

AMONG THE EDUCATIONALOIDS



THE SOCIAL STUDIES DEBACLE

by Chester E. Finn, Jr.

The great dismal swamp of today's school curriculum is not reading or writing, not math or science, not even foreign language study. It is social studies, a field that has been getting slimier and more tangled ever since it changed its name from "history" around 1916. It is also a subject students seldom like, and one that is doing a wretched job of forging historically knowledgeable citizens with a passion for democracy.

Consider some recent evidence:

- Nearly half the high school seniors tested in Baltimore in 1987 could not find the United States on a world map.

- Half the 400 undergraduates enrolling in their first college-level geography course at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville in 1984 could not find Japan or the Middle East on a world map. One in three could not locate Europe.

- Barely half of American eleventh graders in 1976 knew that each state elects two U.S. senators (and just 35 percent knew the circumstance in which a state might have more senators than representatives).

- On the first-ever national assessment of students' knowledge of American history, conducted in early 1986, Diane Ravitch and I discovered that two-thirds of all high school juniors do not know when Lincoln was President or when the Civil War was fought, and that more than half lack basic understanding of the Constitution, *The Federalist*, the *Dred Scott* decision, the Emancipation Proclamation, Senator Joseph McCarthy, the Scopes trial, Jim Crow and Reconstruction. Bear in mind: eleventh grade is the customary year for studying U.S. history, and four-fifths of the youngsters taking part in this assessment were then enrolled in such courses.

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In education, when discontented with the outcomes, we can usually blame the delivery system: such familiar flaws as scanty, mindless homework; puerile textbooks; ill-prepared teachers; slack standards and low expectations. The field of social studies certainly partakes of all these transmission glitches. But the most serious failings of social studies are conceptual, philosophical, even ideological. Simply stated, what most "experts" in the field want students to learn is not what most parents and citizens expect them to know.

In fact, knowledge itself is in some peril. It was but one of five categories in a 1981 "Statement on Essentials" produced by the primary professional organization in this field, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). And under this heading, as much emphasis was given to knowledge about economics, social institutions, intergroup and interpersonal relationships, and "world-wide relationships of all sorts" as to geography, government, and the "history and culture of our nation and the world." In any case, transmission of knowledge is not the overriding goal of social studies, according to another influential NCSS statement adopted in 1983. Rather, the main objective is "to prepare young people to identify, understand and work to solve the problems that face our increasingly diverse nation and interdependent world."

The notion of "interdependency" recurs throughout the writings and speeches of leaders in this field. Small wonder that youngsters wind up not knowing much about the history of the United States or the lore of Western civilization. The social studies *avant garde* regards any such curricular orientation as reactionary and chauvinistic. In his presidential address to the NCSS in November 1987, Florida International University professor Jan Tucker warned against the "nationalization of knowledge" and termed "global interdependence" "the most formidable challenge to social studies in the United States today and tomorrow." He de-

voted the rest of an impassioned lecture to distinguishing between the "territorial state" and the "trading state." The former, which Tucker branded an archaic concept needing to be expunged from American classrooms, "depends upon the direct control of territory and military strength to provide security and well-being for its citizens." In the trading state, by contrast, "strength is derived from a nation's successful participation in an interdependent global trading network." Teaching this view of world affairs means "recogniz[ing] the interests of other nations and peoples as authentic. In the trading state,

a fundamental cultural reciprocity must be assumed."

Remember that we are not here considering the curriculum of a liberal arts college or graduate business school. We are examining what will be taught to eight- and fifteen-year-olds, to boys and girls who are apt to know little save what they learn in school. Cultural reciprocity isn't easy if you've no idea what a culture is or of what your own consists.

Today's fashionable notions in social studies did not result from some abrupt shift in the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate era—though doubtless the left-

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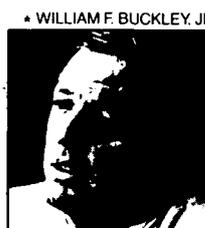
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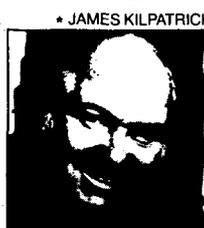
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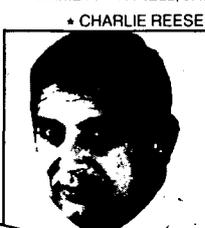
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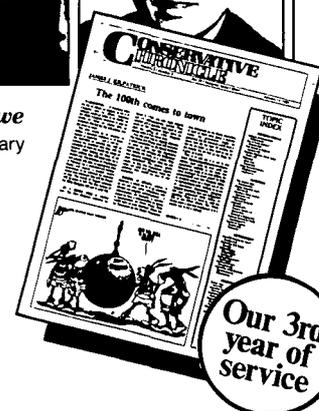


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ward tilt and relativistic tendencies of many contemporary teachers are associated with their having come of age in the 1960s and seventies. Rather, what we are seeing is the accumulation of some seventy years of curricular and pedagogical revisionism. In fact there is some irony in the "global" orientation of today's reformers, who would have youngsters start by understanding the oneness of all humankind before turning to matters more specific to themselves and their nation. For one of the big curriculum reforms of the 1920s and thirties was the introduction into elementary school social studies of the "expanding environments" approach, whereby children are first taught about themselves, their families, their schools and neighborhoods, only gradually—as the child got older—widening the perspective to include more distant places and unfamiliar folk. One might think of today's reformers as aficionados of "contracting environments," moving from the universal to the particular.

Often, though, the particulars are never reached. That is why our youngsters' minds are filled with so little real information. Following Dewey's lead, many educators disdain "mere knowledge." For them, the supreme goal of schooling is "problem solving," and nowhere is this more apparent than in social studies. Consider James A. Banks's popular manual for teachers of this field, which starts by stipulating that the overriding goal of a "modern social studies curriculum" is to help "students develop the ability to make reflective decisions." As for knowledge, Banks writes, "traditional social studies curricula emphasize the mastery of low-level facts, such as the names of rivers, capital cities and important dates." That tradition must now be rooted out and replaced by a "focus on higher levels of knowledge rather than on facts."

Even as social studies has become a grab bag of current events, ersatz social science, one-worldism, and opinion-mongering by uninformed children and half-informed adults, it has not played a very large role in the education of young Americans. Elementary school teachers typically spend only minutes a day on it, and if there is need to eke out more time for reading or math, those minutes may be sacrificed. Nor does the subject loom large in high school. The average 1982 graduate had accumulated just 2.6 course credits in social studies (out of 21 total credits during four years of high school). Besides the American history course that most schools require during the junior year, the paltry requirements in social studies can usually be satisfied by such electives as urban ecology, investment

economics, criminology, energy education, violence in America, even "Singles Living" and "A Celebration of Life" (which turns out to include units on "death education," one of today's trendiest topics).

If the food is tainted, one might respond, it's just as well the portions are small. Why should more time and care be lavished on a subject that as currently taught ranges from trivial and ineffectual to mischievous and damaging?

It's a risk, no doubt about it. But an ignorant populace is at least as worrisome. That is why in effect we have to fight a two-front war: to purge the field of goofiness and reconceptualize its content *and then* to see that more of it is taught. To be learned as well as taught, however, social studies needs to be allowed to be interesting. Certainly the subject matter is inherently fascinating: full of triumphs and tragedies, heroes and villains, exotic places and strange happenings. But we learn from eleventh graders who took part in the 1986 assessment that today's typical history class is deathly dull: lectures by teachers and readings from vast, plodding textbooks chosen because everything imaginable is "mentioned" but nothing controversial is broached. Seldom is this pattern relieved by class discussion, individual projects, original source materials, or field trips.

Even if soundly conceived and imaginatively taught, no single year course in American history can do much more than scratch the surface of this sprawling subject, let alone the other history that we want our children to learn: ancient civilization, medieval and Renaissance Europe, modern Europe, Asia, Latin America, and Africa. And what of geography? Of where the Nile and Amazon rivers flow, of why the poles are ice-capped, of the routes taken by great explorers and where vast human migrations went from and to?



Then there is civics, in many respects the most difficult of these subjects to teach because here the convictions that students acquire are as important as the information they imbibe. It is relatively simple (and none too exhilarating) to instruct them in the differences between bicameral and unicameral legislatures, the workings of the electoral college, and the theory of federalism. But will youngsters ingest a suitable blend of tolerance for human differences (race, religion) and intolerance for certain human behavior (cheating, treason, slothfulness, greed)? Will they absorb not only the theoretical differences between democracy and totalitarianism but also a deep devotion to the former and a horror of the latter?

Here the problem with the social studies establishment is its relentless relativism. When NCSS president Tucker warns against the "territorial state" and the "nationalization of knowledge," he is cautioning against any clear preference for one political or social system over another. When Professor Banks exhorts social studies teachers to expunge the "traditional" approach, with its "development of a tenacious and non-reflective nationalism," and replace it with a "clarified and reflective identification with the world community," he is signalling his own convictions. If the leaders of this field do not themselves believe that democracy is the *best* of all known systems by which to organize a society and a polity, then it isn't likely that fourteen-year-olds studying this subject will end up thinking that.

A recent episode is illuminating. Last spring 150 prominent Americans signed a manifesto called *Education for Democracy*. Beginning with the premise that the survival of democracy "depends on our transmitting to each new generation the political vision of liberty and equality that unites us as Americans—and a deep loyalty to the political institutions our founders put together to fulfill that vision," it called for the schools to become far more purposeful in imparting to all youngsters the knowledge and attitudes necessary for "an informed, reasoned allegiance to the ideals of a free society."

This clear and rather pointed statement was endorsed by public figures across the political spectrum: by George Will and Mary Futrell, by Ann Landers and Bill Bennett, by Walter Mondale and Gerald Ford, by Anthony Podesta and Jeane Kirkpatrick, by Albert Shanker and Orrin Hatch. It was about as close as it is possible to come to an expression of national consensus concerning the teaching of democracy. But a few months later, in the pages of the NCSS journal, *Social Education*, it was denounced for "nationalistic bias clothed in democratic

rhetoric." Since only NCSS members take their journal seriously, the manifesto continues to resonate elsewhere. But don't expect the social studies classes in most American schools to heed it any time soon.

One bright spot in this bleak landscape is California, where in mid-1987 the state board of education adopted a new curricular "framework" that combines history, geography, and civics into a twelve-year sequence that also pays close attention to democratic values, to reasoning and thinking skills, and to such worthwhile social sciences as economics.

Because the new framework will influence both state testing and textbook adoption, it is apt to be quite influential throughout our most populous state. But it was no small task to forge the consensus embodied in it. Some participants wanted to change nothing. Others pressed for special treatment within the curriculum for one or another issue, ethnic group, or viewpoint. The necessary clout came mainly from state education chief Bill Honig, who has placed curricular renewal at the top of his agenda and who values historical knowledge, takes democracy seriously, and prizes cultural literacy for all youngsters, not just the college-bound. The panel convened by Honig included some real historians, old-fashioned readers, unreconstructed patriots, and hardy trench fighters. It took many hours of debate, and some wounded egos and unfriendly feelings are said to linger in the vicinity of Sacramento. But the result was worth it.

If a state like California—and states are where most important curricular choices get made—can achieve agreement on a new approach to social studies, why can't the others? In most, alas, there is no counterpart to Honig and the social studies establishment remains enamored of process, problem solving, and globalism. Although there has recently been established an unwieldy 44-member "national commission" that is supposed to spend several years and many philanthropic dollars scrutinizing the entire field, the NCSS is its primary organizational sponsor and many of its members are leaders of the old guard. This field, in other words, is probably incapable of reforming itself. Risky though it is to urge governors, legislators, business leaders, and other laymen to engage themselves in curricular decisions, sometimes a severe jolt from outside the education establishment is the only alternative to entropy. Meanwhile, most children are emerging from most schools with only a light dusting of history, geography, and civics. □

THE GREAT AMERICAN SALOON SERIES



JOCK BARS

by Joe Mysak

Once, all bars were sports bars, the crafty Ferguson once said to me. "The black-and-white television was on all the time, there was a photo of the '57 Dodgers on the wall, and there was a good man behind the stick. Now, we have sporty boutique saloons designed by Ralph Lauren, and the bartenders are all women. This is what it's come to."

True enough, but as ever, there are gin mills, and saloons, and sports bars. The formula once seemed indestructible and incontestable. Sports and drinking and photos of the Bambino, referred to elsewhere as the patron saint of good food and drink, are naturals. Yet honest city drinkers are forever damned with the false, or, if you will, *faux* saloons, some done up so handsomely they fool even seasoned veterans with bourbon-soaked elbows.

Redemption, as always, lies in the search for the genuine. Nowhere is this more true than in Manhattan, where a recent tour examined what the more pretentious writers might refer to as the *genre* of sports bars. In the outer boroughs and environs, such places might be scared up with little enough problem. In Manhattan, once virtually an entire city of sports and Irish bars (another worthy topic for a future date), the situation is dismal.

There are, of course, the tonier restaurants and hotel bars throughout Midtown where ballplayers disport themselves. But do you really want to hit three figures for an evening's work, just to look at two Leroy Neiman paintings and a cast-iron jockey under bad lighting? If you want to Meet Athletes, a passion of arrested development if ever there was one, you must, of course, hit such spots; for as a class, the big money ballplayers tend to avoid the riff-raff: professional sportsmen do not as a rule go to true sports bars, and Meet The People.

The sports bar formula is just about incorruptible. A loud crowd, fast and friendly bartenders, a good television,

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heavy use of sporting memorabilia. Consider Champion's, in Georgetown. Or Mike Shannon's, in St. Louis. Or J. B. Winberie's, in Boston—the site of Fred Sullivan's fantastic eighteen-rum-and-Coke night, when he kept pace with me and the Tough Al's honorable husband, who were drinking beer. We watched the Red Sox lose, and got to listen to one particularly ornery fan who kept bellowing, inexplicably, "One knock for Knickerbocker beer, *one time!*" In Manhattan, one has to go a ways to scare up similar cozy holes.

There is, on the Upper East Side, Rusty Staub's ribhouse, which features lots of good Staub material, including some aged bats and some great sequences of photographs. And the Big Orange can surely cook up a tender and tasty plate of ribs. But there are as many loathsome Met fans here as there are out at Shea Stadium. That would be bad enough, but at Rusty's, there is also a tad too much, shall we say, meat on the hoof.

One reliable adviser pitched the Raccoon Lodge, a recently opened (little did I at first realize *how* recently opened) tavern on 83rd Street and Amsterdam Avenue.

"*Poseurs*," pronounced the mogul Cheney, on first observing the crowd. "They're all fakes. To the last man."

Yet the place looked as homey as the scenes of my youthful haunts, from the dirty floor, to the pool table, to the metal shuffleboard bowling machine, the jukebox, and the usual neon beer signs and advertisements. There were several old "Honeymooners" photographs, apropos of a place called "The Raccoon Lodge," which everyone in the Free World knows was Ralph Kramden and Ed Norton's old club.

Near the pool table, there was even an aging list of names of those challengers who wanted to play pool, and the appropriate stubby, chewed pencil. I sat down and took in the cloud of acrid cigarette smoke and the rich aroma of Jack Daniel's on flannel shirts. For some inexplicable reason

there were piles of duck decoys over the bar's back mirror, but I was willing to overlook them. No pictures of Casey Stengel or Ted Williams, two popular saloon subjects, but this was okay. Even Uptown, I could smell out a Jersey bar. I settled further into the booth.

"Get a grip, man," said the land baron. "Take a closer look."

There was a large red and white flying horse tacked on the back wall, which in more glorious days graced a Mobil filling station, and which is now apparently the last word in saloon decor in the big town. There was a girl bartender, who mourned a lack of five-dollar bills. Not only was there nobody beyond the age of 35 in the place—other than one fellow who looked like the famed Ed "Big Daddy" Roth, the sixties car customizer, in full poundage—but the crowd included at least a full score of preppie lasses. Not bad in its way, but not a saloon, at least not one of the gorgeous sports dumps I patronized in my youth.

Besides that, the Lodge had opened just three weeks before.

I had, in sum, been taken in.

Faced with a crowd of advertising men, lawyers, and investment bankers out slumming for the evening, most of whom were wearing white wrinkly button-down shirts—and one who looked as if he'd just come in from the tennis courts—I decided the appropriate talk was of marketing with the Celtic poet, McCorry. "Marketing strategy," I said. "Lincoln should begin manufacturing four-door convertibles again."

"*Marketing strategy*: Budweiser should staple little bags of pretzels and nacho chips to each bottle," Mac said. "Or: Build a bar where you pay \$10 at the door, then get to work the stick and drink all the beer you want. *This one would make a mint.*"

This was good, and the way talk should go in a sports bar. We mulled the way certain girls with shoulder-length hair walk when they wear blazers, why redheads almost invariably overplay it, and whether Jack Clark will make any difference to the Yankees, or Bob Horner to the Cardinals.

We pondered the pool table, and the presence in every bar of The Guy Who Is Great At Pool, and who beats all comers. This particular one looked like a rock band roadie and moved in a herky-jerky fashion. All well and good, until I saw him take a slug of his, Good Lord, Mexican beer *with a wedge of lime in it*.

This was not a man who was going to knock them back all night—at least, not without some ugly consequences. Then again, this was not a batch of crusty vets putting to flight the day's demons, but a crowd of slightly homesick young folk living The Life in Manhattan. When the girls started to play pool, we took our leave.

"Want a good sports bar?" The Ancient Mariner asked, by way of proffering advice. "The Old Town. Go there."

And so off down to east 16th Street to the Old Town, a fine old place, looking as it should. I stared into the back-bar mirror, and the Iron Horse grinned back. There were some things you could still depend upon. Lou Gehrig was one of them. "What do you have on tap?"

"I'm sorry, we don't have draft beer," said the bartender.

I waited no longer for a word of explanation, but raised anchor. I have done considerable damage in the Old Town, which has one of the top 10 turn-of-the-century bars in Manhattan, but for my sports-bar money, a saloon must have brew good off the wood. This would not do.

For a moment, we ponder Pete's Tavern, a nice ancient place O. Henry apparently wrote in, and vaguely a sports bar, if the presence of some prehistoric equipment and a few pictures means a sports bar. Pete's also contains the mellow memory of a famous double-date, when, after we packed the girls away in cabs to their destinations, the Big Train and I looked at each other, said, "There's a basketball game on inside, and an awful lot of beer left," and returned to size up