Debate Over the National History Standards Between Lynne Cheney and Gary Nash
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CHARLES GIBSON: As you heard during the newscast, there is controversy over a new report which would help establish the first national standards for teaching history in America's public schools. The problem? Is it wrong to emphasize - critics would say overemphasize - the contributions of minorities, women, and ordinary people? Joining us from Washington, one of the leading critics of the guidelines, Lynne Cheney, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. And from our affiliate KOVR-TV in Sacramento, California, Gary Nash, the co-director of the group that wrote the guidelines. He is a history professor at UCLA. Appreciate both of you being with us.

Professor Nash, let me start with you. What would you do to correct, change, the way history is taught?

GARY NASH, History Professor, University of California, Los Angeles: Well, one way of changing it is to infuse classrooms with lots of exciting, engaging materials, and really insist that students not take the word out of the textbook and accept it as the gospel, as the literal truth. We want students really to interrogate the data. We want them to exercise their own judgment in reading conflicting views of any piece of history and understand that there are multiple perspectives on any particular historical era, movement, event, for that matter. We want this to be a democratic history, where it is a history for the people, of the people, and by the people.

CHARLES GIBSON: Lynne Cheney, that doesn't sound so controversial. What are your objections?

LYNNE CHENEY, American Enterprise Institute: There's a-it's not really a matter, Charlie, of what is in the national standard, it's a matter of what's missing. And there's a whole lot of basic history that simply doesn't appear. Students who learn their history according to these national standards would never hear about Daniel Webster, they would never learn about Robert E. Lee, they would never know about Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, the Wright brothers. They wouldn't be aware that George Washington was our first president, if they learned their history according to these guidelines. They wouldn't know that James Madison was the father of our Constitution.

CHARLES GIBSON: Let me take that back to Professor Nash. Are you leaving out some of the basics? Are you leaving out the people she talked about?

Prof. GARY NASH: That's insulting to teachers, to say that Madison isn't in the book is absurd. Madison was one of the authors of the Constitution, not the author. But there is plenty of material in there which will take teachers and students to this whole business of the Constitutional-

CHARLES GIBSON: But- but the-

Prof. GARY NASH: -Convention and how it was created.

CHARLES GIBSON: But the criticism is, Professor Nash, that in the name of being politically correct, there is a deemphasis on some people, particularly the white males in the past.

Prof. GARY NASH: There are white males on every page of this document. I think people better get this book and read it for themselves. I suggest that Lynne Cheney can't find a page in which white males aren't present.

CHARLES GIBSON: Lynne Cheney?

LYNNE CHENEY: Well, it's simply the case that George Washington is not ever described in here as our first president. James Madison was the father of the Constitution. I did not say author. He was the father of the Constitution. Students learning their history from these standards wouldn't know it.

CHARLES GIBSON: But-

LYNNE CHENEY: I think that people are going to be very, very dismayed when they see these standards. I have never written an op-ed piece that has received quite so much- elicited so much response as the one I have-
CHARLES GIBSON: But-

LYNNE CHENEY: -written on this piece. Parents are-

CHARLES GIBSON: But-

LYNNE CHENEY: -very, very troubled, and they deserve to be.

CHARLES GIBSON: But Lynne Cheney, is there anything wrong- As I understand, and I have not read this document-

LYNNE CHENEY: Right.

CHARLES GIBSON: -but I have read a lot about it now. Is there anything wrong with the idea of studying concepts, like causes of the Civil War or reasons for industrialization-

LYNNE CHENEY: Well, I- I-

CHARLES GIBSON: -rather than studying generals or specific inventors?

LYNNE CHENEY: This is- this is certainly something Mr. Nash and I disagree about. He told Reuters a few days ago that he was against hero-driven history. I think our kids need heroes. I think that they need models of greatness to help them aspire. I think they need heroes so that they can become heroes themselves.

CHARLES GIBSON: Let me take that back to Professor Nash.

Prof. GARY NASH: I'd like the American people to understand that Lynne Cheney's successor at the National Endowment for Humanities, Sheldon Hackney, wants us to have national conversations across the country to talk about who we are as an American people. Now, this book is a splendid example of a three-year national conversation, because it was a conversation among 29 major organizations filled with teachers, filled with educators and historians, indeed, virtually every large membership group that has a claim to the teaching and writing of history. All of them participated in an open, democratic process of trying to reach broad-based consensus.

CHARLES GIBSON: All right.

Prof. GARY NASH: That was our charge-

LYNNE CHENEY: But-

Prof. GARY NASH: -from NEH, and we have achieved it. And I think we have indeed received the support of almost all of these-

CHARLES GIBSON: Let-

Prof. GARY NASH: -organizations.

CHARLES GIBSON: Lynne Cheney, last 20 seconds is yours.

LYNNE CHENEY: Well, Gary, the NEH gave Mr. Nash a very different charge. He was supposed to write a balanced and even-handed set of standards. And he certainly has not done that. There's nothing wrong with a national conversation. There's something very wrong with putting politically correct history standards in our schools.

CHARLES GIBSON: At that- at that-

Prof. GARY NASH: But this book-

CHARLES GIBSON: I'm sorry, I have to leave it at that, although you say you wanted to touch off a national conversation, you have certainly done that, and it will continue. Gary Nash, thank you very much. Lynne Cheney, thank you.

The preceding text has been professionally transcribed. However, although the text has been checked against an audio track, in order to meet rigid distribution and transmission deadlines, it has not yet been proofread against tape.