Most texts do mention African American participation in the war, but they focus primarily on those who sided with the Americans. In fact, those who sided with the British were far more numerous, but you’d never guess it from reading the texts. When they offer numbers, they typically compare the estimated number of black patriot soldiers during the course of the entire war (5,000) with the number of slaves who sought freedom with the British in a single week (generally cited as 300).

In their eagerness to find female heroines of the Revolutionary War, eighteen of the twenty-two texts feature the story of Molly Pitcher. They reify this folkloric legend into a real person, pronouncing unabashedly that she was Mary Hayes. (The legend did not settle on a flesh-and-blood woman until the 1876 Centennial, based only on the word of a local promoter from Carlisle, Pennsylvania.) Most texts display one of the nineteenth century romantic paintings of Molly firing her cannon. These pictures appear old and suitably historic — no matter that these fantasies were painted in the following century.

More than we would like, our texts are based on warmed-over tales of the nineteenth century such as Patrick Henry’s “Liberty or Death” speech (written by William Wirt in 1817, forty-two years after the fact) and Paul Revere’s Ride (popularized in 1861 by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who distorted every detail of the event to make his story better). Although many historians know better, these stories work so well that they must still be included, regardless of authenticity or merit.

More of the myths are perpetuated in elementary and middle school texts than in AP high school texts, but this raises a troubling question: why are we telling children stories that we know to be false? Worse yet: why do we give these tales our stamp of approval and call them “history”?

How do textbook writers deal with advances in modern scholarship that disprove, or at least deconstruct, the myths?

In 1996, David Hackett Fischer published his remarkable deconstruction and reconstruction of Paul Revere’s Ride. Fischer showed that Revere was... part of an intricate web of patriots who rode horses, rang bells, and shot guns to sound the warning. Fischer’s book was so popular that textbook writers had to deal with this new information: Revere was not alone, they now admit — William Dawes (and sometimes Samuel Prescott) rode as well. They water down the legend, but they do not embrace the real impact of Fischer’s findings: the mobilization of April 18-19, 1775, was a truly collaborative effort involving an entire population.

In 1997, Pauline Maier published a book of equal import, American Scripture. Maier uncovered ninety state and local “declarations of independence” that preceded the congressional document. The consequence of this historical tidbit is profound: Jefferson was not a lonely genius conjuring his notions from the ether; he was part of a nation-wide
conversation. Again, textbook writers have watered down the legend while missing the main point. While many textbooks now state that Jefferson was part of a five-man congressional committee, but do not mention a word of those ninety documents produced in less famous chambers.

Some say these myths are harmless — what damage can stories do? Plenty. They change our view of historical and political processes. Myths that celebrate individual achievement mask fundamental truths of great import. The United States was founded not by isolated acts of heroism but by the concerted revolutionary activities of people who had learned the power of collaborative effort.

Consider: In 1774 common farmers and artisans from throughout Massachusetts rose up by the thousands and overthrew all British authority. In the small town of Worcester (only 300 voters), 4,622 militiamen from 37 surrounding communities lined both sides of Main Street and forced the British-appointed officials to walk the gauntlet, hats in hand, reciting their recantations thirty times each so everyone could hear. There were no famous “leaders” for this event — the people elected representatives who served for one day only, the ultimate in term limits. All final decisions were made by “the body of the people,” and the people decided that the old regime must fall.

Similar transfers of power were repeated in every county seat outside Boston. By early fall — half a year before Lexington and Concord — British rule had come to an end, both politically and militarily, for 95 percent of the inhabitants of Massachusetts. On October 4, 1774 — twenty-one months before Congress would approve the Declaration of Independence, the people of Worcester proclaimed that the old constitution was dissolved and they should begin to form a new one, “as from the ashes of the Phenix.”

Why is this momentous story not part of the core narrative of the Revolution? It used to be. Mercy Otis Warren, a patriot who wrote one of the early histories, called the 1774 rebellion “one of the most extraordinary eras in the history of man.” Other early historians covered the events in some detail. But then came the myths. “The shot heard round the world” (Emerson, 1836) told us the Revolution started at Lexington and Concord, effectively muzzling the one that came before it...

The myth that Jefferson was responsible for the ideas in the Declaration of Independence (started by his political supporters) hid the fact that people from the hinterlands of Massachusetts were ready to go that route long before. The end result: not one current textbook chronicles the first overthrow of British rule. How strange that the story of any revolution can be told without at least a mention of the initial overthrow of political and military authority.

The reasons that nineteenth century mythologies are still perpetuated in twenty-first century texts are deeply rooted in both narrative structures and American nationalism.