

“The End of History”
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By Lynne V. Cheney

Imagine an outline for the teaching of American history in which George Washington makes only a fleeting appearance and is never described as our first president. Or in which the foundings of the Sierra Club and the National Organization for Women are considered noteworthy events, but the first gathering of the U.S. Congress is not. This is, in fact, the version of history set forth in the soon- to-be-released National Standards for United States History. If these standards are approved by the National Education Standards and Improvement Council -- part of the bureaucracy created by the Clinton administration's Goals 2000 Act -- students across the country, from grades five to 12, may begin to learn their history according to them. The document setting forth the National Standards divides American history into 10 eras and establishes two to four standards for each era, for a total of 31. Each "standard" states briefly, and in general terms, what students should learn for a particular period (e.g., "Early European Exploration and Colonization: The Resulting Cultural and Ecological Interaction"). Each standard is followed, in the document, by lengthy teaching recommendations (e.g., students should "construct a dialogue between an Indian leader and George Washington at the end of the Revolutionary war").

The general drift of the document becomes apparent when one realizes that not a single one of the 31 standards mentions the Constitution. True, it does come up in the 250 pages of supporting materials. It is even described as "the culmination of the most creative era of constitutionalism in American history" -- but only in the dependent clause of a sentence that has as its main point that students should "ponder the paradox that the Constitution sidetracked the movement to abolish slavery that had taken rise in the revolutionary era." The authors tend to save their unqualified admiration for people, places and events that are politically correct. The first era, "Three Worlds Meet (Beginnings to 1620)," covers societies in the Americas, Western Europe and West Africa that began to interact significantly after 1450. To understand West Africa, students are encouraged to "analyze the achievements and grandeur of Mansa Musa's court, and the social customs and wealth of the kingdom of Mali."

Such celebratory prose is rare when the document gets to American history itself. In the U.S. context, the kind of wealth that Mansa Musa commanded is not considered a good thing. When the subject of John D. Rockefeller comes up, students are instructed to conduct a trial in which he is accused of "knowingly and willfully participating in unethical and amoral business practices designed to undermine traditions of fair open competition for personal and private aggrandizement in direct violation of the common welfare." African and Native American societies, like all societies, had their failings, but one would hardly know it from National Standards. Students are encouraged to consider Aztec "architecture, skills, labor systems, and agriculture." But not the practice of human sacrifice.

Counting how many times different subjects are mentioned in the document yields telling results. One of the most often mentioned subjects, with 19 references, is McCarthy and McCarthyism. The Ku Klux Klan gets its fair share, too, with 17. As for individuals, Harriet Tubman, an African-American who helped rescue slaves by way of the underground railroad, is mentioned six times. Two white males who were contemporaries of Tubman, Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee, get one and zero mentions, respectively. Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, Albert Einstein, Jonas Salk and the Wright brothers make no appearance at all.

I have abundant reason to be troubled by the way that the history standards have turned out. When I was chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, I signed a grant that helped enable their development. In 1992, the NEH put \$525,000 and the Department of Education \$865,000 toward establishing standards for what students should know about both U.S. and world history. The grantee was the National Center for History in the Schools at UCLA, an organization that had produced some fine work, including a highly regarded publication called "Lessons From History" that was also an effort to set standards for the teaching of history. It was this publication, the Center for History said in its application, upon which the government-sponsored standard-setting effort would build.

But a comparison of "Lessons From History" with the National Standards shows only a distant relationship between the two. "Lessons," while rightfully including important Americans, like Sojourner Truth, who have been ignored in the past, also emphasizes major figures like George Washington, who is not only described as our first president but even pictured, as is Robert E. Lee.

"Lessons" conveys the notion that wealth has sometimes had positive cultural consequences in this country, as elsewhere. For the period between 1815 and 1850, students are asked to consider how "the rise of the cities and the accumulation of wealth by industrial capitalists brought an efflorescence of culture -- classical revival architecture;

the rise of the theater and the establishment of academies of art and music; the first lyceums and historical societies; and a 'communication revolution' in which book and newspaper publishing accelerated and urban dwellers came into much closer contact with the outside world."

"Lessons" is honest about the failings of the U.S., but it also regularly manages a tone of affirmation. It describes the American Revolution as part of "the long human struggle for liberty, equality, justice, and dignity." The National Standards, by contrast, concentrates on "multiple perspectives" and on how the American Revolution did or did not serve the "interests" of different groups.

"Lessons" emphasizes the individual greatness that has flourished within our political system and in our representative institutions. It refers -- twice -- to "congressional giants" like Henry Clay and Daniel Webster and the "great debates" in which they participated. The National Standards, which mentions Clay once and Webster not at all, gives no hint of their spellbinding oratory. It does, however, suggest that students analyze Pat Buchanan's speech at the 1992 Republican convention. The only congressional leader I could find actually quoted in the document was Tip O'Neill, calling Ronald Reagan "a cheerleader for selfishness."

What went wrong? One member of the National Council for History Standards (the group that oversaw the drafting of the standards) says that the 1992 presidential election unleashed the forces of political correctness. According to this person, who wishes not to be named, those who were "pursuing the revisionist agenda" no longer bothered to conceal their "great hatred for traditional history." Various political groups, such as African-American organizations and Native American groups, also complained about what they saw as omissions and distortions. As a result, says the council member, "nobody dared to cut the inclusive part," and what got left out was traditional history.

The standards for world history are also soon to be made public. By all accounts, the sessions leading to their development were even more contentious than those that produced U.S. standards. The main battle was over the emphasis that would be given to Western civilization, says a second council member. After the 1992 election, this member reports, the American Historical Association, an academic organization, became particularly aggressive in its opposition to "privileging" the West. The AHA threatened to boycott the proceedings if Western civilization was given any emphasis. From that point on, says the second council member, "the AHA hijacked standards-setting." Several council members fervently protested the diminution of the West, "but," says the second council member, "we were all iced-out."

UCLA's Center for History suggests that its document on standards be viewed as a work in progress rather than a definitive statement. But there is every reason to believe that the certification process put in place by the Clinton administration will lead to the adoption of the proposed standards more or less intact -- as official knowledge -- with the result that much that is significant in our past will begin to disappear from our schools. Preventing certification will be a formidable task. Those wishing to do so will have to go up against an academic establishment that revels in the kind of politicized history that characterizes much of the National Standards. But the battle is worth taking on. We are a better people than the National Standards indicate, and our children deserve to know it.

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