

Lynne Cheney's Attack on the History Standards, 10 Years Later

By Gary B. Nash

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Ten years ago—October 20, 1994 to be exact—brought a screaming headline to the op-ed pages of the *Wall Street Journal*. Under the title “The End of History,” Lynne Cheney, former head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, maligned the National History Standards that she had funded (along with the Department of Education) as a “grim and gloomy” monument to political correctness. She pronounced the standards project a disaster for giving insufficient attention to Robert E. Lee and the Wright brothers and far too much to obscure figures (such as Harriet Tubman) or patriotically embarrassing episodes (such as the Ku Klux Klan and McCarthyism).

Ms. Cheney, it will be remembered, asked the National Center for History in the Schools at UCLA to coordinate the writing of the standards that Congress had mandated in 1992. The standards were developed over thirty-two months in Los Angeles and Washington with teacher task forces working with academic historians, school administrators, and other history educators. Though approved by a national council, half of whose members were her appointees and endorsed by thirty major professional and public interest organizations, the standards were dismissed by Ms. Cheney as having no redeeming value. Her attack sparked a fierce media debate as the nation prepared for the November 1994 election.

HNN readers may remember the furor over the history standards and how some elements of them were revised after a blue-ribbon commission formed by the Council for Basic Education made recommendations. Albert Quie, former Republican governor of

Minnesota and nine-term congressman, chaired the U.S. group that reviewed the U.S. standards. Stephen Muller, president emeritus of Johns Hopkins, chaired the world history group. Both heartily endorsed the revised “basic edition” published in 1996, as did almost everyone else—except Ms. Cheney.

Charlotte Crabtree and Ross Dunn, professors at UCLA and San Diego State University respectively, joined me in writing an account of the media pyrotechnics over the National History Standards. In the book *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 1997), we recounted how Ms. Cheney’s program officer who monitored the standards project over three years, called them “a remarkable document . . . , remarkable in its ambition, its clarity, in the degree to which you have been able to obtain the consensus, the enthusiasm of teachers, and, to perhaps a lesser extent, of scholars around a good deal of this material.” The media controversy continued to fester into the summer of 1995, but at the same time educators and citizens ordered tens of thousands of the standards books. As of this writing, over 100,000 copies are in the hands of teachers, curriculum developers, textbook publishers, parents, and teacher educators. The books seem to have fulfilled their assigned role: to raise the standards for teaching history and provide guidance, particularly in the sprawling field of world history, for bringing history alive in classrooms. As the first page of the standards states, the council overseeing their construction agreed unanimously that the book would mark “a critical milestone but not the final destination in what must be an ongoing dynamic process of improvement and revision over the years to come.”

The standards have been used extensively across the country, and for eight years I have not received a single criticism of the revised

volume. But the project has still stuck in Ms. Cheney's craw. When she had a look at "Helping Your Child Learn History," an innocuous pamphlet first issued by the Department of Education (DOE) in 1993 and revised slightly for a new edition in June 2004, she flipped her lid. A call or two to the Department of Education produced quick action: pulp the 300,000 copies of the 57-page booklet still on the shelves (some 61,000 were already in the hands of parents) and then reprint 300,000 after deleting a few lines that Ms. Cheney found unacceptable. What were the radioactive lines that obliged the DOE to blow taxpayer money and a couple of trees for ten million new sheets of paper?

- the final clause (italicized) in a sentence that read: "Through the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, President George W. Bush has made clear his commitment to the goals of raising standards of achievement for all children and of providing all children with highly qualified teachers and with instruction that is based on scientific research *and that reflects the national standards for instruction in the various subject areas.*"
- a bullet under "Find out about the school's history curriculum," where parents were given questions to ask the principal of their children's school, which read: "Does the history curriculum incorporate the National Standards for History, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the U.S. Department of Education and published in 1996 by the National Center for History in the Schools."
- one line in a list of 17 web sites "that contain great links for both you and your child," including websites for National Standards for Social Studies, National Council for History Education, Family Education Network, KidSource, and National History Day. The offending website? You guessed it: "[National Standards for United States History](#)" followed by the url of UCLA's [National Center for History in the Schools](#).

That's it. Three lines, 300,000 pamphlets trashed, 300,000 reprinted, all compliments of the taxpaying public. On October 8, 2004, the *Los Angeles Times* covered the Cheney gambit on page one with the

headline, "Booklet That Upset Mrs. Cheney Is History." The paper reported that the DOE at first said the pamphlet was recalled because of typographical errors. When challenged, the DOE press secretary changed her story. The new spin was that "the final document was not the accurate reflection of policy that was approved originally" (quote from the DOE's press secretary, Susan Aspey). If that is so, then the DOE will soon recall 9 million booklets on "Helping Your Child Learn Math" (or "Science" or "Geography" or "Civics") because all these other discipline-based pamphlets reference the national standards developed in parallel with the history guidelines.

I was quoted in the *LA Times* article that Cheney's strong-arm tactic was an amazing use of taxpayer money and, more troubling, a shocking example of intellectual interference. Big Sister was at work again, I ruminated, the woman who said in 1994 that she expected an "X-version" of the history standards and got "a Y-version." Having put up half the money, she believed she was entitled to the history standards she wanted, guidelines that would exalt traditional heroes, put a happy face on the American past, and broadcast the triumph of western civilization. As Steven J. Ross, chairman of the Department of History at the University of Southern California put it in an [op-ed essay in the LA Times](#) on October 13, "Destroying books that disagree with one's vision of history will never take us closer to truth and freedom." John Hergesheimer, a much honored teacher in Whittier, California, took up pen in a letter to the editor of the *LA Times* to express his dismay "that the routine update of a useful and positive United States

government handbook for parents could be hijacked and turned into the personal vehicle for the right-wing views of one person—even if she is the wife of the vice-president.”