
What Johnny Still Won't Know About History

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TO THE accompaniment of a fair amount of ballyhoo, the National Standards Project released in April a revised version of its National History Standards, thus signaling the start of Round Two in a fight over whether and how our American and Western heritages ought to be taught in our schools.

The original project, it may be recalled, had been mandated in the early 90's under President George Bush, in the hope of reversing our children's scandalous slide toward historical illiteracy. Lynne Cheney, then the head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, assigned the task to UCLA's National Center for History in Schools, under the direction of Gary Nash and Charlotte Crabtree. But no sooner did the two volumes of Standards appear, comprising outlines respectively of world history and American history, and accompanied by some 2,600 sample lessons, than a long list of critics including Cheney herself (by then no longer in office) denounced them as a brazen exercise in political correctness.

The Standards provoked scores of op-eds and letters, and a 99-1 vote in the U.S. Senate condemning them as anti-American. The World

Standards, the critics argued, had given short shrift to Western civilization, accentuating its darker chapters while ignoring its achievements. The U.S. Standards, they said, set aside the traditional political narrative of American history in favor of tendentious assaults on our heritage—a heritage not of liberty and prosperity but, allegedly, of racism, sexism, environmental destruction, and foreign adventurism.

My own contribution to the debate was an essay in these pages ("Whose History? Whose Standards?" May 1995), concluding that whereas some of the attacks were generalizations based on a few damning examples, the critics were on target regarding the Standards' pedagogical agenda. The world-history lessons, to begin with, did repeatedly hold Europeans up for censure, while granting a moral pass to other cultures (even those of Genghis Khan and the Aztecs). The rise of totalitarianism went unexplained, and Communist holocausts unmentioned. Nothing in the voluminous outline would have helped students to understand why science, industrialization, and ideas of liberty and human rights (not to mention socialism and feminism) emerged in the West, and not elsewhere. The distinction drawn between "Core" and "Related" standards was unfathomable. Above all, the lesson plans, lauded as "treasures" by the *New York Times*, were often tendentious (underscoring, for instance, the oppression of

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women in all times and places), repetitive, way above the heads of students, or just weird.

The U.S. Standards, I concluded, were at least explicit in their bias. The authors invited students to conclude that the American Revolution had left an unfulfilled "agenda" that defined the rest of American history. Hence, the reforms of the Jacksonian, Civil War, Progressive, New Deal, and Great Society eras were uniformly to be extolled (except insofar as they did not go far enough); the cold-war era was defined by unconscionably dangerous "swordplay" between the United States and the Soviet Union; the post-1968 era claimed "precedence" for its "struggle to carry out the environmentalist, feminist, and civil-rights agendas"; and so forth. In foreign policy, the U.S. Standards mocked Woodrow Wilson, all but blamed the United States for the rise of fascism and Pearl Harbor, and repeatedly questioned *Allied* conduct during World War II.

In the face of the criticism leveled at the National History Standards, a nonpartisan body, the Council for Basic Education (CBE), was called in as referee. It concluded that the Standards were indeed flawed, but nevertheless worth saving. The CBE offered a series of stern recommendations: make the Standards voluntary, not mandatory; delete the teaching examples altogether; discourage present-mindedness and moralizing; give more emphasis to science, technology, medicine, and economic and intellectual history; discuss social groups (e.g., women and ethnic minorities) in their true historical contexts, and stress the diversity within as well as among them; make the World Standards reflect a truly global perspective instead of a congeries of regional ones; make the U.S. Standards acknowledge the opportunities, not just the bigotry, that immigrants found in America; and stress the origins and development of American democratic ideals, chief among them the pursuit of *e pluribus unum*.

SO THE UCLA group, supported now by private foundations—the feds had cut off all funds—went back to work and, lo and behold, completed its revisions in just a matter of months. To anyone aware of the project's elaborate procedures, that in itself should have been grounds for suspicion. What with focus groups, task forces, curriculum committees, advisory boards, forums, councils, and panels, some twenty bodies and over 400 persons had supposedly helped to shape the old standards. How was such

rapid "improvement" possible? Were the critiques so compelling that the scales miraculously fell from the eyes of Nash and Crabtree, causing them to see the substance and purpose of history in an entirely new light? Had the 400-odd experts been merely sloppy the first time around, and therefore pleased to have their grand project rewritten? Or were, perhaps, the masters of the project simply bending with the political breeze, having purposely staked out a far-leftist bargaining position in the original Standards so that a merely leftist revision might win approval?

Whatever the authors' private motives, it is a fact that few of the pugilists who leapt into the melee over the original Standards have seemed eager to answer the bell for Round Two. In fact, two of the original critics, Diane Ravitch and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., co-signed a long op-ed article in the *Wall Street Journal* (April 3, 1996) calling for the bout to be stopped. The revised Standards, they wrote, meet all the CBE recommendations and are now "rigorous, honest, and as nearly accurate as any group of historians could make them." Hence they hope that

critics of the original version will declare victory and lay down their rhetorical weapons, as we have done. Any fair-minded reviewer must conclude that everything objectionable in the original documents has been excised.

Not so, replied Lynne Cheney (thereby flunking the Schlesinger/Ravitch litmus test for fair-mindedness). In her own *Wall Street Journal* article (May 2, 1996), Cheney insisted that the revised standards still "take sides" in subtle ways, and opined that we would be better off leaving history curricula up to individual states. The next day Schlesinger weighed in yet again, in the *New York Times*, although he now said he found the whole debate "distracting and irritating." He, too, had been "troubled" by certain tendencies in the original standards, but he also considered the criticism that *others* had leveled at them a "vociferous overreaction," and the Senate's 99-1 condemnation "absurd." In his opinion, the ranks of those against whom the Standards now need to be defended include "militant monoculturalists of the Right."

Whether Schlesinger really believes the UCLA team would have made all the praiseworthy changes it did in the absence of that "vociferous overreaction" is a matter best left to speculation. What is more, those critics whom I recall reading measured the Standards against yard-

sticks of objectivity, historicity, comprehensiveness, relative emphasis, and simple honesty; they did not demand that some "monoculturalist" agenda of their own dominate the revision. But Schlesinger's was not the last word. In another op-ed in the *Times* (May 16, 1996), the historian John P. Diggins resoundingly retorted that whatever cosmetic changes they had made, the authors of the Standards had still gotten the basic things wrong.

In an attempt to decide where the truth lies, I have scrutinized the revised standards as I did the original ones. But I too grow weary. Consider this my parting right cross.

IN THE World History Standards, the first big change has been the elimination of the sometimes impossible, often tendentious, and always too numerous study lessons. What is left is a long list of what students should learn, not a guide to how they should go about learning it. The other big change is the elimination of the rubrics dividing the outline into "Core" and "Related" standards. All subjects now are born equal, although it remains obscure how much time a teacher should devote to each one.

These two great subtractions have swept away most of the targets of the critics. But according to some of the high-school teachers who participated in the generation of the original volumes, they have also destroyed most of the utility the Standards had for the classroom. What good does it do for a ninth-grade teacher in Grand Rapids to be told her students should learn about "Japanese government in the Kamakura and early Ashikaga periods," without being given any advice on how to do that? As it happens, the UCLA center is said to be planning to issue a fat book of study lessons, under separate cover from the Standards themselves. If so, does that mean that material judged harshly by the critics may find its way back into play after all? The answer is not hard to guess.

There is also one noticeable thematic change in the revised World Standards: the muting of feminist influence. References properly abound to the position of women in all times and cultures, but they no longer sport the "in-your-face" quality of the original. Thus, in place of the separate sub-standard on women in ancient Greece, there is now one that describes the "social tasks that men and women of different classes performed"; similarly, the sub-standard on the "changing image and status of women in early

Christian and Buddhist societies" has been replaced by one describing the importance of "both men and women in monastic life." In other cases, women are distinguished by social class and thus no longer treated as if they were a uniform (and uniformly put-upon) group.

The new World Standards also try harder to compare contemporaneous developments in all parts of the world through sections on "major global trends" which range back to the dawn of civilization. Also on the plus side, Russia receives noticeably fuller treatment, as do science and technology. And perhaps most importantly, the weak 20th-century section has been expanded and divided into two much stronger chapters that stress, as the original Standards did not, the rise of ideologies like fascism and Communism and their "elaborate forms of authoritarian repression."

Unfortunately, however, Communist-inspired holocausts still go unmentioned in the World Standards: Stalin's first Five-Year Plan is said only to have "disrupted and transformed Soviet society." And it should also be noted that the great majority of the Standards covering world history *before* 1900 have been left virtually untouched. Thus, although slavery is now recognized as a universal phenomenon, many other anomalies—like the failure to mention the Aztec practice of human sacrifice—still perdure.

But all in all, the revised World Standards retain a good regional and chronological balance, fill a number of the gaps noted by critics, and downplay the double standards and judgmentalism that pervaded the original. A curriculum based on the World Standards would still be extremely ambitious for teachers, not to mention pupils, but they do comprise a learned outline of history.

THE REVISED U.S. Standards are more problematical. They, too, exclude the old, obnoxious study lessons—so, for instance, the pejorative treatment of John D. Rockefeller and "big business" is gone, and the suggestion that Ronald Reagan was a "cheerleader for selfishness" has likewise disappeared down the memory hole.

As in the new World Standards, the authors have also watered down the language that made the struggle by minorities and women against a white patriarchy seem to be the central theme of American history. Thus, where one passage used to say that the postwar era took on "deeper meaning when connected to civil-rights and fem-

inist movements," it now reads, "when connected to politics." And in place of a reference to the founding of the National Organization for Women, the Standards now "explore the range of women's organizations" and "the issues currently dividing women." In similar fashion, the authors have replaced their description of the cold war as morally neutral "swordplay" with passages that acknowledge Soviet espionage and Communist ideology, and that grant the successes of containment. An entirely new sub-standard focuses on U.S. relations with Israel.

Nevertheless, the original "agenda" of the Standards is unchanged. Although "individualism" now gets an occasional nod, the larger context is always the struggle for group identity and equality on the part of women, racial minorities, and "gays." (It is as if the authors were trying to appease Newt Gingrich *and* his lesbian sister.) So readers who leap to the very end of the story in hopes of catching its drift will be pleased (or piqued) to read of "the continuing struggle for *e pluribus unum* amid debates over national vs. group identity, group rights vs. individual rights, multiculturalism [vs. what?], and bilingual education [vs. what?]." Not only does that awkward formulation put poor *unum* at rather a disadvantage, it concludes a section which has asked students to assess the plight, assertions, grievances, and civil rights of immigrants, the disabled, racial and ethnic minorities, and the gay-liberation movement, all of whom, we are told, base their demands on "recurring reference to the nation's charter documents" and "invocation of democratic ideals."

The philosophical passages that introduce the U.S. Standards have also been altered, but the results are decidedly mixed. For instance, two long paragraphs now elaborate on the notion of historical causation, but the example chosen to illustrate this theme—the "devastating demographic effects" and "enslavement of indigenous people" caused by the European discovery of America—is only too predictable in its spin. One big concession is the elimination of a sentence insisting that history "involves *more than* the passive absorption of facts, dates, names, and places" in favor of a new sentence stating that history "*rests on* knowledge of facts, dates, names, places, events, and ideas" (emphasis added in each case). At the same time, however, the new Standards delete an excellent sentence, which formerly concluded the passage on how to teach value-laden material: "The best approach is to

open these issues to analysis grounded in historical evidence and allow a variety of perspectives on the problem to emerge." The Left giveth; the Left taketh away.

ON BALANCE, the new U.S. Standards are fairer and more objective than the originals. But do they restore the quest for individual freedom and fulfillment to the center of the American experience, while making due reference to the freedom denied certain citizens in the past? That is a matter of judgment. Lynne Cheney and John P. Diggins are undeniably correct in stressing that the authors still approach their task with an ideological chip on their shoulders and a partisan interpretation of the American experience. But with the removal of the offending study lessons, less now depends on the language of the Standards themselves than on the quality and predisposition of teachers and the textbooks and teaching aids they employ.

Diane Ravitch and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. are also right to prefer these Standards to having none at all. Uniform standards and classroom materials could be a great boon to school districts that lack the funds for new library and textbook purchases, or even a budget for xeroxing. Then, too, national standards indicating what subjects ought to be taught, and when, can ensure against teachers sticking only to what they like or know, or against students being taught the same material two or three years in a row (it happens). Finally, and perhaps ironically, uniform standards that pay as much attention as these do to "marginalized" people in American history may provide a good argument for eliminating the tiresome, wasteful Black History and Women's History Months that currently interrupt each year's curriculum.

Lynne Cheney now regrets the part she played in supporting the idea of national standards. But thanks to her project, the educational establishment tipped its hand, and that is no small thing. Parents now *know* what most of the people who teach their children, write the textbooks, and control the National Education Association think of American history and values. The angry generation may continue to preside over our classrooms, but, thanks to the controversy over the Standards, the days of its *quiet* conquest may at last be over.

There is also reason to take Schlesinger's and Ravitch's advice that we drop the debate over these Standards altogether. For the fact is that

we have far more serious educational issues to tackle. Many of our schools are beginning to resemble "failed states," where all authority has collapsed and violence, drugs, and truancy rule. In one district (Chester, Pennsylvania), schools are so chaotic that a federal investigating team has recommended simply placing them in receivership.

The fundamental problem that inspired the Standards is, moreover, as dire as ever. Most of our young people are plug-ignorant. According to a 1994 national sample of 22,500 fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders, no more than half of white and Asian students, and no more than a fifth of Hispanics and blacks, meet even a minimal level of historical knowledge. That means that most students cannot place the Civil War in the 19th century or name the cold war as the main theme of U.S. foreign policy after 1945.

Under these circumstances, learned debate about which precise adjectives to attach to the Progressive movement is (if the analogy may be permitted) like quibbling in the 1960's over which model of rural development to try out on a Vietnamese village being racked by intimidation, propaganda, and diurnal warfare. Currently we are doing no better—perhaps even worse—at pacify-

ing our own urban schools than we did in the Vietnamese boondocks. I doubt that Schlesinger, Nash, Diggins, or myself, sent into the fray with our own ideal standards and our pockets bulging with federal money, would make so much as a dent.

However important curricula are, they are powerless to improve education in the absence of security, discipline—and, above all, excellent teachers. Maybe one day we shall have a real "Education President" who will roll back the culture of license, coddling, and "self-esteem" and figure out a way to improve our deteriorating, demoralized teaching corps. But the last in particular will take more than presidential fiat. Indeed, perhaps the final irony in this whole sorry story is that nothing in our time has done as much damage to the quality of teaching, especially at the grade-school level, as the loss of all those intelligent women who once upon a time stayed home with their children or took low-paying jobs as teachers, but who now pursue careers in government, business, the universities, and law. Amid all the other blows it has suffered, American education is reeling from the side-effects of the very feminist movement celebrated in the National History Standards.