

# The National History Standards

Can and Should National *Standards* for History  
Be Taught in Iowa's Schools\*

By

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The teaching of history recently moved from our nation's classrooms to the front burner of controversy on the talk-show circuit. Not since the Department of Education's 1984 report, *Nation at Risk*, has non-professionals taken such an interest in education. The two interests are not unrelated, for the recently published *Standards in United States and World History* are part of the Goals 2000 which hopes to change the education menu the 1984 report characterized as the smorgasbord of desserts, to a nutritious serving of basic foods. The History *Standards* call for a leaner diet, asked that students remember less history in order to do more thinking about history.

So why the controversy? One would think that getting students to think would be applauded. Critics have charged that what the *Standards* ask students to learn about history isn't the "right" history to teach our children. They want a more traditional and less "politically correct" history. Should Iowa schools adopt the National History Standards?

Determining if Iowa should adopt the National History Standards should address three questions. First, will achieving the Standards fulfill the mandate of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act to reach a "broad consensus about the material that constitutes excellence in the teaching and learning of history in our nation's schools." Second, can the history advocated by the Standards be learned by most of our nation's school children, i.e., are the Standards realistic. Third, can prospective teachers and those classroom teachers in need acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to implement the *Standards*.

The most vocal criticism about the propriety of the *Standards* for both United States and World History has come from those

advocating that a more traditional history be taught in our schools. Lynn Cheney, former Chair of the NEH and amateur history guru, for example, described the *Standards for United States History* a "warped view of American history."<sup>1</sup> Rush Limbaugh told his radio listeners that the *Standards* resulted from a secret plan that produced an "insidious document" that is an "intellectually dishonest politically correct version" of history," although as Gary Nash has pointed out, hundreds of educators in a variety of focus groups reviewed them.<sup>2</sup> A Cedar Rapids radio listener called this author after he had discussed the *National Standards for World History* on WHO to complain that the multi-cultural aspects of the *Standards* would further divide this country. Unity, not diversity, he claimed is what this country needs. Linda Seebach writing for the Los Angeles Daily News called *Standards* a "dismal example" of historians imposing a politically correct version on the past.<sup>3</sup>

To counter this criticisms, The Council for Basic Education has recently appointed two independent panels to review the standards. The Pew, MacArthur, and Ford Foundations have provided funding for the project. Each panel includes respected public figures, teachers, and academic historians. According to Christopher Cross, the President of the Council for Basic Education, the task of the panels "will be to review the standards, to evaluate their scholarly merit, balance, and feasibility for practioners, and recommend the types of changes they agree should be incorporated in revised editions of the Standards." The establishment of these prestigious panels holds the promise of a thoughtful and constructive review of the national history teaching standards which have come under the shark attacks described in the previous paragraph.<sup>4</sup>

The *Standards* also take abuse from advocates of a social studies curriculum. The National Council for the Social Studies, although one of the focus groups that reviewed the *Standards*, have concocted their own standards for social studies after failing to get integrated social studies standards put into the Goals 2000: Educate America Act,<sup>5</sup> They sought this inclusion even though social studies as discipline only exists in the minds of social studies educators and not in the nation's classrooms. If we can judge from their criticism of other history dominated curricula such as Charting a Course, many social studies educators will certainly view the dominance of history in the Goal 2000 as turning back the clock.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the thematic and critical thinking aspects of

the history *Standards*, and the implied "post holing" rather than survey approach to teaching history should find some applause from those favoring a social studies curriculum. They might also favor the implied reliance on "authentic assessment" in the assessment, i.e., using activities and projects rather than examinations to measure achievements. The *Standards* adherence to an era or chronological framework, however, will not gain support of those social studies educators enchanted with a "presentist" agenda.<sup>7</sup>

Among historians themselves, some will find fault with the *National Standards for World History* because it ignores large portions of familiar western civilization course content. Others, concerned with American history, will find fault with the *National Standards for United States History*, seeing large gaps created by a heavy emphasis on pre-Constitutional history at the expense of the twentieth century. Some will, however, applaud the integrative nature of the *Standards*, even though they come at the expense of political history. But in the upper echelons of historians, many, I suspect, will find it difficult to accept the notion that content selection should be based on its relevancy for a "properly informed analysis of current issues." This is because the criteria for college history curricula which they know best, are not driven by any current relevancy but by faculty interests acquired in graduate school. Criticisms by professional historians, however, will have little impact on the use or propriety of the *Standards* since most will continue to study the little rather than the large questions dealt with in the *Standards*. Nor will they likely to change their teaching methods in the basic history courses to foster the historical thinking outcomes required by the *Standards*. Identifying standards or outcomes is an anathema to college professors. The thought of teaching and testing critical thinking outcomes will seem alien to most college professors since it implies they should spend their time asking rather than merely answering questions. After all, what takes place in pre-college history classrooms has been of little concern for most college instructors. Don't look for them to change existing history courses to reflect the history *Standards*.

What is of crucial importance if the two *Standards* documents are to have any impact on the nation's children is a positive response by 7-12 classroom teachers. Will they view the *Standards* as realistic goals or as just another list of pontifications decreed by professionals out of touch with the reality of most classrooms?

Some teachers will readily accept the *Standards* because they consist of outcomes already part of good history teaching. Most, I suspect, will view the outcomes as unteachable. There are several reasons for this pessimistic view. Textbook teaching still dominates history classrooms. While both *Standards* are generally thematic, textbooks are topical and chronological. Textbooks survey rather than post-hole history. Leaving out a fact, no matter how unimportant, is an anathema to textbook editors. The material in *Standards* are also too difficult and abstract for most students. The ERAs cover too much content, yet dividing them into shorter units would weaken some of the coherency created by them. More important, the "achievements" will be difficult to assess since they require students to think, not remember. Despite efforts in the last few years, many history teachers still fail to devise tests that evaluate historical thinking. It is also unrealistic to expect classroom teachers to give and grade 150 essay tests every two or three weeks. Teaching historical thinking does not happen by chance. It requires considerable attention as seen by the CAP test experience in California. Implementing the *National Standards for United States History* and *World History* will require the same kind of commitment and effort at the state and district levels. States can expect little help from the national level in the present political climate of deregulation, new federalism, and downsizing of government.

Helping classroom teachers acquire the needed knowledge of content (i.e., "understandings" as this is termed in the *Standards*) and teaching skills will require an extensive in-service collaborative effort by college and university instructors and school districts. Given the past record of the history profession's interest in pre-college teaching significant collaboration is unlikely. Some historians will become involved through NEH institutes, workshops at professional meetings, consulting, publications in journals dedicated to teaching "better history better." These activities can help to move the teaching of history forward, but only at a glacial pace, toward the history standards set for the Goals 2000.

Teachers can also look for help from The National Council for History Education which is developing a series of curriculum guides for United States history, world history, and Western civilization that could help implement the *Standards*. To illustrate how one might infuse the *Standards* into the present curriculum,

Paul Gagnon one of NCHE consultants, has shown what it would take to implement a single world history Standard, "Students Should Understand the Causes of World War I." To teach this Standard, he outlined a series of activities that included small group discussions, debates, a comparison of the causes of World War I and II, use of literature, examining the steps that led to the war after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, and analysis of historical interpretations. His lesson plan shows the amount of class time needed to implement one of three "achievements" for Standard 2 just for one of the six standards listed for the ERA 8, the 20th Century. In other words, it will take a lot of time to adequately teach a Standard in the documents. Even so, Gagnon's example, fails to demonstrate how to evaluate student comprehension of the causes of World War I.<sup>8</sup> Developing appropriate evaluation will be the weakest link in implementing the *Standards*.

While Gagnon's demonstration is very useful, there may not be a need to devise an entirely new set of strategies like those he illustrate before selected Standards can be implemented. Numerous curriculum proposals already exist with specific lessons that could be readily adapted to certain Standards. A list of publications appended to both the *Standards* lists some of these, and there are many others, such as the series on Teaching National Security for American and world history developed by the Mershon Center or lessons published in the OAH's Magazine of History. Dissemination of existing materials would have an immediate impact. Existing materials should not only be made more accessible to teachers, but should also be keyed to the various Standards. Acquiring these materials would help teachers begin teaching the *Standards* immediately.

NEH Teacher Institutes, if they survive the current assault on government programs, could also be helpful. Instead of having the narrow focus that often consists of graduate school seminars rather than more useful broad courses needed by teachers faced with the reality of teaching year-long courses, institutes should focus on various Eras outlined in the *Standards* and how to teach them. It must be admitted, however, that any attempt in the past to infuse methodology into NEH Teacher Institutes resulted in a rejected proposal. Their emphasis should now shift to allow teachers to quit writing seminar papers and develop lessons helping students meet the "achievements" in the *Standards*. These lessons could then

be shared, perhaps over internet. In time a large data bank of materials could become accessible to teachers.

The Iowa legislature should establish grants for collaborative programs between college/university faculty and teachers. These collaboratives could follow the model already demonstrated by the History Teaching Alliance. Collaboratives could be held during the school year and/or summers. The Fiber Optics Network here in Iowa would allow teachers and university faculty to interact without leaving campus. This approach could go one step further by having teachers and the Fiber Optics Network to demonstrate various methods and strategies for teaching the "achievements" to students.

Although the History *Standards* do not suggest a specific curriculum, clearly if they are to be implemented, more not less history needs to be taught. There are currently several such curricula developed that would do this. In-depth teaching requires teaching less history better but this cannot be accomplished when schools teach US History in a single year and certainly not when US History is repeated in the middle school and high school rather than combining US History and World history into a three year sequence such as in Florida. Making such a move will not be easy. There is simply too much entrenched teacher self-interest for keeping the present curricula in place to make such a move universal.

Despite the limitations discussed above, the *Standards* can serve as navigational tools for curricula builders and teachers. Although may not always get students to achieve what the *Standards* suggest, we may be able to steer them in that direction. Some states and some districts will undoubtedly attempt, with varying degrees of success, to make the *Standards* a part of their curriculum and the focus of their teaching. They should try, for reaching for the stars will be an uplifting experience and students will be better served by our effort.

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\* A variation of this article appeared in a Special Issue on National Standards in United States and World History, The History Teacher, (Volume 28, no. 3), Summer, 1995.

- <sup>1</sup> Lynn Cheney, "The End of History," Wall Street Journal (October 20, 1994).
- <sup>2</sup> Quoted in Gary Nash, "National Standards in U.s. History: A Note from the President," OAH Newsletter, 22/4 (November, 1994, 1, 16).
- <sup>3</sup> Linda Seeback, "Studying history or rewriting or rewriting it?" Des Moines Register.
- <sup>4</sup> Page Putnam Miller, Washington Update. National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History, Vol. 1, #s 31 & 32, June 8 & 16, 1995.
- <sup>5</sup> NCSS Legislative Update, Spring, 1993: NCSS, Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: Expectations of Excellence, Washington D.C. NCSS, 1994.
- <sup>6</sup> NCSS Position Statement: "A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies: Building social Understanding and Civic Efficiency," Social Education 57/5 (September 1993), 213-223 also printed in NCCSS Curriculum Standards, pp. 156-177. For other examples see H. Michael Hartoonian, "The Social Studies and Project 2061: An Opportunity for Harmony," The Social Studies, 83/4 (July/August, 1992), 160-163; Shirley H. Engle and Anna Ochoa, "A Curriculum for Democratic Citizenship," Social Education 50/6 (November/December, 1986), 514-525; Willard M. Kniep, "Social Education, Ibid., 536-542; H. Michael Hartoonian and Margaret A. Laughlin, "Designing a Scope and Sequence," Ibid., 502-512.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Paul Gagnon, "How A Standard Becomes a Lesson," History Matters!, 7/3 (November, 1994), 1, 5.