

LOST GENERATION

Why America's Children Are Strangers In Their Own Land

WILLIAM BENNETT

In his 1984 Jefferson Lecture, Sidney Hook pointed to a paradox. During the past 50 years, he observed, our society has been able to make gigantic strides in the direction of greater freedom and social justice, while totalitarian states—first Nazi Germany and then the Soviet Union—have produced wars, holocaust, economic misery, concentration camps, and gulags. “Yet in spite of that record,” Mr. Hook said, “the paradox is that faith and belief in the principles of liberal democracy have declined in the United States. Unless that faith and that belief can be restored and revived, liberal democracy will perish.”

Admittedly, Mr. Hook did not draw on batteries of research teams to document the eroding allegiance to the norms of a free, self-governing society. By the canons of modern social science, then, his observations might be impugned as being impressionistic. But many of the finest minds of our time share his impressions. In 1980, for example, Raymond Aron spoke of “loss of confidence in the country’s institutions” throughout the United States. And in Great Britain, the distinguished philosopher Karl Popper stated flatly, “Americans are no longer certain that their country and form of government are the best.”

Such views are especially worrisome to those of us professionally involved in education. After all, one of the tasks of a school system—indeed, the primordial task of any school system—is the transmission of social and political values. As Bernard Brown observes, “All schools must transmit a cultural heritage and help legitimize the political system—otherwise the regime in the long run loses effectiveness and is replaced, perhaps after a short anarchic interlude, by another regime that knows better how to secure obedience.”

Are American schools helping to transmit our democratic heritage? Do the norms and values that the schools inculcate make the case for our political system? Although the evidence on this question is fragmentary and often anecdotal, what we know is not encouraging. A recent survey found that many 13- and 17-year-olds do not know what happens to a law after it passes Congress, and the majority fail to realize that a President cannot declare a law unconstitutional. In short, far too many students cannot explain the essentials of American democracy.

Why should we be surprised, when many of our schools no longer make sure their charges know the long procession of events that gave rise to modern democracy? We offer our students the flag but sometimes act toward it as if it were only cloth. We neglect to teach them the ancient texts sewn into its fabric, the ideas and endeavors of cultures whose own emblems in time lent us the designs for our own. Too often our high school graduates know little or nothing of the Magna Carta, the Bible, the Greek polis, the Federalist Papers, or the Lincoln-Douglas debates.

We cannot hope that our students will know why the world got into its present situation—or even what that situation is—if they know so little of the events that came before them. Some two months ago, about 15 American teenagers and 15 Soviet teenagers met near Washington to discuss the threat of nuclear war. The Americans were members of a school’s talented and gifted program. The Russians attend an embassy school, and are the children of Soviet diplomats. Here are some excerpts from a newspaper account:

What do you think of America? asked one [American] pupil. ‘America is a good country,’ replied Dmitry Domakhin, 12, whose father is a diplomat. ‘It’s such a pity that it’s a capitalist country.’ Dmitry grinned as the audience of parents and pupils laughed.

Later, he posed his own question to the American children. ‘In the Soviet Union, when we have lunch at school, the lunch is free,’ he said. ‘I just want to know, how much do you have to pay?’ Ninety to 95 cents per meal was the answer. Dmitry smiled again.

Alexei Palladin 14, whose father is a correspondent for [a] Soviet newspaper, pointed out that the Soviet Union and the United States have been friends before. ‘What do you know about the Second World War?’ Alexei asked the Americans. No answer. He nodded as if that was what he expected. ‘Nobody even knows,’ he said, ‘that we were allies. We were fighting Nazism together.’

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When I came across this story, the thought crossed my mind that in exchange for the ability to induce one or two of our talented and gifted youngsters to make some reference, however fleeting, to free elections, free speech, Afghanistan, the Nazi-Soviet Pact, or to the plight of Andrei Sakharov, I'd willingly trade away a couple of Olympic gold medals.

Sharing the Blame

Yet when these students fail to respond with an awareness of historical truths, whose fault is it? Is it theirs? No. Whose children are these? They're ours. Aren't they as bright as their Soviet counterparts? Of course they are. Are they good? Yes. Are they well-intentioned and open-minded? Yes. Are they eager to learn? Yes. They are all these things. But they are also, so it seems, intellectually innocent, and as Kant said, "Innocence is a splendid thing, but it is easily seduced." It is not our students' fault that we have forgotten that intellectual innocence too can be seduced, so that they can only nod their heads in agreement and applaud when confronted with standard Soviet propaganda themes.

It is important for our children to realize the ways in which the past illuminates the present. Our students will not recognize the urgency in Nicaragua if they cannot recognize the history that is threatening to repeat itself. If they have never heard of the Cuban missile crisis, they cannot comprehend the Sandinista head of secret police when he states that "Cuba's friends are Nicaragua's friends, and Cuba's enemies are Nicaragua's enemies." If they know nothing of the Russian Revolution, they cannot comprehend the Sandinista Minister of Defense when he says "Marxism/Leninism is the scientific doctrine that guides our revolution" and "We would like to help all revolutions." If students know nothing of the Monroe Doctrine, what difference will the intrusion of the Brezhnev Doctrine in Central America mean to them?

How have we come to such a pass? Surely one explanation for the fact that democratic values no longer seem to command the assent they once did is that for many years now the teaching of social studies in our schools has been dominated by cultural relativism, the notion that the attempt to draw meaningful distinctions between opposing traditions is a judgment which all virtuous and right-minded people must sternly condemn.

One social studies series for elementary schools, for example, advises the teacher that the material aims to "decrease inclination toward egocentrism, ethnocentrism, and stereotyping." But what this means, it turns out, is more than teaching children that all cultures and traditions are not the same. It means teaching that all cultures and traditions are equally valid, that there are not real criteria for good and bad, right and wrong, noble and base. But if all traditions are equally valid, then there is clearly not much point in transmitting a particular cultural heritage, a distinctive set of social and political values. On the contrary, to the extent that educational philosophy is dominated by the idea of cultural relativism, any attempt to impart a particular tradition is ipso facto illegitimate.

So each generation brings its *tabula rasa* into the world, and many educators, including the cultural relativists, pro-

ceed to teach as if it would be a shame to dirty the slate with any affection or respect for our own tradition. But the world itself is not a *tabula rasa*. Some important things have happened to make us what we are, and we cannot be intelligible to ourselves without remembering these things. We remain alien to ourselves, strangers at home, when we do not know our past.

I am reminded of a passage in C.S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*. The devil Screwtape is tutoring his young nephew and disciple, Wormwood, in the arts of corruption. The trick, he explains, is to keep men from acquiring wisdom, a trick accomplished by cultivating disdain for the past and a devotion to present-mindedness. "Since we cannot deceive the whole human race all the time," Screwtape says, "it is important to cut every generation off from all others; for where learning makes a free commerce between the ages there is always a danger that the characteristic errors of one may be corrected by the characteristic truths of another." I believe that if our children do not even know the inherited principles of a liberal democracy, it is foolish to expect that they should put their faith in those principles.

Correcting the Balance

How then are we to restore the American faith in the principles of liberal democracy? A good way to begin, it seems to me, would be by recognizing the importance and the value of the study of history, and by taking the necessary steps to strengthen history as a subject taught in the schools. As Meg Greenfield of the *Washington Post* writes, "In the reconstruction of American schooling that is going forward I would put properly taught history second on the list of goals to be achieved—right after literacy."

Apart from its intrinsic interest as a record of the past, history is a vitally important study for several reasons. First, history is organized memory, and memory, in turn, is the glue that holds our political community together. Strictly speaking, the United States did not simply develop; rather, the United States was created in order to realize a specific political vision. Today, as in the past, it is the memory of that political vision that defines us as Americans.

Throughout our history, there have indeed been occasions when our actions have fallen tragically short of our vision, and it is important for our students to know about those occasions. Certainly, we Americans are not strangers to sin. But there have also been occasions when we have not fallen short of our ideals, and students ought to know about those as well. Professor Lino Graglia writes, "In the context of inhumanity and misery I read as history, I hold the American achievement high." By studying American history, and yes, celebrating its heroes explicitly for each generation, and noting its achievements as well as its failures, our students are invited to grasp the values of our political tradition.

But if history is a kind of collective memory, it is also a mode of inquiry which aims at determining the truth. As a method of inquiry, history teaches respect for facts and for the proper methods of weighing evidence. It helps us to distinguish superficiality from depth, bias from objectivity, tendentiousness from honesty, stupidity from discernment,

and confusion from lucidity. History provides us with a sense of perspective and with the ability to make critical judgments. As the distinguished historian, Felix Gilbert, has observed, "The past is one way—and not the worst way—of acquiring the right and the criteria to judge the present." And acquiring the criteria to judge the present, it seems to me, is no less vital to the success and well-being of democratic self-government than acquiring a sense of community.

The Danger of Ignorance

But again, in being exposed to the truth about our history, our students, of course, should be exposed to the whole truth. So let it be told. As Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan puts it:

Am I embarrassed to speak for a less than perfect democracy? Not one bit. Find me a better one. Do I suppose there are societies which are free of sin? No I don't. Do I think ours is on balance incomparably the most hopeful set of human relations the world has? Yes I do. Have we done obscene things? Yes we have. How did our people learn about them? They learned about them on television. In the newspapers.

Unfortunately, even the subject of history is in danger of losing its distinct identity, of becoming absorbed in the smorgasbord of this and that known as "social studies." The Council for Basic Education noted in its 1982 report, *Making History Come Alive*:

In most schools today, the subject of history is subsumed by the curricular genus of 'social studies.' Teachers of history belong to social studies departments, they commonly identify themselves as social studies teachers, and they teach other subjects in addition to history. Parents are likely to presume that if their children are taking any social studies courses, they are learning history. They may or they may not be.

The Council for Basic Education report largely confirmed the findings of a 1975 study conducted by the Organization of American Historians. The OAH study noted a significant decline in the teaching of secondary school history throughout the country. It found that in some states "virtually no training in history is demanded" of secondary school history teachers. In one state, history teachers were being encouraged to emphasize concepts that transcend "any given historical situation." In another state, the trend was toward ethnocultural courses; in another, the focus was on problem solving, decision making, and social action. And in another, the OAH representative predicted that history would soon be supplanted by more "relevant" courses such as consumer affairs, ecology, multicultural studies, and so on.

The present decline in the status of history in our schools is very serious. To be ignorant of history is to be, in a very fundamental way, intellectually defenseless, unable to understand the workings either of our own society or of other societies. It is to be condemned to what Walter Lippmann called a state of "chronic childishness." Lippmann continued:

Men must collaborate with their ancestors. Otherwise they must begin, not where their ancestors arrived but where their ancestors began. If they exclude the tradition of the past from the curricula of the schools they make it necessary for each generation to repeat the errors rather than benefit by the successes of its predecessors.

Such a situation is intolerable. In order to change it, I propose an intellectual initiative designed to transmit our social and political values, to generate individual intelligence, and to provide our young people with the perspective they need to function effectively in today's world. At the core of this intellectual initiative—yes, it too is a kind of defense initiative—lies an enhanced appreciation of the role and value of the study of history. Specifically, then, I advocate consideration of the following program:

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First, our schools should treat history as an autonomous discipline, related to, but distinct from, the social studies. This history must be sure to teach the events and the principles that have formed modern states.

Second, local communities should agree (and they can agree) on what constitutes a minimum of historical knowledge which every high school graduate, regardless of whether he or she goes on to college, must master.

Third, just as math and physics must be taught by persons who know their subject, so history must be taught by people who know history. As the Council for Basic Education has pointed out, "The preparation of history teachers should include concentration in history, taught by historians and augmented by significant study in such related fields as literature, the arts, anthropology, and the social sciences."

If taught honestly and truthfully, the study of history will give our students a grasp of their nation, a nation that the study of history and current events will reveal is still, indeed, "the last best hope on earth." Our students should know that. They *must* know that, because nations can be destroyed from without, but they can also be destroyed from within.

Americans are the heirs of a precious historical legacy. Let it never be said of us that we failed as a nation because we neglected to pass on this legacy to our children. Remember that whatever our ancestry of blood, in one sense we all have the same fathers—our Founding Fathers. Let it be said that we told our children the whole story, our long record of glories, failures, aspirations, sins, achievements, and victories. Then let us leave them to determine their own views of it all: America in the totality of its acts. If we can dedicate ourselves to that endeavor, I am confident that our students will discern in the story of their past the truth. They will cherish that truth. And it will help to keep them free. 

ATOMS FOR PEACE

Truman Was Right to Drop the Bomb

ADAM MEYERSON

No American can look back happily on President Harry Truman's decision to drop the atom bomb. At least 120,000 and perhaps as many as 240,000 Japanese civilians perished in the blasts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Tens of thousands more suffered excruciating pain from burns and sores, or died prematurely as the result of exposure to radiation. Most of the victims were women and children. And ever since, Americans have been troubled by the misery we inflicted on a nation that we now have the good fortune of calling our friend.

But this summer, as we approach the 40th anniversary of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki tragedies, it is important to remember a simple chronology. Hiroshima was obliterated on August 6, 1945, Nagasaki on August 9. One day after the second bomb, on August 10, the Empire of Japan announced its willingness to abide by the surrender terms of the Potsdam Declaration, so long as the institution of the Emperor were preserved. The United States immediately accepted, and by August 15, the most infernal war in modern history was over. In short, the two atom bombs did exactly what President Truman hoped they would. They shocked Japan into surrendering, without the need for a bloody American invasion of the Japanese archipelago. In so doing, they shortened the war by as much as a year. And they saved hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of American and Japanese lives.

Yankee troops were scheduled to land on Kyushu in November 1945, and on the central island of Honshu the following March. There can be no doubt that the battles would have been more destructive than the devastation at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. General Marshall predicted a quarter of a million to a million American casualties, with as many or more Japanese deaths. And the experience of other great battles in 1945 made it clear that civilians would bear the brunt of the violence. A hundred thousand Filipino civilians perished along with 16,000 Japanese occupation troops in the defense of Manila, and the city itself suffered greater destruction than any Allied metropolis except Warsaw. The last-ditch defense of Okinawa took the lives of between 40,000 and 70,000 Okinawan civilians, many committing hara-kiri rather than be conquered by the foreign devils.

Of course, there are some who thought that an invasion was unnecessary, and that a naval blockade would be enough to force a Japanese surrender. This was a widely held view in the U.S. Navy, and it would have been a realistic one if Japan had been governed by men who cared much about the survival of their compatriots. By the summer of 1945, Japan was in little position to fight. Most of its war factories had been demolished in the firebombing raids that left Tokyo, Osaka, Nagoya, Kobe, Yokohama, and Kawasaki in ruins and 13 million Japanese without homes. Replenishments for low fuel and food supplies would have to cross the seas, where they would be at the mercy of American submarines.

The bleakness of Japan's military prospects was fully recognized by a growing "peace party" in Tokyo that included the prime minister, the foreign minister, and Emperor Hirohito. On July 12, 1945, the foreign minister sent a diplomatic cable, read by American codebreakers, saying that "His Majesty is deeply reluctant to have any further blood lost among people on both sides and it is his desire, for the welfare of humanity, to restore peace with all possible speed." It is frequently claimed that peace would have been possible without either an invasion or the bomb, if Truman had paid more attention to such signals.

The trouble with this argument is that the "peace party" did not control Japan's guns, and its views did not prevail in the Supreme Council that made the war decisions. The fanatically suicidal war minister, General Korechika Anami, and the army and navy chiefs of staff, Yoshijuro Umezumi and Admiral Soemi Toyoda, remained opposed to surrender under virtually every circumstance. On June 8, 1945, the cabinet resolved to "prosecute the war to the bitter end." On July 27, it decided to treat the Allied surrender terms of the Potsdam Declaration with "silent contempt." The *Mainichi*, one of Tokyo's leading dailies, called the Allied ultimatum a "laughable matter."

The Emperor, meanwhile, looked on in dismay as he saw his country being destroyed. He had opposed the war from the very beginning, but though he was universally revered by his subjects, he was essentially a figurehead in

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