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The New History Wars

By JAMES R. GROSSMAN SEPT. 1, 2014

WASHINGTON — WITH the news dominated by stories of Americans dying at home and abroad, it might seem trivial to debate how history is taught in our schools. But if we want students to understand what is happening in Missouri or the Middle East, they need an unvarnished picture of our past and the skills to understand and interpret that picture. People don't kill one another just for recreation. They have reasons. Those reasons are usually historical.

Last month, the College Board released a revised "curriculum framework" to help high school teachers prepare students for the Advanced Placement test in United States history. Like the college courses the test is supposed to mirror, the A.P. course calls for a dialogue with the past — learning how to ask historical questions, interpret documents and reflect both appreciatively and critically on history.

Navigating the tension between patriotic inspiration and historical thinking, between respectful veneration and critical engagement, is an especially difficult task, made even more complicated by a marked shift in the very composition of "we the people." This fall, whites will constitute a minority of public-school students in the United States. "Our" past is now more diverse than we once thought, whether we like it or not.

It turns out that some Americans don't like it. A member of the Texas State Board of Education has accused the College Board of "promoting among our students a disdain for American principles and a lack of knowledge of major American achievements," like those of the founding

fathers and of the generals who fought in the Civil War and World War II. The Republican National Committee says the framework offers “a radically revisionist view” that “emphasizes negative aspects of our nation’s history.” Stanley Kurtz, in National Review, called it “an attempt to hijack the teaching of U.S. history on behalf of a leftist political and ideological perspective.”

Disagreement is not a bad thing. But learning history means engaging with aspects of the past that are troubling, as well as those that are heroic.

There was a time, for example, when historians didn’t worry much about the slave trade and the emergence of an economy based on forced labor. Historians likened the plantation to a “school,” and emancipated people as children let out of class too soon. Only slightly more than a half-century ago, historians began to “revise” that narrative, examining sources previously ignored or unseen, informed by new ideas about race and human agency. More recently, scholars have revised 19th-century images of the “vanishing Indian,” a wildly inaccurate narrative that lives on in public monuments and popular lore, and has implications for public policy.

This essential process of reconsideration and re-evaluation takes place in all disciplines; imagine a diagnosis from a physician who does not read “revisionist” medical research.

Revisionism is necessary — and it generates controversy, especially when new scholarship finds its way into classrooms. But debate over what is taught in our schools is hardly new. Part of the logic underlying the creation of Catholic schools in 19th-century America had to do with a public-school curriculum that took a distinctly Protestant view of religious conflicts and cultural values. Since the early 20th century, battles have been waged over the relative place of “history” and “civics” in public education, a dichotomy that many professional historians don’t even accept.

In 1994, Lynne Cheney, a former chairwoman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, pronounced the results of a congressionally mandated set of national standards in American history “grim and gloomy,” distorted by “political correctness,” and deficient for paying too much

attention to the Ku Klux Klan and McCarthyism and too little to Robert E. Lee and the Wright brothers.

The latest accusations arise from belief born of assumption rather than careful reading. The document is not a curriculum; in the words of David Coleman, president of the College Board, "it is just a framework, requiring teachers to populate it with content required by their local standards and priorities." Those who assume that America's founders are neglected seem not to have actually read the material. The Declaration of Independence stands front and center alongside the Constitution in the section devoted to "experiments with democratic ideas and republican forms of government," including those of France, Haiti and Latin America. The framework makes clear that these "new ideas" included evangelical religion.

The framework even makes a bow to American exceptionalism — noting "the emergence of distinctly American cultural expressions" in the new republic and declaring that "the United States developed the world's first modern mass democracy." For good measure, one can find Washington's farewell address — not to mention the Articles of Confederation, state constitutions, the Emancipation Proclamation and the Four Freedoms — in both the curriculum framework and the sample exam released by the College Board.

The critics are unhappy, perhaps, that a once comforting story has become, in the hands of scholars, more complex, unsettling, provocative and compelling.

And there's the rub. Fewer and fewer college professors are teaching the United States history our grandparents learned — memorizing a litany of names, dates and facts — and this upsets some people. "College-level work" now requires attention to context, and change over time; includes greater use of primary sources; and reassesses traditional narratives. This is work that requires and builds empathy, an essential aspect of historical thinking.

The educators and historians who worked on the new history framework were right to emphasize historical thinking as an essential aspect of civic culture. Their efforts deserve a spirited debate, one that is always

open to revision, rather than ill-informed assumptions or political partisanship.

James R. Grossman is executive director of the American Historical Association.

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