future generations of Americans cannot be prepared to fight for the ideals, history, and direction of the country if they don't have any idea of what their ancestors did, what they endured, and how they confronted those circumstances.

After these ties are severed, a false past can be taught that will effectively create a guilt-ridden populace who believe that their ancestors were racist, intolerant bigots. Once this foundation of collective guilt is laid, then almost any radical, ill-advised change can be made to the fundamental structure of our government, as long as the change is promoted as "increasing justice and equality" — whether such a claim is true or not.

Thankfully, one accomplished historian is doing the part of 100 in trying to reverse the tide of historical illiteracy that permeates the land. Dr. Thomas E. Woods, Jr. has just penned the companion to his 2005 *New York Times* best-selling book, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to American History*. Woods' latest book, *33*



Questions About American History You're Not Supposed to Ask, serves as an excellent antidote for those who have spent the better portions of their lives being spoon-fed lies and fabrications.

The intellectual barrage Woods is firing in *33 Questions* packs a vicious punch for those unaccustomed to his style, and I would suggest reading *The Politically Incorrect Guide to American History* prior to starting this book. Woods is an engaging writer, who yields an insightful pen that serves to make *33 Questions* exceptionally readable and in 307 pages, a fun and quick read.

In simplified terms, *33 Questions* is a superior work. Woods devotes an essay to each of 33 issues, instead of trying to ham-

So many topics in American history deserve a fair hearing and the sharp eye of veracity that Woods is so quick to provide that one can only hope that *33 Questions* is not the last book Woods pens on American history.

mer multiple points in period pieces, as in *The Politically Incorrect Guide to American History*.

With the essay format, Woods is able to focus his considerable intellect on one question and offer a penetrating analysis of such important topics as: “Were ‘States’ Rights’ just code words for slavery and oppression?” (An emphatic *No!*); “Was the U.S Constitution meant to be a ‘living, breathing’ document that changes with the time?” (Another big *No!*); and, “Can the Federal Government do whatever it thinks will provide for the ‘general welfare’ of Americans?” (Take a stab at the answer to that one.)

In each essay, Woods offers a “myth” that is then countered with “the truth” on the next page. In the essay, “How does Social Security really work?” Woods states the “myth” this way:

Social Security operates like an insurance program: individuals pay a premium into a fund and are thereby entitled to receive benefits in the future. This is just as President Franklin Roosevelt sold the program to the American people.

Woods then corrects this myth with “the truth”:

As the U.S. government has conceded only when forced to before the Supreme Court, the Social Security payments an individual makes are not an “insurance premium” but a tax, which does not give the individual the right to any benefit or earmark funds for him. The individual receives nothing but a promise “to tax your children to take care of you in your old age.”

In the chapter, “Did Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal lift the U.S. out of the Great Depression?” Woods offers us this myth:

Franklin Roosevelt lifted the country out of the Depression and saved American capitalism from its own internal flaws. At the very least he gave people hope at a time of despair.

Quickly working to correct this myth, Woods writes:

As a growing body of

scholarship continues to show, the New Deal actually prolonged the Depression and crippled American capitalism.

The introduction of the book perfectly sets the stage for the rest of the work, as Woods writes about H.L Mencken and the great bathtub hoax of 1917. I’ll leave this little anecdote from Mencken’s incomparable pen a mystery, but Woods clearly states it best when he writes:

Nobel Laureate F.A. Hayek once observed that our understanding of history decisively influences our interpretation of current events.... Let us begin to emancipate ourselves from other specimens of phony history that, even more widespread than Mencken’s bathroom hoax, are no less foolish and far more dangerous.

Woods holds a B.A. in history from Harvard and an M.A., an M.Phil., and a Ph.D. from Columbia University, and is currently a fellow at the Ludwig von Mises Institute in Auburn, Alabama. His academic credentials and his clear prose in *33 Questions* ensure that those who read this fine book won’t be able to automatically disregard the knowledge that it contains.

The only qualm that one encounters in the book is that it ends, which isn’t really Woods’ fault at all. So many topics in American history deserve a fair hearing, and with the sharp eye of veracity that Woods is so quick to provide, one can only hope that *33 Questions* is not the last book Woods pens on American history, and that soon we will have the privilege of reading more untruths about our history corrected.

Perhaps it is Representative Ron Paul who offers the best endorsement of Woods’ work, when he writes, “Woods ... demolishes the historical myths that mislead too many Americans into supporting big government. I strongly recommend Woods’ work.”

The Politically Incorrect Guide to American History has sold more than 100,000 copies. One can only hope the same for *33 Questions*, for the more people who encounter Woods’ work, the greater the chances the shackles of historical illiteracy will be removed for good. ■

