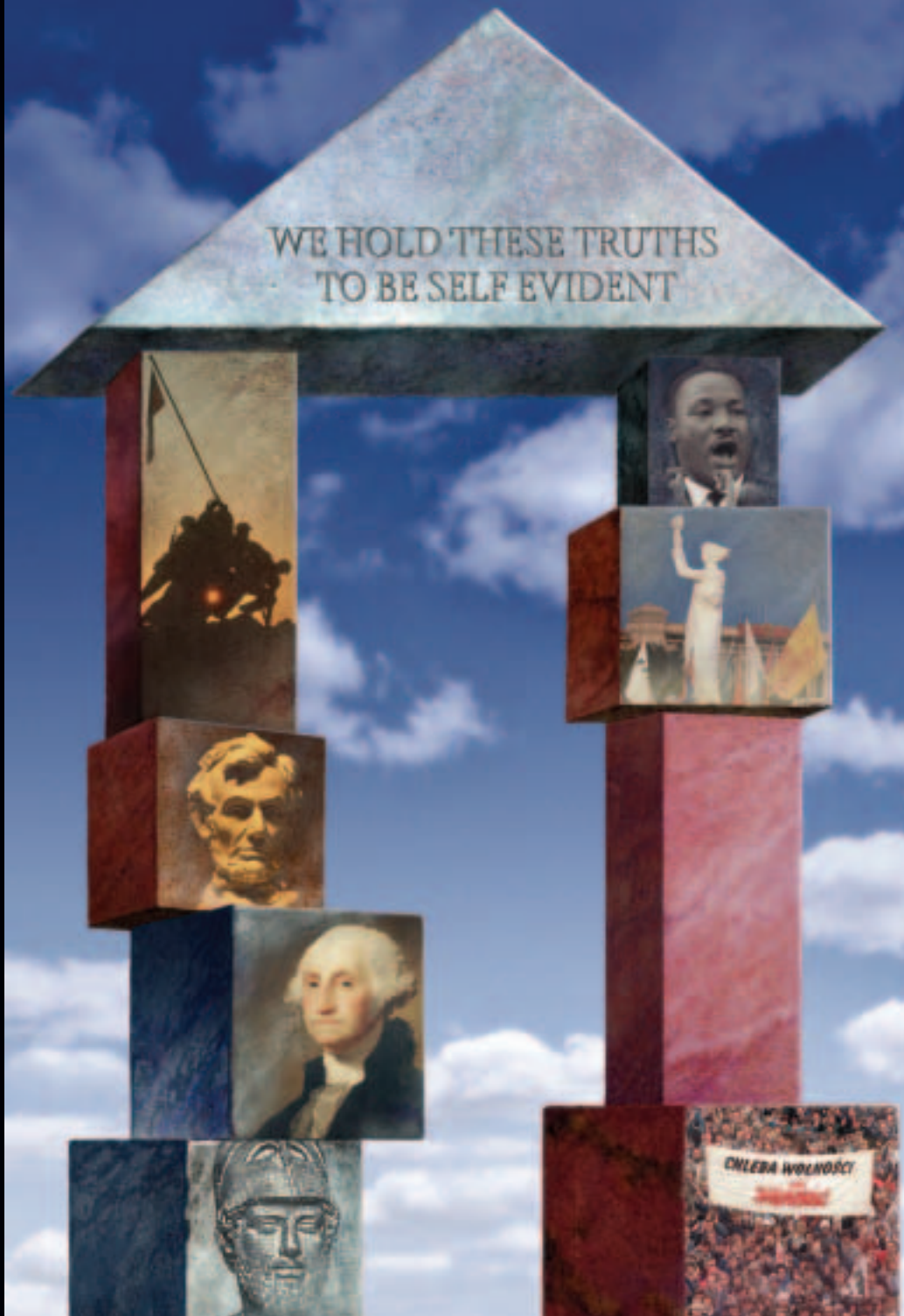
Education for Democracy



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Education for Democracy

Albert Shanker Institute
555 New Jersey Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20001

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The Albert Shanker Institute, endowed by the American Federation of Teachers and named in honor of its late president, is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to three themes—children's education, unions as advocates for quality, and both civic education and freedom of association in the public life of democracies. Its mission is to generate ideas, foster candid exchanges, and promote constructive policy proposals related to these issues.

The institute commissions original analyses, organizes seminars, sponsors publications and subsidizes selected projects. Its independent Board of Directors is composed of educators, business representatives, labor leaders, academics, and public policy analysts.

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Education for Democracy

Renewing Our Commitment

In recognition of the vital role our public schools play in the preparation of citizens and the creation of a common civic culture, a broad cross section of prominent Americans from various fields—education, government, public policy, labor, business, civil and human rights—came together in 1987 to issue *Education for Democracy: A Statement of Principles*. The purpose of this call was to offer perspective and encouragement to teachers and schools as they sought to instill in our youngsters a deep attachment to democratic values and institutions. The document was widely read and well-received.

More than 15 years have now passed, and much has happened during that period. On the education front, the standards movement was born—the long overdue idea that a common core and orderly sequence of learning in each of the major subject fields, including history/social studies, should be set forth in specific terms as a guide for curricular materials and teaching. This effort continues, with all the rough edges one would expect of something new and big. But there is wide consensus that the job of refinement is indeed a worthy one, and good evidence that the movement has brought renewed emphasis both to content and to accountability. We support and salute this historic undertaking.

Regarding the fate of democracy in the world, events have also been dramatic. The Soviet Union, under the grip of Communist totalitarianism for more than 70 years, disintegrated. The Berlin Wall was torn down by people thirsty for freedom. More than a dozen countries emerged from behind the Iron Curtain. Apartheid rule ended in South Africa and Pinochet's regime was swept away in Chile. All was not progress, though: When the fresh winds of democracy reached Tiananmen Square, they were brutally suppressed by the Chinese authorities. Who among us will ever forget the image of the young man—alone and undaunted—facing down the oncoming tanks?

Overall, however, the trend seemed to be toward the democratic model. Some were even predicting the "end of history"—the idea that liberal free-market democracies would eventually become the universal norm. Then came September 11, 2001: the sudden and brutal attack on our country. History was in the saddle again, its early demise a premature call. A new tyranny—Islamist extremism—confronted us, striking at the heart of our cities and symbols. The issue of defending our democracy was no longer an abstraction, the question of civic education no longer an option. As more than one commentator observed, "We were attacked

for being American. We should at least know what being American means."[1] We revisit that question now, and the many others that surround and underlie it.

Our purpose, once again, is to strengthen schools' resolve to consciously impart to students the ideals and values on which our free society rests. While our emphasis is on the schools, we recognize, as Lincoln understood so well, that the preparation of citizens is a task too great for our schools alone. Outraged by a series of vicious mob actions, Lincoln spoke in 1838 to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, about the need for all the major institutions of society—families, churches, schools, universities, courts, government—to share responsibility for instilling democratic values in the nation's citizenry:

> Let the reverence for the laws be breathed by every American mother to the lisping babe that prattles on her lap. Let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges. Let it be written in primers, spelling books, and in Almanacs. Let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation.

Lincoln's particular focus on this occasion was the rule of law, but his insistence that *all of society* join in the task of making citizens extends to the *whole composite of democratic values*—and is as true today as it was in 1838. Our primary and secondary schools do not exist in a vacuum. They cannot succeed in their civic mission without a supportive culture. The prevailing ideas of that larger culture, for better or for worse, seep through the bricks and mortar of their walls. We begin, then, by trying to take the temperature of the times in which we live.

Why We Are Concerned

Consider first this description of how Americans in the mid-19th century observed one of our most venerated national holidays:

> On May 30, 1868, our first official Memorial Day, children all over America picked wild flowers and placed them on the graves of soldiers. In Washington, D.C., people wore mourning scarves and decorated the graves of unknown men who had died at the Battle of Bull Run. Four thousand citizens marched to the National Cemetery in Richmond and marked each of 7,000 graves with a miniature American flag. In Baltimore, disabled veterans witnessed ceremonies from horse-drawn wagons. Across the nation, governors and generals extolled bravery and self sacrifice. Cannons fired. Ministers gave thanks for a reunited nation and the abolition of slavery and searched for God's purpose behind the slaughter of 620,000 soldiers. From Nantucket to San Francisco, from North Carolina to Texas, in large and small towns, Americans honored their Civil War dead by creating statues and memorials on an unprecedented scale.[2]

Now consider by contrast this recent description of children's understanding of the meaning of Memorial Day:

> In December 2000, Congress established the White House Commission on The National Moment of Remembrance to help recover Memorial Day's

Firefighters and soldiers unfurl the stars and stripes at the Pentagon on September 12, 2001, the day after the terrorist attack.

meaning and to encourage acts of remembrance throughout the year. "The idea for the Commission was born in 1996, when children touring Washington, D.C., were asked what Memorial Day meant to them and they responded, 'That's the day the pools open.'"[3]

Something has gone awry, and this is not the only disquieting sign we see. We now have convincing evidence that our students are woefully lacking in a knowledge of our past, of who we are as Americans. In its 2001 assessment of students' knowledge of U.S. history, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that 69 percent of 12th-graders did not know the purpose of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Only 35 percent of 8th-graders understood the meaning of "Jim Crow" laws, and only 29 percent could give an "appropriate" or "partial" explanation of the purpose of checks and balances in the Constitution. The percentage of high-schoolers scoring at the proficient or advanced level in U.S. history was a mere 11 percent. And in the most recent NAEP Civics Assessment, 75 percent of students scored at "basic" or "below basic" levels. Nor is this lack of common civic knowledge limited to the pre-collegiate level. In a recent survey of seniors at the nation's 55 most elite colleges and universities, 81 percent earned an F or D when quizzed on 32 American history questions drawn from a typical high school curriculum—not surprising given that *not a single one* of these institutions requires a course in U.S. history.[4] The historian David McCullough has remarked that in his 25 years of lecturing, he's seen a steady decline in students' historical sense: "I don't think there's any question whatsoever that the students in our institutes of higher learning have less grasp, less understanding, less knowledge of American history than ever before."[5]

Attitudes toward political involvement have also deteriorated. Over the last 30 years, the percentage of young people (under 25 years of age) who vote has dropped by about 15 percentage points, and when asked in the year 2000, only five percent of the 18-to-25 age group said they follow public affairs on a regular basis, down significantly from a generation ago.[6]

Further, many of our students have been left to flounder in a state of moral confusion. Following a visit to Yale in October of 2001, when the ashes of 9/11 were still being sifted through, the commentator David Brooks made this observation:

> If I had to summarize the frustration that some of the students expressed, I would say this: On campus they found themselves wrapped in a haze of relativism. There were words and jargon and ideas everywhere, but nothing solid that would enable a person to climb from one idea to the next. These students were trying to form judgments, yet were blocked by the accumulated habits of non-judgmentalism.[7]

Additional unsettling insights come from a 1999 study conducted by the Center on Adolescence at Stanford University under the direction of William Damon. The study probed young adults' views about themselves and society:

> What struck us was not only what these young people said but also what

they did not say. They showed little interest in people outside their immediate circle of friends and relatives (other than fictional media characters and entertainment or sport figures); little awareness of current events; and virtually no expressions of social concern, political opinion, civic duty, patriotic emotion, a sense of citizenship in any form.

For example, when asked what American citizenship meant to him, one student replied, 'We just had that the other day in history. I forget what it was.' Another said, 'I mean being American is not really special…. I don't find being an American citizen very important,' and yet another said, 'I don't know, I figure everybody is a citizen so it really shouldn't mean nothing….' Although such statements are by no means universal, neither are they atypical. In fact, they are strikingly similar to sentiments that I hear from students in every formal or informal setting that I visit.[8]

Why this loosening from our heritage, this disconnect from the American story? Where is the dignity owed to memory, the gratitude for the freedoms we enjoy?

What has gone wrong, and what to do? Why this loosening from our heritage, this disconnect from the American story? Where is the dignity owed to memory, the gratitude for the freedoms we enjoy? What is the source of the detachment, the indifference to the common good? Why the lack of moral clarity? What was different about the citizens of 1868, who strew flowers across the land on Memorial Day, and the citizens of today, who are more likely to be found checking out the special Memorial Day sales at the local mall? Is it that those past citizens were closer to the experience of the American Revolution and remembered what it was about? Is it that they were agonizingly close to the experience of human bondage and the Civil War and knew that their sons, brothers and husbands had warred over the most fundamental issues of human dignity? Is it that more of them were closer to the experience of immigration and retained poignant images of why their parents or grandparents had fled other lands? Probably some or all of that. Perhaps more.

These would be questions to ponder at any moment, but never more consequentially than now, when the graves at Ground Zero are still fresh in our memory. It may be that September 11 presents us with a moment, an opportunity for civic renewal. Recent studies show that the attacks have "fuel[ed] positive feelings towards political participation and government for significant majorities of young adults." Seventy percent of young people say they are now "somewhat more likely to participate in politics and voting, including a full third (34 percent) who say they are now *much* more likely to participate."[9] Trust in government is also at a new modern high among young people. The challenge is to harness these feelings and this new energy into the creation of a deep and lasting civic engagement.

We Are Not Born Democrats

The Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski opened his 1986 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities by noting that the most famous single sentence ever written in the Western hemisphere was probably the one that announced this country's beginning: "We hold these truths to be self-evident…."

These words continue to move the world. The political system of democracy that is built upon them is radical, recent, rare. It is our children's inheritance. We

must not think we can give it to them casually. We must embed it so deeply in their souls that no one can take it away.

We the undersigned come together as citizens of diverse political persuasion but united as partisans of democracy to address this great mission. Our inquiry—and our concern—rests on three convictions:

First, that democracy is the worthiest form of human governance ever conceived.

Second, we cannot take its survival or its spread—or its perfection in practice —for granted. We must transmit to each new generation the political vision of liberty and equality that unites us as Americans, and a deep loyalty to the political institutions put together to fulfill that vision.

Third, while recognizing that democracy found its first, deepest, and most sustained roots in the West, we explicitly reject the notion that democracy is a uniquely Western value. We believe that liberty and self-governance, based as they are in a belief in the dignity of every human person, are the natural birthright of all people.

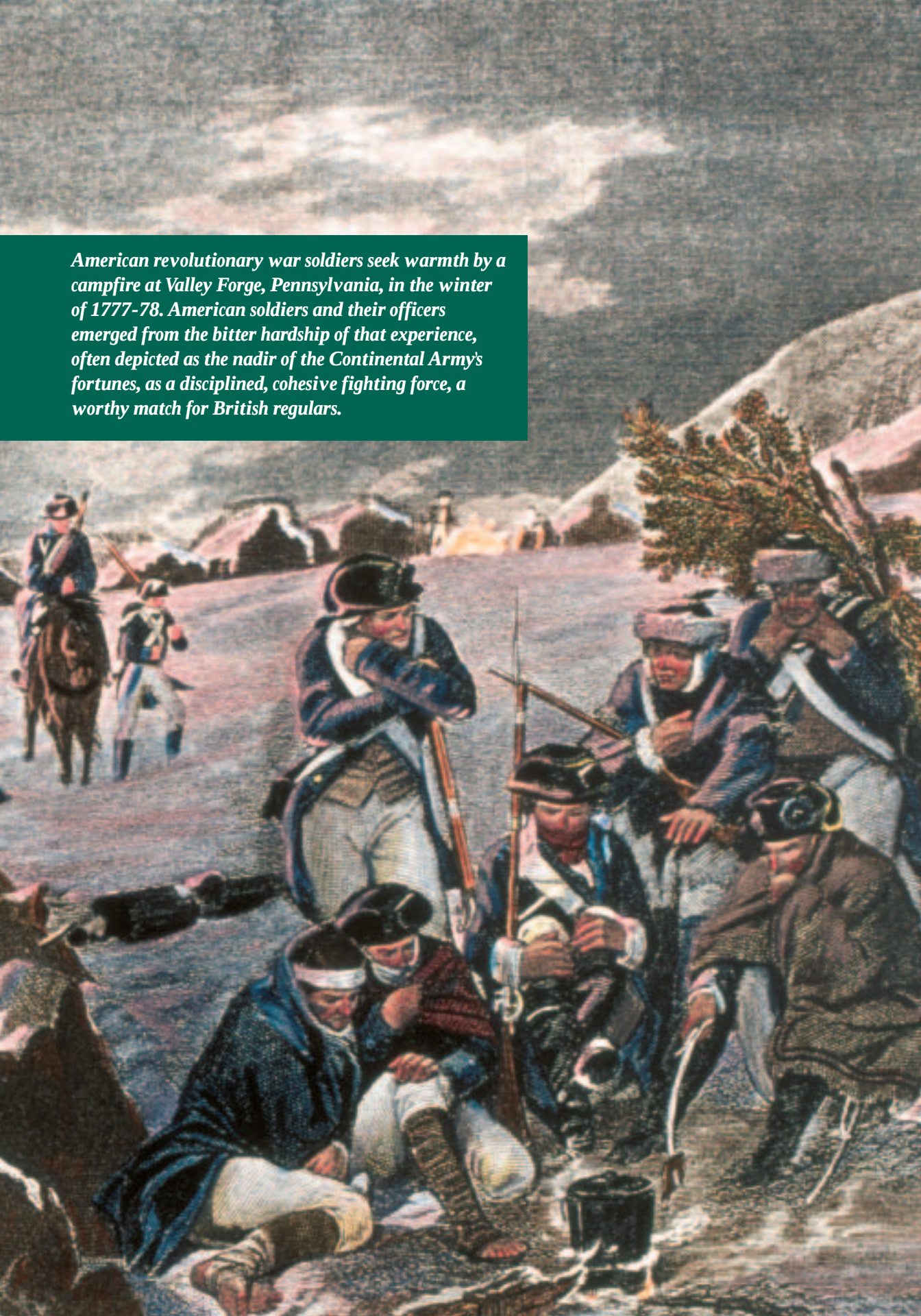
The values and habits upon which democracy rests are neither revealed truths nor innate habits. There is no evidence that we are born with them. Devotion to human dignity and freedom, to equal rights, to social and economic justice, to the rule of law, to civility and truth, to tolerance of diversity, to mutual assistance, to personal and civic responsibility, to self-restraint and self-respect—all these must be taught and learned and practiced. They cannot be taken for granted or regarded as merely one set of options against which any other may be accepted as equally worthy.

We call on our schools to purposely impart to their students the learning necessary for an informed, reasoned allegiance to the ideals of a free society. We want our graduates to come out of school possessing the mature political judgment Thomas Jefferson hoped for, an education that will "enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom." Our students must learn about democracy's short and troubled tenure in human history. They must comprehend its vulnerabilities. They must recognize and accept their responsibility for preserving and extending their political inheritance.

Without knowledge of our own struggle for civil rights, how much can students understand of democracy's capacity to respond to problems and to reform? In ignorance of the Second World War and its aftermath, how much can they grasp of the cost and necessity of defending democracy in the world? Having never debated and discussed how the world came to be as it is, the democratic citizen will not know what is worth defending, what should be changed, and which imposed orthodoxies must be resisted. As the late Albert Shanker observed:

> If a youngster has to take a wild guess that Stalin is either an Olympic athlete or a Renaissance painter, he can't have much of a grasp of the terrors of a totalitarian society as a basis for comparison to his own life.[10]

We do not ask for propaganda, for crash courses in the right attitudes, or for knee-jerk patriotic drill. We do not want to capsulize democracy's arguments into slogans, or pious texts, or bright debaters' points. The history and nature and needs of democracy are much too serious and subtle for that.



American revolutionary war soldiers seek warmth by a campfire at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, in the winter of 1777-78. American soldiers and their officers emerged from the bitter hardship of that experience, often depicted as the nadir of the Continental Army's fortunes, as a disciplined, cohesive fighting force, a worthy match for British regulars.

Education for democracy is not indoctrination, which is the deliberate exclusion or distortion of studies in order to induce belief by irrational means. We do not propose to exclude the honest study of the doctrines and systems of others. Nor to censor history—our own or others'—as closed societies do, nor to hide our flaws or explain them away. We can afford to present ourselves in the totality of our acts. And we can afford to tell the truth about others, even when it favors them and complicates that which indoctrination would keep simple and comforting.

And then we leave it to our students to apply their knowledge, values, and experiences to the world they must create, confident that they will find their own best ways of doing so, on the basis of free, uncoerced thought.

The kind of critical thinking we wish to encourage must rest on a solid basis of factual knowledge. We reject the educational theory that emphasizes "learning skills" over content and that considers any kind of curricular content to be as good as any other. We insist, on the contrary, that the central ideas, events, people, and works that have shaped our world, for good and ill, constitute an essential not an optional body of knowledge.

How Youngsters Come To Cherish Their Freedom

Our charge, put simply, is this: How do we instill in our youngsters an understanding of and an appreciation for their stunning political heritage? How do we educate citizens? How do we raise democrats? These are not simple questions. The Founding Fathers pondered them. Lincoln, perhaps more than any other, worried about them. Political philosophers have debated them since the Greeks. Is the answer found in knowledge? Experience? Temperament? Is simply living in a democracy sufficient—does one breathe in the bedrock values of liberty, opportunity, tolerance, the rule of law?

While the focus of this document is on the role education can play, it is revealing to reflect, and to have our students reflect, upon the many different ways people acquire some piece of the democratic idea—and lodge it deep in their souls.

We begin, then, with three stories. The first illustrates some of the many nuances of civic education and the strong influence the common school culture can have upon youngsters. The two that follow show how other formative experiences can infuse a deep appreciation for democracy and an awareness of the fragility of what we often take for granted:

> Going to school in multiracial rural California in the early 1960s, I did not merely hear about the checks and balances of the Constitution or learn a repertoire of patriotic songs and brief life stories of Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln. My classmates and I also developed a sense of American exceptionalism—a deep appreciation for just how distinctive the culture of the United States had proved to be over two centuries and more, and how it belonged to and benefited all of us....
>
> The class was about 65 percent Mexican-American, 10 percent Asian and African-American, the rest mostly poor rural whites whose parents had

fled the Dust Bowl. Yet I cannot recall a single reference by our teacher, a native Oklahoman, to race, class, or gender, which might so easily have divided us. Instead, we repeatedly heard that President Lincoln, Mark Twain, and John Henry belonged to a heritage we all shared—that we natives had no more claim on FDR or Guadalcanal than did the new arrivals from Oaxaca or the Punjab.

....The most recent immigrants from Mexico, the Philippines, and India often reminded us more complacent native students just how lucky we were to live in the United States. Even when impoverished newcomers identified with past victims of American intolerance, they still believed that they were beneficiaries of a system that could and would improve and thus always offer them more advantages than any alternative.... Contrary to today's popular mythology about our past, slavery and exploitation were not taboo subjects then. Yes, they were evils, we learned; but their amelioration exemplified the constant moral development that was possible and normal in a country like the United States.

—Victor Davis Hanson
"The Civic Education America Needs"[11]

I grew up in secure and comfortable circumstances, give or take an emotional problem or two; but an awareness of the fragility of civilization was instilled early, though subliminally, by the presence in London during my childhood of numbers of unreconstructed bomb sites that were like the gaps between the rotting teeth in an old man's mouth. Often I played in small urban wildernesses of weeds and rubble, and rather regretted their gradual disappearance; but even so, I could hardly fail to see, in the broken fragments of human artifacts and in the plasterwork with wallpaper still attached, the meaning of the destruction that had been wrought before I was born….

The Blitz was within every adult's living memory: my mother's apartment building had been bombed, and she woke one morning with half of it gone, one of her rooms now open directly to the air. In my house, as in many other households, there was a multivolume pictorial history of the war, over which I pored for entire mornings, or afternoons, until I knew every picture by heart. One of them was ever present in my mind when I entered a bomb shelter with my friends: that of two young children, both blind, in just such a shelter, their sightless eyes turned upward to the sound of the explosions above them, a heartrending look of incomprehension on their faces.

More than anything else, however, the fact that my mother was herself a refugee from Nazi Germany contributed to my awareness that security—the feeling that nothing could change seriously for the worse, and that the life you had was invulnerable—was illusory and even dangerous.

—Theodore Dalrymple
"What We Have to Lose"[12]

"We repeatedly heard that President Lincoln, Mark Twain, and John Henry belonged to a heritage we all shared—that we natives had no more claim on FDR or Guadalcanal than did the new arrivals from Oaxaca or the Punjab."

> Parents are actually quite concerned—even somewhat alarmed—by a threatening sense that something, some part of America's identity as a nation, is eroding and slipping away.... A Secaucus, New Jersey, parent had this story to tell: "There are a lot of freedoms that we very often take for granted. We recently took a friend to the Statue of Liberty. He was an immigrant from China whose family is not allowed to leave, and he fell to his knees and kissed the ground. And it was the most moving thing I ever saw in my life because I realized the basic things we take for granted. My children were awed, just absolutely dumbstruck. And you know teenagers are hardly ever without something to say."
>
> —From *A Lot To Be Thankful For: What Parents Want Children To Learn About America*
> Public Agenda Report, 1998

These vignettes help us reflect on some of the elements that compose the democratic idea and the democratic temper. We should collect more such stories, ones that help us delve deeply into this complex topic—and ones that stir us. We should include in our democratic anthology the struggles taking place this very moment: No matter how brutal the tyranny they face, nor how frightening the consequences to themselves, there are people in every part of the globe who, with courage, determination, and ingenuity, are developing ways to survive—and to resist. From these inspiring contemporary accounts, students will see that freedom's cry is truly universal and its narrative far from finished.

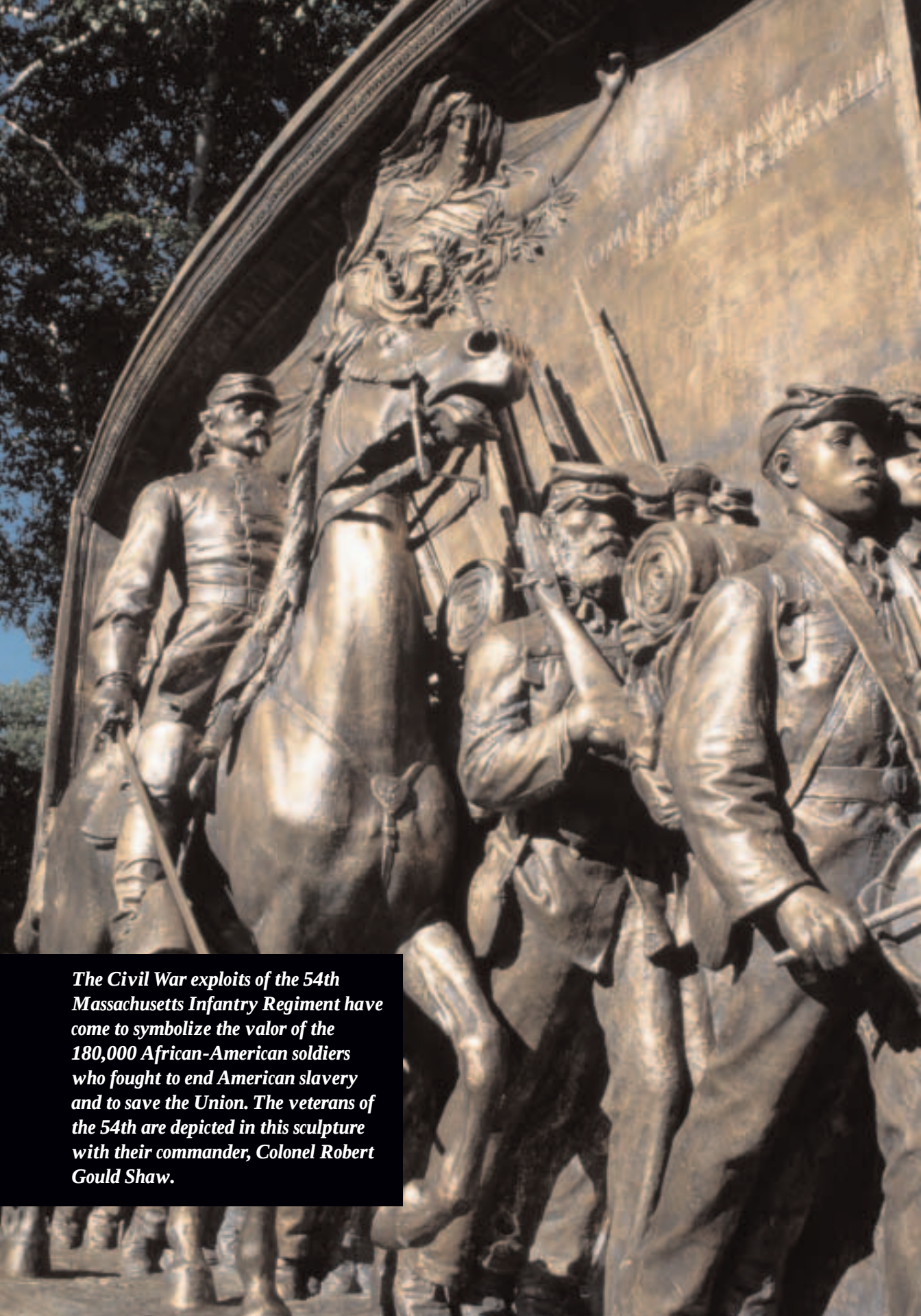
We should draw too from the deep truths found in good literature. Students will not soon forget Atticus's devotion to equality under the law in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. They will remember Huck Finn daring to choose nonracial friendship over the prejudices of the day. Younger children can learn from *Crow Boy*, a story set in a small Japanese village, that cruelty—like all human vice—is a universal phenomenon, as is the capacity for empathy and kindness to overcome it. And we can all be reminded by *All the Places To Love,* and the other works by Patricia MacLachlan, that large, abstract allegiances (such as love of country) begin with small, particular ones.

We should share these stories with our students, for youngsters need characterizations of the democratic vision that will resonate in their minds and in their hearts. They are wary of George Washington and the Cherry Tree pieties. Without giving up the best of the old, we need a new collection of democratic stories, including ones that give flesh to the democratic creed. By this shall they know us.

The Education We Hope For

What specifically must our schools teach in order to prepare young democrats? We propose four essentials:

1. A robust history/social studies curriculum, starting in the elementary years and continuing through every year of schooling;
2. A full and honest teaching of the American story;



The Civil War exploits of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment have come to symbolize the valor of the 180,000 African-American soldiers who fought to end American slavery and to save the Union. The veterans of the 54th are depicted in this sculpture with their commander, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw.

3. An unvarnished account of what life has been and is like in nondemocratic societies; and
4. A cultivation of the virtues essential to a healthy democracy.

We now take up each of these in turn.

A Robust History Curriculum

A serious engagement with history is essential to the nurturing of the democratic citizen. Only history can give students an appreciation for how long and hard and tangled the road to liberty and equality has been. Only history can place them at the center of the battles—philosophical, political, military—that have determined our fate, and stir them with the stories of those who stood willing to sacrifice all they possessed to those battles. History allows students to witness endless natural experiments—ones that cannot be reproduced in the laboratories of human behavior—that illuminate which conditions proved toxic to democracy, and which nourished it. History helps students recognize antidemocratic ideas, in all their disguises, thus preparing them for the next—inevitable—false colors. History imparts a deeper understanding of the truly radical ideas upon which democracy is built, and of the institutions established to bring life and permanence to those ideas. History grounds students in reality, allowing them to see the limits imposed by human nature and protecting them from utopian fantasies. History tempers self-righteousness, by providing the perspective students need to compare themselves with people of other times, other places. History teaches young citizens about unexpected consequences and the trade-offs that choice imposes. History forces them to stand with those who had to make difficult decisions, so that they know the demands of responsibility and resist the easy shots of those who breathe only the pure air of the sidelines. History accustoms students to look behind assertions and appearances, to insist on the "whole story." History also shields them from despair—we have, after all, survived much—and blesses them with the belief that truth is more powerful than the lie, and that a few good people can make all the difference.

The study of the past does something else: It gives youngsters a sense of historical consciousness—a connection and continuity with those who came before. This feeling, which is one of both belonging and responsibility, begins with knowledge but touches something that knowledge cannot reach: the mystic chords of memory that Lincoln immortalized. In feeling the presence of the past in their lives, students begin to see that there is a path that has been made ready for them, one on which they can find their place, extend into uncharted territory, and leave their footprint.

Finally, in the proudly pluralistic society that is so uniquely American, the mastery of a common core of history binds us together, creates a common civic identity based on a patriotism of principles, and unites us in the shared undertaking that is both our past and our future.

The study of history should begin in the primary grades. We know from both common sense and cognitive science that knowledge is the only reliable basis for more knowledge, that knowledge builds upon itself in a slow cumulative march, and that we must start early with a carefully crafted, sequential curriculum. We have learned, particularly from the experience of hundreds of schools across the country that follow the Core Knowledge curriculum, that young children are eager to learn about the world. In contrast to the typical second-grade social studies texts, with their vacuous, boring topics such as "We Work Together" and "Our Needs and Wants," second-grade Core Knowledge students are beginning to learn about the geography and ancient civilizations of Asia, the importance to the world of early Chinese inventions, the new kind of government being born in Athens, the role James Madison played in the writing of the American Constitution, the development of the steamboat and the building of the Erie Canal, and so forth.[13]

Proceeding into the middle grades and high school, a strong history/social studies curriculum would devote at least six years to history, geography, civics, and economics, with history as the integrative core. United States and World History, segmented by era, would each receive three years, leaving a year of electives in middle school and in high school. (For extensive detail on a model curriculum, see *Educating Democracy: State Standards To Ensure a Civic Core* by Paul Gagnon for the Albert Shanker Institute.)

All the social science topics would be taught together around the chronological narrative, so that each subject enlivens the other. Political scientist Diana Schaub offers an example of how questions of political philosophy might be incorporated:

> Selections from Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* can be a wonderful way for even quite young children, and certainly for high schoolers, to reflect on the various meanings and preconditions of freedom.
>
> Douglass's first act of self-emancipation was not his bodily flight north to freedom, but rather his spiritual flight—his ingenious and laborious self-education. The young Frederick had heard his master rage about the dangers of slaves learning to read. He had overheard his master say that "If a slave learns to read…it will forever unfit him to be a slave." This speech, Douglass later wrote, was "the first decidedly anti-slavery lecture" he had heard, for from that moment he "understood the direct pathway from slavery to freedom." On his own, spurred by his conviction of the transformative power of knowledge, Douglass taught himself to read.
>
> His master was right about the incompatibility of literacy and slavery. With knowledge, the adolescent Douglass became increasingly sullen and obstreperous. He was turned over to a man who was known as a Negro-breaker. After six months of backbreaking labor and the lash, Douglass determined not to submit to the next beating. He defended himself in a two-hour, hand-to-hand fight which the Negro-breaker was unable to win. Douglass was never whipped again. Writing about this incident in his autobiography, Douglass said "I had reached the point at which I was not afraid to die. This spirit made me a freeman in fact, though I still remained a slave in form."

Only history can give students an appreciation for how long and hard and tangled the road to liberty and equality has been. Only history can place them at the center of the battles—philosophical, political, military—that have determined our fate.

> These two episodes provide rich and controversial material for inquiring into the meaning of freedom. Douglass suggests that all men live in a kind of slavery so long as they live in ignorance and fear.[14]

In approaching history instruction, what else can we do to avoid turning all of it into just one long parade of facts, what Henry Ford famously dismissed as "one damned thing after another"?

Addressing this problem, historian Wilfred McClay has spoken about the importance of selectivity and meaningfulness to memory. His insight may help us understand why so many students seem to forget—or never to have learned—so much of the history they are taught:

> Memory is most powerful when it is purposeful and *selective*. It requires a grid, a pattern of organization, a structure within which facts arrange themselves in a particular way, and thereby take on significance. Above all, it requires that we possess stories and narratives that link facts in ways that are both meaningful and truthful, and provide a principle of selection—a way of knowing what facts are worth attending to…. We remember those things that fit a template of meaning, and point to a larger whole. We fail to retain the details that, like wandering orphans, have no connection to anything of abiding concern.…The design of our courses and curricula must be an exercise in *triage*, in making hard choices about what gets thrown out of the story, so that the essentials can survive….We need to be willing to identify those things every American student needs to know, and insist upon them...while paring away vigorously at the rest.[15]

We agree—both on the need for compelling theme and narrative, and on paring down the over-stuffed history frameworks and textbooks that now wear down our students and teachers. One answer is to focus upon the unending drama of the historical struggle for democracy. The overarching story, in both modernized and traditional societies, is the struggle to civilize, to curb the worst impulses of human nature, and to secure freedom of conscience, speech, and assembly; consensual government; the rule of law; the right to own property and to pursue opportunity—Lincoln's "open field"; change without chaos or violence; social justice. The ongoing, worldwide struggle for a free center of "broad, sunlit uplands," in Churchill's phrase, is the best hope of the earth, and we would make it the heart of a reordered curriculum for history and social studies.

Telling the American Story

Our students need and deserve to be told the story of their country—a full and truthful account. An honest rendering of American history would not ignore its serious flaws, past or present. Students should learn about the Trail of Tears, and about the promises made and broken to Chief Joseph. They should learn about the Middle Passage, the Dred Scott decision, the Fugitive Slave Law, and all the degradations and inhumanities of slavery. They should learn about the Triangle Shirt Waist fire and black lung disease, and they should read the 1861 description, "Life in the Iron Mills." They should learn that in the 19th century, the law

Suffragette marches along Fifth Avenue, New York City, ca. 1914 - 1918 in one of many protest demonstrations calling for women to be given the right to vote.

offered no recourse to a woman whose husband beat her. They should know that in 1890, the average American life expectancy was about 47 years. They should learn about the Know-Nothing Party and the Chinese Exclusion Act. And much more that was wrong.

But an honest account would also tell students about the legislation enacted to end child labor; the establishment of the eight-hour-day and the 40-hour-week, and the safety-and-health regulations that have done so much to protect workers; the provision for a floor of financial security for the elderly, and medical care for the indigent; the establishment of Yellowstone Park (larger than Rhode Island and Delaware combined) and other public preserves, and the many ambitious efforts to clean our rivers and air and restore our forests; the accommodations required for the disabled in building construction, transportation, and employment; the provision for a separate judicial system for juveniles; the mandate to provide an appropriate education for the handicapped; the commitment to give special help to those students whose first language is not English. An honest account will tell students that women—who until 1920 were not even allowed to vote—now occupy seats of honor in the Supreme Court, the Congress, and the President's Cabinet, and as corporate board members, newspaper publishers, law firm partners, and college presidents.

A truthful rendering would also remind students that their country provided the fertile ground for unparalled material and scientific progress, which has contributed so much to the quality—and length—of hundreds of millions of lives. Students can take pride in the fact that American ingenuity has given the world the electric light and the telephone, the alkaline battery and modern air conditioning, nylon and synthetic rubber, the laser and photographic film, the computer and the Internet, jazz, baseball, and the skyscraper. American medical research produced the vaccines for polio, hepatitis B, and yellow fever; and invented the MRI, the CAT scan, and the pacemaker.

Most important, students should learn that only once was their country willing to have its young men slaughter each other in war by the hundreds of thousands, and that was when it could no longer walk away from the glaring contradiction between its practices and the principles enshrined in its Declaration of Independence. The quest for racial equality did not, of course, end with the Civil War, and students should learn of the great struggles and achievements of the modern civil rights movement, America's long-overdue reckoning with the historic national shame of racial discrimination.

From the accounts of these transformations—and of the individuals, the organizations, the movements that fought for them—students will recognize the genius of democracy: When people are free to dissent, to criticize, to protest and publish, to join together in common cause, to hold their elected officials accountable, democracy's magnificent capacity for self-correction is manifest. It is important that students see this, not only because it is true, but also because they will realize that change is possible and that the future is indeed in their hands.

Unfortunately, not enough students are learning about the American past from such a perspective. In too many instances, America's sins, slights, and shortcomings have become not just a piece of the story but its *essence*. Legitimate self-crit-

icism has too often turned into an industry of blame. It is not just that we are flawed, the account goes, but that we are *irredeemably* flawed. Such an interpretation is distorted, harmful to students, and strongly counter to the views of parents.

We begin, once again, with some seasoned observations. The first is from Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, a professor of American foreign relations at San Diego State University. Self-described as someone "from the activist left and…proud of that heritage," she writes that "it is time to admit that this generation of historians—with some notable exceptions—has yet to deliver to students, and to the public, a usable and balanced interpretation of the past…. There are numerous examples of the castigating tendency of American scholars, but my personal favorite is an anthology I reviewed a few years back. This textbook gave undergraduates three articles on World War II. The first was on Japanese internment, the second on segregation of black troops in the South, and the third on harassment of Italian Americans. Every article discussed an aspect of the war that was absolutely true, yet, collectively, they made for a portrait of the war that was fundamentally false. No Adolf Hitler, no Emperor Hirohito, no Holocaust—only an imperfect America battling its demons…. It would not hurt," she concludes, "for professional skeptics to meditate—only briefly, if it hurts too much—on the nature of American goodness."[16]

America's sins, slights, and shortcomings have become in too many instances not just a piece of the story but its essence.

Our second observation comes from veteran history teacher Peter Gibbon, who has spent the last several years traveling the country, talking to students about who—if any—their heroes are and what constitutes heroism. "As a historian," he writes, "I have been tracing the changing face of the American hero, researching what has happened to the presentation of heroes in history books, and analyzing ways revisionist historians have shaped teachers' attitudes, which in turn shape the way students respond…. I taught American history for many years and from many different books. There is much in these texts now about income inequality, environmental degradation, the horrors of immigration, and the hardships of the Western frontier. Strikes, massacres, and lynchings are vividly described. Contemporary history books cover in detail the Vietnam War and our shameful treatment of Native Americans.

"Little mention is made in them, however, of genius or heroism…. From many of our textbooks, one would not know that in the span of human history, the United States has stood for peace, wealth, and accomplishment and has made possible millions of quiet and contented lives."[17]

Gibbon is worried about the cumulative effect of this "sour, sort of suspicious view" of American history upon youngsters.

> "Why is this damaging to young people?" he asks. "First, it makes them ashamed of their past and pessimistic about the future. Second, it implies that we are superior to our ancestors and encourages attitudes of ingratitude and self-righteousness. Third, by repudiating the notion that one person can make a difference, it makes young people suspicious of greatness. And, finally, attributing all progress to social and economic forces fosters historic fatalism. Concentrating on the dark side can lead young people to conclude that the world is a hopeless place."[18]

The prevalence of a strong negative bias in the telling of the American story is confirmed by two recent studies that examined the most widely used American history textbooks.

A year 2000 report, *History Textbooks at the New Century*, by the American Textbook Council began by describing the important role textbooks play in our civic life: "The ways that history textbooks affect how students see themselves, their nation, and the world cannot be quantified. But their civic impact is uncontested. American history textbooks are the official portraits of our country's past that are purchased by local and state governments and that are assigned to students with the foreknowledge that these students will someday participate in public affairs. How much these students know and what they think about their nation and world will indelibly affect civic character."

Reviewing approximately 20 texts published since 1997, and concentrating on U.S. history textbooks commonly used in the fifth, eighth, and eleventh grades, the study concluded that "[F]aith in progress and patriotic pride have vanished…. What has replaced them is too often a nation that has repeatedly fallen short of its ideals, led by a patriarchy that deserves censure…. Young readers.…may learn about a nation's shameful past…in such a way as to undercut civic confidence and trust…. The new history textbooks are helping to erase—if not national memory—then juvenile appreciation of the nation's achievements."[19]

The second study comes from the historian Diane Ravitch, who recently completed a review of both U.S. history and world history textbooks. Her observations are presented in her book, *The Language Police*. Examining the presentation of U.S. history, Ravitch too found that the narrative of the American story has been dramatically altered:

> What is truly new about American history textbooks of the late 1990s is their ideological slant. Like the world history texts, they too are committed to cultural equivalence. The old U.S. history narrative stressed the important contributions of England and the European enlightenment to the new American nation. It centered on the rise of democratic institutions and the ongoing struggle to expand the rule of law....
>
> The new textbooks have adopted the "three worlds meet" paradigm that the UCLA history center advocated as part of its [1994] proposed national standards for U.S. history. In the new textbooks, democratic values and ideals compete with a welter of themes about geography, cultural diversity, economic development, technology, and global relations. In order to show how "three worlds" met, the texts downplay the relative importance of the European ideas that gave rise to democratic institutions and devote more attention to pre-Columbian civilizations and African Kingdoms…. The textbooks…have nearly buried the narrative about the ideas and institutions that made our national government possible.[20]

It is jarring to place the observations and study results presented above alongside the views of what American parents think of their country and what they want their children taught. A 1998 report by Public Agenda, which included a

Members of Solidarnosc trade union rally in Poland. After years of protest, martial law, imprisonment and struggle, Solidarnosc shattered communism in Poland, leading to its demise throughout Eastern Europe and, ultimately, the Soviet Union.

random sample survey of 800 parents of school-age children plus focus groups and individual interviews with parents and teachers in different parts of the country, found the following:

- Eighty-four percent of parents consider the United States "a unique country that stands for something special in the world," and 90 percent agree that it "is a better country than most other countries in the world";
- Eighty-nine percent of parents overall, 88 percent of African-American parents, and 84 percent of Hispanic parents believe "there's too much attention paid these days to what separates different ethnic and racial groups and not enough to what they have in common";
- Eighty-four percent of parents overall, 81 percent of African-American parents, and 80 percent of Hispanic parents would be "upset/somewhat concerned" if their child were "taught that America was, and still is, a fundamentally racist country."[21]

This disharmony between parents' views and the content and tone of current curricular materials should embolden our efforts to bring about a more truthful, more profound perspective to the American experience. This is not the place for specifics, but for the spirit that we believe should animate the American story and, by implication, the story of the West—the spirit of progress toward a more just and humane society—we turn to the eloquent words of Alan Charles Kors, professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania and editor-in-chief of the *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*:

> It is a dangerous intellectual error to imagine that goodness, wisdom, order, justice, peace, freedom, legal equality, mutual forbearance, and kindness are the normal state of things in human affairs, and that it is malice, folly, disorder, injustice, war, coercion, legal inequality, murderous intolerance, and cruelty that stand in need of historical explanation.… We understand the defaults; what should astonish us is the ability to change them….
>
> It is not aversion to difference, for example, that requires historical explanation; aversion to difference is the human condition. Rather, it is the West's partial but breathtaking ability to overcome tribalism and exclusion that demands explanation, above all in the singular American accomplishment. It is not the injustice of difference in America that requires historical explanation, as if that were the odd phenomenon of human affairs. That injustice indeed requires reflection, so that we never lose sight of human moral weakness in general or of our own malice in particular. But historically, it is the existence and agency of Western values by which that injustice has been and is being progressively overcome that truly

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. addresses the historic March on Washington, in August, 1963. More than a quarter million people peacefully marched in support of civil rights legislation designed to end historic discrimination against African Americans in voting, employment, housing, and other areas of American life.

should excite our curiosity and awe….

> The fruits of that civilization have been an unprecedented ability to modify the remediable causes of human suffering, to give great agency to utility and charity alike; to give to each individual a degree of choice and freedom unparalleled in all of human history; and to offer a means of overcoming the station in life to which one was born by the effort of one's labor, mind, and will.
>
> Abundant as they have been, with merely these fruits the civilization of the West might well have remained a parochial one to the rest of the world, closed, xenophobic, and all-conquering. There have been those, indeed, who wished and worked for that, and there have been depredations occasioned by our arrogance—which we subject to critical study and restudy in almost all domains of social, political, and moral knowledge. The drama, however, is that this civilization of the West, for all of its faults and sins, believed that its values and knowledge were not parochial, but universal, the birthright of every human life and soul.…[22]

Teach Students What Life Is Like in Nonfree Countries

It is not surprising that American society is found so wanting when most of our students have nothing with which to compare it. If left ignorant of what life has been and is like in nondemocratic societies, the mind has no meaningful point of reference and finds refuge in a utopian—and therefore dangerous—fantasy of perfection. Against this abstract ideal, needless to say, we fall short again and again.

Until images of the Taliban flashed across American television screens—women clubbed for being out at the "wrong" hour of the day, homosexuals buried alive, music and even kites banned—our children hadn't a clue (how would they know?) that there is a world out there where the assault on human rights and dignity is commonplace, where the concept of political liberty is unknown. Or known but trampled.

As the British historian and poet Robert Conquest has written, "People forget what a remarkable thing it is that in our countries we have such rights and liberties. Civilizations have existed for thousands of years in which there was no trace of the mere idea of criticizing the government, of being secure from arbitrary arrest, of having a fair trial (or even a fairish trial, or even a trial at all), of printing almost anything one likes, of voting for one of a number of candidates for public office."[23]

Accustomed, for example, to living in a society where the right to nonviolent protest is taken for granted and political differences are settled peacefully, students cannot grasp—unless we tell them—that there have been and still are brutal regimes that have a different view of how to deal with conflict and dissent. Hitler offered this advice for dealing with Gandhi:

> "Shoot Gandhi," he said, "and if that does not suffice to reduce them to submission, shoot a dozen leading members of Congress; and if that does not suffice, shoot two hundred and so on until order is established. You

will see how quickly they will collapse as soon as you make it clear that you mean business."[24]

It is our natural inclination to want to protect children from the knowledge of evil. But the price we—and they—pay for that silence is too high. Just as parents must explain to their children, in an age-appropriate way, that there are child molesters, and how to spot them and how to protect oneself against them, so must we tell them of other evils in the world. The classicist and military historian Victor Davis Hanson reminds us that, "All the great evils of the 19th and 20th 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 reticent about, their innately evil natures and the great peril they posed to free peoples."[25]

Diane Ravitch's textbook study, which in addition to U.S. history also includes an analysis of a dozen world history texts, helps explain why students are likely to have a distorted view of the world:

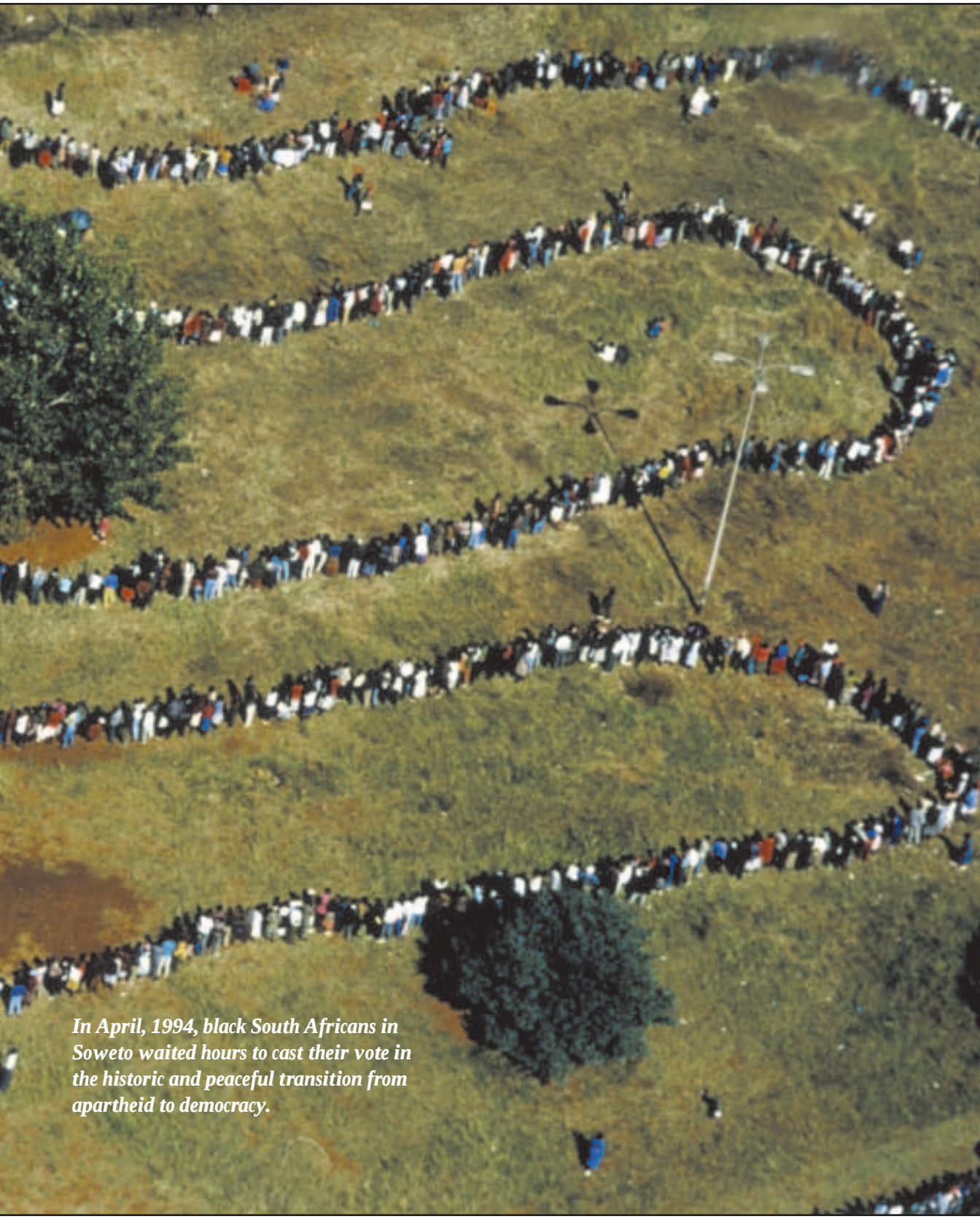
> The textbooks published in the late 1990s do…contain a coherent narrative. It is a story of cultural equivalence: All of the world's civilizations were great and glorious, all produced grand artistic, cultural, and material achievements, and now the world is growing more global and interconnected. Some bad things happened in the past, but that was a long time ago and now the cultures of the world face common problems.…
>
> The textbooks sugarcoat practices in non-Western cultures that they would condemn if done by Europeans or Americans. Seemingly, only Europeans and Americans were imperialistic. When non-European civilizations conquer new territories, the textbooks abandon their critical voice. They express awe toward the ancient empires of China, India, Africa, and Persia but pay no attention to how they grew….
>
> Some texts present Mao as a friendly, inclusive leader who listened to the peasants and won their support, just like our politicians. Most texts point out that the Communist Party killed one million landlords and that at least 20 million Chinese people died because of a famine caused by Mao's disastrous Great Leap Forward. Some mention the humiliation of teachers and professionals during the Cultural Revolution. But it often seems as though these were just unfortunate events that occurred while Mao and the Communist Party were successfully transforming China into a modern industrialized society. Not much is said about thought reform, stigmatizing people by their social origins, prison camps, the cult of personality, class warfare, the "anti-Rightist campaign," the systematic oppression of political opponents, and other ugly elements of totalitarianism. Students who read these texts….might well conclude that the Chinese Communist program had its ups and downs, its good policies and its bad policies (just like ours), but overall produced great gains for the Chinese people.[26]

Until images of the Taliban flashed across American television screens, our children hadn't a clue that there is a world out there where the assault on human rights and dignity is commonplace.

This half-education of our children must stop. We applaud the programs that bring students to Washington, D.C., to see the workings of their government, but we must also take them with words and stories to North Korea, to Nazi Germany, to Stalinist Russia, to apartheid South Africa, and to the Islamist theocracy that now terrorizes Sudan.

It is revealing to contrast the sanitized treatments presented in the textbooks to the real-life horrors that afflict so many in the world. There is, sadly, a large body of literature on the barbarity of the human race from which to draw. We offer three examples: a description by Christopher Hitchens of a recent trip to North Korea, a recollection by Nelson Mandela of his imprisonment in South Africa, and an account from Amnesty International Canada about the treatment of women in Saudi Arabia.

In the closing months of the twentieth century, I contrived to get a visa for North Korea. Often referred to as "the world's last Stalinist state," it might as easily be described as the world's prototype Stalinist state. Founded under the protection of Stalin and Mao, and made even more hermetic and insular by the fact of a partitioned peninsula that so to speak "locked it in," the Democratic People's Republic of Korea still boasted the following features at the end of the year 2000. On every public building, a huge picture of "The Great Leader" Kim Il Sung, the dead man who still holds the office of President in what one might therefore term a necrocracy or mausolocracy. (All other senior posts are occupied by his son, "The Dear Leader" Kim Jong Il.) Children marched to school in formation, singing songs in praise of aforesaid Leader. Photographs of the Leader displayed by order in every home. A lapel button, with the features of the Leader, compulsory wear for all citizens. Loudspeakers and radios blasting continuous propaganda for the Leader and the Party. A society endlessly mobilized for war, its propaganda both hysterical and—in reference to foreigners and foreign powers—intensely chauvinistic and xenophobic. Complete prohibition of any news from outside or any contact with other countries. Absolute insistence, in all books and in all publications, on a unanimous view of a



In April, 1994, black South Africans in Soweto waited hours to cast their vote in the historic and peaceful transition from apartheid to democracy.

grim past, a struggling present, and a radiant future. Repeated bulletins of absolutely false news of successful missile tests and magnificent production targets. A pervasive atmosphere of scarcity and hunger, alleviated only by the most abysmal and limited food. Grandiose and oppressive architecture. A continuous stress on mass sports and mass exercise. Apparently total repression of all matters connected to the libido. Newspapers with no news, shops with no goods, an airport with almost no planes. A vast nexus of tunnels underneath the capital city, connecting different Party and police and military bunkers.

…[T]here really are "hate" sessions during breaks in factory or office work, and at an evening of "mass games" I was shown, via multiple hypnotizing flashcards, the hideous image of a grim-visaged "enemy" soldier hurtling towards me, to be replaced by the refulgent and reassuring face of The Great Leader. These are details; what was entirely unmistakable was the atmosphere of a society where individual life is *absolutely pointless*, and where everything that is not absolutely compulsory is absolutely forbidden.

—From *Why Orwell Matters* by Christopher Hitchens

Newspapers were more valuable to political prisoners than gold or diamonds, more hungered for than food or tobacco; they were the most precious contraband on Robben Island. News was the intellectual raw material of the struggle. We were not allowed any news at all, and we craved it…. The authorities attempted to impose a complete blackout; they did not want us to learn anything that might raise our morale or reassure us that people on the outside were still thinking about us.

We regarded it as our duty to keep ourselves current on the politics of the country, and we fought long and hard for the right to have newspapers. Over the years, we devised many ways of obtaining them….

When we did get hold of a paper, it was far too risky to pass around. Possession of a newspaper was a serious charge. Instead, one person would read the paper….and make cuttings of relevant stories, which were then secretly distributed to the rest of us. Each of us would write out a summary of the story we were given; these summaries were then passed among us, and later smuggled to the general section….

When I noticed the newspaper lying on the bench, I quickly left my cell, walked to the end of the corridor, looked in both directions, and then plucked the newspaper off the bench and slipped it into my shirt. Normally, I would have hidden the newspaper somewhere in my cell and taken it out only after bedtime. But like a child who eats his sweet before his main course, I was so eager for news that I opened the paper in my cell immediately.

I don't know how long I was reading; I was so engrossed in the paper that I did not hear any footsteps. Suddenly, an officer and two other warders appeared and I did not even have time to slide the paper under my bed. I was caught black-and-white-handed, so to speak. "Mandela," the officer

said, "we are charging you for possession of contraband, and you will pay for this."

—From Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*

Women in Saudi Arabia who walk unaccompanied, or are in the company of a man who is neither their husband nor a close relative, are at risk of arrest on suspicion of prostitution or other "moral" offenses.

Neives, a Filipina who was working as a maid in Riyadh in 1992, was invited by a married couple to celebrate the wife's birthday at a restaurant. She and a female friend decided to go. At the restaurant they were joined by a male friend of the couple. A group of mutawa'een (religious police) entered the restaurant, saw the group and arrested them. They suspected Neives of being there for an introduction to the male friend of the couple. Neives denied the accusation, but was deceived into signing a confession written in Arabic that she understood was a release order. That confession was the sole basis of her conviction and sentence—25 days imprisonment and 60 lashes, which were carried out….

Women who breach the strict dress code for women also face arrest. Margaret Madill, a Canadian nurse working in Saudi Arabia in 1993, took a taxi home with a female friend after a shopping trip in Riyadh. Suddenly a mutawa' jumped into the taxi and forced the driver to go to the headquarters of al-Mutawa'een. When they arrived, the women were locked in the taxi in the extreme heat for up to six hours. They screamed for help and were then beaten. They were accused of indecent dress and public intoxication. They were then transferred to al-Malaz prison and held for two days before being released without charge.

—From Amnesty International:
Saudi Arabia: End Secrecy, End Suffering[27]

There is something else we must tell our students, for it is one of the most potent lessons of the 20th century: Education has not proven to be sufficient armor against antidemocratic ideas.

Reading these descriptions, and other accounts of the many scars on human history, students will demand to know: How could these things happen? How did such oppressive regimes come to power? Why don't people rise up against them? Could anything similar happen here? And they will think, perhaps even aloud: I am so fortunate.

Students will be particularly interested in—and we have a special obligation to tell them about—the nightmares that drowned the 20th century in blood, and who supported them, who apologized for them, who stood against them. If we can bring our students to truly comprehend that the survival of civilization in the 20th century was, as Robert Conquest has written, "a near thing,"[28] they may become more serious about wanting to understand the genesis of democracy, its long path, the many stumbles, the unfinished work, the no guarantees.

There is something else we must tell our students, for it is one of the most potent lessons of the 20th century: Education has not proven to be sufficient armor against antidemocratic ideas. Some of the best minds of Europe, including two Nobel Prize winners, were in Hitler's thrall. And many, many intellectuals—

people who had received the best education, who had undoubtedly read Locke and the *Federalist Papers* and who could recite Pericles's funeral oration—returned from political pilgrimages to Stalinist Russia, North Vietnam, Mao's China, and a host of other tyrannical regimes with idealized accounts of the "workers' paradise" they had seen. Describing the visits to the Soviet Union, one observer summed up the suspension of reality that permeated:

> There were earnest advocates of the humane killing of cattle who looked up at the massive headquarters of the OGPU with tears of gratitude in their eyes, earnest advocates of proportional representation who eagerly assented when the necessity for a Dictatorship of the Proletariat was explained to them, earnest clergymen who walked reverently through anti-God museums and reverently turned the pages of atheistic literature, earnest pacifists who watched delightedly tanks rattle across the Red Square and bombing planes darken the sky, earnest town-planning specialists who stood outside over-crowded ramshackle tenements and muttered: "If only we had something like this in England!" The almost unbelievable credulity of these mostly university-educated tourists astonished even Soviet officials used to handling foreign visitors.[29]

It is true, too, that terrorist movements such as Peru's Shining Path and Italy's Red Brigade were drawn heavily from the ranks of university students and the professoriate. Students were part of Hitler's vanguard, and in fascist Italy "Giovinezza! Giovinezza!" (Youth! Youth!) was a common rallying cry. We know also, of course, that most of the leadership of al Qaeda are university graduates, many of them educated in the West.

What are we to make of all this? Is it an argument against education, or intellectuals? Quite the contrary. It is an argument for studying this phenomenon, this aberration, as an important part of education for democracy.

The moral and intellectual failures that led many to ignore what was there for the seeing and to embrace ideological and political extremism should be examined by high school students. What was so powerful as to overwhelm intellect and knowledge and render the mind impervious to evidence? Was it utopian longings? A desire for power? The romanticism of revolution? The vanity of claiming to hold the moral high ground? The need for an Idea that answers all questions, stills all doubts? Was it inspired, as Francois Furet thought, by the age-old hatred of everything bourgeois?

We do not have all the answers to this complex phenomenon, and we may never have. But by making students aware of it, by making it part of their political education, we can help inoculate them against it and enable them to recognize those who succumb. This alone would be a great accomplishment for the 21st century.

Cultivate the Virtues Essential to a Healthy Democracy

The hero of the American Revolution and the revered first president of our new republic understood that democracy cannot rest on formal institutions alone. Its pillars must be set deeper. "The foundation of our national policy [must be] laid

A young Chinese man stands up to a line of tanks in this agonizing and inspiring photo of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing, an iconic image that has come to symbolize the universal desire for freedom.

in the pure and immutable principles of private morality," George Washington declared in his First Inaugural Address.

Two centuries later, the hero of another revolution and the revered first president of a newly-freed Czechoslovakia echoed Washington's view. President Vaclav Havel, his imprisonment as a dissident still fresh, addressed his fellow citizens:

> It is my responsibility to emphasize, again and again, the moral origin of all genuine politics, to stress the significance of moral values and standards in all spheres of social life, including economics, and to explain that if we don't try, within ourselves, to discover or rediscover or cultivate what I call "higher responsibility," things will turn out very badly indeed for our country…. The best laws and the best-conceived democratic mechanisms will not in themselves guarantee legality or freedom or human rights— anything, in short, for which they were intended—if they are not underpinned by certain human and social values.[30]

Our students will have no problem understanding this, for they have experienced what happens when the moral fabric of society begins to unravel. To take one example: It would have been unthinkable only a generation ago to imagine that hundreds of thousands of students would begin each school day by having to pass through metal detectors and hand over their backpacks to be searched. Students may agree with the need for the searches, and they may be grateful for the security the detectors provide. But they also know that something has gone very wrong along the way. Shouldn't the most abundant, most influential, and most democratic republic in the history of the world produce a culture in which it is *not* necessary for children to be checked daily for weapons?

The statutes outlawing violence can double or triple in number, but absent a deeply embedded respect for the rule of law—what the political scientist Roy Godson calls "a culture of lawfulness," absent a moral bond with the community, absent the social compact that makes freedom possible, the metal detectors will not go away.

The most exemplary Constitution, the most wisely-crafted plans for the separation of powers in government, scrupulously honest elections, an independent judiciary, tightly-worded laws: As essential, as hard-won as these are, they cannot by themselves give us a rich, flourishing democratic culture. Only a society underwritten by personal and civic virtue can do that.

Education for democracy, then, must extend to education in moral issues and democratic dispositions: training the heart as well as the head. What do we do with this freedom we have, the choices and decisions we daily face? How do we live as free men and free women? Is freedom the same as license? Or does self-government begin with the governing of one's self? What happens when rights are not accompanied by responsibilities?

These are some of the questions with which we must engage our students. And these are the questions our children want us to engage them in, for—despite their transparent protests—they do not want to be set totally adrift, unmoored, "free" to make up the rules as they go along. This, as they know in their hearts, is not freedom but abandonment.

We need not be stymied in our efforts by the debilitating influence of the concept of "moral relativism," which robs us of any ethical standards. If there is only opinion—yours, mine, Osama bin Laden's—only personal perspective or preference or conditioning, then on what basis do we pass judgment on Hitler's gas chambers or Hussein's torture chambers? Objectivity does not require neutrality or blind tolerance. It is hardly necessary to be neutral in regard to freedom over bondage, or the rule of law over the rule of the mob, or self-mastery over irresponsibility, or reflective, consequence-accepting choice over mindless impulse, in order to describe objectively the differences among them, or among their human consequences.

Values are best taught when they are encountered, in school and in life. Here the humanities have much to contribute. Wide reading and study in the humanities provides students the opportunity to reflect, in the company of the best that has been thought and said, on the elements that compose the good life and the good society. Through their engagement with history, literature, law, philosophy, and biography, students will grow in their ability to judge the moral worth of various outcomes. In doing so, they will begin to lay claim to an essential ethical faculty: moral clarity. For to choose the good, one first has to discern the good.

"We are given, by inheritance, our unchained state. But to make of oneself a free man or woman is the work of a lifetime."

Biography—the real-life stories of exceptional men and women—can be especially compelling for youngsters. In his book, *A Call to Heroism*, Peter Gibbon explains why:

> Heroes instruct us in greatness when they triumph. Idealistic, they ask us to be better. Courageous, they ask us to be braver. Visionary, they show us how to transcend our time. But they also instruct us when they are imperfect and in doubt, when they suffer and fail…. Human beings become heroic when, against all odds, they persist; when, despite their flaws, they achieve….
>
> With heroes, we experience the extraordinary and expand our notion of what it means to be human…. We are in prison with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Growing deaf, we compose the *Ninth Symphony;* on our backs, we paint Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel…. When Nelson Mandela leaves his South African cell without rancor and invites his guards to his inauguration, we are instructed in magnanimity. By not quitting after the winter at Valley Forge, George Washington teaches us perseverance and endurance. When Mother Teresa leaves her comfortable convent school and moves to Calcutta, we learn about compassion.[31]

Our 18th-century founders would be pleased to have such stories as part of the school curriculum, for they took education in moral issues very seriously indeed. This is hardly surprising. The basic ideas of liberty, equality, and justice, of civil, political, and economic rights and obligations are all assertions of right and wrong, of moral values. The authors of the American testament had no trouble distinguishing moral education from religious instruction, and neither should we. The democratic state can take no part in deciding which, if any, religion forms its citizens' consciences. But it is absurd to argue that the state, or its schools, cannot

be concerned with citizens' ability to tell right from wrong, and to prefer one over the other in all matters that bear upon the common public life. This would be utterly to misunderstand the democratic vision, and the moral seriousness of the choices it demands of us. As Diana Schaub has written:

> We are given, by inheritance, our unchained state. But to make of oneself a free man or woman is the work of a lifetime. It is not a work that was completed by the founding generation, or Lincoln's generation, or what has been called "the greatest generation," or that will be completed by the millennial generation. The work of fitting the mind and spirit for freedom is the work of each and every generation, and of each and every individual. To be the land of the free—in the full sense, in the sense made possible by liberal education—would be a new birth of freedom indeed.[32]

Across the country, many, many schools and teachers have stayed faithful to the legitimate civic mission of our schools. They have given an honest account of the American story. They have insisted on a serious, rigorous approach to subject matter. They have celebrated the resplendent diversity unique to this country while making it clear that there is much more that unites us than divides us. They have taught their students to be humble before evidence, logic, observation, experience. They have let no ideology cloud their vision nor political fashion mute their voice. They have told their students that there is such a thing as truth and that it can be sought. They have modeled civility and self-restraint and a respect for the views of others. They have spoken of the neglected virtue of gratitude.

Enjoying new freedoms in Afghanistan, a woman lifts her burqa in public and a boy flies a kite. Both activities were illegal during the reign of the Taliban.

They have done all this out of their good instincts, their commitment to truth, and their faithfulness to high standards in their academic disciplines. At times, as we believe this document demonstrates, they have had to stand against influential currents in the larger culture.

We salute and honor these efforts, and place ourselves fully on their side. By supporting the core of our democratic heritage, these teachers and schools have provided indispensable sustenance for its continual renewal. They have taken to heart Lincoln's summons: that each generation must take up the task of perpetuating the American experiment.

As citizens of a democratic republic, we are part of the noblest political effort in history. Our children must learn, and we must teach them, the knowledge, values, and habits that will best protect and extend this precious inheritance. Our schools play a major part in this mission, and we the signatories of this document pledge them our full support and call upon all Americans to join us.

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*Signatories**

** List in formation. Organizational names appear for identification purposes only.*

Joe Aguerrebere
President, National Board for Professional Teaching Standards

Fouad Ajami
Majid Khadduri Professor and Director of Middle East Studies, Johns Hopkins University

Anthony J. Alvarado
Chancellor of Instruction, San Diego City Schools

Morton Bahr
President, Communications Workers of America

Rhonda Barad
Eastern Director, Simon Wiesenthal Center, New York Tolerance Center

Benjamin Barber
Author, *Jihad vs. McWorld* and *Fear's Empire*

Raymond "Buzz" Bartlett
President and CEO, Council for Basic Education

Peter L. Berger
Director, Institute for the Study of Economic Culture, Boston University

Walter Berns
Resident Scholar, American Enterprise Institute

John Brademas
President Emeritus, New York University

Senator Bill Bradley
Managing Director,
Allen and Company

Terry Branstad
Former Governor of Iowa

Donna Brazile
Chair, Democratic National Committee Voting Rights Institute

Eli Broad
Chairman, AIG SunAmerica Inc. and Founder, The Broad Foundation

Ann Bryant
Executive Director, National School Boards Association

R. Thomas Buffenbarger
International President, International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers

Gaston Caperton
President, The College Board

Leo Casey
Civic Education Consultant and Special Representative, United Federation of Teachers

Linda Chavez-Thompson
Executive Vice President, American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations

Henry Cisneros
President and CEO, American CityVista

Reverend Richard Cizik
Vice President, Governmental Affairs, National Association of Evangelicals

William Jefferson Clinton
Former President of the United States

David Cohen
Professor of Public Policy, Center for Public Policy Research in Education, University of Michigan

Michael Cohen
President, Achieve, Inc.

Robert J. Cottrol
Harold Paul Green Research Professor of Law and Professor of History and Sociology, George Washington University

Midge Decter
Writer

Larry Diamond
Senior Fellow, Hoover Institution

Douglas H. Dority
International President, United Food and Commercial Workers International Union

Christopher Edley
Professor, Harvard Law School and Member, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights

John M. Engler
Former Governor of Michigan

Amitai Etzioni
University Professor, George Washington University

Sandra Feldman
President, American Federation of Teachers

Edward Fire
President, International Union of Electronic, Electrical, Salaried, Machine, and Furniture Workers/CWA

Harvey Flaumenhaft
Dean, St. John's College, Annapolis

John Fonte
Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese
Eléonore Raoul Professor of Humanities and History, Emory University

Hillel Fradkin
President, Ethics and Public Policy Center

Patricia Friend
International President, Association of Flight Attendants

Mary Futrell
Dean, Graduate School of Education and Human Development, George Washington University

Paul A. Gagnon
Senior Research Associate, Center for School Improvement, Boston University

William A. Galston
The Saul Stern Professor, School of Public Affairs, University of Maryland

Matthew Gandal
Executive Vice President, Achieve, Inc.

David J. Garrow
Author, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
W.E.B. Du Bois Professor of the Humanities and Chair of Afro-American Studies, Harvard University

Carl Gershman
President, National Endowment for Democracy

Ron Gettelfinger
President, United Automobile, Aerospace, and Agricultural Implement Workers of America International Union

Peter H. Gibbon
Senior Research Fellow, School of Education, Boston University

Roy Godson
Professor of Government, Georgetown University

John Goodlad
President, Institute of Educational Inquiry

Nancy S. Grasmick
Superintendent of Schools, Maryland

Ernest G. Green
Managing Director for Public Finance, Lehman Brothers

Vartan Gregorian
President, Carnegie Corporation of New York

Joy Hakim
Author, *Freedom: A History of US*

Sonny Hall
International President, Transport Workers Union of America

Lee Hamilton
President and Director, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

Wade Henderson
Executive Director, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights

Alexis Herman
Former U.S. Secretary of Labor

Frederick M. Hess
Resident Scholar, American Enterprise Institute

Sylvia Ann Hewlett
President and Founder, National Parenting Association

Norman Hill
President, A. Philip Randolph Institute

E.D. Hirsch, Jr.
Chairman of the Board, Core Knowledge Foundation

Byron Hollinshead
President, American Historical Publications

G. Thomas Houlihan
Executive Director, Council of Chief State School Officers

James B. Hunt, Jr.
Former Governor of North Carolina

Joseph Hunt
General President, International Association of Bridge, Structural, Ornamental, and Reinforcing Iron Workers

Frank Hurt
International President, Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers, and Grain Millers International Union

Sol Hurwitz
Retired President and Honorary Treasurer, Committee for Economic Development

Gloria T. Johnson
President, Coalition of Labor Union Women

John F. Jennings
Director, Center on Education Policy

Donald Kagan
Sterling Professor of Classics and History, Yale University

Richard D. Kahlenberg
Senior Fellow, The Century Foundation

Ambassador Max M. Kampelman
Chairman Emeritus, Freedom House

Amy Kass
Senior Lecturer in Humanities, University of Chicago

Thomas H. Kean
President, Drew University

Penn Kemble
Senior Fellow, Freedom House

Edward M. Kennedy
U.S. Senator, Massachusetts

Senator Bob Kerrey
President, New School University

Ambassador Jeane J. Kirkpatrick
Senior Fellow, American Enterprise Institute

Diane L. Knippers
President, The Institute on Religion and Democracy

Alan Charles Kors
Professor of History, University of Pennsylvania and President, Foundation for Individual Rights in Education

David Kusnet
Visiting Fellow, Economic Policy Institute

Nat LaCour
Executive Vice President, American Federation of Teachers

Robert R. LaGamma
Executive Director, Council for a Community of Democracies

Irena Lasota
President, Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe

Gail M. Leftwich
President, Federation of State Humanities Councils

John Lewis
U.S. Representative, Georgia

Seymour Martin Lipset
Senior Scholar, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

Tom Loveless
Director, Brown Center on Education Policy, The Brookings Institution

Martin Maddaloni
General President, United Association of Journeyman and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipefitting Industry of the U.S. and Canada

Herb Magidson
Chair, Democracy Committee, American Federation of Teachers

Harvey C. Mansfield
William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Government, Harvard University

Ray Marshall
Professor Emeritus and Audre and Bernard Rapoport Centennial Chair in Economics and Public Affairs, University of Texas at Austin

Will Marshall
President, Progressive Policy Institute

Radwan Masmoudi
President, Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy

Wilfred M. McClay
SunTrust Chair of Excellence in Humanities and Professor of History, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

David McCullough
Historian and Author, *John Adams* and *Truman*

Edward J. McElroy
Secretary-Treasurer, American Federation of Teachers

Gerald W. McEntee
President, American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees

Kweisi Mfume
President, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

John Norton Moore
Director, School of Law and National Security, University of Virginia

Marc H. Morial
President and CEO, National Urban League

Joshua Muravchik
Resident Scholar, American Enterprise Institute

Ralph G. Neas
President, People for the American Way

Diana Villiers Negroponte
Adjunct Professor of History, Fordham University

Michael Novak
George Frederick Jewett Scholar in Religion, Philosophy, and Public Policy, American Enterprise Institute

Terence M. O'Sullivan
General President, Laborers' International Union of North America

John J. Patrick
Professor of Education, Indiana University

Robert Pickus
President, World Without War Council, Inc.

Marc F. Plattner
Editor, *Journal of Democracy* and Director, International Forum for Democratic Studies

Norman Podhoretz
Editor at Large, *Commentary* Magazine

Arch Puddington
Director of Research, Freedom House

Dr. Susan Kaufman Purcell
Vice President, Americas Society/Council of the Americas

Wendy Puriefoy
President, Public Education Network

Charles Quigley
Executive Director, Center for Civic Education

Diane Ravitch
Research Professor of Education, New York University and Author, *The Language Police*

Christopher Reeve
Chairman, The Christopher Reeve Paralysis Foundation

Bill Richardson
Governor of New Mexico

Richard W. Riley
Former U.S. Secretary of Education

Arturo Rodriguez
President, United Farm Workers of America

Richard Rodriguez
Author

Andrew J. Rotherham
Director, 21st Century Schools Project, Progressive Policy Institute

Michael Sacco
President, Seafarers International Union of North America

Robert A. Scardelletti
International President, Transportation• Communications International Union

Harold H. Schaitberger
General President, International Association of Fire Fighters

Diana Schaub
Chair, Department of Political Science, Loyola College in Maryland

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.
Historian and Author

Gilbert T. Sewall
Director, American Textbook Council

Donna E. Shalala
President, University of Miami

Lee S. Shulman
President, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

Edward C. Sullivan
President, AFL-CIO Building and Construction Trades Department

John Sweeney
President, American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations

Kathleen Kennedy Townsend
President, Operation Respect

Susan L. Traiman
Director, Education Initiative, The Business Roundtable

Philip Uri Treisman
Professor of Mathematics and Director, Charles A. Dana Center, University of Texas at Austin

Michael E. Ward
Superintendent of Schools, North Carolina

Ben Wattenberg
Senior Fellow, American Enterprise Institute

Reg Weaver
President, National Education Association

Eddie N. Williams
President, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

Lynn R. Williams
President Emeritus, United Steelworkers of America

Jennifer Windsor
Executive Director, Freedom House

Jay Winik
Historian and Author, *April 1865*

Alan Wolfe
Professor of Political Science and Director, Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life, Boston College

Harry Wu
Executive Director, Laogai Research Foundation

Tatiana Yankelevich
Assistant Director, Andrei Sakharov Archives and Human Rights Center, Brandeis University

Susan Tave Zelman
Superintendent of Public Instruction, Ohio

This sculpture, modeled from an historic photograph of U.S. Marines raising the American flag on the bloody Iwo Jima battlefield, calls to mind the transcendent courage and sacrifice required to win World War II.

The Albert Shanker Institute
555 New Jersey Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20001

202•879•4401

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