

The Market Liberal

Vol. 7, No. 7-8

The Knowledge Network Foundation

March-April, 1993

by Gregory F. Rehmke

Burn your world history textbook?

Not because it's false, nor because it's flammable, but because it's boring.

History can help us make sense out of the present. But by masking the controversy inherent in history, textbooks contribute to our ignorance of the past. Some of history's grimmer lessons may be repeated in our time. A solution for students is to take responsibility for their own knowledge of history.

How many students sit placidly in horrendously dull world history classes each year? Bored out of their minds, students stare blankly ahead as a stream of apparently random names, dates and assertions whiz by them. How many, while listening to someone drone on about who shot Archduke Ferdinand, day-dream of scenes from the movie *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*? Anyone? Anyone?

History classes would benefit from an infusion of energy and initiative from high school speech and debate. Instead of lecturing at students, speech teachers become advisors and coaches. Students choose their own approach to topics, and learn to investigate competing evidence, theories and worldviews. Speech students are active participants in their own education.

Each of us must chart our own course in history, and for that speech and debate experience is an excellent background. History is not like chemistry or physics whose facts and theories are generally agreed upon. Instead, history is inherently controversial. Theories of chemistry are much easier to test than are theories of history (such as why some countries grew wealthy while others did not).

Does history matter? Well, for those interested in public policy debates, whether on environmental, health care, or other issues, history should play a central role. For current public policy debates—President Clinton's economic policies and position on the NAFTA trade agreement, for example—history could hardly be more important nor more ignored. Free trade policies and lower tax and spending rates have through history created broad gains in living standards for lower and middle income families. But without a forum for discussion and debate, and without a historically literate public, there is no easy way to bring the experience of the past to bear on the policy debates of the present.

Prosperity follows the freedom of enterprise and exchange, which in turn depends on secure property rights and the rule of law. Prosperity leads, in turn, directly to better health care and a cleaner environment—this year's and next year's debate topics. Government regulation of economic activities—the health care and pollution-control industries, for example—has and will continue to have unintended consequences. Not the least of these is the distortion of evolving technologies and institutions. The market is a process that centrally legislated planning can rarely accommodate. But since few seem

Continued page 2

Inside

- Don't burn your textbook .3**
- Domes of trade 4**
- No men should control 7**
- Budget history to repeat .9**
- Radical Ideas from past 10**
- Ignorance & pollution 11**



to have gleaned this lesson from the study of history (or economics), Americans are likely to learn it firsthand with today's pollution-control policies, and planned reforms of the health care industry.

It is the job of debaters and others interested in public policy to delve into history and sift through the experience of past regulatory experiments.

Unfortunately, the average high school world history text is not the best place to start. Open a world history text and out pours both too much and too little about the past. Too much about what happened and too little about why it happened. Without some clue as to why western countries rose from the dismal poverty of the past, we are unlikely to have a clue how today's impoverished countries can rise out of poverty. We may even be unable to keep ourselves from consuming our own wealth – the capital and institutions left to us by recent generations. Wealth offers little protection against future poverty, as the rise and fall of past world powers demonstrate.

Study history, save the world

Taking responsibility for one's own knowledge of history takes more work – but is more fun than being spoon-fed from textbooks. And, as an added benefit, the average debater is far more likely to help save the world as a historian than as a lawyer or public policy wonk in Washington D.C.

World history can be and should be a fascinating subject. It is only the average world history classroom and textbook that somehow smother the brilliance, wonder, savagery, splendor, weirdness and tragedy of mankind's history on this planet. Bill and Ted had the right idea – for an excellent historical adventure, first escape the classroom. But they had Hollywood and a time machine and most students don't.

Or do they? How would we recognize a true time machine?

What if there is a time machine nearby, but it doesn't look like one until it's opened? In fact, time machines do exist, they are built by men and women called historians and are called books.

History books propel us straight into the past. Great history books and historical novels draw us into worlds as alien as any visited by the Starship Enterprise. But this must sound like bosh to students who have suffered through state-chosen history texts – thick, dreary and soulless things with meandering text, maps, questions and pictures gripped in plastic-coated covers. These dreadful textbooks aren't really books at all, any more than a Frankenstein monster is a person, or sawdust is a tree. True books spring from the minds of individuals and are wrestled to the page through months or years of concentration. They are researched, drafted, checked, rewritten, and edited until finally a vision of the world emerges. Textbooks emerge from a bureaucratic committee process, where they can be scrambled by special interest group pressures and political manipulations.

Where have the famines gone?

I am two hundred pages deep into Volume I of Fernand Braudel's *The Structures of Everyday Life: Civilization and Capitalism 15th-18th Century* (one should not, of course, judge a book by its title). Dozens of other history books can equally well bring the past to life, but Braudel is simply stunning. In chapter after chapter, after pages of seemingly unimportant details, a grand landscape of the past emerges. And it is unlike anything glimpsed from the pages of high school textbooks.

Imagine looking out through the eyes of a long-dead ancestor, pulling on leather boots at sunrise and walking off to the fields into the chilly morning sun of the sixteenth century.

Life for our distant ancestors was very strange compared to anything we know. Few knew of

anything but poverty. More than anything our ancestors knew death. Their parents, friends and spouses died young, and many of their children died before them.

Braudel reports "In the Beauvaisis in the seventeenth century 25 to 33% of new-born children died within twelve months; only 50% reached their twentieth year." (p. 90). In some years crops were plentiful, but in others they failed due to poor weather or were destroyed by wars. The wonder of the modern world is not that poverty, hunger and famine still exist here and there, but that so much of humanity has escaped the

Continued next page

Staff

Editor

Gregory F. Rehmke

Editorial Assistant

Joan Guthrie

Advisors & Contributors

Tyler Cowen

George Mason Univ., Virginia

Paul Heyne

Univ. of Washington, Seattle

Dan Klein

Univ. of California, Irvine

Leonard Liggio

Institute for Humane Studies

John Majewski

Univ. of California, Los Angeles

Dale Miller

Univ. of Pittsburgh

Karen Monsen

Austin, Texas

Joan Kennedy Taylor

New York

Brad Young

Indiana University

The Market Liberal is published by The Knowledge Network Foundation, a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit educational foundation. To subscribe send \$12.00 to The Knowledge Network Foundation, 14307, 23rd Ave. S.W., Seattle, Washington 98166. Telephone: (206) 248-0510. Fax: 243-8384.

endless cycles of famines and wars.

"Any national calculation shows a sad story," writes Braudel, "France, by any standards a privileged country, is reckoned to have experienced 10 general famines during the tenth century; 26 in the eleventh; 2 in the twelfth; 4 in the fourteenth; 7 in the fifteenth; 13 in the sixteenth; 11 in the seventeenth and 16 in the eighteenth. While one cannot guarantee the accuracy of this eighteenth-century calculation, the only risk it runs is of over-optimism, because it omits the hundreds and hundreds of local famines." (p. 74)

Famines struck virtually every country in every century for as long as we have records – until the eighteenth century. And then suddenly famines virtually disappeared in western countries. Why? No small number of debate arguments point accusing fingers at modern industrial civilization. But world trade and industrial growth brought an end to the famines that took the young and the old, the weak and the unlucky, and seared the minds of all who survived.

In the twentieth century the major famines hit only those countries where war or reactionary governments (or both) destroyed property rights and markets. The Bolsheviks created the terror-famine in Ukraine in the late 1920s, killing millions. And in the early 1960s, the Chinese communists collectivized agriculture, igniting a famine that left 20 million dead.

Of course there is much more to history than the terrible. But terror has a way of calming us down, of providing us equanimity for facing the daily travails of losing our wallet or locking the keys in the car.

The average history textbook provides us alike less terror and less brilliance, less grand scope and less minute detail.

Doing battle with the system

Textbooks, critics claim, are another step in the process of cranking out young people content

with the status quo. Not all history teachers are satisfied with textbooks. And many have come to expect so little from students, that any sign of interest and initiative would be welcomed.

So try this test. Search out five or ten history books that cover or overlap the material your class is supposed to trod through. Then ignore the textbook and read real history books instead. Take responsibility for your own knowledge of history.

What about students up against history teachers bent on foiling free history research and time travel (i.e. they won't sign library passes)? Well, so what? Let history class fade as complex historical worlds materialize. Any student that can read and discuss ten or twenty history books or historical novels (and once the ball gets rolling, books will be devoured by the dozens) has nothing to fear from a slighted history class and forgotten textbooks. Life goes on even for those who ignore multiple-choice tests. Just transform a few multiple-choice questions into essay questions – and ignore the rest. Write thoughtful essays in answer to these questions on the back of the test, and turn it in with a sincere and hopeful smile.

Be polite or be crushed

And finally, try to be polite when thumbing your nose at the system. Where possible avoid confrontation and help potential adversaries save face. Teachers, principals, school districts and state governments are supposed to serve us, not us them. Students can often do what they want as long as they bow to the educational system and acknowledge its authority. Those not bowing to the system may be ground into dust. Which brings us the historical question of how the current educational system gathered its authority. A question not likely to be dealt with in history textbooks.

Good luck and good reading. ★

Don't burn your history textbook!

Even if history is boring, it is probably too extreme to light up your class with your history textbook. It is probably not your textbook anyway. Most textbooks are bought by schools or school districts after being recommended by textbook committees. In fact, many texts are *written* by committees, sometimes in frantic last-minute efforts to cover all bases and satisfy all evaluation committee interests. But efforts to satisfy everyone often satisfy no one. And in any case bureaucrats are not the best judges of writing style. Not surprisingly then, textbooks tend to be tedious.

Paul Gagon, an historian at the University of Massachusetts commented, in a study of high school history textbooks "you can read through the whole Colonial era and come away with the notion that not a single American ever had an idea in his head throughout the period." Gagon complained also that history texts had become "watered-down and value-free."

So, will a watered-down history text catch fire? Better not to try. Instead take our advice and follow your instincts for excitement. An adequate study of history will require plenty of drudgery, and plenty of research, writing and revision. But the drudgery shouldn't be at the beginning. Good history should be engaging, enthralling, soul-inspiring, spine-tingling – not every line, but every now and then.

Try historical novels like Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables & Ninty-Three*, or for U.S. history Kenneth Roberts' *Oliver Wiswell* and *Rabble in Arms*. For non-fiction try J. M. Roberts' *Triumph of the West*, R.R. Palmer's *History of the Modern World*, any of Paul Johnson's books, Rosenberg & Birdzell's *How the West Grew Rich*, J. Mokyr's *The Lever of Riches*, or G. Gunderson's *The Wealth Creators*. ★