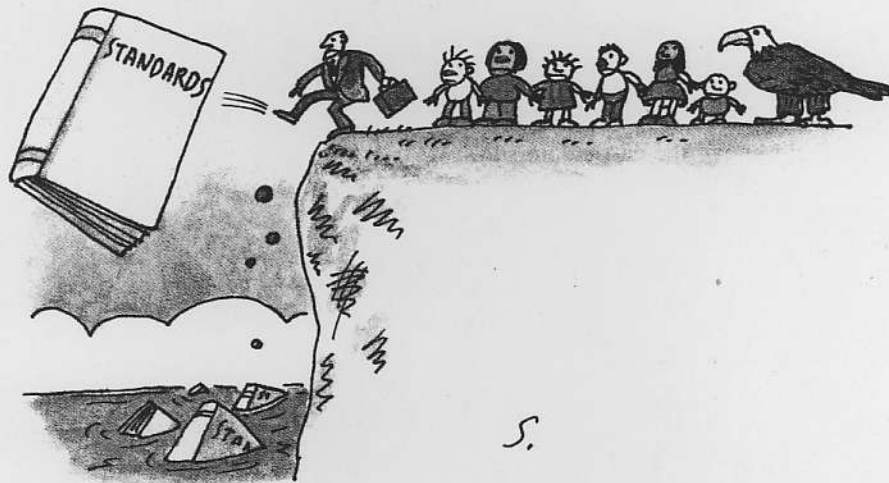


# WHAT SHOULD CHILDREN LEARN?

by PAUL GAGNON

*National standards have been thwarted,  
but state-mandated academic standards and  
local action can yet save the schools*



**C**AN the wishes of two Presidents, Republican and Democratic, of most governors, of several Congresses, and of up to 80 percent of the American public and teachers simply be ignored? So it seems. Over the past five years all of them have called for national academic standards, to make schools stronger and more equal. But their will has been frustrated by the century-old habits of American educators unable to conceive of excellence and equity co-existing in the schools most children have to attend. This makes a depressing story, but some of it needs telling if those children are to see a happy ending. For to succeed where national efforts failed, state and local school leaders, teachers, parents, and citizens need to understand what they are up against, what has to be done differently, and how much is at stake.

They can begin by recognizing, and tolerating no longer, the vast inertia of an educational establishment entrenched in many university faculties of education; in well-heeled interest associations, with their bureaucracies, journals, and conventions; in hundreds of research centers and consulting firms; in federal, state, and local bureaucracies; in textbook-publishing houses and the aggressive new industries of educational technology and assessment. On the whole this establishment is well-meaning, and it is not monolithic, all of one mind. But its mainstream, trained and engrossed in the means rather than the academic content of education, instinctively resists any reform that starts with content and then lets it shape everything else—most certainly the means.

Starting school reform by first deciding what every child should learn strikes most people as only common sense. But to many American educators, it spells revolutionary change. The standards strategy for school reform would give subject-matter teachers and scholars, and the educated public, unprecedented power to spur genuine change—change far deeper than questions of school choice, methods, or management. Means and management are not the problem. The overused business analogy breaks down: business first decides the content of its product; means follow. But educators, unwilling to focus on subject matter, have never decided what content everyone should know; the curriculum stays frozen, incoherent and unequal. For more than a decade American citizens have wanted high, common standards—the only new idea for their schools in a century. But to get them, they will have to work around the establishment, and overturn the status quo.

The first step toward change was taken in 1983, when the National Commission on Excellence in Education delivered a ringing wake-up call: “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.” The commission’s report, *A Nation at Risk*, told us that other countries’ schools were doing better in both quality and equality of learning—and ours were losing ground on each count. In the commission’s words, “a rising tide of mediocrity” belied our democratic promise that “all, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost.”

*A Nation at Risk* gave rise to the standards strategy for school improvement, talk or the avoidance of which has pre-occupied American educators ever since. It said that all high school students, regardless of background or vocational prospects, needed a common core curriculum of four years of English, three years each of mathematics, science, and social studies, and a semester of computer science. The college-bound should add two years of foreign language. In the early 1980s only 13.4 percent of our high school graduates had taken the first four of those “new basics.” Adding the computer semester dropped the percentage all the way to 2.7,



and adding foreign language made it 1.9. “Mediocrity” was a mild word for what was going on. But the public paid attention: many states and districts raised their core academic requirements, over the objections of experts who declared that dropout rates would soar, for minorities most of all.

By 1990, the National Center for Education Statistics found, 39.8 percent of high school graduates had taken the recommended years of English, mathematics, science, and social studies; 22.7 percent added the computer semester; 17.3 percent added both computers and the foreign language. Instead of rising, the dropout rate for African-Americans declined, and for Hispanics remained roughly stable. The percentage of African-American students taking the required years of academic subjects rose from 10.1 to 41.1; for His-



panics it rose from 6.3 to 32.7. “Top-down” recommendations, with state and local implementation, had made a difference, and they continue, albeit at a slower rate, to do so.

The glass, however, is still at best half full. And by comparison with the democratization of public schools in other countries, it is well under half empty. Our 25 percent dropout rate means that the roughly 40 percent of high school graduates in 1990 who got the recommended classes made up only 30 percent of all young people of that age. In 1991, in two school systems at opposite ends of the earth, about two thirds of the corresponding Japanese and French age groups completed markedly more-demanding academic programs, which included foreign languages. In both countries about half the students were in programs combining technical and liberal

education. Even disregarding foreign languages, relatively few of our young people graduate from academic programs that are as rigorous as those abroad. For fully equivalent programs, a generous estimate of American completion would be 15 percent—about a quarter of the French and Japanese completion rate.

We used to say—and too many educators still say—that we cannot compare our schools with those of other countries, because they educate only an elite and we try to educate everybody. Untrue for thirty years, this is now the opposite of the truth. They educate the many, and we the few. To our shame, a disadvantaged child has a better chance for an equal and rigorous education, and whatever advancement it may bring, in Paris or Copenhagen than in one of our big cities.

Comparing curricula makes us look bad enough, but what is behind the course titles on student transcripts? Are American courses as substantial as those abroad? To make them so, President George Bush and the nation's governors launched a movement to set national standards for course content at meetings in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 1989. Goal Three of their statement insisted that course content be academically "challenging," comparable to that in the best schools here and overseas, and—for equity—that all students be offered such content and be expected to master it. Polls showed overwhelming public support, even for a national curriculum.

Shortly after, Congress set up a National Council on Education Standards and Testing, to "advise on the desirability and feasibility of national standards and tests." In its report of January, 1992, the council recommended both. National content standards, it said, ought to "define what students should know and be able to do" in English, geography, history, mathematics, and science, "with other subjects to follow." A core of common content was needed to "promote educational equity, to preserve democracy and enhance the civic culture, and to improve economic competitiveness." It should set high expectations, not minimal competencies; it should provide focus and direction, not a national curriculum.

The ball was handed off to the U.S. Department of Education, which in turn funded privately based consortia of scholars and teachers to decide what was most worth learning in each major subject. The stage was set to open equal opportunities for learning, to temper the curricular chaos of 15,000 school districts, so that children would no longer be entirely at the mercy of where or to whom they were born. Some of us in the Department of Education were sure it could be done. We were wrong. The department itself never decided how the standards strategy ought to work, or how to explain it to others. Last year four of the national projects it had commissioned—in the arts, civics, geography, and history—issued their documents. (Science and foreign-language projects are still under way. A math project had been separately completed



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do it right? Are we as a people ready to apply the standards of our very best schools, public and private, to all the others, and reform a system that is generally mediocre and shamefully unequal? A century of avoidance says no.

#### THE TEN AND THE NINE

**T**HE idea that democratic education requires a rigorously academic core for every student is not new. The report of the illustrious Committee of Ten, published in 1894, forcefully articulated it, calling for an established academic curriculum for all high school students, *whether or not they were going to college*. Italics are needed, for the committee was falsely accused in its time of caring only for the college-bound, and thus of being elitist and anti-democratic. This line is still taken by educators who have not read the report.

in 1991.) After spending more than \$900,000, the English project had been defunded for nonperformance, its professional associations unable to do for our language and literature what other nations have done for theirs. (One subcommittee solemnly voted that the phrase "standard English" be replaced by "privileged dialect.") Only the civics document earned countrywide respect. The others met with disbelief and complaint over their length and extravagant demands. The American-history standards set off an ideological conflict that is still boiling, an issue for presidential candidates at campaign stops. (For an examination of the disappointing standards for world history, see page 74.)

A year after the standards projects reported, the national version of standards-based reform is dead of multiple wounds, some self-inflicted, others from our culture wars, still others from congressional antipathy to any federal initiative, and most from American educators who have long resisted establishing a common core of academic learning. Recovery now depends on the states' choosing their own standards. But where a well-funded nationwide effort collapsed, how can states step in and

The story of the Ten's defeat and the triumph of progressive education's dumbed-down version of John Dewey's ideas, which reads eerily like the failure of the national-standards movement today, is best told in Richard Hofstadter's *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1964. Chaired by Charles William Eliot, the president of Harvard, the Committee of Ten was made up of six university scholars (several had taught in secondary schools), three high school principals, including the head of the Girls' High School in Boston, and William T. Harris, the U.S. Commissioner of Education. The common core they advocated required four years of foreign language and English language and literature, three to four years of math and science, and two to four years of history. Young Americans taking on the profession of citizen, they said, needed a demanding curriculum, not the "feeble and scrappy" courses offered in too many high schools. This was doubly important for "school children who have no expectation of going to college," so that they might have at maturity "a salutary influence" upon the affairs of the country.

The report could have been written today. It anticipated the progressive pedagogical agenda and our latest "innovations" as well. It decried the "dry and lifeless system of instruction by text-book." Facts alone were repellent; schooling was for "the invaluable mental power which we call the judgment." It deplored mere coverage. To reach a common core of essentials, less was more: "select the paramount." The committee argued for active inquiry in original sources, studies in depth, individual and group projects, seminars, debates and re-enactments, field trips, museum work, mock legislatures and conventions. All possible teaching aids should be used: engravings, photographs, maps, globes, and the "magic lantern." To make time, school hours needed to be longer and more flexible.

For the new curriculum the Ten urged that history, civil government, and geography be taught as one. They wanted history and English "intimately connected," with constant cross-referencing to other countries and eras, to literature and art. They wanted more time for foreign languages, starting in the elementary grades. The continuing education of teachers needed more rigor—courses during the school year, taught by university scholars, for teachers who needed "the spirit or the apparatus to carry their classes outside . . . [the] narrow limits" of textbooks. Educators today reinvent these century-old ideas and declare them "exciting," as though nobody before—least of all academicians—could have thought such things.

The Ten's marriage of common substance and varied methods—exactly the object of today's standards strategy—was broken by the advent of a new corps of nonacademic educators who argued that common requirements would force a multitude of students to drop out. In 1911 a Committee of Nine on the Articulation of High School and College turned the Ten on their heads. The Nine, primarily public school administrators, insisted that school "holding power" depended

on meeting interests that "each boy and girl has at the time." To focus on academics was to enslave the high school to the college, and lead students away from "pursuits for which they are adapted" toward those "for which they are not adapted and in which they are not needed." Schools should focus on industrial arts, agriculture, and "household science."

The influence of what Hofstadter called an "anti-intellectualist movement" also stood out in *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*, issued in 1918 by the National Education Association's Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, and nationally distributed by the U.S. Office of Education. Again made up of administrators, the commission included no academic subjects in its list of seven things high schools ought to teach: health, command of fundamental processes (the three Rs), "worthy" home membership, "worthy" use of leisure, vocation, citizenship, and ethical character. This report, too, could have been written today, by the promoters of content-free brands of "outcomes-based education," which they celebrate as new and "transformational."

### MASS TRIAGE

**F**ROM the 1920s on, vast numbers of children were locked into curricular tracks and "ability groups" on the basis of surface differences—race, ethnicity, language, social class, sex, "deportment," and intelligence as categorized by inane notions of testing—that had nothing to do with their potential. At the low point of this mass triage, leaders of the "Life Adjustment" movement of the 1940s consigned up to 80 percent of all American children and adolescents to the nonacademic heap. Hofstadter called it the most anti-democratic moment in the history of schooling. In the next decade James Bryant Conant's influential book *The American High School Today* (1959) still sought no common academic core and considered no more than 20 percent of students as "academically talented." The rest, Conant said, should "follow vocational goals and . . . develop general interests." And in *The Education of American Teachers* (1963), Conant added that at the university level "a prescription of general education is impossible unless one knows, at least approximately, the vocational aspirations of the group in question."

Thus spoke mainstream American educators, habitually failing to recall the three distinct purposes of schooling—for work, for public affairs, for private culture—and ever unable to imagine what free people could be as citizens or private personalities outside their daily work. From the report of the Nine to the present, educators (including those at many universities) have put socializing the masses and job training ahead of intellect. At different times socializing takes on various looks from group to group, left to right. But its common root is distrust of ordinary people's minds and spirit. Unable to think and seek the good, ordinary people must be socially

engineered to amuse themselves and to behave. We boast of escaping the old world's class system, but cherish our own brand of social privilege. Academic standards, educators have said for a century, are not for everyone—as though most people do not deserve or need a liberal education, as though we want them not as equals but only to work and to buy, Beta-minuses out of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. To feel better, we tell one another the story that schools can be "different but equal," a swindle still outliving its twin, "separate but equal."

In contrast, the cataclysms of depression and war brought educators in Europe to other views by the 1950s: it was time to democratize their schools, by leveling upward. As European secondary schools were opened to all, the political parties of the left resolved that the children of workers and the poor should gain whatever personal and political power they could from the same academic curriculum formerly reserved to the few.

A generation earlier America had leveled downward, accepting a dual, unequal school system sold to trusting citizens with warm words of solicitude by expert-specialists. In fact those specialists were perpetuating elitism by denouncing liberal education as elitist. Europeans were not so trusting as we, either of experts or of one another. Out of revolution and class conflict they had raised wariness to a high art, looking behind words for consequences. In Europe the schools had been battlegrounds for ideas about human nature, religion, history, national honor, and democracy itself. European democrats who had suffered Nazi occupation were not about to accept the notion that schools could be different but equal.

Had we looked overseas after midcentury, we could have learned from both our allies and our enemies in the Second World War. But we did not and still do not. Those most reluctant to look abroad are the promoters of giddy educational fixes that no foreign country would take seriously, from subjecting schools to the "free market" all the way to killing off academic disciplines in favor of "issue-based inquiry." Albert Shanker, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, puts it squarely, as usual: Americans tolerate a "marked inequality of opportunity in comparison with Ger-



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many, France, or Japan." Why do students work harder in those countries, with the same TV and pop culture to distract them? Because their educators have decided what all students should know by the end of high school, Shanker says, and they have "worked back from these goals to figure out what children should learn by the time they are ages fourteen and nine." Standards are universal and known by everyone, so "fewer students are lost—and fewer teachers are lost."

#### CONTENT-BASED REFORM

**G**RANTED, the U.S. Department of Education's own ambivalence did not help the standards strategy's reception. What could easily have been explained as a necessarily slow four-step process—in which most important decisions would be left to states, local districts, schools, and teachers—remained in confusion. And when expensive standards projects refused to discipline themselves and lugged forth great tomes that looked like

national curricula, the department gave up trying. It let go the idea of a national core of essential learning and decided to say that setting standards was now up to the states.

Having fifty sets of standards need not mean disaster. But the Committee of Ten was right: something close to national agreement on a vital common core is indispensable to educational equity, to dislodge and replace the empty, undemanding programs that leave so many children untaught and disadvantaged. Without some such agreement, the much-heralded devolution of reform leadership to the states could make things worse.

The four steps essential to content-based school reform are no mystery. But conventional educators will object to them, for they focus on subject matter and must be carried out by subject-matter teachers and scholars, not by curriculum specialists unlearned in academic disciplines. In step one, teachers and scholars work together under public review to write the content standards—brief, scrupulously selected lists of what is most worth knowing in each academic subject. These have but one function: to lay before students, parents, teachers, and the university teachers of teachers the

essential core of learning that all students in a modern democracy have the right not to be allowed to avoid. "Core" means what it says: teaching it should take no more than two thirds of the time given to each subject, the rest being left to local school and teacher choice.

This step is the most critical but most often misunderstood. What is a subject-matter essential, or "standard," and what is not? It is specific, not abstract, but it does not descend to detail. In history a typical standard asks students to understand the causes of the First World War, with an eye to the technological, economic, social, and political forces at work, together with the roles of individuals, of accident, and of ordinary confusion. It does not ask students to "master the concept of conflict in world history." Nor does it ask them to memorize the names of the twenty central characters in the tragedy of the summer of 1914.

As they select each standard, scholars and teachers must consider whether they can explain its importance when students ask "So what?" The First World War is an easy example. What it did to Americans was to shape their lives and deaths for the rest of the twentieth century—from the Depression and the Second World War to the end of the Cold War, from our hubris of 1945 to our present fantasy that we have spent ourselves too poor even to keep our parks clean or our libraries open. If a standard cannot be explained to the young, or to an educated public, it is either too general or too detailed. In a hurry, some states have issued "common cores of learning" that are lists of healthy attitudes and abstract "learning outcomes." Others have copied detail directly out of the overstuffed national standards documents. Neither is a help to teachers or curriculum makers.

Step two was never "national" business: writing a state curriculum framework, saying in which grades the essentials should be taught. Its function is to end the plague of gaps and repetitions that only American educators seem resigned to accept as normal. Articulating subject matter across the elementary and secondary years also requires a collaboration of equals—teachers, scholars, and learning specialists—each of whom has things to say that the others need to hear. The word "framework," too, means what it says; it leaves the third step—course design and pedagogy—to the school and the teacher. They must have the authority to make the choices most important to them and to their students: the topics and questions by which to teach the essentials, the day-to-day content of instruction, the materials and methods best suited to their students and to their own strengths.

Step four, writing performance standards and tests of achievement, can sensibly follow only when the others have been taken. But some states are hurrying to award expensive contracts to outside testing firms before anyone has thought about, much less decided, what is worth testing. To leave this to experts and let the rush to "accountability"—which

now has a potent assessment lobby behind it—drive standards and course content will kill all chances for school improvement. Not everything precious can be measured, and not everything measurable is worth teaching; pap is pap, a drop or a gallon. So once more it is teachers and scholars who must decide what to assess.

Content-based reform will not always be easy even for teachers and scholars. All who teach, from the grades to graduate school, will have to be differently educated than they now are and teach differently than they now teach. For example, the history learned at any level depends on the prior education of both student and teacher. And the decision about what history to teach must anticipate what is to be learned at higher levels. But this is not how American schools and universities work. Teachers and academicians habitually shape each course as an island entire to itself, as though what they teach, or do not teach, matters to nobody but themselves—as if others had no right to notice, and none to intervene. That must change.

Schoolteachers and university scholars will have to accept each other as equals, because aligning subject matter demands seamless, collaborative work from pre-school through Ph.D. They rarely do so now. Nor do elementary and high school teachers confer, or teachers in the same building. Apart from ego, insecurity, and worries over turf, collaboration takes time, which schools and universities rarely provide, and personal commitment, which they rarely reward. Moreover, to choose essentials and to design frameworks



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## OBSTACLES AND PROSPECTS

**O**F the obstacles reformers confront, the toughest may be our mad utilitarianism. Consider the three aims of schooling—preparing the worker, the citizen, and the cultivated individual. We put the worker ahead of the other two, as if they had no effect on the nation's economy or the quality of work done. Turning to citizenship, we bypass the substance of history, politics, letters, and ideas and peddle ready-made attitudes. Thus American educators have never had to think consistently about the moral, aesthetic, or intellectual content of public schooling for the masses—the gifts that academic subjects open for everyone.

Since academics have been for the few, it follows that our teacher corps is academically undereducated, ill prepared to offer challenging content to all its charges. Teachers are not to blame. Since so little is expected from most students, the university teachers of teachers—whether in content or pedagogy—see no reason to ask much of *them*. The time it will take to re-prepare teachers is itself an obstacle. There are no shortcuts to content-based reform, which makes it vulnerable to hawkers of new fashions from an education industry whose planned obsolescence leaves *haute couture* in the dust.

States will discover that the changes required by academic school reform will call down showers of objection. "Standards alone will not solve our problems"—as if anyone

and assessments, educators will have to debate priorities. What *is* truly most worth knowing? What must be left out? Academicians avoid such questions at all cost; witness their chaotic college curricula. University faculties will have to alter their major programs, giving up pet courses for others that better prepare the next generation of teachers and help those already teaching. They will have to battle colleagues into coherent general-education requirements for underclassmen. To do all this, academicians will need to be broadly educated, and be differently rewarded by administrative and trustee policies.

States whose educators accept this degree of change will accomplish standards-based reform. Where change is rejected, they will fail. The hard fact is that anchoring school reform in academic learning—and putting teachers and scholars in charge—is foreign in all senses. It would redirect the mainstream of American education as the twentieth-century parade of much-hyped fashions never has. Life Adjustment, "greening," the open classroom, "back to basics," career education, "futures learning," global consciousness, "doing-a-value," critical and creative thinking, and "outcomes-based" education (are there other kinds?)—not one of these has ruffled the establishment or gotten beneath the surface to substantial subject matter, and so not one has improved the schools of most American children. Indeed, by leaving weary teachers awash in the debris from successive tides of obsession and indifference, they have made things worse.





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# Botched Standards

*Which is more important for young people to study—Magna Carta or the Mongol empire? The latest answer may surprise you*

thought they could. "Standards will oppress minorities and the poor"—as if the absence of standards does not leave educators free to offer unequal schooling and tax cutters free to slash school spending. "Standards will stifle innovation"—as though clear and equal standards were not the best friends of innovators. Parents have seen far too many passing fads that skew or empty the curriculum. Settled aims will make it easier to experiment with school structure, school size, and all the ways that schools have to be different from one another to meet different circumstances.

States will find friends in teachers and citizens who, not overspecialized, have no ideology to press, and who understand that the three purposes of education—for work, for citizenship, and for private life—are by their nature distinct, many-sided, requiring different, sometimes opposite, modes of teaching aimed at different, sometimes opposite, results. Schooling for work is a "conservative" function, demanding disciplined mastery of tasks from the world of work as it is, not as we wish it to be, and objective testing of student competence. Schooling for citizenship, in contrast, is a "radical" activity, egalitarian and skeptical in style, mixing the hard study of history and ideas with free-swinging exchange on public issues. The school nurtures both teamwork and thorny individualism, at once the readiness to serve and the readiness to resist, for nobody knows ahead of time which the good citizen may have to do. To educate the private person, the school must detach itself much of the time from the clamor of popular culture. It must be conservative in requiring students to confront the range of arts, letters, and right behavior conceived in the past, toward the liberal end that their choices be informed and thereby free.

People well know that to work at these three purposes, schools must serve both society and the individual, must be close to daily life at some moments and wholly insulated at others. They know that different things are learned best in different ways, from drill to brainstorming, and that schools have to be *both* disciplined and easygoing, hierarchical and egalitarian, at different times for different subjects at different levels—mixing pleasure and pain, each often following upon the other.

In sum, they can understand why TheodoreSizer is not indulging in paradox when he says that only "a loose system that has rigor" can correct what he describes in *Horace's School* (1992) as "the inattention of American culture to serious learning." We need, he says, "generous localism" applied with high and common academic expectations. For a century we have resisted this, treating the majority of our children as though they were learning-disabled. We say that knowledge is power, but we have kept knowledge from millions of children, adolescents, and even college students. Our chance to make this long-delayed turn to democratic education is now in the hands of the states and local schools.

THE world-history document issued by the National Center for History in the Schools, at UCLA, and funded by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities, is worth a close look, as a cautionary tale for reformers who may assume that scholars see the role of standards more clearly than others do. Given its 314 pages, and the limited time schools allot to world history, it is not helpful even for picking and choosing, because it has no continuing questions to help readers focus on essentials, as better textbooks do. To avoid the battles among specialists that selection would have set off, its authors, careful to offend no vocal constituency, acted on the dubious principle that all societies and all eras back to prehistory deserve equal space in the education of young Americans. By so doing they buried essentials under mounds of undifferentiated matter, much of it academic exotica and antiquarianism.

The document's failure is surprising, because its opening pages are eloquent on why citizens must study history. No reason, it argues, is "more important to a democratic society than this: *Knowledge of history is the precondition of political intelligence.*" It adds, "Without history, a society shares no common memory of where it has been, what its core values are, or what decisions of the past account for present circumstances." Also in italics is Etienne Gilson's remark "*History is the only laboratory we have in which to test the consequences of thought.*" But between the promise and the execution we find a chasm. The volume is weakest on thought and the consequences of ideas, on core values and common memories, not only the West's but any civilization's. It is thin on political turning points and institutions, and thereby on the drama of human choice and its effects. For all its length and pretentious demands, it scants the artistic, literary, and philosophical legacies of world cultures, and it shortchanges the past 250 years, which saw so many of the decisions that "account for present circumstances."

Its treatment of world history has thirty-nine main standards, 108 subheads, and 526 sub-subheads, all of them called standards. None of the main standards or subheads is devoted to ideas, whether philosophical, religious, ethical, or moral, social, economic, or political. One must descend to the 526 sub-subheads, or to fragments of them. Neither the

Judaic nor the Christian principles that are the sources of Western values, morals, and views of justice and of ideas of the individual's dignity and responsibility—even for unreligious or anti-religious thinkers—are given more than one half of a sub-subhead, less than a thousandth of the document's substance. The ideas of Islam and of Protestant reformers fare no better. However, the topic "mastery of horse-riding on the steppes" gets twice that space, the Scythians and the Xiongnu fill two full sub-subheads, and the Olmecs get a main standard all to themselves.

On the secular side, there is nothing of medieval thought about just rules of law, war, economic life, or social responsibility. Later we find nothing of Renaissance or Reformation theory concerning society, economics, or politics. Enlightenment thought and its impact on Church and State are relegated to a single sub-subhead. French revolutionary ideas "on social equality, democracy, human rights, constitutionalism, and nationalism" get one sub-subhead out of ninety-four for the years 1750-1914. For the twentieth century a single sub-subhead asks students to explain the "leading ideas of liberalism, social reformism, conservatism, and socialism as competing ideologies in 20th century Europe." Leninist and Fascist-Nazi ideologies are each assigned half of a sub-subhead, so that only two sub-subheads must do for the political ideas and ideology of the entire twentieth-century world.

In squeezing European civilization, the document is also meager on the political history that makes sophisticated citizens. There is nothing on the failure of Athenian democracy to overcome the forces of pride and demagoguery. The vast questions about Rome's decline that so preoccupied the American Founders are compressed into part of a subhead, less than half the space given the Gupta empire in India. As to politics in the years 1000-1500, a single sub-subhead is

devoted to "analyzing how European monarchies expanded their power at the expense of feudal lords and assessing the growth and limitations of representative institutions in these monarchies." So, buried and unnamed in half of that sub-subhead are Magna Carta and the Model Parliament, along with the prime political lesson that true constitutions require a balance of power in society. In the same era entire standards take up the Mongol empire and sub-Saharan Africa.

The seventeenth-century English Revolution gets a single sub-subhead (out of eighty-four for the era 1450-1770)—no more than "evaluating the interplay of indigenous Indian, Persian, and European influences in Mughal artistic, architectural, literary, and scientific achievements." The authors find nothing special about English constitutional history that American citizens should know, in keeping with today's fashion of decrying "Whig history," as though the worldwide struggle for political freedom, and all of its sacrifice, setbacks, and advances, were only a myth to hoodwink the innocent young. All but absent, too, is the history of labor. In the section covering the twentieth century there is no mention of trade unions, their battles and importance to democracy and social justice, and why totalitarians make them their first victims. Even the vast twentieth-century struggle of liberal democracies to overcome Nazism and Soviet communism fades into pale generalities.

Some of the weaknesses in the world-history document are but the reverse side of American virtues: hopefulness and generosity; our eagerness to embrace diversity, to be self-critical, to shun "ethnocentrism." In what other country do people cringe at that word and are students required to study other cultures but not their own? The standards also reflect our impatience with politics, our reluctance to admit that only politics can turn aspirations into reality, and our impa-



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tience with the gloomier views of human nature that accept the presence of evil in the world, and the tragedy and imperfection of the human condition.

The fact remains, however, that in deference to current styles in the history profession, the authors played down the Western sources of their own American consciences, and failed to do the work of selecting what would best serve the education of American students, or of society at large. Fortunately, their introduction makes clear why state and local teacher-scholar teams must do better. Nothing less is at stake than our political competence as a people.

Taking the solidity of democratic institutions for granted, educators have worried too little about the hard things they require citizens to understand. Now, in the mid-1990s, we have reasons to pay more attention. For one thing, it takes a perverse effort of will to deny that the effects of technology

and economics, demography and nature, make our problems and the world's more complicated than ever. Or to deny that nostrums peddled by the loudest voices in politics and talk TV and radio are more simplistic than ever. Or that blaming "government" for every ill and anxiety—while not yet so virulent as under the Weimar Republic—betrays a flaming ignorance of history and human nature.

### WHAT HISTORY TEACHES

**W**ITH respect to world history, what should Americans know and teach? What is the main story? It is not the parade of military, technological, and economic "interactions," or the endless comparisons among often incomparable centers of great power, that global studies dwell upon—although these must, of course, be taken into account. The big story is not the push to modernize but the struggle to civilize, to curb the bestial side of human nature. What students can grasp very well is that this is a common struggle, in which all peoples and races are equal—equal in our natures, equal in the historical guilt of forebears who pursued war, slavery, and oppression. Black Africans, Anglo-Americans, Europeans, Native Americans, North African and Middle Eastern peoples, Mongols, Chinese, and Japanese—all have pursued these things when they have had the power to, afflicting one another and weaker neighbors.

For our time, the first lesson to be learned from world history, the most compelling story, is the age-old struggle of people within each culture to limit aggression and greed, to nourish the better side of human nature, to apply morality and law, to keep the peace and render justice. Students can see the glory and agony of this struggle, and how often it has been lost. Because human evil exists, good intent has never been enough. It has taken brains, courage, self-sacrifice, patience, love, and—always with tragic consequences—war itself to contain the beast. Against the twin temptations of wishfulness and cynicism, history says that evil and tragedy are real, that civilization has a high price but that it, too, is real, and has been won from time to time. In history we find the ideas, the conditions, and the famous and ordinary men and women making it possible.

All peoples have taken part in the struggle to civilize. An honest look at the past reveals a common human mixture of altruism, malevolence, and indifference, and reasons for all of us to feel both pride and shame. Starting from any other point of view is historically false, and blind to human nature. Historians—and standard setters—have a special obligation to be candid. But many popular textbooks are unflinchingly pious about other cultures and ultra-critical of our own, preaching a new-style ignorance in reaction against, but just as pernicious as, our older textbook pieties about ourselves and disdain for others. Both are pernicious because both sap the will to civilize. People who are taught to feel specially

### NIGHT TERRORS

Whose voice is it in mine when the child cries,  
terrified in sleep, and half asleep myself I'm there  
beside him saying, shh, now easy, shh,

whose voice?—too intimate with all the ways  
of solace to be merely mine; so prodigal  
in desiring to give, yet so exact in giving

that even before I reach the little bed,  
before I touch him, as I do anyway,  
already he is breathing quietly again.

Is it my mother's voice in mine, the memory  
no memory at all but just the vocal trace,  
sheer bodily sensation on the lips and tongue,

of what I may have heard once in the pre-  
remembering of infancy, heard once and then  
forgot entirely till it was wakened by the cry,

brought back, as if from exile, by the child's cry—  
here to the father's voice, where the son again  
can ask the mother, and the mother, too, the son:

why has it taken you so long to come?

—ALAN SHAPIRO

guilty, or specially victimized, or naturally superior, will not reach out to others as equals; they will not pay the costs in toil, tears, and taxes always imposed by that struggle.

This is not a "conservative" or "liberal" issue but one of trusting children, adolescents, and adults to work with historical truth, however inconvenient or impolite it may seem. History reinforces the rough notion of equality that we learn on the playground and in the street: there are like proportions of admirable and avoidable people in every imaginable human grouping—by age, class, race, sex, religion, or cultural taste. Individuals are not equal in talent or virtue, and certainly not equally deserving of respect. To teach otherwise is to invite ridicule and resentment. Instead what must repeatedly be taught, because it is not quickly learned—but is quickly forgotten in hard times—is that in civilized society it is every person's *rights* that are equally deserving of respect: rights to free expression, equal protection under law, fair judgment, rigorous education, honest work and pay, an equal chance to pursue the good.

This hard truth we accept, and remember, only with the help of historical insight, which is indispensable in forging a democratic conscience—that inner feeling that we ought to do the right thing even if only out of prudence. For we see again and again that societies failing to accord a good measure of liberty, equality, and justice have hastened their own decay, particularly over the past two centuries, since the American and French revolutions told the world that these three were the proper aims of human life and politics, and that it was right and possible to bring them to reality—by force if necessary.

Student-citizens need to be acutely sensitive to the central political drama of world history since the 1770s—what Sigmund Neumann called the "triple revolution" aimed at national unity and independence, at political democracy and civil rights, and at economic and social justice. This, too, is not a liberal or conservative matter. Whether we approve or deplore these ends, or the means to them, does not lessen their force or our need to deal with them, at home and abroad. Modern history tells us that whenever any one of them is frustrated for long, masses of people will sink to envy, self-pity, fury, and a search for scapegoats, *führers*, and quick, violent solutions.

Good history is not always fun to learn, any more than is chemistry or mathematics, and we should not pretend that it is. The job of citizen is no easier to prepare for than that of doctor or bridge builder. Nor is good history always popular. It denies us the comforts of optimism or pessimism. It gives the lie to nostalgia, whether for left-wing or right-wing or feel-good politics. Its lessons offer no cure for today's problems, only warnings we are silly to ignore. As they select the essentials of U.S. and world history, state and local standard setters and curriculum makers can look for the particulars that teach such lessons best—memorable events, ideas, and people whose stories need telling, but always in the context of longer narrative history.

For example, an American-history standard should require

the ability not only to recall points in the Constitution and Bill of Rights but also to understand the ideas and events behind them, back to Greek and Roman thought and institutions, to Judeo-Christian views of human nature and responsibility, to Magna Carta and the English Revolution, to Hobbes, Locke, and Montesquieu, Burke, Paine, the Federalists and the anti-Federalists. These essentials are not grasped by playacting a few quarrels from hot Philadelphia afternoons of 1787—though playacting can make a good start if the script is based on original sources.

Moreover, the lesson of the Constitution is not nearly complete without learning the harrowing consequences of a cheap answer to labor shortages that American planters were sure they had found in the early 1600s—slaves from Africa. A tortured Constitution, belying the Declaration's promise, was only one, early payment. The Civil War followed, and even 620,000 dead did not purchase the free and equal Union for which Lincoln prayed in his Second Inaugural. New chains of bondage were forged, and another century of repression and humiliation followed, before the civil-rights movement of the 1960s restarted a process of liberation whose grinding slowness continues to divide and embitter us.

Likewise, a world-history standard on the Second World War teaches little unless that war is seen as a consequence of the outbreak of the First World War and of the murderous incompetence with which it was fought, of the Bolshevik Revolution, of world depression, of the furies and civic ineptitude that destroyed the Weimar Republic, of Hitler's rise on the shoulders of private armies, and of the liberal democracies' wishful rejection of the costs of collective security, from the Paris Conference of 1919 through the Spanish Civil War to the Nazi occupation of Prague in 1939. Nor can it teach nearly enough without examining the Holocaust, the ultimate horror, itself a consequence of all these things and more since the Middle Ages.

The fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War brought back the war's satanic nature, from Rotterdam to Dresden, Nanking and Bataan to Hiroshima. The debates over guilt revealed widespread avoidance of history's warnings. Some seemed to doubt that evil exists and has to be dealt with, even by making war. Others seemed to deny that any war, launched for whatever cause, will carry frightful human consequences, will be as hellish as weapons permit. And 1945 was not the end. The Cold War followed from the effects of both world wars. Draining lives and resources, fouling our politics, skewing economic life, it divided us against one another, from the Red scares of the 1940s and 1950s through the bloody Korean and Vietnam wars. Its legacy clouds our view of a changing world and its needs, not least our own need to distinguish between force that is necessary and force that is not. All these afflictions are consequences of human choices back to 1914 and earlier, many of them in pursuit of cheap, quick answers in defiance of history's lessons and the imperatives of civilized life. ☞