American history: Having another déjà vu moment

The repeating cycles of history in the United States could serve as lessons for a better future, if we recognize them.

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Robin Chenoweth: Soon, Americans will participate in a rite deeply intrinsic to American culture. Razor-thin margins indicate this could be among the tightest presidential elections in the country's history. But will it be? In fact, four of the United States' 59 presidential elections have been handed to victors who lost the popular vote; three of whom won the electoral college. Donald Trump was one in 2016. George Bush was another in 2000, after he captured five more electoral votes than Al Gore but a half-million fewer popular votes. Rutherford B. Hayes won by a single electoral vote. And these aren't anomalies. John Kennedy won his election by fewer than 120,000 popular votes, and James Garfield won in 1880 by 8,000 votes. How quickly we forget. Which got us thinking about an Inspire episode we did in 2021: Why history repeats itself. Because elections and their drama circle back with such regularity, we decided to do a boomerang ourselves. Because it's never a bad idea to reconsider lessons that history provides. Let's remember what Professor Cynthia Tyson, Clinical Associate Professor Tammi Augustine and Daniel Redman, now a lecturer, all in the multicultural and equity studies education program, had to say in this episode that originally aired in July 2021. Augustine, by the way, is now at Wayne State University.

Robin Chenoweth: Just about any scenario playing itself out in the United States today has happened before. Impeachment of a president? It first happened in 1868, when Andrew Johnson was impeached for abuse of presidential. Political polarization? Our present divide doesn't hold a candle to the cataclysm the nation faced over ending slavery and how to heal the deep fractures the Civil War. Racial protest? So many examples, but to name a few: Chicago, 1919. The Tulsa Race Massacre, 1921. The 1967 Newark riots. The nationwide outcry in 1968 after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. The Miami protests in 1980. Los Angeles, after the police beating of Rodney King in 1992. Cincinnati, 2001. Ferguson, 2014. And of course, the George Floyd protests. And how about something as isolated as forced vaccinations and quarantines during pandemics? Ask a social studies education professor or teacher about what George Washington did during the Revolutionary War

Tami Augustine: Smallpox at the time really could have been quite an undoing for American troops. And George Washington being the leader that he was, knew that. When people say, 'Well, what would our founding fathers think about these lockdowns? Or about vaccinations?' Well, we have historical evidence.

Robin Chenoweth: This is the Ohio State University Inspire Podcast, a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology. I'm Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer. In this episode, we look at the historical record to see what implications it has for the many issues our country faces in 2021. How can history help us? And why do we as Americans so often choose to simply downplay the lessons history provides? And how are we deciding to teach students about that history? Just choosing an example to take a deeper dive into history, what did George Washington do, back in 1776?

Tami Augustine: As smallpox was decimating some of the troops and their ability to fight, he was in Boston, and he actually quarantined the city. He shut down Boston to isolate the troops there, to not allow people to come into the city to spread smallpox further. He then also made the choice to inoculate any new soldiers, so that as they were going through the process of getting their uniforms, etc., they would get inoculated against smallpox so that they would be protected, and he wouldn't have to worry later about just continuing to lose troops to smallpox.

Robin Chenoweth with Tami Augustine and Daniel Redman: I remember you saying before that it was not a popular decision.

Tami Augustine: No, it was not a popular decision. But that's what leaders do. Right? They make decisions that are necessary and not always popular.

Daniel Redman: One of the things that amuses me about that question and sort of the discourse around it is that the resistance and concerns about vaccination protocols and things that we see today aren't new, and exactly the kind of discourse around them isn't new either. We can look at the polio vaccine when it was being rolled out. And people had very, very similar conversations about the question of whether or not they should get vaccinated for polio.

Robin Chenoweth: Now, if you're like me, you remember the adulation that your parents and grandparents had for Jonas Salk, who developed the vaccine, as being a savior of children everywhere. Which he was. But because history has a way of glossing over its missteps, you might not recall a thing called the Cutter Incident. As the vaccine was being rolled out, a California lab didn't fully deactivate some of the viral cells it used to make the vaccines. This was a new process, right? Forty thousand children were infected with polio. Ten died. It paled in comparison to the number of people who died from polio before the ultimately successful vaccination campaign. But Cutter planted seeds of doubt.

Daniel Redman: It was the same kind of questions that people were asking today about, 'Can the government force people to get polio vaccinations?' Or, 'Is that authoritarianism?' It was also the 50s. And so, it was all tied up in the discourse around, 'Oh, is this too much like socialism,' having the government saying, 'People have to get these kinds of vaccinations.' And can we tie this into the Red Scare discourse that was taking place at the time? So, people having

a pushback and feeling that they don't trust the government when it comes to things like vaccinations for pandemics and vaccinations for any number of diseases and what can and can't be mandated for them to do… That's, that’s not a new thing. It's an ongoing pattern in American history that we've seen over and over.

Robin Chenoweth with Tami Augustine and Daniel Redman: Do you think we remember history differently, as we progress through it?

Daniel Redman: I think that we have a tendency in schools to want to teach history in the way that makes us look best, historically speaking. And I think that times in which people have some disagreement over something that we have later decided is uncontroversial, like being vaccinated against polio, are things that don't surprise me if they've been glossed over.

Tami Augustine: I do agree with that. I think that, we can … The Civil Rights Act, I think, is another good example. We can look back fondly at it now and say, ‘Look at this wonderful thing we did.’ But at the time, it was very partisan. This was a fight. This was not Martin Luther King is a hero. He was assassinated. He was murdered. We forget, as we get further away, and we look back and say, ‘Well, this was a really good thing that we did.’ We forget the violence that went with that. The partisanship, how the vote went in Congress. All of those things were very contentious.

Robin Chenoweth with Tami Augustine and Daniel Redman: Do you think that should make us feel better about what we're going through now?

Daniel Redman: I mean, it's… in the sense that it's comforting to say, ‘Hey, what's happening now isn't new. And we've gotten through it before.’ But also, it makes me wish that we didn't repeat the same destructive cycles. And it makes me wish that we were more attuned to ‘Oh, hey, we have faced a similar challenge before and look at how we handled it. What if we did it better this time?’ And I guess it concerns me, we're handling things more or less the same way we did 50 or 70 or 100 years ago. I wish that we understood more about how to not repeat the same mistakes.

Robin Chenoweth: So how have the broad brushstrokes applied to history and social studies found their way into classrooms and, by extension, into American thought? What are we forgetting? And what did we never learn? As it turns out, a lot. The misremembering of American history goes all the way back to the discovery of America, and begins with a false timeline, says Cynthia Tyson, professor of multicultural and equity studies.

Cynthia Tyson: Until the lion tells his side of the story, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter. We know that in most schools, especially elementary education, Christopher Columbus was seen as this explorer, this discoverer, this person who was bold and courageous and discovered a new world. While part of that is true, yes, he did embark courageously to take on a

voyage. But you can't discover and find something that was already existing without you before you even got there.

Robin Chenoweth: Archeological evidence shows that Siberians populated the Americas as early as 18,000 B.C., possibly arriving by boat. Moderate to high evidence indicates that Indonesians, Japanese, Afro-Phoenicians and West Africans all explored the Americas before Columbus did. Yet other than the occasional mention of Icelanders in Newfoundland in 1000 A.D., those don’t show up in most K-12 textbooks. And most don’t tell what Columbus’ own writings and primary source documents make clear: That he and his men kidnapped and enslaved thousands of Native Islanders and forced many to search for gold upon threat of death. Hundreds of thousands of Indigenous people died — and not just from disease — which is why none exist on islands like Haiti and the Bahamas today. Some chose suicide over subjugation.

Cynthia Tyson: If we're going to talk about Christopher Columbus, because we don't necessarily want to not teach it, let's talk about the history in a way that includes the voyager’s perspective, as well as those who were already in the place that he ended up landing. And we know that there's more of that that's happening in some places, but there's still some pushback. People don't want the heroes of our history put in a light that isn't positive. That's a disservice to children. … Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. there was some controversy around his story where people said, ‘Well, you know, he didn't lead a life that was absolutely stellar.’ Well, yeah, but because he was human. I remember as a young child watching something on television, and somebody saying that Dr. King was a smoker. And I thought, ‘What? No way!’ And I thought, ‘How could he smoke?’ He was, like, near to a hero. He was like, an idol, an icon. But that humanized him in a different kind of way. It gave me a glimpse into what it means to be human. As we receive these young people in our classrooms, it is our responsibility, and I think our obligation, to expose them to as many different perspectives, diversity of experiences, because that's what school should be. It should be a marketplace of ideas. It should be a marketplace of diverse experiences, so that they can sample all of these things as they're making sense of their world. And when they are in decision-making positions, all of that comes into play.

Robin Chenoweth: Sometimes, we’re left to deal with the decisions made by people who came down on the wrong side of history. Look no further than the headlines. Tami Augustine.

Tami Augustine: The Department of the Interior for the first time, the article just came out, is taking a closer look at the Indian boarding schools.

Robin Chenoweth: From 1819 until 1969, across the nation, the federal government removed Indigenous children from their families and placed them in 300 government-funded boarding schools.

Tami Augustine: There's violence around that. This was an intentional effort by the United States government through the Indian Civilization Act of 1819, to create Indian boarding schools to separate Indigenous children from their families, from their communities, and to assimilate them to white culture, and to intentionally suppress their culture, their identity and their language. We don't really talk about that, necessarily, and when we talk about Indigenous history in the United States. This is why it's important that we also have diverse representation in our federal government. Now working with the various Indigenous Nations to examine what is the lasting impact of these schools. And again, so when we look at children being separated at the border, this isn't the first time we've been here. It just looks a little different now than it did in the 1800s.

Daniel Redman: I think we'd have a greater context for understanding the historical implications of those patterns repeating were it not for the fact that we face such a widespread sort of cultural pushback to even really being able to meaningfully have those kinds of conversations in K through 12. If you want to understand how we are, where we are, you have to reckon with the good and the bad of American history and face the parts of us that we might not want to face.

Tami Augustine: And, Daniel, I think what you said is so important. United States history isn't all good. It isn't all bad. But there is a presence of all of those things. And so, when we want to eliminate the examination of the more challenging parts of our history, the more destructive parts of our history, we can't possibly understand how to move forward. We can't possibly solve the problems that our nation is facing today. And when we say, 'Oh, we look fondly back at a time. Oh, it was so much easier when…' But if we really look at history, United States history has been full of conflict from the very beginning. Some more constructive conflict, some more destructive conflict, but there's always been conflict. So, it's just who's telling that story. Are we willing to look at the uglier parts of our history as part of who we are, as a nation, just as we want to live up to the ideals of our nation?

Robin Chenoweth: Ignoring the hurtful parts of history doesn't make them go away. The pain just festers. If you don't believe it, look at the racial unrest in America today. And if you're like me, you simply never learned the true roots of that unrest, or at least not in your K-12 education. A 2018 study by the Southern Poverty Law Center showed that, out of 1000 high school students surveyed, only 8% correctly responded that the South seceded from the Union because of slavery. Only 1/3 understood that the 13th Amendment ended slavery. I remember what I learned in school. I remember a teacher saying to us that the Civil War was not really about slavery.

Tami Augustine: And I think you're still going to hear that in classrooms. That's the thing, Robin, so in some classrooms, you're actually going to hear, you're absolutely going to hear that it wasn't about slavery, it was about all of these other things now, because people deliver the historical content differently, and often from perspectives that validate who they are and where they are. I think in some classes, we see a different story.

Daniel Redman: I think you'd be hard pressed to find a school where slavery isn't being taught. It's got to be in everybody's state standards. The question comes down to how is it framed? Is it framed as, 'Oh, this was a core foundational part of the American economy for a long time?' That for far, far too long, it was just taken as a given that would never be abolished? And that we ought to really reckon with that and consider how much of the growth of our nation is rooted in this really terrible atrocity? Or is it being treated like it was a blip on the radar, and we screwed up and then a bunch of heroes stopped it, and now it's over and everything is great. Those are the difficult questions. I think that there are teachers out there who are trying to reckon with the ways in which our country's founding is tied up in some really problematic things like how deeply ingrained the institution of slavery was, and like how many of our founding fathers that we teach as heroes were advocates of it or defenders of it, and the way that once it was over, that certainly didn't suddenly mean everything was fine. There are centuries of ongoing impact, and we still see the impacts. Those conversations are happening in some classrooms. And then in other classrooms, it's being downplayed. So, it's gonna depend on where you are, it's going to depend on the individual teacher, it's going to depend on what pressures are coming from school districts on how teachers should be teaching things.

Robin Chenoweth with Tami Augustine and Daniel Redman: I want to read something I found in The Guardian. It's interesting to me that this was in a British newspaper, because it's addressing some of these same issues. But the editorial writer said, "People say we won the war, even if they didn't fight. Or we won the World Cup, even if they didn't play. Indeed, one needn't even been born to identify with the triumph in the question. Then, the 'we' is implicitly understood as an embrace, and it spans time, space, and agency. But few will ever say in a similar vein, we raped people, or we massacred people. For them, the 'we' is understood as an accusation. And in those moments, individuality becomes the ultimate alibi. What did that have to do with me? I wasn't even alive then,". That was very compelling to me. Would either one of you like to comment on that?

Tami Augustine: I think this goes right back to what Daniel was just saying. When we want to celebrate the good things, it's comfortable, we feel good. We like to feel good. When we have to honestly look at the challenges and address the ongoing impact of that and the ongoing, the implications of the destructiveness and the violence, that's a lot more challenging and a lot more uncomfortable. It is where we can grow. It is where we can create change. But it's so much easier to say, 'Look how great we are, look at this wonderful thing we did'. I guess I would also question who the 'we' includes? Is it really everyone? Would everyone say we won? Do they identify and connect with that we?

Daniel Redman: I'm fascinated by the construction of 'we' in that quote. It doesn't actually surprise me that that resonates so much with American history, while coming from a British publication, because I think that so much of the function of Western civilization in general, the apparatus of making you identify with the nation. If your concept of 'we' is that we as people

are appendages of the state under which we live, and in which we participate in that society, then yeah, that quote makes sense. But if you view the nation in which you live, and the culture in which you participate from the other direction, and you're like, 'No, it's an appendage of us,' then you can say, 'We as a culture don't have to be bound by the history of what our society has done and what our nation has done. We are a people, and we can decide what we want the future of our culture to look like, and it will be a reflection of us, and it will respond to us. And in a democracy, if a democracy is what a democracy purports to be, then that should be our construction of the state. It should be a projection of us.

Robin Chenoweth: I admit, I had to listen to Daniel's words several times to get the full meaning. I even posed his idea at a social gathering I attended of education and political experts. Their takeaway? You don't typically hear Germans downplaying the holocaust. After World War II, most Japanese became pacifists. Sometimes the most patriotic thing we can do is to both celebrate our success, and deeply examine the mistakes made in the nation's past, flesh through the ongoing consequences and do the hard work to resolve what could have been done better. Stop the repeating cycle. A dynamic, self-reflective democracy is a strong democracy. We owe that to the students we teach.

Daniel Redman: If the idea is that we are nothing but avatars of our state and we are meant to fall in line with the historical patterns of our state and not question them, then are we a democracy? Or are we peasants? Right? Are we people falling in line with some people in power, who want us to think a certain way? And I think that that, what 'we' means to you, and that sentence, in that quote that you read, can be, I think, a powerful reflection of, what do we want our education to be preparing our students to do, and to be?

Robin Chenoweth: In the 21st century, we are staring down some pretty enormous challenges, as we have established, eerily like those that people faced who came before us. A pandemic, huge economic and education gaps, racism, political and social polarization. Cynthia Tyson.

Cynthia Tyson: We are now facing a moment where we will have to ask ourselves, how do we want history to record us? On what side of history do we want to be recorded? And people are making some decisions now at the individual, community, state and federal levels, that, 150 years from now, it'll be interesting to see what the stories will be.

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