

## **Our National Alienation and Amnesia**

By William J. Bennett

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How do we ask our children to fight, and perhaps die, for a country they do not know?

Tens of millions of Americans are about to celebrate our nation's Founding. The worrisome question is, will future generations take to this celebration the way we have for the past 231 years if they do not know the first, second, or third thing about their country?

Two years ago, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David McCullough told the U.S. Senate that American History was our nation's worst subject in school. The latest National Assessment of Educational Progress (a.k.a., "our Nation's Report Card"), released last month, bears that out again. Our children do worse in American history than they do in reading or math. McCullough testified we were facing the prospect of national amnesia, saying, "Amnesia of society is just as detrimental as amnesia for the individual. We are running a terrible risk. Our very freedom depends on education, and we are failing our children in not providing that education."

Double Tragedy McCullough is right, and it is a double tragedy: a) our children no longer know their country's history and b) the story they do not know is the greatest political story ever told.

It is not our children's fault. Our country's adults are expected to instill a love of country in its children, but the greatness and purpose of that country are mocked by the chattering classes: Newspaper columns and television reports drip with a constant cynicism about America while doubts about her motives on the world stage are the coin of the realm. Too many commentators are too ready to believe the worst about our leaders and our country, and our children's history books — and even some of the teachers — close off any remaining possibility of helping children learn about their country.

Many of our history books are either too tendentious — disseminating a one-sided, politically correct view of the history of the greatest nation that ever existed; or, worse, they are boring — providing a watered down, anemic version of a people who have fought wars at home and abroad for the purposes of liberty and equality, conquered deadly diseases, and placed men on the moon.

Today, we have textbooks that give several chapters to Bill Clinton's "reinventing government" theme but dismiss Dwight Eisenhower's support of the Interstate Highway Act in 1956 with a single sentence. Young Americans are likely to learn more about Eisenhower's impact on the country by actually driving with their parents on an Interstate and seeing the signs by the roadside than by reading biased textbooks.

The National History Standards team completely missed the moon. They called for standards which emphasized Soviet gains in space in the 1960s and the American Challenger disaster in 1986, but they completely omitted any reference to the U.S. landing on the moon.

Historians of greater standing, like the late Arthur Schlesinger Jr., pointed to the moon landing as the greatest event of the 20th century. It happens also to have been JFK's greatest success. Schlesinger is right and the standards are wrong.

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Yet none of the drama of the race to the moon is captured in textbooks today. Students are more likely to know about the failed Apollo XIII mission from the truly excellent Hollywood movie than they are to know that Astronaut Jim Lovell was also on the very successful Apollo 8 mission of 1968. President Johnson, alerted that the Soviets might try a loop-around the Moon and claim to have beaten us, ordered Frank Borman, Jim Lovell, and Bill Anders to make the hazardous journey. NASA told the astronaut wives their husbands' chances of a safe return were only 50-50. Our astronauts circled the moon that year and read from the Book of Genesis on Christmas Eve! The Soviets had bragged that their earlier victories in space proved that atheist Marxism was true. Isn't John F. Kennedy's legacy worth a more dramatic and compelling treatment than students are given today?

At least when a textbook is one-sided, however, it could give a student something to argue about; but boredom in our curriculum promises only the death of the subject matter as well as any interest in it. What a shame that great men and women like George Washington, Abigail Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, Amelia Earhart, Jesse Owens, Martin Luther King Jr, and so many others should be consigned to brief mentions only, and then to the sighs of uninterested study. Their stories are just not told.

The textbooks are not the only indicators of the growing national amnesia that begins in childhood. Almost every young citizen's first introduction to George Washington is a boring, snaffle-mouthed picture on our main currency, the dollar bill. Is this the appropriate depiction of the man once known as the "the fiercest chieftain in the forest?" Who would know he was in his early forties during the Revolution he led, and not guess that he was destined for a convalescent home?

Who knows that America's war against Islamist terror did not begin on September 11, 2001, but that Thomas Jefferson fought our first war on terror, against Muslim slave traders in North Africa who had enslaved some 1.25 million Europeans some 200 years earlier? Children are not taught this.

Not so long ago, we knew our history as the inscription atop the National Archives in Washington declaring what is contained beneath: "The Glory and Romance of Our History." How to preserve, how to recapture and re-teach, that glory and romance when over one-third of our eighth graders and over fifty percent of our twelfth graders perform below even "a partial mastery of the knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work" at their given grades according to the Nation's Report Card in History?

Let us call for a renewal. Begin with the texts. Let us have a national contest sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities or the Department of Education for better history textbooks, and grant the winners emoluments and recognition. Judges should be award-winning teachers, tour guides, National Park Rangers, and parents — all of whom are known to love their subject. There really is no good reason for a dulled down history. As McCullough put it, to take what was once "a source of infinite pleasure" and make it "boring," "is a crime."

### Meet the People

While speaking of money, let us start with a child's first introduction to George Washington — the dollar bill. We should replace the picture of him now, which represents nothing and nobody anyone would want to study, much less respect, with an engraving based on Jean-Antoine Houdon's magnificent 1785 sculpture of Washington. It is the most accurate depiction of Washington in life that we have, depicting

a virile man at the height of his physical and mental powers. In this sculpture Washington is the man old men respected and young men wanted to ride with. He is also the gallant hero all the young ladies wanted to dance with. But he is more, much more.

As commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, Washington in 1775 firmly ordered his soldiers not to celebrate Pope's Day. It had been a New England tradition for 150 years to set afire effigies of the pope. These straw men were filled with live cats whose screams were said to be those of the popes in Hell. Washington knew that the Continental Army "swarmed with Roman Catholic soldiers" and he wisely put an end to such bigotry. He not only ended Pope's Day in the Army, he ended it in America.

King George III in 1783 said that if General Washington resigned his commission to Congress, then meeting in Annapolis, he really would be "the greatest man on earth." Washington did that. What does it take to get that kind of praise from your enemy? Go to Annapolis today, and you are likely to be told that "someone told Washington he had to resign." Similarly, several popular history textbooks simply edit down George Washington (and other greats like Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt) to less than greatness; or, they insist on giving equal time to presidents like John Tyler and other figures like Hawaii's Queen Liliuokalani.

There's little sense that textbook writers have taken to heart the criticisms of the rejected National History Standards of 1994. These Standards totally neglected Washington's role as the first president. For example, Professor Harry Jaffa notes that Washington's Letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, written in 1790, was the first time in history that any national leader addressed the Jews as equal fellow citizens. Isn't that remarkable fact worth favorable attention?

These stories about our greats like Washington are accessible in excellent biographies by writers such as Walter Isaacson, David McCullough, and Joseph Ellis. Why don't high schoolers get them in their texts?

Frederick Douglass is almost forgotten in history, or, as Howard Zinn treats him in his *A People's History of the United States*, he is a bitter and harsh critic of the U.S., not the hopeful, humorous, full-blooded reformer crying out for justice. Douglass — a one time slave — was once so popular (and supportive of our leaders) that he turned down a run for president of the United States on a third party ticket in order to campaign for the now historically maligned Ulysses S. Grant. History has been unkind to Grant as well, but Douglass knew him as "the great chieftain whose sword cleft the hydra-head of treasons," who helped give the black man the vote with his "true heart and good right arm."

Young Fred knocked down the slave-breaker Edward Covey when his owners on Maryland's Eastern Shore wanted him beaten into submission. Frederick later wrote the fight was his "resurrection as a man." Later, he held onto the seat in the first class section of a Massachusetts train. The white conductor enlisted several toughs to beat up Frederick and throw him out of the whites-only section. Frederick protested that he'd purchased his ticket. He wound up on the train platform, bruised and rumped, but still clutching the seat he'd paid for. Riveting details like these show Frederick Douglass as a man with a passion for justice, a man of courage and combativeness. He was not a potted plant nor was he just another bitter critic of America and her ideals.

While speaking of Douglass, let us re-teach who this man was. He and Lincoln were the greatest political thinkers of their day. Douglass was the greatest Marylander of all time. We should put up a great statue of him in front of Maryland's Historic Old State House. We can make room for Douglass by moving the

statue of Chief Justice Roger B. Taney to the front of the State Archives Building in Annapolis, where he belongs.

While speaking of moving, parents are our children's first teachers and constitute the single-best Department of Education. While looking for summer vacations and road trips, consider taking your children to some of our great historical sites and monuments where the magic of "once-upon-a-time" can be touched and seen with children's own two hands and own two eyes: Antietam; Gettysburg; Mt. Rushmore; the Lincoln, FDR, and Jefferson Memorials; the Alamo; Pikes Peak — these are all great vacation destinations, and children will love and know what happened there, what is taught there, the stories there.

In his farewell address to the nation, the large-minded amateur historian President Ronald Reagan warned of what we see in our nation's report card today, saying "If we forget what we did, we won't know who we are. I'm warning of an eradication of the American memory that could result, ultimately, in an erosion of the American spirit." How much more dangerous is this now, as we fight a war for our very existence and expect young Americans to sign up and fight for a country and way of life worthy of their own lives? In the long run, why will future Americans want to stand up and fight for a country they do not even know — a country in which they are born aliens? How do we ask them to fight, and perhaps die, for a country they do not know?

Our history is full of controversy, suffering, struggling, overcoming, and winning. There is no reason to elevate its failings at the expense of its successes, nor is there reason to ignore its failings or, worse, turn it into a snooze-fest. The task is to tell the truth — but can we not do so in an interesting, lively, and glorious way — the way I know and have seen some teachers do?

The great adventurer Bernard DeVoto once wrote to Catherine Drinker Bowen about why her task as a historian was so important: If the mad, impossible voyage of Columbus or Cartier or La Salle or Coronado or John Ledyard is not romantic, if the stars did not dance in the sky when our Constitutional Convention met, if Atlantis has any landscape stranger or the other side of the moon any lights or colors or shapes more unearthly than the customary homespun of Lincoln and the morning coat of Jackson, well, I don't know what romance is.

Indeed. Our history is all that and more, much more. America was, is, and — we hope — will continue to be the place where, more than anyplace else, dreams actually do come true. It is, as Abraham Lincoln described it, "the last best hope of earth." But to live that dream, to know what hope we convey, and to teach it from generation to generation, we must describe it, appreciate it, and learn to fall in love with it all over again. Thankfully, historical amnesia still has a cure. Let us begin the regimen now.

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