

Off the shelf

By [Richard A. Kauffman](#)

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David Barton is what I call a “faux historian.” With only a B.A. in religious education from Oral Roberts University, Barton has written widely on American history, remaking it into his own image. He’s been called upon as an “expert” by the Texas Board of Education, the Republican Party and the likes of right-wing talking head Glenn Beck.

Many conservatives love Barton’s historical revisionism, particularly his arguments that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and that the founders did not share our notions about the separation between church and state. [Mike Huckabee said](#) he wished every American had to listen to a simultaneous telecast of David Barton lecturing—even if at gunpoint.

Barton’s latest book, *The Jefferson Lies*, has drawn criticism from a wider group than the usual liberals and professional historians. A group of black and white evangelical pastors from Cincinnati [called for a boycott](#) of Barton’s publisher, Thomas Nelson, because the book justifies Thomas Jefferson’s ownership of slaves and glosses over his racism and his unorthodox theological views. “You can’t be serious about racial unity in the church,” said one of the Cincinnati pastors, “while holding up Jefferson as a hero and champion of freedom.”

The reaction to Barton’s book—from pastors like these and from professional historians—led Thomas Nelson to [pull the book from the market and recall all copies](#). Although Amazon [still lists it](#), the book cannot be found at the [Nelson website](#). My guess is that if no other publisher picks up the book, Barton will self-publish it, as he has done other publications, under his own Wallbuilders label [<http://www.wallbuilders.com/>].

I appreciate the way academics like [Thomas S. Kidd](#), [John Fea](#), [Warren Throckmorton](#) and [Michael Coulter](#) have called Barton to accountability—all people who consider themselves evangelicals. But along with checking his facts, the plausibility of his interpretations of the past, and his political motivations, there’s a deeper critique to

be made.

It has to do with what Stephen Colbert calls “truthiness,” where “truth” is whatever we want it to be. Or, as a senior advisor in the Bush administration said to author Ron Suskind, “[We create our own reality.](#)”

I was part of a stimulating conversation last week with Read Schuchardt, [an expert in what is called media ecology](#). He made the point that in our digital world the line between fact and fiction is increasingly blurred—a blurring that he sees quite distinctly in his own students at Wheaton College. It seems strange to me that students at a leading evangelical college—people who claim to be seekers of the Truth—would tolerate such a blurring.

But this blurring exists, and Barton has contributed to it. For this, he needs to be challenged.