

Shortchanging the Future: The Crisis of History and Civics in American Schools

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Foreword

by Walter A. McDougall

“If we act only for ourselves,” wrote Dr. Samuel Johnson, “to neglect the study of history is not prudent. If we are entrusted with the care of others it is not just.” Prudence and justice have been two words conspicuous by their absence in our otherwise verbose debates on how, why, and when to teach what sort of history to American children. We are told that we should no longer privilege the traditional patriotic narrative. But is the only alternative a narrative that damns “dead white males” as oppressors, thereby ensuring that *live* white male children grow up hating history? We are told that history classes should no longer privilege law, politics, and war. But is the only alternative a disembodied collection of gender and racial and ethnic and sexual stories that divide rather than unite us? Perhaps we should take a lesson from (heaven forbid!) our politicians in both parties who know how to celebrate the achievements of the minority persons in their midst without denigrating the country that hosted those achievements. (That goes double for the persecuted: who would honor Martin Luther King, Jr., today if his movement for civil rights had met no resistance?) Why is it so hard for us all to agree that the United States has had more than its share of racial, ethnic, and religious conflict *precisely because* it became the most diverse nation in the world, but that minorities have risen *precisely because* they could insist upon rights first trumpeted forth by the United States! As Samuel Huntington wrote, “America is not a lie; it is a disappointment. But it can be a disappointment only because it is also a hope.”

The present study is especially troubling because it documents not only disagreements over standards, but the fading away of history

altogether. Fewer hours are devoted to it; students display commensurately greater ignorance. Perhaps this is simply a function of demoralization or distraction. But I suspect it is also on someone’s agenda. For national history is precisely that – national – and the trendy scholars on the university level have left the nation-state behind in favor of transnational movements, international organizations, non-state actors, and the globalism symbolized by the Internet and social media. All those developments matter greatly. But looking around, I don’t see sovereign nation-states disappearing, and so long as they exist it will matter greatly whether and how they teach their own histories. That is because the teaching of history serves three vital functions.

The first, obviously, is its intellectual function. History is the grandest vehicle for vicarious experience: it educates provincial young minds (we are all born provincial) and obliges them to reason, wonder, and brood about the vastness, richness, and tragedy of the human condition. If taught well, history trains young minds in the rules of evidence and logic, teaches them how to approximate truth through the patient exposure of falsehood. That is, no one can claim to have a lock on historical Truth with a capital T, but rigorous history should teach us what is False with a capital F. History also gives children the mental trellis they need to situate themselves in time and space and organize all other knowledge they acquire in the humanities and sciences. To deny students history is to alienate them from their community, nation, culture, and species.

The second pedagogical function of history is quite different, and often seems to conflict with the first. That is its civic function. From the ancient Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans to

the medieval church to the modern nation-state, those charged with educating the next generation of leaders or citizens have used history to impart a reverence for the values and institutions of the creed or state. The post-modern critic may immediately charge that to do so amounts to a misuse of history and the brainwashing of young people. The indoctrination imposed by totalitarian regimes or Islamic *madrassas* is an obvious heinous example; the sort of selective history sometimes taught in postwar Japan, Israel, or the United States can also do harm. But to cite such examples is to beg the question. The civic purpose of history cannot be abolished, since all history, be it traditional or subversive of traditions, is supportive or corrosive of healthy patriotism. So the real question is how the civic function—raising up citizens—may be fulfilled without doing violence to the intellectual function of history.

Resolving those questions is sometimes painfully hard and a matter of conscience, which brings us to the third function of history: the moral one. If honestly taught, history is the only academic subject that inspires humility. Theology used to do that, but in our present era—and in public schools especially—history must do the work of theology. It is, for all practical purposes, the religion in the modern curriculum. Students whose history teachers discharge their intellectual and civic responsibilities will acquire a sense of the contingency of all human endeavor, the gaping disparity between motives and consequences in all human action, and how little control human beings have over their own lives and those of others. A course in history ought to teach wisdom—and if it doesn't, then it is not history but something else.

I believe it is possible to pursue all three purposes of history in books and the classroom. None of us will do so without friction and shortfalls, because we are no less creaturely than the historical people we teach about. Moreover, the quality of our instruction is limited and skewed by the finite set of facts we know or set before our pupils. But errors of fact and judgment as to what to include or omit are excusable and correctable. What is inexcusable and, as Samuel Johnson wrote, imprudent and unjust is the willful denial or distortion of truth in order to “slam dunk” into students an intellectual, civic, or moral purpose at the expense of the other two. Johnson was probably thinking of statesmen when he referred to those “entrusted with the care of others.” But no one is more entrusted with the care of others than teachers, and no teachers more than historians. May this study breathe common sense and good will into our councils.

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History by apprising [citizens] of the past will enable them to judge of 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; it will enable them to know ambition under every disguise it may assume; and knowing it, to defeat its views.

- Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query 14, 1781

Executive Summary

The collective grasp of basic history and civics among American students is alarmingly weak. Beyond dispiriting test results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress and other measures, poor performance in history and civics portends a decay of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for a lifetime of active, engaged citizenship. The reasons for this decline are many: the amount of time devoted to history in K-12 education has demonstrably shrunk over time; demands to make curriculum more inclusive have led schools and teachers to dwell on social history, race, and gender in ways that distort the nation's historical narrative. These changes are in turn reflected in textbooks and teaching materials used in social studies classrooms. Problems with teacher training

and qualification compound the problem, leaving teachers poorly equipped to arrest the decline in history and civics. Past efforts to arrest or reverse the decline, however well intentioned, have had little discernible impact. Attempts to create national history standards have failed, and great caution must be exercised before further efforts are made to write or impose such standards. Instead, states should consider adopting highly rated sets of state standards in history and social science such as those in South Carolina, California, or Massachusetts. In addition, states should also consider using the U.S. Citizenship Test as a requirement for students to graduate from an American public high school, for admission to a public college, or for eligibility for a Pell grant and any other public funds.

I. Is the Study of United States History on the Wrong Side of History?

When Americans speak of the crisis in education, we typically cite the poor performance of our children in reading, mathematics, and science. Compared to our students' grasp of foundational ideas in history and civics, however, reading, mathematics, and science are pillars of strength.

Likewise, it is commonly observed that teachers with low academic expectations are a principal cause of the sorry state of public education. Undoubtedly, history teachers with low academic expectations have contributed to the unsatisfactory level of historical knowledge among our high school graduates. Much greater responsibility, however, should be assigned to the steady decay of the content of the history curriculum, the decline of its standing within K-12 education, and the methods by which teachers are asked to convey its hollowed-out content. History lessons and civic education are too often a means to celebrate diversity and bolster student self-esteem, rather than rigorous courses of study designed to ensure a deep understanding of the past, the world in which we live, and the responsibilities citizens have in a representative form of self-government.

Broad societal trends conspire against a thoughtful, rigorous study of history. Diminishing patience for sustained reading by adults as well as students makes it ever less likely that students will graduate from high school with well-grounded knowledge of the principles, procedures, and institutions that are foundational to our form of democracy.

In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* famously noted that "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." Our earliest commentators on the public purpose of education might have gone so far as to view our present neglect of civics and history as an act of treason. As E.D. Hirsch, Jr. observed in his 2010 book *The Making of Americans*, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century contributors to this country's political structure saw schools as the main hope for the preservation of democratic ideals and the endurance of the nation as a republic. As James Madison had it, "The advancement and diffusion of knowledge is the only guardian of true liberty."¹

Today, we view the goals of educational attainment—individually or collectively—largely through an economic lens. While common historical knowledge and shared civic virtues are fundamental to a shared national identity and common civic culture, which in turn is fundamental to the proper functioning of our local, state, and national forms of self-government, we are more narrowly concerned at present with "college and career readiness"² and economic competitiveness.

We ignore history at our peril. The neglect of a commonly understood heritage and the failure to cultivate civic values breed cynicism, distrust, and the decidedly un-American idea that ordinary citizens lack agency to manage their own affairs. It is not an extreme or alarmist view to suggest that civic and historical illiteracy now presents a serious threat to our national survival.

It is not by accident that we have arrived at this troubling pass. As a discipline, history has come to be seen as secondary in importance to literacy and mathematics—or perhaps too hot to touch. History textbooks are both declining in importance and of poor

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quality. At the national, state, and local levels, curriculum is a political football. Touted pedagogical methods have undermined sound study of history. Dubious strategies and activities, aligned with revised content and promoted with vigor in recent decades, are cloaked with benign or positive attributes that make it difficult for those outside the school, including parents, to understand the kind of damage they have done to the history and social studies curriculum.

It must also be noted that our teaching force now consists largely of those whose own education came in an era of diminished emphasis on history and civics. It is not clear that they are equal to the task of re-energizing the academic study of these essential disciplines.

Alarms have sounded over the decline in the importance of history in K-12 education for many years. There have been many well-conceived attempts to turn back the tide, and several examples of first-rate curricular and pedagogical approaches. However, they have had no discernible impact on the broader trends in the K-12 history and civics curriculum, nor on student achievement more broadly.

The following report is comprised of seven sections. Although few need to be convinced how little history and civic knowledge American students possess, we begin with a brief review of data on student achievement in these subjects. From there, we describe major changes in the content of the history curriculum in the past half-century. We then suggest how these alterations in content became incorporated so quickly and so rigidly into the curriculum.

An explanation of the function of state guidelines, regulations, or statutes in changing

the content of the history curriculum leads logically to a discussion of the placement of United States history in the curriculum, problems with teacher qualifications, and pedagogical issues, followed by a description of the evolving nature of textbooks, both in content and influence. To understand the decline in student performance in history and civics, it is important to understand the influences that have contributed to it: a teaching force ill-prepared to adequately teach the subject, and problems with the curriculum materials they use, both print resources and instructional technology.

The paper goes on to describe nation-wide initiatives designed to counter the effects on students of these alterations in the content of the history curriculum, the limitations in teacher qualifications, and the deficiencies in current instructional materials. We then discuss how national and state standards have contributed to the many problems we have commented on in Sections III to VII.

As we write, a new effort to develop national social studies standards for K-12 is well underway. A clear-eyed understanding of the results of past efforts at the state and national level with history standards is essential before we go down that road again. Past experience with the pitched battles fought over what students need to know in history or social studies leaves little room to be sanguine about standards-setting at the national level; content-free “process” standards might be expedient, but would be of little use to teachers or curriculum writers. One modest reform might be for states to use the existing and non-controversial U.S. Citizenship Test to establish baseline expectations for what students must know in history and civics.

II. What National Tests in History and Civics Tell Us

Historical illiteracy among the nation's high school students is not new. It has been discussed and lamented by eminent intellectuals and historians from George Santayana to Richard Hofstadter. It has also been documented more recently by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) history tests from 1986 through 2010, the most recent testing year. Scores on the NAEP history tests, which are administered to a stratified random sample of students in grades 4, 8, and 12 in every state, have been consistently low over time, among all ages, and in every state.

A. Results of NAEP history tests

On the 1986 grade 12 test, 60 percent did not know that the purpose of *The Federalist Papers* was to promote ratification of the United States Constitution in New York State; 60 percent failed to recognize the purpose of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation; 40 percent were not familiar with the concept of checks and balances; and 33 percent could not adequately identify the Declaration of Independence. The results demonstrated a limited understanding of the United States Constitution and significant Supreme Court of the United States decisions. "Many [students]," one study commented at the time, "lack a clear understanding of the fundamental document that defines the organization and powers of the federal government, as well as the rights and liberties of citizens."³

In the 1990s, scores did not improve and it became clear that a lack of historical knowledge extended into elementary and middle schools. In 1995, after another round of tests, there was no longer any doubt that knowledge of United States history was

abysmal. Over 80 percent of students in grades 4, 8, and 12 failed to demonstrate knowledge of American history at a Proficient level, a level that, according to NAEP, demonstrates "solid academic performance."⁴

Graduating seniors headed to college and the workforce with minimal understanding of their nation's past. "More than half of America's high school seniors," the *New York Times* wrote in 1995, "do not know basic facts about American history..."⁵ On the 2006 NAEP history test, a mere 13 percent of seniors scored Proficient, while over 50 percent failed to score at the Basic level. Scores on the 2010 test remained largely unchanged: Fourth graders could not explain why Lincoln was important; and high school students failed to explain the Korean War. Perhaps the most alarming finding: 98 percent of graduating seniors could not explain the importance of *Brown v. Board of Education*.⁶ Moreover, there were very few high scorers on any NAEP history test. No more than 2 percent of students in grades 4, 8, and 12 scored at the Advanced level on the 1994, 2001, 2006, or 2010 NAEP test. The collapse of our children's historical knowledge base was now beyond dispute, devastating, and complete.

B. Results of NAEP civics tests

The NAEP civics tests document a similar collapse of civic literacy in our public schools. Age and grade level do not matter; the results and trends are consistent. For example, on the 2006 civics test, grade 12 scores (and grade 8 scores) were stagnant from 1998 to 2006.⁷ Just 43 percent of the grade 12 test-takers could describe the meaning of federalism in American government, or the sharing of power between the federal and state governments.

The 2010 civics results were not significantly different from results in 1998.⁸ The NAEP survey of what students are studying revealed serious and growing deficiencies in the high school curriculum. The percentage of students who said they studied the president and cabinet during the school year fell from 63 percent in 1998 to 59 percent in 2010, and the percentage of students who said they studied the United States Constitution during the school year fell from 72 percent in 2006 to 67 percent in 2010. It is clear and inarguable that the K-12 curriculum does not have a strong impact on pre-college students' understanding of our basic political institutions and principles.

C. Impact of higher education on history and civic knowledge

On top of these shortfalls at the school level, college seems to add little to American students' understanding or appreciation of history and civics. Reviews of college history programs by the National Association of Scholars and others indicate fewer general requirements and more emphasis on race, class and gender. In three successive years, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) conducted surveys to determine the impact a college education has on civic knowledge.⁹ In 2006, ISI gave approximately 14,000 college freshmen and seniors at 50 colleges nationwide a 60-question multiple-choice exam on fundamental knowledge of America's history and institutions. The average freshman scored 51.7 percent and the average senior scored 53.2 percent.

In 2007, ISI tested another set of over 14,000 college freshmen and seniors. Similarly, the average freshman scored 50.4 percent and the average senior scored 54.2 percent. The ISI concluded that American colleges generally

fail to significantly increase civic knowledge among their students.

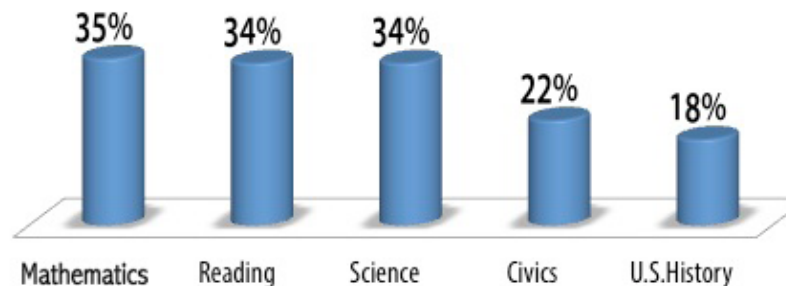
In 2008, ISI widened the field of respondents to adults to measure the independent impact of college on the acquisition of civic knowledge, and how a college education and civic knowledge independently influence a person's views. A random, representative sample of 2,508 American adults was given a 33-question basic civics test. The average college graduate in this sample scored 57 percent, correctly answering only four questions more than the average high school graduate.

D. Summary and Conclusions

On the most recent NAEP assessments, 35 percent of 8th graders scored Proficient or higher in math; 34 percent in reading and science. Such results have driven decades of alarm over the poor performance of American education. Yet in civics, only 22 percent reached the Proficient level; in United States history, only 18 percent—results that make reading, mathematics, and science achievement seem robust by comparison. (See Figure 1.)

Long-term voting trends in national elections for young adults demonstrate that a low level of civic literacy correlates with a low level of civic participation. Voter turnout among young American citizens (18 to 24) in the 2010 midterm election was 21.3 percent, almost steadily declining from 25.4 percent in 1974, according to CIRCLE's estimates from the 2010 United States Census Current Population Survey, November Supplement.¹⁰ It is possible to conclude at this point that the effect of the K-12 history and civics curriculum is not merely disappointing; it is profoundly disturbing.

Figure 1: U.S. 8th Graders Scoring “Proficient” or Higher on the National Assessment of Educational Progress by Subject



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2011; 2010

III. Changes in the History Curriculum

To understand why our students know so little of our own history and how a lack of civic knowledge has begun to diminish appreciation of fundamental American ideals, a brief description of the major factors contributing to the erosion of the history curriculum in U.S. schools is necessary. Three factors have altered the content of United States history in the K-12 history curriculum and reduced the time students once spent learning about our common civic heritage and the rights and responsibilities of American citizenship: a stress on modern America; the social content that has been added and used to frame it; and the time available for teaching it after world history was added to the curriculum.

A. Curriculum narrowing and the compression of United States history

In elementary schools, history and civic education must take a back seat to teaching language arts and mathematics. A large-scale 2005 study showed only 5.2 percent of third-grade class time going to social studies, compared to 47.7 percent for English language arts and 24.3 percent for mathematics.¹¹ A similar study of first-grade

class time previously showed only 2 percent devoted to social studies.

In high school, world history is always taught, often because of a mandate. Facing clear time constraints, the United States history syllabus is frequently telescoped to concentrate on the twentieth century or the nation’s history since 1945.

Sometimes the approach to the subject is thematic, not chronological. Domestic nineteenth-century presidential politics and industrial development, the emergence of America as a world power, World War I and the New Deal may yield to events after 1945, leaving nineteenth-century America compressed into the Founding, Slavery, and the American Civil War. These omissions make for wide gaps in knowledge across classes and schools. While subjects like the War of 1812, Western Settlement, and Industrial Revolution remain in textbooks, they may be brushed over or skipped in favor of the Harriet Tubman story. The result is a history program focused heavily on the last half-century, and students incompletely versed or almost ignorant in what happened before that. High school students are rarely asked to read a complete history book or write a serious history term paper.

B. Alignment of American history with identity politics

Compounding the problem of compressed time for U.S. history, many teachers have chosen to dwell exclusively on social history, race, and gender in ways that distort the nation's historical narrative. As early as the late 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, writer Frances FitzGerald in *The New Yorker* and historian C. Vann Woodward in *The New Republic* warned the literate public of a changing national narrative that could erode civic feeling and create a negative fantasy of the nation's past.¹² FitzGerald even discerned a tendency toward nihilism in curricula, textbooks, and civic conscience.

Multiculturalism's near universal appeal to history teachers by the beginning of the 1990s lay in its pledge to broaden the nation's understanding of the past, calling attention to minority groups that had been neglected and improving the balance of old and new history. Academic societies and teacher's organizations, state panels, and commissions issued declarations calling for increased attention to race, class, and gender in social studies curricula. In the jargon of the day, "multiple perspectives" based on ethnicity, gender, and other ascriptive conditions were deemed essential to the reconstruction of the curriculum.

Repudiating "Eurocentrism" was the antidote for previous distortions and omissions of non-white and non-Western history. Ridding history of pervasive cultural bias was for multiculturalists the task ahead. Policy intellectuals of all stripes tried to accommodate, while criticizing, these impulses. Throughout the 1980s, leading historians cautioned against the tribalism at the core of multiculturalism and its insistence on the use of multiple perspectives in both

American and world history. Sociologist Nathan Glazer declared multiculturalism a new universal; historian Arthur Schlesinger warned of the disuniting of America in a book that first appeared in 1991 and then went through several editions. The culture wars were on, and have never ended.¹³

Some individuals and agencies promoting multiculturalism wanted more than inclusion. The so-called triumphalism of the old American history needed dressing down, in their eyes. This meant diminished attention in the curriculum to the establishment of responsible republican government and a federal system, the development of a fruitful national economy, the extension of the franchise and educational opportunities for immigrants, blacks, and women, the nation's growing influence in world affairs, and a rising standard of living for all. An understanding of these once central topics became the main casualty of a "new paradigm" eager to re-draw the national record and the nation's heroes.

By the mid-1990s a seemingly benign movement had morphed into a movement that conceptualized diversity in very narrow terms both within this country and outside its boundaries. It had also merged with an instructional approach called "critical pedagogy," which focused on questions about power and status and on cultivating negative attitudes toward white Americans and the traditional content of the curriculum. Despite loud and persistent claims to the contrary, it did not seek to develop what the public understood by "critical thinking," a term once synonymous with analytical thinking.

Unhappy with the progressive historical narrative that had held sway for half a century, advocates of multiculturalism recast the Americans once presented as

heroic pioneers, religious dissenters, and immigrants fleeing from poverty in the Old World. In some classrooms America became the story of European invaders, slaveholders, native slaughter, religious intolerance, and other injustices. Influenced by books such as Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* and James W. Loewen's *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, many teachers told a new and downbeat story of the nation's past.¹⁴

Both multiculturalism and critical pedagogy sought to induce skepticism in students about the worth of the political and moral principles sustaining self-government, "liberating" them from fantasies about the intentions of the framers. At the same time, multiple perspectives approaches to the study of United States history made claims that advancing students' group identity would translate into heightened self-esteem and increased academic achievement—a cardinal selling point to naïve or guilt-ridden educators and policy makers.

The multiple perspectives approach has utterly failed to show positive results with respect to student knowledge of United States history, to judge by the NAEP and other tests. But it has left many students alienated from our political principles and from the basic act of civic participation—voting.

C. Rise of world history

As a result of imperatives to expand world history, the position of United States history as a keystone of the secondary social studies program was successfully challenged because it had to compete for inelastic time in K-12 social studies programs at the state and district level. The impact of two decades of content revision has been remarkable. Figures such as Julius Caesar, Marcus Aurelius, Copernicus, Magellan, Louis XIV,

Mozart, Napoleon, Charles Darwin, and Woodrow Wilson have been diminished, or perhaps lost, as Western civilization was compressed and reshaped to make room for the new. Students' gaze was directed from the West and Atlantic civilization toward the Other, while the curriculum has ignored or marginalized the foundations of their nation's past and its government.

Revised world history instructional materials now contain expanded but inaccurate treatments of non-Western societies. While critical of slavery, Christianity, European expansion, capitalism, and industrial civilization, they are generous or lyrical about African, Arab, and Asian achievements. The world may be redrawn or refitted to fit partisan views of global wealth and poverty. Climate change has entered into the picture. Western political history and ideas frequently compete equilaterally with the civilization of Islam and the entire non-Western world. Facing pressure from groups demanding "inclusion" or favorable treatment, education officials and textbook editors re-write state curriculum frameworks and instructional materials in response.¹⁵

IV. How Changes to the History Curriculum were Driven or Reinforced

The push for higher standards in United States history originated in broader efforts to overcome the academic mediocrity described in the 1983 federal report *A Nation at Risk* (see Section VIII for more detail on this report and the movement for national and state standards). California took the lead in developing new state history standards in 1986, three years after the report appeared. But with increasing force, cresting in the early 1990s, pressure came from academic

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organizations and single-interest groups to add and subtract historical events, movements, and figures in history materials, undercutting the balance and academic thrust of California's and other history standards.

A. Mandated social content in instructional materials

State departments of education deliberately encased the tenets of multiculturalism in state textbook oversight and state standards to shape the content of the social studies (and literature) curriculum. With numerous special interest groups actively working on state, county, and local curriculum offices and educational publishers, building social studies curricula around social content became foundational from the late 1980s on.

Advocates of this new paradigm ensured its imprint on school curriculum materials by adding criteria for social content to state-mandated evaluations of instructional materials. Among the first advocates were multicultural-friendly state departments of education, led nationally by New York state between 1989 and 1991.¹⁶ Its 1989 *A Curriculum of Inclusion* claimed that the state social studies curriculum had valued "Anglo-Saxon norms" at the expense of other ethnic standards, exhibiting "deep-seated pathologies of racial hatred." It declared: "The monocultural perspective of traditional American education restricts the scope of knowledge. It acts as a constraint on the critical thinking of youth because of its hidden assumptions of white supremacy and white nationalism."

By the turn of the century, the guidelines for all kinds of social content had often been incorporated into law. For example, California's *Standards for Evaluating Instructional Materials for Social Content*,

issued in 2000, created a powerful content armature to which curriculum developers, textbook editors, and district-level supervisors still adhere. Such standards and back-office directives became essential determinants of what classroom teachers emphasized. These special concerns included race, class, gender, age, ability, sexuality, religion, and the environment. California's Education Code prohibits the use of instructional materials that contain "any matter reflecting adversely upon persons on the basis of race or ethnicity, gender, religion, disability, nationality, or sexual orientation..."¹⁷

California's Fair, Accurate, Inclusive and Respectful (FAIR) Education Act, known also as SB 48, passed in 2011, is a significant example of history-related legislation that pushes the curriculum towards social content.¹⁸ FAIR requires textbook publishers to manufacture lessons and textbooks that draw attention to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender figures in history at all grade levels.

This act, and similar bills coming from many different advocacies across the political spectrum, amounts to legislative malpractice. No matter whatever else is happening, state and district administrators must respond to content directives, in this case, about sexual orientation. And they do so by creating class programs and instructional materials that recognize, highlight, and heroize people not for their achievements or historical significance but for ascriptive conditions like race, gender, and sexual orientation.

California's legislature is responsible for another recent act of malpractice. In March 2010, a partisan media firestorm swept the national media when the Texas State Board of Education voted to adopt

revisions to their social studies standards that were objectionable to state progressives. In response, the California legislature passed a law—SB 1451—called the Yee Bill after its sponsor, Senator Leland Yee, that is worthy of notice because of California’s prominence in influencing textbook content. It states:

- (h) It is widely presumed that the proposed changes to Texas’ social studies curriculum will have a national impact on textbook content since Texas is the second largest purchaser of textbooks in the United States, second only to California.
- (i) As proposed, the revisions are a sharp departure from widely accepted historical teachings that are driven by an inappropriate ideological desire to influence academic content standards for children in public schools.

Who or what agency is to decide what are widely accepted historical teachings? Especially if the only accepted and acceptable historical teachings are highly partisan but taken as baselines, and controversial or unsettled views are outside a perimeter of acceptability? Any effort to compose national standards in United States or world history faces cultural agitators on the left and the right who are not looking for a middle way. Any proponent of core or national standards needs to address both partisan historiography, whether from a Texas state board or in a Yee bill, and the influence of the media in casting the controversy in a particular way.

What Texas produced as a United States history curriculum was much less radical or sinister than what the concerted media assault on the state board of education claimed.¹⁹ The state standards were not outside a reasonable perimeter of accepted historical teachings and to make them so in the Yee bill heralds

the possibility of history in the future driven by identity politics and intense multicultural feeling. Diversity themes of the kind that Senator Yee and like-minded partisans accept as legitimate push elected officials and school administrators to drive the social studies curriculum toward indoctrination and away from academic soundness.

B. Summary and Conclusions

Together, state standards, diversity guidelines, and criteria for the social content of instructional materials helped persuade curriculum overseers that inclusion of multiple perspectives and a stress on group identity, a history shaped by the 1994 national history standards and new paradigm, were central to social studies programs going forward. Although promising efforts to codify and reform history curricula during the last twenty years have occurred at the state level, they are few in number and without much national influence. State history standards produced in Massachusetts in 1996 and then in 2001 have been widely recognized as among the most constructive and content-rich of the genre, but it is difficult to detect their influence elsewhere.

It will become increasingly difficult in coming years to monitor the contents of instructional materials, as the process for state textbook adoptions used to do. Largely on account of textbook-publishing economics, the disintegration of meaningful and effective state textbook adoption criteria has accelerated (see Section VI). The process erected a century ago in California and other states to insure academic quality and integrity has increasingly less traction.

Ironically, at the same time that state textbook adoption systems have been fading in their economic might and curriculum-shaping

power, social studies and civics textbooks are almost uniform in content. Teachers have little choice in instructional materials offered by three major school publishers: McGraw-Hill, Pearson, and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. All mass-market instructional materials are produced as packages that will fit the needs of most possible classrooms and align with state content oversight demands. Decades of state curriculum and textbook directives from partisans on the left and right make identity politics foundational in curriculum development. Efforts to protect or add more perspectives to those already in state guidelines, standards, and curriculum materials will likely continue.

V. Issues in Curriculum Placement, Teacher Qualifications, and Pedagogy

Early United States history and Western civilization is disappearing from many undergraduate and graduate programs. Most teachers have little or no formal training in either, or in political philosophy. Yet they are sometimes expected to teach complex political history at early grade levels where in-depth understanding is not possible for most students. They may be asked to use age-inappropriate primary sources and documents. Or they may be forced to teach elements of world history in which they are completely unversed. We look at the problem with curriculum placement first.

A. Curriculum placement for history and U.S. government

The 2006 version of Arkansas' social studies standards for K-8 is not atypical. Students may study different aspects of United States history, government, and citizenship, along with topics in economics, environmental studies, and geography, at every single

grade level. No one grade is set aside for a chronological course in United States history covering many centuries, and bits and pieces of the period leading to the Founding and the Constitutional Period itself (roughly from the American Revolution to about 1800), the philosophical antecedents to the United States Constitution, and its distinctive features appear at different grade levels.

This kind of fragmented approach to the study of United States history results from using a social studies framework. Such documents in other states often include standards for every social science: psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, civics (government), and geography (plus history). Unfortunately for Arkansas students, many standards about the Constitutional Period appear in grade 6, a grade level at which the history and meaning of our basic political principles may not be readily grasped.

In many other states (e.g., Massachusetts), grade 5 usually provides students with their first course in United States history covering the Constitutional Period. The course may stop at about 1800 or go as far as the American Civil War if the teacher is eager to spend a lot of time on slavery, thus treating the Constitutional Period quite skimpily. Whatever the coverage, though, the average fifth grader is incapable of bringing much depth of understanding to our basic political principles. Moreover, most fifth graders are not able to read our seminal documents because of a lack of background knowledge, vocabulary, or lack of experience with the archaic language of the historical period.

Traditionally, many students have studied United States history and the Founding Period in grade 8, and many still do. The placement in grade 8 is due to more than the

fact that grade 8 was once the stable of that dull warhorse, civics. It is also due to the theory behind the “spiral curriculum,” a way of designing a K-12 curriculum that when applied to the study of history made some sense at the time it was proposed decades ago. Educators believed that it made little sense to teach United States history from 1492 to the present in grades 5, 8, and 11, the three years often devoted to national history. Students never got very far into the 20th century in grade 11.

So, proponents of the spiral curriculum suggested that grade 5 go from 1492 to the War of 1812, grade 8 from the Founding Period to Reconstruction after a review of the Revolutionary War, and grade 11 from Reconstruction to the present after a review of the Founding Period. The problem is that grade 8 by default may be where the most intensive study of the Founding in a historical context takes place unless the high school provides a United States history survey course in grade 11 that begins with the discovery of the New World or 1620. Needless to say, if the grade at which students study the Founding Period is grade 8, it is unlikely that they will learn much if anything about the Enlightenment, John Locke, or Montesquieu, and read *The Federalist Papers*.

B. Qualifications of United States history and United States government teachers

According to information compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics for an August 2006 Issue Brief, using data drawn from the NCES 1999–2000 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) teacher and school questionnaires, “Fewer than half (45 percent) of history students at the secondary level in 1999-2000 were taught by teachers who had a postsecondary major or minor in history. In 73 percent of the cases in which students’

teachers lacked a history major or minor, however, the teacher had a major or minor in another social science.”²⁰

Overall, most secondary-level history students are taught by a teacher who has state certification in social studies (including history). But by not making it clear what a license in social studies means with respect to knowledge about American political principles and institutions and by lumping all secondary teachers of history together, these statistics make the situation look far better than the academic reality they camouflage.²¹ Appendix A shows what Massachusetts did to increase the academic background of its history and government teachers.

In states with many rural schools, students in grade 8 are often taught by a teacher holding a middle school generalist license or a K-8 license. The jack-of-all-trades classroom teacher in grades 7 and 8 has often taken no more academic coursework in any one subject than the teacher of grades 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 holding the same license. This means that students in grade 8 in rural schools may be taught about the Founding period by a teacher whose most recent coursework on that period was when she was in middle school herself.

C. Academic meaning of a social studies license

A basic question is what a license in social studies means with respect to academic substance. Few colleges have departments of social studies in the arts and sciences. Most have departments of history, political science, economics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and, sometimes geography. A social studies license does not guarantee that the teacher has studied the Constitutional Period in depth. A license that provides such flexibility means a jack-of-all-trades, master

of none, unless a college has had the good sense to insist on a strong background in U.S. history or government for the preparation program. But there is no systematic research across states on what specific academic content is required by a license in the social studies.

D. Problematic teaching and learning approaches

The ways in which history are taught and learned today contribute to a deep crisis in conveying essential outlines of the nation and world, past and present. These methods take place in a context of reduced time for the study of history and for sustained reading of complex informational texts.

When it comes to teaching social studies, elementary-level teachers say with good reason: “there is only so much time in the day.” There are lunch breaks, recesses, health mandates, and any number of non-academic responsibilities teachers face before a history or civics lesson. High school history and civics teachers face required academic courses in which students exhibit a wide range of reading skills, interest, and attendance.

Before junior high school, when teachers are trying to teach the basics of language and numbers, history and civics are likely to be pushed to the side of the school day. In addition, compulsory mixed ability classes compound the problem. Reduced reading of complex informational texts to accommodate slow readers diminishes what all students can learn.

At all levels—elementary, middle and high school—principals are trying to comply with mandates and trying to meet performance floors in mathematics and English. They are rarely called to account for poor student performance in social studies. From state-

level minimum competency testing to No Child Left Behind and beyond, teachers are captives of narrowly focused, top-down directives intended to improve mathematics and English scores.

Activity-based learning

Social studies teaching suffers from learning theories like project-based learning that schools of education favor and district and state curriculum directors promote, even though there is little research evidence to support them.²² School administrators, curriculum specialists, education professors, workshop presenters, psychologists, and textbook publishers tell teachers that activity-based learning produces superior learning results.²³ Passive learning—lecture, reading, listening, taking notes, memorization, drill – all torpedo student interest and cooperation, teachers hear. Content will soon be forgotten, they are told, if it is not so alien and off-putting in the first place that it will go unlearned.

Activity-based learning makes special claims for educational success with children who are challenged or overmatched by traditional academic learning. When challenged to prove or defend itself, the activities school of pedagogy rejects counter-premises: that the ability to communicate derives from grammar and vocabulary; that agility with words and numbers gives children additional ability to absorb, filter, and process information; that knowledge leads to mastery; and that gathering, sorting, and understanding requires hard work, the rewards of which are not evenly bestowed.

Activity-based learning may constellate itself with cooperative learning, process writing, multiple intelligences, project-based learning, and other systems designed for comprehensive learning. It often rejects the

primacy of academic learning, now broadly applied to large bodies of hard knowledge including textual study of the United States Constitution, Bill of Rights, and amendments.

Activity-based learning is not confined to early childhood education or lower grades, a handful of “innovative” classrooms for gifted children, or mediocre schools. If a teacher tries to defend traditional learning, or thinks that order in lessons and classrooms is a plus, she may face scorn and intimidation. She may be accused of being instructionally out-of-date or even insensitive to student needs. For many teachers, asking students to learn dates and geographic place names is “rote,” unnecessary, and even destructive.²⁴

Popular forms of group activity such as field trips can be just as problematic. They are beloved by students and teachers, but they often have minor educational substance and little to do with history. For example, a California fourth-grade teacher might spend a day—and bus money—taking children to an amusement park train ride to study the Transcontinental Railroad or to a Candy Hunt in the foothills to “role play” the ’49 Miners and Gold Rush.

Critical Thinking and Inquiry

Many teachers who teach history and civics have been taught to promote a “critical” thinking style in which the possibility of objective knowledge is largely dismissed and history is “socially constructed.” They may also be taught to assume that traditional Euro-American culture represents ideas and symbols that allow the dominant race, class, and gender to dominate and oppress.²⁵ Further, they may employ the inquiry method or what they call Socratic interchange. In many workshops, a teacher learns in rhymes not to be a “sage on the stage” but a “guide on

the side,” and is urged to resist the temptation to lecture or simply explain.

Critical analysis of unsettled historical events—some of them closer to current events than to history—is popular. But when students bring no factual background or original insight into the subject, the exercise is sterile as instruction, in other words, a waste of time, one that can devolve into mere opinion or parroting of partisan viewpoints.

These problems in pedagogy are by no means exclusive to social studies or civics. Systematic study of grammar and literary works, especially old ones, problem sets, the Periodic Table or other taxonomies, memorization, and composition, teachers hear again and again in college courses and workshops, have a deadening effect on student interest. Pressed to ignite student interest or even entertain, teachers abandon prepared lessons. Analogous to the way that fluent language depends on grammar and spelling, learning history and building a narrative takes time. It is easy to learn a wrong—or a misshapen—story along the way and difficult to unlearn it.

E. Summary and Conclusions

Because of the increased emphasis on language arts and mathematics and other demands on teacher time, the fundamental building blocks that prepare students for a rich engagement with historical content are largely absent. Further working against this outcome are evolving practices in pedagogy, which tend to favor activity-based learning and promote “critical thinking” as a stand-alone skill, apart from any particular body of knowledge or academic content. The net result is a set of circumstances that dismiss or downplay a view of history as a critical mass of ideas and knowledge necessary for students

to gain a deep conceptual understanding of any historical event, figure, or movement. The curriculum, teacher preparation, and pedagogical trends in evidence in K-12 education effectively conspire against desired and desirable outcomes in history and civics. *The Concord Review*, which publishes exemplary history research papers by high school students, has been a lonely example of an effort to encourage history teachers to assign term papers.

VI. Textbooks and Instructional Technology

Since 1979, textbook critics Frances FitzGerald, Paul Gagnon, Diane Ravitch, Gilbert T. Sewall, and others have commented unfavorably on the technical and substantive deficiencies of history and social studies textbooks in schools. They have agreed that U.S. history textbooks have lost clear sight of America's plot and purpose. The continuing loss of text and high-color format has aggravated content problems. Narratives are thinner to make them more "readable," and what remains of the U.S. story is often distorted to suit interest groups.

That problematic generation of textbooks is now coming to the end of its life cycle. It is unclear what is replacing them since the authority of a primary textbook in K-12 history and civics has faded. In classrooms as recently as ten years ago, textbooks were often the chief if not sole source of information about the subject for teachers and students alike. This is no longer the case.

California and other powerful states exert residual force on textbook publishers. They do not have the content control of the past. The publishers themselves continue to be powerful agents on the national school establishment through their American

Association of Publishers. But the influence and customary power over textbooks, both of state departments and mass-market school publishers, are waning. Textbooks hold a prominent place in classrooms, but in history and social studies classes, especially before the eighth grade, a substantially diminished one from even ten years ago.

A. Usefulness of history textbooks

Familiar, efficient, and relatively cheap. Teachers, parents and the public see them as manuals, reference tools, and lesson plans. They contain exercises and packaged learning. Teacher editions contain leading questions for teachers to use to spark class discussion as well as the answers to these questions.

Accessible to teachers and students, albeit in different ways. Textbooks do not need to be plugged in and do not require technology for their use. However, textbooks play a secondary role in history and civics instruction below grade 8 level.

In high schools, printed textbooks serve as the foundation on which high school teachers create their lessons. They act as close-at-hand, indexed reference authorities and as lesson outlines. Moreover, textbooks have long been pitched at a lower reading and information level than their grade level would warrant so their content is accessible to a broad range of students.

Clear structure for teaching and learning. They offer an organized sequence of ideas and information that few teachers, particularly in the elementary and middle school, have the time, capability, or (in many cases) interest to create on their own. Textbooks also come with supplementary materials that support district or state standards and mandated content. There is little in the textbook-

making process that cannot be transmitted to electronic hardware and digital delivery, but logistical problems and teacher re-training pose enormous barriers to smooth technical transition.

Time-savers. They provide a prepackaged delivery system that helps to conserve teachers' time and energy. Packaged history and civics lessons “work” in the compressed time frames of most K-8 classrooms. Few elementary-level teachers possess sufficient formal training in history, government, and economics to construct their own lessons on the fly. Textbooks and standards are their flying manuals, so to speak, and most teachers want clear instructions on how “to fly,” that is, to deliver a lesson that requires no building time.

B. Challenge of digital materials

All claims of the digital revolution's immediate relevance in social studies should meet sustained skepticism. Yet its role in social studies instruction going forward cannot be overestimated. Policy and curriculum critics may not want the digital future but it wants them.

Emory University English professor Mark Bauerlein and Oxford University neuroscientist Susan Greenfield have each observed that the shift to electronic and digital materials, big board or small, seems to inhibit patient absorption of facts and concepts.²⁶ It is easy to say, “Get rid of the dancing squirrels on the whiteboard screen teaching us how a bill becomes a law,” but such distractions are precisely what software content providers know school districts and teachers want for “engaging” students and teaching history and civics.

Gauging overall quality—what “good” instructional materials and what “bad”

materials teachers use—is impossible today. Instructional materials come from infinite directions: not just from corporate publishers but also from countless internet sources. The upside for the future is a profusion of wonderful instructional web-based materials, beginning with the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) outstanding set of Edsitement lessons for K-12 teachers at all levels, which include many substantive academic projects and activities.²⁷ The downside is that common fare easily accessed on the Internet may lead teachers to make questionable instructional decisions, and create lessons from shoddy or disreputable sources, often taking materials not from such authoritative sources as the NEH or textbooks, but from inferior sources of uneven quality. Given teachers' overarching lack of historical knowledge, especially at the elementary and middle school levels, this is a particularly acute concern.

Moreover, the breakneck pace at which educational technology has injected itself into America's classrooms risks moving social studies classes closer to electronic infotainment. That certainly is the risk, and it argues for some solid baseline of history content. Teachers of history and social studies, especially before grade 8 when subject-specific courses are unlikely, are increasingly apt to rely on short modules they can present to a class on a big-screen whiteboard. Moreover, in July 2009 California's legislature suspended all K-8 textbook adoptions and purchases, letting districts use textbook allocations for other expenses. (At the high school level, the state never placed restrictions on high school instructional materials, leaving selection to individual school districts.)

■ **Shortchanging the Future**

As described in Section IV, textbook adoption requirements in California and other large states have long exerted a force on textbook publishers through textbook adoption requirements. Nationally state adoption systems have been fading and in disarray for a decade. Today the pressure on traditional publishers of instructional materials is intense. How they will respond—if they can respond—remains up in the air and traditional publishers’ economics going forward are ominous.

A digital textbook can be downloaded, projected, and printed, and can range from simple text to a Web-based curriculum embedded with multimedia and links to Internet content. Some versions must be purchased. Others are “open source,” free and available online to anyone. Their quality may never be determinable, and it is not clear how a state or any agency can do so. The equity issues of educational software and hardware are real. Tablet-based instructional material and multimedia are more likely to be available in private schools and affluent public schools.

Classroom teaching of history and civics through integrated multimedia modules that can be projected on monitors, whiteboards, or accessed by computers continues to gain popularity. Instructors want the capacity to access software and multimedia easily and frequently, and many of them would like to build a social studies program around pre-packaged, big-screen learning modules. Discovery Education, a Maryland-based cable media company with no direct background in textbook publishing, extending its in-school audio-visual streaming programs into such modules, has obtained state approval for science programs in Florida, Oregon, Indiana, and Louisiana.²⁸

California intends to require the availability of open-source materials. The state department of education is making efforts to set benchmarks of quality, with some success in digital high-school mathematics and science books. But it is hard to imagine that state curriculum offices in California or any other state can even begin to monitor, much less approve and “adopt,” lists of instructional materials of enormous profusion and variety, or try to police the internet for educational quality. A profusion of modules and learning-related websites, many of them open source and available on YouTube and other high-traffic portals, means that state-level textbook adoption in the future is likely to become a counterfeit or regulatory fiction. But state regulations and laws protecting “social content” are likely to endure.

C. Summary and Conclusions

On account of inertia and broad public pressure to keep books in classrooms and as a part of student lives, printed hardbound and paperback textbooks will not disappear soon. But they are problematic with respect to their content today, as are digital materials. Teachers at all levels are misled by graphic design and adornment, or they *like* what textbook editors call the “bells and whistles.” Teachers are ill-equipped to judge good, better and best, especially with the profusion of non-traditional teaching materials in today’s classrooms.

The variety of instructional media used in classrooms today is so much broader than “books” that the term “textbook” is obsolete and even misleading. Increasingly, electronically-derived reference sources, such as Wikipedia or other source material not in printed volumes or in documents or library stacks, have become the ruling authorities. Nevertheless, they are not an

effective substitute for sustained reading of well-written history textbooks or other serious works of history for an understanding of the basis for this country's existence.

VII. Efforts to Improve Civics and History

Once the anti-civic implications in history became clear, and curricula and textbooks began to respond to the pressure from many directions to dwell on the negative aspects of our national history and on demographic groups specified by affirmative action policies, it did not take long for observant history educators, legislators, and jurists to develop programs, projects, organizations, and resources for teachers to try to counter these anti-civic implications.

A. Traditional American History Grant Program

The so-called Byrd Grants were for a decade a paramount history and civics reform initiative. The program began in 2002 after an initial \$50,000,000 appropriation by Congress; new appropriations ended in 2011 in the aftermath of program cuts by the current administration. A major initiative to promote understanding of American history, the Traditional American History grant program sponsored by U.S. Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia was funded under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.²⁹ It supported three-year professional development programs for U.S. history teachers that sought to raise student achievement by improving teachers' knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of American history. The program guidelines made it clear that our political principles and founding documents were to be explicitly addressed.³⁰ Applicants were invited "to propose projects that enable students to gain an understanding of these principles

and of the historical events and people that best illustrate them." A 2005 evaluation of the Byrd Grants was inconclusive because evidence on effectiveness came mainly from teacher self-reports.³¹ By general agreement the quality of the many teacher development programs was uneven, and their impact on revitalizing classroom history less than originally hoped.

B. Center for Civic Education

One of the first major initiatives was the development of the Center for Civic Education in California. Its roots lay, in part, in the Law in a Free Society project, a K-12 curricular effort in the 1960s that focused on basic concepts of constitutional government such as justice, authority, privacy, and responsibility.³² Initially funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Center became an independent nonprofit organization in 1981 and in 1987 developed its *We the People* program as an outgrowth of the Bicentennial Commission on the Constitution of the United States of America, established in 1985, which focuses on teaching the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights; American political traditions and institutions at the federal, state, and local levels; civic participation; and the rights and responsibilities of citizens. The program conducts local, state, and national student competitions on the Constitution and Bill of Rights.³³

In the meantime, in 1994, the Center released the National Standards for Civics and Government, funded by the U.S. Department of Education and the Pew Charitable Trusts.³⁴ Unlike the reception accorded to the national history standards, they received widespread acclaim from voices at all points on the political spectrum at the time of its release. This

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resource has been used nationwide since to develop state standards in history, civics, and the social studies.

C. Some Major Public and Private Initiatives

Since 2002, *We the People*, a widely respected program of the National Endowment for the Humanities, has been designed to encourage and enhance the teaching, study, and understanding of American history, culture, and democratic principles. It has made many important curriculum building grants and made possible innumerable teacher education and enrichment programs to educational and cultural institutions nationally. The New York-based Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History and the Philadelphia-based Foreign Policy Research Institute have similarly funded and held numerous high-quality teacher institutes, summer programs, and conferences.

The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation has funded a number of significant civic education reform initiatives. The first project, The Bradley Commission on History in Schools, was formed in 1987. The following year the Commission, chiefly a group of historians, issued *Building a History Curriculum: Guidelines for Teaching History in Schools*. The report recommended a set of themes and narratives as the foundation for three broad areas of study: American History, Western Civilization and World History. The document also presented several potential sequences and content of courses for the elementary, middle and high school grades. The Commission later published a collection of essays entitled *Historical Literacy*.³⁵

The Commission and others had concluded that new organizations for the study of history were needed for both historians and history

teachers. The National Council for the Social Studies was the only national organization for history teachers, but it included all the disciplines taught as the social studies in K-12 under its umbrella.

The National Council for History Education (NCHE) was founded in 1990 as a successor to The Bradley Commission on History in Schools. The NCHE, having championed strong history programs since, described itself “an organization dedicated to promoting history in school and society.” It issued a widely circulating newsletter, *History Matters*, and held over the years many outstanding teacher in-service education programs and conferences.

A more recent Bradley Foundation project, resulting in a report entitled *E Pluribus Unum: The Bradley Project on America’s National Identity*, published in 2008.³⁶ It discusses at length the characteristics of an American national identity, the civic and transnational challenges before U.S. students, and the importance of a sound civic education.

D. Independent Textbook Reviews

As a means of improving instructional materials, the American Federation of Teachers and the Educational Excellence Network produced widely circulated critiques of history textbooks, working on the premise that publishers, states, and teachers would seek out better texts, lessons, and curricula.³⁷ American Textbook Council was founded in 1989 to review history textbooks and has issued major reports and guidelines since, including *History Textbooks: A Standard and Guide*.³⁸

Diane Ravitch’s *The Language Police* and the 2004 Fordham Institute report *The Mad, Mad World of Textbook Adoption* explained how many of the state-level adoption criteria may

distort the textbook market, entice extremist groups to hijack the curriculum, and result in mediocre instructional materials.³⁹

But efforts at textbook review and reform of state textbook adoption criteria as means to improve history education have had limited impact. Moreover, the changing nature of instructional materials in recent years has rendered textbook review obsolete and irrelevant, given the economics of educational publishing and the force of new media.

Despite these efforts and others of so many alert educators and motivated philanthropists, a great many of them at the local level, it cannot be said that they have made much of a dent in the basic problem they correctly identified—the extent of ignorance in our young people and their teachers about the basic principles and institutions that shape their lives in so many different ways.

E. Civics Reinvented as Service Learning

In addition to efforts to bolster the traditional history and civics curriculum, a different approach to address concerns about the development of civic identity has gained favor in the last fifteen years. Community service requirements for high school graduation or college admission, with or without academic credit, became increasingly common. The value to civic health of community service requirements, “service learning,” and student volunteerism is not easily measured. Unlike the initiatives above, they do not actively seek to instill academic knowledge. Moreover, compulsory community service is controversial among some parents, students, and others who believe that community service should be voluntary and without the expectation of a reward, whether in the form of credit or payment. As of August 2011, only Maryland and the District of Columbia

had adopted community service as a high school graduation requirement. But high school districts in 35 states had incorporated some form of service learning, compared to districts in only seven states in 2001.

VIII. History of National and State History Standards

The push for higher standards in United States history originated in the effort to overcome the academic mediocrity of our public schools as described in the immensely influential 1983 federal report *A Nation at Risk*. California took the lead in developing new state history standards in 1986, three years after the report appeared. In the mid-1980s, a consensus began to emerge among business leaders, policy makers, and educators that the best approach to weak academic achievement in K-12 was “setting standards against which progress could be tracked, performance judged, and curricula, textbooks, and teacher training aligned.”⁴⁰ The growing snowball came to be called “standards-based reform.”

A. Background for first set of national standards

National standards and tests got a huge boost from Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), at a National Education Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia, September 1989, convened by President George H.W. Bush and attended by almost all of the nation’s governors. 1989 also saw the release of national standards by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), the first professional education organization to work out standards for its subject. Although NCTM would later be severely criticized for its emphasis on pedagogy, among other issues, by college-level mathematicians who

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as a group had been mostly excluded from the process for developing mathematics standards for K-12, NCTM's 1989 document set a precedent for other professional education organizations in the next six years.

In 1991, President Bush set forth his "America 2000" plan, proposing among other things a system of national standards in five major subjects and voluntary national tests in grades 4, 8, and 12. He wanted American students to leave "grades 4, 8, and 12 having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, and geography... so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy."

According to Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander, the America 2000 plan was intended to serve as a "catalyst of change." Nevertheless, America 2000 didn't pass because it included vouchers and, to many legislators, appeared to threaten local control of curriculum and instruction. In the meantime, encouraged by funding from the United States Department of Education (USDE) and the National Endowments for the Humanities and the Arts during both the Bush and Clinton administrations, and by other sources of funding, national standards were being developed by national education organizations in English language arts and reading, the arts, science, history, geography, and civics.

In 1994, President William J. Clinton signed into law his own version of America 2000 called Goals 2000, which encouraged but did not mandate states to develop their own "voluntary" state standards. In the meantime, efforts to develop national standards by professional education organizations and discipline-based experts were grinding to

a halt, chiefly because of the flap over the proposed United States history standards released in 1994.

B. First flap over national history standards

Moved by California's successes in developing sound state standards in 1986, enthusiasm for national curriculum standards, not only in history but across the curriculum, grew in the first Bush administration. The expectation was that codified history standards would provide teachers and curriculum developers a strong baseline at all grade levels. National history standards arrived after two years of debate in 1994, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and produced by the University of California/ Los Angeles Center for the Study of History in the Schools.

The makers of these standards successfully achieved their goal to "redistribute the nation's historical capital."⁴¹ This revision of United States and World history set off years of curriculum-related acrimony. The Senate repudiated them in January 1995 by a vote of 99 to 1 in a bitter political display, but the new standards were demure and balanced compared to the aggressive multiculturalism of the day. These standards established unique and overpowering content baseline for textbook developers and state curriculum makers. They have had incalculable force in shaping state standards, mandates, and workshops since then, acting as baselines for state departments of curriculum, assistant superintendents, and textbook editors.

C. State of state history standards

In the past two decades, two organizations have assumed the responsibility of reviewing the myriad sets of state standards in history or social studies that have been issued through

the years: the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. (The Council for Basic Education also reviewed the first sets of standards that had appeared by the mid-1990s but ceased to exist soon after.) For that, they should be applauded. It was messy and tedious work for reviewers trying to figure out what criteria to use and how to apply them to a large number of typically incoherent and poorly written documents.⁴²

Not only did no other foundations engage in this difficult but necessary undertaking. Neither did any scholarly or discipline-based organization at the post-secondary level, such as the Organization of American Historians (founded in 1907), the American Historical Association (founded in 1884), or the American Council of Learned Societies (founded in 1917). These organizations apparently did not realize that reviewing state standards in their own discipline was as much their responsibility as the AFT's. Undoubtedly, it would have taken some time for these organizations to find a group of highly regarded historians and other scholars with a range of perspectives on American history to review voluntarily a document addressing their discipline in the K-12 curriculum. But some could have been found, and it would have been an appropriate public service to the students, teachers, and parents and other citizens whose tax money supports most members of the humanities at public universities or in other positions.

Beginning in 1995, the AFT began to publish articles with advice on how states could write good standards and, once the first versions appeared in the mid to late 1990s, reviewed them annually in *Making Standards Matter*, a monograph that rated their quality in a brief but informative way. Following up on its

long interest in “educating for democracy,” the AFT also asked historian Paul Gagnon to review and rate the “civic core” in state history standards.⁴³ Summarizing his study in an article in the *American Educator* in Fall 2003,⁴⁴ Gagnon noted that: “Not one of the 48 states (Iowa and Rhode Island allow local choice), nor the District of Columbia or Defense Department school system, wrote a document that had *both* a clear focus on civic/political education and was teachable in the limited time schools have to teach.” By civic core, he meant “a focus on government, political history, and the aspects of economics and geography that have shaped political choice and institutions, with significant human consequences,” leaving “ample room in each school year for other aspects of history and social studies.”

The Fordham Institute did more detailed evaluations of state standards than the AFT did in its annual monograph, selecting scholars or other experts in a subject area to review and rate all the state standards in their area. Sheldon Stern, the resident historian at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, reviewed then current versions of state history standards for American history for the Fordham Institute in 2003, finding United States history in poor shape in most state standards documents. Stern and his son, Jeremy Stern, also an American historian, reviewed current versions of state history standards for American history in 2011, finding little improvement.⁴⁵ They noted the following differences between strong and weak history standards:

“The strongest standards tend to:

- offer coherent chronological overviews of historical content, rather than ahistoric themes organized into different social studies strands;

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- offer a clear sequence of content across grades, revisiting the content of early grades in later grades in a more thorough and sophisticated manner, appropriate to students' developing cognitive abilities;
 - systematically identify real (and important) people and specific events, and offer explanations of their significance;
 - integrate political history with social and cultural history;
 - recognize historical balance and context, discussing—for example—both the rise of political liberty and the entrenchment of slavery in America, the growing conflict between these concepts, and the long American struggle toward greater social and political justice;
 - recognize America's European origins, while also acknowledging and integrating the roles and contributions of non-Western peoples;
 - encourage comprehension of the past on its own terms, discouraging “presentism”—whereby students judge the past through the lens of today's values, standards, and norms—and avoiding appeals to “personal relevance”; and
 - be presented in clear, jargon-free language, with straightforward internal organization.”
- divide United States history across grades such that standards covering early American history are (typically) relegated to elementary or middle school, when students rarely possess the intellectual maturity and sophistication to study it with the necessary rigor or understanding;
 - ignore political history in favor of amorphous social issues;
 - be politically tendentious, seeking to mold students to specific political outlooks rather than to encourage historical comprehension or independent critical thought;
 - present misleading or inaccurate content;
 - encourage “presentism” rather than contextual comprehension;
 - posit students' present, personal interpretation of historical events as the main arbiter of history's significance; and
 - be couched in abstruse and often meaningless edu-jargon, and presented in overly complex and confusing mazes of charts and tables.”

Most of the shortcomings, according to the Sterns, could be attributed to the ill-considered decision by most states to embed history in social studies.

“The weakest standards, on the other hand, tend to:

- ignore chronology by separating related content into social studies themes and categories;
- minimize real people and specific events, instead making broad generalizations and invoking specifics only with random and decontextualized examples;

D. Second flap over national history standards coming?

In 2012, a decision was made to try again for national history standards—or maybe a framework. As of this writing it remains unclear who is funding the effort, who is actually writing the standards, and what procedures are being followed. The draft document is expected to be issued sometime in 2013 from the Council for Chief State

School Officers (developers of the Common Core standards). The working title of the document is “Vision for the College, Career, and Civic Life (3C): Framework for Inquiry in Social Studies State Standards.” At present we know little more than the following:

“The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Inquiry in Social Studies State Standards is currently being developed through a state-led effort facilitated by CCSSO and supported by 15 professional organizations representing the 4 social studies content areas: civics, economics, geography, and history. The C3 Framework is being authored by known experts in the academic disciplines and social studies education in collaboration with classroom teachers, state department of education personnel, and professional organization representatives.”

In November 2012, a confidential draft of the “standards” was circulated. They consisted for the most part of general statements or questions—no content.

IX. Conclusions and Recommendations

An examination of NAEP scores over the past two decades demonstrates civic and historical ignorance is high and rising. This ignorance poisons our politics, erodes civic culture, and effectively disenfranchises millions. Contemporary narratives in history affect how American students think about themselves, their country, and their relationship to the world. Advancing American interests and democratic values at home and abroad requires clear sight as to what those interests and values are. If these interests and values are not known—or if they are taken for granted or scorned—the nation cannot easily endure, or it may do so in a way that conflicts with the ideals of the

Founding and its civic principles. Without civics or a shared past, the nation’s citizen may conduct their international affairs in foolish or self-destructive ways or simply be unable to elect officials who make sensible laws and administer in the common interest, while protecting freedom and liberty.

Where history is not neglected in K-12 education, it risks being drained of its narrative power. Demands for increased attention to world history leaves students with an impressionistic and often inaccurate sense of the development of our nation and Western civilization; moves to correct previous distortion and omissions, however well-intentioned, risk substituting one air-brushed version of history for new, more inclusive air-brushed versions. Civics is increasingly not a subject to be studied at all, but an activity in which to be engaged, repackaged as “service learning.” The result is a demonstrable lack of civic knowledge (NAEP) and a slow, steady decay of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for a lifetime of active, engaged citizenship.

The results of a 2010 survey of Virginians by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and the Center for the Constitution at James Madison’s house Montpelier suggest the ultimate price to be paid for our lack of civic and historical knowledge. This survey found not merely a lack of knowledge about the United States Constitution but a creeping indifference, even disdain, for its principles. Only 27 percent of younger Virginians understand that the American constitutional system limits the power of government; a strong majority (68 percent) disagreed with the idea that the government is empowered to act for the common good. Nearly one in five of young Virginians (19 percent) thinks the rule of law is only a “somewhat

important” constitutional principle, while about 15 percent think limited government and separation of church and state are only somewhat important constitutional principles. By contrast, older Virginians were much better informed and demonstrated greater faith in the system. It is tempting to see in these attitudes echoes of an era of schooling before history and civics were sidelined.

It is difficult to find reasons to be cheered or to expect a renaissance in history in our schools. As a discipline, history has been stubbornly polite about its marginalization. Squeezed from the curriculum; viewed as secondary to reading, writing and STEM subjects; or reduced to a means of celebrating diversity, history has been abused, neglected or hijacked across K-12 education. It remains largely absent from accountability measures.

The easiest response would be to demand national standards and testing in history. But there is little reason to expect these impulses to be fruitful. Skills-based common standards too timid to establish clear expectations about what educated Americans should be expected to know will add little value. Civic skills and dispositions rest on the bedrock of shared content. Rather than another stillborn attempt at history standards making, we recommend:

1. That states adopt one of the highly rated sets of state standards in history and social science such as those in South Carolina, California, Massachusetts, Alabama, Indiana, Washington, D.C., or New York. State legislatures, governors, and state boards of education should pass legislation or vote to develop, adopt, and implement content-rich, well-regarded state United States history standards, which describe our form of government, its philosophical and historical antecedents, as well as our nation’s history.

2. That states could use the U.S. Citizenship Test at the end of grade 11 for students to graduate from an American public high school, for admission to a public college, and for eligibility for a Pell grant and any other public funds. The U.S. Citizenship Test offers a telling window into just how poor is our grasp of even the most basic civic knowledge. In order to become a United States citizen, would-be Americans are asked ten questions and must answer at least six correctly. The content is non-controversial: name one right or freedom in the First Amendment; list the three branches of government; name of one of your U.S. Senators; how many justices serve on the U.S. Supreme Court, and so on. These are things that every schoolboy used to know when schoolboys knew things. A 2011 study by Xavier University noted that while 97.5 percent of naturalized citizens pass this most basic test of civic knowledge, only two out of three Americans can do the same. When the standard is raised to seven out of ten, half of all adults fail. Presumably the children in our schools would score lower still were they asked to take the exam.

States might also consider administering the U.S. Citizenship Test to prospective teachers, especially those who teach the critical elementary grades. Administering even a minimum competency civics exam such the U.S. Citizenship Test would, at the very least, establish a baseline expectation that our schools are to ensure that all students reached voting age with the basic knowledge of history and civics that we demand by law of our newest fellow citizens.

A compelling case can be made that history and civic content has been systematically watered down without an attendant sense of widespread urgency or even a grasp of

the effect of this on the nation's civic health and well-being. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan frequently describes education reform as "the civil rights issue of our time."⁴⁶ When one considers the strong correlation between educational attainment and voting participation, this observation seems more apt than perhaps Mr. Duncan even realizes. A sound, basic education can and should promote national identity, unity, and loyalty without indoctrination. Cultivating understanding of and pride in America's history and ideals is an appropriate end of public education that in no way conflicts with the goal of creating independent, free-thinking citizens in a pluralistic society.

We become citizens by birth, but Americans by choice. Absent ties of blood and soil, a shared narrative and a set of common ideals is all that we have to unite us. It is all we have ever had. This alone cements history's demand on the curriculum and the attention of educational policymakers.

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Pioneer Institute is an independent, non-partisan, privately funded research organization that seeks to change the intellectual climate in the Commonwealth by supporting scholarship that challenges the “conventional wisdom” on Massachusetts public policy issues.

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Appendix A: How Massachusetts Increased Academic Requirements for History and Government Teachers

What Massachusetts did in revising its licensing regulations and licensure tests for history and government teachers may be informative to other states. Although Massachusetts provided for a license in history as well as in social studies before 2000, it found that most teachers teaching history in the state until the early 2000s were licensed as social studies, not history, teachers. To address the limitations in the academic background of those teaching history at the middle and high school level, the 2000 revision of the Massachusetts teacher licensure regulations (and the licensure tests based on them) did several things. First, it abolished three licenses: the K-8 license, the middle school generalist license, and the social studies license.

No one shed public tears about the elimination of the K-8 license. Only the association for middle schools protested the elimination of the generalist license even though a number of school systems in the state (e.g., Boston) had already established a policy of not hiring any teacher for grades 6, 7, and 8 with a middle school generalist license. The elimination of the social studies license did meet with many howls from the field because it was not clear what social studies teachers' continuing professional development should consist of. But no complaints were received from the state's colleges. As a consequence, since 2000, the history or U.S. government teacher has had to be licensed as a history or government teacher for grades 5-8 or 8-12.

Second, the revised regulations and licensure tests made it clear what disciplines should be stressed by prospective teachers of history

or U.S. government in their undergraduate coursework. The topics required for study in the preparation programs for each type of teacher come from only the four disciplines of history, political science, geography, and economics, and the weights on the licensure tests reflect the proportion of topics listed for each discipline. Those seeking a history license for grades 5-8 or 8-12 now take a licensure test with 37-39 items on U.S. history, 30-32 items on world history, and 30-32 items on geography, government, and economics (plus two short essays).

To attract students who major in political science, Massachusetts now has a license called political science/political philosophy, for grades 5-8 or 8-12. This licensure test contains 18-20 items on political philosophy, 24-26 items on U.S. government and civics, 18-20 items on comparative government and international relations, 24-26 items on history, and 11-13 items on geography and economics (as well as two short essay questions). Topics from sociology, anthropology, and psychology as disciplines are not addressed on either licensure test, nor can teachers be licensed to teach these subjects in K-12.

To indicate how well test-takers have fared on the new test for U.S. government teachers, Table 1 shows the passing rate on all test administrations in 2010 of the revised history test and the new political science/political philosophy test. As can be seen, the number of first-time test-takers passing the new test at each administration of the test in 2010 ranges from 10% to 54.5% of the total of those taking the test for the first time. An unanswerable question is why most test-takers fail this licensure test? What kind of courses have they taken as (most likely) political science or history majors or minors? The test development company estimated it as at the beginning college level in difficulty.

Table 1. First-Time Test Takers and Test Retakers for the History and the Political Science/Political Philosophy Licensure Tests, March 2010-November 2010

Test Name	First-Time Test Takers		Test Retakers	
	N	% Passing	N	% Passing
	N	% Passing	N	% Passing

November 2010

History	207	74.4	83	38.6
Political Science/Political Philosophy	9	11.1	6	50.0

September 2010

History	100	68.0	63	20.6
Political Science/Political Philosophy	11	54.5	5	40.0

July 2010

History	257	75.9	89	40.4
Political Science/Political Philosophy	10	40.0	6	0.0

May 2010

History	233	71.7	87	29.9
Political Science/Political Philosophy	10	10.0	8	12.5

March 2010

History	255	76.5	95	32.6
Political Science/Political Philosophy	20	25.0	8	37.5

Source: Massachusetts Department of Education website.

