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history book blitz How we interpret the past.

American History 101

From: Jon Wiener
 To: Diane Ravitch
 Subject: How To Revive History by "Teaching the Conflicts"
 Tuesday, May 17, 2005, at 4:17 AM PT



More than a decade ago, the first Bush administration asked historians to draft guidelines for what all schoolchildren should know about the American past. The resulting curriculum guide, however, drew fire from critics for being politically correct—paying more attention to slavery and McCarthyism than to battlefield triumphs or great inventors like Thomas Edison. The historians and their defenders replied that they weren't trying to prescribe a fixed catalog of facts to teach but rather important themes in the American past and habits of mind necessary for thinking about history, and that it was necessary to

teach the bad as well as the good.

The debate over how history should be taught—and what role if any it should play in instilling patriotism in children—has continued. Under the current Bush administration, Sen. Robert Byrd sponsored an initiative to fund collaborations between secondary schools and professional historians. Bush's National Endowment for the Humanities' new "We the People" program promotes history education that celebrates America's past and its democratic system. To many historians' surprise, the federal funding available for history has surged. But how it will be spent leads invariably into politics.

Slate's editors thought that the political questions about the teaching of history deserved some informed debate. Most people can probably agree that history should neither be an uncritical celebration of bygone heroes nor a bill of indictment against dead white men; its purpose is neither to build self-esteem nor to indoctrinate. But the middle ground between these poles is a difficult one to map. Should history be used to promote patriotism and a regard for American democracy? If so, what's wrong with its being used also to instill pride among blacks, women, or gays? How much should history education focus on heroes and how much on debunking myths? Does knowing history make us better citizens?

With these questions as merely a guide, we've asked Diane Ravitch, author of The Language Police, and Jon Wiener, professor of history at the University of California at Irvine and author most recently of Historians in Trouble: Plagiarism, Fraud and Politics in the Ivory Tower, to debate the issues.

Dear Diane,

Debates about how much American students know about their own history, and about how our citizens should be taught what they don't know, are anything but abstract ones these days. Before we get down to the business of discussing those questions, let me set the current scene. President Bush campaigned in 2004 with the argument that we were fighting in Iraq for freedom and democracy, and that America was on a historic mission. Some opponents expressed skepticism about that, but the president's re-election suggests that a majority of voters accept what historians might call this Wilsonian vision as a justification for war. They did this despite the fact that past wars often turned out differently from what presidents promised at the beginning, despite what we might call the lessons of history.

While "the lessons of history" provide no simple solutions to today's problems and policy conflicts, an effective democracy requires some knowledge on the part of its citizens of the nation's past. Of course, "the lessons of history" are often disputed—the causes of the Civil War, the legitimacy of dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, what

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we learned from Vietnam. That is why the best approach in the classroom is, as educators say, to "teach the conflicts." Teachers ought to say where they stand, and why. But they also have an obligation to be fair—to present the best arguments and evidence for the interpretations they disagree with. Then we should invite students to think for themselves.

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"Teach the conflicts" was first proposed by [Gerald Graff](#) almost 20 years ago; his strategy applied to teaching not just history but all of the humanities. At a time when the humanities were engaged in a protracted battle between traditionalists and postmodernists, Graff offered a way out; he argued that honesty requires teaching about debates among schools of interpretation. Not surprisingly, some traditionalists objected, on the grounds that teaching the conflicts was a subversive way to advance the forces of relativism—and some postmodernists objected on the grounds that traditional approaches to "truth" had been rendered obsolete. Yet teaching the conflicts indisputably makes for great pedagogy because it calls on students to engage in critical thinking themselves.

The first thing that students need to learn about the history of the American ideals of democracy and freedom, in my view, is that democracy and freedom are not fixed, unchanging qualities given us by the founding fathers. The meanings of democracy and freedom have often been debated; our history is the history of those debates, of battles over the way freedom and democracy should be defined—and practiced. And of course some issues are no longer debated—whether slavery is good for Africans, whether women should vote. Still, the debates about those issues—the pro-slavery argument, the argument against women's suffrage—remain a significant part of our past and ought to be part of the curriculum. (Also they can be fascinating: Should women be protected from the "filth" and "degradation" of election campaigns, as a California man argued in 1879?)

Over the past 25 years, "the new social history" has radically transformed our ideas about whose voices are part of the debate. Today, students study not only political leaders, military heroes, and captains of industry, but also working people, slaves, women, immigrants. Today, we know something about how freedom was defined by newly freed slaves in the years following the Civil War and how advocates of women's suffrage challenged the notion that "all men are created equal." Today, we teach that history is made not only by the powerful, but also by people who once were barely visible to historians—by slaves, by striking workers, by housewives.

The fruits of a comprehensive yet subtle focus on conflicting conceptions of freedom are nowhere clearer than in Eric Foner's new textbook, [Give Me Liberty](#). The book (which is based on his 1998 book, [The Story of American Freedom](#)) was published last summer and already has been assigned at more than 200 colleges and universities. Students should study three dimensions of freedom, Foner argues: the changing meanings of freedom; "the social conditions that make freedom possible"; and the limits of freedom in different periods, the forces that made it possible for some to enjoy freedom while others did not.

The point is not to avoid teaching about American ideals, as some critics of this approach might charge; the point is to make sure to teach about the gap between ideals and realities as well. The Declaration of Independence described liberty as an "inalienable" right, yet the founding fathers accepted the existence of slavery. The Spanish-American War was fought in the name of democracy and freedom, but it ended with a horrifying campaign of counterinsurgency against Filipinos and the establishment of American economic domination and a long-term military presence in both the Philippines and in Cuba. The debate in the 1890s between imperialist and anti-imperialist ideals, between Rudyard Kipling's "White Man's Burden" and Mark Twain's

withering contempt for the war camp, takes on a striking relevance today with the Iraq war: Did we fight to bring freedom to the people of the Philippines?

The goal of teaching history through debates is not a celebration of American virtue but a more complex appreciation of changes over time in the meanings of democracy and freedom. I look forward to hearing your thoughts and to working through some of the thorny specific issues teachers and textbook writers and standard-setters face.

Best,
Jon

From: Diane Ravitch
To: Jon Wiener
Subject: Don't Know Much About History
Tuesday, May 17, 2005, at 8:12 AM PT

Dear Jon,

I approach the issues of teaching history in the schools from a somewhat different vantage point than you. Students do need to understand that the important issues in history continue to be hotly debated today by historians. Students also need to be protected from plodding textbooks that give off a phony aura of encyclopedic "truth" and that turn history into a deadly boring subject in which all the facts are already known. Students also need, to the greatest extent possible, to be able to imagine themselves into a past in which decisions were made without knowing how things would turn out.

Here are the basic problems of history in the schools today, as I see them:

One, every national assessment has shown that students don't know much history. On the authoritative [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#), the scores for U.S. history are consistently the lowest of any subject tested; typically more than half of seniors score "below basic," the lowest possible rating. In no other subject do a majority of students register so little knowledge of a subject taught in school. Defenders of the status quo say that students have never known much history, but that hardly seems to be an intellectually respectable response, especially if you think that history is important, as we do.

Two, in most states and most schools, history has gotten submerged and smothered by social studies. We know what history is, even if we argue about the specific issues to be included or how to interpret them. Social studies, on the other hand, is a curricular smorgasbord that includes all sorts of studies, which collectively diminish the time available for history. Social-studies teachers treat history as only one of a dozen different "studies" that they cover, and by no means the most important. Worse, they emphasize concepts and ignore chronology, which makes hash of history.

Three, because of the dominance of social studies and the diminution of history, a large percentage of people who teach history have not studied history; instead, they have majored in social-studies education, a social science, communications, or any number of other fields, but not history. Data collected by the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) indicate that a majority of people teaching history do not have a major or a minor in history. You can understand that when the teacher does not have an in-depth knowledge of history, it is very difficult to expect him or her to have a secure grasp of complex historical issues and debates and to be able to raise probing questions of the conventional accounts.

Fourth, because of the dominance of social studies and the diminution of history, most state standards for social studies give short shrift to history. They are usually the product of the state social-studies leaders, who come from a wide variety of fields. The latest rating of state history standards was written by Sheldon Stern, historian at the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston (his [analysis](#) was published by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute). Stern found only six states (California, Massachusetts, New York, Arizona, Alabama, and Indiana) with exemplary history standards, where students actually encounter solid history. The history standards in 30 states were rated as weak or ineffective. Even in states with excellent standards, students may get meager history instruction. I heard today from a middle-school teacher in New York who surveyed 100 students and found that 95 of them had no knowledge of such basic facts as the capital of their state, the name of the governor, the identity of Churchill or Stalin, or when the Civil War or World War II were fought.

As our conversation proceeds, I hope we will have a chance to talk about some of the genuine problems that occur when history teachers try to incorporate the new social history. It turns out to be very difficult to teach multiple perspectives—those of housewives, feminists, slaves,

workers, farmers, native Americans, free blacks in the antebellum South, Hispanics, plantation owners—when students don't have a basic grasp of the events and ideas, the scaffolding of American history. If you don't know the central events and players—the central narrative—it is difficult to understand the views and behaviors that diverge from the central narrative. How can you teach "multiple perspectives" when students don't know what happened in the first instance? Nor is it so easy to "teach the conflicts." When we teach the Holocaust, do we give equal time to those who deny that it even happened? When we teach about McCarthyism, do we give equal time to his supporters? When we teach about the Ku Klux Klan, should there be any time for their defenders? Should there be equal time for abolitionists and pro-slavery voices? This goes to the issue of multiple perspectives, but it raises another important issue. That is, that teachers and historians who write standards need help in figuring out not only what to include but what to leave out. That is one of the most difficult issues in teaching history, and historians have not been much help to school people in differentiating what is most important from what is least important.

Best,
Diane

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*Diane Ravitch is research professor of education at New York University and is the author of [The Language Police](#). She was the primary writer for the California History/Social Science Framework adopted by the State Board of Education in 1988 and has served as consultant for history curriculum to several other states. Jon Wiener is professor of history at the University of California, Irvine, a contributing editor of the Nation, and is the author, most recently, of [Historians in Trouble: Plagiarism, Fraud, and Politics in the Ivory Tower](#).
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