

pressing mandated reforms, the Standards are small potatoes and deserve less attention than the more threatening state reforms.

Despite this negativity, each history teacher should judge the Standards for herself or himself. Theodore Rabb of the National Council for History Education admitted that the Standards are not perfect, but they might be helpful. They *do* set standards for thinking historically; they *do* organize U.S. history chronologically. They *do* offer some good suggestions for lessons, and the book *does* include a helpful list of resources. Each teacher and department should take the good and forget the bad.

Above all the Standards must remain voluntary. They should exist as an evolving presence, something like the British Constitution. To codify the Standards will lead to a national test, another assessment that will cause teachers to teach for the test. The end result would be worse history. It would help impose a uniformity at the expense of regional diversity. These Standards or any future Goals 2000 reform will not improve the teaching of history. Regardless of the quality of the Standards, what matters are those students who are in the classroom day after day. To make history come alive for them, each teacher must draw upon what he or she knows. Pedagogy has some worth, but compared to knowing history, it is worth less. What the teacher needs is more history. The Standards just offer some focus.

The "New" National Standards

Philip Reed Rulon

If we open a quarrel between the past and the present, we shall find that we have lost the future.

Winston Churchill, Speech,
House of Commons, June 18, 1940

The opportunity to comment on the new National Standards for high school history classes has provided me with the impetus to reflect on my professional past. Rightly or wrongly, I have concluded that my three-plus decades in higher education have been filled with academic schizophrenia. On one hand, my mentors in boarding school, college, and university taught me the traditions of my discipline and instilled in me a reverence for the earliest historians and their poetic, literary, and well-researched narratives. The latter, incidentally, were articles and books that wove the threads of our American heritage from the top of the loom down. Moreover, perhaps by simple association—because we rarely talked about it—the idea evolved that teachers and professors should be dispassionate observers, men and women who viewed society from the windows of Ivory Towers, people who did not directly engage in the din and passions of their day. Now, with the benefit of

hindsight, it seems clear that the model for new members of the club was that of the Oxford Don.

Conversely, a year-long campus riot my last year in graduate school became a portent that the intellectual world of the future was not going to be as smooth and tidy as originally envisioned. However, that signal was largely ignored—it was necessary to finish and defend the dissertation in order to move onward, and perhaps upward. However, student anger continued on into my tenure-track years. The first focus was the war in Vietnam, followed by issues relating to poverty, racism, and the power elites in churches, schools and colleges, and government. Some even questioned my lectures, pedagogical choices, and textbooks. This was not the kind of lifestyle I had envisioned for myself; but, after some deliberation, I remained, beginning a private, personal post-doctoral course. Some two or three years were devoted to digesting essays and documents from the perspective of the “bottom of the rail.”

The view from the lower rung was far different from the historical scenes painted by the Old Masters. Increasingly, this vantage point was much more related to those individuals who occupied seats in my classroom. (I even discovered that a professor could learn from his students, especially in the area of culture.) With a different paradigm from which to work, my reading and research brought many new faces into my mental reservoir: Mansa Musa, Phyllis Wheatley, Sequoyah, Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, Margaret Fuller, John Muir, Mary E. Lease, Woody Guthrie, Upton Sinclair, James Baldwin, Betty Friedan, César Chavez, Russell Means, and many others. All these individuals appeared in my syllabus long before publication of the National Standards. It was therefore, something of an old home week to find vintage friends there.

On the other hand, the near void of traditional data in the new standards is disappointing. History from only the bottom up is as incomplete as history from just the top down. Then, too, there are some omissions that suggest credit has not been extended to some of our forbearers, scholars who were conscious of the importance of social history long ago. The questions posed in the assignment sections at the end of the chapters are often more steeped in the social sciences than the discipline of history. And finally, some sections of the National Standards contain an intellectual arrogance and reflect the simplistic view that our past is simply the present writ small. It is, then, an attitude as well as content that has opened a serious breach between the present and the past. This quarrel, unless we work in concert, may cause, as Winston Churchill once said, a loss of our future. We cannot let our schools become intellectual Bosnias.

I have always had a great deal of respect for Carl Becker's idea of “every person his own historian.” It follows, then, at least for me, that high school history ought to be more related to teaching and learning modes of inquiry rather than rigid, specific pieces of content. The day of revealed truth, especially in classrooms located in a democratic society, should be long gone. Simply put, our goal ought to be to replace “I believe” with “I think.” By training students to be historians, we give them the skills that are needed in order for them to make their own personal reconciliation of past and present. I think this is a far better pursuit than turning race against race, gender against gender, and haves against have nots.

In conclusion, there is not just one set of curricula for the schools of America. That is why, for example, the social studies theorists of the late 1960s and early 1970s, working under the umbrellas of the National Defense Education Act and the Education Professions Development Act (funded by the United States Office of Education), did not call for a national conference. Most thought that in a democratic society educational institutions should be social and intellectual centers, organizations that constantly debate how much of the cultural heritage should be transmitted to the next generation. The quarrel between Liberals and Conservatives over what should be retained, what should be deleted, and what should be added, makes the course of study a constant battleground. Should schools be evolutionary or revolutionary? In this vein, the National Standards for United States History is a document worthy of serious consideration, but it is most presumptuous to think that it contains all we need to insure our students will enter the twenty-first century with open minds.