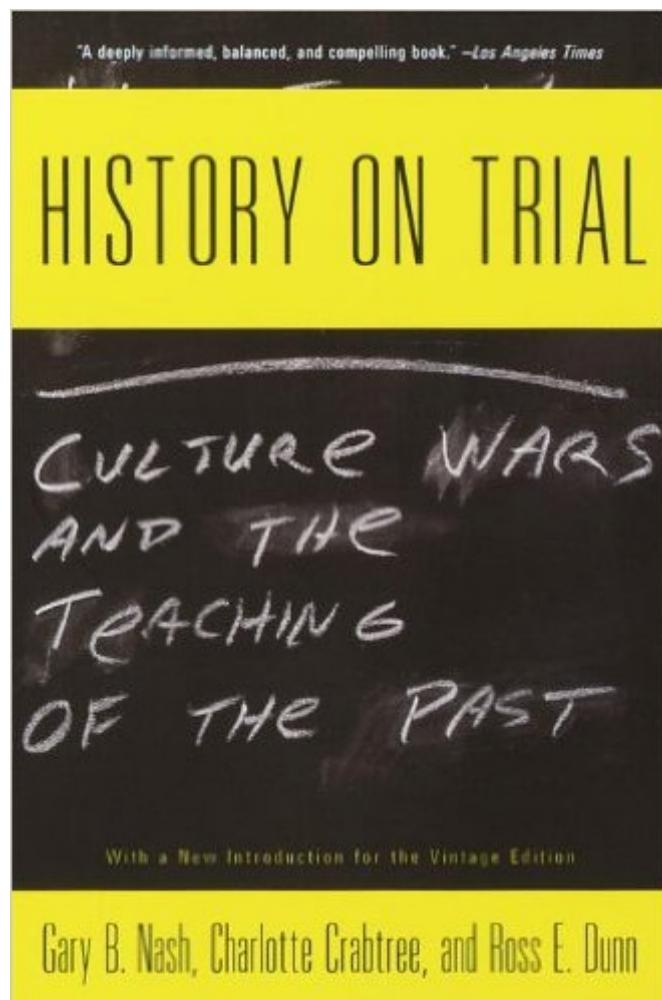


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History On Trial: Culture Wars And The Teaching Of The Past



Synopsis

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION "A deeply informed, balanced, and compelling book." --Los Angeles Times

In History on Trial, authors Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn examine the controversy and criticism over how our nation's history should be taught, culminating in the debate about National History Standards. The book chronicles a media war spearheaded by conservatives from National Endowment for the Humanities veteran Lynne Cheney to Rush Limbaugh, posing questions with regard to history as it relates to national identity. What, the authors ask, is our objective in teaching history to children? Is the role of schools, textbooks, and museums to instill patriotism? Do we revise and reinterpret the past to tell stories that reflect present-day values? If so, who should articulate these values? Wonderfully clear, timely in its intentions, History on Trial provides a thoughtful account of the ways in which Americans have, since the beginning of the Republic, perceived and argued about our past.

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Customer Reviews

Begun in 1989 as a bi-partisan initiative to enhance the teaching of K-12 history to America's students, the authors of this book--Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn--along with many others, prepared a set of guidelines and teaching examples that would guide instructors in the preparation of their classes. "History on Trial" is largely about the effort to prepare the guidelines and the furor that they caused in the mid-1990s, although there is a discussion in the early part of the book about the "culture wars" in general in the latter twentieth century. Funded by the National

Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and aided by the Department of Education, the effort to develop these National Standards at UCLA's National Center for History in the Schools derailed in 1994 because of a conservative attack that characterized the effort as "hijacked" by political correctness and the agenda of the American Left. Led by Lynne Cheney, former head of the NEH, and aided by conservative commentators ranging from Rush Limbaugh to William Bennett to Charles Krauthammer, conservatives criticized the work of a large community of historians and teachers who developed these voluntary standards. They questioned the effort to challenge students to consider new ways of seeing the past, they criticized the reexamination of traditional interpretations, they abhorred a more multicultural and questioning approach to delving into history. It was during this era that "revisionist history" first entered the lexicon as a term of derision, as if understanding of the past could never be altered in any way.

The culture wars of history are fascinating. Unfortunately, they are still with us. How we interpret the past will always be a matter of contention as the juxtaposition between memory and reality collide. Unfortunately, the way American politics work conflicts with the actual intelligent development of national standards and all levels of education. The culture wars of history go back many years, but the battle in the 90s was particularly nasty just like it is today. The sad thing is that the culture wars appear to be completely political in nature with little factual basis to them. Gary Nash and Charlotte Crabtree (she passed away in 2006) were the lead developers overseeing the creation of the National History Standards in the late 1980s and 1990s. Funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), an organization then led by Lynne Cheney, wife of future vice president Richard Cheney, they and others developed a solid set of standards for use in K-12. By the time the standards were ready for release, Lynne Cheney had left the NEH and entered the political arena as a conservative Republican. As a result, Cheney would attack the standards, Nash, Crabtree, the historians and educator working on the project and anyone or anything involved with it via mass media. Nash and Crabtree show in this book how the standards were created, why they were created, and who was involved in them. They also show how Lynne Cheney supported the work up until she left for politics. In the process, Nash and Crabtree thoroughly debunk the smear campaign waged by conservative media. In fact, they expose the entire affair as nothing more than a political maneuver by conservatives jockeying for votes by playing on the fears of Americans.

The dedication reads simply, "This book is dedicated to the nation's history teachers". Being a member of such an oft-maligned group, this reviewer could not fail to read every word of History on

Trial with critical interest. Nash and company give a fascinating overview of the debates that have raged regarding the teaching of America's history and continue to torment our national conscience today. As a history of history alone the book would be worthwhile. The primary controversy explored involves the uproar that arose over publication of the national history standards. These had been developed by the National Center for History in the Schools, established and funded by the NEH, headed by Lynne Cheney from 1986-1992. While some of the writing does seem a defense of the embattled authors being assaulted by right-wing conservatives, both critics and defenders of the NCHS are quoted liberally. In fact, it is noted that there were few defenders in the early days of the attacks. The reader is allowed to make up his/her own mind. The initiative to develop standards came at a time when many were charging that our nation's schools were failing. George Bush had developed the Goals 2000 plan and education committees, governors, state legislatures, and local education boards began to seek solutions. The problems were not with the idea of setting standards, but with a perceived emphasis on social history and historical interpretation skills at the expense of rote memorization of traditional names, dates, and events. The US history standards were the most viciously attacked. Critics did not want teachers to discuss failures or faults with the system. They preferred glorification of national heroes (adult, white males) and national institutions.

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