

# IMPERILING THE REPUBLIC: THE FATE OF U.S. HISTORY INSTRUCTION UNDER COMMON CORE

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Founders of the American experiment in democracy assumed that understanding American history was essential in a Union where public-spirited citizenship and the capacity to live under laws “wholesome and necessary for the public good” would characterize the new nation. To proceed without the knowledge of history, in their view, was a sure path to “a tragedy or a farce.”

The Common Core standards for English language arts provide standards for the English language arts but also “literacy” standards for history. This report analyses these literacy standards and offers the following solutions to the problem Common Core’s architects sought to solve—how to help poor readers in high school become college and career ready citizens of this country after graduation from high school.

1. Schools can establish secondary reading classes separate from the English and other subject classes. Students who read little and cannot or won’t read high school level textbooks can be given further reading instruction in the secondary grades by teachers with strong academic backgrounds (like Teach For America volunteers) who have been trained to teach reading skills in the context of the academic subjects students are taking. It’s not easy to do, but it is doable.
2. A second solution may be for schools to expand the notion of choice to include what other countries do to address the needs of young adolescents who prefer to work with their hands and do not prefer to read or write much. Alternative high school curricula starting in grade 9 have become increasingly popular and successful in Massachusetts. There are waiting lists for most of the regional vocational technical high schools in the state. The trades they learn in grades 9-12 motivate them sufficiently so they now pass the tests in the basic high school subjects that all students are required to take for a high school diploma and over half now go on to some form of post-secondary education.
3. The most important solution to the problem of poor reading—and an inadequate U.S. history curriculum—in high school is for state boards of education, governors, and state legislatures to disallow public schools to use the Advanced Placement United States History (APUSH) curriculum just issued by the College Board for the most able readers in high school, and to require heterogeneous courses in U.S. history in which all students, high- or low-income, native or immigrant, study together the common civic core spelled out in Paul Gagnon’s *Educating Democracy*, issued in 2003 by the Albert Shanker Institute.

Surely the American Federation of Teachers could assemble a *estschrift* written at a high school level to honor a historian who dedicated his academic life to advancing the education of the low-income students he taught in the Boston area. Self-government cannot survive without citizens who are willing to ask informed questions in public of educational policy makers and demand answers.

## I. THE ROLE OF HISTORY IN THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT IN DEMOCRACY

When asked to comment on and support a plan for public education in the new western state of Kentucky in 1822, James Madison, then widely respected as a leading founder of the republican Union declared Independent in 1776 and the formulator and expositor of its Constitution, responded with a theory of good republican self-government. It required, Madison insisted, intelligent, responsible, public-spirited citizens, who would have knowledge of “the globe we inhabit, the nations among which it is divided, and the characters and customs which divide them.”<sup>1</sup>

Education, Madison insisted, “cannot be too much applauded. A government deriving its power from the people, and a people without “popular information, or the means of acquiring it, [was] but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy, or perhaps both,” he asserted. “A people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.” His pleasure at Kentucky’s plan was “not a little enhanced,” he said, “by the enlightened patriotism which is now providing for the State; a plan embracing every class of Citizens.” “Cheaper and nearer seats of Learning,” he explained, would allow “parents with slender incomes...to place their sons in a course of education putting them on a level with the sons of the Richest.” This would provide “Learned Institutions...diffused throughout the entire Society, the education needed for the common purposes of life.” This would allow for “wherever a youth was ascertained to possess talents meriting an education which his parents could not afford, he would be carried forward at the public expence,... to the completion of his studies at the highest” seminaries.

Madison thus applied his promotion of education to all citizens regardless of wealth (later formalized in systems of universal public education), and to the needs not only of citizens and political leaders, but also to the development of talents for the various professions and occupations that would

flourish in a free and self-governing society. A plan of education encompassing these broad, history-focused, objectives, Madison believed, was the only way to avoid the “Farce or Tragedy” of an uneducated self-governing electorate.

In turning to the content of the proper education for free and self-governing citizens, Madison, like his fellow philosopher-historians John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, began with their collegiate studies at Princeton, Harvard, and William and Mary respectively, as they learned the ancient languages of the Greek historians Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, and Plutarch, and of the Romans Livy, Sallust, Caesar, and Tacitus. When Madison and Jefferson drew up a list of 307 works they proposed for a Library of the Continental Congress in 1783 (blocked by the anti-government-spending delegates), they included books by the latest, often radical European historians such as Pierre Bayle, Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Barbeyrac, as well as contemporary English and Scottish historians such as Gibbon, Hutcheson, Robertson, Priestley, Hume, and Adam Smith. The list also included the four “books of elementary right” that Jefferson would declare were at the root of American thinking about government at the time of the Declaration of Independence: “Aristotle, Cicero, Sydney, and Locke.”

Finally the two Virginians recommended long lists of histories, exploration accounts, tracts, laws, and treaties about the Americas since the Columbian discovery. Then lawmakers might work with knowledge of the needs, dangers, and accomplishments of the people from whom they derived their “just powers” of government. The study and understanding of history, that is, was deemed essential to those taking part in the public life of the self-governing republic formed under the Constitution.

A study of history, and a consciousness of its importance in understanding the nation “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all . . . are created equal” in 1776, and the Constitution that became its operating framework, was of great

importance to the founding generation. Benjamin Franklin, for example, as a nine-year-old growing up in Boston in 1715, heard Increase Mather preach about the rumored death of “that wicked old Persecutor of God’s People, Lewis XIV.” When sixty and moving toward the Declaration of Independence, Franklin remembered this sermon as his first recollection of commentary on public affairs. It placed not only historical knowledge at the center of his world view but also a view that saw the world as dominated by a struggle between “persecutors” of the people and a community seeking to live in political freedom. Thus Franklin’s vastly important and useful public career arose in part from both his knowledge of history and a moral perspective on it. Three years after his recollection of Mather’s sermon, he signed the Declaration of Independence, and eleven years after that the Constitution.

Franklin noted in his to-become-famous autobiography that though he had had only two months of formal schooling, “from a child I was fond of Reading and all the little money that came into my Hands was ever laid out in Books.” Apprenticed to his brother’s printing shop, he had access to a large bounty of books and pamphlets that he stayed up nights to read through as much as he could. From an English translation of *Plutarch’s Lives* he learned not only the facts of the history of the Ancient world, but also its concern for the commonweal and for the public character of its leaders. Plutarch admired leaders who were not only great but also good. Thus he extolled Cicero’s career in the Roman Senate, especially for showing “how invincible right and justice are [when] eloquently set forth,” but condemned him for acquiescing in Caesar’s dictatorship, “a more grievous and greater tyranny” than that of Catiline, which Cicero had led in suppressing.<sup>2</sup>

From the persistent moral perspective of this history Franklin learned important lessons in how to fulfill diligently his dual citizenship roles, to rule and be ruled, with honor, responsibility, and public spirit—a message he conveyed to the members of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 when, in considering suffrage requirements, he asked that

they do nothing to “depress the virtue and public spirit of our common people; of which they had displayed a great deal during the war.”

Turning to modern history, Franklin’s understanding came from what he called “R. Burton’s Historical Collections...small Chapman’s Books and cheap, 40 or 50 in all.” Written and sold for the unsophisticated market, drama, excitement, marvels, patriotism, villainy, and heroism fill every page. One “cheap” volume, *The History of Nine Worthies of the World*, tells of nine famous soldiers: Hector of Troy, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Joshua, David, Judas Maccabeus, King Arthur, Charlemagne, and King Godfrey of Jerusalem.

For more recent English history, Burton told of Drake’s murderous passages along the Spanish Main in *The Life and Dangerous Voyages of Sir Francis Drake*, but claimed nonetheless that Drake’s “Civility to the Conquered had often been experienced.” Franklin’s own, later version of this precept was “there never was a good war or a bad peace.” In another volume Burton deplored Cromwell’s military dictatorship while praising his “singular courage...and greatness of mind.” In a volume published during the reign of Charles II, Puritan excesses are further condemned and the execution of Charles I, described with intense drama, is called “a horrid and nefarious act.”

Writing after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, Burton shows in *A History of the House of Orange* how the “glorious ancestors” of King William III of Holland had rescued his country, and then England itself, from the “French...and Slavery.” Thus England enjoyed “a Government founded upon Law and Justice; A Government calculated for the support of the Protestant Interest throughout the World.” In case his readers might have missed the moral and principled lessons for actors in history, Burton explained in *The Unfortunate Court Favorites of England* and *The Whole Duty of Youth* how Queen Elizabeth’s Essex and Charles I’s Strafford had “compromised their integrity to flatter their masters and afterward received their just rewards from the public executioner.” In contrast, the lives of Isaac, Joseph,

and several princes of England showed the just merits of being “good, obedient, pious, diligent, and honest.” Poor Richard would not disagree.

Franklin elaborated the effects of his early reading of history in his 1749 *Proposals Relating to the Education of the Youth in Pensilvania*. He explained that “the Causes of the Rise or Fall of any Man’s Character, Fortune, Power, &c., . . . indeed the general natural Tendency of Reading good History, must be, to fix in the Minds of Youth deep Impressions of the Beauty and Usefulness of Virtue of all Kinds, Publick Spirit, Fortitude, &c. . . . History,” he added, “will also give Occasion to expatiate on the Advantage of Civil Orders and Constitutions, how Men and their Properties are protected by joining in Societies and establishing Government; their Industry encouraged and rewarded, Arts invented, and Life made more comfortable: The Advantages of Liberty, Mischiefs of Licentiousness, Benefits arising from good Laws and a due Execution of Justice, &c. Thus may the first Principles of sound Politicks be fix’d in the Minds of Youth.” The study of history for its own sake, then, was the indispensable path to the upright character of the public-spirited citizen and to the establishment of a good government of just and socially useful laws.

The future “father of the Constitution,” James Madison, had acquired a strong general knowledge of history in preparatory school and college, but he turned especially to it in his effort to deepen his understanding of public affairs as the colonies moved toward the Declaration of Independence. He sought from his college friend in Philadelphia copies of Adam Ferguson’s *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* and Joseph Priestley’s *An Essay on the First Principles of Government*, books that would prepare him to take learned part in the Virginia conventions and legislatures sure to come with Independence. In his most momentous use of history for public purposes, though, in the months before the Constitutional Convention of 1787, he gathered around him not only his own growing library, but also the “literary cargo” of books Jefferson had carefully selected for him from the book stalls of Paris, London, and Amsterdam.

Madison had at his disposal the latest Enlightenment, multi-volume works of French scholarship such as *Diderot’s Encyclopedie Methodique* and deThou’s *Historie Universalle*, and other histories reflecting the critical spirit of Voltaire and the French philosophes. Madison also had available to him classical works such as *Plutarch’s Lives* and the histories of Polybius, the historical orations of Demosthenes and Cicero, and modern “Whiggish” (Jefferson’s term) histories such as Sir William Temple’s *United Provinces of the Netherlands* and Abbe Raynal’s *History of England*. From this study he compiled a booklet of forty-one pocket-sized pages “Of Ancient and Modern Confederacies” that he used in 1787-1788 at the Federal Convention and at the Virginia Ratification Convention.

He included the public in his linkage of historical knowledge to the well-being of the common good of the nation by substantially including his study of the ancient and modern confederacies in *Federalist* 18, 19, and 20. He learned from this study that a sovereign confederation of sovereign states (as the Articles of Confederation was) was a “solecism in theory,” and in practice was “subversive of the order and ends of civil society” substituting “the destructive coercion of the sword, in the place of the mild and salutary coercion of the magistracy.”

In a similar study of the “Vices of the Political System of the United States,” Madison gathered the extensive collection of not only the laws, debates, and treaties of the Continental Congress, but also those of each of the thirteen states, plus any histories of the states already in print he and Jefferson had been mindful to have in their proposed Library of Congress. Concentrating on the “perverseness” of the states, he catalogued their quarrels with each other, their defiance of federal measures, and their violation of solemn international agreements, of “national” measures for internal improvements and of regulation of commerce.

The result was that in the eyes of history and of other nations, the United States had lost sight of its general welfare and of the need for a disciplined

respect for law. The need was clear, he wrote Washington a month before they each took their seats in the Constitutional Convention of 1787 (Franklin was already there), since “an individual independence of the States is utterly irreconcilable with their aggregate sovereignty,” it was necessary at once “to support a due supremacy of the national authority, and not exclude the local authorities whenever they can be subordinately useful.”<sup>3</sup> The lessons of history confirmed that “a more perfect Union” was necessary.

The founders insisted and assumed, then, that understanding human, especially American history, was essential in a Union “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all... are created equal” where public-spirited citizenship and the capacity to live under laws “wholesome and necessary for the public good” (the first specific aspiration stated in the Declaration of Independence) would characterize the new nation. To proceed without the knowledge of history that undergirded essential public-spirited citizenship and good laws was a sure path to “a tragedy or a farce.” All would have agreed on the shared obligation of all social agencies, government and non-government, public and private, to foster these qualities. Thus Franklin’s aspiration might be achieved that “the first Principles of a sound Politicks might be fixed in the Minds of Youth.”

## **II. THE CRISIS IN THE STUDY OF U.S. HISTORY**

U.S. history is in trouble. Though many Americans take their children to the battlefield of Gettysburg, read the latest book by historian David McCullough, or watch the latest video on the History Channel, the teaching and learning of history in our nation’s schools is in a state of disrepair. America’s Founders would be deeply troubled. Madison, perhaps, would wonder if we have reached the point of farce or tragedy that he worried about – a nation with a democratic political system but one with a populace lacking in historical and civic knowledge.

The signs of trouble are widespread. At the elementary level, the National Council for the

Social Studies (NCSS) has warned of a wholesale loss of instructional time resulting from the focus on mathematics and reading in the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act and in the Common Core State Standards adopted by over 45 states. The NCSS has also noted that “abundant research bears out the sad reality that fewer and fewer young people, particularly students of color and students in poverty, are receiving a high quality social studies education, despite the central role of social studies in preparing students for the responsibilities of citizenship.” According to one recent and massive study, elementary students spend less than 3.5 hours a week on “social studies.” “We do not,” one elementary social studies teacher noted “have time and no one in the district cares about social studies.”<sup>4</sup>

The teaching and learning of civics and history (let alone the amorphous subject of “social studies”) is not a priority in our elementary schools, nor a priority among most of our nation’s leaders. A bipartisan group of scholars known as the Commission on Youth Voting and Civil Knowledge recently issued a report in which they noted that “Civic education for most policy makers” is a “low priority.” The overwhelming majority of states, the writers of the report stated, do not assess school and student performance in the field of social studies or history. Further, the overwhelming majority of states do not require certification in U.S. government for government teachers.<sup>5</sup> Another recent study conducted by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement found equally depressing results. Education in social studies, the report concluded, is not a priority at the state or national level. In 2001, the report noted, only 34 states administered social studies assessments. By 2012-2013 that number had dropped to 21.<sup>6</sup>

Absent a focus on social studies, history, or civics at all levels of our K-12 public school system it is not surprising that student knowledge of our own nation’s history is minimal. For 25 years, in fact, student scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests have been dismal. In 1986, for example, 60 percent of

seniors failed to understand that the goal of the *Federalist Papers* was to support ratification of the Constitution. In 1995 more than 80 percent of students in all tested grades failed to achieve a proficient rating (a rating that demonstrates “solid academic performance.”) In 2006, only 13 percent of seniors scores proficient and in 2010, only 12 percent of seniors scored proficient. Amazingly, the 2010 NAEP test demonstrated that almost 100 percent of graduating seniors could not explain the importance of *Brown v. Board of Education*.<sup>7</sup>

A few leading Americans have voiced concerns over these trends. In 2008, former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor and Congressman Lee Hamilton of Indiana wrote that a healthy democracy requires informed, knowledgeable citizens but “too many people today do not understand how our political system works.”<sup>8</sup> In a 2011 article, O’Connor and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan wrote that “Civic knowledge is not inherited through the gene pool. It is learned – at school and at the dinner table. And, too often, our schools are doing a poor job of transmitting civic knowledge.”<sup>9</sup> O’Connor and Duncan also pointed out that the crisis of historical and civics-based learning is most acute among African Americans and Hispanics. NAEP statistics confirm this. On the 2010 NAEP tests over 50 percent of Hispanic 12th graders and over 60 percent of African Americans failed to achieve a basic understanding of civics.<sup>10</sup> Results for African Americans and Hispanics were similar on the 2010 NAEP U.S. history test. To earn a score that demonstrates a “basic” understanding of U.S. history content required a cut score of 294. The average score for African Americans was 268. For Hispanic Americans it was 275. For white Americans it was 296.<sup>11</sup>

Such appalling gaps in educational achievement on issues that are fundamental to the life of our democracy warrant extra state and national attention. Instead, state and national leaders seem to be looking the other way. NAEP administrators, for example, have decided to eliminate two of their U.S. history and civics assessments (for grade 4 and grade 12). Massachusetts, which has one of the

highest ranked set of history standards for K-12, has totally suspended its history assessments.<sup>12</sup> The crisis of history extends all the way to the College Board and a course taken by almost half a million high school students. Starting in the fall of 2014, the College Board will be implementing a re-designed Advanced Placement U.S. History curriculum in which U.S. history has been completely distorted. We discuss this new curriculum in detail later.

History teachers see that their subject plays second fiddle to mathematics and English. They also see that a core part of American history (the philosophical and historical antecedents to the Constitutional period, as well as the contentious issues with which the Framers grappled) has been deliberately minimized or distorted by the College Board in its redesigned A.P.U.S. history curriculum. How did a nation that once believed the learning of history was fundamental to the success of a democracy become a nation in which the evolution of democracy and of a republican form of government is minimized, ignored, left to chance, or politicized?

## A. THE HISTORY OF HISTORY EDUCATION

Prior to the American Revolution, existing schools focused on religious instruction. New England colonies led the way. The Puritans who came to Massachusetts in the 1600s believed that reading was essential for all members of their religious communities so that they could understand the Bible. Puritans established the nation’s first public high school (Boston Latin School in 1635) and its first college (Harvard College in 1636) to train the lawyers and ministers needed in the colony. Puritans later required the establishment of locally-supported elementary and grammar schools as towns became incorporated. A hornbook (a wooden paddle with lessons tacked on and covered by a piece of transparent horn) was used for decades to teach Puritan children how to read the Bible. Throughout the 1600s and 1700s, most colonists received little to no history education.

The American Revolution helped change this. The founders of our experiment in democracy

insisted that its success depended upon an educated citizenry. People needed knowledge to rule themselves. Greater knowledge, including greater historical knowledge, would create better citizens—citizens who could protect America’s fragile experiment in freedom. “Preach,” Jefferson wrote, “a crusade against ignorance.... Establish and improve the law for educating the common people.... General education will enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom.” Jefferson also noted that “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, it expects what never was and never will be.” Teachers and writers, the Founders insisted, need to educate Americans. One way to do this, Noah Webster believed, was to banish British textbooks and use books written by Americans. “For America in her infancy to adopt the maxims of the old” Webster wrote, “would be to stamp the wrinkles of old age on the bloom of youth.... Begin with the infant in his cradle. Let the first word he lisps be Washington.”<sup>13</sup>

After the Revolution, more educators rallied around the ideas of our nation’s Founders. In Massachusetts, Horace Mann led efforts to create the first common school system – schools that would be supported by taxpayers and teach a common curriculum. In the 1830s and 1840s, Mann (who became the state’s first secretary of education) was concerned that the ideas of Jefferson and Webster were not being implemented. Many children, he argued, received no schooling at all and the schools that existed were often in poor shape. Students, in turn, sat for long hours on benches and did little more than practice writing, learn the alphabet, and memorize texts. The learning of history was, at best, an afterthought. Deep historical content was not in the curriculum—if a curriculum even existed. To change this, Mann urged the creation of common schools that would provide all children an opportunity to acquire the knowledge that would help them advance in society. “Education,” Mann argued, “is the equalizer of the conditions of men, the great balance wheel of the social machinery.”<sup>14</sup>

In 1852, Massachusetts became the first state in the nation to require all children to attend school

(they could be private or public). Along with reformers like Mann in Massachusetts, reformers in New York, including Governor Silas Wright, called for the creation of common schools for the purpose of imparting knowledge to all students so that they could become better citizens and sustain America’s democratic experiment. “On the careful cultivation in our schools, of the minds of the young,” Wright declared, “the entire success or absolute failure of the great experiment of self-government is wholly dependent.”<sup>15</sup>

In response to the efforts of reformers and in response to the concerns many Americans had with the rising numbers of immigrants who, many felt, did not have the habits and values needed for self-government, common schools grew in number across the states. More and more children began to receive at least some education. Still, the history that students learned was limited. Many students read from popular books such as *McGuffey’s Eclectic Readers* that were light on history but emphasized moral tales focused on admirable personality traits.

19th-century educators who did support the teaching of history did so in an effort to instill a common knowledge that all citizens would need to fulfill their democratic responsibilities. Charles Goodrich, a writer of popular 19th-century textbooks, declared that his goal was to make students “so familiar with the lives and sayings of famous Americans that they will have no difficulty in understanding” any modern reference to them.”<sup>16</sup> One popular history textbook that teachers used for many years was Salma Hale’s *History of the United States*. Hale made his goals clear. The preservation of American freedom, he wrote, depended on “the universal diffusion of knowledge” and “this truth should sink deep into the hearts of the old and the young.” American citizens, he continued, “should never forget the awful responsibilities resting upon them.... To them is committed an experiment, successful hitherto, the final result of which must have a powerful influence upon the destiny of mankind; if favorable and happy, the whole civilized world will be free; if adverse, despotism and darkness will again over shadow it.”<sup>17</sup>

By 1900 common schools existed across the nation. Spending on schools increased as did student enrollment, spurred on by increasing immigration. Though history education was limited, there was widespread acknowledgment among educators that the teaching and learning of history merited a growing place in the school curriculum. In 1899, for example, the American Historical Association created the “Committee of Seven” to examine the high school history curriculum and make proposals for reform. The committee’s report recommended four years of history at the high school level: ancient history in grade 9, medieval and modern Europe in grade 10, English history in grade 11, and American history and civics in grade 12.<sup>18</sup>

The Committee of Seven’s report was a moment of promise for history educators. It did not last long. At the turn of the century a new group of “progressive” educators began an attack upon the teaching of rigorous academic history that continues to this day and, in many respects, has now triumphed. In 1913 a committee led by Thomas Jesse Jones, a Welsh immigrant deeply interested in the education of African Americans, created a report titled “Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education.” Jones and other members of the committee believed that education had to be made “relevant” to students. And history, according to Jones, was not relevant to the vast majority of students who would, after a few years of schooling, go off into factories and never have to bother themselves with the boring, arcane facts of the past. In place of history, schools should offer “social studies” classes that would help children accept their lot in life by teaching them skills they would need in the factories of the modern world.<sup>19</sup>

The anti-intellectual sentiment expressed by Jones eventually became part of a report created by the National Education Association’s (NEA) Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, issued in 1918, and reflective of the larger progressive trend in the field of education. The authors of the NEA report argued that the purpose of schools was to promote “social efficiency.” Schools had to help each student “find his place and use that place to shape both himself

and society toward ever nobler ends.” One way to do this was to do replace history with social studies which the report defined as “subject matter related directly to the organization and development of human society, and to man as a member of social groups.” History was too far removed from the immediate needs and wants of children. It was too arcane, too academic, and too likely to involve abstract thoughts. The fragile minds of so many American youngsters simply could not handle history. A separate Committee on Social Studies argued that “Facts, conditions, theories, and activities that do not contribute rather directly to the appreciation of methods of human betterment have no claim.” Social studies, the NEA insisted, had to trump history.<sup>20</sup>

Progressive reformers latched onto newly created Intelligence Quotient (I.Q.) tests to argue that most students were not suited to serious academic subjects such as history. It was far better, they insisted, to train people for “real-world” work. The head of the Stanford University Department of Education argued that “We should give up the exceedingly democratic idea that all are equal and that our society is devoid of classes. The employee tends to remain an employee; the wage earner tends to remain a wage earner...”<sup>21</sup>

The progressives gained momentum. In response to their theories, state after state and district after district began to dramatically revise their curriculum, eliminating core academic subjects such as history and replacing them—as Virginia did—with activities focused on the “major functions of social life,” or the “Production of Goods and Services and Distribution of the Returns of Production.” At the elementary level, schools ditched content in favor of fun-filled activities like block building.<sup>22</sup> Schools also began to track students. Only those deemed worthy would receive rigorous academic training in all subjects, including history. Some critics of progressivism sought to challenge these changes.

## **B. POST WORLD WAR II CHANGES IN HISTORY EDUCATION**

After World War II—and with more and more students attending school (80 percent of teenagers were enrolled in high school in 1950)—a few academics wondered if we were on the verge of producing a large class of citizens without the necessary knowledge to be self-governing citizens in a democratic society.<sup>23</sup> A leading critic of the progressive trend was University of Illinois historian Arthur Bestor. Bestor sought to rally opposition to progressivism by calling for a greater emphasis on academic subjects for all students. “One can search history and biography in vain,” Bestor argued, “for evidence that men or women ever accomplished anything original, creative, or significant by virtue of narrowly conceived vocational training or of educational programs that aimed merely at ‘life adjustment.’”<sup>24</sup> The Soviet launch of *Sputnik* in 1957 also convinced many Americans that we were falling behind our rivals in core academic subjects.

Change, however, was either slow or non-existent and particularly in the field of history. Many educators continued to dismiss the importance of history as irrelevant to the lives of students. In 1951, A.H. Lauchner, speaking before a convention of high school principals, declared that “We shall some day accept the thought that it is just as illogical to assume every boy must be able to read as it is that each one must be able to perform on a violin...”<sup>25</sup> Learning how to read, let alone learning history, Lauchner insisted, is simply unnecessary for many children. In 1967 one social studies educator, Edgar Wesley, wrote an article titled “Let’s Abolish History.” In it, he emphatically declared that “no teacher at any grade level... should teach a course in history as content. To do so is confusing, unnecessary, frustrating, futile, pointless, and as illogical as to teach a course in the World Almanac, the dictionary, or the Encyclopedia.”<sup>26</sup> So much for the heroic tales of olden times! After World War II, day in and day out, most students did not take much history and certainly did not benefit from a clearly defined, grade-by-grade history curriculum; instead, they

took social studies classes that focused on current events, “social living” classes, or classes on problems such as drug use. History, when taught, was based on student interest and “hands-on” activities.

By the 1960s and 1970s, proponents of history education could rightly feel dispirited. Two main forces were aligned against any substantive change. First, most schools of education had become centers of progressivism. Year after year, education schools graduated teachers with little content knowledge but plenty of “child centered” teaching methods. In tandem with state and local governments, as well as school administrators, there emerged what Bestor referred to as “an interlocking directorate of professional educationists.”<sup>27</sup> Second, alongside the continued anti-academic focus of progressives, there emerged new political and educational movements (characterized by terms such as “New Left,” “radical,” and “multicultural”) that spawned out of the heated politics of the 1960s and in most cases melded with the ideas of progressive education.

New Left, radical, or multicultural historians, commentators, and educators urged a dramatic revision in the way that history was taught at all educational levels. It was time, they said, to move beyond Western triumphalism and American exceptionalism and focus on people and movements that have often been ignored. At its best, this new movement called for more attention to the history of American Indians, African Americans, Hispanics, and women, topics that had previously received little attention in history classes. On the other hand, the ideas of this new movement tended to verge into simplistic and polemical views of the past. So too did it promote the idea of the teacher as an activist—a person who should seek to change the views of students through historical study. Thus, Howard Zinn, author of the popular *A People’s History of the United States*, declared that it was his goal to “awaken a great consciousness of class conflict, racial injustice, sexual inequality, and national arrogance.”<sup>28</sup> Students, for Zinn and his followers, were not autonomous—they could not make up

their own minds but, instead, had to be led along the path of proper historical thinking.

Progressive educators believed that their ideas were in the best interests of students. But facts began to tell a different story. All the changes progressive educators had made did not lead to better results, either on history tests or on SAT verbal and math tests. From 1963 to the late 1970s, SAT verbal scores dropped from an average of 478 to the 420s. Math scores dropped from an average of 502 in 1963 to 466 in 1980. Student knowledge of history and civics, as NAEP tests would soon demonstrate, was also minimal. Most damaging, the theories of progressive and multicultural educators were clearly not working for low-income students who face an enormous education gap in all major subjects, including history.<sup>29</sup>

By the early 1980s, when a commission appointed by President Reagan issued a stinging indictment of American education titled “A Nation At Risk,” many Americans favored a change. They wanted education reform focused on rigorous academic standards for all core subjects including history. “The educational foundations of our society,” the authors of *A Nation at Risk* noted, “are being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people...If any unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.”<sup>30</sup>

Soon after the release of *A Nation At Risk*, a group of noted historians and educators including William McNeill, C. Vann Woodward, Gordon Craig, Diane Ravitch, and Paul Gagnon created the Bradley Commission to call for a nation-wide commitment to the teaching and learning of history. Bradley Commission members noted that the nation-wide education crisis that was the focus of *A Nation at Risk* was in many cases worse for history. In the elementary grades, they pointed out, “history is typically a forgotten subject.” It had been replaced by content-light “expanding horizons” classes where students spent time learning about their family and community, not on

the amazing stories of famous Americans or the great turning points of American history. In the middle and high school grades, Bradley members continued, students received a vast sludge of social studies classes but little if any U.S. history and almost no world history. To remedy these problems the Bradley Commission called for radical changes at the elementary level—the replacement of a hazy social studies curriculum with a curriculum focused on actual historical content as well as biography, literature, and geography. At the secondary level the Commission called for students to study four years of history, including world history, Western history, and U.S. history. It was time, Commission members argued, to give history its proper place in American schools. “History answers not only the what, the when, the where, and the who about the course of human experience on our planet but more importantly, the why.” Commission members also noted that history “provides the basis for understanding such other disciplines as philosophy, the arts, religion, literature, law, and government.”<sup>31</sup>

Momentum was clearly building for change. In his 1990 State of the Union Address and in his America 2000 plan, President George H.W. Bush insisted that by the year 2000 Americans students “must be first in the world in math and science achievement.” Bush also declared that every school should “ensure that all students learn to use their minds well so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.” It is, Bush insisted, time to act. “Education,” he declared, “is the one investment that means more for our future because it means the most for our children. Real improvement in our schools is not simply a matter of spending more: It’s a matter of asking more—expecting more—of our schools, our teachers, of our kids, of our parents, and ourselves.” Bush also recommended the writing of “world class” standards in all major subjects, including history.<sup>32</sup> In response to the rising tide of support for reform, educators at the national and state level set to work.

At the national level, the attempt to write history standards failed. Educators and members of

Congress condemned the set of national history standards produced under the leadership of the National Center for History in Schools at the University of California in Los Angeles under the direction of Gary Nash as being one-sided and overly negative in its portrayal of American history. At the state level, however, the 1990s and 2000s witnessed much positive change. State after state began writing history standards and developing history assessments. Though many state standards were of poor quality (either because they lacked rigor, were not specific, or were politically biased), several states did develop strong, rigorous history standards. The state history standards produced by South Carolina, Alabama, California, Indiana, Massachusetts, and New York offered well-developed U.S. and world history standards that were academically sound, cohesive, and challenging.

To provide just one example, consider California's grade 11 standards on the Civil Rights movement. The standards require students to read and discuss the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision; understand Martin Luther King Jr.'s "philosophical and religious dedication to nonviolence by reading documents such as his 'Letter from Birmingham Jail'"; and be familiar with many of the famous leaders and activists of the Civil Rights Movement as well as key turning points of the movement including King, Rosa Parks, the sit-ins, the attempt to integrate Little Rock, Arkansas's Central High School, the March on Washington in 1963, and the Selma to Montgomery marches in 1965. The California standards also call for readings of books related to the era, including *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*.<sup>33</sup>

But just as it appeared possible for genuine reform in the teaching and learning of history to take place, political and institutional support for serious academic reforms changed. The shift came from something old and something new. Progressive educators at schools of education had continued to fight against serious academic history standards in favor of amorphous social studies and thinking skills. TheodoreSizer, former dean of the

Harvard Graduate School of Education, insisted that the "myriad, detailed and mandatory state 'curriculum frameworks,' no matter how scholarly they were, are attacks on intellectual freedom."<sup>34</sup> Popular education writer Jonathan Kozol insisted that assessments based on the state standards smacked of memories of "another social order not so long ago that regimented all its children...to march with pedagogic uniformity, efficiency, and every competence one can conceive—except for independent will—right into Poland, Austria, and France, and World War II."<sup>35</sup>

Alongside the progressive educators came radical and multicultural historians who insisted that state standards needed to be more reflective of recent scholarship on race, class, and gender. In his popular 1995 book *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, James Loewen insisted that one of the reasons African Americans and Hispanic students do so poorly is because they never hear their history. "Black students," Loewen argued, "consider American history as usually taught 'white' and assimilative, so they resist learning it. This explains why research shows a bigger differential between poor and rich students and white students, in history than in other school subjects." The same, Loewen argued, is true for girls because "women and women's concerns and perceptions still go underrepresented in history classes."<sup>36</sup> Loewen's claims managed to be both wrong (by the time he wrote his book scholarship and teaching had been transformed by the views of New Left, radical, and multicultural historians for three decades) and insulting at the same time (as if people can comprehend only the history of their own race or gender and only when it is written by those of their own race or gender).

Added to these forces was something new—national legislation that took the wind out of the sails of history educators. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), passed by Congress in 2001, required that all schools receiving public funding had to test students in mathematics and reading.<sup>37</sup> History had been omitted. States and districts took notice. Support for history, as is attested by the studies discussed in the introduction to this section, waned.

A second major blow came with the arrival and adoption by many states of the Common Core standards, also for only mathematics and English language arts. As NCLB did, the Common Core is pushing states and districts to focus overwhelmingly on adjusting and revising their curriculum and professional development programs around the Common Core's two areas of focus. Its website proudly declares that "the [mathematics and English language arts] standards were created to ensure that all students graduate from high school with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college, career, and life, regardless of where they live." If the father of our Constitution, James Madison, or the father of public education, Horace Mann, were alive today they would surely ask whatever happened to the importance of educating students to become self-governing citizens in a democratic society.<sup>38</sup>

In 2000, it appeared that the stars were aligned and genuine reform could take place. Today, in 2014, it is quite clear that devoted teachers and educators will need, once again, to rally support for genuine change. The trends of the last several years have led our nation's schools into a position where the importance of historical knowledge—the knowledge necessary for citizenship in this country—is simply not valued. Madison's fears are becoming reality.

### C. CHANGES IN THE ADVANCED PLACEMENT U.S. HISTORY CURRICULUM

The culmination of many of the trends that have shaped history education over the last several decades can be found in the new College Board curriculum for Advanced Placement U.S. History (APUSH). The new curriculum is in a 134-page document (with a 50-page content outline). Without much open discussion, it replaces the existing curriculum that had been guided by a 5-page topic outline following the sequence contained in many state standards.

The new APUSH curriculum begins with a set of historical thinking skills and a set of themes that are heavily focused on the trendy issue of "identity." The first theme, for example, asks students to

"explain how various identities, cultures, and values have been preserved or changed in different contexts of U.S. history with special attention given to the formation of gender, class, racial, and ethnic identities."<sup>39</sup>

On the other hand, there is no theme dedicated to the concepts of federalism, separation of powers (both of which receive brief mention in the curriculum), and individual rights in the APUSH curriculum. Indeed, while the Board is so intent on promoting what it considers good teaching through the reading and study of primary source documents, it fails to even mention the one set of documents essential for understanding American government and American politics: the *Federalist Papers*.

The core of the Board's new curriculum is a lengthy content outline that covers American history from 1491 to the present. It is a remarkable outline, for what it includes and for what it excludes. Marching in step with so much trendy academic scholarship, the new APUSH curriculum minimizes attention to important political leaders (in the name of what radical and multicultural historians derisively refer to as "top down" or "white male" history) and replaces them with "history from the bottom up"—a history of processes and social movements, and explorations of "identity." When teaching about the American Revolution, teachers are not asked to teach about Benjamin Franklin, Patrick Henry, Paul Revere, or Sam Adams. Alexander Hamilton is mentioned as a suggestion, not a requirement. Neither Thomas Jefferson nor James Madison (a primary author of the *Federalist Papers*) is mentioned.<sup>40</sup> Neither are such titans of antebellum American politics as Andrew Jackson, Daniel Webster, and Henry Clay mentioned. Important 20<sup>th</sup>-century presidents such as Teddy Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, and JFK are also absent. Harry Truman will not be around to give anyone hell as he, too, is missing.

The College Board under its new president, David Coleman (the chief architect of Common Core's English language arts and literacy standards) appears to want a high school history curriculum

that mirrors the ideological proclivities of much that passes for academic scholarship today. Although the College Board has nothing to say about Indian methods of warfare and captivity, including the use of ritualistic torture, it is relentless in castigating Europeans, particularly the English, as racist. The English, the curriculum notes, developed “a rigid racial hierarchy.” It also notes the “strong belief in British racial and cultural superiority” and the “racial stereotyping and the development of strict racial categories among British colonists...”<sup>41</sup> Whatever else the British settlers brought to this country (such as their rights as Englishmen) is missing.

Similarly, the College Board paints a dark picture of the Industrial Revolution. “Labor and management,” the College Board writes, battled for control over wages and working conditions, with workers organizing local and national unions and/or directly confronting corporate power.”<sup>42</sup> That most workers never joined unions and that most workers (and the millions of immigrants who came to America) embraced the Industrial Revolution and the increased standard of living it entailed (through higher wages, electrical power, refrigeration, and indoor plumbing) is a truth that does not appear in the new APUSH curriculum. The Board’s treatment of various political movements in the 1960s and 1970s is equally distorted. Movements led by Latinos and American Indians are said to be motivated by a concern for “social and economic equality and a redress of past injustices.” Conservatives, on the other hand, are motivated by fear. As the Board writes: “Conservatives, fearing juvenile delinquency, urban unrest, and challenges to the traditional family, increasingly promoted their own values and ideology.”<sup>43</sup>

Lastly, the Board does not refer to the 9/11 terrorist attacks as terrorist at all—it simply declares: “Following the attacks of September 11, 2001...” The Board also does not mention either Al Qaeda or Osama bin Laden and proceeds, instead, to have teachers focus on the “lengthy, controversial conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq” and the “questions” Americans raised “about the

protection of civil liberties and human rights.” The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were controversial, and the concerns Americans have raised about civil liberties are worthy of discussion. But, absent an understanding of the ideas of Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden and their unbending hatred of the United States as well as of Israel, and their desire (and demonstrated ability) to kill as many innocent people as possible, it will not be possible for students to understand or discuss in any meaningful way America’s response to terrorism.<sup>44</sup> The omission of Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden is all the more curious when one considers that the College Board places a strong emphasis on what it calls “contextualization” or “the ability to connect historical events and processes to specific circumstances of time and place and to broader regional, national, or global processes.”<sup>45</sup> Clarity and balance, as well as breadth and depth of topics, are sorely lacking in the new APUSH curriculum.

To paraphrase a Sergio Leone movie, the new APUSH curriculum represents the bad and the ugly but not the good of American history. The result is a portrait of America as a dystopian society—one riddled with racism, violence, hypocrisy, greed, imperialism, and injustice. Stories of national triumph, great feats of learning, and the legacies of some of America’s great heroes—men and women who overcame many obstacles to create a better nation—are either completely ignored or given brief mention. One searches the new APUSH framework in vain for mention of the Mayflower Compact, Washington’s crossing of the Delaware, the War of 1812, or the writing of the Star Spangled Banner. The Battle of Gettysburg is mentioned (as a suggestion!), but Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address* is not.<sup>46</sup> Thomas Edison has disappeared from our history, as have Emma Lazarus (and her great, symbolic poem “The New Colossus”) and Eleanor Roosevelt. It is not clear why all of them are gone.

Most mysterious of all is the total absence of Martin Luther King, Jr. and King’s great “I Have a Dream Speech.” The new APUSH mentions neither, not even as suggested topics! The College Board’s defense is to say that it wants to give

teachers greater choice—to relieve (as is stated in the introduction to the new curriculum) teachers from “the pressure to cover an unlimited amount of content in their A.P. U.S. history course.”<sup>47</sup> Such a defense is inconsistent with the many terms the Board does list and it also makes little academic sense. How, for example, can a student understand the civil rights movement—something the Board does declare as a goal—without understanding King’s philosophy of non-violence and civil disobedience?

History is a series of amazing stories of tragedy and triumph, of sadness and hope, of corruption and virtue. From history, students learn of the entirety of human experience. They learn how civilizations are formed. They learn how civilizations fall apart. They learn about the great ideas and religions that have influenced millions of people. They learn how wars start and their consequences; they learn what leadership is and is not; they learn how people come together to fight for causes; they learn how governments are formed and how they are changed. So too do they learn amazing tales of heroism—true stories that inspired previous generations and can still inspire our nation’s youth today. Most important, it is from our history that students learn what it is to be a citizen in a democracy.

As the introduction to this paper noted, when Madison prepared to discuss and to write the Constitution and the *Federalist Papers*—arguably the most important work done by any American—he did so by studying history. In the next section, we will more closely examine how the Common Core negatively impacts the teaching and learning of history.

### III. HOW COMMON CORE THREATENS THE STUDY OF U.S. HISTORY

It sounds excessively dramatic to say that Common Core’s English language arts (ELA) standards threaten the study of history. In this section we show why, in the words of a high school teacher, “if implemented as their authors intend, the common core will damage history education.”<sup>48</sup> But we first

clarify how the study of history in K-12 ever got tangled up in Common Core’s ELA standards.

#### A. HOW COMMON CORE CAME TO INCLUDE STUDY OF HISTORY

The sad story begins with the reason for the contents of a document titled Common Core Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects.<sup>49</sup> The bulk of the document is on ELA standards. But the last seven pages (pp. 59–66), titled Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects, provide “literacy” standards for these subjects in grades 6–12. The introduction to the whole document explains why these standards are in this document.

The standards establish guidelines for English language arts (ELA) as well as for literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. Because students must learn to read, write, speak, listen, and use language effectively in a variety of content areas, the standards promote the literacy skills and concepts required for college and career readiness in multiple disciplines.

The College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards form the backbone of the ELA/ literacy standards by articulating core knowledge and skills, while grade-specific standards provide additional specificity. Beginning in grade 6, the literacy standards allow teachers of ELA, history/social studies, science, and technical subjects to use their content area expertise to help students meet the particular challenges of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language in their respective fields.

It is important to note that the grade 6–12 literacy standards in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects are meant to supplement content standards in those areas, not replace them. States determine how to incorporate these standards into their existing standards for those subjects or adopt them as content area literacy standards.

As indicated, Common Core’s literacy standards are justified on the grounds that college readiness means being able to read, write, and speak in all subject areas—a reasonable expectation if the “all” doesn’t mean every subject taught in college or a level of proficiency beyond the level of the

coursework in the subjects taught in a typical high school.

The first public draft of the ELA standards—in September 2009—made the standards-writers’ vision even clearer than the final version does. It expected students in English classes to “demonstrate facility with the specific reading demands of texts drawn from different disciplines, including history, literature, science, and mathematics.” As the draft explained, “Because the overwhelming majority of college and workplace reading is non-fiction, students need to hone their ability to acquire knowledge from informational texts...[and] ...demonstrate facility with the features of texts particular to a variety of disciplines, such as history, science, and mathematics.” That is the basis for entangling the study of history in the final version of Common Core’s ELA document and for the standards-writers’ misconceptions about how students learn to read and write intelligently in other subjects.

The attempt to make English teachers responsible for teaching high school students how to read history, science, and mathematics textbooks relaxed during 2009-2010 after critics made it clear that English teachers could not possibly teach students how to read textbooks in other disciplines. This criticism was supported by the common sense argument that teachers can’t teach students to read texts in a subject they don’t understand themselves, as well as by the total lack of evidence that English teachers can effectively teach reading strategies appropriate to other disciplines and thereby improve students’ knowledge in that discipline.

Nevertheless, Common Core’s ELA standards still expect English teachers to teach “informational” texts about 50 percent of their reading instructional time at every grade level. At least, that is what K-12 curriculum specialists nationwide see as the curriculum implications of 10 standards for reading “informational” texts and only 9 for reading literary texts at every grade level in the ELA part of the ELA document, even if “informational” texts are called “nonfiction.”

## **B. RESEARCH ON READING AND WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM (RAWAC)**

Although it is now agreed that English teachers can’t be expected to teach students how to read texts in other subjects in order to improve student learning in these subjects, is it possible that teachers of these other subjects can teach reading strategies that improve students’s knowledge of their subject? The lack of a reference to even one study in a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) 2011 research brief on RAWAC<sup>50</sup> and in a review of the research titled *Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices*, issued in August 2008 by the Institute of Education Sciences,<sup>51</sup> strongly implies that there is little if any research to support the expectation that subject teachers can effectively teach reading skills in their own classes in ways that improve student learning. Not only are subject teachers reluctant to teach reading in their own classes (as the research indicates), there’s no evidence that even if they do, student learning will be enhanced.

So how do secondary students learn how to read their history books or their science and mathematics textbooks? We will return to this hugely important question at the end of this section—after we look at some literacy standards for history in Common Core—to better understand the problem the standards writers created for the entire secondary curriculum—and at the reasons for the failure of the movement called RAWAC.

## **C. WHAT ARE COMMON CORE’S LITERACY STANDARDS?**

Common Core’s literacy standards are clearly not academic, or content, standards, as the introduction to its ELA document promised. They are statements of different purposes for reading and writing in any subject. Here are three standards for History/Social Studies in grades 11/12 as examples:

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.7](#)

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of

information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.8](#)

Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.9](#)

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources

What is telling in the introduction to the whole document is the expectation that subject teachers are to use the content of their subject to teach students how to read, write, and talk in their subjects, not the other way around. Teachers are not to draw on students' reading, writing, and speaking skills (i.e., their intellectual or thinking processes) to learn the content of their disciplines. Secondary school learning has been turned on its head without any public murmur in 2010, so far as we know, from history, science, or mathematics teachers or their professional organizations, probably because most subject teachers did not know they were being required to teach reading and writing in a document ostensibly designated for English and reading teachers. (The National Council for the Social Studies apparently knew what the ELA standards writers intended, according to this article,<sup>52</sup> but did not communicate any concerns to its members, so far as we know.)

This stealth requirement should have sparked broad public discussion when the final version of the Common Core standards was released (in June 2010) and before state boards of education voted to adopt them. But, so far as we know, there is no record of any attempt by a state board or commissioner of education to hear from a broad range and large number of secondary teachers in all subjects (including English and mathematics teachers).

#### **D. WHY EARLIER EFFORTS AT RAWAC FAILED**

A major attempt to get subject teachers to teach reading and writing skills called Writing across

the Curriculum (WAC) or Reading and Writing across the Curriculum (RAWAC) took place in the 1960's and 1970's at the college level and in K-12, and it had gradually fizzled out with little to show for it. There was no explanation in the Common Core document of how Common Core's effort was different, if in fact it was. Perhaps the standards writers simply didn't know about these failed movements and why they failed. As noted above, NCTE's 2011 policy research brief did not reference even one study after boldly declaring that the "research is clear: discipline-based instruction in reading and writing enhances student achievement in all subjects."<sup>53</sup> RAWAC failed for many reasons, and we suggest some of the most obvious ones first.

*No systematic information available:* On the surface, the effort to make secondary subject teachers responsible for assigning more reading to their students and/or teaching them how to read whatever they assigned sounded desirable and eminently justifiable. But there was no systematic information on what the average student read, how much they read, or why they were not doing much reading if that were the case. Why assign more reading and/or try to teach students how to read it if there were reasons for not assigning much reading to begin with (e.g., no textbooks available, students couldn't read whatever textbooks were available on the topic, students wouldn't do much homework)?

*Misunderstanding of what history teachers do:*

Part of the demise of RAWAC in K-12 may be attributed to a misunderstanding by its advocates of what history teachers actually do in a classroom when teaching history. They might ask their students, for example, to describe and document Lincoln's evolving political position on how best to preserve the Union from the beginning to the end of the Civil War—after giving them a range of documents to read or look at. Such a directive requires application of [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.7](#) (integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media in order to address a question or solve a problem) to a history lesson, which is how the

general skill gets developed. But, in doing so, history teachers are not trying to teach a literacy skill; they are aiming to expand students' conscious knowledge base.

Take another possible example—a lesson on totalitarianism. History teachers might assign and discuss a reading on a totalitarian state in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—how it controls resources and people's behavior. They might then ask directly: "According to this reading, what is a totalitarian state like? What does it try to do? What were the weaknesses of the Soviet Union as an example of a totalitarian state? History teachers are unlikely to talk about (or think in terms of) "main idea" or "supporting details" in discussing what students have read about a totalitarian state," but they are clearly talking about a main idea and supporting details when they raise specific questions for discussion about a specific topic. They are asking students to apply these general skills in topic-related language for the classroom lesson and thereby develop the skills.

History teachers (like science teachers) use the specific content of their discipline in ways that require students to apply their intellectual processes and their prior knowledge to what they have been assigned to read or do. If students cannot answer the questions on the grounds that they couldn't read the assignment, other issues need to be explored.

*Less and less reading outside of school:* The demise of RAWAC in K-12 can also be traced to the diminishing amount of reading and writing done outside of school hours. How much reading have students been doing on the topic under discussion? In other words, do they have any prior knowledge? Are they familiar with the vocabulary related to the topic? The two are related. Students can absorb some of the discipline-related vocabulary of a discipline-based topic by reading and re-reading the material carefully (as in history) or by working carefully with material named by these words (as in a science lab) without constantly consulting a glossary. But how to get students to do more reading (or re-reading) is not the

purpose of a standard. Getting students to address questions about particular topics in a discipline with adequate and sufficient information (i.e., to develop their conscious understanding of the topics) is one purpose of a standard.

Reading and writing as homework is the student's responsibility, not the teacher's. This responsibility is not shaped by the words in an academic standard. It is dependent on a student's self-discipline and motivation, elements of the student's character beyond the teacher's control. Teachers can set up incentives and disincentives, but these must be reinforced by policies set by a school board, parents, and school administrators. They are not governed by academic objectives.

*History teachers' self-image:* Needless to say, the demise of RAWAC in K-12 can in part be traced to content teachers' self-image, an issue highlighted in the research literature. The need for writing in subject-based classrooms makes sense to most teachers, but significantly more writing activities didn't take place in the secondary school in response to RAWAC efforts in large part because content teachers, with large numbers of students to teach on a daily or weekly basis, did not see themselves as writing teachers. They continue to see English teachers as teachers of writing (and literature), and themselves as teachers of specific subjects like math, science, or history. Students who read little or read mainly easy texts are unlikely to be able to do the kind of expository writing their subject areas require because the research is clear that good writing is dependent on good reading. This points to another possible reason for the demise of RAWAC.

*Stress on autobiographical, narrative, or informal writing:* The emphasis on non-text-based writing in the ELA class began in the 1970s. Advocates of a writing process tended to stress autobiographical narrative writing, not informational or expository writing. Students were also encouraged to do free "journal" writing because it was shapeless and needed no correction. Subject teachers were fighting an overwhelming emphasis on non-reasoned and non-text-based writing in elementary

classrooms, secondary English classes, and teacher workshops from the 1970s on and may have decided that asking for reading-based writing and re-shaping what students submitted was not worth the effort. We simply don't know because there is no direct and systematic research on the issue.

*Professional development on different history content, not discipline-based reading:* There may be yet another reason that subject teachers avoided implementing RAWAC. There is little in-depth research on this issue, and for good reason. We know little about the quality of the professional development they received. The focus of professional development for history teachers at the time RAWAC was being promoted was often the content or view of the content that was being introduced in the name of critical pedagogy or multiculturalism. The workshops described in “The Stealth Curriculum: Manipulating America’s History Teachers”<sup>54</sup> have a decided focus on teaching teachers and their students what to think about U.S. and world history rather than on how to read and write in a history class. Reading and writing activities were included in these workshops, but the development of “literacy” skills was not their goal.

Providing professional development is a huge and very profitable industry because most of it is mandated by local, state, or federal authorities. But it has almost no track record of effectiveness in significantly increasing students’ knowledge of the subject. This was the conclusion of a massive review of the research on professional development for mathematics teachers undertaken by the National Mathematics Advisory Panel (NMAP) in 2008.<sup>55</sup> There is no reason to consider the situation different for history teachers. Note that we are not talking about professional development to teach history teachers how to teach reading and writing in their own subjects; we are talking about workshops to teach teachers the content of the subjects they are already licensed to teach so they can better teach the content to their students.

*No information on qualifications of workshop providers:* Professional development to teach

history teachers how to teach students to read and write in their disciplines presents an even bleaker picture. Not one study showing the effectiveness of the practice is cited in the NCTE report in 2011 or in an IES report in 2008 despite both reports lauding its benefits. None of the studies reviewed by the NMAP for its task group report on professional development looked at the adequacy of the academic qualifications of the professional development providers in the reviewed studies. Yet the qualifications of professional development providers was such a serious issue in implementing the state’s Education Reform Act of 1993 that the Massachusetts Department of Education required the involvement of historians in the “content” workshops for history teachers it funded even though it could not establish criteria for the organizers of these workshops.

#### **E. HOW COMMON CORE DAMAGES THE K-12 HISTORY CURRICULUM**

The underlying issue is revealed by the titles offered in Appendix B as “exemplars” of the quality and complexity of the informational reading that history (and English, science, and mathematics) teachers could use to boost the amount of reading their students do and to teach disciplinary reading and writing skills. The standards writers do not understand the high school curriculum.

*Inappropriate exemplars for informational reading:* While English teachers in grades 9–10 may be puzzled about the listing for English teachers of Patrick Henry’s “Speech to the Second Virginia Convention,” Margaret Chase Smith’s “Remarks to the Senate in Support of a Declaration of Conscience,” and George Washington’s “Farewell Address”—all non-literary, political speeches—history teachers in grades 9/10 may be even more puzzled by the exemplars for them. We find, among a few appropriate exemplars (on the history of indigenous and African Americans), E.H. Gombrich’s *The Story of Art*, 16th Edition, Mark Kurlansky’s *Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World*, and Wendy Thompson’s *The Illustrated Book of Great Composers*. It’s hard to see any high school history teacher comfortably

tackling excerpts from those books in the middle of a grade 9 or 10 world history or U.S. history course. Yes, these titles are only exemplars of the quality and complexity desired, but what would be appropriate for the courses history teachers are likely to teach in grade 9 or 10?

The informational exemplars in Appendix B for history teachers in grades 11/12 are even more bizarre. Along with a suitable text, Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, we find Julian Bell's *Mirror of the World: A New History of Art* and *FedViews*, issued in 2009 by the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco. These two titles clearly don't fit into a standard grade 11 U.S. history course or a standard grade 12 U.S. government course. These exemplars are out of place not just in a typical high school history class but in a typical high school curriculum.

The standards writers wanted to make teachers across the curriculum as responsible for teaching "literacy" as the English teacher, which at first sounds fair, almost noble. But to judge from the sample titles they offer for increasing and teaching informational reading in other subjects, informational literacy seems to be something teachers are to cultivate and students to acquire independent of a coherent, sequential, and substantive curriculum in the topic of the informational text.<sup>56</sup> Strong readers can acquire informational literacy independent of a coherent and graduated curriculum. But weak readers end up deprived of class time better spent immersed in the content of their courses.

*Inappropriate literacy strategies—a nonhistorical approach to historical texts:* Perhaps the most bizarre aspect of Common Core's approach to literary study is the advice given teachers by its chief writer David Coleman, now president of the College Board, on the supposed value of "cold" or "close" (non-contextualized) reading of historical documents like the "Gettysburg Address." Doing so "levels the playing field," according to Coleman. History teachers believe doing so contributes to historical illiteracy.

Aside from the fact that "close" reading was not developed or promoted by Yale English professors Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren as a reading technique for historical documents, no history or English teacher before the advent of Common Core would approach the study of a seminal historical document by withholding initial information about its historical context, why it was created at that particular time, by whom, for what purposes so far as the historical record tells us, and clear language archaisms. Nor would they keep such information from being considered in interpreting Lincoln's speech. Yet, David Coleman has categorically declared: "This close reading approach forces students to rely exclusively on the text instead of privileging background knowledge, and levels the playing field for all students."

As high school teacher Craig Thurtell states: "This approach also permits the allocation of historical texts to English teachers, most of whom are untrained in the study of history, and leads to history standards [Common Core's literacy standards for history] that neglect the distinctiveness of the discipline."<sup>57</sup> Thurtell goes on to say that the "study of history requires the use of specific concepts and cognitive skills that characterize the discipline—concepts like evidence and causation and skills like contextualization, sourcing, and corroboration. These concepts and skills are largely distinct from those employed in literary analysis. Both disciplines engage in close readings of texts, for example, but with different purposes. The object of the literary critic is the text, or more broadly, the genre; for the historian it is, however limited or defined, a wider narrative of human history, which textual analysis serves."

#### **IV. THE FOUNDERS' VIEW OF FEDERALISM AND A COMMON CORE**

Federalism as an essential principle of American government stands as the creative organizing concept that allows the fulfillment of the basic ideals of republicanism, liberty, and the public good. As Jefferson explained in his first inaugural address, federalism meant "the support of the state governments in all their rights, as the most

competent administrations for our domestic concerns and the safest bulwarks against anti-republican tendencies; [and] the preservation of the general government in its whole constitutional vigor, as the sheet anchor of our peace at home and safety abroad.” (Jefferson, like Madison, John Adams, and other founding political theorists, that is, saw federalism as at least as much a way of dividing the powers of government to seek the public good, as a way of limiting them.) The first “Union,” established on sentiments and principles that had come into existence before Independence, had tried to formalize itself in the Articles of Confederation, really a mere league of states where “delegates” from the states cast the (one) vote of their state in the proceedings of the Continental (“Old”) Congress. The terms “confederation” and “federation” were synonymous in the eighteenth century; both meant a form of meeting together where sovereign states cast votes as government units; the people, at least directly, were not involved.

The word came, though, to have a new, unprecedented meaning: it meant the form of government proposed in the new Constitution; it was said to define “federalism” itself, and its defenders called themselves “federalists.” Speaking for the defenders of the Constitution (federalists), Madison explained that some of its features were (conventionally) “federal,” such as the election and equality of the states in the Senate, and the explicit designation of some powers to the national (now to be termed “federal”) government, while others were reserved to the states. On the other hand, some features were national in that they rested directly on the people, such as the election of members of the House of Representatives.

Furthermore, Madison explained, “the operation of the government on the people in their individual capacities in its ordinary and most essential proceedings” was a function of a national government, which he now designated as the federal government. Thus, he concluded, “the proposed Constitution...is in strictness [according to the conventional definitions] neither a national nor a federal Constitution, but a composite

of both,” now itself taken to define the word “federal.”<sup>58</sup>

The word thus became part of the larger ideology of balance or separation of powers seen as essential to republicanism, liberty, and the public good. In the conception popularized by Montesquieu, Voltaire, and many English “Whig” theorists after the Glorious Revolution of 1689, balance and separation of powers meant “the supreme legislative and the supreme executive...a perpetual check and balance to each other.”<sup>59</sup> In America, though, where state sovereignties already existed within the Union after 1776, the idea of federalism came to include the republican governments of the states as part of the division of powers that would make the balancing of them even more effective than was the case in the unitary (but by 1765 also corrupt) British nation. Parliament, the Declaratory Act had asserted powerfully in 1766, had “authority to make laws and statutes...in all cases whatsoever.”

Such an all-powerful legislature, John Adams thought, would reflect “all the vices, follies, and frailties” of human nature, and “make arbitrary laws for its own interest.” He recommended instead a legislature of two houses, a separate executive with veto power over the laws, an independent judiciary with fixed salaries and tenure during good behavior, and a sharing of power between the national and state governments—a federalism requiring separation of powers within the governments of both states and nation.

The extensive size of the new republic required as well a division of powers between the center and the peripheries—a unique, liberty-enhancing, public good-oriented conception of American government that had become the new definition of the word “federalism” itself. The people, as sovereign, could, under the new federal idea, convey to both state and national governments such powers as they deemed proper, as well as withhold those deemed improper. They could also decide how the powers of the state and national governments related to each other, for example, the supreme law clause, the “necessary and proper”

provision, the power to regulate commerce, and the first, ninth, and tenth amendments. This was American federalism, a system that, as Madison had explained to Washington as the Constitutional Convention was about to convene (see above), would “at once support a due supremacy of the national authority, and not exclude the local authorities wherever they can be subordinately useful.” The “mixed” nature of the new Constitution was, though, entirely republican in that all of its powers were “derived...directly or in directly from the...people,” and thus remained faithful to “the fundamental principle of the [American] Revolution . . . to rest all our political experiments on the capacity of mankind for self-government.”<sup>60</sup>

Jefferson offered his own understanding of federalism by noting the difference between the care for “the liberties and rights of man” during twenty-five years of government under the Constitution in the United States, and the assaults on them during the Napoleonic era in Europe with “the generalizing and concentrating all cares and powers into one body...[under] the autocrats of Russia or France.” “The secret,” Jefferson explained, “will be found to be in the making [of man] himself the depository of the powers respecting himself” by trusting as few powers as possible to the higher, “more oligarchical,” branches of government. “Let the national government,” he said, “be entrusted with the defense of the nation, and its foreign and federal relations; the state governments with the civil rights, laws, police, and administration of what concerns the state generally; the counties with...local concerns, and each ward direct the interests within itself.... This would form a gradation of authorities, standing each on the basis of law, holding everyone to its delegated share of powers, and constituting truly a system of fundamental balances and checks for the government.”<sup>61</sup>

Thus, a sharing of the powers of government while acknowledging the checks and balances among the federal parts was the way to combine, as Madison put it in *Federalist* 37, “the requisite stability and energy in government with the inviolable attention

due to liberty and to the republican form.” Both men sought throughout to emphasize ways to keep the sharing and balancing as close to the needs, concerns, and purposes of the people as possible. Whatever the more technical and legal issues involved in the operation of the federal system, especially the division of power between the states and the federal government, the over-riding intention was to have the voices of the people, whether expressed through federal, state, or local governments, their administrative agencies, or quasi-public “non-governmental agencies,” listened to and responded to, especially when up against the “oligarchs,” what we would probably think of today as “the bureaucracy.”

In thinking through how any public question being handled in the vast bureaucracy of the federal system could be true to the basic philosophical premise of the system, the first concern must be full and earnest attention to the various voices, advocacies, critiques, and proposals coming from the public. Whatever their place in or relation to any federal, state, or local laws or agencies, federalism requires first and foremost openness to the pursuit and exercise of power. It also required, as Jefferson had explained in considering the “rapid importation of foreigners” (immigrants) into the United States after the American Revolution, that the newcomers, destined to take part in American government, be imbued as soon as possible with the “specific” and “peculiar” principles of the new American polity. Only then could they learn to “harmonize as much as possible in matters which they must of necessity transact together” with other citizens.

These principles were, Jefferson declared, “a composition of the freest principles of the English constitution, with others derived from natural right and natural reason.” Jefferson supposed that a combination of federal law on immigration and state laws on education that were in effect a common core based on historical studies, would be the republican way to seek, in one important area, the public good.

Jefferson's proposals on receiving immigrants and attuning them to the needs of citizenship in the "peculiar" government coming into existence in the United States then shows how the civic core spelled out by historian Paul Gagnon in *Educating Democracy*, issued in 2003 by the Albert Shanker Institute,<sup>62</sup> could be an essential part of improving history and civic education in the various state K-12 education systems within the United States. Since, as Jefferson explained, "civil government is the sole object of forming societies," the understanding of the history of that formation must be at the center of the education, formal and informal, in common experience and bookish, of those who are, under the Constitution, to "transact together" the public business. To fail to do this, he warned, was to risk the citizenry of the nation becoming "a heterogeneous, incoherent, distracted mass,"<sup>63</sup> rather than the public-spirited body good republican government required. The federal system, built into the U.S. Constitution and state constitutions, as well as via the regular lawmaking and constitutional amendment processes, provides a unique and effective way to discuss and eventually fulfill this ideal.

## V. CAUSES OF POOR READING IN HIGH SCHOOL

Not only did the writers of the Common Core English language arts standards profoundly misunderstand how reading in a history class differs from reading in a literature class, they basically misunderstood the causes of the educational problem they sought to remedy through Common Core's standards—the number of high school graduates who need remedial coursework in reading and writing as college freshmen and the equally large number of students who fail to graduate from high school and go on to a post-secondary educational institution.

The architects of Common Core assumed that the major cause of this educational problem is that English teachers have given low-achieving students too heavy a diet of literary works and that teachers in other subjects have deliberately or unwittingly not taught them how to read complex

texts in these other subjects. This assumption doesn't hold up.

High school teachers will readily acknowledge that low-performing students have not been assigned complex textbooks because, generally speaking, they can't read them and, in fact, don't read much of anything with academic content. As a result, they have not acquired the content knowledge and the vocabulary needed for reading complex history textbooks. And this is despite (not because of) the steady decline in vocabulary difficulty in secondary school textbooks over the past half century and the efforts of science and history teachers from the elementary grades on to make their subjects as text-free as possible. Educational publishers and teachers have made intensive and expensive efforts to develop curriculum materials that accommodate students who are not interested in reading much. These accommodations in K-8 have gotten low-performing students into high school, but they can't be made at the college level. College-level materials are written at an adult level, often by those who teach college courses.

Higher levels of writing are increasingly dependent on higher levels of reading. Students unwilling to read a lot do not advance very far as writers. The chief casualty of little reading is the general academic vocabulary needed for academic reading and writing. The accumulation of a large and usable discipline-specific vocabulary depends on graduated reading in a coherent sequence of courses (known as a curriculum) in that discipline. The accumulation of a general academic vocabulary, however, depends on reading a lot of increasingly complex literary works with strong plots and characters that entice poor readers to make efforts to read them. The reduction in literary study implicitly mandated by Common Core's ELA standards will lead to fewer opportunities for students to acquire the general academic vocabulary needed for serious historical nonfiction, the texts secondary history students should be reading.

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

There are several possible solutions to the problem Common Core's architects sought to solve—how to help poor readers in high school.

1. Schools can establish secondary reading classes separate from the English and other subject classes. Students who read little and cannot or won't read high school level textbooks can be given further reading instruction in the secondary grades by teachers with strong academic backgrounds (like Teach For America volunteers) who have been trained to teach reading skills in the context of the academic subjects students are taking. It's not easy to do, but it is doable.
2. A second solution may be for schools to expand the notion of choice to include what other countries do to address the needs of young adolescents who prefer to work with their hands and do not prefer to read or write much. Alternative high school curricula starting in grade 9 have become increasingly popular and successful in Massachusetts. There are waiting lists for most of the regional vocational technical high schools in the state. The trades they learn in grades 9-12 motivate them sufficiently so they now pass the tests in the basic high school subjects that all students are required to take for a high school diploma and over half now go on to some form of post-secondary education.
3. The most important solution to the problem of poor reading—and an inadequate U.S. history curriculum—in high school is for state boards of education, governors, and state legislatures to disallow public schools to use APUSH, the AP U.S. History curriculum just issued by the College Board for the most able readers in high school, and to require heterogeneous courses in U.S. history in which all students, high- or low-income, native or immigrant, study together the common civic core spelled out in Paul Gagnon's *Educating Democracy*. Surely the American Federation of Teachers could assemble a *festschrift* written

at a high school level to honor a historian who dedicated his academic life to advancing the education of the low-income students he taught in the Boston area.

We are left with an overarching question. Why were intelligent and educated people (state board of education members, state commissioners of education, and governors) so eager to accept the opinions of standards writers who had no understanding of the K-12 curriculum in ELA and were not historians or “experts” in history education, either? Why didn't intelligent and educated people read Appendix B for themselves, especially in the high school grades, and ask how subject teachers could possibly give “literacy” instruction in the middle of content instruction? Most might not have had the time to ponder the implications of the titles for informational texts across the curriculum. But not one of them? Self-government cannot survive without citizens who are willing to ask informed questions in public of educational policy makers and demand answers.

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## About Pioneer

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## Endnotes

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37. Congress did establish, in 2001, the Teaching American History (TAH) program. The TAH program has provided millions of dollars in grants to recipients in every state to promote the professional development of teachers of American history. But the results, according to the U.S. Department of Education, have been lackluster. In a 2011 report, the Department of Education noted that with fewer and fewer states providing state-wide history

assessments to students it was difficult to measure if students were doing any better because of the TAH program. The Department of Education report noted that “Grantee evaluations that were reviewed lacked rigorous designs, and could not support a meta-analysis to assess the impact of TAH on student achievement or teacher knowledge.” The report also found that “Teaching American History grants often lacked support from district or school administrators and were not well integrated at the school level. Grantees struggled to recruit a diverse range of teachers, particularly less experienced teachers and those most in need of support.” See U.S. Department of Education, Teaching American History Evaluation, Final Report at: <http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/teaching/us-history/tah-report-9-9-11.pdf>

38. The Common Core website is: <http://www.corestandards.org/about-the-standards/>
39. The College Board, AP United States History, p. 21.
40. Historian Gordon Wood has written that “it is lamentable that Americans do not remember Madison as well as they should, especially when we reflect on what he achieved: The major architect of the Constitution; the father of the Bill of Rights and one of the strongest proponents of the rights of conscience and religious liberty in American history; the coauthor of *The Federalist*, surely the most significant work of political theory in American history; the leader and most important member of the first House of Representatives in 1789; the cofounder of the Democratic-Republican party in the 1790s; the secretary of state in Jefferson’s administration; and fourth president of the United States....” See Gordon Wood, *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different* (New York: Penguin Books), p.143.
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42. The College Board, AP United States History, p. 61.
43. The College Board, AP United States History, p. 75.
44. The College Board, AP United States History, p. 79.
45. The College Board, AP United States History, p. 15.
46. A highly-respected Civil War historian, James McPherson, would surely be surprised by the AP’s decision to leave out the Gettysburg Address. McPherson has written that “to resolve the mystery of why the North fought...one can do no better than to read carefully Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address*. The answer is there, in this classic prose poem of 272 words that can be read aloud in two minutes.” See James McPherson, “The Art of Abraham Lincoln,” in *The New York Review of Books*, July 16, 1992. Another historian, Gary Wills, has argued that the *Gettysburg Address* is arguably the most important “expression of American spirit” – even more so than the Declaration of Independence because Lincoln’s Address “determines how we read the Declaration. For most people now,” Wills has written, “the Declaration means what Lincoln told us it means, as a way of correcting the Constitution itself without overthrowing it.” See Gary Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), pp.146-147.
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50. <http://www.ncte.org/library/nctefiles/resources/journals/cc/0203-mar2011/cc0203policy.pdf>
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