

## Rethinking How We Teach History in the Shadow of January 6, 2021

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*One choice is vote against the objection. And tens of millions of Americans will see a vote against the objection as a statement that voter fraud doesn't matter, isn't real and shouldn't be taken seriously. And a great many of us don't believe that. On the other hand, most, if not all of us believe we should not set aside the results of an election just because our candidate may not have prevailed. And so I endeavor to look for door number three, a third option. And for that, I look to history, to the precedent of the 1876 election, the Hayes-Tilden election where this Congress appointed an electoral commission to examine claims of voter fraud. Five house members, five senators, five Supreme Court justices, examined the evidence and rendered a judgment (Cruz, 2021).*

At 1:51 p.m. on Wednesday, January 6, 2021, Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) spoke on the floor of the United States Senate in support of an objection raised by Representative Paul Gosar (R-AZ) of Arizona's Electoral Votes. Twenty-two minutes after making the case for an electoral commission, Cruz and his Senate colleagues would adjourn to the call of the chair and evacuate the chamber as it was threatened, and then broached, by rioting insurrectionists.<sup>1</sup> The sight of individuals overrunning the United States Capitol was shocking. However, it might have been a bit less shocking to students of American history who remember the last time an electoral commission was discussed in the halls of America's seat of government. The surprise was not that an electoral commission proposal would beget violence. The surprise was the speed at which the violence appeared.

In 1876, Democratic candidate Samuel J. Tilden was hoping to follow Ulysses S. Grant and end the postbellum lock-hold Republicans had on the presidency. Tilden's path to the White House was obstructed by more than 15 years of post-Civil War presidential politics dominated by Republicans and another war hero, Rutherford B. Hayes.<sup>2</sup>

On election day, November 7, 1876, the United States saw remarkable voter turnout. The United States Election Project identifies it as the highest-turnout election ever.<sup>3</sup> Tilden won a majority of the popular vote, and nearly the required Electoral Votes to carry the day. However, results in three Southern states – including Florida – were marked by violence and allegations of manipulation. This information, combined with the patchwork of government that stitched the South together after the war, led to multiple slates of electors and general confusion. It would be up to Congress to decide.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Broadcast. *The Final Vote*. Washington, DC: MSNBC, January 6, 2021.

<sup>2</sup>"Samuel Tilden Biography." National Parks Service. U.S. Department of the Interior, November 12, 2019. <https://www.nps.gov/gate/learn/historyculture/samuel-tilden-biography.htm>.

<sup>3</sup>"National-1789-Present," United States Elections Project (University of Florida Department of Political Science), accessed March 31, 2021, <http://www.electproject.org/national-1789-present>.

<sup>4</sup>Blackford, Sheila. "Disputed Election of 1876." Miller Center, January 28, 2021. <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/educational-resources/disputed-election-1876>.

But Congress punted, forming an electoral commission. Five Democratic congressmen (3 House, 2 Senate), five Republican congressmen (3 Senate, 2 House) and five Supreme Court justices were empowered to accept or reject electoral slates. On 8-7 votes, all three pro-Hayes Southern slates were accepted. Despite resistance, Hayes was inaugurated, Tilden returned to New York, and America was changed forever.<sup>5</sup>

As part of his victory, Hayes agreed to several provisions, most notably the final removal of federal troops from former Confederate states. This, combined with a new *laissez-faire* approach to civil rights for African-Americans in the South, saw the death of Reconstruction and the ensconcing of Jim Crow for nearly a century.<sup>6</sup>

One would think the dramatic twist and the long-term impact of the race would lead 1876 and 1877 to resonate deeply. Certain elections tend to stick in the mind of the “average American,” usually because of their influence on the direction of the country itself. 1800. 1860. 1932. But what of 1876?

The election, and subsequent administration, have become an afterthought. *CNN* categorizes Hayes as one of “seven presidents nobody remembers.”<sup>7</sup> *Time* magazine says Hayes is best remembered for the creation of the Easter Egg Roll.<sup>8</sup> Hayes’ victory set in motion one of the most significant developments in what becomes modern American history, and yet his term is so forgotten it becomes fodder for a song on *The Simpsons* about “lesser-known presidents.”<sup>9</sup>

Why has this seminal election escaped wider popular interest? The historiographical evolution of Reconstruction and Jim Crow, from the Dunning School to the modern reconsideration, plays a large role. But has secondary education contributed to the problem? I argue it does, and a simple solution would benefit students and America’s knowledge of itself.

At Florida’s flagship university (University of Florida),<sup>10</sup> its highest-profile private university (University of Miami),<sup>11</sup> and in its secondary schools,<sup>12</sup> U.S History is taught across two courses. The year 1877 is used as the dividing line, reflecting its significance. In practice, however, teachers are given two unenviable choices: One is teaching this critical period of history at the very beginning of the second course, at the start of a school year when student schedules are barely set and orientation activities are kicking off. The other (even worse) option is jamming this topic in at the end of the first course, when students and teachers have one eye on final exams and another on the door to the end of the semester or school year.

<sup>5</sup>Coenen, Dan T., and Edward J. Larson. “Congressional Power Over Presidential Elections: Lessons from the Past and Reforms for the Future.” Williamsburg, February 2002. <https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/wmlr/vol43/iss3/2/>, 862-865.

<sup>6</sup>Comer Vann Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1966), 169-171.

<sup>7</sup>Christopher Connolly, “Seven Presidents Nobody Remembers,” *CNN* (Cable News Network, September 28, 2007), <https://www.cnn.com/2007/LIVING/wayoflife/09/28/forgotten.presidents/index.html>.

<sup>8</sup>Randy James, “Top 10 Forgettable Presidents,” *Time* (Time Inc., March 10, 2009), [http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1879648\\_1879646\\_1879693,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1879648_1879646_1879693,00.html).

<sup>9</sup>Andy Greene, “Flashback: The Simpsons Celebrate America's 'Lesser-Known' Presidents in Song,” *Rolling Stone* (Rolling Stone, November 14, 2019), <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-news/simpsons-americas-lesser-known-presidents-song-912340/>.

<sup>10</sup>“History < University of Florida - UF Catalog,” History < University of Florida (University of Florida), accessed May 18, 2021, <https://catalog.ufl.edu/UGRD/courses/history/>.

<sup>11</sup>“History (HIS),” University of Miami Academic Bulletin (University of Miami), accessed May 18, 2021, <https://bulletin.miami.edu/courses-az/his/>.

<sup>12</sup>“PDF” (St. Augustine, August 2020).

A solution might be found in the pedagogy of other social studies. A thematic approach might be best suited for understanding the key events of American history, as well as avoiding pitfalls of the current chronologic style – particularly in secondary education.

Eight themes – four themes per class over the course of two years – could cover American history more cohesively. Those themes could be: **Power and Limits of Government; Slavery and Freedom; Civil Rights and Voting; Conflict and Expansion on the Borderlands; Technology, Business, and Labor; The Immigrant Experience; Evolution of Domestic Policy and Evolution of Foreign Policy.** While this would depart from the norm, the change could allow educators a new way to engage with students, particularly students who dismiss history as a study of names and dates of the past. Units could be tinkered with and moved around depending on needs of the school district and state, with a particular focus on End of Course exam requirements.

Thematic U.S. History is not groundbreaking. Mary E. Connor argues for it in her work, “Teaching United States History Thematically.” Connor (1997) points out an upside of thematic teaching: It leans on chronology, while including repetition. She points out another area of history neglected due to time constraints: modern history.

It is not uncommon to hear of classes that never get to the Civil Rights movement or the Vietnam War, much less the events of more recent decades. The signal beauty of the thematic approach recommended here lies in the fact that in the first unit—the American Character and American Belief System—students can be holding informed discussions of the views of our political leaders on current issues by mid-October.<sup>13</sup>

In the pages of *In Context*, Kacie M. Nadeau, Ph.D (2019) argues for a thematic reconsideration of how history and language arts are taught together. This goal is admirable and considering the benefits of thematic learning identified (a greater focus on reinforcement, evaluative skills and analysis from alternate perspectives), a holistic reconsideration of the history classroom could expand on these positives.<sup>14</sup>

James Madison wrote of public education that, “Knowledge will for ever govern ignorance: and a people who mean to be their own Governours, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.”<sup>15</sup> Our curriculums focus intently on *what* knowledge our students are intended to gain. But can we improve on *how* our students process and use that knowledge? Educators have a responsibility to constantly think and rethink the ways we engage with our students, to ensure they understand not only what happened in history, but how it happened, and how it impacts them today and beyond.

<sup>13</sup>Mary E. Connor, “Teaching United States History Thematically,” *Social Education* 61, no. 4 (1997): pp. 203-204.

<sup>14</sup>Kacie M. Nadeau, “Thematic Timelines: An Interdisciplinary Approach to History and Literacy,” *In Context* 2, no. 3 (May 2019): pp. 6-7.

<sup>15</sup>“From James Madison to William T. Barry, 4 August 1822,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/04-02-02-0480>.

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