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THE KIDS ARE (GOING TO BE) ALRIGHT

In another Progressive Era, in a different country, Nikita Khrushchev is remembered as saying, "Historians are the most powerful and dangerous members of any society. They must be watched carefully.… They can spoil everything." We can revise Khrushchev's observation to fit the American scene. Over here, people say it's the history test makers who have the power to spoil everything.

Since its launch last fall, the new curriculum framework for the AP U.S. History Test (APUSH) has sailed into a headwind of opposition. Conservatives complain the revised APUSH course indoctrinates students into a Holden Caulfield-like contempt for American exceptionalism ("It's all phony") with lessons exaggerating what is "bad about America." The APUSH framework has been denounced by the Republican National Committee. It has been censured by school boards in Colorado, Nebraska, and North Carolina. APUSH has been threatened with defunding by lawmakers in Oklahoma, Texas, Georgia, and Tennessee. Channeling the spirit of Nikita Khrushchev, conservatives believe the College Board's history test makers are "powerful and dangerous." Ben Carson, the neurosurgeon jockeying for a presidential run on the Republican ticket, claims the new curriculum is so "anti-American" that "most people" who complete the course will be "ready to sign up for ISIS."[1]

Meanwhile, under the media radar, others voice their own doubts about the revised APUSH program. I've listened to professors questioning whether the new APUSH will deepen students' knowledge or just put a College Board stamp of approval on continued ignorance. Secondary teachers legitimately wonder if it is humanly possible to pull off what APUSH expects them to do now: teach both breadth *and* depth, content *and* historical thinking. Meanwhile, it isn't just conservatives who care about how the new course will affect the civic education of youth. So it's no great surprise the history test makers are being watched carefully.

I come to this conversation with three questions in mind. Are the revisions to AP History really changes for the better? Will the new expectations of the exam make a difference in how teachers teach the course? And can the new APUSH curriculum survive politicization in the rough and tumble of the culture wars? The contributors to this forum have a lot to say on the first and second questions. In my mind, though, the second and third questions are tightly linked. So I will share some thoughts about how APUSH could be taught in an era of deep disagreements about values and the nature of history. On behalf of readers of the forum, I thank our contributors for their measured, incisive

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essays and reports from the field. I feel encouraged by what I read here. I think the people APUSH ultimately matters for—the kids—are going to be alright.

IS APUSH REALLY NEW AND IMPROVED?

The purpose of Advanced Placement history courses is to prepare students for college-level work. Students take AP for mercenary reasons, too: if they score well on the exam, they expect to receive college credits. This creates a difficulty for my colleagues and me at Augustana: our department does not accept AP credits toward completion of the major. Our policy is not popular with students and parents. But one student who doesn't have a problem with it is Patrick Lenz, the current president of the Augustana History Club. In high school Patrick steered clear of AP U.S. History when a teacher warned him the AP course was "memorize this, memorize that." But if he took the regular U.S. history course, Patrick was told, he would experience debates, simulations, field trips, and spirited discussions about controversial events and values. "That sounded way better," Patrick recalls.

My department's policy of no credit for AP history, along with Patrick's thumbs down for the old version of the course, seems warranted by what AP teachers remember about the course. Lopez describes taking students on a "forced march … through endless memorization." Santos recalls "the race through the textbook." And Straussman testifies students avoided APUSH because "they were not good at memorizing date and names." "The focus," reports Strausmann, "was on factoids (names, dates, places) over context, depth, and connections to change over time." This kind of pedagogy is called "coverage," a generic form of instruction in which teachers convey essential information in a textbook or list of standards. For teachers, the race to cover a table of contents usually leads to teaching by mentioning. For students, 180 days of mentioning feels like trying to get a drink of water from a firehose. Or, in the case of APUSH, with its thick, college-level textbooks and an exam that could test for anything and everything, like trying to take a sip from Niagara Falls. Creative teachers such as Lopez, Santos, and Straussman found ways to enrich the old APUSH course. But one can see how the coverage framework pressured teachers to conform to a failed model of instruction.

And there can be no doubt that coverage is a broken model.[2] We don't need to get into the weeds of research on teaching and learning to concede its failures. Let's just ask: where are the college history professors who are grateful to the College Board for sending half a million well-prepared students our way every year? (I haven't met any.) We can also ask: what national history assessments show improvement in student scores over the period that enrollment in AP History swelled? (Answer: none.) The dearth of thank you notes and higher test scores is predictable. Most of the material that students stuff in their heads for the May AP exam vanishes from their minds afterwards like dry ice on a warm day. More troubling, with all that history getting covered, something important got covered up: the analytic thinking moves that lie at the heart of historical mindedness and are so valuable for democratic citizenship. The teachers in this forum testify that the old APUSH course had no provision for training students to assess significance or to analyze the testimony of sources or to frame good historical questions. That is why history departments such as mine decline to accept AP history credits.

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But now we may have to reconsider our policy. The new exam and curriculum framework designed by Lawrence Charap and his colleagues is better—very much better—than the older course. The new APUSH is better calibrated with how adolescents learn. It builds on decades of research by cognitive scientists on historical thinking. It harmonizes better with the expectations of college history professors for what high school graduates should know, value, and be able to do. The essence of the revision comes down to this: whereas the old APUSH course rewarded students for knowing other people's facts, the revised course expects students to justify what they claim to know about the past. In the old course, history was one fact after another, a list of subjects to be familiar with. The new APUSH presents history as a murky domain of knowledge in which protocols and habits of mind are necessary to distinguish sense from nonsense and know anything about the past at all. The old test smelled like remember-ology. The new test measures how good one is with the intellectual discipline of history.

There will be professors who say the test makers have "spoiled everything," deemphasizing content knowledge in order to promote mushy "thinking skills." I have less sympathy for this view than I do critiques of the test by conservatives. At least conservatives begin with a truth: that ideas matter, that the stories people tell have consequences. But defenders of coverage begin with a falsehood: that facts can be stored in the head like furniture in an attic, there to be pulled down some day when a situation calls for it. But that's not how memory works. We remember what we *do* on a regular basis. If we want students to know who did what when, we must ask them to do something with that knowledge again and again. The new APUSH requires students to do history even with the multiple choice questions. So I believe it has a much better chance than the old "drill and kill" to produce both a discerning historical mindedness and a retentive grasp of factual information.

WILL THE NEW APUSH IMPROVE HISTORY INSTRUCTION?

Defenders of coverage and "teaching by mentioning" are on the defensive these days. Still, Jonathan Zimmerman worries that bad habits by college instructors will make the APUSH redesign a fruitless effort. "Put simply," writes Zimmerman, "many college-level historians do not teach undergraduates in a way that promotes the kind of thinking we purport to prize. So it's highly unlikely—although surely not impossible—that our high schools will institute such instruction on a mass scale." Ten years ago I would have agreed with Zimmerman's pessimistic assessment. But not now.

Zimmerman is right about one thing: higher education is riddled with deep pockets of poor teaching and backwaters of illiteracy about history teaching and learning. But, fortunately, the times they are a-changing. Last year, sixty history departments completed the American Historical Association's Tuning Project, a collaborative process in which participants harmonize or "tune" the core goals, assessments, and instructional practices of the discipline with curricula to support those goals. Another one hundred departments have signed on for Tuning Round II. New pedagogies such as "Reacting to the Past" and "uncoverage" circulate widely and are inspiring instructors to adopt more effective instructional practices. With leadership from the AHA, graduate schools are taking more responsibility for the training of future college history teachers. Sure, there are still plenty of lecture halls where a professor sashays on stage while the students

swipe through Facebook. But the buzz being generated by legions of creative instructors in higher education gives me hope that the redesign of AP will not be in vain.

Zimmerman should not, however, be construed as saying that high school history instruction will only improve when academic historians become missionaries to the high schools with the gospel of historical thinking and the medicine of good teaching practices. If anything, innovation and reform has been working the other way around. One might list six or seven good books on history teaching written by and/or for secondary teachers, such as Bruce Lesh's *Why Don't You Just Tell Us the Answer?* and the materials offered by the Stanford History Education Group (a website that every teacher, at any level, should bookmark).[3] With no resources of similar scope and quality available for college instructors, pedagogical reformers at the college level have been poaching from secondary teachers for a long time. I can testify that the experience of being an exam reader at APUSH's June readings was transformative for my teaching. I'm not sure I would have seen the limitations of being a "sage on the stage" if not for conversations I had with high school teachers at the exam readings. It was at APUSH readings that I became aware of "backwards design" and learned how to use rubrics. So I expect that the good sense that has gone into the revised APUSH curriculum framework will work its way out and up to improve history education at all levels.

Still, we might wonder if AP teachers are prepared to take on what Lopez calls "an incredible challenge." Santos suspects some teachers, perhaps especially those who did not major in history in college, will revert to skimming the surface and assessing only lower-level thinking. Straussman and Lopez believe students who don't know very much history need a narrative arc to make sense of the past. They worry that the AP curriculum framework doesn't provide one. All of these are plausible concerns.

But again, I'm hopeful. I'll say more about the need for narrative anon. But I think what Larry Cuban called "persistent instruction"[4]—the surface-skimming, teacher-centered coverage mode of teaching referenced by Santos—will be dealt a significant blow by the new expectations built into APUSH. "We value what we assess." If the truism is true, teachers now have a powerful incentive to redesign their courses on the model of inquiry-based approaches. If they do not, their students are going to receive mostly 1s and 2s when the AP results come back. Here, "teaching to the test" may do a world of good.

Teachers, of course, will need quality professional development if they are to make the "mindset shift" described by Santos and retool their courses. Santos, Lopez, and Straussman are inspiring examples of what this guidance could look like. Their enthusiasm for the incredible challenge is infectious. If we could clone them and send copies to every high school history department in the nation, our problems here would be solved. Now that the College Board has stepped up to provide leadership in history education, would that we could see a return of funding for improving history education on the level of the suspended Teaching American History grants!

BUT: IS THE NEW APUSH POLITICALLY SUSTAINABLE?

Pushback from conservatives alarmed by the revised APUSH program triggers unpleasant memories of the mid-1990s "history wars." When in 1994 Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch urged federal funding for voluntary national history standards, she

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called on UCLA's National Center for History in the Schools to draft and circulate the proposed standards. In January 1995, after weeks of furious debate among historians, policy elites, and media commentators, the United States Senate voted 99–1 to reject the UCLA standards for presenting "a disproportionately pessimistic and misrepresentative picture of the American past."[5] No one wants to go there again.

But maybe we should. Passionate, morally charged, occasionally rancorous deliberation is what participatory democracy looks like. If we think that conversations about history education are too compromised by the uninformed, the ill-educated, and the overly partisan, the alternative is a more elitist deliberative republic such as that envisioned by the American Founders, men who sought ways to insulate the good judgment of supposedly wise elites from undisciplined public passions.

But I think it's a mistake to try to sneak improved history education in quietly through a back door, claiming a professional expertise that comes from knowing our subject better than any beautician or plumber (or witless red state legislator) possibly could.

To be sure, some of the criticism from conservatives is ill-informed. As Jeremy Stern persuasively argues, there is a pervasive misunderstanding about the authority of the curriculum framework, approaching what seems to be a willful misreading of the document's examples as requirements. But not all the concerns are outlandish. The issue of localism versus national control is a real and persistent political issue in this country about which intelligent people disagree. And one might well wonder, as some conservatives do, whether it's a good thing for a private corporation such as the College Board to exercise so much power over how history will be taught in schools. It's not like experts were ever wrong about something, you know? (The Left used to remember that.)

The concerns of conservative critics should be welcomed and addressed. And especially in two places, I submit. In the public sphere, defenders of APUSH should take a lesson from Cold War history and remember that the opponent is not monolithic. Even on an issue such as history education, conservatives do not all think alike. Rush Limbaugh may think that history is "what happened," but Bill Bennett and Paul Johnson would disagree with him about that.[6] Many conservatives like to think of themselves as the party of reasoned deliberation as opposed to the Left's alleged preference for indoctrination through political correctness. This means that by their own logic, conservatives have nothing to fear from a multiperspectival history classroom, so long as the teacher doesn't put her thumb on the scale. Defenders of APUSH should invest more time in reassuring conservatives that the classroom is a free zone for respectful debate. Would it be so hard for the College Board to throw conservative critics a bone and include in the curriculum framework examples of historical study with an appeal to conservative moral intuitions such as gratefulness, liberty, and authority, to balance the Left's preference for values of care and fairness? It might take an anthropological mind to engage conservatives in this way, but surely it can be done.

The other place conservatives' worries should be addressed is in the history classroom. Here I disagree with Brenda Santos who writes, "for me at least the political controversy does not seem particularly relevant to the classroom." Au contraire, I want to say. The political controversy may well be the answer to a problem raised by all three AP teachers. Santos criticizes the new framework for "its lack of a concrete or dominant structure." Straussman says he is trying to figure out "how to supplement my students' sense of the basic structure of a historical narrative." And Lopez wonders how she can present

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the myriad events and overlapping historical trends and issues of the new curriculum "in a sensible way to students who are first encountering them."

The answer—I should say, an answer—to concerns about how to bring coherence to the APUSH course is to "teach the conflicts."[7]

To be coherent, courses need Big Questions. Our ongoing culture war therefore suggests a good master question for a survey U.S. history course would be "what is the story of American history?" With a big question like this tying every unit together, the culture war–instead of just being a problem for U.S. AP—actually could offer a solution for bringing intellectual unity to the course in a way that promotes understanding that history is an "argument without end."[8]

So if I were teaching AP history, I would say something like this to students on the first day:

Human beings live inside stories. We tell stories to make sense of the world around us and to inform ourselves about who we are and what we are supposed to do. Without big stories, human beings get lost. Courage fails; aimlessness and depression sets in.

Stories about the American past are some of the most important stories we live in. Stories people have told to make sense of the United States have inspired revolutions and social movements. Stories about America have encouraged citizens to fight wars and to make peace. Some say the stories we tell about our national past are so dangerous that we should teach only one authorized story or even no big stories at all. I disagree. If we teach only one story, that's indoctrination. If we teach no stories about the America past, then the Consumer Story wins. That's the story that says "the one who dies with the most toys wins, and to heck with everyone else." A lot of money is spent by corporations to make us believe the Consumer Story. But I know of more powerful stories still.

In this course we are going to think about what stories make the most sense of the American past. There's not an unlimited number of stories to tell about America, you know. In fact, over the last 500 years, it's possible to identify maybe seven or eight stories people have told to make sense of the New World and later, the United States. Today, in public life, maybe three of these stories circulate widely and are frequently debated.

I'm not here as your teacher to tell you that one of these stories is true and the others false. I am here to give you training in how to make that decision yourself. One of the lessons I want to teach you is that a good story can be told well or it can be told stupidly. I am going to train you in criteria and habits of mind that will help you distinguish between nutty stories that can't be believed and, very broadly, plausible stories that have a chance at being true. You're going to learn to ask historical questions, weigh evidence, cross-examine testimony, and tell credible stories of your own.

As we study the stories that Americans and others use to make sense of the American past, the most important thing I have to teach you will be this: There will always be more than one plausible way to interpret the past. But there will be an infinity of ridiculous ways to make sense of the past. Being an adult, and a good citizen, means knowing the difference and becoming comfortable with this fact of life: that the opposite of a true story is not a false story. Sometimes, the opposite of a true story is another true story.[9]

CONCLUSION

Nearly half a million students annually take the Advanced Placement Test in U.S. History. With the APUSH brand representing a gold standard for what good history instruction should be, this is a curriculum that punches above its weight. For that reason, a

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lot of people have an interest in APUSH. That also means that some feel they have a lot to lose.

I am grateful to the editors of *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* for hosting this valuable conversation about the new APUSH. It is easy to see that criticism of APUSH turns reckless where knowledge and understanding of the new curriculum framework is thin, and we must work to counter such misunderstanding. Yet as in previous chapters of America's history wars, disagreements over the new APUSH emerge from fundamental differences people have about the nature and purposes of history. These differences are not easily reconciled. Thus, our primary task as scholars, teachers, and citizens should, arguably, be to nurture the vibrancy of a dialogue that properly crosses ideologies, moralities, and pedagogies. If the final results do not turn out exactly the way we wish, I hope it won't be because "powerful and dangerous" historians failed to engage their critics. Or, under pressure from culture warriors, forgot how to be peacemakers.

NOTES

[1]Valerie Strauss, "Ben Carson: New AP U.S. History Course Will Make Kids Want to 'Sign Up for ISIS'," *Washington Post*, September 29, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2014/09/29/ben-carson-new-ap-u-s-history-course-will-make-kids-want-to-sign-up-for-isis/.

[2]For more on the coverage model and its inadequacies, see Lendol Calder, "Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey," *Journal of American History* 92 (March 2006): 1358–69; Joel Sipress and David Voelker, "The End of the History Survey Course: The Rise and Fall of the Coverage Model," *Journal of American History* 97 (March 2011): 1050–66; and chapter 2, "On the Limits of Collective Memorialization and Persistent Instruction" in Bruce A. VanSledright, *The Challenge of Rethinking History Education: On Practices, Theories, and Policies* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

[3]Bruce Lesh, "*Why Won't You Just Tell Us the Answer?": Teaching Historical Thinking in Grades 7–12* (Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2011); Sam Wineburg, Daisy Martin, and Chauncey Monte-Sano, *Reading Like a Historian: Teaching Literacy in Middle and High School History Classrooms* (New York: New York Teachers College Press, 2011); Stephane Levesque, *Thinking Historically: Educating Students for the 21st Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); Chauncey Monte-Sano, Susan De La Paz, and Mark Felton, *Reading, Thinking, and Writing About History: Teaching Argument Writing to Diverse Learners in the Common Core Classroom, Grades 6–12* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2014); S. G. Grant and Jill Gradwell, eds., *Teaching History with Big Ideas: Cases of Ambitious Teachers* (Lanham, ME: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010); Bruce VanSledright, *The Challenge of Rethinking History Education: On Practices, Theories, and Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Nikki Mandell and Bobbie Malone, *Thinking Like a Historian: Rethinking History Instruction* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2008); Stanford History Education Group: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past website, https://sheg.stanford.edu/."

[4]Larry Cuban, "Persistent Instruction: The High School Classroom, 1900–1980," *Phi Delta Kappan* 64 (Oct. 1982): 113–18.

[5]Diane Ravitch and Jon Wiener, "American History 101," *Slate,* May 17, 2005, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts_and_life/history_book_blitz/features/2005/american_history_101/how_to_revive_history_by_teaching_the_conflicts.html. The authors of the 1994 National History Standards recount the controversy in Gary Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (Vintage, 2000); an excellent essay from one of the major players is Diane Ravitch, "The Controversy over National History Standards" in Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, eds., *Reconstructing History: The Emergence of a New Historical Society* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 242–52.

[6]In an Op-Ed defending the Common Core, Bennett writes: "We can all agree that there are common and shared truths in English, literature and math." Tellingly, Bennett, the author of a three-volume history of the United States did not include history on that list. See "The Conservative Case for Common Core," *Wall*

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Street Journal, September 10, 2014, http://www.wsj.com/articles/william-j-bennett-the-conservative-case-for-common-core-1410390435.

[7]Gerald Graff, *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (New York: Norton, 1993).

[8]I say more about the need for metanarratives in history survey courses in Lendol Calder, "The Stories We Tell," *OAH Magazine of History* 27:3 (2013), http://maghis.oxfordjournals.org/content/27/3/5.extract.

[9]For a description of what such a course might look like, see Lendol Calder, "But What is Our Story?" at Teachinghistory.org, http://teachinghistory.org/issues-and-research/roundtable-response/24660.

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