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“A Trojan Horse for Social Engineering”: The Curriculum Wars in Recent American History

Ever since the nation’s founding, Americans have wrestled with Hector St. John de Crevecoeur’s famous 1782 riddle: “What then is the American, this new man?” Rare is the historical moment when any one answer to that seemingly straightforward question has satisfied a broad consensus. In fact, intense struggles over efforts to define a normative American identity have long marked cultural politics in the United States. More to the point, Americans have always fought the so-called culture wars, a term of recent vintage that signifies the angry, often politically consequential clashes over moral conduct and, indeed, over the meaning of Americanism itself. And, for as long as Americans have fought the culture wars, they have debated the role of education, the institution most essential to ensuring the reproduction of national identity. The school curriculum has particularly been the object of bitter recriminations, since it conveys, in the words of sociologist James Davison Hunter, “powerful symbols about the meaning of American life—the character of its past, the challenges of the present, and its future agenda.” Walter Lippmann put it even more succinctly in American Inquisitors, his scathing indictment of 1920s curriculum vigilantes: “It is in the school that the child is drawn towards or drawn away from the religion and the patriotism of its parents.”

That the United States has always been home to millions of evangelical Christians, who tend to mix their religious and national identities, has tinged the rhetoric of American cultural and educational politics with an eschatological hue.
This became increasingly true in the twentieth century as more and more Americans were scarred by the acids of modernity, which burned gaping, irreparable holes in the fabric of Christian America. In this way, the culture wars, more than a battle over national identity, have served as a struggle for the *soul* of America, a clash over what it meant to live in a world in which all foundations had been pulled out from under, a world in which, at its starkest, “God is dead.” Even devout Christians—devout Christians especially—had to act upon the implications of modernity. Often, such activism played out in the arena of curriculum politics. For instance, in pushing back against modernist forms of knowledge that fanned the flames of religious skepticism, such as biblical criticism and Darwinism, early twentieth-century conservative evangelicals—who by the 1920s began referring to themselves as “fundamentalists”—successfully enacted laws that made reading the King James Bible mandatory in schools and that outlawed the teaching of evolution. Fundamentalist educational activism in the 1920s grew out of the desire of traditionalist Protestants to assert or reassert religious control over public schools, which they thought were becoming increasingly secular.²

That the culture wars—and accompanying curriculum wars—are a fixture of modern American political culture is not to say that they have not evolved, becoming more or less intense, depending on contextual factors. Change is as much a feature of the long history of the American culture wars as is continuity. The enormous cultural changes made manifest during the 1960s, for instance, gave life to a prolonged period of unrelenting cultural strife. The civil rights and feminist movements, which shifted the contours of the nation’s racial and sexual landscapes, were met in kind by backlash movements. Similarly, the moral liberalization that gripped the land was greeted by what historian David Courtwright terms a “moral counterrevolution.” As with earlier eras of cultural polarization, the post-1960s culture wars were often fought on an educational battleground, and not only because the school curriculum continued to serve as a crucial means of cultural reproduction. This was also because the schools, as the government institution Americans most entered into on a regular basis, were thought to be in the vanguard of secularist forces so feared by millions of conservatives.³

This article is about these post-1960s culture wars over school curriculum: over what books American children should read in school, what history they should be taught, and what Americans should learn about human origins. It is about a clash of cultures, between a conservative movement that viewed
recent cultural changes with suspicion and educators who sheathed their liberal curriculum designs in a cloak of professionalism. The article is also about the ironies of a conservative movement that rails against the state as an entity of secularism, and yet forms alliances with representatives of that very state, namely, with neoconservatives who sought to reshape the national curriculum more to their liking from within the hallowed halls of government.

In 1994, former Secretary of Education William Bennett charged that a seemingly innocuous curriculum reform put forward by the Clinton administration, “outcome-based education,” was in fact “a Trojan horse for social engineering.” In staking this position, Bennett followed the lead of conservative Christians who contended that “outcome-based education” was a means to smuggle “secular humanism” into the schools. One Christian Right pamphleteer contended that “outcome-based education” and similar school improvement plans served as “tools to educate children for a ‘new social system’ where they will be developed for use as resources of the federal government’s choosing.”

That same year, Lynne Cheney, former chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), blanched in the Wall Street Journal that the National History Standards—an attempt to systematically bridge the gap between professional historiography and the secondary school curriculum—portrayed American history as “grim and gloomy.” Powerful conservative voices such as talk-show radio phenomenon Rush Limbaugh and Christian Coalition President Ralph Reed joined Cheney in rallying against the Standards, which they described as anti-American propaganda. This prompted a January 18, 1995, nonbinding “Sense of the Senate” resolution that condemned the Standards by a tally of 99–1. Senator Bennett Johnson, a Republican from Louisiana, cast the only vote against the resolution because he thought a nonbinding measure was too soft.

Curriculum battles such as these allowed conservatives to articulate their discontent with the larger liberalizing moral landscape. Whereas most liberal curricular trends pointed toward relativism and away from American exceptionalism, conservatives, in stark contrast, supported a curriculum rooted in moral absolutes, one that taught children the goodness of God, Family, and Country. However, conservative resistance to liberal curricular reform was ironic in its divergences. For example, foremost among those pushing for national standards in history and other core subject areas were neoconservative policymakers such as Bennett, Cheney, and Chester Finn, all prominently positioned in the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush.
Cheney, for instance, approved the initial grant to the National Center for History in the Schools (NCHS) at UCLA for the purposes of producing the National History Standards. But even after lavishing NCHS with federal money, Cheney turned against NCHS out of her disappointment that the Standards were a synthesis of post-1960s social “history from below,” rather than the traditional political narrative she thought students needed.6

Ironies abounded. Neoconservative educational thinkers in the Bush administration originated “outcome-based education,” the target of so much conservative venom, as a way to accentuate “excellence,” as opposed to “equity.” For them, “outcome-based education” simply meant that educational progress was to be measured by what students produced (outcomes) rather than by what resources were put into schools (inputs). Finn contended that conservatives were wrong to oppose it, though he made this argument with an important “devil lurks in the details” qualification, contrasting his vision with how liberal educators in the Clinton era implemented it. “Rather than itemizing the basic skills and knowledge that well-adjusted children should be able to demonstrate in core academic subjects,” Finn lamented, “the lists of outcomes that were actually drafted had more to do with social attitudes, ideological positions, and interpersonal relations.” In other words, though neoconservatives aligned with Christian conservatives against liberal curriculum reform, they were far from monolithic in their approaches to instituting a conservative curriculum. Neoconservatives pushed for a set of centralized, federal educational reforms. Christian conservatives, in contrast, sought to break all ties with a federal educational establishment that they deemed hopelessly secular.7

No matter their divergent means, in their mutual goals conservatives of all types tapped into a venerable American tradition of resisting curriculum reform. Of course, prior to the twentieth century, such resistance was not always clearly conservative. The Protestant elite who set up the common school system, led by Horace Mann, believed that such institutions provided training for the poor and working class. As such, those who decried the invasiveness of compulsory education often did so out of class hostility. Most of the opposition to the compulsory school laws passed by Massachusetts in 1852, the first of their kind, came from working-class families, such as those who formed a majority in the growing manufacturing town of Beverly, which voted to discontinue its high school in 1860. Beyond being a proxy for class control, Mann’s public schools were also viewed as agents of Protestant indoctrination. After a Boston public school assistant principal beat a Catholic student in 1859 for refusing to partake in mandatory readings from the King
James Bible, the Catholic Church began to build its network of parochial schools. Catholic schools eventually grew to be far and away the largest private school system in the United States, despite the challenges they faced after passage of the Blaine Amendments in 1875, which prohibited the spending of public money on parochial schools. The very existence of such a large parochial school system represented tangible evidence of anti-public school animus on the part of Catholics.

Resistance to public education began to take on more conservative overtones in the twentieth century, when the school curriculum slowly but surely merged with the progressive curriculum innovated by John Dewey and a cohort of prominent pedagogues at Columbia University’s Teachers College. Progressive education was a secular movement that sought to distance the national curriculum from the ecumenical Protestantism of Mann’s common schools. An increasing number of schools stopped requiring mandatory Bible reading, and some even began to teach Darwin’s evolutionary science instead of creationism, a trend that sparked, famously, the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial in Dayton, Tennessee. By the end of the 1930s, the progressive curriculum had become even more prevalent. Teacher’s College professor Harold Rugg’s popular textbooks, *Man and His Changing Society*, which incorporated scholarship of historians such as Charles Beard, who subjected the American past to the paradigm of class conflict, were assigned to more than five million students in five thousand school districts. But conservative resistance to progressivism grew as well, made evident by the successful movement in 1940 and 1941 to remove Rugg’s textbooks from schools. By the early Cold War, conservative educational vigilantism, abetted by McCarthyism, had turned back the tides of the progressive curriculum across the nation. In the 1950s, as thousands of progressive educators learned the hard way, mere mention of John Dewey was akin to summoning the ghosts of Karl Marx.

But Cold War conservatism only kept a lid on the liberalizing trends of a modernizing curriculum for a short time. The cultural earthquakes of the 1960s shattered the short-lived, antiprogressive consensus formed in the early Cold War. By the 1970s, the Christian Right had valid reasons to believe that the nation’s public schools no longer represented their moral vision. The Supreme Court enshrined secularism in the schools with a series of landmark cases, most famously the *Engel v. Vitale* decision, which declared school prayer unconstitutional in 1962. Curriculum trends were just as distressing. In social studies, students were increasingly challenged to clarify their own values, independent of those instilled by their parents and churches. In science, teachers slowly overcame the perpetual taboo against teaching evolution.
And in health classes, honest discussions of sex came to replace moral exhortations. A popular anthropology curriculum created for elementary students by psychologist Jerome Bruner in the early 1970s—MACOS, or, “Man: A Course of Study”—exemplified the liberalization of the curriculum. During a MACOS unit, students examined the Netsilik Eskimo culture, including their practice of killing the elderly, in order to understand, yet not judge, cultural differences. Such relativism became the norm.10

Beyond moral challenges to conservative Christian orthodoxy, in related curriculum developments traditional race and gender norms were also upended. Cosmopolitan-minded educators believed it their job to solidify civil rights and feminist gains by making tolerance and inclusion manifest in the national curriculum. To do so, they took it upon themselves to overturn curriculum materials that, as the National Education Association (NEA) reported in 1974, “tend to perpetuate images of white, middle-class, suburban families living in traditional bliss.” In these endeavors, educators had federal assistance. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 earmarked around $400 million for schools to purchase “multi-racial” and “multi-ethnic” texts. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Black, Chicano, Ethnic, and Women’s Studies programs were founded at hundreds of universities in order to allow minority and women students to avow identities apart from a normative American identity. In 1972, Congress codified increased attention to ethnicity by passing the Ethnic Heritages Act, which, beyond creating a new mechanism for sorting ethnicity, funded “greater awareness of cultural variety” in schools. Although the Reagan and Bush administrations sought ways to reverse these trends, the push for diversity in the curriculum nonetheless persisted into the 1980s and 1990s. The new name for this older curricular trend was “multiculturalism.” A controversial 1991 New York State report, “One Nation, Many Peoples,” represented this multicultural approach, as it de-emphasized assimilation by affirming “a right to cultural diversity.”11

In short, a liberalized curriculum spread throughout the nation’s schools. But such changes were more often perplexing than transformative. Although multiculturalism prevailed in history and social studies, it failed to put a dent in the textbook industry’s tradition of unreflective pro-Americanism. New historical actors—most prominently, women and blacks—found places in the national narrative. But the narrative arc, a banal affirmation of progress, freedom, and democracy, remained. In fact, the multicultural challenge to normative American representations has rendered textbook companies more averse than ever to controversy, reducing history and social studies textbooks to so much pablum. This was most evident in the fact that religion was excised
from the curriculum almost entirely, making it nearly impossible to attain an accurate historical understanding of the United States, by any measure a very religious country. Hoping to reverse this disturbing trend, President Clinton in 1995 issued a “Directive on Religion in the Public Schools,” clarifying that, although it is unconstitutional for public schools to promote religion, it was perfectly legal for them to teach about religion.12

Grassroots religious conservatives organized against liberal curriculum reform during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Unsurprisingly, sex proved to be a key front. In 1963, Dr. Mary Calderone founded the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) on the premise that objective sex education was a more realistic means to suppress the sexual revolution than chastisement. Many educators agreed with her, including Sally Williams, a school nurse in Anaheim, California, who created a popular sex education curriculum. Williams sought to direct students away from premarital sex, but her curriculum described sexual intercourse in relatively graphic fashion for students in as early as seventh grade and also provided information to older students about birth control. Conservatives, predictably, opposed such an approach, and in 1969, after gaining a majority on the Anaheim school board, promptly ended the sex education program.13

Conservatives elsewhere replicated the efforts of Anaheim activists. Billy James Hargis’s Christian Crusade helped launch a national movement against sex education. Hargis’s lieutenant, Gordon Drake, authored a pamphlet—“Is the Schoolhouse the Proper Place to Teach Raw Sex?”—that purportedly sold 90,000 copies in three months. Hargis and Drake forever engraved SIECUS, “the pornographic arm of liberal education,” as a subversive group in the conservative lexicon, “all a part of a giant communist conspiracy.” In his stock speech, Hargis claimed that sex education was part of a larger plan hatched by SIECUS and the NEA to “destroy the traditional moral fiber of America and replace it with a pervasive sickly humanism.” In a letter to Christian Crusaders, Hargis complained about a sex education program in Jefferson County, Colorado, where the principal noted that “the concept of morality being taught in his school to elementary grade children was quite different from that of their parents and pastors, and the kids would have to decide which was right.”14

In Kanawha County, West Virginia, violent protests erupted when the school board sought to align with a state regulation enacted in 1970 mandating that all West Virginia students read texts that reflected the nation’s multiethnic composition. The Kanawha textbook fight, described in hyperbolic fashion as “the shot heard around the world,” influenced the Christian
Right’s approach to later curriculum battles and to the larger culture war. Alice Moore, the wife of a local evangelical minister who was elected to the Kanawha board in 1970 on an anti–sex education platform, was the first to publicly object to the proposed reading list. Due to her tireless campaigning during the summer of 1974, when the Kanawha schools opened that September, at least 20 percent of the student population stayed home. In sympathy, county coal miners organized a wildcat strike. Violence marred the campaign: buses were shot at, teachers were harassed, and a school district building was firebombed. National right-wing groups descended upon West Virginia to join the cause, including the John Birch Society and the Ku Klux Klan, the latter of which held a notorious rally at the state capitol. Behind the scenes, the newly formed Heritage Foundation, still relatively unknown, offered free legal support to protestors and organized a conference on the rights of parents. Connie Marshner, the Heritage Foundation’s first director of education, later maintained that the West Virginia story called attention to “the textbook problem across the country” and helped inform the Christian Right during its later culture-war struggles.15

Race was a factor in the Kanawha textbook battle. Local conservatives seemed horrified that Eldridge Cleaver’s Soul on Ice, depicted as “anti-white racism,” appeared on the list. However, religion and morality most centrally concerned protestors. The inclusion of The Autobiography of Malcolm X on the approved list offended Alice Moore not because of its frank discussion of white supremacy, but rather due to Malcolm’s giving “all praise to Allah” that he was no longer a “brainwashed Christian.” Jack Maurice, editor of the local newspaper, attributed the controversy to the “renewal of the theological dispute . . . pitting the Fundamentalists against the Modernists . . . the Literalists in their interpretation of scripture, against the Symbolists.” As opposed to traditionalism, the modernist educators glorified, in Alice Moore’s words, “self-actualization,” “clarification of their own values,” and the dangerous idea that “truth is whatever is truth to that individual.” For the Kanawha conservatives, such relativism was a slippery slope to a host of dangerous, anti-Christian ideologies. As one parent remembered: “They were teaching my kids socialism, homosexuality, and situational ethics.”16

The NEA sent a panel of educators to Kanawha County in December 1974 to hold hearings on the nature and scope of the protests. The panel premised its intervention on the grounds that professional educators sought “objective thinking in children” as opposed to the “subjective determinations” of those parents who protested. The locals saw through this fig leaf. Maurice, for example, told the panel: “I think the illusions of objectivity are often self-centered and
quite misleading.” Similarly, Reverend Henry Thaxton of Christian American Parents testified that he was “deeply concerned about those who hide behind professionalism” while hypocritically stamping the curriculum with anti-Christian dogma. The final report issued by the NEA panel recognized that religious differences moved the protestors to action. “For generations,” the NEA summarized its findings, “a fundamentalist religious belief has given meaning to the mountain way of life and has given the mountain people the strength to withstand its hardships.” This echoed how a national correspondent described the protests: as “a full-scale eruption of frustrations against a worldly culture imposed on an area literally a world apart from the rest of the country.” Although correct about opposition to cosmopolitan ideas, the condescending notion that such anger was isolated to a rural backwater failed to capture the growing national dissatisfaction with the secular aspects of the multicultural curriculum.17

The movement against the liberal curriculum was part and parcel of the rising Christian Right. In part, this was because educational politics blended so easily with family politics, the latter of which contributed mightily to energizing the Christian Right in the 1970s, thanks to Roe v. Wade and the nearly successful push for an Equal Rights Amendment. Mel Gabler and Norma Gabler, who converted their small-town Texas home into a national center for exposing liberal bias in the nation’s textbooks, said that their main concern was that textbooks were “destroying the family” by means of so-called values clarification. Interviewed about the West Virginia textbook wars, Mel Gabler said: “What really bugged me was that textbooks seem to divide the children from their parents, especially the social studies which appear to teach the child a philosophy alien to the parents.” “Family Forum” participants, who convened in Buffalo, New York, in 1982, made connections between curriculum and family politics explicit. Joining Phyllis Schlafly and Jerry Falwell on the roster of speakers, Secretary of Education Terrel Bell exclaimed: “Education is a family matter. The parent is the foremost teacher, the home is the most influential classroom, and the schools should exist to support the home.”18

Some of the most influential evangelical writers of the 1970s—Francis Schaeffer, Rousas John Rushdoony, and Tim LaHaye—placed education alongside the family at the center of their plans to redeem American culture. They contended that the schools had been taken over by an elite who sought to spread an anti-Christian ideology they termed “secular humanism.” LaHaye, who later gained fame as the best-selling author of the fundamentalist Left Behind series about the apocalypse, founded a network of Christian schools in San Diego in the 1960s and wrote a number of popular books in
the 1970s and 1980s that provided readers with a framework for understanding secular humanism. More than an ideology, LaHaye described secular humanism as a religion in its own right.19

LaHaye dedicated his 1983 book, *The Battle for the Public Schools: Humanism’s Threat to Our Children*, to “the growing army” of parents “who realize that secular humanism, the religious doctrine of our public schools” is to blame for “the origin of rampant drugs, sex, violence, and self-indulgence in our schools, which are not conducive to the learning process.” LaHaye aimed his rhetorical onslaught against an educational establishment that he believed was “determined to jam atheistic, amoral humanism, with its socialist world view, into the minds of our nation’s children and youth, kindergarten through college.” Teleevangelists echoed these concerns. On his popular television show, *The 700 Club*, Pat Robertson told viewers that the American government was “attempting to do something that few states other than the Nazis and Soviets have attempted to do, namely, to take the children away from the parents and to educate them in a philosophy that is amoral, anti-Christian and humanistic and to show them a collectivist philosophy that will ultimately lead toward Marxism, socialism and a communist type of ideology.” “The greatest enemy of our children today in this United States,” fretted Jimmy Swaggart, “is the public school system. It is education without God.” Without God, perhaps, but not without religion. Christian conservatives argued that secular humanism was a religion in its own right. LaHaye listed the traits that he thought defined a religion and argued that secular humanism, “the official doctrine of public education,” evinced all of them, including “a stated doctrine or dogma,” “a priesthood,” “seminaries,” and “open acknowledgement of its position.”20

As in the 1950s, conservatives pointed to the persistent influence of John Dewey as evidence that the schools represented the religion of secular humanism. Prominent religious intellectual Richard John Neuhaus, for instance, begrudgingly admired Dewey for his honesty, particularly compared to those who followed in his footsteps. “Dewey was both wiser and more candid than much of today’s public educational establishment,” Neuhaus wrote. “He made no bones about the fact that education required religion and, in his view, the religion required is the religion of humanism.” This conservative argument has found support in some nonconservative corners, such as from communitarian philosopher Charles Taylor, who convincingly argues that the modern shift to secularism was not merely a history of “subtraction”—of people becoming disenchanted with God because of science and naturalistic explanations of creation and other phenomena. Taylor theorizes, rather, that people found “fullness” in humanism, or “confidence in our own powers of moral ordering.”21
Support from respected philosophers, however, did not amount to legal support. Designating secular humanism a religion, and arguing that its dominion over the public school curriculum was a violation of the First Amendment, proved an innovative, though largely unsuccessful, tactic in the Christian Right’s legal struggles to influence public education during the 1980s. Although the Supreme Court expanded the concept of religious freedom in its 1965 decision in *United States v. Seeger* to allow for conscientious objection on moral grounds unrelated to religious affiliation—which conservatives interpreted as judicial recognition that secular humanism was, in fact, a religion—the courts largely treated secular humanism as functionally nonreligious in dealing with Christian Right challenges to public school curricula. But this was not for lack of effort and creativity on the part of conservatives.22

In 1986, a federal district court excused some Tennessee children from a reading class because their parents found evidence of secular humanism in the assigned books. But a federal appeals court found no proof that “any plaintiff student was ever called upon to affirm or deny a religious belief” and overturned the Tennessee decision. In 1987, conservatives found a sympathetic federal judge in W. Brevard Hand, who ruled against Alabama textbooks in *Smith v. Board of School Commissioners* on the grounds that their secular humanist “omission” of religion “does affect a person’s ability to develop religious beliefs and exercise that religious freedom guaranteed by the Constitution.” This line of thinking was consistent with the jurist’s mission to prove the Supreme Court wrong in its efforts to build a wall of separation between religion and the public schools. But it was arrived at by way of a detour. In the 1983 case that first made his name, *Wallace v. Jaffree*, Hand had declared that the First Amendment did not bind states and, as such, that Alabamans were free to establish religious practices of their choosing, even if such practices negated for some the “ability to develop religious beliefs.” This argument served as an important precursor to originalism, the theory that jurisprudence should be constrained by an absolute understanding of the Constitution, in terms of either its original meaning or the original intent of those who framed it. Hand’s originalism stood in opposition to incorporation, a process by which portions of the Bill of Rights were applied at the state level—the logic that prevailed in *Engel v. Vitale*. Anticipating that the Supreme Court would reject his logic regarding incorporation, Hand constructed an alternative legal rationale by using the incorporation precedent against itself: he contended that secular humanism was the established religion of the public schools and thus violated the religious freedom of Christians. Hand
was overruled at the appeals level, but not before leaving a lasting mark on conservative understanding of public schooling.\textsuperscript{23}

Conservatives understood the teaching of evolution as the centerpiece of “the religious doctrine of our schools.” As such, one of their main tactics was to inject creationism into biology classrooms. But as with efforts to remove reading materials deemed secular humanist, the courts impeded the conservative agenda: in its 1987 decision in \textit{Edwards v. Aguillard}, the Supreme Court overturned a Louisiana law mandating that biology teachers include creationism in their lessons on evolution, objecting that the law’s sole purpose was to “advance the religious viewpoint that a supernatural being created humankind.” Despite legal setbacks, conservatives had a great deal of public support, made evident by a 1996 Gallup poll that suggested over half of Americans rejected the theory of evolution. This created enormous pressure on biology teachers. The National Academy of Sciences (NAS), the leading professional association of scientists, fought back against widespread creationist sentiments and sought to aid biology teachers with the publication of two pamphlets: “Teaching About Evolution and the Nature of Science” (1998); and “Science and Creationism” (1999). The NAS pamphlets represented some of the clearest explanations about the science of evolution, and some of the best refutations of creationism and “intelligent design,” the idea that species differentiation was not, as Charles Darwin had it, random, but rather the work of a higher order. But despite their lucidity, the NAS pamphlets were not as sensible about curricular politics. For instance, they implied that opposition to the teaching of evolution on religious grounds was misplaced because most “major religious denominations have taken official positions that accept evolution,” small consolation to those fundamentalist Christians who could not reconcile their faith with Darwinism.\textsuperscript{24}

What the NAS pamphlets underestimated was the very real threat their curriculum posed to millions of conservative Christians. Such underestimation extended to professional educators more generally. They failed to recognize that, as their curriculum increasingly reflected the nation’s racial and ethnic diversity, it also mirrored the secularization of the public sphere, which was increasingly intolerant of religious worldviews, particularly of the fundamentalist variety. Educators mistook this intolerance for professionalism, the hypocrisy of which was highlighted by the ironic conservative appropriation of multicultural argumentation, such as when Judge Hand compared “the state denial of the history of religion in the textbooks to the state activity in denying black history and its contributions in these texts.”\textsuperscript{25}
In the 1990s, the Christian Right implemented a new technique in its fight against the liberalized curriculum. Activists ran “stealth” campaigns for local school boards, only campaigning among their coreligionists, who were expected to vote in high numbers. “We’re trying to generate as large a voter turnout as possible among our constituency,” the Christian Coalition’s Ralph Reed explained, “by communicating with them in a way that does not attract the fire of our opponents.” The plan worked to perfection in Vista, California, a suburb of San Diego, where conservatives gained a three-person majority on the five-person school board in 1992. The new board rapidly gained national attention with ostentatious curriculum mandates, such as adding secular humanism to the district’s comparative world religions classes in order to establish it as a religion. John Tyndall, one of the newly elected conservatives who worked as an accountant for the Institute for Creation Research, a creationist think tank, attracted controversy when he asked a committee of science teachers to review a manifesto for intelligent design—Of Pandas and People: The Central Question of Biological Origins—for inclusion in the curriculum. Soon after the committee predictably rejected the book, the conservatives on the board rewrote the local science standards to include the following clause: “To enhance positive scientific exploration and dialogue, weaknesses that substantially challenge theories in evolution should be presented.” The local teachers union, allied with moderate parents who found the overtly conservative politicization of their schools distasteful, organized a successful recall of the conservative Vista board members in 1993.26

Christian conservative success in the early 1990s seemingly proved fleeting, and not only in Vista. In Lake County, Florida, conservative board members were voted out after sensational attempts to mandate patriotic history. In rural Blissfield, Michigan, evangelical anger against “outcomes-based education” reforms failed to block a local school-improvement plan based on the ideas of influential progressive educators John Goodlad and Ernest Boyer. But however unsuccessful in these specific instances, such efforts created discord that spurred hundreds of thousands of Christians to migrate out of public schools and into Christian day schools. Conservative disharmony also helped swell the ranks of the homeschooled, all of which ultimately weakened the liberalized curriculum and public education more generally.27

Neoconservatives stood primed to take advantage of this fractured educational landscape. An assemblage of intellectuals who wrote for small but influential magazines such as Irving Kristol’s Public Interest and Norman Podhoretz’s Commentary, neoconservatives were instrumental in undermining the liberal idea that government policy could solve problems related to
racism and poverty. They considered such notions naïve and ultimately dangerous in their proclivity to make things worse, an understanding made clear by the title of a Kristol essay on welfare: “The Best of Intentions, the Worst of Results.” A massive government study written by sociologist James Coleman in 1966—officially titled “Equality of Educational Opportunity” but more famously known as the “Coleman Report”—found that school funding had little bearing on educational achievement and, thus, efforts to achieve “equity” were wasteful. The Coleman Report became a touchstone for those who argued that pushing for educational “excellence,” measurable by standardized tests, was the best method to improve schools. Chester Finn often spoke about how “holding schools to account for their students’ academic achievement” was the only educational policy that made sense in a “post-Coleman” world. In other words, though government educational policy could not create a more equal society, by setting high standards it could compel schools to strive for academic excellence. This notion resulted in a neoconservative approach to school reform distinct from the Christian Right: whereas the Christian Right organized at the grassroots level, and distrusted federal intervention, neoconservatives sought to implement top-down solutions from their perches in the federal government. But these differences in means paled by comparison to agreement over ends: most conservatives agreed that the liberalized curriculum needed to be curtailed.

William Bennett, who served as chairman of the NEH during the first Reagan administration, then as secretary of education during the second, was the nation’s most powerful educational neoconservative. Bennett, who earned a doctorate in political philosophy from the University of Texas, where he focused on the thought of Madison, Lincoln, and, of all people, Martin Luther King Jr., maintained that “ideas and ideals ultimately move society—ideas and ideals contained in the great works of Western civilization, which students should encounter through education.” During his tenure at the Department of Education, Bennett persistently charged that the public schools were failing miserably in fulfilling the two tasks traditionally assigned to it: imparting basic knowledge and inculcating moral character. He deemed the liberalization of the curriculum a disaster, blaming trends that began in the 1960s, when the nation experienced “a sustained attack on traditional American values and the place where those values had long had a comfortable and congenial home—the school.”

Bennett and his neoconservative allies in the Reagan and Bush administrations concluded that national standards for basic knowledge would undermine the liberalized curriculum and also improve learning in mutually
reinforcing ways. In making the case for standards, neoconservatives counted on support from powerful economic and political actors, who almost uniformly understood the state of American public education through the lens of *A Nation at Risk*, a widely publicized 1983 report that argued American schools failed to teach basic skills, which in turn undermined the nation's ability to compete in an increasingly global economy. A 1989 meeting of state governors in Charlottesville, Virginia, called by President Bush on the topic of education, made setting national standards in five core subject areas, including history, *de facto* national policy. In response, Lynne Cheney, chair of the NEH, and Diane Ravitch, assistant secretary of education, secured an initial grant of $1.6 million for NCHS to develop national history standards.³⁰

Although most professional historians thought national standards a wise idea in theory, given that history curricula lacked any semblance of uniformity across the country, they were skeptical of Bush administration objectives. But with noted social historian Gary Nash, author of several revisionist interpretations of early American history, serving, unbeknown to Bush officials like Cheney, in a lead role at NCHS, their fears were allayed and the major historical associations signed on to the project. The *National History Standards* thus resulted from a massive collaboration between public school teachers, social studies specialists, administrators, university historians, and other professional and interest groups. After nearly three years of revision and compromise, a consensus was reached and the *Standards* went to press in October 1994. Most of those responsible for the creation of the *Standards* considered the final product a remarkable achievement. Their document, they believed, would help bridge the gulf between the historical discipline's best practices and the public school curriculum taught to millions of American schoolchildren.³¹

Although the *Standards* were the product of consensus, unanimity was never achieved. Chester Finn, a member of the *Standards* steering committee, outlined his concerns after reading the final version. “In its valiant effort to gain the approbation of innumerable constituencies within the education and history communities whose blessings have been thought desirable,” Finn wondered, in contrast, how the *Standards* might be interpreted by groups not involved in their creation, such as legislators, the Chamber of Commerce, the American Legion, and “callers to the Rush Limbaugh show.” Finn viewed the *Standards* unfavorably: “What can only be termed ‘political correctness’ and ‘relativism’ rear their unlovable (but increasingly familiar) heads in too many places. Sometimes this takes the form of an unwarranted emphasis on various
victim groups, overwrought attention to certain minorities, the inflating of the historical contribution of minor figures who happen to have the proper characteristics, and other such slightly overwrought efforts at after-the-fact egalitarianism.” The gist of Finn’s memorandum served as a prescient warning of the coming storm.32

Cheney launched the massive attack on the standards with her *Wall Street Journal* opinion piece titled “The End of History.” Cheney complained that “those pursuing their revisionist agenda no longer bother to conceal their great hatred of traditional history,” especially after “Clinton’s election unleashed the forces of political correctness.” In this vein, she decried that the standards insufficiently spotlighted traditionally important figures such as Robert E. Lee while lavishing attention on supposedly marginal figures such as Harriet Tubman. Most egregiously, the standards equivocated on the national purpose in relation to the Cold War, which was “presented as a deadly competition between two equally culpable superpowers, each bent on world domination.” “Ignored,” she lamented, “is the most salient fact: that the struggle was between the communist totalitarianism of the Soviet Union, on the one hand, and the freedom offered by the United States, on the other.” Limbaugh joined the fray a few days after the publication of Cheney’s piece, denouncing the standards created by “Gary Nash and a select group from UCLA” as a “bastardization of American history” that should be flushed “down the sewer of multiculturalism.” “History is real simple,” Limbaugh explained. “You know what history is? It’s what happened. It’s no more.” In the wake of such widespread criticism, the Senate condemned the *Standards*. Hoping to salvage its hard work, the committee revised them several times, but to no avail. The critics would not be appeased; the *Standards* were never officially sanctioned.33

That the *Standards*, and professors like Nash who publicly defended them, came in for such abuse was consistent with the evocative trope that had wormed its way into American political discourse in the early 1990s. It went as follows: an elitist class of intellectuals sought to police the thought of those Americans whom they believed clung to racist, sexist, jingoistic, and other atavistic attitudes. In policing discourse, it was believed that the American professoriate endangered free speech in the name of what came to be known as *political correctness*, “P.C.” for short. President George H. W. Bush told the 1991 graduates of the University of Michigan that political correctness, however laudable its intentions, had violated free speech by declaring “certain topics off-limits, certain expression off-limits, even certain gestures off-limits.” In their quest to open minds, it seemed, liberal educators had inadvertently
managed what Allan Bloom famously called “the closing of the American mind.”

What made politically correct professors and higher-education administrators threatening was that they dominated the means of advancing through America’s white-collar hierarchy. In 1960, there were about 3.5 million Americans enrolled in universities; by 1970, this number had more than doubled to around 7.5 million. The size of faculties grew proportionally. Historian James Livingston nicely relates this demographic explosion on the nation’s college campuses to what he describes as the “debates about the promise of American life.” “By the 1970s,” Livingston contends, “the principal residence of that promise was widely assumed to be the new ‘meritocracy’ enabled by universal access to higher education.” To this extent, class resentment aimed at intellectuals made sense, in a misplaced sort of way, since intellectuals indeed held the levers to any given individual’s future economic stability.

A similar, earlier demographic explosion in secondary education helps to explain the politicization of the public school curriculum: the percentage of American teenagers who graduated from high school increased from 6 percent in 1900 to 88 percent in 2000. One of the most remarkable features of twentieth-century American history is the success the nation had in getting its young people into its schools. Attending state-run schools became constitutive of American modernity; to American modernity’s discontents, the schools became the crux of their anxieties. The post-1960s curriculum wars, thusly understood, granted Americans space to articulate varied responses to the startling cultural and moral changes made manifest in the final decades of the twentieth century. For conservatives, the curriculum wars were a vehicle for, to paraphrase William Buckley, standing athwart the secular, liberal values of modern America and yelling “Stop!”

Have conservatives been successful in their efforts to stop the liberal trajectory of the curriculum? Answers to this question are decidedly mixed. In terms of moral content, conservatives have seemingly lost. Save for a few recent symbolic victories, such as in Texas, where religious conservatives on the state board of education revised the history standards to reflect their values, the American curriculum continues to reflect a post-1960s moral paradigm: secular, relativistic, and culturally liberal. Sensing defeat, many conservative curriculum warriors have abandoned the battlefield by joining the Christian day-school and homeschool movements. But while losing the struggle for conservative content, conservatives are winning the battle for educational form, as neoconservative arguments about standards have become the new national paradigm.
Since passage of President Bush’s bipartisan No Child Left Behind in 2001, student scores on standardized exams are increasingly tied to teacher and school evaluations, upon which rewards and punishments are meted out. President Obama’s “Race to the Top” further codifies high-stakes testing by allocating scarce federal resources to those states most aggressively implementing so-called accountability measures. As a result, the liberal curriculum is effectively rendered mute, since standardized tests largely measure cognition, not content retention. And yet, many conservatives have joined forces with liberals in opposing No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top. Few Americans, conservative or not, want their own children’s educations weighed down by too much testing, even if they disagree on what’s best for other people’s children. This is an ironic development, since conservative anxieties about the liberal curriculum and neoconservative concerns about standards have long been mutually reinforcing. But, this new alliance, which brings together conservatives and liberals against the testing regime, highlights the older and equally ironic alliance between religious conservatives, who sought to reassert local control, and neoconservatives, who worked to command the federal educational establishment. Both groups wanted to reverse the liberal curriculum, but the means by which the neoconservatives succeeded in doing so alienated many of their erstwhile Christian right allies.38

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NOTES

1. I would like to thank David Courtwright for inviting me to contribute to this issue and for his wonderfully insightful editing. I am also grateful to Donald Critchlow and everyone else who astutely commented on my paper at the enjoyable “Morality and Politics” conference hosted by the Arizona State University department of history. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur’s famous question, written in his 1782 Letters from an American Farmer, specifically addressed the intermingling of northern and western Europeans in the eighteenth-century United States. Sam Tanenhaus recently reformulated this question in relation to the latest front in the curriculum wars, the revision of state history standards conducted by the conservative Texas Board of Education. Tanenhaus, “Identity Politics Leans Right,” New York Times, 21 March 2010, “Week in Review,” 1–2. My conceptualization of a “normative America” is indebted to historian Edward A. Purcell Jr.’s invaluable study of how mid-twentieth-century intellectual debates were shaped by attempts to come to terms with American democratic norms, The Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism and the Problem of Value (Lexington, Ky., 1973). James Davison Hunter’s account of the culture


6. Cheney retrospectively contended that she turned against the *Standards* because she was blindsided. More likely, since she resigned as chair of the NEH soon after Clinton took office, she felt fewer constraints in attacking them in order to curry favor with the rising 1994 Republican majority, led by Newt Gingrich. *Telling the Truth: Why Our Culture and Our Country Have Stopped Making Sense—and What We Can Do About It* (New York, 1995).


never to the degree that his conservative detractors believed, John Dewey’s educational philosophy—the bedrock of progressive educational thought—was indeed tied to an explicitly liberal, even radical, political agenda. See Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education (New York, 1916). This book represents Dewey’s educational philosophy at its most fully developed. The attack on Rugg’s books is detailed in Zimmerman, Whose America? 66–78. For a look at conservative educational vigilantism in the context of the Cold War and a broader analysis of the conservative conflation of progressive education with communism, see Andrew Hartman, Education and the Cold War: The Battle for the American School (New York, 2008), esp. chap. 5.


13. For a detailed narrative on how the Anaheim anti–sex education struggle was important to the renewal of the Christian Right, see William Martin, With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America (New York, 1996), 102–16. See also Moran, Teaching Sex. Moran details the history of SIECUS and the Anaheim sex education curriculum in chap. 6, “Fighting the Sexual Revolution.”


16. Most of these quotes can be found in “The Great Textbook War” radio transcripts. The Jack Maurice quote is found in the NEA Archives, box 2162, folder 1. The pamphlet passage is from Martin, *With God on Our Side*, 122.


19. Most historians who study the modern Christian Right discuss how religious conservatives framed their educational positions against “secular humanism.” For example, Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (Oxford, 2010), dedicates a subsection of chap. 7 on the “Culture Wars in the Carter Years” to “Concerns about ‘Secular Humanism’ in Education,” 134–37. For how the writings of Schaeffer, Rushdoony, and LaHaye influenced grassroots activists in their curriculum battles during the 1980s and 1990s, see Detwiller, *Standing on the Premises of God*, esp. chap. 8.

20. Tim LaHaye, *The Battle for the Public Schools: Humanism’s Threat to our Children* (Old Tappan, N.J., 1983), 38, 29, 71. This was the third book in a three-part “Battle” series that LaHaye wrote, which also included *The Battle for the Mind* and *The Battle for the Family*. Robertson and Swaggart, who uttered their concerns about secular humanist schools in 1984 and 1985, respectively, are quoted in Hunter, *Culture Wars*, 202–3.


that has marked American social thought since the 1970s, Age of Fracture (Cambridge, Mass., 2011), 235–37.


25. The best historical analysis of the problem of religion in America’s schools is James Fraser, Between Church and State: Religion and Public Education in a Multicultural America (New York, 1999). Fraser addresses the paradox of how conservative Christians adopted the “rights” language of multicultural educators in making the case that the teaching of secular humanism as a religion abridged their rights as Christians. Hand, American Education on Trial, 7.

26. Reed is cited in Detwiller, Standing on the Premises of God, 220. Binder covers the Vista school board history in depth, Contentious Curricula, 161–69. The debate over evolution continues, of course. In the late 1990s, a conservative majority on the Kansas school board controversially removed evolution from its state standards. In 2005, a local Pennsylvania school board voted to have a statement supporting intelligent design read to all students. In response, President George W. Bush declared that both evolution and intelligent design “ought to be properly taught . . . so people can understand what the debate is about.” Judge John E. Jones found the Pennsylvania rule unconstitutional in Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District. Jones argued that “the secular purposes claimed by the Board amount to a pretext for the Board’s real purpose, which was to promote religion in the public school classroom, in violation of the Establishment Clause.” “Federal District Court on Intelligent Design,” Historic Documents of 2005.

27. Ernest L. Boyer, High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America (New York, 1983); John I. Goodlad, A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future (New York, 1984). Boyer and Goodlad’s books were all the rage in teachers colleges, yet their modest Deweyan proposals to better integrate school and community hardly seem radical in comparison to the critical pedagogues who were also beginning to gain influence, especially Paulo Freire and his acolytes Henry Giroux and Michael Apple. Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (New York, 1971). The Christian day-school movement got its start in the South as a form of resistance to Brown v. Board of Education. Whether the movement persisted as such is a matter of debate. In the late 1970s, the Carter administration’s IRS challenged the tax-exempt status of this growing chain of schools. What the federal government viewed as its attempt to close a loophole that allowed some whites to evade court-ordered desegregation, the Christian Right saw as a war against religious expression. William J. Reese, History, Education, and the Schools (New York, 2007), views the creation of the schools through the lens of religion. Joseph Crespino, In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution (Princeton, 2007), understands Christian day schools as segregation by other means. Of course, the two arguments are not mutually exclusive. For a long history of homeschooling, as well as for recent conservative growth in home-schooling, see Milton Gaither, Homeschool: An American History (New York, 2008).


32. Finn is quoted in Symcox, *Whose History?* 121.


