The teaching of history seems to be in crisis. At the secondary level the debate has been engaged over what America's youth should be learning about our nation's past; as the controversy over the National Standards for United States History is played out on the editorial page, television talk shows and in the Senate chamber, the role of the teacher, the student, and course content is very much up for grabs. But one thing is certain: everyone has an opinion even if few of the participants in the debate have actually read the Standards or are teaching in America's high schools. My comments are based upon teaching at an elite private school for the last thirteen years, after having taught at a state university for the previous five.

This debate commenced last fall with the publication of National Standards for United States History and World History, but storm warnings echoed years earlier with the report of the Bradley Commission and other joint-sponsored reports on Social Studies in the Schools. Issues related to pedagogy have been even more pressing as secondary school teachers are flooded with material about the student-centered classroom and new delivery systems preparing students for the twenty-first century, as if the very mission of the profession of teaching is as committed to reformatting as the new versions of computer software that appear every month. Workshop leaders talk about the teacher becoming the guide on the side rather than the pilot flying the plane, as though academic teachers were engaged in an athletic activity that relegated the teacher to the status of a coach sitting on the bench while the team moved the ball up the field. We learn that students learn best facing one another, so that it is important to replace antiquated desks with seminar tables or to move those armchair desks into "the circle." We are told that everyone has a different learning style: some students are passive learners and some are active learners - and, of course, there is a gender dimension to learning that must be taken into consideration as well.

We are asked to provide more inclusive, more relevant, more self-referential material to enhance students' self-esteem and to educate students for the coming century. Some teachers say that "the box" is already so filled that the only way we can do that is by lengthening the school year as well as the school day. And we must not forget that the two-parent working family requires a longer school day and year to provide the child the care that the homemaker used to offer. All of which leads to the school's becoming a surrogate parent as teachers are exhorted more and more to provide the ethical guidance that doomsayers tell us is no longer coming from the home.

We are told that we should teach students how to think and not what to think, and so it really does not matter if a teacher lacks the expertise to teach a subject because enthusiasm and pedagogy are more important than content. Or, as my former Head of School once said, when hiring someone who had no training in the subject she was supposed to teach, "We're more interested in the spirit of teaching around here."

Finally, teachers are being urged to have their students do "projects" rather than end of the year final exams or term papers. And as projects replace year-end final exams in the student-centered classroom, students shape the curriculum and design projects that provide "hands-on" activity. Everyone is a historian. Adopt a project, create a documentary, write a novel, put a historical figure on trial, hold a constitutional convention, host your very own Congress of Vienna.

The central issue that has been lost in much of this debate, and one directly addressed by the National Standards, is that too much emphasis has been focused upon pedagogy and not enough on content. What the Standards offer are a solid grounding in American history as well as pedagogical suggestions that offer the best promise yet of a balanced curriculum. My views on the subject are tempered by chairing a department for five years, interviewing job applicants, attending workshops on the East Coast and keeping up with the literature in the field. If one issue has become more compelling to me than all others, it is the lack of academic content in education schools and in much of the teaching that goes on in our schools. Not all that long ago, I interviewed a M.Ed. from Columbia University's Teachers College who indicated that one of her only content-oriented courses was on historiography in which she wrote a historiographical essay on slavery. I asked her to talk about Winthrop Jordan's White Over Black and Edmund Morgan's American Slavery, American Freedom. She hadn't heard of either work. Since most public school systems require certification, which can only be obtained in education schools, and this experience focuses more on pedagogy than content, is it any wonder that high school students seem to know little about their nation's past and that teachers seem threatened by efforts to encourage a core of knowledge? How are high school teachers to acquire the historical grounding to instruct their students in an engaging, meaningful history?

High school teachers writing in the special issue of the Journal of American History on "The Practice of American History" repeatedly comment that they act in isolation and that most students dislike the subject.(1) Therefore, many teachers think of social history as a convenient way to spice up their classes, serving it in easily-digestible bites that do not cohere to a larger narrative. One colleague assigns a student to teach a class on all of women’s history from Seneca Falls to Roe v. Wade, while another is asked to instruct his classmates on the entirety of African American history from Reconstruction through the modern Civil Rights movement in a single class period. He thinks this is what it means to be "inclusive." The achievement of the National Standards is that they integrate social history into the larger political and economic narrative, in the process asking students to formulate questions, interpret data and assess sources in a way that should satisfy critics who think social history is simply fluff.

The larger dimension of the problem is revealed by the political firestorm raised by the National Standards. Gary Nash seemed genuinely surprised by such an assault. Yet one only has to keep a historical frame of reference to realize that such an attack should have been expected. After all we are now veterans of what have been called the "culture wars," so how could Nash and his colleagues at the National Center for History in the Schools have been caught off guard by Lynne Cheney's offensive? When we consider that a large percentage of Americans never take an American history course after high school, and the content of that curriculum has been the focus of debate since, at least, the William Bennett years, we must keep in mind that much is considered at stake in the effort to establish standards for the teaching of American history. The Mathematics Standards have been released with little public discussion. Yet this field does not sum up American national identity nearly so much as history does. Considering that we are living in an era that has witnessed a rising tide of nativism and condemnations of museum exhibits and books that challenge cherished verities in American history, it is not surprising that the teaching of American history would become a highly charged topic. The teaching of American history has always been assigned an important role in assessing and shaping the imagined community of the United States and our notions of a shared past. Even Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., has warned us about the possible "Disuniting of America."

Education has always played a critical role in acculturating immigrants, transforming them into American citizens. In many ways, the United States is venturing onto uncharted waters these days. In the late nineteenth century the school was used to push Native Americans, African Americans, and the new immigrants into accepting an American value system. As the United States moved into its greatest period of multiculturalism, just as great was the effort to unify the nation under a single banner of American social identity. "Hyphenism" was soundly condemned. What has changed, of course, in the last thirty years, has been the acceptance and celebration of pluralism that has transformed the classroom and the larger society. What we are now experiencing is the inevitable backlash as the conservatives wish, once again, to use the classroom to transform this multicultural America into a red, white, and blue banner that celebrates not the contributions of different cultures but the contribution of the dominant culture. Social history - the history of women, of African Americans, of working class America - makes the Lynne Cheney brigade so upset because it dwells upon diversity, struggle, and the arbitrary exercise of power. As the United States heads into a twenty-first century that will see the minority become the majority, then the high school curriculum becomes, according to conservatives, the battleground for deciding what that America will be like. Who will be exercising power? What values will be trumpeted as those worth emulating? The struggle is more imagined than real, but to the Cheneyites it is as significant as the fears raised by Madison Grant, Theodore Roosevelt, and other defenders of true Americanism at the beginning of this century.

Lynne Cheney has become the Madison Grant of her generation. In 1916 Grant warned that undesirable immigration would lead to the "Passing of the Great Race." Cheney has condemned the Standards as "the gloomy, politically driven, blame-the-West-first revisionism that is all too common today."(2) Madison Grant feared the mongrelization of the United States.(3) Cheney fears an American history that fails to emphasize "the individual greatness that has flourished within our political system and in our representative institutions." Both fear an America that recognizes pluralism and fails to adhere to the traditional story of America's greatness.

Legislation like California's Proposition 187 and publications like Peter Brimelow's Alien Nation are merely latter-day versions of early-twentieth-century calls for immigration restriction and reveal an America that has never fully come to terms with its past, present, or future. Brimelow sees an America experiencing a "demographic mutation" capable of destroying the American nation.(4) Been there. Seen it. Done that.

Peter Stearns asks how we might respond to the rantings of the Right. My answer is that we continue to teach an American history of meaning, one that integrates social history along with political and economic history. Part of the problem is generational in that an older generation is less likely to have been educated in social history and is unwilling to learn. A retired colleague refused to accept social history as a story worthy of being told. "If they didn't..."
vote," he'd often say, "then they didn't count." Women, African Americans, and Native Americans were not part of his American history. He probably agrees with Lynne Cheney, but he held those views before she entered the debate. My guess is that a large part of the teaching profession is not that interested in this debate nor, alas, would adoption of the National Standards significantly change the way American history is currently being taught. Too much of the older generation is opposed to a more inclusive history, and too much of the younger is incapable of teaching it effectively. (5) We have our work cut out for us, and we should keep our focus on the education schools, insisting that they equip their graduates to teach content. We should also work with organizations such as the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, which are supporting teacher training initiatives. Last summer I participated in a Gilder Lehrman seminar on slavery taught by David Brion Davis; I found it to be a model of how the newest academic work in history can be introduced to school teachers.

My job is to make American history a seamless web, filled with achievements and contradictions. What it comes down to finally, is that there is good history and bad history. Social history is an indelible part of the American fabric. What my retired colleague never understood is that just because women did not vote until the twentieth century does not mean that they can be left out of his classroom. The conscious decision to deny women the right to vote opens up serious discussion that benefits the entire class. An American history that reveals all the dimensions of the story, one that recognizes women and minorities, that challenges students to ask questions about who was included and under what terms, that celebrates humankind's capacity for greatness and recognizes its penchant for evil will always be a story worthy of being told.

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ENDNOTES

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5. The secondary school teachers who contributed to "The Practice of American History" seem intimidated by modern scholarship.