
THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

Reviews of articles from periodicals and specialized journals here and abroad

The Battle over History Standards

A Survey of Recent Articles

It is familiar news, but still disturbing: most American high school students appear to know little about U.S. history and less about world history. In a 1988 national test, only a minority of seniors showed even a general sense of the chronology of events in America's past or were familiar with the Declaration of Independence and other fundamental texts. The National Standards for United States History and the National Standards for World History, unveiled a year ago, were supposed to help schools and teachers do better by spelling out, in two volumes of outlines and study guides, what students in grades 5-12 should be taught. But the firestorm of criticism that the proposed standards ignited suggests that America's common culture may be, for now at least, so divided as to render that educational mission almost impossible.

"The controversy over the standards is part and parcel of a larger, profoundly political, culture war," observes Gary B. Nash, a historian at the University of California at Los Angeles, in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Apr. 21, 1995). Nash is codirector of the National Center for History in the Schools, which coordinated the writing of the National Standards documents. On one side of the barricades, in his view, are historians who "have tried to go beyond a happy-face American history and a triumphant celebration of Western civilization." On the other side are critics who "believe that young Americans should not learn that . . . every society's history is full of paradox, ambiguity, and irresolution."

Other prominent scholars take a similar view. "Historians become notably controversial," Michael Kammen, president of the Organization of American Historians (OAH), claims in the *OAH Newsletter* (May 1995),

"when they do not perpetuate myths, when they do not transmit the received and conventional wisdom, when they challenge the comforting presence of a stabilized past. Members of a society and its politicians in particular, prefer that historians be quietly ironic rather than polemical, conservators rather than innovators."

The "politicians" to whom Kammen refers include, presumably, the members of the U.S. Senate, who voted 99-1 in January for a resolution expressing disapproval of the National Standards. Lynne Cheney, who headed the National Endowment for the Humanities when it approved funds for the National Standards project in 1992, also has sharply condemned the results. "Reading the world history standards," she writes on the *New York Times* op-ed page (Mar. 10, 1995), "one would think that sexism and ethnocentrism arose in the West, when Western civilization has in fact led the way in condemning the unjust treatment of women and encouraging curiosity

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about other cultures. The American history standards make it seem that Joseph McCarthy and McCarthyism (mentioned 19 times) are far more important than George Washington (mentioned twice) or Thomas Edison (mentioned not at all)."

But the views of even informed citizens count for only so much in the eyes of Theodore K. Rabb, a Princeton historian. He believes that the interpretations of professional historians should be "privileged" (to use a term popular in the academy). "When citizens have had their say," he writes in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Mar. 10, 1995), "they must understand that there are professional standards that govern acceptability in history no less than in physics." The National Standards, Rabb declares, "*should reflect the full range of interpretations that professionals in the field regard as reasonable* [his italics]."

But the National Standards, particularly in U.S. history, manifestly fail to meet even that restricted test. The critics include not only politicians, journalists, and others outside the historical priesthood but also professional historians. Walter A. McDougall, a historian at the University of Pennsylvania, writes in *Commentary* (May 1995), that the world history standards give non-Western cultures "a moral pass, but with one exception: their treatment of women. If any consistent ideological thread runs through the world Standards, it is feminism. Over and over again, whether the subject is ancient Rome, Christian Europe, the Islamic world, China (footbinding gets repeated coverage), India, or Mesoamerica, students are prompted to ask 'what obstacles [women] faced,' 'what opportunities were open to them,' 'what life choices were available,' and 'in what ways were women subordinate?'" Such cues, McDougall says, invite students to conclude "that sexual roles were always a function of patriarchy backed by theology."

Boston University's John Gagliardo, one of 11 historians who appraise the National Standards in a special issue of *Continuity* (Spring 1995), similarly finds an exaggerated emphasis in the world history standards on the status of women. Moreover, he says, the stan-

dards give the impression that the main reason that the West dominated much of the world after the mid-15th century was "its willingness to employ a superior technology, in all its forms, for purposes of dominion over people who lacked the moral unscrupulousness and lust for power and wealth that characterized the West. What this vaguely moralizing approach fails to recognize is the power and virtues of the Western cognitive tradition, traceable all the way back to the intellectual syntheses of the ancient classical world, which gave to Western society an apprehension of reality—including its temporal and spatial components—very different from that of any other civilization that has ever existed."

Examining the National Standards for American history, Walter McDougall says that although "race, class, and gender" probably get too much attention, "the basic political narrative is still there." The problem, he says, is with its "spin": that the "deeper meaning" of American history is to be explained "in terms of minority and female struggle versus white male resistance. This is the *gnosis* a pupil must grasp to get good marks. If Europeans braved the unknown to discover a new world, it was to kill and oppress. If colonists carved a new nation out of the woods, it was to displace Native Americans and impose private property. If the 'Founding Fathers' (the term has been banished) invoked human rights, it was to deny them to others. If businessmen built the most prosperous nation in history, it was to rape the environment and keep workers in misery."

In the National Standards on U.S. history, as reproduced in a special issue of the *OAH Magazine of History* (Spring 1995), the Cold War is portrayed not as a struggle between totalitarian tyranny and constitutional democracy but as the "swordplay" of two morally equivalent powers, the Soviet Union and the United States. It "rightfully claims attention," according to the text, "because it led to the Korean and Vietnam wars as well as the Berlin airlift, Cuban missile crisis, American interventions in many parts

of the world, a huge investment in scientific research, and environmental damage that will take generations to rectify."

Diane Ravitch, a historian of education and a champion of national standards, says in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Feb. 17, 1995) that the history standards "are deeply flawed. I don't believe that one can teach civic values, as the standards claim to do, or explain our society's successes and failures, without emphasizing the Western democratic tradition. But . . . the standards should be substantially

revised, not abandoned."

Forrest McDonald, the noted University of Alabama historian, disagrees. For about two decades, he writes in *Continuity*, "left-wingers . . . have dominated the history departments of the most prestigious schools as well as the two major associations of professional historians." So long as that dominance continues, he says, any national standards drawn up by the historical establishment are unlikely to be much different. The best course, in his view, is to scrap the idea altogether.

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

America the Resilient

"Malaise and Resiliency in America" by Seymour Martin Lipset, in *Journal of Democracy* (July 1995), 1101 15th St. N.W., Ste. 802, Washington, D.C. 20005.

In a much-noted article earlier this year, Robert D. Putnam, director of Harvard University's Center for International Affairs, pointed out alarming signs of decay in America's "civil society" [see "The Periodical Observer," *WQ*, Spring '95, p. 137]. Lipset, a sociologist at George Mason University and a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center, argues that while decay has probably taken place, America's civil society "remains relatively healthy."

There still is greater civic engagement among Americans than among most other peoples, Lipset asserts. A 1990 survey showed that 82 percent of Americans belong to voluntary organizations—compared with 53 percent of Germans, 39 percent of the French, 36 percent of Italians, and 36 percent of the Japanese. Nearly half of all Americans reported taking part in charitable or service activities, compared with only one-fifth of the French and less than one-seventh of the Germans. Americans also remain among "the most religiously committed people in Christendom," Lipset says. Although there are conflicting data, Gallup polls show that membership in churches and synagogues has stayed steady at about two-thirds, and weekly atten-

dance has hovered around 38 percent since 1950.

Moreover, Lipset says, most Americans "are not unhappy about their personal lives or prospects." A 1994 Hudson Institute study found that more than four in five Americans say they are "optimistic about my personal future," and about two in three are "optimistic about America's future." As that study and others show, Lipset says, Americans "still view the United States as a country that rewards personal integrity and hard work, as a nation that—government and politics aside—still 'works.'"

These are not the views of a people in crisis. Despite the oft-noted declines in political participation, in confidence in political institutions, and in the strength of the traditional two-party system, and despite the apparent signs of civic decay, "the American political system . . . is in no real danger," Lipset concludes.

The Making of George Washington

"George Washington: Today's Indispensable Man" by Forrest McDonald, in *The Intercollegiate Review* (Spring 1995), 14 South Bryn Mawr Ave., Bryn Mawr, Pa. 19010-3275.

Embarking on the perilous course of revolution, Americans had to trust someone—and