

Review of the Minnesota K-12 Social Studies Standards by John D. Fonte, Ph.D.

I will (1) make a few general comments about the document as a whole, (2) provide specific comments about particular parts of the standards, and (3) analyze the issues and ideas that have emerged (explicitly and implicitly) from the public comments that you have received so far.

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Let me preface by stating that my experience includes examining and vetting history-social studies curricula for around 20 years:

- as a member of the steering committee of the congressionally-mandated National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), “the nation’s report card” for content in civics;
- as a senior researcher at the U.S. Department of Education for nine years, who worked on content issues in history and civics for NAEP;
- as principal advisor for CIVITAS: A Framework for Civic Education funded the Pew Charitable Trust, and appointed by the general editor to write the chapter on The Federalist Papers;
- as an educational consultant for the Texas Education Agency, the Virginia Department of Education, the California Academic Standards Commission, the American Federation of Teachers, and the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Lithuania.
- as a history and social studies teacher in junior high school, high school, and college

(1) General Comments

Overall I believe the Minnesota standards are outstanding, among the best that I have seen in reviewing many state documents. This is true for a number of reasons. First of all, any state standards should clearly delineate what is most important for students to know as future citizens in American democracy. Education for American citizenship has been central to the entire purpose of public schools since the days of Horace Mann. It is even more central today in a world of crisis and multiple challenges.

A recent consensus document (*Education for Democracy*) developed by the Albert Shanker Institute of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) states that: “We now have convincing evidence that our students are woefully lacking in a knowledge of our past, of who we are as Americans.” The AFT document called upon America’s schools to confront this challenge: “We must transmit to each new generation the political vision of liberty and equality that unites us as Americans, and a deep loyalty to the political institutions put together to fulfill that vision.”

The AFT statement was signed by a politically diverse group of Americans including former President Bill Clinton; Jeanne Kirkpatrick; Senator Edward Kennedy; Diane Ravitch; Reg Weaver, President of the National Education Association; Sandra Feldman, President of the American Federation of Teachers; Kweisi Mfume, President of the NAACP; Arturo Rodriguez, President of the United Farm Workers of America; former Michigan Governor, John Engler; the historian David McCulloch; educator John Goodlad; and many others. The AFT document concludes with the following paragraph:

“As citizens of a democratic republic, we are part of the noblest effort in history. Our children must learn, and we must teach them, the knowledge, values and habits that will best protect and extend this precious inheritance. Our schools play a major part in this mission, and we the signatories of this document pledge them our full support and call upon all Americans to join us.”

The great strength of the Minnesota standards is that they respond to the challenge presented by the AFT document to transmit “this precious inheritance” to a new generation of American students. Certainly, it is imperative that American students from all ethnic backgrounds understand the development of constitutionalism, limited government, liberal democracy, free institutions, civil society, market economics, American history and world history—if they are going to become active citizens in American democracy. The Minnesota document performs this mission well.

Moreover, the draft is balanced and inclusive, and provides a “warts and all” approach that covers the negative as well as the positive aspects of American history. As I will examine in detail in the third section of this memo (“Analysis of the Public Comments”), the standards examine the role of minorities, women, and non-Western peoples as well as the role of men and people of European ancestry. The standards also thoroughly examine social and cultural history, geography, economics, civics and government, as well as political and intellectual history and ideas.

(2) Specific Comments.

Page 1., the second benchmark, would better read: “Students should know how individuals from many diverse backgrounds including Native American and immigrant groups have contributed to American history.”

Page 5, Grade 2, last benchmark on the page, President’s Day is still officially George Washington’s birthday, so this could read “Washington’s Birthday/President’s Day.”

References throughout the elementary grades in Government and Citizenship to students learning the symbols of American patriotism through songs, holidays and the like, is excellent. This pedagogical approach is entirely consistent with all the sociological literature for the past sixty years on age appropriateness (see for example, the work of Sidney Verba, the famous political scientist; Stanley Renshon, CUNY psychologist; Diane Ravitch; E.D. Hirsch, etc.) Furthermore, it is also completely in sync with the

mission of the public schools and supported by the overwhelming majority of Americans. It is extremely important that all of this material remain in the final draft.

There is constant reference to the benchmark, “Respecting different opinions in a diverse society.” The important thing about America is that it is a free society. The Soviet Union and the old Yugoslavia were “diverse societies” but not “free societies.” Difference of opinion is respected in this country because America is a free society, not because it is a diverse society.

Page 15 Grade 5. There should be reference to the Catholic Reformation (not simply “Counter-Reformation”) as well as the Protestant Reformation; this would include Loyola and the founding of the Jesuits.

Page 17, Grade 5, using geography with history in American Civil War battles is a pedagogically sound approach.

Page 26, Grade 7, benchmarks on the Founders views are comprehensive, excellent and should not be changed.

Page 29 Grade 8, US History benchmark, “Students will identify the segregation and racism that faced new immigrants such as the Irish and Chinese.” would read more accurately as follows: “Students will understand that new immigrants including, Irish, Chinese, and others, faced discrimination and prejudice as well as opportunities.”

Page 36 (bottom) and page 37 (top), US History on the pre-Colonial and the Colonial period, American students should clearly understand that the institutions, laws, language, religion, and culture of the 13 colonies came overwhelmingly from the British Isles and were not primarily the result of “interactions” that occurred among different groups. Leading historians and political scientists including Pulitzer-prize winners such as Walter McDougall and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and prominent scholars including Samuel Huntington, John Patrick Diggins, Eugene Genovese, Forrest MacDonald and many others, have made this point abundantly clear.

Page 38 Grade 9-12 US History second benchmark from the top should also mention Alexander Hamilton (co-author of *The Federalist Papers*) as an important figure in the Constitutional debates.

Page 41 Grade 9-12 US History standard and benchmark on internationalism and isolationism after World War I is misleading. One of the leading opponents of Wilson’s League of Nations proposal was Henry Cabot Lodge, a strong internationalist who favored a military alliance system rather than “collective security” in an unreliable League. During the 1920s the Presidential policies of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover and Secretaries of State Charles Evans Hughes and Frank B. Kellogg (a Minnesotan and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize) were internationalist (not isolationist) in trade, treaties, and disarmament agreements as leading historian of American foreign policy Pulitzer-prize winner, Walter McDougall pointed out in *Promised Land, Crusader State*.

Isolationism, as a conscious movement, came later during the 1930s. It should be clear to the students that Lodge, Harding, Coolidge, Hoover, Hughes and Kellogg were not isolationists.

Page 42 Grade 9-12 US History standard on anti-communism at home should be clarified. Since the end of the Cold War scholars have examined Soviet records (*e.g.*, the Venona documents, see the work of John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr) and found out that there were, indeed, Soviet spies and American Communists (who were disloyal to our country) in the US government. This is a controversial area of history, but we must follow the evidence where it leads and it leads to a serious Red threat, not simply a “Red scare.” In other words, Joe McCarthy (who exaggerated) is not the whole story. Minnesota students should understand that there were real spies and real traitors, that Alger Hiss and the Rosenbergs were guilty beyond a shadow of a doubt, and that to dismiss anti-communism as a “Red Scare” or a “witch hunt” (as some widely used textbooks assert) does not stand the test of the evidence that is now available.

Page 42, Grade 9-12 US History benchmark on contributions of immigrants to America should note that immigration succeeded in America more than in any other country because American leaders in both major political parties (Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Louis Brandeis) and in civil society (Jane Addams), launched a conscious policy of “Americanization” that ensured that the new immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe would be patriotically assimilated into the mainstream of American life.

Page 42, Grade 9-12 US History on end of the Cold War and role of Ronald Reagan. I noticed some complaints in the public comments about the “role of Ronald Reagan,” but Soviet leader M. Gorbachev and his chief advisor Alexander Yakovlev have both credited Reagan’s role in the Western victory in the Cold War. For a bipartisan cast you could also mention Harry S. Truman’s resolve in confronting the Soviet threat at the beginning of the Cold War. This would also make sense in Minnesota terms because Senator Hubert Humphrey was a leader of the pro-Truman anti-communist forces in the 1948 election campaign. Thus, you would have two bookends, Democrat Truman at the beginning and Republican Reagan at the end, Presidents who successfully met the challenge of international communism.

Page 47 Grade 9-12 World History, bottom of the page, benchmark on genocide. Documents available since fall of the Berlin Wall make it clear beyond any doubt that Communist governments (in the USSR, China, Cambodia and elsewhere) were responsible for the largest number of victims of genocide during the 20th century. Recent books that examine Communist genocide include the following: *The Black Book of Communism* (Harvard University Press) first published in France and edited by scholar Stephane Courtois; *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* by British scholar Robert Conquest; and *Gulag: A History* by Washington Post journalist Anne Applebaum. Even a very low estimate of the number of innocent victims killed (because of their class, race, or ethnicity) by Communist regimes would be over 60 million people murdered, and most scholars think the figure is closer to 80 million. The Nazis-Fascists killed an estimated 25

million. There should be specific reference to the communist role in 20th century genocide, particularly in the USSR, China, and Cambodia.

Page 48 (bottom) and page 49 (top) Grade 9-12 Government and Citizenship. These are outstanding benchmarks for the capstone course on American democracy. However, it should be clear that these benchmarks including the benchmark explaining American national sovereignty should supercede the geography section (page 51) that contains the following benchmark, “Students will understand the changing nature of sovereignty and its impact on political units in the United States.” I have no idea what this benchmark means. It should be eliminated. American students should understand (as the benchmarks on page 48 make clear) that our national sovereignty (independence) is central to our freedom and to the very essence of our democratic republic. If American sovereignty (*i.e.*, self-government) is lost, American democracy is lost.

Page 50 Grade 9-12 Government and Citizenship bottom of page on the different philosophies and structures of government compared to the American system. Besides feudalism, socialism, communism, monarchies, parliamentary systems and the like, Minnesota students should be familiar with philosophies and structures of radical Islamic regimes such as the current government of Iran and the former Taliban regime of Afghanistan, and compare them to the American system.

War on Terrorism. Since September 11, 2001 the United States and its allies have been involved in what is called the “War on Terrorism.” While there are obviously differences among Americans over the Iraqi war and the direction of American foreign policy in general, the overwhelming majority of Americans are united in their determination to win the war against the terrorists. This unity is manifest in the signatories to the AFT Education for Democracy document (Clinton, Kennedy, Mfume, Rodriguez, John Lewis, etc.) listed earlier. This unity, and the nature of the enemy, must be understood by all American students and stated clearly in the standards. .

(3) Analysis of the Public Comments.

Since this process is a public dialogue, it makes sense to provide an overview of the public comments on the Minnesota K-12 Social Studies Standards that have been posted on the Minnesota Education Department’s website to date. There are essentially **four categories of public comments.**

FIRST CATEGORY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS

Excerpts. “We can not minimize the importance of content...” “I don’t have a problem with content, because children need content in order to make cogent arguments. As a teacher I believe this is important...” “I think the standards as they are presented in era form for history are extremely helpful...” “I am pleased that the standards take a balanced approach to social studies by providing actual standards in understanding diverse cultures, the perspectives of different genders, as well as the wars and the founding fathers, ancient history as well as modern...” “Students need to understand

national sovereignty and the founding principles/founding documents must be emphasized—this document does that.” “ I applaud you...I am a parent and I know how the Profile watered down academics, and I see it now in my own daughters who were honors students in high school, but who needed remedial courses when they got to college, due to the disaster of the Profile. Please continue with these new standards.”

Analysis of the First Category of Public Comments. This group of teachers and other citizens is supportive of the efforts to strengthen the academic content of the social studies curriculum and to teach our young people the essentials of American citizenship in the complex world of the 21st century. This category probably constitutes the overwhelming majority of people in Minnesota, although not necessarily the overwhelming majority of people who wrote in to the Department of Education.

SECOND CATEGORY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS

Excerpts. “As a fourth grade teacher, I feel you may be a year ahead in what you are asking students to know...” “Will all 7th graders be expected to complete all the s[ocial] s[tudies] subjects in one year? They are so diverse...What will a 7th grade class look like?...”As a fifth grade teacher...the working draft ...is pretty scary to me...The topic of medieval Europe and the Renaissance in Europe is not even in the textbook...Our new textbook does cover Mayan, Aztec, and Incan civilizations. Those may be more appropriate for fifth graders to study.”

Analysis of Second Category of Public Comments. This group consists almost entirely of elementary and junior high school teachers who are worried that the proposed standards are too difficult for their students. The teachers in this group are sincere and reasonable, but apparently are not aware of all the available evidence that points to the success of solid academic programs for younger students.

Clearly, the work of the Diane Ravitch, Paul Gagnon, Albert Shanker, the California curriculum of the 1990s, the Fordham Foundation, the Core Knowledge project, the AFT democracy projects of the 1980s and 1990s have long pointed out that young students are fascinated by a content rich-history and literature as story (“long ago and far away”) approach to elementary school social studies curriculum that examines ancient civilizations and far away places. At the same time, young students are bored and unchallenged by the insipid (“my neighborhood”) approach that has little social science evidence to back up its claims of effectiveness.

As the AFT’s Education for Democracy Statement declared:

“We know from both common sense and cognitive science that knowledge is the only reliable basis for more knowledge, that knowledge builds upon itself in a slow cumulative march, and that we must start early with a carefully crafted sequential curriculum. We have learned particularly from the experiences of hundreds of schools across the country that follow the Core Knowledge curriculum, that young children are eager to learn about the world. In contrast to the typical social studies texts, with their vacuous, boring topics

such as “We Work Together” and “Our Needs and Wants,” second grade Core Knowledge students are beginning to learn about geography and ancient civilizations of Asia, the importance to the world of early Chinese invention, the new kind of government being born in Athens, the role James Madison played in the writing of the American Constitution, the development of the steamboat and the building of the Erie Canal, and so forth.”

In the public comments, one teacher wrote, “I want my students to have high self esteem. This isn’t going to happen if they have to learn about Pompeii.” This teacher could not be more wrong. Social science research tells us that young students gain self-esteem through the accomplishment of learning about new things. The second graders who are fascinated by, and have learned about, Pompeii (*i.e.*, about ancient Rome), and ancient China, and James Madison are the students who have genuine (not artificial) self-esteem because they have learned through their own efforts and merits.

THIRD CATEGORY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS

Excerpts. “These new standards...do not expose children to diverse heroes/heroines”...”It leaves out major history such as suffragettes, Indian struggles...”...It is a major step backwards, eliminating aspects of diversity that acknowledges the contributions of all races, colors, and culture to this country.”... ”The role of women and women’s rights are sadly failing in this draft.”...”make this more inclusive. Also, where are the women?”...”our children need to get an inclusive picture of history that includes Native American history.”...”Equity and multicultural issues need to be addressed.”...”History needs to be taught from multiple perspectives not simply the perspective of the dominant US culture.”...”Standards are too narrow.”...”This isn’t holistic.”...”This content is old school.”...”Where is Malcolm X.”

Analysis of the Third Category of Public Comments. This category consists of people (many of them teachers) who have strongly attacked the draft, yet clearly, have either not read the document or chosen to ignore what is in it, and thus demonstrated what could honestly be characterized as bad faith. That is to say, this group was looking for something to attack and it didn’t really matter what was actually in the draft.

Let us examine in detail what is actually in the draft standards.

By mastering the standards students will “understand important cultural aspects of major American Indian tribes, including traditions, customs, and beliefs, as well as their scientific and cultural contributions.” They will become familiar with the Dakota, the Lakota, the Ojibwe the Kwakiutl, the Inuit, the Iroquois, the Plains, the Woodland, and the Pueblo Indians. They will also learn how Sacagawea assisted the Lewis and Clark expedition. Besides the Indians of North America they will learn about the Indian civilizations of the Aztecs, Incas, and Mayas.

In addition, students mastering the standards will learn about pioneer women such as Laura Ingalls Wilder, Annie Bidwell, Narcissa Whitman; “slave women gaining freedom

in the west,” and “Wyoming granting suffrage to women in 1869.” They will also learn about the cultures in Minnesota of “Hispanic, Somali, and Hmong immigrants;” of Chinese immigrants in American history; of “the art, literature and music of the Harlem Renaissance,” of “artists including Langston Hughes and Duke Ellington;” of the artist Georgia O’Keefe; of “new opportunities for women and minorities” on the home front in World War II. Further students will “identity the significance of civil right movement,” and know and understand “the evolving role of women,” and “the impact of Viet Nam, Watergate and the counter culture on American life, culture, politics, and economics.”

Furthermore in mastering the standards students will learn “why Harriett Tubman was called ‘Moses.’ “ They will also learn about Frederick Douglas, Sojourner Truth, the African slave trade, the Middle passage, the Southern Plantation system; the impact of North American slavery on colonial life; the women suffrage movement; the Fugitive Slave act, the Dred Scott decision; Reconstruction and the significance of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the US Constitution immediately following the Civil War.

In addition, the standards declare that “students will describe racial segregation, the rise of Jim Crow, and other challenges faced by black citizens in the New South.” They will be required to understand the “Great migration [of African-Americans] to the North and West.” In addition students, “will know and understand key people and events in the civil rights movement including but not limited to: Brown v Board of Education, Thurgood Marshall, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr. (including, but not limited to the ‘I have a Dream speech’), Malcolm X and the Voting rights Act.” They are also required to describe east African kingdoms of Axum and Zimbabwe and West African civilizations of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai in terms of geography, society, economy, and religion, and have an understanding of colonialism in Africa.

Any fair-minded observer would recognize the Minnesota standards as balanced and comprehensive. The examples above examine the role of minorities, women and the non-West. At the same time, the standards review traditional topics such as the ideas of Athenian democracy, the Roman republic, Locke, Montesquieu, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and The Federalist Papers

FOURTH CATEGORY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS

Excerpts “Patriotic Symbols, Songs, and Events represents (sic) the worst type of nationalistic propaganda and must be eliminated from the standards.” ...”the song ‘you’re a grand old flag, suggested for fourth grade, could be offensive to some people who don’t believe in pledging allegiance.” ...”Also, the strong emphasis on memorizing patriotic songs and the meaning of specific patriotic symbols has a definite conservative odor to it.” ...”Certain terms are inappropriate, such as patriotism. Symbols, songs, and places are elevated to be venerated. This is inappropriate.” ...”These standards promote white supremacy.””the ‘Battle Hymn of the Republic’ and ‘God bless America’ have clearly religious messages and ought not to be taught in school as expressing American ideals.” ... “Teaching about religion violates the separation of church and state.”

Analysis of the Fourth Category of Public Comments. This category constitutes a group opposed to what one commentator calls the “patriotism, capitalism, and theism” of the standards. The strident criticism of this group appears to be orchestrated because the same stock phrases are repeated over and over again. Their quarrel is not simply with the standards, but apparently with the purpose of public schools and the American system itself. The idea that “patriotism” is somehow a “partisan” or “conservative” value—as opposed to an American value—would be news to Presidential candidates Howard Dean, John Kerry, Richard Gephardt, Wesley Clark, Joe Lieberman, Dennis Kucinich, and Al Sharpton who have placed an emphasis on patriotism at the center of their campaigns. And it would be news to Senator Ted Kennedy, Kweisi Mfume, President of the NAACP, and the other signatories of the American Federation of Teachers Document, which states forthrightly:

“Finally, in the proudly pluralistic society that is so uniquely American, the mastery of a common core of history binds us together, creates a common civic identity based on a patriotism of principles, and unites us in a shared undertaking that is both our past and our future.”

Far from being “inappropriate,” nothing is more “appropriate” in a democracy than for American public schools to teach American values to American children. This is why Americans created public schools in the first place. This is why we agree to pay taxes for public schools. This is at the heart of American democracy.

According to a Yankelovich Public Agenda Poll of a random sample of parents of school age children, the American people agree. Eighty-four percent of the parents consider the United States “a unique country that stands for something special in the world,” and ninety percent agreed that it “is a better country than most other countries in the world.” Eighty-nine percent of parents overall, 88 percent of African-American parents, and 80 percent of Latino parents believe “there’s too much attention paid these days to what separates different ethnic and racial groups and not enough to what they have in common.” Moreover, eighty-four percent of the parents overall, 81 percent of African-American parents, and 80 percent of Latino parents would be “upset or somewhat concerned” if their child were “taught that America was, and still is, a fundamentally racist country.”

To ignore patriotic American values, as suggested by some of the public commentators on this draft, would be anti-democratic. It would be “public” education that ignores the “public.” Thus, it would be in opposition to a core democratic principle “government by consent of the governed.” Moreover it would constitute a taxpayer-funded public education system that would be explicitly against the consent of the overwhelming majority of the American people, as the Public Agenda poll clearly demonstrates.

National History Standards Revisited? Some critics of the Minnesota standards have complained that the standards’ developers have not built upon the framework of the national history standards. These critics need to be reminded that the national history standards that were published in the 1990s, unfortunately turned out to be a biased and

flawed set of standards. They not only created a great uproar across the nation, but were actually condemned by the US Senate in an overwhelmingly bi-partisan 99-1 vote. Not surprisingly, both of Minnesota's Senators at the time (1995), Democrat Paul Wellstone and Republican Rod Grams, voted to condemn the national history standards.

A letter from a group of academic historians at the University of Minnesota essentially calls for replacing this draft with the ideological framework of the national history standards. These historians complain that the current draft paints American history in too positive a light. Instead of using terms like "settlement" and "exploration," they prefer to describe early American history as one of "conquest," "subjugation," "exploitation," and "enslavement." Thus, they want the standards to emphasize the "genocidal impact" of the "European incursions" in the Americas. They see American history primarily in terms of slavery for African-Americans, genocide for American Indians, subjugation for women, xenophobia for immigrants, exploitation for poor people, and economic bullying for other nations. (One wonders why so many people from all over the world are trying (sometimes disparately) to emigrate to this "racist" land and become Americans.) They ridicule the idea that America was "defending freedom" in the struggle against communism in Viet Nam and Korea. (That would be news to the thousands of Vietnamese and Koreans who fled communist tyranny for American freedom.) They even ridicule the idea that there is such a thing as "our history."

The historians' letter complains that the standards are "grossly biased in favor of Europe," *i.e.* in favor of Western civilization. But it makes no sense to strive for mathematical parity. If the standards devote equal time to the five or six major cultures in the world, Western Civilization will automatically be shortchanged. Clearly, the study of Western civilization— heir to the rich legacy of Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem, of Judaism and Christianity, of individual rights and political freedom, of the belief in reason and science, the rule of law, and constitutional, liberal democracy—is central for students who will be future citizens of *this* nation. As History Professor Donald Kagan of Yale reminds us, the United States "was never a nation in the sense of resting on common ancestry but one that depends on a set of beliefs and institutions deriving from the Western tradition."

That Western tradition has shaped our modern world for both good and ill. If liberal democracy, individual rights, and the rule of law are Western ideas, so too are fascism, communism, and nihilism. Princeton historian Bernard Lewis has noted that even the concepts of "Eurocentrism" and "multiculturalism" were invented by Western intellectuals. In fact, to understand today's world, students from all over the globe, not just American ones, have to be thoroughly grounded in the history of Western institutions. Not surprisingly, this is exactly what the top students in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan are doing today. It is not "Eurocentric" to emphasize the study of Western ideas and institutions and the principles of America's founders; it is common sense and essential for education for citizenship in our nation.

In fact, the large influx of non-Western immigrants into the U.S. means that it is *more*, not less, important for all American students to gain a thorough understanding of the

principles and origins of our liberal democracy and our Western heritage. As Sidney Hook put it more than a decade ago, precisely because America is a "pluralistic, multiethnic, and uncoordinated society" all citizens need a "prolonged schooling in the history of our free society, its martyrology, and its national tradition." Just as a hundred years ago it was more important for immigrant children to understand the ideas and institutions of eighteenth century America than those of the Czar's empire, the Ottoman provinces, and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, so today it is more important for the children of new immigrants to understand the (Western) ideas and institutions of eighteenth century America than those of eighteenth century Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

In the final analysis, the overall complaint of the UM historians letter is that the draft does not parrot the negative view of America that they, and many of their colleagues in the academy, propagate to captive student audiences and in their small in-bred journals—that is what they mean by the phrase “accepted scholarly interpretation” on page 2 of their letter. Of course, these historians are free to advance their opinions, as are the many other historians and scholars who disagree with them. In this memo, I have noted numerous historians and scholars who reject the “national standards revisited approach” of the group at the University of Minnesota. There is no good reason why the State of Minnesota in the post 9/11 world of 2003 should revise this document along the lines of the discredited national history standards of the 1990s.

On religion. As noted above, one commenter stated, “Teaching about religion violates the separation of church and state.” Another wrote, “As a 6th grade teacher, I do not want to teach the Protestant Reformation. I believe in the separation of church and state.” These statements reveal that some of the teachers who made public comments on the Minnesota standards do not have the slightest knowledge of the law, the Constitution, or even what constitutes sound educational practice.

The Supreme Court, lower courts, and state courts have consistently ruled that public schools are supposed to teach **about** religion, not, obviously, religion, *per se*. As Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson wrote in *Illinois ex rel. McCollum v. Board of Education*, “One can hardly respect a system of education that would leave the student wholly ignorant of the currents of religious thought that move society.”

Needless to say, this would include learning “about religion,” such as the Protestant Reformation. It would include learning about references to a “creator” in the Declaration of Independence. It would also include learning the significance of patriotic songs that exemplify American ideals during particular periods of historical crisis such as the Battle Hymn of the Republic during the Civil War (“let us live to make men free”) and “God Bless America” during World War II and in the aftermath of the recent terrorist attacks. For example, on the night of September 11, 2001 hundreds of members of Congress from across the political spectrum gathered on the Capitol Steps to sing “God Bless America,” immigrant Irving Berlin’s musical tribute to his adopted country. For our children to learn the meaning of this song and why liberal and conservative, Democrat and Republican congressmen (many of them bitter political foes) came together spontaneously on the

night of September 11 to sing it, is not “teaching religion.” It is teaching American history, in which, religion, and religious language, has sometimes played a role. Why is this so difficult for critics of the Minnesota standards to grasp?

ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center), a leading resource center funded by the U.S. Department of Education, lists a series of documents that provide guidelines for teaching about religion in the public schools. These include, but are not limited to the following: American Association of School Administrators, **Religion in the Public Schools**, Arlington, Va, AASA, 1986, ED 274 06; Haynes, Charles C., **Religion in American History: What to Teach and How**, Alexandria, VA, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1990. ED 320 845; **History- Social Science Framework and Criteria Committee, History Social Science Framework for California Public Schools**, Sacramento, CA, State Department of Education, 1988 ED 293 779; Gilbert T. Sewall, **Learning About Religion**, American Textbook Council, 1998; C Frederick Rissinger, “**Religion in the Social Studies Curriculum**,” ERIC Digest (ED 363 553), August 1993.

All of this material has been available (most, for more than a decade) to anyone who has done minimal research on teaching about religion in public schools. Again, many of the critics of the Minnesota standards have simply failed to do their homework.

CONCLUSION. The American Federation of Teachers statement quotes a scholar who observed that on September 11, 2001, “We were attacked for being American. We should at least know what being American means.” “Our purpose,” the AFT document then continues, “is to strengthen schools’ resolve to consciously impart to students the ideals and values on which our free society rests.” The Minnesota K-12 Social Studies Standards perform this task admirably.