

**The Debate over the National Standards
An Assessment by Three Historians
Edited by
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Historians know all too well that hand-wringing over what we shall teach our children is about as old as the nation itself. As Walter Licht has noted, "Faced with recurring diagnoses, suggested cures, and confused debate, historians can only greet the latest best-selling jeremiad [on public education] with both skepticism and bemusement." (Licht, *Getting Work: Philadelphia, 1840-1950* [1992]) Thus the brouhaha over the recently published National History Standards for American and world history in primary and secondary schools may be seen as yet another turn in the cycle. As in all such debates, there is the usual generous serving of bombast, posturing, fear, arrogance, and plain ignorance. One hopes that there has also been a glimmering of enlightenment, understanding, and respect as well, in short, a bit of light amidst the heat.

Gary B. Nash, Professor of History at the University of California at Los Angeles and Director of the National Center for History in the Schools, which produced the standards, asserted in a recent presidential address to the Organization of American Historians, that the uproar over the standards is part of a larger "profoundly political culture war" over the kind of perspective we shall put on our past. He cited as examples the controversy over a 1991 "West as America" exhibit at the National Museum of American Art, the national debate the next year over the quincentennial of Columbus's voyage, and the recent "pyrotechnics" over the Smithsonian's *Enola Gay* exhibit. Nash added:

All of these controversies involve an assault on curators, artists, and historians who have sought more than a single perspective on the past, have tried to open their work to new voices and different experiences, and have tried to go beyond a happy-face American history and a triumphant celebration of Western Civilization. Some critics believe that young Americans should not learn that life is bittersweet and that every society's history is full of paradox, ambiguity, and irresolution.

Amen. And yet, if history is any guide, historians will play a modest role at best on the national stage in resolving such controversies (if indeed they are resolvable.). For most history teachers, the issues will be thrashed out on a more personal, local level; as one of the contributors below notes, "[W]hat matters are those students who are in the classroom day after day."

In the hope of shedding a bit more light on the standards by those who actually practice the teaching of history, the staff of *Teaching History* invited three of its long-time contributors to assess the standards and react to this latest national educational donnybrook. Two are with the public schools, one teaches on the university level. All are much involved in history education. The common thread running through their essays is that the standards, with their admitted limitations, must remain voluntary but cannot be ignored, if our students, about to enter the twenty-first century, are to learn to think and make decisions wisely in an ever-more complex and multicultural nation and world.

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**Do We Have the Intellectual Courage to
Stand Up to This Revisionist Hogwash?**

James F. Adomanis

The words on the yellow post-it tab read, "Do we have the intellectual courage to stand up to this revisionist hogwash? The people in the trenches do, but do their so-called leaders?" The note, which was attached to a *Washington Times* article written by Carol Innerst entitled "Some historians see new standards as revisionist coup. Project cost

National Council for the Social Studies, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the Bradley Commission, the National Governors Association, and others involved in the ongoing task of designing social studies curriculum and instructional practices. This work in Maryland predated the Standards movement. The outcomes focus on the knowledge base required for understanding history and the social sciences, the process skills needed to analyze and apply that knowledge base, and the attitudes needed to use the knowledge and skills within a context of justice and democratic decision-making. The difference in grade level assessment would be in the context and complexity of the tasks and questions.

The Core Learning Goals for the Social Studies include core learnings from the Maryland School Performance Outcomes for Social Studies: Political Systems, Peoples of the Nation and the World, Geography, and Economics. The expectations reflect a blend of the Maryland Social Studies Outcomes and the National Standards in History, Civics and Government, Geography, Economics, and Social Studies. Embedded in the social studies expectations and indicators are requirements that students demonstrate an ability—individually and as part of a group—to gather information, think critically, solve problems, negotiate, and reach consensus with others as needed to facilitate responsible decision-making, to understand complex ideas, and to generate new ideas. Real-world applications constitute an essential component of these skills and processes. The expectations and indicators are written in such a manner to allow curriculum to be implemented using either a chronological or thematic approach.

I believe that American education is at yet another crisis stage, one that parallels the xenophobia of the early twentieth century. Statistics relate that America is changing demographically again. So its rich heritage and fascinating stories will now be told from a multiperspective view that has been set to standards in order to give educators guidelines, informational support for their teaching endeavors, and, one hopes, thought-provoking ideas that will challenge today's youth to become better thinkers, decision-makers, and problem-solvers.

I am hopeful that educational leaders will have the intellectual courage to stand up for what they believe to be good historical practices and guidelines and that classroom teachers will adopt the history standards for their classroom. If not, American education may have to wait another generation of students in order to improve the quality of history instruction in today's classroom.

The Standards - An Evolving Presence

Brian Boland

The recently published National Standards for United States History will not be read with much enthusiasm by classroom teachers. The forces of suspicion, economics, time,