

# Whose History? Whose Standards?

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THE National Standards Project, conceived under George Bush, born and reared by Bill Clinton's *Goals 2000: Educate America Act*, and nursed with \$2.2 million from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the Department of Education, took sick the moment November's election returns were in. Conservative critics had claimed that the Standards\*—two volumes of outlines and study guides for the teaching of, respectively, world and U.S. history in grades 5 through 12—were an abomination designed to indoctrinate young people in anti-Americanism. Riding this wave, Senators Robert Dole (R., Kans.) and Slade Gordon (R., Wash.) now introduced amendments that would have forbidden the use of federal funds for implementation of these Standards, and required that any future recipients of such funds "have a decent respect for United States history's roots in Western civilization."

In the event, the Senate settled on a resolution, rather than a law, condemning the Standards. It passed on January 18 by a vote of 99-1, the lone dissenter, Bennett Johnson (D., La.), holding out for tougher action.

Does this mean that the Standards are dead? As a federal guide to state school boards, perhaps. But the fact remains that the Standards reflect a consensus of the historical profession on what and how children should be taught. Indeed, they reflect what our children are *already* taught in schools across the country, and are sure to influence future authors of textbooks as well. If liberal academics suffer at all from this affair, it will not result from the Senate's wet blanket, but from their own triumphalism in publicizing what had heretofore been a quiet conquest of America's schoolrooms.

AMONG critics of the Standards, Lynne Cheney, former head of the NEH and thus the person who, ironically enough, had assigned management of the project to UCLA's National Center for History in Schools, fired the first shot in this

latest battle of the culture wars. Imagine, she wrote last October in the *Wall Street Journal*, an outline of history that pays more attention to the founding of the Sierra Club than to George Washington. Or that invites students to celebrate the "grandeur" of Mansa Musa's West African kingdom while focusing its discussion of Europe on persecution, imperialism, and the slave trade. Or that makes seventeen references to the Ku Klux Klan but only one to Ulysses S. Grant, the man who saved the Union, and none to Thomas Edison, who changed the fundamental relationship between man and nature. In Cheney's view, the Standards "save their unqualified admiration for people, places, and events that are politically correct"; she judges that the project went off the rails because revisionist historians took heart from the 1992 election of Bill Clinton and "iced out" those with more traditional views.

Following Cheney, columnists like Charles Krauthammer, Patrick J. Buchanan, and John Leo, and historians like John P. Diggins and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, complained that the Standards denigrate Western civilization and always depict non-Western ones in a favorable light. They adduced more examples: the Standards invite students to appreciate Aztec "architecture, skills, labor system, and agriculture," but ignore the Aztec religion of human sacrifice; depict Genghis Khan through the eyes of a papal legate whose cultural biases pupils are told to discern; ask students to indict John D. Rockefeller; assess Ronald Reagan as "an agent of selfishness"; and contrast the ecological virtue of Native American culture with our rapacious industrialism.

For their part, defenders of the Standards accused conservatives of forming an opinion on the basis of a few "howlers" so often repeated that one had reason to ask whether the critics had really read the volumes. "Even a cursory look," wrote Jon Wiener (a contributing editor of the *Nation*), "suggests that the assault by Cheney and Co. was flawed." Wiener saw no "preferential treatment of women and minorities." Perhaps

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\* National Center for History in the Schools, *National Standards for World History: Exploring Paths to the Present* and *National Standards of United States History: Exploring the American Experience*, Charlotte Crabtree and Gary B. Nash, project co-directors (University of California at Los Angeles, 1994).

Washington's and Edison's names do not appear where one might expect, but students could hardly avoid them while doing assignments on the American Revolution and great inventors. In any case, counting references proves nothing, since the *most* mentioned name turns out to be Richard Nixon's. (One need not wonder why.)

William H. McNeill, a revered dean of world historians, denied "anti-Western bias," and insisted that our children need to know about our "global past" and the "variety of peoples and groups that played a part in the development of the U.S." Finally, the *New York Times* accused critics of misrepresentation: "Liberal bias creeps into, perhaps, a couple dozen of the 2,600 sample lessons."

How can a responsible citizen judge this artillery duel? One way is simply to take the word of the columnist whose politics most resemble one's own, but to do so means simply reinforcing one's prejudices. The opposite response is to say, in effect, "a pox on both your houses." After all, history has no epistemology comparable to the natural sciences; it is a function of selection and viewpoint, and hence can never be wholly objective. Moreover, each generation rewrites history according to new information, methodologies, and its own search for a "usable past." So why not declare, with Tolstoy, that history is "a collection of fables," or with Mark Twain that it is just "fluid prejudice"?

Why not? Because cynicism, unfortunately, is a sure-fire sign that a nation is losing the will to sustain itself. A people's history is the record of its hopes and travails, birthright and education, follies and wisdom, and all else that binds it together. A nation grown cynical about its own history soon ceases to be a nation at all.

No, the only way to form a discriminating opinion of the Standards is to study them *in toto*, trying to come to grips with not only the political but perhaps especially the educational issues involved. That is what I did, and my report follows.

THE two books of Standards begin with almost identical chapters describing the purpose of the overall project. On the first page a tension erupts between two italicized reasons why history matters: first, because "*Knowledge of history is the precondition of political intelligence*"; second, because "*History is the only laboratory we have in which to test the consequences of thought.*"

The first formula, though undeniable, is almost an invitation to teachers to abuse classroom instruction as a ploy to help children make "intelligent" political choices. The second formula is a corrective, inasmuch as the consequences of ideas have so often been terrible. The test of the Standards is thus whether a healthy tension is maintained between the two formulas, or whether in fact the lessons are long on "presentist" allusions and short on the perils of ideology. We shall see.

The introduction also describes the skills that students ought to acquire. Historical memory is labeled the key to our connectedness with all humankind. (Yes, "mankind" has been purged from the language.) History should teach us to see matters through others' eyes, without requiring that we approve or forgive. Standards should be demanding, and promote active questioning rather than passive absorption. Standards should be applied to *all* students equally; no "dumbed-down" curricula that deny equal opportunity to large numbers of children. Standards should be rooted in chronology and teach students to apprehend patterns and cause-and-effect relationships. Standards should strike a balance between broad themes and specific events. Standards should impart the values of rigorous scholarship such as evaluation of evidence, logical argument, interpretive balance, comparative analysis, comprehension, and "issues-analysis and decision-making." Finally, students should apply these "thinking skills" to their own lives in order "to detect bias, to weigh evidence, and to evaluate argument, thus preparing them to make sensible, independent judgments, to sniff out spurious appeals to history by partisan pleaders, and to distinguish between anecdote and analysis."

Who could not applaud a school that trains children—*all* children—in all these ways? But what are the chances any school could do so? Consider asking high-school students, not only to read their homework assignment with a modicum of understanding but then to do the following with it:

- Identify the source of a historical document and assess its credibility.
- Contrast the differing values, behaviors, and institutions involved.
- Differentiate between historical facts and interpretations.
- Consider multiple perspectives of various people.
- Analyze cause-and-effect relationships and multiple causes.
- Challenge arguments of historical inevitability.
- Compare competing historical narratives.
- Hold interpretations of history as tentative.
- Evaluate major debates among historians.
- Hypothesize the influence of the past [*sic*].

This splendid instructional guide for a Ph.D. thesis defense is what the Standards aim to require of all 5th to 12th graders, including those we used to regard as in need of remedial help or as underprivileged. In practice, this curriculum would overtax the capabilities of most *teachers*, not to mention pupils, with the result that 90 percent of the students would flunk, or else (more likely) 100 percent would pass, under the "Wizard of Oz" syndrome. ("You're just as smart as anyone else," the Wizard said to the Scarecrow. "The only thing you don't have is a degree.")

Diane Ravitch has argued that the notion of

Standards does not mean “dragging down the students at the top, but expecting more of all students, especially those who are in the bottom half.” It seems to me more plausible that the equality plank is meant to abolish “elitist” segregation of advanced students from those who are variously “challenged,” thereby raising the self-esteem of the latter. Indeed, the theory that history should nurture self-esteem among women and minorities informs the Standards throughout, and is another source of tension.

**I**N THE World Standards history is divided into eight eras, the first of which covers pre-history up to 4000 B.C.E., the second up to 1000 B.C.E., the third up to 300 C.E., the fourth up to 1000, the fifth up to 1500, the sixth 1450 to 1770, the seventh up to 1914, and the last the 20th century.

Each era contains a certain number of Standards, and each Standard is elaborated, in turn, in subheads describing subjects to be covered. Finally, each list of subheads is followed by study lessons deemed suitable for grades 5-6, 7-8, or 9-12. The lessons number well over a thousand—one measure of their radical inclusiveness.

Few would dispute that American students today need to learn about other cultures. Historians like McNeill were arguing the case for world history long before “multiculturalism” came along. Accordingly, the Standards’ general guidelines mandate that courses “should treat the history and values of diverse civilizations, including those of the West, and should especially address the interactions among them.” But inasmuch as the Standards assume that world history will take the place of the old “Plato to NATO” Western Civ course, it is legitimate to ask, as the critics do, whether the Standards “privilege” *non*-Western histories, thereby reversing rather than redeeming the wrong.

As I worked my way through the eight eras, I did get an impression that the West was slighted. So I made a tally of the 109 sub-standards, dividing them into columns labeled “Western,” “Non-Western,” and “Interactive” (which usually entailed relations between “the West and the rest”). I counted the ancient Mediterranean as Western, pre-Columbian America as non-Western and post-Columbian as Western except when Latin America was lumped with the third world. The rest of the rubrics lent themselves to easy triage.

The results surprised me. Western history won out over non-Western by a margin of 43 percent to 35 percent, with Interactive garnering 23 percent. If we award the West a 40-percent share of the Interactive sections, the overall balance is almost 50-50; that is, half the material covers what we think of as Western Civ, and half the rest of the world put together. If, in practice, students are obliged to take only one year-long course in world history, *every* culture would be slighted. But if students spend four or more semesters on

world history, as the Standards recommend, then the 50-50 division is commendable. It all depends on what is taught about the civilizations and the interactions among them.

One more introductory note. A peculiar feature of the World Standards is the labeling of substandards as either Core or Related. On first thought, this technique seems a useful aide for teachers deciding what to stress during precious class time. But on second thought, the curriculum is so all-encompassing that most teachers will probably not pay any attention to Related subjects; they will just toss them out with a sigh of relief. And that means genuine loss in the few cases when seemingly indispensable subjects are inexplicably stamped Related.

One such case appears in the Standard on Ancient Greece. Athenian democracy (and its “limitations”) are Core. So, too, is the expansion of Hellenic culture by Alexander the Great. But the “major cultural achievements of Greek civilization” and the Greek wars with the Persian empire are merely Related. Thus, students learn (1) that Athenian democracy was flawed (by slavery, class oppression, and patriarchy), and (2) that otherwise Greek civilization is notable only for the militarism that coopted it and set off to rule the world. Is this meant to serve as a “distant mirror” of American history? Perhaps not consciously. But the authors do consciously render as optional all of Greek art, science, and philosophy, the spread of which is why Alexander was important in the first place, as well as the moving tale of Thermopylae, when the West first united to defend itself against an Eastern tyranny—not to mention the birth of history itself in the works of Thucydides and Herodotus.

My suspicion is that the project directors invented the category of Related in order to ease compromise among committee members pressing their own specialties and those determined to keep the Standards manageable. “OK, OK,” says the weary chairman, “the ‘influence of the T’ang Dynasty on Southeast Asia’ is in, but only if it’s Related. . . .” At which point the China scholar barks, “Do you have any idea how crucial the T’ang is to Asian history? Besides, Europe got three Cores and no Relateds last time. If you’re going to call the T’ang Related, then make early medieval Europe Related, too.” And so it is.

**A** SECOND potential source of distortion is the Standards’ determination to give all cultures equal time. Thus, while the overall balance is defensible, some particular equations seem absurd. Standard #3 in Era 3, for example, covers the rise of major religions *and* empires in Eurasia from 500 B.C.E. to 300 C.E. Does this mean what it says? Are the Roman empire and the first Chinese and Indian dynasties lumped together in a single Standard with the origins of Christianity, Buddhism, and Confucianism? Yes! In the meantime, Standard #4 is wholly

devoted to “the achievements of Olmec civilization,” a *Core* subject. Such “symmetrical asymmetries” permeate the major standards.

One surprising slight is the deemphasis on the history of ideas. This may not have been deliberate; it may be another perverse side effect of inclusiveness. If everyone is to be covered, then everything *about* everyone cannot be. But to omit huge chunks of philosophy, science, and art not only contradicts the stance against “dumbed-down” curricula, it renders incomprehensible other broad swaths of history. For instance, the standard for 19th-century Europe covers nationalism and social movements but labels “technological, scientific, and intellectual achievements” Related. Ditto for “new departures in science and the arts . . . between 1900 and 1940.” It would seem that the authors do not deem the revolutions in power and work wrought by thermodynamics, chemicals, electricity, internal combustion, modern medicine, and nuclear physics to be central to the task of teaching what the 20th-century experience is all about.

What is more, a student restricted to Core standards might well escape high school without ever being exposed to the ideas of Mill, Marx (he appears once, so do not play hooky that day), Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud, and Einstein. Nor do any of the study plans appear to explain the origins and nature of ideology. How then can students comprehend the relativism and totalitarianism that are defining features of “modern times”? How, indeed, can they “test the consequences of thought,” as the Standards’ introduction promises they will?

According to the *Times*, the real “treasures” are found not in the outline of history but “among the 2,600 assignments that accompany the standards.” In fact, many of these “examples of student achievement” are pedagogically silly, whatever their ideological slant. No “treasures” are buried among the assignments designed to make the classroom “crackle” with mock trials, debates, and play-acting. Such ploys are artificial, time-consuming, and often boring to students not directly involved. Moreover, no one but an expert could “recreate a *tertulia*, or social gathering, held by women leaders such as Maria Josefa Ortiz” without the script being written for him.

Nor are “treasures” found among assignments that are impossibly difficult for most high-schoolers (“Research the core and periphery thesis of Immanuel Wallerstein”), impossibly time-consuming (“Using books like *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, assess the accuracy of such literary accounts in describing the French Revolution”), or simply impossible (“Write a dialogue between a Muslim and a Hindu on what they see as the reasons for the spread of Christian missions, what the impact will be on their faiths, and how best to resist the ap-

peals of Christian missionaries”). Crackle, snore, or make things up?

ONE common criticism of the assignments is that they always look at events from the point of view of the downtrodden and their self-appointed spokesmen. The truth is more subtle than that.

Some sections in which one would expect to encounter a “devil theory” (e.g., 19th-century European imperialism) are in fact circumspect. Some are bizarre: of the twenty assignments on World War II, five address the Holocaust, three address children; three more address children *in* the Holocaust, and four raise moral objections to *Allied* bombing. Others are skewed: enslavement of Africans and slave revolts are mentioned repeatedly, always in Core Standards (the Haitian rebellion appears in three separate contexts), but the American abolitionist movement is Related and slavery in other cultures is not mentioned at all. Still other lessons are deafening in their silence: China’s Taiping rebellion—a slaughter on the scale of World War I—is discussed only in terms of “rural poverty,” and Communist Chinese purges and famines—slaughter on the scale of World War II—are ignored with the exception of one 8th-grade assignment inquiring after the results of the Cultural Revolution.

So it is true that non-Western cultures are given a moral pass, but with one exception: their treatment of women. If any consistent ideological thread runs through the world Standards, it is feminism. Over and over again, whether the subject is ancient Rome, Christian Europe, the Islamic world, China (footbinding gets repeated coverage), India, or Mesoamerica, students are prompted to ask “what obstacles [women] faced,” “what opportunities were open to them,” “what life choices were available,” and “in what ways were women subordinate”?

Nowadays few would argue against the inclusion of hefty doses of women’s history so long as the subject is not a fig leaf for ahistorical ideology. But who can doubt that boys and girls are expected to conclude from the above questions that: women have always and everywhere been suppressed; they undoubtedly hated their lot; and the cause of this universal phenomenon was . . . what? Ah, there is the crux of the matter. Was it due to the physical exigencies of child-bearing, or the economic exigencies of child-rearing, in pre-industrial societies? Or because a sexual division of labor was taken for granted by most women as well as men? No; the promptings invariably invite students to conclude (or be told) that sexual roles were always a function of patriarchy backed by theology.

Which brings us to religion, another hot button. Perhaps to avoid the risk of offending Bible Belt school districts, the authors do not hold up Christianity for explicit assault, nor do they ridicule other world religions (except in regard to

their dogma on women). But close reading reveals some interesting tendencies. Judaism is reduced repeatedly to “ethical monotheism”; the prophets and messianic promise are absent, and Moses is not mentioned by name until a query concerning his place in the Qu’ran. The teachings of Jesus and Paul are likewise described in ethical terms and compared to Buddhism. The Gospel is absent. The defining debate over Iconoclasm in Byzantine history is absent. The role of Benedictine monasteries in the founding of European civilization is Related (so the “Dark Ages” are condemned to remain dark). The Crusades are treated at length, but not as the belated Christian *counteroffensive* they were. The Reformation lessons contain *one* question on the theology of Luther and Calvin. And although Jews appear in various contexts, Judaism as a historical force disappears.

So religion is treated as ethics—ethics betrayed, moreover, as soon as believers attribute them to a transcendental source. It should therefore come as no surprise that the finale—the last assignment in the entire World Standards—asks pupils to “define ‘liberation theology’ and explain the ideological conflicts surrounding the philosophy.” The true “end of history”: liberation theology! Or is it not a theology but an ideology? Or a philosophy? The confusion about what distinguishes these three categories may be the authors’ most chilling shortcoming of all.

In short, the World Standards are pretty much what one would expect from a committee. For all their balance between West and non-West, and their laudable stress on cultural interaction, they are too inclusive, difficult, tendentious, or ahistorical. A brilliant, tireless teacher *might* walk an elite class through this material in two or three years. Even then, I doubt whether students could explain why Western civilization became the only universal one; why science, technology, freedom—and prosperity beyond the dreams of Kublai Khan—arose in the West, and not elsewhere; why at length the West fell into a long civil war, and why the totalitarians lost.

Am I then suggesting that students should be taught to honor Western civilization, despite its history of wars and oppression, and despite the contributions of other cultures? I am. The decency of life in the next generation may depend on it.

**I**N THE context of American history, the functional equivalent of multiculturalism is “diversity.” According to their critics, the authors of the U.S. Standards were so determined to celebrate diversity that they ended up, in Diane Ravitch’s words, “accentuating ‘*pluribus*’ while downplaying ‘*unum*.’” The alleged result is a curriculum that goes out of its way to mention the struggles of “marginalized” groups at the expense of what used to be thought the central narrative of American history.

To be sure, the Standards’ criteria themselves mention the importance of commonalities, but only as an afterthought: “Standards for United States history should reflect both the nation’s diversity exemplified by race, ethnicity, social and economic status, gender, region, politics, and religion, and the nation’s commonalities.” The last include “our common civic identity and shared civic values,” “democratic political system,” and the (question-begging) “struggle to narrow the gap between [our] ideals and practices.” Nowhere do the Standards suggest that conflict between equality and liberty is the defining fact of American history.

Having read the criticisms, I expected the authors to give short shrift to politics in favor of social and cultural history. So I did another content analysis. To begin with, the U.S. Standards divide our national story into ten eras with the breaks coming at 1620 (arrival of the Pilgrims); 1763 (end of the French and Indian Wars); 1801 (end of the Federalist period); 1861 (Civil War); 1877 (end of Reconstruction); 1900 (U.S. emergence as world power); 1930 (onset of the Depression); 1945 (end of World War II); and 1968. These watersheds conform to traditional periodization, and the temporal coverage (with its halfway point at 1877) is also conventional. Each era is then defined by standards (two to four, in the U.S. case) and sub-standards listing the topics students are expected to master.

I totaled the 91 sub-standards according to both field (political, social, economic, etc.) and “group focus” (women, Native Americans, white males, etc.), splitting some standards in half when they focused on two groups or relations between them. It turns out that nearly 60 percent of the sub-standards cover politics and foreign policy, and traditional material, all told, comprises about 65 percent of the book. Not bad.

But let us turn the equation around: is not 35 percent a generous portion to attribute to the implicitly “unique” experiences of women and minorities, especially when virtually *zero* space is devoted to the unique experiences of Irish, Germans, Italians, or Jews? My own sense is that, while “race, class, and gender” are probably overrepresented, the basic political narrative is still there. So the question hinges again on what “spin” it is given.

The spin is spun on the first page of the first standard, when 5th and 6th graders are asked to compare Native American ideas on “how the land should be used” with those of Europeans. In the 7th and 8th grades, students ask whether Native American societies were “primitive” at all, or whether they had not in fact “developed complex patterns of social organization, trading networks, and political culture”? The true answer to this false dichotomy is: yes, the Amerindian tribes had social conventions, trade, and politics—what human beings do not?—but, yes, they were primitive and certainly just as capable of aggression

toward aliens (and one another) as any other race. But that is not the answer suggested for Native Americans, or for West Africans, who are likewise celebrated for their high culture and “attitudes toward nature and the use of the land.”

Enter Columbus. Now, Spanish and English practices toward Amerindians and Africans are ugly pages of history that need to be read. But they need to be read *as history*, which is to say that students need to enter the heads of the historical actors. Imagine you were a 16th-century Spaniard who happened upon an Aztec temple bristling with horrific idols and priests carving out the living hearts of men. Would you have any doubt that you had stumbled on to Satan’s own kingdom? Can you imagine the carnage if the *Aztecs* had managed to equip themselves with galleons and guns and sailed off to Portugal or West Africa? That Europeans were greedy hypocrites goes without saying. The crime against history is for the authors to pretend that non-Western cultures were somehow pristine.

Why the pretense? The answer appears explicitly in the introduction to Era 2: while learning about European decimation of Native Americans and enslavement of Africans, “students should also recognize that Africans and Native Americans were not simply victims, but were intricately involved in the creation of colonial society and a new, hybrid American culture.” In other words, the spin is there to raise the self-esteem of minority students: yes, you are victims, but you also have great value. And to raise the consciousness of white students: you owe much, in both senses of the word, to people of color.

The historiography of self-esteem also demands a pecking order. I was surprised at first that the Standards follow their indictment of the Spaniards with assignments questioning England’s “black legend” about the evils of Catholic Spain. Then I understood: Hispanics, too, are victims, so long as their accusers are Wasps.

**T**HE Standards on the American Revolution have been the subject of particular acrimony. One accusation—that they do not pay attention to the colonists’ struggle to “bring forth a new nation”—is not borne out. There is plenty of material on the Revolutionary War and Constitution. What strikes me as idiosyncratic is how *Tory* it is. Students are repeatedly asked whether the English Parliament’s position on taxation was not in fact reasonable, whether the colonies’ resistance was really justified, how a Loyalist would have viewed the Intolerable Acts, whether a break with England was inevitable.

A conspiracy theorist might see here a bias against liberty. But the real flaw in the treatment is, once again, ahistoricity. Thus, four of the five sub-standards covering the Revolution’s effects deal with the contributions and frustrations of slaves, Native Americans, and women. As the introduction explains, the Revolution “called into

question long-established social and political relationships—between master and slave, man and woman, upper class and lower class, officeholder and constituent, and even parent and child [*sic*—and thus demarcated an agenda for reform that would preoccupy Americans down to the present day.” And so, “students need to confront the central issue of how revolutionary the Revolution actually was.”

Well, how revolutionary was it? To be sure, women in revolutionary America were not given the vote. But in how many countries could *anyone* vote in 1776 or, for that matter, 1876? The slaves were not freed. But where else in the world did anguished debate over slavery occur at that time? The authors seem surprised by all that was commonplace, and take for granted all that was rare. So they ask students to seek explanations for the wrong data. It should not be surprising that 18th-century Virginia planters owned slaves. What is striking is the fact that these rustic colonials wrote the Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and *The Federalist Papers*, and made advances in self-government and human dignity that amazed and shook the Atlantic world.

Finally, what “agenda” was it that the Standards say was “demarcated,” and by whom? The nature of the “agenda” is no mystery, because it reappears in every later era. For the 1801-61 Era, the leitmotif is a quotation from Emerson: “What is man born for but to be a reformer” (as if no “reform” could possibly have negative consequences). Students are told to discover the “predecessors of social movements—such as the civil-rights movement and feminism”—in the “attempts to complete unfinished agendas of the revolutionary period.” The introduction to the Civil War warns against placing “[t]oo much stress on the unfinished agenda. . . .” The one for the early 20th century instructs students to be “fascinated with the women’s struggle for equality. . . .” The introduction to Era 8 concedes that “World War II deserves careful attention as well” because it “ushered in social changes that established reform agendas that would occupy the United States for the remainder of the 20th century.” The introduction to Era 9 instructs teachers that post-World War II history “will take on deeper meaning when connected to the advent of the civil-rights and feminist movements that would become an essential part of the third great reform impulse in American history.” Finally, the introduction to Era 10 “claims precedence” for the “reopening of the nation’s gates to immigrants” and the “struggle to carry out environmental, feminist, and civil-rights agendas.”

Not surprisingly, given this abiding *agenda*, the “last word” in the U.S. Standards is this: “Evaluate the effect of women’s participation in sports on gender roles and career choices.” Women’s athletics: the real “end of history”?

If, then, the U.S. Standards are not grossly imbalanced in terms of coverage, they do explain

the “deeper meaning” of American history in terms of minority and female struggle versus white male resistance. This is the *gnosis* a pupil must grasp to get good marks. If Europeans braved the unknown to discover a new world, it was to kill and oppress. If colonists carved a new nation out of the woods, it was to displace Native Americans and impose private property. If the “Founding Fathers” (the term has been banished) invoked human rights, it was to deny them to others. If businessmen built the most prosperous nation in history, it was to rape the environment and keep workers in misery.

Nowhere is it suggested that when aggrieved minorities have demanded justice, they have appealed to the very principles bequeathed by our nation’s architects (not to mention “The Great Architect of the Universe”). Nowhere is it suggested that women and minorities have striven not to overthrow what white men had built, but to share more abundantly in it. Nor is it mentioned that most women, most of the time, have identified with their fathers or husbands as farmers, clerks, or laborers, Democrats or Republicans, Southerners, Northerners, or Westerners, Protestants, Catholics, or Jews.

In most lessons women are just women, blacks are just blacks. Only once does an apparent reference to men as just men appear, in a question imagining the damage done to workers’ self-esteem by unemployment during the Depression. But even then the gender-neutral term “heads of households” is substituted. Apparently there were no *men* in America’s past. So who was oppressing women all those years?

I WAS especially skittish when I read the sections on foreign policy, expecting a neo-Marxist critique of American imperialism. In fact, the treatment of 19th-century diplomacy—the tale of Manifest Destiny—is instructive and balanced. The Standards even pass up the chance to ridicule the War of 1812, one of the sillier episodes in American history, and they present a balanced portrait of the origins of the Mexican War. The section on the Spanish American War says too little about its roots in the Cuban revolt, but exposes students to a range of opinions on the U.S. colonial episode.

How strange, then, that a negative spin enters the text with Woodrow Wilson! First, students are invited to conclude that American neutrality was a sham. Then students are asked to explain why Americans dedicated to “making the world safe for democracy” denied it to many of their citizens at home, actively prosecuted dissenters, and violated the civil liberties of nonconformists. . . .” Finally, Wilson’s Fourteen Points are introduced for the purpose of asking whether he lived up to them when he intervened in Russia, whether Germany was cheated when it agreed to an armistice on the basis of them, and whether they contributed to the failure of the Treaty of Versailles.

These are all legitimate issues. But they betray an ahistorical double standard that judges American *motives* by the most saintly ideals, while excusing or ignoring other nations’ *deeds* on the grounds of necessity or differing values. Setting aside the question of accuracy, is it wise to teach grade-schoolers that Wilson was foolish or hypocritical to proclaim democracy, disarmament, self-determination, free trade, and a League of Nations to a war-ravaged world? Maybe the authors are just too eager to teach subtleties better saved for college. Or maybe they mean to answer Yes, lest a new generation be seduced by patriotic rhetoric into new Vietnam-style crusades.

It gets much worse. The 7th- and 8th-grade Standards for World War II say *nothing* about the nature or ideologies of the fascist regimes, but do ask students to assess American blame for going isolationist, and to consider the causes of American tension with Japan dating back to 1900. Thus prepared, 9th to 12th graders will have no trouble answering, “Why did Japan set up the Co-Prosperity Sphere?” and whether the U.S. oil embargo was “an act of war” precipitating Pearl Harbor.

The four high-school lessons on the conduct of the war cover (1) the Anglo-American delay in opening a second front and the Soviet role in defeating the Axis; (2) the Allied failure to respond to the Holocaust; (3) the extent to which Norman Rockwell’s illustration of the Four Freedoms is an accurate portrayal of the American image; (4) the decision to use the atomic bomb. What are students to conclude when all their lessons call into question *Allied* conduct?

As for the Standards on the effects of the war, these include questions on women workers, internment of the Japanese-Americans, the anti-Hispanic “zoot-suit” riots, the wartime contributions of African-, Mexican-, and Native-Americans, and two more on the internment of the *nisei*. Millions of mothers and wives of servicemen, not to mention the (overwhelmingly white male) veterans themselves who risked their lives to destroy fascism, may wonder why there is no room for them.

The cold war, defined as the morally neutral “swordplay of the Soviet Union and United States,” is important not because this nation sacrificed for four decades to contain another totalitarian empire, but rather

because it led to the Korean and Vietnam wars as well as the Berlin airlift, Cuban missile crisis, American interventions in many parts of the world, a huge investment in scientific research, and environmental damage that will take generations to rectify. It demonstrated the power of American public opinion in reversing foreign policy, it tested the democratic system to its limits, and it left scars on American society that have not yet been erased.

Accordingly, the lesson plans make no mention of Soviet expansion, or Soviet and Chinese totalitarianism and mass murder. Instead, one

of three questions for grades 5-6 is about McCarthyism; three of five questions for grades 7-8 are about McCarthyism; and two of three questions for Grades 9-12 are about . . . McCarthyism, while the third asks students how "U.S. support for 'self-determination'" conflicted with "the USSR's desire for security" in Eastern Europe, and whether we threatened the Soviets through "atomic diplomacy."

So instructed, students would be hard-put to explain why the United States, Western Europe, Japan, and ultimately China joined hands in fear of the Soviet Union. So beset by red herrings, students would be easy prey for conspiracy theories linking the cold war to hysterical anti-Communism or the military-industrial complex.

There may be no such thing as Truth-with-a-capital-T about complicated historical phenomena. But there is such a thing as discernible Falsehood. And the above is an example—with a capital F.

THE Standards came into existence because of the widespread realization that young people are largely ignorant of history. Now that the project has borne fruit, it is clear that people had different ideas as to what students are ignorant of. A parent of the older generation may be shocked that students do not know our first President. A professor from the 60's generation may be shocked that students do not "know" that the U.S. was at least equally at fault for the cold war. An avatar of the "new history" may be shocked that students do not know Susan B. Anthony, and would rather discuss MTV.

The co-director of the Standards project, Gary B. Nash of UCLA, says his benign purpose was to liberate pupils from the "prison of facts" that make history "boring." But facts are not imprisoning: they are all we have to *liberate* us from the tyranny of deception and opinion, our own as well as others'. Liberals used to believe that; it is terrifying to learn they no longer do. And as for history being boring, the fault for that lies, always, with the teacher. How can you possibly make the French Revolution boring?

Let us be honest. These Standards are too demanding for most *college* surveys. They are offensive to all who value the exceptional achievements of the American experiment. They will even fail to advance the cause of the politically correct, and that is because they aim to debunk historical myths that have not been imparted to this generation in the first place. Ghetto blacks and Valley girls are not going to have their consciousness raised. They will simply imbibe (or ignore) a new myth concocted by a new "over-thirty" elite.

What is more, the Standards' droning critique of white, middle-class American men may provoke an intellectual backlash as earnest (if not as violent) as the student revolts of the 60's. The authors of the Standards may not realize this be-

cause (I suspect) they are still aiming their arrows at their own parents and teachers from the 50's and 60's. But they are hitting the kids of today between the eyes.

Those kids are bleeding. I see it every semester in my Ivy League classrooms. Graduate students who are ignorant of the bare skeleton of the historical narrative. Honor students who cannot write grammatical English. Average students who cannot write, do not read, and will not think. Or are intimidated. Or handicapped by self-hatred, self-righteousness, second-hand anger, or cynicism. The youth of Athens, corrupted.

My plea to high-school teachers is this: forget the politics—forget *your* politics. Just make sure your graduates can read and write, know some geography, and know when the Civil War happened. For if they do, then college professors will have something to build on. As it is now, we spend much of our time conveying basic facts, correcting writing, and debunking the reverse myths so widely taught in high schools: "No, Mr. Slackoff, we did not drop the atomic bomb on Japan rather than Germany because we were racist. The first atomic test did not occur until two months after Germany surrendered. Meanwhile, do you know what a dangling participle is?"

The battle of Standards is part of a larger war: Donald Kagan's fight for Western Civ at Yale; the Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian; the politicization of the American Historical Association which voted in 1982 to condemn the Reagan defense build-up on the learned conclusion that it would provoke nuclear war. In light of this melee, the notion that nationally-mandated Standards are wise is mad. I agree with Hanna Gray, president-emerita of the University of Chicago, when she writes that "certification" of a version of history is "contrary to every principle that should animate the free discussion of 'knowledge.'" But she ducks one point. Children will be exposed to one textbook, one teacher. They *will* have standards imposed on them. So the question remains: who chooses?

I have no instrumental solution. But I do know that none will work unless educators remember their calling, which is not to impart attitudes, feelings, or even convictions, but knowledge and wisdom. These are hard to acquire, harder still to impart. But they are what breed success, and success is what breeds self-esteem. That is why the late Carl Becker, whose high-school text first hooked me on history, and a liberal at a time when liberals still honored liberty, dedicated his otherwise "Eurocentric" *Modern History*

TO ALL TEACHERS  
OF WHATEVER RACE OR COUNTRY  
OF WHATEVER PERSUASION  
WHO WITH SINGLENESS OF PURPOSE  
HAVE ENDEAVORED TO INCREASE KNOWLEDGE  
AND PROMOTE WISDOM IN THE WORLD.