

GARY NASH, CHARLOTTE CRABTREE, AND ROSS DUNN'S  
*HISTORY ON TRIAL*

*History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past*<sup>1</sup> by Gary Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross Dunn looks at the controversy in the United States during the 1990s over the National Standards for History. The authors pinpoint a culture war that erupted in the fall of 1994, continued intensively for another two years, and involved pundits from education, media, and political establishments (xiii). This “culture war” pitted the work of Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn, who promoted history curriculum standards for the nation’s secondary schools, against conservative resisters like Lynne Cheney and Rush Limbaugh, who claimed the standards to be liberally oriented and conspiratorial.<sup>2</sup> But because of “the inseparability of public educational programs and policies from political ideology, national identity, and the struggle for social justice,” the authors rightly recognize that democracy necessitates serious public discussion of the nation’s historical consciousness (ibid.). This work, they understand, is “contentious” and “political” and has many precedents. As such, the controversy represents an important aspect of the country’s *raison d’être*—the liberty to speak freely, to challenge, and to disagree, even about the nation’s past. The authors feel that their book “argues that if Americans should ever find themselves coalescing around a single version of the past endorsed by government, they are also likely to discover that they no longer have a democracy” (xx).

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<sup>1</sup>New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997; reprint, New York: Vintage, 2000.

<sup>2</sup>But to assume, as the authors do, the controversy to be little more than a conflict “between two visions of patriotic history” is superficial and simply naive (15).

The authors welcome the controversy itself as an indispensable feature of “genuine democracy” (259). But they ironically fight vigorously against and even condemn rightist politicians and media muckrakers. Every complaint they raise in contradistinction to the conservative vision of America’s historic consciousness consequently appears to be so much tongue in cheek, self-serving, and hypocritical. If the controversy over standards is good for education in America and if the authors believe that “the history standards tempest, whatever damage it did, had a silver lining” (271), then why make a big fuss? Does the liberal process of free speech in America’s democracy need the tutelage of academic historians in order to function effectively? The authors should have dedicated themselves to the task of defining the standards for history education, as they did, and left it to the politicians, the media, and the American public (including local educators at state, county, and city levels) to decide whether or not the standards were right, needed adjustments, or should be rejected. To a certain extent, this happened, and the authors appropriately make reference to state and local developments. But it is instructive that the controversy takes place chiefly in bureaucratic circles. In this sense, the authors correctly identify the clash of two cultures, that is, a power struggle between elite academics and elite magnates in media and politics—a bureaucratic culture war!<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>In one respect, the authors set up the proverbial straw man, since they fail to give any voice at all to history teachers or professional historians who took issue with the standards. But this is to be expected, since all three are affiliated with the highly bureaucratized National Center for History in the Schools. For critiques of the standards, see the essays in “An Educational Mission: Standards for the Teaching of History” (Part IV) in Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, eds., *Reconstructing History: The Emergency of a New Historical Society* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 237-298.

To excuse their participation in the vilification, the authors place the controversy of the 1990s in a larger context: the twentieth-century tradition of ardent battles over the *what* in regard to America's past and its meaning. *History on Trial* does cohere in its development of a concise historiography of history wars, rather than culture wars, from the 1920s through the 1980s (see chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5).<sup>4</sup> But this means that the authors do not address the topic of their book—the controversy in the 1990s over the National Standards for History—until chapter seven! So more than half the book does not deal directly with the topic but only covers background. Nonetheless, *History on Trial* lucidly illustrates a variety of lessons: (1) why the study of history should not become politicized; (2) why historians should stick to their craft and not behave like politicians; (3) why any definition of national history will be contradictory and arguable; (4) why a multi-approach to national history will be absolutely necessary; (5) how politicians use history to their advantage and thereby lose credibility; (6) how media personalities promote history for a popular audience and thereby lost credibility; and (7) why the public really does not care much about academic history.

In the final analysis, Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn only state but do not prove their thesis. They simply assume without proof that “one of the signs of emerging democracy in countries that until recently have been ruled by authoritarian governments is that citizens start arguing publicly about history” and that “authoritarian states don't have history wars, but democracies frequently

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<sup>4</sup>The writing is uneven but understandably so, since three authors contribute to the work.

**David W Fletcher, Fall 2002**

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do” (259-260).<sup>5</sup> They have not developed the argument extensively by way of comparison and contrast. For this reason, *History on Trial* is not to the point. The book at best gives an anecdotal survey of the nation’s twentieth-century history wars and an extended discussion of the recent controversy over the National Standards for History from the proponents’ viewpoint.

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<sup>5</sup>The limited assessment they make of education and politics in Germany, Japan, Russia, and, more extensively, Great Britain is inadequate for such comprehensive statements.