

## THE NATION

### Ways to Look at the Past (Or Did It Really Happen?)

The charges were as familiar as the names. Last month the National Center for History in the Schools, an affiliation of teachers and administrators, released a volume entitled "National Standards for United States History: Exploring the American Experience," the first of two guidebooks on the teaching of history in grades 5 through 12; the second volume, "World History: Exploring Paths to the Present," was issued last week. Sponsored by the University of California at Los Angeles, financed by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Department of Education, advised by distinguished professors across the land, the guides have managed to provoke instant controversy.

In the conservative corner: Lynne Cheney, head of the humanities endowment when the grant was approved, denouncing them as "politically correct to a fare-thee-well," and the Old Testament columnist Charles Krauthammer, thundering against "the denigration of learning itself." In the liberal - or radical - corner: the feminist historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, a consultant on the project who deplored the fact that it had become "politicized," and Eric Foner, a historian of the American left, who complained that "pressure groups from the right demand a political correctness of their own."

In the middle are the conscientious, intermittently dutiful and imaginative guidebooks, efforts to establish some standard of learning at a moment when American students' knowledge of history has reached a new low. But in the polarized climate of academic discourse, it was perhaps inevitable that any effort to codify what students ought to know would become a battle.

To be sure, the National Standards volumes betray certain tics identifiable as academic chic: a disdain for "the passive absorption of facts, dates, names and places"; a preoccupation with "narratives," as if history were a branch of folklore; a determination to avoid "value-laden issues" for fear of being found "elitist" or "hierarchical." And the language often mimics current lit-crit jargon: "The Tempest," for instance, is an opportunity to explore "the prevailing attitude toward cross-cultural contacts with new people - encountering the 'other.'" (As for the "31

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Main Understandings" that students are supposed to master, they sound like something out of the I Ching.)

### Robert E. Lee?

The guides will no doubt be hotly debated for months. Does Mercy Otis Warren deserve pride of place beside Samuel Adams and Tom Paine? Why six references to Harriet Tubman and not one to Robert E. Lee? When the authors of "World History" ask students to study "changing gender roles during the Renaissance and Reformation," to "role-play a discussion between an upper-class Hindu and a Muslim about their reaction to British presence in India in the late 19th century," it's not hard to imagine the responses they invite. But the method is

true to the spirit of the enterprise: namely, that our understanding of history is subject to change.

Revision is the essence of history-writing. As Alan Brinkley, a professor of history at Columbia who participated in a focus group for the National Standards project, points out, many scholars now believe that ending World War II didn't require dropping atomic bombs on Japan; the 1950's were characterized as much by racism and McCarthyist repression as by suburban bliss. "There's never a moment when a historical question is settled, about which over time there is not some debate," Mr. Brinkley said. "The process of revising and reinterpreting history is what historical scholarship is all about."

To look back at history is, in a sense, to look back at the writing of history. An entire generation of historians, from Avery Craven to J. G. Randall, interpreted the Civil War as an "avoidable conflict." In the 1960's diplomatic historians like Gar Alperowitz, Gabriel Kolko and Walter Lefebvre maintained that the cold war was more than a response to Soviet aggression; the United States had its own global designs. "You can name virtually any field of history and find revisionists," Mr. Brinkley said. "There were New Deal revisionists, Lincoln revisionists, Eisenhower revisionists."

In emphasizing formerly "disenfranchised" peoples and cultures, the authors echo the revisionist progressive historiography abroad in the land, which casts America in a grim, even malevolent light. When Columbus's discovery was marked a century ago, as Richard Bernstein wrote in his new book, "Dictatorship of Virtue," the nation was celebrating its own founding, "the starting point for a prolonged epic of freedom, progress, and not incidentally, the

subjugation of 'savage tribes.'" The quincennial, he noted, was "close to the inverse of the quatercentenary," an occasion for soul-scarching about collective national crimes.

### Slaves and Peasants

Even the vantage of the historian has been revised. The old history, "history from above," scrutinized kings, presidents, political leaders and thinkers. The New History, as it's known in the trade, looks at the anonymous masses: slaves, peasants, ordinary citizens. Popular culture, the plight of women and the oppressed have become legitimate subjects of inquiry.

There's nothing new in this. Radical interpretations of history - especially others' history - are themselves a natural development in historiography. "It is all too easy to idealize a social upheaval

which takes place in some other country than one's own," wrote Edmund Wilson in the introduction to a new edition of his classic, "To the Finland Station," seeking to justify his sympathetic portraits of revolutionary figures who had since been discredited. "So Englishmen like Wordsworth and Charles James Fox may have idealized the French Revolution, and so men like Lafayette may have idealized our American one."

As any student of psychoanalysis knows, idealization leads to desecration. What goes up must come down. The current fashion for questioning the old historical "narratives" may well come to be seen as symptomatic of an era when history was in the grip of a fanatical reformist zeal. Why, future historians might wonder, was historical scholarship in the '90's so out of step with its times? Why was it so militantly progressive when the mood of

the country was so conservative? (Witness last week's election results.) Was it because liberal ideology had become so "marginalized" that the only place it could find was in the academy?

Just asking. The point is that revision itself is no bad thing. As Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. argued in "The Cycles of American History," it's "an essential part of the process by which history, through the posing of new problems and the investigation of new possibilities, enlarges its perspectives and enriches its insights." All history is revisionist.

Or, as Oscar Wilde put it, "The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it."

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## The University of Toronto Archives is pleased to announce the opening of the Charles Perry Stacey Personal Records on November 17, 1994.

The records accumulated by Dr. Stacey occupy 15 metres of shelf space. They extend over 190 years, from 1798 to his death in 1989, though the bulk of the material dates from the latter half of the nineteenth century. Detailed finding aids have been prepared for the larger accessions, comprising most of the records, and the remainder are described at the accession level. His personal records provide a rich and detailed source of historical information on the many activities of his long career. In addition to his own records are those of members of his family which provide details about domestic and business life. Dr. Stacey was recognized as the dean of Canadian military historians, having served from 1945 to 1959 as Director of the Historical Research Section of the General Staff at Army Headquarters, Ottawa. He subsequently taught history at the University of Toronto until 1976. He was appointed a University Professor in 1973 and Professor Emeritus in 1981. He was elected president both of the Canadian Historical Association and the Royal Society of Canada, sat on the Massey and Glassco commissions, and served as an adviser to numerous other organizations. For further information, contact the University of Toronto Archives, 120 St. George St. Toronto, ON M5S 1A5 (416) 978-5344.