

## Teachers Respond: Debating the Future of Social Studies

**John Cartiana (Former teacher and administrator in Paterson, NJ; Vice-President, NJCSS):** The debate over the teaching of social studies or history in our schools usually ignores the key element of the discussion: the children. Educators don't teach social studies or history; they teach children about social studies or history. So the question needs to be rephrased, "Social studies or history, what is best for our children?" As usual, children get shortchanged in this debate because the pundits advocate their own personal or political agendas. Combine the divisiveness of the debate with shrinking budgets, and students receive less and less social studies or history. Our country is at a critical time in its democracy, and students need the knowledge of history and the skills and process of social studies. Why must we limit the education of our next generation to choices that diminish their horizons? I want social studies classes for our students, but do also demand the richness and complexities of our history.

I believe our students must become literate in the social studies and history. Our democracy demands that we produce informed, intelligent citizens who can solve problems, make choices, and fight for the common good. Therefore, students need to study how laws are made, as well as how to be politically active in society. They need to learn the story of history that includes the elite white males who owned property as well as the disenfranchised, oppressed groups like women and ethnic and racial minorities. Students need to study the history of violence in this country as well as the problem solving skills to react rationally when placed in a violent situation. Our children deserve the best, not the narrow agendas of clashing ideologies. Students need to learn history - the facts, warts, and heroes. They need to learn the skills of analyzing history to make judgments and evaluations, so they will make appropriate decisions in the ballot box.

I saw the application for the Teaching American History grant and became very nervous at the term, "traditional history." Who defines traditional history? Are professors, historians, and the politicians advocating their particular social and political agendas? At the same time, those educators who claim there is no "canon of historical facts" and that children need only to be taught how to access facts via the Internet are equally guilty of pushing an agenda that limits the scope a child's education. Children need both

knowledge and the skills to process that knowledge in order to be productive human beings and citizens.

Unfortunately, while both sides fiddle with their agendas in this debate, the children are losing because less and less social studies and history are being taught in the schools. Children are not getting either; they're getting neither. School districts have prostituted their mission to the mastery of standardized testing. There are no standardized tests in New Jersey so there is little social studies or history being taught especially in grades K-6. Equally as devastating, examine what subjects an undergraduate student needs to pass to receive a certificate to teach social studies in our schools. Some institutions of higher learning do not mandate core history subjects for a person to become certified to teach in our schools. Students can take what I consider elective courses in history, and still be certified to teach the complicated topics and themes of our history. While we argue over what should be taught, we produce a crop of teachers woefully inadequate to teach either area.

It's time to stop being so full of ourselves that we believe our agenda is best for children. We must have a vision of the end product that we are trying to produce for the betterment of humanity and our society. It's the children, stupid!

**Gloria Sesso, Director of Social Studies, Patchogue-Medford, NY:** Thomas Jefferson supported a general education not just for the few but for all citizens "to enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom." He felt that the general education for all citizens should be chiefly historical for "history, by "apprising them of the past, will enable them to judge the future; it will avail them of the experience of other times and other nations; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men. . . ." Teaching "traditional American History" is not a phrase to be feared but one that enhances the mental abilities of students. It provides explanatory power because information is developed within a context. Students engage in reasoning when they can analyze sources and determine significance. History as the core of the Social Studies provides the framework for asking and answering questions with substantive content rather than free floating opinions in a vacuum.

Concerning what history to teach, we need to move the educational debate to a higher stage and leave behind the futile dialogue between "content" and

“method.” It is just as critical to transcend the false dichotomy between facts and conceptual analysis. Historical understanding requires both knowledge of facts and ways of thinking about facts. How do you choose the facts, skills and concepts that are worth the limited time that we have in classrooms. Among the essential understandings is the story of the long human struggle for liberty, justice, equality and dignity. Americans need to understand the ideas, conditions, and people all over the earth who have carried the struggle forward and those who have hobbled, betrayed or defeated it wherever the struggle has been waged.

Kenneth Jackson, former Chairman of the Bradley Commission in History and Professor of History at Columbia University, reminds us that unlike many other peoples, “Americans are not bound together by a common religion or a common ethnicity. Instead, our binding heritage is a democratic vision of liberty, equality and justice. If Americans are to preserve that vision and bring it to daily practice, it is imperative that all citizens understand how it was shaped in the past, what events and forces helped or obstructed it, and how it has evolved down to the circumstances and political discourse of our time.” For example, students need to be asked what Lincoln meant in the Gettysburg Address when he said “These dead shall not have died in vain? What was the “new birth of freedom” of which he spoke? Lincoln viewed the Declaration of Independence as the founding moment of American identity. His “four score and seven years” pointed to 1776 and he revolutionized the Declaration’s ideals further when he spoke of dedication to the “proposition that all men are created equal.” Teaching about the meaning of the Gettysburg Address in its context and its reliance on the founding ideals of the United States is traditional American history and it is essential that it be taught in terms of our identity as citizens.

No system, says Paul Gagnon in *Democracy’s Half-Told Story*, “religious, political, economic, or educational, can be understood without knowing its adventures - - its origins and their circumstances, the ideas and forces that propelled or obstructed it, its successes and failures, its changing role in the larger world of other systems.” History provides the integrating force for promoting literacy and the analysis of ideas.

**Ellen Orr, Hutch Tech High School, Buffalo, NY:** In elementary and middle schools, teachers should focus on the social aspects of learning, including all of the skills children need to be good students. The content

gets repeated from year to year so it is not as important. However, I believe the social studies curriculum in upper grades definitely needs to focus on historical content, especially United States history. There is too much information that students entering college do not and it should not be that way. High school social studies teachers must provide students with good content background and an understanding of our country, how it formed and a tangible sense of the fundamental things that happened in the past. That said, I do a lot of hands-on and interactive instruction in my classes. I provide students with a time line and a list of pertinent facts and then have them research additional material themselves. My goal is to have my students discover important historical information for themselves. You cannot just give students dry information. It will get too boring and you will lose them along the way.

**Monica Kwiatkowski, Cuba-Rushford Middle School, Cuba, NY:** Being a middle school teacher, I think the process of learning about the world and learning how to acquire information are more important than just providing students with social studies content. Generally, I would say an integrated social studies approach is more important than plan historical content. The 21st century is a global age and students need to be able to explore civics, ethics, economics and cultures and all the other wonderful things that go along with being part of a global community. One of the things I like to do in my classes is to instill a sense of social history. This helps students develop a sense of empathy for others. In a thematic unit on immigration and Ellis Island, students play the role of being immigrants. They build their own trunks and go through the process of entering the country through Ellis Island.

**Sue Oppici-Kluxen, Community M.S., West Windsor-Plainsboro, NJ:** We need to teach social studies. History is not complete enough. The study of history alone will not provide students with all of the analytical tools that are needed to understand the world and all situations. To understand the history of an area you must understand its geography and the culture of its people. For students to understand a society, or an earlier era, we need to teach them to empathize with others, not just a collection of facts. I accept that students need background information, but without all of the relevant factors that social studies provides they will never fully understand the world around them.

## Debating the Future of Social Studies

**Melanie Yaskulski, Dryden, NY CSD:** I lean toward teaching social studies because it covers a wide range of areas. Students need to be familiar with economics, government, and religions in addition to history. Advanced placement classes can be more specialized, but the regular social studies curriculum must expose students to all the disciplines. In social studies, character education is very important. Teachers need to help students examine their morals and their decisions, which also means focusing on civics and citizenship. Even if you believe teachers should just teach history, I think you would have to agree that these things are important. Recently, my students read a book called *The Sunflower* by Simon Wiesenthal. It is the story of a Holocaust survivor who must decide whether to forgive a former Nazi soldier who is on his death bed. This story confronts students with a moral dilemma that they have to consider and it helps them to better understand their own values and beliefs. In addition, by personalizing choices such as this one, it makes it easier for students to connect with the events of the past.

**Shirley Riefenhauser, Newburgh, NY CSD:** Students learn social studies from kindergarten through 12th grade. Instead of focusing on content knowledge in my high school classes, I prefer to involve students in using what they have learned. Knowledge of history is just the beginning. In my advanced placement government class we debate civic duty and civility and a variety of political issues. My goal is to have students become passionate about the world. They are going out into the world, either to college or to work. If they do not understand what it means to be a productive citizen when they leave my class, they may never understand it. They need to know what their rights are as apartment renters or homeowners, to know why they pay local taxes in the community in which they raise their children, and even how to look at their own children's homework.

**Kathy Wurster, Washingtonville, NY High School:** I teach 10th grade global history and a human rights elective that is predominantly for 12th graders. Human rights education is my passion and I am on the social studies council's Human Rights Committee. I think there has to be a combination of both the history and social studies approaches to education. Students need content knowledge as a foundation, but teachers must also introduce them to higher level thinking skills and discussion of vital issues. I always tell students when

we have debates that they need to support what they say with factual information. As a teacher, I help my students get historical facts, facilitate the development of analytical skills and then guide them in the use of information to formulate and present opinions. I also help my students explore broad understandings about the world. The main idea I try to teach is that we Americans are not an entity unto ourselves. We can no longer survive in isolation. Students have to see themselves as global citizens and to learn tolerance. To make this possible, social studies must be comparative. Students need to be exposed to other cultures, to other types of governments, to other types of peoples and ideas.

**Gary Zay, East Hampton, NY Middle School (2004 New York State Middle School Social Studies "Teacher of the Year"):** When I grew up in the 1960s, middle school and high school students took history and geography as separate subjects. I prefer to teach history that way rather than as part of social studies. I think students really have to learn content, particularly in middle school and high school. When you teach a broad subject such as social studies to 8th graders and try to include economics, political science, history and geography all mixed together, students are overwhelmed and things get lost.

**Deborah Lloyd, Peru, NY High School:** I believe teachers should try to integrate the teaching of history and the social studies. Within the 11th grade United States history curriculum the focus should be on historical content, but we also need to have students examine history from the human perspective. In order to do this, we need to integrate areas such as geography, psychology and economics. I think this approach helps students understand events such as the Holocaust and institutions such as slavery. A social studies focus also encourages students to explore different views on issues. My school is in the North Country and my students spend time studying John Brown, who owned a farm there. Some people consider him a religious fanatic and others describe him as a martyr. One of the things we ask is "What caused John Brown to act in this manner?" I want students to understand that people are the products of their times. I do not think they will learn this by simply examining historical "facts." History should not be slighted but it's important to include social studies within the curriculum.

**Karen Maresca Ridge HS Basking Ridge NJ:** The curriculum should be a combination of both history and social studies. You cannot really understand a society without exploring its history, but its history is only a part what makes up any society. Students also need to understand the sociological, economic and political dimensions of a civilization. They need to explore its moral and philosophical ideas. In my school, rigor and relevance are central to teaching. We want teachers to take instruction to a higher level by having students enact simulations and complete projects. We encourage them to think about subjects from multiple perspective, not just recount facts. In my classes, students are writing their own versions of the Constitution as they examine the different responsibilities of government.

**Jady Simmons, RSCD#17, Rochester, NY:** I teach 4th grade in Rochester, New York. We cover New York State history everywhere from Native Americans up through Industrialization. I do not just stick with dates and times, I hated that when I was in school. Instead, we look at why things happened, cause and effect, and points of view. Elementary school students need to know a little bit of historical information, but I would rather have them understand the process of history; The “why did something happen?” Right now we are finishing up the American Revolution and we spend almost the entire time talking about “points of view.” Why did some people decide to become Patriots while other people remained Loyalist or were fence-sitters? I think this is much more important than knowing which battle happened on what date. When 4th graders come to me they do not always know enough, or even how, to draw a conclusion. My job is to teach them how by asking a lot of questions.

**Howard Krug, John Marshall High School, Rochester, NY:** Our classes should have a history content focus if we want students to understand the origin of the United States and how it evolved as a society. My major teaching approach is to have students examine historical documents and to analyze them. While the process of understanding history is important, if they do not have the content knowledge, they will not understand what they are learning about. I teach a mini-unit on reformers and activists in pre-Civil War ante-bellum society. One of the things I like to do is have students look at different reformers and ask what their aims were, why they started out doing what they did, and what is their impact on our lives

today. While students learn about the reformers, I am also teaching them how to be historians. They may examine a person’s diary and compare their own analysis with the conclusions of a biographer. We must make sure they can connect historical events with each other and how they impact our history and our lives today.

**Thomas Caswell, Oswego, NY High School:** There must be room for both content knowledge and process learning in social studies education. In New York state, the 9th, 10th, and 11th grade curricula are really a lot more history based, although they include a high degree of learning how to learn and analysis. In twelfth grade the focus is on government and economics, two of the social sciences. When I teach history I use a lot of primary source documents. I have a project every quarter that includes student research and encourages them to be creative. Often it is designed to enhance their computer skills. It can be a PowerPoint presentation, a video documentary, or a newspaper from the past where they write articles. In my experience, these projects are the keys to authentic student learning. I had a student recently who was working with me in a web design class who designed a diplomacy project. He was not generally a strong academic student, but he succeeded in learning more about World War II and the debate over Isolationism versus Intervention than he ever would have learned in a traditional history classroom. Students gravitate towards projects. It gets them hooked on history and social studies. In traditional history classes, teachers are disseminating information. But with projects, students are working with knowledge. I like both methods. I lecture sometimes. But with projects, students are collecting, sorting and organizing what they learned. When they try to make sense of the knowledge and apply it, they will never forget it.

**Douglas Cioffi, Kellenberg Memorial HS, Uniondale, NY:** There has to be some sort of compromise here. Personally, I agree with both authors on different levels. Both approaches to teaching are important and both should be emphasized. However, I feel that historical facts and content knowledge must be taught first and be the basis for social studies. With this base knowledge, students will be able to apply what has happened and use it to understand the world around them today. I think the old adage applies here, “Those who do not know history are doomed to repeat it.” How can students make decisions about today’s

## Debating the Future of Social Studies

world and society without knowing why the society is the way it is? Students really are the future and must be given a balanced idea of the world around them. Let the students make the decisions as long as they know the who, what, when, where, why, and how.

**John Myer, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto:** In Canada we have a muted form of the debate between history and social studies. The curriculum works differently depending on the provinces. Social studies tends to be the elementary curriculum. History, geography, etc. appear as separate subjects beginning as early as grade 7 in Ontario and as late as grade 12 in British Columbia. The ideological divide between social studies and history is also less clear cut with many of those in favor of more emphasis on history in a “progressive” camp. In my view, good curriculum is good curriculum and good teaching is good teaching. Social studies / history have less status than language, math, science, and technology. To quote Rodney King, “Can’t we just get along?” More to the point, rigid ideological battles based on false dichotomies do not do us- social studies or history educators- any good. Perhaps if some of the more rabid history ideologues in your country and in mine took an historical perspective they might see the folly in their ways.

**Ron Widelec, Kennedy High School, Bellmore, NY:** The events of September 11, 2001 have been used to justify turning schools into patriotism-factories, where students memorize “history” and learn about the wonders of western civilization and how the United States is “mankind’s last, best hope.” Chester Finn sees history as a story of “amazing deeds by heroes and villains in distant times and places”. Life would be much easier if everything were so black and white. However, one person’s hero is another person’s villain. How should social studies teachers present Christopher Columbus? Should we glorify America’s “manifest destiny” while demonizing Hitler’s Lebensraum? How can we teach the horrors of the Islamic invasions of Europe while glorifying the Crusades or call the Holocaust “genocide” and the Indian removals “progress”? Questions like these should drive the social studies/history curriculum. I agree that Democracy is the best form of government developed so far. But I am convinced that student will reach this conclusion on their own. I have enough confidence in both democracy and my students that I do not feel compelled to indoctrinate them.

**Monica Longo, Kennedy High School, Bellmore, NY:** Chester Finn believes that students are historically ignorant because teachers have not forced them to memorize lists of dates and facts To correct this “madness,” he defends the lecture-driven and teacher-centered “chalk and talk” method of teaching. Somehow the end result of teaching this way would be the creation of patriotic citizens. In my experience, the “chalk and talk” style of teaching is dull and ineffective. In elementary school, I had to memorize the Gettysburg Address and the order of the presidents. I memorized them, but ask me today to recite these things and I cannot because they were facts with no meaning for me. When teachers try to force students to memorize information with no true understanding of what they have memorized, we fail them, our profession and our society.

**Hanae Okita, East Meadow, NY High School:** There is nothing wrong with nationalism and having pride in one’s country, but teachers must also protect against growing ethnocentrism. It seems as if Chester Finn is advocating American supremacy. The United States has committed crimes and atrocities throughout its history, but I get the feeling that Finn does not want us to talk about these things. As the world grows more interconnected and the population of the United States grows more diverse, students need to know more than traditional American history. I agree with Finn that it is important for students to learn historical content, but there is more to being a teacher than teaching content.

**Michelle Vevante, Jericho, NY Middle School:** As a middle school teacher, one of the most challenging things is to engage students in a lesson. Telling them they need to know certain information “just because” is frustrating and does not prepare them to be “patriotic citizens” as Finn et al wish it would. Classroom teachers understand these problems. While some students will memorize the content of a lecture in order to do well on a test, most need to become interested in a subject to learn and understand. I agree that there is a problem when more than half of Americans believe that dinosaurs coexisted with the humans. The question is why they believe it. I suspect the correct dates were presented in a drill and skill format but were quickly forgotten. I truly believe that teaching students what Finn thinks is important promotes a misunderstanding of the world outside of the “bubble” that many Americans live in.

## The Social Studies Wars: Critical Episodes from the Past

by Ronald Evans

Portions of this essay were drawn, with permission, from Evans, R. (2004). *The Social Studies Wars: What Should We Teach the Children?* The book is available from Teachers College Press.

Over the history of social studies, indeed since its inception, a number of critics have attacked the field for its sins against history, one or more of the social sciences, or mainstream values and the American way of life. This article examines several episodes in the war on social studies looking at the specific criticisms made, arguments offered in defense of social studies programs or materials, and the net result of each episode.

During the 1920s, the 1916 Report of the Committee on Social Studies of the National Education Association's Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education was sharply criticized by advocates of traditional history and the social sciences. Anna Stewart accused the Report of "many inconsistencies" and wrote disparagingly of the trends it set in motion, such as the move "to damn history in order to boost civics." Ross L. Finney, a sociologist, criticized the new Problems of Democracy (POD) course, arguing for a more general social science approach, and weighing in against "the mere forensic exchange of ignorant opinion." Much of the criticism centered on POD and its failure to advance "scientific study." Social studies leaders responded by developing a consensus definition and organization, the National Council for the Social Studies, to serve as an umbrella for history and the social sciences and to disavow support for any particular curriculum pattern or plan of organization. By the late 1920s the field's status was described by one astute observer as "Chaos in the Senior High Social Studies."

### Rugg Controversy

In the 1930s and early 1940s, controversy and criticism centered on social reconstructionism as embodied in a social studies program developed by Harold Rugg of Columbia University and the American Historical Association's Commission on Social Studies. Critics viewed the Rugg materials as "against private enterprise" and as a "subtle, sugar-coated effort to convert youth to Communism." Later critics accused the books and others of being "un-American." In defense of social studies and the Rugg

materials, the Academic Freedom Committee of the National Council for the Social Studies issued a strong statement and a packet of materials. Rugg and his colleagues organized a defense committee, and Rugg engaged his critics directly. The episode left an impression that social studies was some sort of radical plot.

### Controversy Over American History

A third important controversy occurred in the 1940s. It centered on charges from a respected historian, Allan Nevins, published by *The New York Times* that U.S. history was no longer sufficiently taught in the nation's schools. Once again, the bogey was social studies. Hugh Russell Fraser, who joined what came to be referred to as *The New York Times* crusade against social studies, blamed "extremists from NCSS and its twin brother, Teachers College," for the decline in the teaching of history. Social studies educators including Edgar B. Wesley, Wilbur Murray, and Edgar B. Hunt responded vigorously and provided evidence that U.S. history was a "universal requirement" in the nation's schools. The net result of the stalemate was that social studies was once again portrayed as faddish, and that attempts at innovation by "educationists" led to a dilution of the study of political history and of American heroes.

**"Much of the dialogue in the field has been clouded . . . by the bias of proponents of various programs and proposals."**

In the 1950s, attacks on social studies became a central part of attacks on progressive education. Mainstream critics charged that social studies was anti-intellectual and red-baiting critics, calling it a form of propaganda for communism or socialism. Arthur Bestor, one of the most respected critics, called social studies an anti-intellectual "social stew." After suffering defeats, and with many progressive educators at or near retirement, the response from social studies

## Debating the Future of Social Studies

was rather anemic. The net result was the decline of progressive experimentation with curricular fusion and birth of a social studies movement centered on study in the academic disciplines. By this time the pattern of boom and bust, or innovation and reaction, had become a familiar cycle.

### New and Newer Social Studies

In the aftermath of another period of innovation, the era of the new social studies, there were a number of attacks. These included academic freedom cases involving teachers Keith Sterzing and Frances Ahern in which teaching innovations were literally put on trial. Book and textbook controversies occurred in Kanawaha County, West Virginia, and in the state of Georgia. The most famous controversy of the period centered on MACOS, a project of the new social studies era described by U.S. Congressman John B. Conlan as a “dangerous assault on cherished values and attitudes” because of its “approving” depiction of euthanasia, wife-swapping, cannibalism, and infanticide. In defense of social studies, NCSS issued statements on academic freedom, and organized the NCSS Legal Defense Fund. The Wingspread Conference focused on understanding and overcoming the controversy. The incident contributed to the impression that social studies was influenced by radicals with an un-American bent, and it combined with the “failure” of the new and newer social studies to leave the field seemingly directionless.

### Revival of History

Into the void stepped the revival of history in the 1980s. Diane Ravitch made social studies a scapegoat for the “decline and fall of history teaching,” portraying it as a vacuous form of “tot sociology.” Critics charged that social studies was poorly defined and directed by fashion. The movement gathered steam with formation of the Bradley Commission and substantial funding from the conservative Bradley Foundation. The response among social studies educators was to create a new consensus definition and to support the standards movement, offering social studies as an umbrella for the teaching of history and the social sciences. The net result was an increase in course-taking in history and the social sciences, notably in world history and geography, and a decline in elective social studies offerings. The episode also contributed to the further denigration of social studies

as the directionless and poorly defined concoction of “educationists.”

A number of conclusions might be drawn from these episodes. First, criticisms often stick, despite defense and counter arguments. Over the years, criticisms of social studies have taken their toll on the vitality and public impression of the field. Second, the sum total of the criticisms over the years may have left the general impression that social studies is an unsound educational idea, developed by second-rate scholars in schools of education. Third, in each episode, it seems, politicians and policy advisors tend to embrace the traditional academic disciplines in battles over social studies. Alternatives may continue to face rough sledding. Fourth, the response of social studies educators to criticism has varied from vigorous in the 1930s and 1940s, to anemic in more recent periods. This suggests that social studies educators consider developing a stronger response to critics including: a war chest for mounting a defense; clarification of alternative theoretical traditions in social studies with development of practices and materials in support of each; development of a new consensus with a stronger focus on the social issues at the heart of a purist, Deweyan approach to social studies; support for experimentation including unified field approaches to social studies.

Despite the attacks on social studies over its history, previous attempts at reform have made some difference in classrooms. The Problems of Democracy course, the Rugg social studies program, and the new social studies all made inroads in classroom practice in some schools and with some teachers. However, in each case, reforms met limited success because the reformers underestimated the persistence of the grammar of schooling, the basic aspects of schools, classrooms, and teaching that seem to defy change and to deflect attempts at reform.

What can make a difference in the future? A more open dialogue among the camps in the struggle over social studies could make a difference. It could lead to a more balanced approach to reform, built around alternative conceptions of social studies with teachers and school districts encouraged to explore alternative paths. Unfortunately, much of the dialogue in the field has been clouded by a sort of natural cheerleading, by the bias of proponents of various programs and proposals, by the unfortunate use of propaganda techniques, and by the influence of well financed, highly visible, and vocal interest groups.

## Are “Social Studies Extremists” to Blame?

by Alan Singer

Does history repeat itself? Maybe, but I am not convinced. One thing that certainly keeps returning is public outrage at the state of historical knowledge (or the lack of it) of the nation’s young people. In August 2003, Chester Finn Jr., writing in the foreword to a Fordham Foundation report (Leming, Ellington & Porter, 2003), charged that “American kids were emerging from K-12 education . . . with ridiculously little knowledge or understanding of their country’s history, their planet’s geography, their government’s functioning, or the economy’s essential workings.” Finn blamed “the field of social studies itself” where “the lunatics” have “taken over the asylum.”

An article in the December 2003 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan* (Paxton, 2003) gives an historical perspective to what has often been a very “presentist” debate. In the article, Richard Paxton examined responses to poor student scores on formal and informal history surveys in 1917, 1943, 1976, 1987 and 2002. What is striking about the dates of these surveys is the way popular concern about the efficacy of social studies education tends to surface during periods of national emergency. The 1917 survey appeared during the first World War, which was also a time when there was a major debate about the ability of the schools to effectively educate and assimilate millions of recent Eastern and Southern European immigrants and their children. The 1976 survey was conducted during the first post-Watergate/post-Vietnam War presidential election. The 2002 survey followed the events of September 11, 2001, as the United States and the Bush administration prepared to respond heightened alarm over international terrorist threats.

The 1943 debate over the ability of social studies curriculum to prepare Americans for world leadership came in the middle of World War II as the United States prepared to re-educate and attempt to democratize Nazi-dominated Europe. It was perhaps the most vitriolic outburst and in many ways the most similar to today’s controversy. For about a week in April it dominated the front page of *The New York Times* as historians, educators and politicians argued about what to do to promote patriotism and an appreciation of American institutions. For many of the protagonists, the arch-villain was that old deceiver, the social studies.

### Ignorance of U.S. History

On Sunday, April 4, a front-page headline declared, “Ignorance of U.S. History Shown by College Freshman.” A survey of 7,000 new students at 36 colleges and universities across the country exposed a “vast fund of misinformation on many basic facts.” Adding to the concern was that most of these students

had studied either American history, government, or social studies while in high school and that eighty percent of the institutions of higher learning did not require a United States history course to qualify for an undergraduate degree.

The test, a copy of which appeared alongside the article, required students to identify 49 men, order events in proper sequence, explain where selected cities and states were located, and answer additional questions about government, significant events and famous people (including one woman, Susan B. Anthony). According to the article, “More impressive than the lack of knowledge is the amount of misinformation that the survey disclosed. A vast majority of the college freshman . . . could not identify such names as Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson or Theodore Roosevelt. . . .” Twenty-five percent did not know that Lincoln was president during the Civil War. Over 150 respondents, primarily from Southern states, thought that Jefferson Davis had been President of the United States. Thirty-five percent of those surveyed thought that Alexander Hamilton had been a president. “Only 4 per cent knew that the Homestead Act was passed in 1862. . . .” Geographic “knowledge” about the nation was equally problematic.

Who was responsible for this troubling state of affairs? According to Hugh Russell Fraser, chairman of the committee on American History of the federal Office of Education and Dr. Allan Nevins, Professor of History at Columbia University, the freshman were either poorly taught by the high schools or had quickly forgotten what they had learned. Fraser blamed “social studies extremists” for the “appalling neglect of American history in the high schools and elementary schools of the nation. . . . The pitfall they have stumbled into has been due to a failure to recognize that the structure of history does not lend itself to the technique of the social studies. And this failure has led to tragic results. . . . National, State and local educational and civic groups should demand that the

## Debating the Future of Social Studies

schools throw off the shackles of the social studies extremists with regard to instruction in American history in its elementary stages. The subject should be taught in a chronological time-sequenced manner. All topical and arbitrary outlines of study should be discarded as superficial and arbitrary.”

### U.S. Senators Enter Controversy

A headline on the front-page of the next day’s *New York Times* (April 5, 1943) announced that “Senators Deplore Students Ignorance of Nation’s History.” Senator Joseph F. Guffey of Pennsylvania declared that he was prepared to launch “an inquiry into means by which the Federal Government can promote better instruction of history in schools.” Senator Homer Bone charged that the survey results were “an indictment of our system of teaching. We are fighting a terrible war to preserve a system which rests on magnificent traditions and it will be a shock to most people to know how little knowledge of our national history our high school students have absorbed.” Bones concluded, “If we love America as we think we do the time is here to let our boys and girls know what we are fighting for.”

Senator Elbert Thomas rejected the idea that the quality of social studies teaching was to blame and said that the survey indicated the need for more federal aid to education. He added that “800,000 boys who were physically fit had to be rejected by the Army because they could not read or write.” However, Senator Robert Taft of Ohio “declared that he had always maintained that high schools did not teach enough American history.”

The Gruffey resolution was later endorsed by Senator Robert LaFollette of Wisconsin and Senator Tom Connally of Texas (April 7, 1943). Senator William Langer of North Dakota said the problem was low teacher pay. “Twenty-six of the forty-eight States are employing teachers at less than \$600 a year.” However, Congressional representative Sol Bloom of New York, while admitting he was “not a college graduate or a professional history teacher,” quickly added that “The real reason teachers do not make American history interesting to their pupils is that they do not know enough about it.”

The War Department demanded that American history be given higher status in the “Victory course” for high school students. According to Major Harold Kent, a liaison officer between the War Department and the Office of Education, “The Army believes in the need for a strong course in the American background, for you cannot understand what the war means unless

you understand the institutions which make up this country – and that means unless you know American history.”

A number of educators joined the debate over the meaning of the survey results. Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler, the president of Columbia University declared it was “perfectly outrageous that such a situation exist.” The Rev. Lawrence Gorman, president of Georgetown University called for “compulsory American history courses in all institutions of higher learning.” Dr. Harry Wright, president of the City College of New York felt that he could not draw a “hard and fast conclusion from the survey, though the results were obviously bad.” Professor Nelson Mead, chair of its history department wanted young people to become more “world-minded” because the United States was “destined to play a significant if not determining role in world-wide problems at the close of the war.” Professor Wilbur Hallenbeck of Teachers College, Columbia believed that the survey provided “a clue to the need of getting a better understanding in the minds of the rising generation of the background of democracy” while William Russell, the dean of the college felt “The real cause of our ignorance, not only in history, but of science and other fields, can be found in our short school year.”

### Local School Officials Reply

While Ellsworth Buck, president of the New York City Board of Education indicated that “they intended giving the matter thorough study,” an outraged East Orange, New Jersey Board of Education instructed the Superintendent of Schools to call a conference of all school principals to promote more adequate teaching of United States history. A different tack was taken by Constance Warren, president of Sarah Lawrence College. She felt that the survey indicated “how very mechanically American history has been taught” and that as a result “little of it remains with students by the time they enter college.” The Rev. Dr. Joseph Brady, head of the History Department at Seton Hall College in South Orange, New Jersey blamed the “very common trait of students of leaving knowledge behind them in whatever classroom they happen to leave or whatever school they happen to finish.”

Professor Irving Krull of Rutgers University suspected that some of the students may have treated the survey as a joke because many of the answers were “too far-fetched to be serious.” This position was endorsed by the *Harvard Crimson*. However, Dean Frans Ericsson of Upsala College in East Orange, New

## Debating the Future of Social Studies

Jersey saw the problem as the failure of high schools to make American history “factual enough.” Professor Oscar Darlington of Hofstra College, Hempstead, New York summarized the ideas of many participants in the debate, arguing that the enthusiasm of students “for history study has been dampened by attempts to debunk historical characters and to debunk idealism.”

The faculty at New York University was sharply divided. Alexander Baltzly and Andre Beaumont, Jr. of the history department blamed curriculum planners for the poor showing of students. However, Professor Clyde Eagleton of the Political Science department believed that “students have enough history to understand our traditions. Instead of focusing on the lives and work of great men from the past, courses should “contain a lot more civics to prepare the student to be an intelligent voter.”

### New York Times Editorial Page

The editorial and letter-to-the-editor page of *The New York Times* documented the explosive response to the crisis. On April 5, columnist Anne O’Hare McCormick declared that “the teachers of democracy need to improve their technique at home before they set out to re-educate the Germans and rewrite the too-well-taught history of Germany. . . . No one can teach others what he does not know himself. The world after the war will be a hard and competitive world in which the missionaries of democracy cannot expect to spread the gospel unless they understand what it means as an evolving process and believe in it.” On April 7, an editorial noted that the Russian government was placing a heavy emphasis on student memorization of names, places and dates “to teach the younger Russian generation how to love and defend their Russian fatherland.”

Letters writers included Maynard Thomas of Utica, New York, who wrote that “It is almost unbelievable that students can acquire so much erroneous information” and worried how young Americans could be “properly sold on a country when they lack knowledge of its great leaders.” Doris Benardette of Brooklyn was amused by the entire controversy. She suspected similar ignorance in other academic areas and explained, “What I see very clearly is that the teaching of ‘trends,’ without the so-called dry facts, has encouraged ‘blah’ and plenty of it.” Two junior high school students from New York City complained that while they felt competent in their knowledge of United States history, they had learned “very little foreign history, ancient or modern” and that “although

we read every day about Germany and her future, we have learned nothing about her past.”

The April 8th edition of *The New York Times* printed quotes from educators around the country praising the newspaper for the public service it had performed by exposing the depth of historical illiteracy. Dr. Charles Wilson, chairman of the Colgate University History department declared “History has frequently been the stepchild of the secondary school instructional staff. The staff member who has been hired primarily to teach physical education or modern languages has been given a history book and a week’s start on the class under the theory that any one can teach history.” Dr. John Wade, Superintendent of New York City Schools defended the students and teachers of his city and announced that 96% of the students who took the test passed the January, 1943 state standardized history exam. This included seven New York City high schools with a 100% passing rate.

Then just as suddenly as it had erupted, the crisis passed. By April 9th, either other war news had taken priority or the public was just plain bored of the story. The entire controversy was dropped from the pages of *The New York Times* until historians (and politicians) would once again repeat themselves.

*New York Times* articles: Ignorance of U.S. History Shown by College Freshmen, April 4, 1943, 1; Abroad, The Teachers of Democracy Need to begin at Home, April 5, 1943, 18; American History Test, April 5, 1943, 13; American History Urged as Compulsory, April 5, 1943, 13; Senators Deplore Student Ignorance of Nation’s History, April 5, 1943, 1; School Test Stirs Action in Senate, April 5, 1943, 13; Social Studies Extremists Blamed for Ignorance of Nation’s Record, April 5, 1943, 13, Survey Supports Teachers’ Findings, April 5, 1943, 13; Better Teaching of History Sought In Resolution Before Senate Body, April 7, 1943, 1; Comments on the American History Test, April 7, 1943, 24; History Teaching Under Senate Fire, April 7, 1943, 13; Praise U.S. History Test, April 7, 1943, 13; Topics of The Times, April 7, 1943, 24; History Survey Praised, Criticized, April 8, 1943, 15; Regents Test in American History, April 8, 1943, 15; U.S. Now Planning to Educate Europe, Officials Reveal, April 8, 1943, 1.

### References:

- Leming, J., Ellington, L., & Porter, K. (2003). *Where Did Social Studies Go Wrong?* Washington, DC: Fordham Foundation.
- Paxton, R.(2003, Dec.). “Don’t Know Much About History - Never Did,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, 85(4), 264-273.

## Diane Ravitch's "The Language Police": A Review

by Michael Whelan

Ravitch, Diane. *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003, 255 pps., \$24.00, hardcover. ISBN 0-375-41482-7.

In a prefatory "Note to the Reader" Diane Ravitch writes (p. xi) that *The Language Police* "describes the regime of censorship that has quietly spread throughout educational publishing in response to pressure groups from both the left and the right." And so it does, although focusing mainly on the field of history, not educational publishing in general, and also restricting its analysis to the last twenty years or so. But, within those parameters, Ravitch offers many seemingly well-deserved disparaging observations. Nevertheless, there are some problems. Her narrative is awkwardly disingenuous in key places. Her conception of censorship is somewhat misleading throughout and the range of pressure groups she singles out for comment on both sides of the ideological spectrum is far too limited.

But perhaps most telling, the persuasiveness of her ultimate conclusion suffers from much the same "golden age" interpretive fiction that has marred a number of her earlier exposes, perhaps most notably, *What Do Our 17-Year Olds Know?* (Ravitch and Finn, 1987). Her assessment of conditions in the present, as well as her analysis of what should be done about them, relies on a presumption of some "golden age" in the past, offering specific remediative guidance. But to paraphrase Lee Hays, one of the singer-songwriters of the legendary folk group the Weavers, the past that Ravitch wants so much to believe in just ain't what it used to be. And it never was.

### Solving a Mystery

Early on Ravitch explains that she decided to write *The Language Police* "as a way of solving a mystery." Almost by accident, she says she "stumbled upon an elaborate, well-established protocol of beneficent censorship, quietly endorsed and broadly implemented by textbook publishers, testing agencies, professional associations, states and the federal government." This protocol began, she acknowledges, as an "entirely reasonable and justified" effort to exclude from school textbooks and curricula "any conscious or implicit statements of bias against African Americans, other racial or ethnic minorities, and females." But in more recent years, she maintains, it has evolved "into a surprisingly broad and increasingly bizarre policy of censorship." Such censorship, she continues, setting

forth her full thesis, "has gone far beyond its original scope and now excises from tests and textbooks words, images, passages, and ideas that no reasonable person would consider biased in the usual meaning of the term" (2-3).

After commenting on a few of the more "breathhtakingly bizarre" examples of that censorship in chapter one (most of which have received considerable, often sensational, attention in the popular media), she offers several personal anecdotes about the pervasiveness of the censorship codes in chapter two. Thereafter, she presents the core of her analysis, describing in four consecutive chapters the censoring influences of, respectively, textbook publishers, testing companies, and what she simply refers to as "the Right", and "the Left." There is little here that is new, but remarkably, Ravitch claims that much of it was to her. Maintaining, for example, that she did not realize that educational materials are screened for language and topics that might be considered "controversial or offensive."

**The study of history must ever keep apace of the challenges of changing times.**

Such ignorance on the part of someone of Ravitch's experience seems wholly incredible. After writing so much about public education, it doesn't seem possible that she could be so unaware of the various pressures that influence what eventually winds up in textbooks and on standardized tests.

### Ravitch's Ultimate Purpose

This initial feeling of disingenuousness was subsequently reinforced by Ravitch's multiple citations of Frances FitzGerald's *America Revised*, where so much of the sausage-like nature of textbook publishing is fully detailed. But perhaps Ravitch had only just recently read this now nearly twenty-five-year-old classic. Or perhaps feigning ignorance this way is but a rhetorical device. If so, it is distracting and tends to raise unnecessary suspicions about Ravitch's ultimate purpose in traversing this fairly well trodden terrain.

That purpose becomes clearer by the time the reader gets to the final chapter, "The Language Police:

Can We Stop Them?” where she proposes a threefold strategy to combat the four main censoring cabalists, each having now been fully revealed in the preceding chapters. The first part of this strategy calls for the creation of “a real market” in textbook publishing, thereby realizing all the attendant benefits that “real competition” supposedly fosters. The second part calls for “sunshine,” by which Ravitch means creating “mechanisms to expose censorship to public review,” thereby realizing the general disinfecting effects that public awareness supposedly promotes. To this end she includes an extensive appended “Glossary of Banned Words, Usages, Stereotypes, and Topics” as, one presumes, the first step in this public awareness campaign. Finally, part three of her remediative strategy calls for better trained teachers, who, among other things, she maintains, would more likely adopt the allegedly improved textbooks published by the more market-driven publishing industry. That is something of a circular argument, of course. Nevertheless, these three proposals taken together may indeed have some salutary effect on what is taught in schools. But Ravitch’s presentation of them seems to presume that such conditions do not already exist in many places. And that is misleading. Competitive markets in textbook publishing and adoption exist in many states, as do mechanisms for public review of school policies and practices. Rigorous requirements for teacher certification, moreover, are the norm in many states. To claim otherwise, as Ravitch and many other critics of school education do these days, is simply a canard.

### Historical Perspective Needed

If Ravitch is serious about combating censorship in schools, she might have launched her analysis with a more historical perspective of the problem. Doing so would have been more instructive and more effective in generating the response from readers she claims she wants. Her short-sighted historical analysis tends to leave readers with a fundamentally mistaken impression about the nature of censorship in schools, and poorly prepared to combat it. Restricting her analysis to the last twenty years tends to leave readers believing that the existence of pressure groups seeking to influence the definition of school knowledge is a relatively recent phenomenon, which of course it is not. On the contrary, school knowledge, whether expressed in textbooks, on standardized tests, in official curricula, or in what teachers actually do in classrooms, has always been socially defined, and in

part by means of pressure groups representing a wide range of ideological positions and practical interests. This is well documented by most leading educational historians.

### Who Are the Pressure Groups?

Furthermore, the list of pressure groups Ravitch identifies as currently constituting the ideological “right” and “left” is far too limited, further weakening the potential effectiveness of the corrective response she hopes to inspire. The right, as she defines it, consists almost exclusively of fundamentalist religious groups, and the left of what she refers to as militant feminists and militant liberals. There is a rough balance in that accounting, but one which ignores the longstanding agitation and influence of, for example, business groups and unions, the military and many patriotic groups, multicultural advocacy groups of various stripes and stridencies, some prominent professional academic associations, many print and electronic media institutions, politicians and political bureaucrats, and many parent and community organizations, among others. To depict all of the many different, often conflicting, yet frequently realigning groups that seek to influence school-level education as so limited in number and so static in their objectives seems a classic example of missing the forest for the tress, and in this case, for but a few, relatively scrawny ones at that.

Most problematic is Ravitch’s ultimate conclusion. In portraying the issue of censorship in schools as but a recent phenomenon she seeks to make plausible the assertion that the recent past can provide an appropriate standard for the definition of school knowledge today (at least in the field of United States history). In doing so, she offers her most explicit affirmation of the deceptively misleading “golden age” interpretation of the history of education in the United States. Typical of this all-too-common argument, she locates and defines her golden age as having existed between and in contradistinction to two surrounding “dark ages.” The earlier of these dark ages in this instance is the period prior to the 1970s, when, she concedes, the overall conception of the country’s history as represented in school textbooks was significantly deficient, leaving out many “important events and participants.” But during the 1970s, she then argues, many of those omissions were addressed, largely through the application of the newly established textbook publishing protocol, which, again, she describes as having initially been reasonable, justified

and beneficent. Thus, sometime around the mid-1980s, she maintains, the “moment was right to tell a new story about the American past . . . one that acknowledged the contributions of women, African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and others” (136) previously excluded. Particularly significant to Ravitch, this more inclusive conception did not replace the traditional “democratic narrative” of the country’s history, but enhanced it “by broadening its cast of characters.” Alas, she then argues, this propitious moment was soon lost as scholarly (and political) discourse in the field of history during the 1990s was dominated by questions about “race, gender, ethnicity, and . . . class conflict,” commencing what Ravitch sees as the more recent dark age. Having thus temporally located and generally described her “golden age,” she then puts it forth as an enlightened and achievable curricular goal for the future. Ah, those good old days! But in this seductively rosy view of the past, nostalgia and wishful thinking are easily mistaken for insight and wisdom.

### The Study Of History

Truth is, however, the past is generally not a very good guide for organizing history education, as ironic as that statement may seem on first reading. Rather, the present (which includes our hazily anticipated sense of the future) is the proper guide for the study of history. Questions about the past that most urgently need studying, that is, tend to arise from pressing concerns about the present. It was quite natural, in other words, and more significantly, quite proper that historians during the 1990s focused attention on matters related to race, gender, class and ethnicity. The country, after all, was in the midst of an unprecedented period of immigration in terms of both absolute numbers and overall diversity, and was simultaneously going through a dramatic re-distribution of wealth. People throughout the country were rightly concerned about these social and economic changes. Historians inquiring into them in an effort to find ways that the past might inform the present were not contaminating historical knowledge, as Ravitch believes, but pursuing historical understandings of great current import. In general, it is just such inquiry that keeps historical study vital, open-ended and informative, rather than dead, doctrinaire or merely antiquarian.

At its best, historical knowledge is ever-evolving, constantly responding to questions generated by the ever-changing present. The past never changes, of course, but what is significant about it does, constantly

and inexorably. How much has 9/11, to cite but the most obvious example, reoriented our sense of what is and is not important about the past? Constant reorientation of this sort is the nature historical knowledge, and history education in schools needs to reflect that fundamental reality if it is to remain relevant and therefore defensible as an intellectual pursuit. Historical study in schools needs to keep up with the present, in other words, by asking questions of critical current concern. That is not to argue for some crude, “tabloid “ sense of relevance or, on the other hand, to argue that the traditional “democratic narrative” of the country’s history that Ravitch recommends is irrelevant. Rather, the sense of relevance that needs to characterize historical study in schools should be deep and in some ways timeless. Perhaps most pressing in this regard, the study of history needs to provide students with regular, meaningful opportunities to inquire into all that is involved in being a fully participating member of society’s public decision-making processes. The traditional democratic narrative, moreover, may inform, and in turn, be informed by such inquiries. Students today, for example, need to inquire deeply into the meaning of the traditional narrative’s central ideological ideals of liberty, justice and equality (to which most pledge their allegiance every day). What, exactly, do those ideals mean in light of the country’s greatly increased ethnic diversity and appreciably altered distribution of wealth? Does a personally professed commitment to the ideal of equality, for example, demand anything in response to such profound social changes, and if so, what? Similarly liberty and justice. The study of history, in sum, must ever keep apace of the challenges of changing times, thereby helping students to lead more informed and enlightened lives. Relying on some bygone “golden age” of curricular organization as our study guide simply won’t do.

**References:** FitzGerald, F. (1979). *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century*. Boston: Little Brown.

Ravitch, D. and Finn, C. (1987). *What Do Our 17-Year Olds Know: A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature*. New York: Harper & Row.