

Teaching about 9/11 in 2011: What Our Children Need to Know

by

LAMAR ALEXANDER
WILLIAM DAMON
LUCIEN ELLINGTON
WILLIAM GALSTON
VICTOR DAVIS HANSON
CRAIG KENNEDY
KATHERINE KERSTEN
WALTER RUSSELL MEAD
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Introduction by

CHESTER E. FINN, JR.

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We first published these ten essays (along with others) between 2002 and 2003; many thanks the essayists featured here, and to those who contributed to the original series.

For this project, thanks go to many on the Fordham team: to President Chester E. Finn, Jr. and Executive Vice President Michael J. Petrilli for seeing the value in this project and for seeing it through the finish line. Research Fellow Tyson Eberhardt assisted in many ways, from providing background research for the introduction and handling logistics for the project to managing media outreach. Policy Analyst Daniela Fairchild shepherded the report through production and Joe Portnoy, new-media manager, took care of marketing and dissemination. The cover design is courtesy of ayzek@iStockPhoto.com and the fine layout is the work of Emilia Ryan.

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INTRODUCTION

by CHESTER E. FINN, JR.

In the decade since September 11, 2001, much that affects almost every American has changed: Memorials have been built and visited. Ceremonies and commemorations have been held. Osama bin Laden has been taken out. Further acts of terrorism have been perpetrated and more (as far as we know) have been fended off. The “Arab Spring” (and summer) is transforming longstanding governance and power relationships in that part of the planet. And our domestic lives have been altered, probably forever, both by irksome inconveniences (e.g. TSA body scanners) and, more fundamentally, by the awareness that Americans really do have mortal enemies and are more vulnerable than most of us had supposed.

Yet some things haven’t changed much. These include the arrival around this time each year of a new generation of children into our schools and the challenges that their teachers face in equipping them with the skills and knowledge that young Americans need. Today—as for the past nine Septembers—that challenge includes determining what and how to teach them about both the events of September 11, 2001 in particular and the larger issues surrounding those events.

This can be daunting. It’s hard enough to impart to one’s pupils a body of basic knowledge—information and understanding about history, geography, religion, geopolitics, and more. But when it comes to September 11 and the issues surrounding it, all of that knowledge is embedded within a complex web of values, emotions, prejudices, opinions, and hopes, all them subject to intense disagreement among adults and mighty battles among the nation’s leaders. What is a fifth- or tenth-grade teacher to do?

Within months of the September 11 attacks, we at Fordham resolved to try to help educators wrestling with such challenges. We did this because we sensed a fundamental, indeed urgent, need for useful guidance but also because we detected much nonsense (and worse) spewing forth—alarming stuff that most teachers would have the good sense to ignore or repudiate but that might seduce and mislead some and thereby harm their students and thus America itself.

So we asked a number of distinguished educators, historians, and other scholars, public officials, and thoughtful pundits to share with us—and through us with teachers and the broader public—their own thinking on what and how to teach about September 11 and the issues surrounding it.

The response was gratifying, albeit not surprising. By September 2002, we were able to publish twenty-three terrific short essays in one compilation, “[September 11: What Our Children Need to Know](#).”

In the months that followed, however, the nonsense continued to spew, so we resolved to try again. We invited the original authors to revise and update their essays—most did—and we added a few more. I penned a longish introduction. And in September 2003, we brought out “[Terrorists, Despots, and Democracy: What Our Children Need to Know](#).”

Almost everything in those two volumes remains fresh and almost alarmingly germane today and I encourage you to check them both out in full. But to simplify and expedite that effort, while making our own small contribution to the tenth anniversary commemoration of the September 11 attacks, we offer here ten of the best and most enduring of those essays.

After all, America’s place on this planet is no transient topic. And it is now clearer than ever that, if we wish to prepare our children for future threats and conflicts, we must arm them with lessons from history and civics that help them learn from the victories and setbacks of their predecessors, lessons that, in Jefferson’s words, “enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom.”

Yet not every classroom instructor knows as much as they would like about these matters and some are unsure how best to present them to schoolchildren. Few get much help from their states: Most state social-studies standards for the high school grades don’t even mention the September 11 attacks. And the handling of this topic by textbooks is no better. Two scholars who recently examined the treatment of September 11 in history and civics texts told *Education Week* that “a lot of it was really cursory and lacked the specific detail you would see in the rest of the text on other things....For the most part, they didn’t want to engage kids in any kind of controversy about 9/11.”

The teacher’s challenge is often rendered harder still by leading figures in the field, especially the field of social studies. It does not exaggerate to say that the conventional wisdom on these topics that is being dispensed mirrors neither the values held by most Americans nor the innate love of democracy—and sense of accuracy and fair play—that animates most teachers.

Of what does that “conventional wisdom” consist? To answer that question, begin by recalling some of the instructional advice offered right after September 11, 2001. The worst-lesson-of-all prize probably belonged to a Maryland teacher, one of whose pupils shared this account with the *Washington Post*: “Why do some people hate America? Why did they do it? They wanted to bomb our symbols. That’s what my mom said. Because we’re bossy. That’s what my teacher said. She said it’s because we have all the weapons and we think we can boss other countries around. They’re jealous of us.”

But that teacher was not alone. In an article in the *Post* that same autumn, several prominent educators said the lesson of the attacks was that U.S. schools must focus more on multiculturalism and that our indifference to other cultures somehow made us culpable for the terrorists’ actions. We were at fault. The victim should be blamed for his victimization.

One is reminded of the frostier days of the Cold War, when unilateral disarmers produced “nuclear winter” curricula for U.S. classrooms that said, in effect, America is responsible for the world’s perilous state and, if only we would renounce our militaristic ways, everyone would be far safer. (History shows just the opposite to be true.)

Not all the dubious instructional counsel that flooded the airwaves and Internet after September 11, 2001 took the form of “blaming America.” Much more widespread was simple disregard for patriotism and democratic institutions, non-judgmentalism toward those who would destroy them, and failure to teach about the heroism of those who defend them.

Instead, article after article and website after website counseled teachers to promote tolerance, peace, understanding, empathy, diversity, and multiculturalism. Here, for example, are excerpts from a broadside by the National Association of School Psychologists:

A natural reaction to horrific acts of violence like the recent terrorist attacks on the United States is the desire to lash out and punish the perpetrators....While anger is a normal response felt by many, we must ensure that we do not compound an already great tragedy....Most importantly, adults must model tolerance and compassion in their words and behavior. They should also encourage children to explore their feelings about prejudice and hate....Violence and hate are never solutions to anger....All people deserve to be treated with fairness, respect, and dignity....Vengeance and justice are not necessarily the same.... We need to work for peace in our communities and around the world. The best way that we can stand up for our country at this point is to unite behind the principals [sic] that make us strong....Tolerance is a lifelong endeavor....Avoid stereotyping people or countries that might be home to the terrorists....Address the issue of blame factually....Do not suggest any group is responsible. Do not repeat the speculations of others, including newscasters.... Discuss how it would feel to be blamed unfairly by association....Emphasize positive, familiar images of diverse ethnic groups....Read books with your children that address prejudice, tolerance, and hate.

(Today’s “tips for educators” by the same organization regarding the handling of the tenth anniversary are in exactly the same vein, including active discouragement of “memorial” activity for “students who do not need it.”)

Some of that is needed, to be sure, but rarely did the promulgators suggest that teachers should also read books with their pupils that address patriotism, freedom, and democracy; that deal realistically with the presence of evil, danger, and anti-Americanism in the world; or that hail the bravery and sacrifice of those who, for more than two centuries, have defended our land against foreign aggressors—including our debt to those who perished or were wounded on September 11, 2001.

In May 2002, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) recycled on its website a short story, “My Name is Osama,” that had first been published in a teachers’ supplement called *Middle Level Learning*. Written by Sharifa Alkhateeb, president of the Muslim Education Council and director of the Peaceful Families Project (supported in part by the U.S. Justice Department), it is a brief and rather touching story of how an Iraqi immigrant boy with the unfortunate name of Osama is gratuitously teased, heckled, even bullied, in a U.S. school because of his name and national origin.

Such a story can be a legitimate part of a comprehensive effort to ensure that young Americans’ responses to September 11 and events in the Middle East do not include bias toward their Arab and Muslim classmates. What one wants to know, however, is whether the rest of the curriculum is there, too: the civics part, the history part, the harsher lessons about how difficult it is to safeguard American values from those who despise them in an increasingly menacing world. Why had Osama and his family migrated to U.S. shores? What is it that they came for? Why was it important to them? Where is that part of the lesson?

The biggest, richest, and politically most influential of our education organizations is the National Education Association (NEA), which created a special website called “Remember September 11.” As one browsed its recommended lessons and background guidance for teachers, the dominant impression was one of psychotherapy via the Internet. But political agendas slipped in, too. A journalist plumbing the NEA website found, for example, the union urging teachers not to “suggest any group is responsible” for the September 11 attacks. Not surprisingly, the NEA’s advice was applauded by the Council on American Islamic Relations, whose spokeswoman termed the union’s curricular materials “a well-balanced, wide range of resources teachers can use to help teach students how to appreciate diversity.” (That page has since vanished from the NEA website, although searching that website for September 11 material still yields some lusus.)

What is “well-balanced” in this context? Is “diversity” all that needs to be taught and learned? So one might gather from the NEA and other organizations. This was certainly the case with a special “teachable moments” website maintained by the NCSS. As that organization’s president, Adrian Davis, explained, its goal was to help “social studies educators...reinforce the ideals of tolerance, equity, and social justice against a backlash of antidemocratic sentiments and hostile divisions.” Nothing there about accurate history of the U.S., the Middle East, Islam, or the world. Nothing there about democratic values and their protection. Certainly nothing about patriotism. Everything was about either tolerance or mental health. (Today the Davis remarks are in a “members only” portion of the NCSS website.)

A small outfit like Fordham cannot counteract the malign influence of large national organizations like NCSS and NEA. But we can do our bit to rebut folly and offer constructive help to the field. Our goal is to lend educators a hand, to furnish constructive advice and helpful information to those who earnestly seek to do right by their students while tackling some of the most perplexing of curricular and pedagogical challenges.

That's what we tried to do eight and nine years back. And that's what these ten brief essays do.

Journalist/commentator Richard Rodriguez, perhaps best known today as an essayist on the PBS NewsHour, writes of the threat to America's future posed by our ignorance of its past.

Foreign-policy expert Walter Russell Mead writes of heroism and historian Victor Davis Hanson of America's continuing role as man's "last and greatest hope."

Craig Kennedy, president of the German Marshall Fund of the United States (and a Fordham trustee), discusses the centrality of tolerance in the American creed while Andrew Rotherham, co-founder of Bellwether Education Partners, underscores the urgency of learning history.

Stanford professor William Damon examines the meaning of freedom in a dangerous world and the role of schools in inculcating a genuinely balanced understanding of it in their pupils.

U.S. Senator (and former Education Secretary) Lamar Alexander offers seven tough questions for teachers to pose to their students—and suggests some answers.

Lucien Ellington, co-director of the Asia Program and professor of education at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, explains why our historical and civic knowledge is so weak, while veteran journalist Katherine Kersten, now a senior fellow at the Center of the American Experiment, frames the essential elements of a sound curriculum in U.S. history; William Galston of the Brookings Institution (also a White House alumnus and long-time advocate of better civic education) suggests six enduring "truths" about America.

These ten excellent essays are, to repeat, just the apex of a mountain of wise counsel and insightful analysis. You would not make a mistake to scale the entire peak—and please share whatever value you find there with colleagues, practitioners, and policymakers near and far.

Much more important, however, is to pause—not just this Sunday, but frequently and solemnly—to recall the sacrifice of life itself by some 3,000 people on September 11, 2001 and the sacrifices that America has made in the decade since then. Our children need—and deserve—to understand this and to appreciate what about America is worth fighting and dying for. We all need to recognize the obligation of adults—not just educators but all of us—to ensure that these fundamental lessons are well taught and thoroughly learned.

Teaching about 9/11 in 2011: What Our Children Need to Know

SEVEN QUESTIONS ABOUT SEPTEMBER 11

by LAMAR ALEXANDER

During a previous Senate campaign shortly after September 11, 2001, I listened carefully, as politicians do, for the words that seemed to resonate most with my audiences. To my surprise, I found there was just one sentence I could not finish before every audience interrupted me by breaking into applause: “It is time to put the teaching of American history and civics back in its rightful place in our schools so our children grow up learning what it means to be an American.”

The terrorists who attacked us on September 11 weren't just lashing out at buildings and people—they were attacking who we are as Americans. Most Americans recognize this, and that's why there has been a national hunger for leadership and discussion about our values. Parents know that our children are not being taught our common culture and shared values. National tests show that three-quarters of the nation's fourth, eighth, and twelfth graders are not proficient in civics knowledge, and one-third do not even have basic knowledge, making them civic illiterates.

That's why I made American history and civics the subject of my maiden speech and first piece of legislation in the United States Senate. By a vote of 90-0, the Senate passed my bill to create summer residential academies for outstanding teachers and students of American history and civics. Their purpose is to inspire better teaching and more learning of the key events, key persons, key ideas, and key documents that shaped the institutions and democratic heritage of the United States.

So if I were teaching about September 11, these are some of the issues I would ask my students to consider:

- *Is September 11 the worst thing to happen to the United States?* The answer, of course, is no, but I'm surprised by the number of people who say yes. It saddens me to realize that those who make such statements were never properly taught the history of our country. Many doubted America would win the Revolutionary War. The British sacked Washington and burned the White House to the ground in the War of 1812. In the Civil War, we lost more Americans than in any other conflict, as brother fought against brother. The list goes on. Children should know why we made those sacrifices and fought for the values that make us exceptional.

- *What makes America exceptional?* I began the first session of a course I taught at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government by making a list of 100 ways America is different than other countries—not always better, but unique. America's exceptionalism has been a source of fascination since de Tocqueville's trip across America in 1830, where he met Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie on the Mississippi River. His book, *Democracy in America*, is still the best description of America's unique ideals in action. Another outstanding text is *American Exceptionalism* by Seymour Martin Lipset.
- *Why is it you can't become Japanese or French, but you must become American?* If I were to emigrate to Japan, I could not become Japanese; I would always be an American living in Japan. But if a Japanese citizen came here, he could become an American, and we would welcome him with open arms. Why? Because our identity is based not on ethnicity but on a creed of ideas and values in which most Americans believe. Historian Richard Hofstadter wrote, "It is our fate as a nation not to have ideologies, but to be one." To become American citizens, immigrants must take a test demonstrating their knowledge of American history and civics.
- *What are the principles that unite us as Americans?* In Thanksgiving remarks after the September 11 attacks, President Bush praised our nation's response to terror. "I call it the American character," he said. Former Vice President Al Gore, in a speech after the attacks, said, "We should fight for the values that bind us together as a country." In my Harvard course we put together a list of some of those values: liberty, *e pluribus unum*, equal opportunity, individualism, rule of law, free exercise of religion, separation of church and state, *laissez faire*, and a belief in progress.
- *If we agree on these principles, why is there so much division in our politics?* Just because we agree on these values doesn't mean that we agree on their application. Most of our politics is about the hard work of applying these principles to our everyday lives. When we do, they often conflict. For example, when discussing President Bush's proposal to let the federal government fund faith-based charities, we know that "In God We Trust," but we also know that we don't trust government with God. When considering whether the federal government should pay for scholarships that middle- and low-income families might use at any accredited school—public, private, or religious—some object that the principle of equal opportunity can conflict with the separation of church and state.
- *What does it mean to you to be an American?* After September 11, I proposed an idea I call "Pledge Plus Three." Why not start each school day with the Pledge of Allegiance—as many schools still do—followed by a teacher or student sharing for three minutes "what it means to be an American"? Some of the newest American students will probably be some of the best speakers. I found in teaching my Harvard class that the student who best understood American identity was from the Ukraine.

- *Ask students to stand, raise their right hand, and recite the Oath of Allegiance, just as immigrants do when they become American citizens.* I did this at a speech I gave recently on my American history and civics bill. It's quite a weighty thing to "absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty" and to agree to "bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law."

Our history is the struggle to live up to the ideals that have united us and defined us from the very beginning, the principles of the American Character. If that is what students are taught about September 11, they will not only become better informed. They will strengthen our country for generations to come.

Senator **Lamar Alexander** chairs the Senate Republican Conference and serves on committees overseeing education, clean air, highways, science, appropriations, and the Tennessee Valley Authority. He is the only Tennessean ever popularly elected both governor and U.S. senator. Senator Alexander has been U.S. education secretary, University of Tennessee president, and professor at Harvard's School of Government. He chaired the National Governors' Association and President Reagan's Commission on Americans Outdoors.

FROM THE PERSONAL TO THE POLITICAL, FOR THE LOVE OF FREEDOM

by WILLIAM DAMON

For the most part, American schoolchildren are exceptionally astute when it comes to matters of personal relations. They know a lot about themselves, their families, and their friends. No doubt their fine social awareness is related to how they spend their spare time—for the most part, interacting with family and friends or consuming mass-media entertainment that focuses on the nuances of interpersonal situations (sitcoms, soaps, teen horror movies, rap songs, and so on). As active learners, contemporary children become extraordinarily sophisticated in small-scale human behavior far younger than previous, more sheltered, generations.

One thing that they learn very quickly is that they love “freedom.” For the most part, what American children mean by “freedom” is the license to do and say what they want. Because their world is bounded by themselves and their immediate social relationships, this amounts to the liberty to resist demands by others for conformity in thought and deed. Many young people in America will go to the mat for the right to make their own value judgments, to enjoy their own music, to dress as they like, to spend their time and money as they wish, and to choose their own friends. In general, our culture supports the sense of personal autonomy that young people cherish.

Unfortunately, today’s schoolchildren understand very little about the world beyond their own intimate circles of friends and family. Their ignorance most notably includes an almost complete lack of awareness about how rare their most prized possession, freedom, is in large parts of the world. Nor do they have much appreciation of what freedom means for a civic and political life that deals with matters more serious than recreational choices.

Indeed, young people in our country know practically nothing about national or global politics, and they care even less. By the end of the twentieth century, social scientists and educators were beginning to express concern about the troublesome know-nothingism that had spread among the ranks of American youth. In normal times, this would be a grave problem for the future of civic life in our democracy. But now we no longer live in normal times. We are now at war, a war that may endure well into the maturity of today’s students. It is our responsibility to prepare them for their engagement in it, and our schools need to participate in this charge. They must do a far better job of educating youngsters about the world beyond their own personal lives and pleasures.

Schools must help our children understand freedom on a national and global stage. As part of this understanding, students must learn why freedom always needs to be defended—to understand the wisdom behind the maxim that eternal vigilance is the price we pay for our liberties. And our

children must come to understand this in contemporary terms: the price of freedom in the world today; who threatens it; and what should we do, as U.S. citizens, to preserve and advance freedom in the world?

How can our schools impart this essential understanding? To begin with, they must abandon the well-intentioned but intellectually corrosive species of moral relativism that now infests public-school curricula in the name of “multiculturalism.” Schools must start teaching the plain truth about the world—namely that all cultures are not equally benign with respect to their support of individual freedom. And our schools must teach what life is like in places that do not honor freedom.

Social studies—which now emphasize tolerance for non-Western cultures and criticism of our own—must give students a living sense of what the absence of freedom really means in some parts of the world. Teach them about how writers feel in societies where the reward for writing a critical statement about the government is a death sentence. Teach them about how women feel in cultures that intentionally keep them illiterate and disenfranchised, in cultures that force them to wear veils and other smothering clothes, punish them (rather than their attackers) when they are raped, and threaten them with harm as a means of extorting dowries from their families. Draw the contrast with societies where everyone gets to vote, protest, join unions, start businesses, worship or not as they wish, and (to bring the point home) even choose their own manner of dress and leisure pursuits.

“Students must learn why freedom always needs to be defended—to understand the wisdom behind the maxim that eternal vigilance is the price we pay for our liberties.”

Once students come to understand what is really at stake when freedom is won or lost, they must learn about the history of freedom, how it has grown in some places and slipped away in others, and why that happens. Teach them how American rights were forged through suffering at Valley Forge and Selma; how utopian Russian dreams vanished into tyranny; how a budding German democracy succumbed to terrorism and divisiveness in the Weimar years; how zealous, or corrupt, dictators in the Middle East have ruled their populations through fear, thuggery, and intimidation. History should be taught as a narrative of what has gone right and what has gone wrong along the road to liberty.

In teaching history, balance is key. My daughter’s high school U.S. history course relied on the highly critical *People’s History of the United States* as a primary text. It did not offer a balanced approach. It’s an acceptable part of the reading list, but it is too lopsided to be the main source of historical knowledge. I would place the terrible errors that this critical text highlights (e.g. the Tulsa race riots, the American Indian massacres) in context of the self-corrections that they spawned. And I would point out that it

is a rare and precious freedom to allow teachers to talk with students about shortcomings of their own culture (compare, for example, with the education that students get in an Islamic *madrassa*). Students also need to learn about historical horrors in countries that have destroyed freedom—such as the Nazi pogroms, the Soviet purges, and the Cambodian killing fields. A balanced history course will give students such compelling reasons to care enough about our free society that they will eagerly defend it when it is threatened and work to correct it when it does not live up to its own high ideals.

If schools would encourage students to care about our society, this would be a crucial first step in getting them to take responsibility for it as engaged citizens. It would be a big step, but there is one more that is needed: to take responsibility for human freedom wherever it is in peril. John Dunne's *Meditation XVII*, with its famous line, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main," should be compulsory reading for American school children. In our increasingly global existence, our students need to know that, in order to protect our own freedoms, we must work to ensure the freedoms of others. We must resist people who despise freedom wherever they are, and we must discredit the warped ideologies that feed their hatred. Our schools can play a key role in this by teaching students how our constitutional rights have secured our freedoms for generations, and how America throughout her history has successfully fought the threats of enslaving ideologies.

William Damon is a professor of education at Stanford University, director of the Stanford Center on Adolescence, and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution. For the past twenty-five years, Damon has written on character development at all stages of life. Damon's recent books include *Failing Liberty 101* (Hoover Press, 2011); *The Path to Purpose: How Young People Find their Calling in Life* (2008); and *The Moral Advantage: How to Succeed in Business by Doing the Right Thing* (2004). Damon was founding editor of *New Direction for Child and Adolescent Development* and is editor in chief of *The Handbook of Child Psychology* (1998 and 2006 editions).

CIVIC AND HISTORICAL LITERACY FOR A DANGEROUS WORLD

by LUCIEN ELLINGTON

Since the events of September 11 and our nation's subsequent struggles against evil, I have been simultaneously encouraged and afraid when I experience young peoples' reactions. My encouragement comes from personal conversations with children and teenagers and through watching television and reading accounts of what countless young people said about the very real threats to our civilization. Most young Americans have exhibited intuitively patriotic reactions to our nation's pursuit of the enemies of the United States.

My fear is rooted in the fact that most of those patriotic reactions seem only intuitive. I am in daily contact with far too many young people who are confused or ignorant about the history of this country, other cultures, and what it really means to be an American citizen. Even the future history and social-science teachers in my classes at a middle-level state university often don't know seminal dates and events in world and U.S. history and lack other basic knowledge from the social sciences that is essential to civic literacy. Numerous studies illustrating national civic and historical ignorance on the part of the public in general, and young people in particular, confirm my own impressions. One survey conducted shortly before the second Gulf War indicated that, although the majority of Americans could not find Iraq on a world map, the problem was particularly serious among students who were in their late teens and early twenties. What more graphic evidence is required that students are not learning the most basic historical and social-science content?

Why are we largely, in times that require the most informed citizens, a nation of civic and historical illiterates? Though this situation has many causes, the primary reasons are the low level of social-studies instruction in the nation's schools and the almost complete lack of clear history standards in the states. Other factors exacerbate these problems:

- *The lack of emphasis on content knowledge in colleges of education and university history departments.* Most social-studies education professors denigrate content knowledge as “trivial pursuits.” Most history professors who work with future teachers think it beneath them to ask objective questions that ascertain whether a student knows something as basic as the decade in which the Civil War was fought. When asked why students aren't held accountable for actually knowing—say, the date of the fall of the Roman Empire in the West—the typical historian will respond that this kind of content should have been learned in middle or high school. Theoretically, the historians are correct, but they have little inkling of vacuous fads—like multiple intelligences and constructivism—that rob students of the chance to acquire genuine historical knowledge in their K-12 classrooms. The lack of content-oriented classroom history instruction in the lower grades requires academic historians to do the unthinkable and teach the basics to college students.

- *The clear ideological bias that many education and history professors exhibit.* Contemporary and historical comparisons provide strong evidence that the United States, despite our flaws, is one of the world's most evolved nations. All nations have used schools to create a sense of social cohesion in the young based upon common historical and civic knowledge. Achievement of student social cohesion through knowledge of our traditions and institutions should be a paramount goal of all history and social-science teachers. Good teachers can achieve this goal without resorting to jingoism or ignoring our societal flaws. Unfortunately, as several studies indicate, a disproportionately high number of the current generation of academic historians, because of their own political leanings, do not agree with the notion of positive American exceptionalism. Most social-studies education professors, as a colleague and I have learned from our own research, are ideologically to the left of the typical history teacher and are therefore likely to teach that we are a severely flawed society. Our graduating education majors do not leave university with a clear idea that they have a duty to promote love of country through their instruction, or even to impact the content knowledge required to present an honest account of American and world history.

- *Most states' meager requirements to teach history and social science.* Typically, teachers can teach history, civics, and economics without an academic major in the subject they teach, and with only a smattering of lower level content requirements in several of these areas. Since the requirements are so lax, it is quite common for athletic coaches to “qualify” to teach history, regardless of their background. Students will never learn any subject if their instructors are ignorant of it.

- *The scarce amount of history and civics actually taught in early grades.* Most young people who love history and are good at it first became excited about the heroes and villains of the past when they were small children. Yet, thanks to more than seventy years of the “expanding horizons” social-studies curriculum in elementary schools—a progressive education relic with no empirical research base, whereby young students learn about “our friends and neighbors on the police force” instead of Paul Revere or Rosa Parks—children have very little exposure to the stories of heroes, battles, victories, and defeats that most of them would find interesting. So, it is almost a guarantee that young children won't get excited about history, since they have so little exposure to it.

- *The contraction of what little early grade history now exists in favor of reading and mathematics.* Although the No Child Left Behind Act is a much-needed step in improving standards in public schools, its relentless focus on reading and math leaves even less class time for civics and history instruction since many administrators and teachers think instruction in these subjects won't improve the standardized test scores for which they are accountable.

In our post-September 11, 2001 world, it is more important than ever that these shortcomings be fixed. Specifically:

- State governments should replace generic social-studies teacher-certification requirements with a requirement that secondary history or social-science teachers have the equivalent of an academic major in history, economics, or government.
- There should be a national campaign to rid elementary schools of the “expanding horizons” curriculum and replace it with one that is solidly grounded in exciting and rich history, civics, and geography content—similar to that of the E.D. Hirsch-inspired Core Knowledge Curriculum.
- Policymakers and the general public should realize that, although literacy and numeracy for all are imperative, achievement of that goal can be rendered compatible with student acquisition of solid education in American and world history, civics, geography, and economics so long as administrators and teachers carefully structure their curricula and classroom assignments.

The solution to our students’ widespread historical and civic illiteracy won’t be easy, but the times demand it. Now more than ever, there is an absolutely critical need for thoughtful citizens who understand both national and international affairs.

Lucien Ellington is senior fellow at FPRI’s Wachman Center and UC Foundation professor of education at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. He holds advanced degrees in history, economics education, and education; is the recipient of scholarship and grant-writing awards at his university; and has been awarded an Asian Studies Development Fellowship by the East-West Center and two Wilbur Foundation Fellowships. Active in history and social-science education and educational reform, he served as president of two state social-studies councils and as a consultant for the state of Indiana, the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence, and the Core Knowledge and Thomas B. Fordham Foundations.

SIX TRUTHS ABOUT AMERICA

by WILLIAM GALSTON



Question: What should teachers teach their students about September 11 and the momentous events flowing from it?

My answer: Some of the most important truths about American civic life.

First, there is such a thing as civic virtue, and whether or not citizens possess it can be a matter of life and death. The memory of police, firefighters, and random civilians doing their duty (and more) in the face of overwhelming danger is as indelible as are the images of the collapsing World Trade Center and the maimed Pentagon. The stunning live pictures of our troops fighting in Iraq showed us how much rests on the discipline and dedication of our armed forces, many of whom are barely out of high school.

Because civic virtue is not innate but must be learned, we must pay careful attention to the processes—institutional and informal—through which it is cultivated. Public schools have an important role to play in encouraging thoughtful citizenship, not only in civics classes but also through student government and extracurricular activities that teach young people how to organize groups and work together toward shared goals.

We must ask ourselves whether civic virtue is something that can be delegated to others, so that some act while the rest of us watch, or whether it requires engagement from everyone. We cannot all fight fires or foreign foes. But we can all pay attention to public affairs, vote, serve on juries, and discharge the modest obligations our country asks of us in return for the blessings of American citizenship.

Second, from its inception, our country has been nourished by flows of immigrants from many nations; never more so than during the past four decades, when our population has been enriched by new citizens from every corner of the globe, representing an astonishing range of cultures and religions. For all the talk of our increasing diversity, we have learned once again that Americans possess a civic identity that both includes and surmounts our differences. Collectively, the attacks on September 11 were an assault on all Americans, without regard to their race, creed, or national origin, and we responded to it as one nation. We watched together, mourned together, gained strength and resolve from one another.

Our armed forces reflect the diversity of our population, but they also offer a model of how these differences can be incorporated into shared standards and common purposes. Our task in the years ahead is to ensure that our society as a whole matches the stunning level of social integration that our military has achieved.

Third, even in a democracy that mistrusts politics and abjures concentrated power, leadership matters. The president's exemplary conduct in the first dreadful weeks after September 11 helped rally us to a sense of mission and significance. The core of democratic leadership, we learned once again, is public discourse that makes clear the principles for which we act and responsibly declares the facts that should guide our judgment about what we must do together.

In this context, it is especially damaging when doubts are raised about facts asserted by our leaders. The failure to find Iraqi weapons of mass destruction in the months immediately after the end of major conflict in Iraq—and the subsequent doubts raised about the veracity of the evidence the president presented in the State of the Union address in the run-up to the war—weakened people's confidence that they had been told the unvarnished truth about the threats our country faced. The maintenance of the public's trust is essential, especially in matters of life and death.

In a democracy, moreover, the basic premises of public policy should always be open for candid discussion, and no one should claim a monopoly on patriotism. Americans of good will disagree about the war in Iraq and about President Bush's decision that actions to preempt and prevent future attacks would henceforth be more central to America's national defense strategy. Democratic debate should always be robust, but it should never be embittered by charges that legitimate dissent is unpatriotic.

“Because civic virtue is not innate but must be learned, we must pay careful attention to the processes—institutional and informal—through which it is cultivated.”

Fourth, in the face of danger, it is hard to keep our balance and safeguard essential liberties. In the weeks after September 11, the president's leadership helped put a lid on what might otherwise have been escalating attacks on Arab and Muslim Americans. At the same time, new laws requested by the administration and enacted by the Congress have granted the government emergency powers that could lead to unwarranted infringements of freedom if not carefully monitored. Many Americans have been troubled by the lengthy detention of hundreds of individuals without formal charges or access to lawyers, and by the incarceration of captured combatants in circumstances that some believe are inconsistent with international law.

It remains to be seen whether history will judge these measures as harshly as it does the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. But the possibility is sobering, and it is in no way unpatriotic for citizens to pose such questions. The venerable maxim that eternal vigilance is the price of liberty is as true today as ever before.

Fifth, the relation between religion and politics in the United States, though hardly uncontested, is a hard-won accomplishment of great worth. We have managed to avoid the Scylla of state secularism

and the Charybdis of theocracy while fostering an astonishing variety and vitality of religious faith and observance.

Nonetheless, there are groups in the world with very different ideas about the proper relation between religion and politics, and we must ask ourselves whether what we take for granted should serve as the single model for all nations. This question will become especially pressing as we continue to create opportunities for the people of Iraq to frame new political institutions for their country, because many Iraqis believe that their religion should have more of an official role than is consistent with American constitutional principles.

Sixth, whether we like it or not, our country is enmeshed in the world beyond our borders. As the world's most powerful nation, our actions inevitably affect everyone else. We are disliked in some quarters because of the principles we espouse, the policies we pursue, and the friends we support.

We must accept the burden of protecting ourselves and our friends against the enemies we cannot help making. At the same time, as the authors of the Declaration of Independence understood well, it is important to have a decent respect for the opinions of mankind. This means not only candidly stating the reasons that impel us to act, but also paying attention to the views of nations that disagree with us. This is especially important when, as is often the case, the ends we pursue depend on the cooperation of other nations, including those that disagree with us.

For example, as American involvement in the Middle East has required significant numbers of troops for years rather than months, the drain on the U.S. military and treasury has increased. Persuading those of our allies who disagreed with us about the war to share the burden of building a durable democratic peace is important and cannot be done without some measure of patience, humility, and mutual forbearance.

William Galston is the Ezra K. Zilkha Chair in Governance Studies and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. Formerly the dean of public policy at the University of Maryland, Dr. Galston specializes in issues of American public philosophy and political institutions. In the 1990s, he served as deputy assistant for domestic policy to President Clinton, and later as executive director of the National Commission on Civic Renewal.

PRESERVING AMERICA, MAN'S GREATEST HOPE

by VICTOR DAVIS HANSON

September 11, 2001 brought back to us ancient wisdom that has often been forgotten or caricatured in this age of multiculturalism, situational ethics, and moral relativism. Freedom, democracy, an independent judiciary, and the dignity of the individual are not innate to the human species. They are fragile ideas that must be taught to our youth in each generation—and then protected by us all from enemies who will always fear and hate us for what we are, and who will therefore often strive to destroy all that we hold dear.

Not all cultures are equal in their moral sensibilities; few dictators, theocrats, tribal leaders, or communists welcome the introspection and self-criticism that are necessary for moral improvement. So before we seek guidance from others abroad or adjust our policies to an apparent international consensus, Americans must first ask of other nations in the world: Do their people vote, do they respect the rights of women, do they enjoy freedom, and can they express themselves without audit or censorship? Such requisites are as valid for the United Nations as they are for other nations, especially when an autocratic China is on the Security Council and many voting members of the General Assembly would never extend such democratic privileges to their own people.

“The idea of cultural relativism was blown apart by the terrorists as surely as our architectural icons in New York and Washington, D.C.”

Americans should also remember that we are a multiracial society—the world’s most successful—bound together by a shared commitment to Western values and the U.S. Constitution. Although we are of every color, religion, and ethnic background, we are not a multicultural state. True, we are enriched by music, food, and literature from abroad, but not by the world’s bleak alternatives to freedom, open markets, constitutional government, and the rule of law. The terrorists killed us precisely for our shared core values, for our *unum*, not our *pluribus*.

The idea of cultural relativism was blown apart by the terrorists as surely as our architectural icons in New York and Washington, D.C. The failure to exercise moral judgment—denying that Islamic fundamentalism and fascism is a great plague upon the world that would destroy the rights of women, the very notion of religious tolerance, and all the gifts of the Enlightenment—is not proof of forbearance, but of abject ethical decrepitude. All the great evils of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—chattel slavery, German Nazism, Japanese militarism, and Soviet communism—led to the ruin of countless millions of innocents because millions of other Westerners were either too timorous,

too confused, too ignorant of, or too reticent about, these movements' innately evil natures and the great peril each posed to free peoples.

By the same token, we must take up the challenge of civic education—through the reading of seminal texts and uncensored, candid class discussion—to end the dangerous idea of moral equivalence. In the present conflict, we must reject the notion that the loss of innocent civilians deliberately murdered in a time of peace is somehow the same as accidental civilian deaths that occur from efforts to punish evildoers during a time of war. The moral choice that confronts man tragically has never been the stark antithesis between wholly good and purely evil, but rather the obligation to distinguish the mostly good from the mostly bad. The demand for perfection as a prerequisite for action is not only utopian and unworkable, but in our present crisis fatal for millions who depend on the United States to back its moral vision with real power to thwart killers and protect the weak and innocent.

Finally, we should always be mindful of the limits that are imposed upon our brief lives by nature and by God. History teaches that those omnipotent angels who would solve all man's problems if just granted enough power over others—to create a new master race or a new proletariat man—end up as abject devils. Racism, sexism, homophobia, and economic exploitation: these are the sins not of America, but of man himself. We feel these oppressions more acutely than others in the world precisely because we alone have the institutions, the power, and the will to battle and often overcome them. *But in our heightened expectations for instant redress, we should never allow our occasional disappointments as mere humans to change or subvert America*—the nature of its laws, the spirit of its constitution, the telling of its past or the culture of its people—which history proves has offered man his last and greatest hope.

Victor Davis Hanson is the Martin and Illie Anderson Senior Fellow in Residence in Classics and Military History at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, a professor of Classics Emeritus at California State University, Fresno, and a nationally syndicated columnist for Tribune Media Services. He is also the Wayne & Marcia Buske Distinguished Fellow in History, Hillsdale College, where he teaches each fall semester courses in military history and classical culture. He was awarded the National Humanities Medal in 2007 and the Bradley Prize in 2008.

DEFENDING AMERICAN TOLERANCE

by CRAIG KENNEDY

Some commentators have tried to argue that the United States was targeted on September 11, 2001 because of the irresponsible use of American economic and military power in the rest of the world. In this wrong-headed view, al-Qaeda was simply attacking an “imperialist power.” However, the real core of Osama bin Laden’s hatred of America was his opposition to open, secular, and democratic societies where individuals have rights that are not linked to their religion, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity. For fanatics of all stripes, the basic freedoms that Americans enjoy—and defend so vigorously—are a threat to their goal of creating societies based on narrow and unforgiving ideologies that have little room for the civil and political liberties that we take for granted. In the twenty-first century, the threats to democratic states will come from states and organizations that view democratic and open societies as the enemy.

We should be proud of American tolerance. In the days after September 11, 2001, some feared we would see a great outpouring of anti-Islamic and anti-Arab sentiment in the United States. Despite a few well-publicized attacks, however, most Americans had the opposite reaction. They reached out to their Islamic and Arab neighbors; stood guard outside mosques and Arab cultural centers; and bought books by the thousands on Islam and the Arab world. While others want to view us as a racist and intolerant country, the United States may be more tolerant than any other democracy in the world.

In Germany, France, and Great Britain, respectable politicians can still make speeches characterizing certain ethnic groups in ways that are absolutely unacceptable in the United States. In those same countries, attacks upon immigrants and on mosques, synagogues, and other structures associated with religious and ethnic minorities are a common occurrence. While similar attacks on buildings or individuals in the United States would be widely reported, little attention is given to these relatively frequent acts of intolerance in Europe.

The point is not that Europe is bad, but rather that Americans can feel very good about the tolerant society that we have created. It is not perfect by any means. Racial, religious, and ethnic prejudices still exist. However, when compared to other open societies in the world, the United States has succeeded in creating an atmosphere in which immigrants, religious minorities, and others outside of the mainstream are not just tolerated, but also actively integrated into our society. This our students need to appreciate. This our teachers need to teach them.

Craig Kennedy has been president of the German Marshall Fund (GMF) since 1995. Under his leadership, GMF has focused its activities on bridging U.S.-European differences on foreign policy, economics, immigration, and the environment. As president of the Joyce Foundation from

1986 to 1992, he built the Foundation's environmental program and launched a new program on U.S. immigration policy. He serves on the board of the nonprofit Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, the Rocky Mountain Institute, and the European Foundation Center.

WHAT IS “EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY”?

by KATHERINE KERSTEN



Our children are living in perilous times. To prepare them to preserve their heritage of freedom in this dangerous world, we must place education aimed at cultivating democratic citizenship at the heart of the school curriculum.

Education for democratic citizenship has two central components. First, our young people should come to understand—and embrace—the principles of liberty, equality, and justice upon which this nation was founded. They should learn about the institutions that make self-government possible, and become acquainted with democracy’s unique historical roots. Second, they should develop the qualities of character that mark true citizens: courage, loyalty, responsibility, gratitude to forebears, and a self-sacrificing devotion to the common good. As democratic citizens, they must have a capacity for judgment, an ability to discern their duty, and a love for—and desire to perpetuate—the republic.

The heart of civic education is the study of American history and government. In recent decades, however, our schools have fallen woefully short in these areas, as evidenced by the abysmal results from the 2001 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), on which more students scored “below basic” in American history than any other subject. (This trend hasn’t subsided in more recent iterations of the NAEP.)

A glance at the textbooks that dominate U.S. history and government classrooms suggests why. Today’s standard texts are dry, lacking in detail, monotonous, and politically tendentious. Such books could never inspire students to cherish their heritage of freedom. To foster democratic citizenship, we must fundamentally change the way our schools teach history and government. We must work to tell America’s dramatic story in a way that engages young people’s imaginations, excites their gratitude, and reveals what is at stake in the American experiment.

America’s story has two major themes: principles and people. Our challenge is to bring both to life for students. In teaching principles, we should make liberal use of original documents, as well as the stirring rhetoric of the Revolutionary and Civil War eras. The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Federalist Papers, the great speeches of George Washington, Patrick Henry, and Abraham Lincoln—all eloquently capture the essence of the American creed of liberty and equality, of majority rule and minority rights.

As students study these documents, they should dissect and debate the fundamental ideas from which our nation’s political vision springs. On the subject of natural rights, for example, they could read not just Lincoln, but also Stephen Douglas; not just Frederick Douglass, but also John C. Calhoun. By

exploring the assumptions and implications of these competing interpretations, students are likely to develop a reasoned allegiance to the principles that define our common life.

In addition to learning America's founding principles, students need to know our nation's history. By studying political history, they will discover how their forebears translated democratic ideas into institutions and practices. To grasp America's future possibilities, they must learn about the great statesmen, lawgivers, explorers, military heroes, inventors, economic innovators, and social crusaders whose decisions and actions have given our nation its shape.

A central part of America's story is its status as a nation of immigrants. For generations, the world's "tired and poor" have streamed here to take advantage of our extraordinary economic freedom and opportunity. Yet few contemporary students understand or value this aspect of their heritage. To rectify that situation, education for democratic citizenship should include the stories of immigrants like Elie Wiesel, Frank Capra, and Jaime Escalante, who endured great hardships to live the American dream.

"We must work to tell America's dramatic story in a way that engages young people's imaginations, excites their gratitude, and reveals what is at stake in the American experiment."

A curriculum that centers on America's founding principles and history will lay the groundwork for democratic citizenship. But students need a broader context for informed decision-making: They must understand the place of America's experiment in ordered liberty in the larger world. Our young people need to know where else in the world self-government has taken root, and why—and where it has not, and why. They must be familiar with the various systems of government and social organization that compete with liberal democracy. Finally, they must study democracy's enemies and analyze its vulnerabilities. (An eloquent guide here is "Education for Democracy," a statement—with accompanying curricular guidelines—issued in 1987 by the American Federation of Teachers, the Educational Excellence Network, and Freedom House in conjunction with the bicentennial of the Constitution.)

This means, first, that our students must make a special study of the history of Western civilization. The West gave birth to representative government and the unique ideas that undergird it, including natural rights, freedom of conscience, and the rule of law. In addition, students must become familiar with the history, geography, and political systems of other areas—today, most urgently, the Middle East—whose societies have not been receptive to democracy.

Finally, our young people need to understand the ideas and forces that threaten democracy and the potential costs of defending or extending freedom. By studying World War II and America's nearly

fifty-year Cold War with Communism, they can learn much about the policies that are likely to strengthen democracy, and those that are likely to undermine it. Likewise, by examining our nation's post-war nation-building efforts in Japan and Germany, the Marshall Plan in Europe, and our effort to contain Communism through the Vietnam War, they can assess the benefits and risks of attempts to spread freedom and prosperity to other lands. Informed citizens need to be knowledgeable on all these subjects. In the end, however, teaching young people to be good citizens requires more than conveying knowledge. It also requires encouraging the cultivation of certain traits of character. In a word, it requires what the ancient Greeks called a *paragon*, or character ideal.

Many students today have difficulty distinguishing between a celebrity and a hero. We can help them to discern that all-important difference by acquainting them with champions of democracy and inspiring them to say, "I want to be like that."

To that end, our students need to hear the heroic stories of Washington at Valley Forge. They need to hear Nathan Hale's last words. They should also hear the voices of ordinary Americans, like Union soldier Sullivan Ballou, who wrote movingly to his wife before the Battle of Bull Run about his love of country. Novels and stories are another powerful vehicle for conveying the virtues of the citizen and patriot. My own children have thrilled to *Johnny Tremain*, and I still remember how moved I was at reading Edward Everett Hale's "The Man Without a Country" in ninth grade.

Our task as educators is to help young people see that America is worthy of their love and to help them become worthy of their heritage as American citizens.

Katherine Kersten is a veteran journalist, columnist, and author whose work has appeared in many major newspapers and magazines. She is a senior fellow at the Center of the American Experiment, a nonpartisan Minnesota public-policy organization that focuses on free-market solutions to national and local problems.

FORGING HEROES

by WALTER RUSSELL MEAD

We did not discover on September 11, 2001 that we have enemies, or even that we live in a dangerous world. What we discovered that day was that organized groups of terrorists have both the will and the ability to create terrible devastation within the United States. Americans today face a new kind of danger; the world we live in is neither a peaceful place nor one in which our security can be taken for granted.

That was the bad news, and there is no point in pretending that it isn't serious and disturbing. From the president on down, Americans are rightly concerned and worried about the dangers we face.

“All students should be encouraged to think about what makes heroes and how...we can all be heroes in our daily lives.”

But September 11, 2001 also gave rise to some good news. First and foremost, there was the courage and heroism that so many Americans showed on that fateful day. There were the heroes of the New York City police and fire departments who ran into burning buildings to help victims escape. There were the hundreds of workers in the World Trade Center who helped one another get out. There were the heroes on Flight 93 who, when it was clear that the terrorists who had hijacked their plane were intent on using it as a weapon, organized a counter-attack that foiled the hijackers and saved untold lives in Washington, D.C. At a moment's notice, as soon as danger struck, hundreds and thousands of ordinary Americans

who were going about their ordinary business—ordinary Americans who were Muslims, Christians and Jews; men and women; all races, all ethnic groups, all age groups; people from all parts of the country and all walks of life—all of a sudden turned into heroes.

Americans showed on September 11, 2001 that we are still a nation of heroes. All students should be encouraged to think about what makes heroes and how—like Gotham's policemen and firemen who continued doing the right thing even when it became difficult and dangerous—we can all be heroes in our daily lives.

Younger students should also be reassured that policemen, firemen, teachers, and other adults stand ready to protect them if danger strikes. Moreover, Congress and the president are working to strengthen our defenses against new attacks. Protecting the American people from new terrorist attacks is now our government's number one priority. That is good news and students should understand it.

Finally, students should reflect on our values and the values that shape American society. We don't want to live in the kind of world the terrorists want to make—a world ruled by fear, one in which there is only one way to think and believe. Students should think about what freedom means in their own lives and why it is worth defending.

Walter Russell Mead is the James Clarke Chace professor of foreign affairs and humanities at Bard College, and the editor-at-large of *The American Interest*. From 1997 to 2010, he was a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, serving as the Henry A. Kissinger senior fellow for U.S. foreign policy from 2003 until his departure. His book, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (2002), was widely hailed as a study that will change how Americans and others think about U.S. foreign policy. It received the Lionel Gelber Award in 2002 for the best book in English on international relations.

AMERICA: ALWAYS VULNERABLE, NEVER INEVITABLE

by RICHARD RODRIGUEZ

Through the dust of September 11, 2001, America's children need to see clearly a terrible truth: There is nothing inevitable about our civilization—nothing inevitable about American individualism, freedom of movement and social mobility, or our secular tolerance. All can be undone.

For my parents, immigrants to this country, America seemed surprising and new. On the other hand, because I was born here I assumed America. I assumed that my parents' hard work would gain us passage to the middle class; I assumed that women and men of every race could vote; I assumed freedom of opinion, just as I assumed that people of various religions could live as neighbors.

Perhaps such rosy assumptions are inevitable in the young. The old know change; the young know only the given. Similarly, because America is a young nation, we easily assume our civilization as a given. Older nations, by contrast, have seen their great cities toppled, the beliefs and assumptions of generations overturned overnight.

When I was in school, U.S. history classes seemed happily fated. There were past calamities, to be sure—slavery, the massacre of American Indians, the mistreatments suffered by the poor—but these were mere obstacles to the present, obstacles overcome by battles or treaties or acts of Congress, or by the lucky coincidence of heroic lives and national need. As a boy, I loved American history, precisely for its lack of tragedy. I loved Ben Franklin and the stories of the Underground Railroad and the New Deal, because everything led happily to me, living at 935 39th Street in Sacramento, California.

The man awoke, years later, to see jet airliners (the symbol of our mobility) turned against us by terrorists; to see the collapse of the World Trade Center (the symbol of our global capitalism); to see a wall of the Pentagon (the assurance of our self-defense) in flame. What I realized that Tuesday morning is that America is vulnerable to foreign attack.

But I wonder now if we understand that our civilization has always been vulnerable. Our American values and laws emerged over time, after false starts and despite many near-reversals. For example, our tradition of religious tolerance and secularism, that today makes America home to every religion

“There is nothing inevitable about our civilization—nothing inevitable about American individualism, freedom of movement and social mobility, or our secular tolerance.”

in the world, was not born easily or quickly. Mormons, Jews, Catholics—a variety of persons have in the past suffered religious persecution at the hands of their American neighbors. Today, to their shame and ours, there are some in America who attack Muslims.

Lacking a sense of the tragic in U.S. history books, our children never are taught that America finally was formed against and despite the mistakes and reversals we committed against our own civilization. Now, our children glance up to wonder at the low-flying plane on the approaching horizon. They need, also, to look back in time, to see America ever-invented, forged through difficult decades into a civilization. That civilization was always at risk. Always vulnerable. Never inevitable. Not just because of threats from without. But from our own ignorance of all we possessed.

Richard Rodriguez is a contributing editor at New America Media in San Francisco. He writes regularly for several newspapers and magazines, both in the United States and in England. He has also written an autobiographical trilogy on class, ethnicity, and race: *Hunger for Memory* (1982), *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (1992), and *Brown: The Last Discovery of America* (2002).

A BASIC EDUCATION FOR THE POST-9/11 WORLD

by ANDREW J. ROTHERHAM

The past ten years have shown the importance of ensuring that Americans understand their history and the broad contours of the world around them. For the overwhelming majority of Americans, public education is how we learn these things. That is why unity about some core purposes and content in public education is essential in our diverse and increasingly individualized society.

The September 11, 2001 attacks and the subsequent war in Iraq brought the question of content to a head, and heated debates rage about how and what to teach concerning these events. Yet September 11 and Iraq are distinct issues. The relativism and “blame America” sentiment in the wake of September 11 was largely based on ideology and preexisting positions rather than the facts and gravity of a major attack on our soil and way of life. The Iraq situation presents a more complicated set of issues, one in which reasonable people disagree about the wisdom and efficacy of “preemptive” warfare as well as the magnitude of the threat the Hussein regime posed to the United States.

Talented teachers can always tailor lessons to reflect current events. But the fluidity of the current environment, coupled with bona-fide disagreements about foreign policy and defense strategy, makes trying to develop model curricula to teach about these issues a Sisyphean task. A wiser and more manageable project for educators and schools is to tackle their students’ generalized dearth of content-rich curriculum and effective teaching about civics, history, geography, and religion. Grounding the discussion in these subjects enables students to understand current issues in context. The role for educators is not to teach students what to think about al-Qaeda, Iraq, or the next crisis, but rather to give them information so they can intelligently think about it for themselves.

We can start to do this by rethinking what we mean by curricular “basics” in today’s world. These must come to include understanding the history and functioning of our democracy, a reasonable grasp of world history, and knowledge of the world’s major religions. These are not new subjects, but they have taken on far greater importance in the post September 11 world.

Crooner Sam Cooke is not the only American who doesn’t know much about history. It is essential that students learn about the texts and ideas that helped launch our nation. These documents can be studied in differing depths depending on children’s age and sophistication, but the Constitution, Bill of Rights, and Declaration of Independence can help youngsters of every age to understand the foundations of our nation, its democratic traditions, and the guiding principles of its founders. Too often, we teach only what these documents say and not why they are so important to the health of our nation and its ideals.

Understanding these documents, the liberal traditions they embody, and the sweep of American history in which they play so large a role provides vital context when students study other parts of the world.

Many of our cherished institutions and ideas—including popularly elected governments, a free press, and religious pluralism—do not exist in the nations that breed terrorism. And these institutions did not arise here and do not survive here by accident but, rather, through blood, sacrifice, and vigilance.

Good instruction in geography and world history is also essential to understanding the antecedents of today's challenges and the interconnectedness of today's world. The importance of teaching history is obvious; without it, how can one make heads or tails of geopolitical issues? Similarly, at a time when only about one in three Americans has a passport and even fewer travel internationally, geography instruction must cut deeper than lines on a map, landmarks, and cuisine. Students must learn about the political, economic, and social environments in other countries, because these factors profoundly shape international issues.

Today it's impossible to make sense of current events without a basic understanding of the history of Islam and its major theological divisions. Learning about Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism also gives students a richer understanding of their world and the causes of some of its most virulent conflicts. Unfortunately, teaching about religion in schools is too often a casualty of the culture wars or unwarranted anxiety about what the First Amendment does and does not permit in public-school classrooms. That must be rectified. Beyond the nostrums of left and right, there is room to fashion a curriculum on this complex yet vital aspect of history.

“Content knowledge is the essential ingredient of real thinking.”

All of these subjects are inherently political, but the stakes are too high to allow political considerations to block or distort their consideration. Just prior to the first anniversary of September 11, for example, spurred by reporting in the *Washington Times*, allegedly anti-American curricular advice on the National Education Association's website became a *cause célèbre* among conservatives. Though the *Times's* account was misleading, the ensuing fracas obscured the deeper education problem: how lacking in serious content most of the proposed lessons were.

Content knowledge is the essential ingredient of real thinking and too often our emphasis on “teaching children how to think” fails to ensure that they have something to think about. When it comes to al-Qaeda, Iraq, and future challenges, the failure to impart essential information and give students a framework for analyzing these issues means we imperil informed debate. That is a most unfortunate way to test Jefferson's notion that an informed citizenry is essential for a healthy democracy.

Andrew J. Rotherham is a co-founder and partner at Bellwether Education, a nonprofit organization working to improve educational outcomes for low-income students. Rotherham leads

Bellwether’s thought leadership, idea generation, and policy-analysis work. He also writes the weekly “School of Thought” column for *TIME* and the *Eduwonk* blog and is the co-publisher of “Education Insider,” a federal policy-research tool produced by Whiteboard Advisors. Rotherham previously served at the White House as special assistant to the president for domestic policy during the Clinton administration and is a former member of the Virginia Board of Education.