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History the Weapon

Writing history is an old and honorable profession with distinctive standards and purposes. The historian's goals are accuracy, analysis, and objectivity in the reconstruction of the past. But history is more than an academic discipline up there in the stratosphere. It also has its own role in the future of nations.

For history is to the nation rather as memory is to the individual. As an individual deprived of memory becomes disoriented and lost, not knowing where he

has been or where he is going, so a nation denied a conception of its past will be disabled in dealing with its present and its future. As the means of defining national identity, history becomes a means of shaping history. The writing of history then turns from a meditation into a weapon. "Who controls the past controls the future," runs the Party slogan in George Orwell's *1984*; "who controls the present controls the past."

I

Historians do their damndest to maintain the standards of their trade. Heaven knows how dismally we fall short of our ideals, how sadly our interpretations are dominated and distorted by unconscious preconceptions, how obsessions of race and nation blind us to our own bias. We remain creatures of our times, prisoners of our own experience, swayed hither and yon, like all sinful mortals, by partisanship, prejudice, dogma, by fear and by hope.

The spotlight we flash into the darkness of the past is guided by our own concerns in the present. When new preoccupations arise in our own times and lives, the spotlight shifts, throwing into sharp relief things that were always there but that earlier historians had casually excised from the collective memory. In this sense, the present may be said to re-create the past.

Historians must always strive toward the unattainable ideal of objectivity. But as we respond to contemporary urgencies, we sometimes exploit the past

for nonhistorical purposes, taking from the past, or projecting upon it, what suits our own society or ideology. History thus manipulated becomes an instrument less of disinterested intellectual inquiry than of social cohesion and political purpose.

People live by their myths, and some may argue that the facts can be justifiably embroidered if embroidery serves a higher good, such as the nurture of a nation or the elevation of a race. It may seem more important to maintain a beneficial fiction than to keep history pure—especially when there is no such thing as pure history anyway. This may have been what Plato had in mind when he proposed the idea of the "noble lie" in *The Republic*.

But enthusiasts are all too likely to confuse "noble lies" with reality. The corruption of history by nationalism is instructive. Nationalism remains, after two centuries, the most vital political emotion in the world—far more vital than social ideologies such as communism or fascism or even democracy. But it was not the product of spontaneous generation. "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness," as Ernest Gellner has said; "it invents nations where they do not exist. . . ." Nationalism was developed by intellectuals in the interest of aspiring elites and thereafter propagated to receptive masses. And it continues to thrive because it taps potent emotions of history and locality to give individual lives meaning in an increasingly baffling universe.

Today the nationalist fever encircles the globe. In the West the contagion convulses Ireland and Israel, divides Belgium, Cyprus, and Canada, arouses Brit-

tany, Corsica, and the Basque country. Nationalism broke up the Soviet empire and now threatens to break up the Soviet Union itself. In the third world, nationalism, having overthrown Western colonialism, launches a horde of new states, large and micro, often at each other's throats in reenacting ancient quarrels of history.

Within nation-states, nationalism takes the form of ethnicity or tribalism. In country after country across the third world—India, Burma, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Iraq, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Angola, Trinidad, Guyana—ethnic groups struggle for power and, in desperate cases, for survival. The ethnic upsurge in America, far from being unique, partakes of the global fever.

II

The invocation of history is indispensable to nations and groups in the process of making themselves. How else can a people establish the legitimacy of its personality, the continuity of its tradition, the correctness of its course?

Often history is invoked to justify the ruling class. "The past," writes the British historian J. H. Plumb, "has always been the handmaid of authority." This is top-dog history, designed to show how noble, virtuous, and inevitable existing power arrangements are. Because it vindicates the status quo and the methods by which power is achieved and maintained, it may be called exculpatory history.

Other times history is invoked to justify the victims of power, to vindicate those who reject the status quo. Isaiah Berlin has described how the "humiliated and defeated Germans" in the early nineteenth century lashed back against the arrogant French:

They discovered in themselves qualities far superior to those of their tormentors. They contrasted their own deep, inner life of the spirit, their own profound humility, their selfless pursuit of true values—simple, noble, sublime—with the rich, worldly, successful, superficial, smooth, heartless, morally empty French. This mood rose to fever pitch during the national resistance to Napoleon, and was indeed the original exemplar of the reaction of many a backward, exploited, or at any rate patronised society, which, resentful of the apparent inferiority of its status, reacted by turning to real or imaginary triumphs and glories in its past, or enviable attributes of its own national or cultural character. . . . Hence the value of a real or imaginary rich historical past to inferiority-ridden peoples, for it promises, perhaps, an even more glorious future.

This is underdog history, designed to demonstrate what Bertrand Russell called the "superior virtue of the oppressed" by inventing or exaggerating past glories and purposes. It may be called compensatory history.

Both exculpatory and compensatory history use the past in order to shape the future. For 70 years in the Soviet Union, scholars practiced exculpatory history, sedulously defending every twist of the party line and every whim of the Kremlin dictatorship. Then came Gorbachev; and *glasnost* led in due course to the emancipation of historians.

For the first time ever, Soviet historians became free to write honest history—to describe the purges and the gulags, to demythologize Stalin and even Lenin, to reassess Bukharin and even Trotsky, to condemn the Soviet-Nazi pact of 1939, to pronounce Stalin's U.S.S.R. a totalitarian state, even to doubt the sacred Revolution itself. "A new future requires a new past," said Eric Foner of Columbia after four months as a lecturer at Moscow State University. "To legitimize these far-reaching changes, the press and public officials now paint the history of the Soviet era in the blackest hues." As party-line history was an instrument of dictatorship, honest history is an instrument of democracy.

In Japan the government's dedication to exculpatory history demonstrated persisting unwillingness to accept responsibility for aggressions and atrocities of half a century ago. School textbooks unrepentantly portray the Japanese conquest of Korea and invasion of China in terms so benevolent as to provoke official protests from Seoul and Beijing. Young Japanese are taught to see their country as a victim rather than the cause of the Pacific War.

When the eminent historian Professor Saburō Ienaga tried, as he wrote in the preface to the English

edition of his notable book *The Pacific War*, "to show the Japanese people the naked realities," he was subjected to official persecution. Japanese courts upheld the Education Ministry's censorship of Ienaga's factual account of the Japanese "rape of Nanjing" in 1937. As Ienaga observed, the less the young people of Japan are taught the true history of the war, the greater the risk of a "similar danger" in years to come.

By the 1960s German historians had come to accept the crimes of Hitler as a unique German responsibility and to trace Nazism back to nineteenth-century German history and culture. But the revival of German nationalism in the 1980s set off a scholarly campaign to sanitize the national past. The crimes of Hitler, influential historians argued, were not unique, nor were they peculiarly German. All Hitler was doing was imitating genocidal policies invented by Stalin, substituting race for class. Hitler had no doubt done awful things, but other nations had committed comparable atrocities without suffering the same international disfavor. Nazism was deplorable but not fundamental, more a matter of bad luck and aberration.

As Franz Josef Strauss, the conservative leader, said, Germans must not let the vision of their glorious past "be blocked by the sight-screens of those accursed 12 years between 1933 and 1945. German history cannot be presented as an endless chain of mistakes and crimes." Michael Stürmer, a conservative historian, criticizes the German "obsession with their guilt" and calls for a new affirmation of national identity. Stürmer understands the stakes: "Loss of orienta-

tion and the search for identity are brothers. . . . Anyone who believes that this has no effect on politics and the future ignores the fact that *in a land without history, he who fills the memory, defines the concepts, and interprets the past, wins the future.*"

History is a weapon. Perhaps their own vicissitudes as a nation—from democracy to Nazism to communism back to democracy in half a century—have made Czechs particularly sensitive to the manipulations of history. "The first step in liquidating a people," a historian observes in Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, "is to erase its memory. Destroy its books, its culture, its history. Then have somebody write new books, manufacture a new culture, invent a new history. Before long the nation will begin to forget what it is and what it was." "The struggle of man against power," says another character, "is the struggle of memory against forgetting."

Vaclav Havel, Czech playwright and president, made a pointed address in the presence of Kurt Waldheim of Austria. "He who fears facing his own past," Havel said, "must necessarily fear what lies before him. . . . Lying can never save us from the lie. Falsifiers of history do not safeguard freedom but imperil it. . . . Truth liberates man from fear." Honest history is the weapon of freedom.

III

American history was long written in the interests of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant males. My father, growing up in the 1890s in Xenia, a small Ohio town containing large contingents of Germans, Irish, and blacks, one day asked his father, who had come from Germany as a child and whose hero was Carl Schurz, the American army officer, politician, and reformer, why the schoolbooks portrayed England as the one and only mother country. My grandfather's wry comment was that apparently the only Germans worth mentioning were "the Hessians who had fought on the wrong side in the War for Independence." Irish and blacks fared even less well in schoolbooks, and the only good Indians were dead Indians. Non-WASPs were the invisible men (and women) in the American past.

The Anglocentric domination of schoolbooks was based in part on unassailable facts. For better or for worse, American history has been shaped more than anything else by British tradition and culture. Like it or not, as Andrew Hacker, the Queens political scientist, puts it, "For almost all this nation's history, the major decisions have been made by white Christian men." To deny this perhaps lamentable but hardly disputable fact would be to falsify history. But history can also be falsified by suppression of uglier aspects of Anglo rule—callous discrimination against later immigrants, brutal racism against nonwhite minorities—

and by the creation of filiopietistic myths.

Myth-making began as early as Parson Weems's biography of Washington. As Anglocentric myths grew, they had at times to be protected against the British themselves. Anglophobia died slowly in the United States; and, despite the current theory of an Anglo-Saxon cultural conspiracy, American WASPs, from the Adamses in the eighteenth century to the Lodges in the twentieth, were always among the leading Anglophobes.

After the First World War, patriotic organizations, persuaded that Britain had tricked the United States into the struggle, hunted down pro-British propaganda in American textbooks—as 30 years later a new generation of superpatriots hunted down pro-Soviet propaganda. Scholars were charged with selling out to British gold and plotting to bring the republic back into the empire. Official investigations were launched against “Anglicized” books in New York City, Washington, D.C., St. Louis, and elsewhere. Wisconsin, Oklahoma, and Oregon passed “pure-history” laws.

William Hale Thompson, running for mayor of Chicago in 1927 with the support of Colonel McCormick's Anglophobic *Chicago Tribune*, seized upon this agitation, promising to “biff King George on the snoot” if he dared come to Chicago. In his book *New Viewpoints in American History*, my father had an ironic sentence about the representatives of George V rendering homage “at the tomb of the great disloyalist and rebel of a former century, George Washington.” Discovering *New Viewpoints* on a University of Chi-

cago reading list, Big Bill Thompson denounced the “infamous book” and its infamous author for thus characterizing the sainted father of his country. A Thompson henchman, a Damon Runyon character called Sport Herrmann, tried to remove the “treason-tainted” book from the public library. Frustrated there, Sport bought himself a copy and burned it in a patriotic bonfire.

An early cultural pluralist, Big Bill Thompson was determined not only to “stop the defamation of America's heroes” but to see that justice was done to “heroes of Irish, Polish, German, Holland, Italian, and other extractions.” As ruling groups cherish their set of self-justifying myths, so excluded groups seek counter-affirmations of their own historical and cultural dignity, myths celebrating, and often exaggerating in the manner so well described by Isaiah Berlin, their own unacknowledged contributions to the making of America.

IV

The ethnic enclaves thus developed a compensatory literature. Inspired by group resentment and pride, this literature very often succumbed to the Platonic temptation of “noble lies.” Professor John V. Kelleher, Harvard's distinguished Irish-American scholar, provided gently satiric testimony about the Irish case:

My earliest acquaintance with Irish-American history of the written variety was gained

from the sort of articles that used to appear in minor Catholic magazines or in the Boston Sunday papers. They were turgid little essays on the fact that the Continental Army was 76 percent Irish, or that many of George Washington's closest friends were nuns or priests, or that Lincoln got the major ideas for the Second Inaugural Address from the Hon. Francis P. Magehegan of Alpaca, New York, a pioneer manufacturer of cast-iron rosary beads.

This is what Professor Kelleher called the there's-always-an-Irishman-at-the-bottom-of-it-doing-the-real-work approach to American history.

Such ethnic chauvinism was largely confined, however, to tribal celebrations. Even in Boston and environs, where the Irish dominated school and library boards, they made no effort to impose their compensatory history on the public-school curriculum. And as the Irish rose in American society, Kelleher recalled, pietistic articles began to vanish from the Boston press. "Now one is rarely seen," he wrote in 1960, "even around March 17. I wonder whose is the major component in the Continental Army these days." (The answer would probably be blacks and Jews.) Kelleher was musing about the Irish in the spring of the year that an Irish Catholic was elected president of the United States—a signal of ultimate acceptance that relieved Irish-Americans of the need for ethnic cheerleading.

People from groups that began by sitting far be-

neath the salt may end, once they have made it themselves, by defending the Anglocentric canon. In 1990 Peggy Noonan, the charming and witty Irish-American ghostwriter for a second Irish-American president, urged that immigrants be instructed, not in the exploits of their own crowd, but in "the great unifying myths that define the dreams, characteristics, and special history of America. . . ." Otherwise, she said, "if our retelling of our past is dominated by the compulsive skepticism of the modern mind, with its ill-thought-out disdain, then we will stop being America."

Nor has anyone in recent years more wrathfully denounced scholarly iconoclasm than Professor Allan Bloom, the Jewish-American author of *The Closing of the American Mind*. "We are used to hearing the Founders charged with being racists, murderers of Indians, representatives of class interests," Professor Bloom wrote, condemning the debunkers for "weakening our convictions of the truth or superiority of American principles and our heroes."

Debunking is an ephemeral phenomenon, nothing to get excited about. If any kind of positive case can be made, rebunkers will appear in due course. The British historical journalist Paul Johnson can even make a hero out of Calvin Coolidge. History proceeds by revision and counterrevision. As the great Dutch historian Pieter Geyl splendidly put it, "History is indeed an argument without end."

V

The Irish and the Jews had their share of gristle in the American cauldron, but they finally made it: hence the emergence of people named Noonan and Bloom as defenders of Anglocentric verities. The situation is radically different for nonwhite minorities facing not snobbism but racism.

Most white Americans through most of American history simply considered colored Americans inferior and unassimilable. Not until the 1960s did integration become a widely accepted national objective. Even then, even after legal obstacles to integration fell, social, economic, and psychological obstacles remained. Blacks and Indians confront American democracy with its most tragic challenge.

Both black Americans and red Americans have every reason to seek redressment of the historical balance. Indians, however, lack the numbers, the unity, the visibility, and the political weight of African-Americans. Twelve percent of Americans are black, and the felt pressure to correct injustices of past scholarship comes mostly on their behalf. And indeed the cruelty with which white Americans have dealt with black Americans has been compounded by the callousness with which white historians have dealt with black history.

Even the best historians: Frederick Jackson Turner, dismissing the slavery question as a mere "incident" when American history is "rightly viewed";

Charles and Mary Beard in their famous *The Rise of American Civilization*, describing blacks as passive in slavery and ludicrous in Reconstruction and acknowledging only one black achievement—the invention of ragtime; Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager, writing about childlike and improvident Sambo on the old plantation. One can sympathize with W. E. B. Du Bois's rage after reading white histories of slavery and Reconstruction; he was, he wrote, "literally aghast at what American historians have done to this field . . . one of the most stupendous efforts the world ever saw to discredit human beings. . . ."

The job of redressing the balance has been splendidly undertaken in recent years by both white and black historians. Meticulous and convincing scholarship has reversed conventional judgments on slavery, on Reconstruction, on the role of the blacks in American life. After the murder of Medgar Evers in Mississippi in 1963, President Kennedy invited his widow and children to the White House. Later, Kennedy reflected on the days when Radical Republicans like Thaddeus Stevens advocated a tough Reconstruction policy toward the South. "I'm coming to believe that Thaddeus Stevens was right," he said. "I had always been taught to regard him as a man of vicious bias." He would not be taught that way today.

The reversal has extended from the world of scholarship to the popular culture. *Glory*, Edward Zwick's superb movie, told many white Americans for the first time about the record of black soldiers in the Civil War. How many had known before that 186,000

blacks served in the Union Army—about the same number as composed the entire United States Army in 1939?

But scholarly responsibility was only one factor behind the campaign of correction. History remains a weapon. "History's potency is mighty," Herbert Aptheker, the polemical chronicler of slave rebellions, has written. "The oppressed need it for identity and inspiration." (Aptheker, a faithful Stalinist, was an old hand at the manipulation of history.) "The thing that has kept most of us, that is, African-Americans, almost crippled in this society," said Malcolm X, "has been our complete lack of knowledge concerning the past."

More than Irish or Italians or Jews, black Americans, after generations of psychological and cultural evisceration, have every right to seek an affirmative definition of their past. Far more than white ethnics, they perceive themselves to be in a trap of cultural "hegemony" in which they are flooded by white values and demeaning self-images. Whites, some black intellectuals argue, control "knowledge production," and the need is to overcome "communicentric hegemony"—that is, "a canon which reflects the hegemonic culture." For blacks the American dream has been pretty much of a nightmare, and, far more than white ethnics, they are driven by a desperate need to vindicate their own identity.

"The academic and social rescue and reconstruction of Black history," as Maulana Karenga put it in his influential *Introduction to Black Studies* ("a landmark in the intellectual history of African Americans," according to Molefi Kete Asante of Temple

University), "is . . . [an] indispensable part of the rescue and reconstruction of Black humanity. For history is the substance and mirror of a people's humanity in others' eyes as well as in their own eyes . . . not only what they have done, but also a reflection of who they are, what they can do, and equally important what they can become. . . ."

VI

One can hardly be surprised at the emergence of a there's-always-a-black-man-at-the-bottom-of-it-doing-the-real-work approach to American history. A man named Crispus Attucks led the mob that British troops fired upon in the Boston Massacre before the Revolution and was among those killed. He was a sailor and of dark complexion, perhaps a mulatto, perhaps an Indian. No one knows much about Crispus Attucks. But "to evaluate a book on Attucks solely by the canons of scholarly objectivity and historical accuracy is missing the point," one writer observes. "It ignores the necessity of creating black counterparts to the Nathan Hale and Molly Pitchers of the white past."

Why this necessity? "The extent to which the past of a people is regarded as praiseworthy," the white anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits wrote in his study of the African antecedents of American blacks, "their own self-esteem would be high and the opinion of others will be favorable." The failure to celebrate the past, black publicists say today—as British and Irish and Jewish publicists had said before

them—is a powerful reason for low self-esteem in the present. The remedy is the recovery of bygone glories and heroes. “We’ve got to stop waiting for white folks to put us in their history books,” says Professor Jacob Gordon of the University of Kansas. “The Jews have done a good job of this. We’ve got to create Afrocentric academies and create our own history books.”

White domination of American schools and colleges, black academics say, results in Eurocentric, racist, elitist, imperialist indoctrination and in systematic denigration of black values and achievements. “Physical enslavement,” notes Kofi Lomotey of the State University of New York in Buffalo, has been succeeded by “psychological enslavement.” “In the public-school system,” writes Felix Boateng of Eastern Washington University, “the orientation is so Eurocentric that white students take their identity for granted, and African-American students are totally deculturalized”—deculturalization being the “process by which the individual is deprived of his or her culture and then conditioned to other cultural values.” White education, writes Maulana Karenga, cuts out blacks, “the fathers and mothers of humankind and human civilization,” and aims to turn black students into “obscene caricatures of Europe, pathetic imitators of their oppressors.” Liberation would be impossible “until the white monopoly on Black minds was broken.” “In a sense,” says Molefi Kete Asante, the Eurocentric curriculum is “killing our children, killing their minds.”

In history, Western-civilization courses are seen as cultural imperialism designed to disparage non-

Western traditions and to impress the Western stamp on people of all races. In literature, the “canon,” the accepted list of essential books, is seen as an instrumentality of the white power structure. Nowhere can blacks discover adequate reflection or representation of the black self. Black students, one scholar writes, “succumb to a sort of brainwashing which denies them the ego-strength that comes from self-awareness, self-knowledge, and the security of group identity.” Asante advises black students to take two sets of notes—one to help them pass the examinations, the other to preserve their sanity. “When they say Shakespeare was the greatest writer who ever lived, you write it down so you can pass the test. But you write in the margins, ‘This is nonsense.’”

Some black educators even argue ultimate biological and mental differences, asserting that black students do not learn the way white students do and that the black mind works in a genetically distinctive way. Black children are said, in the jargon of the educationist, to “process information differently.” “There are scientific studies that show, at early ages, the difference between Caucasian infants and African infants,” says Clare Jacobs, a teacher in Washington, D.C. “Our African children are very expressive. Every thought we have has an emotional dimension to it, and Western education has historically subordinated the feelings.” Charles Willie of Harvard finds several distinct “intelligences” of which the “communication and calculation” valued by whites constitute only two. Other kinds of “intelligence” are singing and dancing, in both of which blacks excel.

According to Professor Asa Hilliard, a black psychologist at Georgia State University, black students have cultural characteristics that whites lack: "high levels of energy, impulsive interrupting, and loud talking." (Hilliard's acquaintance with whites must be limited.) The "communication style" of the black child, writes another black psychologist, Na'im Akbar, includes considerable body language, eye movement, and positioning, "words that depend upon context for meaning and that have little meaning in themselves" and "a wide use of many coined interjections (sometimes profanity)." To force black children to learn standard English, some contend, only deepens their sense of inferiority; blacks should therefore be taught in "black English" as Hispanics should be taught in Spanish.

The psychological difference between blacks and whites, some hold, has an organic base. Whites must strive for supremacy, according to the black psychiatrist Frances Cress, to make up for their racial inferiority, caused by their "genetic inability to produce the skin pigments of melanin which are responsible for all skin coloration." "Black superiority in the areas of mental development, neurological functioning, and psychomotor development," opines Amos Wilson, "[are] . . . all related to the possession of a high level of melanin."

Salvation lies in breaking the white, Eurocentric, racist grip on the curriculum and providing education that responds to colored races, colored histories, colored ways of learning and behaving. Europe has reigned long enough; it is the source of most of the evil

in the world anyway; and the time is overdue to honor the African contributions to civilization so purposefully suppressed in Eurocentric curricula. Children from nonwhite minorities, so long persuaded of their inferiority by the white hegemony, need the support and inspiration that identification with role models of the same color will give them.

The answer, for some at least, is "Afrocentricity," described by Asante in his book of that title as "the centerpiece of human regeneration." There is, Asante contends, a single "African Cultural System." Wherever people of African descent are, "we respond to the same rhythms of the universe, the same cosmological sensibilities. . . . Our Africanity is our ultimate reality." Those who say that Africans and African-Americans have nothing in common but the color of their skin are talking nonsense. "There exists an emotional, cultural, psychological connection . . . that spans the ocean." Civilization originated in the highlands of East Africa, and "our ancestors do in fact gather to inspire us and do bring us victory."

VII

The belated recognition of the pluralistic character of American society has had a bracing impact on the teaching and writing of history. The women's-liberation movement, the civil rights movement, the ethnic upsurge, and other forms of group self-assertion forced historians to look at old times in new ways. Scholars now explore such long-neglected fields as the

history of women, of immigration, of blacks, Indians, Hispanics, and other minorities. Voices long silent ring out of the darkness of history.

The result has been a reconstruction of American history partly on the merits and partly in response to ethnic pressures. In 1987 the two states with both the greatest and the most diversified populations—California and New York—adopted new curricula for grades one to 12. Both state curricula materially increased the time allotted to non-European cultures.

The New York curriculum went further in minimizing Western traditions. A two-year global-studies course divided the world into seven regions—Africa, South Asia, East Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, Western Europe, and Eastern Europe—with each region given equal time. The history of Western Europe was cut back from a full year to one quarter of the second year. American history was reduced to a section on the Constitution; then a leap across Jefferson, Jackson, the Civil War, and Reconstruction to 1877.

In spite of the multiculturalization of the New York state history curriculum in 1987—a revision approved by such scholars as Eric Foner of Columbia and Christopher Lasch of Rochester—a newly appointed commissioner of education yielded to pressures from minority interests to consider still further revision. In 1989, a Task Force on Minorities: Equity and Excellence (not one historian among its 17 members) brought in a report, its first sentence sounding the keynote:

African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Puerto Ricans/Latinos and Native Americans have all been the victims of an intellectual and educational oppression that has characterized the culture and institutions of the United States and the European American world for centuries.

The “systematic bias toward European culture and its derivatives,” the report asserts, has “a terribly damaging effect on the psyche of young people of African, Asian, Latino, and Native American descent.” The dominance of “the European-American monocultural perspective” explains why “large numbers of children of non-European descent are not doing as well as expected.” The 1987 curriculum revision, the report concedes, did include more material on minority groups, but “merely adding marginal examples of ‘other’ cultures to an assumed dominant culture” cannot counteract “deeply rooted racist traditions”; all it produces is “Eurocentric multiculturalism.”

Dr. Leonard Jeffries, the task force’s consultant on African-American culture and a leading author of the report, discerns “deep-seated pathologies of racial hatred” even in the 1987 curriculum. A provocative teacher at the City College of New York, Jeffries describes Europeans as cold, individualistic, materialistic, and aggressive “ice people” who grew up in caves and have brought the world the three D’s, “domination, destruction, and death,” whereas Africans who grew up in sunlight, with the intellectual and

physical superiority provided by melanin, are warm, humanistic, and communitarian "sun people." (He also tells his CCNY classes that "rich Jews" financed the slave trade.)

The consultant on Asian-American culture called for more pictures of Asian-Americans. The consultant on Latino culture found damning evidence of ethnocentric bias in such white usages as the Mexican War and the Spanish-American War. The ethnically correct designations should be the American-Mexican War and the Spanish-Cuban-American War. A later commentator objected to the term *slaves* on the ground that it "depersonalizes the oppression of a people. If a text were to use 'enslaved persons,' the act of enslavement would be made more explicit." The consultant on Native American culture wanted more space for Indians and bilingual education in Iroquois.

A new curriculum giving the four other cultures equitable treatment, the report concluded, would provide "children from Native American, Puerto Rican/Latino, Asian American, and African American cultures . . . higher self-esteem and self-respect, while children from European cultures will have a less arrogant perspective."

The report views division into racial groups as the basic analytical framework for an understanding of American history. Its interest in history is not as an intellectual discipline but rather as social and psychological therapy whose primary purpose is to raise the self-esteem of children from minority groups. Nor does the report regard the Constitution or the American Creed as means of improvement. Jeffries scorns

the Constitution, finding "something vulgar and revolting in glorifying a process that heaped undeserved rewards on a segment of the population while oppressing the majority." The belief in the unifying force of democratic ideals finds no echo in the report, no doubt because the ideals were disqualified by their Eurocentric origin. Indeed, the report takes no interest in the problem of holding a diverse republic together. Its impact is rather to sanction and deepen racial tensions.

VIII

The recent spread of Afrocentric programs to public schools represents an extension of the New York task-force ideology. These programs are in most cases based on a series of "African-American Baseline Essays" conceived by the educational psychologist Asa Hilliard.

Hilliard's narration for the slide show "Free Your Mind, Return to the Source: The African Origin of Civilization" suggests his approach. "Africa," he writes, "is the mother of Western civilization"—an argument turning on the contention that Egypt was a black African country and the real source of the science and philosophy Western historians attribute to Greece. Africans, Hilliard continues, also invented birth control and carbon steel. They brought science, medicine, and the arts to Europe; indeed, many European artists, such as Browning and Beethoven, were in fact "Afro-European." They also discovered Amer-

ica long before Columbus, and the original name of the Atlantic Ocean was the Ethiopian Ocean.

Hilliard's African-American Baseline Essays were introduced into the school system of Portland, Oregon, in 1987. They have subsequently been the inspiration for Afrocentric curricula in Milwaukee, Indianapolis, Pittsburgh, Washington, D.C., Richmond, Atlanta, Philadelphia, Detroit, Baltimore, Camden, and other cities and continue at this writing to be urged on school boards and administrators anxious to do the right thing.

John Henrik Clarke's Baseline Essay on Social Studies begins with the proposition that "African scholars are the final authority on Africa." Egypt, he continues, "gave birth to what later became known as Western civilization, long before the greatness of Greece and Rome." "Great civilizations" existed throughout Africa, where "great kings" ruled "in might and wisdom over vast empires." After Egypt declined, magnificent empires arose in West Africa, in Ghana, Mali, Songhay—all marked by the brilliance and enlightenment of their administration and the high quality of their libraries and universities. Then Moorish invaders from the north plundered the black empires and sent West Africa into decline. European slave traders thereafter invented "fantastic tales of savagery about Africans" so that the slave trade would appear an act of Christian charity. Clarke concedes that slavery existed in West Africa before the Europeans arrived, but it was, he suggests, a humane and kindly servitude. The subsequent deterioration of Africa was caused by "the greed and imperialistic goals of the European nations."

Other Baseline Essays argue in a similar vein that Africa was the birthplace of science, mathematics, philosophy, medicine, and art, and that Europe stole its civilization from Africa and then engaged in "malicious misrepresentation of African society and people . . . to support the enormous profitability of slavery." "It was not done by accident," adds Leonard Jeffries. "It was done as part of a conspiracy to prevent us from having a unified experience." The coordinator of multicultural/multi-ethnic education in Portland even says that Napoleon personally shot off the nose of the Sphinx so that the Sphinx would not be recognized as African.

Like other excluded groups before them, black Americans invoke supposed past glories to compensate for real past and present injustices. Because their exclusion has been more tragic and terrible than that of white immigrants, their quest for self-affirmation is more intense and passionate. In seeking to impose Afrocentric curricula on public schools, for example, they go further than their white predecessors. And belated recognition by white America of the wrongs so viciously inflicted on black Americans has created the phenomenon of white guilt—not a bad thing in many respects, but still a vulnerability that invites cynical black exploitation and manipulation.

The black American predicament is another variation on the familiar theme of nationalism. No American scholar has written more fondly about the Arab quest for identity or has more sharply accused the West of imperialism and racism than the Palestinian-American Edward W. Said of Columbia. Yet Said sees in his beloved Arab Middle East the pathos of "an

aggrieved and unfulfilled nationalism, beset with conspiracies." He warns against "the provincial and self-pitying posture that argues that a largely fictional and monolithic West disdains us. . . . There are many Wests, some antagonistic, some not." He warns too against "thinkers who want to start from scratch and zealously, not to say furiously, take things back to some pure, sacred origin. This has given all sorts of pathologies time and space enough to take hold." Serious black scholars see the black predicament with similar clarity.

History as a weapon is an abuse of history. The high purpose of history is not the presentation of self nor the vindication of identity but the recognition of complexity and the search for knowledge. "We need odes not to blood and mythology or uprooted, mourned or dead plants," writes Said, "but to living creatures and actual situations."

3

☆☆☆☆

The Battle of the Schools

There is nothing more natural than for black Americans, as wounded racial groups have done through history, to assert pride and claim identity and, because black wounds are so much deeper than white, to do so with tragic intensity. Nor is there anything more natural than for generous-hearted people, black and white, to go along with Afrocentrism out of a decent sympathy for the insulted and injured of American society and of a decent concern to bind up the wounds. Still, doctrinaire ethnicity in general and the

dogmatic black version in particular raise questions that deserve careful and dispassionate examination.

I

Cultural pluralism is a necessity in an ethnically diversified society. But the motives behind curriculum reform sometimes go beyond the desire for a more honest representation of the past. "Multiculturalism" arises as a reaction against Anglo- or Eurocentrism; but at what point does it pass over into an ethnocentrism of its own? The very word, instead of referring as it should to all cultures, has come to refer only to non-Western, nonwhite cultures. The president of the Modern Language Association even wonders why "we cannot be students of Western culture and multiculturalism at the same time." Can any historian justify the proposition that the five ethnic communities into which the New York state task force wishes to divide the country had equal influence on the development of the United States? Is it a function of schools to teach ethnic and racial pride? When does obsession with differences begin to threaten the idea of an overarching American nationality?

I am constrained to feel that the cult of ethnicity in general and the Afrocentric campaign in particular do not bode well either for American education or for the future of the republic. I would like to pose some of the questions that worry me.

Little is harder to talk honestly about in America these days than race. Too many sensitivities are in-

involved, too many opportunities for misunderstanding. I may perhaps be pardoned if I try to make clear where I come from. Both by inheritance and by conviction I believe in the pluralistic approach to the writing and teaching of history. My father was his generation's great champion of social history, of urban history, and immigration history. He was an active member—in the end, the last white member—of the executive council of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and a staunch friend of its director, the noted black historian Carter G. Woodson, and of such other black scholars as Charles Wesley, W. M. Brewer, Rayford W. Logan, Alruthius Taylor, and John Hope Franklin.

As for me, I was for a time a member of the executive council of the *Journal of Negro History*. I wrote in that journal 20 years ago that black history is "essential if we are to know in its majesty and terror the real history of the United States." I believe in the importance of teaching Americans the history of other cultures—East Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, Polynesia. I have been a lifelong advocate of civil rights.

Cultural pluralism is not the issue. Nor is the teaching of Afro-American or African history the issue; of course these are legitimate subjects. The issue is the kind of history that the New York task force, the Portland Baseline essayists, and other Afrocentric ideologues propose for American children. The issue is the teaching of *bad* history under whatever ethnic banner.

One argument for organizing a school curriculum

around Africa is that black Africa is the birthplace of science, philosophy, religion, medicine, technology, of the great achievements that have been wrongly ascribed to Western civilization. But is this in fact true? Many historians and anthropologists regard Mesopotamia as the cradle of civilization; for a recent discussion, see Charles Keith Maisels' *The Emergence of Civilization*. If there were as many Iraqi-Americans as there are black Americans, we would no doubt have a campaign for an Iraqocentric curriculum—a campaign that could mobilize more substantial historical evidence than Afrocentrists have produced. But there aren't enough Iraqi-Americans, and by 1990 they had troubles of their own.

The Afrocentrist case rests largely on the proposition that ancient Egypt was essentially a black African country. I am far from being an expert on Egyptian history, but neither, one must add, are the educators and psychologists who push Afrocentrism. A book they often cite is Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, a vigorous effort by a Cornell professor to document Egyptian influence on ancient Greece. In fact Bernal makes no very strong claims about Egyptian pigmentation; but, citing Herodotus, he does argue that several Egyptian dynasties "were made up of pharaohs whom one can usefully call black."

Frank M. Snowden Jr., the distinguished black classicist at Howard University and author of *Blacks in Antiquity*, is most doubtful about painting ancient Egypt black. Bernal's assumption that Herodotus meant black in the twentieth-century sense is contradicted, Snowden demonstrates, "by Herodotus him-

self and the copious evidence of other classical authors." Frank J. Yurco, an Egyptologist at Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History, after examining the evidence derivable from mummies, paintings, statues, and reliefs, concludes in the *Biblical Archaeological Review* that ancient Egyptians, like their modern descendants, varied in color from the light Mediterranean type to the darker brown of upper Egypt to the still darker shade of the Nubians around Aswan. He adds that ancient Egyptians would have found the question meaningless and wonders at our presumption in assigning "our primitive racial labels" to so impressive a culture.

Yurco's verdict on John Henrik Clarke's Baseline Essay exposition of the Afrocentric case is comprehensive—"a mélange of misinformation, inconsistency [*sic*], outright fallacious information, half-truths, and outdated information . . . virtually valueless as scholarship . . . reads more like a medieval chronicle in parts than like a current survey of history."

The Egyptologist Dr. Miriam Lichtheim is equally dismissive: "I do not wish to waste any of my time refuting the errant [*sic*] nonsense which is being propagated in the American black community about the Egyptians being Nubians and the Nubians being black. The Egyptians were not Nubians, and the original Nubians were not black. Nubia gradually became black because black peoples migrated northward out of central Africa. The 'Nile Valley School' is obviously an attempt by American blacks to provide themselves with an ancient history linked to that of the high civilization of ancient Egypt." "Totally false," says Profes-

sor Afaf Marsot of the Near-East Center of the University of California at Los Angeles. "That's a myth, based on the flimsiest kind of evidence. The Egyptians were a mixed population, as all Mediterranean people are mixed. Every Egyptologist will tell you what I'm telling you."

II

After Egypt, Afrocentrists teach children about the glorious West African emperors, the vast lands they ruled, the civilization they achieved; not, however, about the tyrannous authority they exercised, the ferocity of their wars, the tribal massacres, the squalid lot of the common people, the captives sold into slavery, the complicity with the Atlantic slave trade, the persistence of slavery in Africa after it was abolished in the West.

As for tribalism, the word *tribe* hardly occurs in the Afrocentric lexicon; but who can hope to understand African history without understanding the practices, loyalties, rituals, blood-feuds of tribalism? Black historians of an earlier generation, like Carter Woodson, wrote of the "orgies of war and sacrifice of human beings" in West African societies. That note is not struck in the Afrocentric curriculum.

One can go on indefinitely citing dubious claims Afrocentrist ideologues represent as facts—that Pythagoras and Aristotle, for example, stole their mathematics and philosophy from black scholars in Egypt. But there is no reliable evidence that either Py-

thagoras or Aristotle ever visited Egypt. In the case of Pythagoras, writes Professor L. Pearce Williams, the Cornell historian of science, the Babylonians and Egyptians certainly were acquainted with the Pythagorean relationship, but the Pythagorean theorems, the proof of the relationship, were Hellenic. In the case of Aristotle, the notion that Alexander the Great pillaged the Library of Alexandria on his old tutor's behalf falls before the facts that there was no Alexandria to pillage until Alexander founded the city and that the consensus of classical scholars is that the library was not established until half a century after Alexander and Aristotle died. In any case, ideas can hardly be "stolen"—totally removed from the original owner—like jewels. As Diane Ravitch sensibly asks, how in the world does one "lose knowledge by sharing it"?

The Baseline Essay on science and technology contains biographies of black American scientists, among them Charles R. Drew, who first developed the process for the preservation of blood plasma. In 1950 Drew, grievously injured in an automobile accident in North Carolina, lost quantities of blood. "Not one of several nearby white hospitals," according to the Baseline Essay, "would provide the blood transfusions he so desperately [*sic*] needed, and on the way to a hospital that treated Black people, he died." It is a hell of a story—the inventor of blood-plasma storage dead because racist whites denied him his own invention. Only it is not true. According to the biographical entry for Drew written by the eminent black scholar Rayford Logan of Howard for the *Dictionary of Amer-*

ican Negro Biography, "Conflicting versions to the contrary, Drew received prompt medical attention."

Is it really a good idea to teach minority children myths—at least to teach myths as facts? A reporter for the *Oregonian* describes what is going on these days in Portland classrooms: "[black students] have learned, for example, that Africans visited the Americas long before Columbus did and that Cleopatra was black." Is Afrocentric chauvinism any different from the Irish-American myth-making satirized by John V. Kelleher? Does not this uncritical glorification carry us back to Plato's "noble lies"?

III

The deeper reason for the Afrocentric campaign lies in the theory that the purpose of history in the schools is essentially therapeutic: to build a sense of self-worth among minority children. Eurocentrism, by denying nonwhite children any past in which they can take pride, is held to be the cause of poor academic performance. Race consciousness and group pride are supposed to strengthen a sense of identity and self-respect among nonwhite students.

Everyone is distressed over the state of American education, especially in our cities. Everyone is concerned with the search for remedies, especially remedies that will not require money and increase taxes. Curriculum revision costs little; it appeases militant nonwhite minorities; it relieves guilt feelings among

the white majority. It might even work. Or will it? Does Afrocentrism have much possibility of working even in its own terms?

Will black children really do better in school if they are taught that everything good in the world came out of Africa? This proposition assumes a live connection between black America and Africa, and especially Egypt as Afrocentrism's prime exhibit. But any relationship between Egyptians, whatever color they may have been, and black Americans is exceedingly tenuous.

Black Americans do not trace their roots to Egypt. The great majority of their ancestors came from West Africa, especially the Guinea coast. They were from a variety of tribes and spoke a variety of languages; Professor Ali Mazrui tells us that Africa contains some 850 distinct ethnic and linguistic groups. Any homogeneity among slaves derived not from the African tribe but from the American plantation.

But what about Afrocentricity and the proposition that the black mind works in a genetically different way? May there not be abiding psychological and biological ties to Africa? The "unique status" of black psychology, claims the black psychologist Wade Nobles, derives from "basic African philosophy which dictates the values, customs, attitudes, and behavior of Africans in Africa and the New World." This line of thought has obvious affinities with Léopold Senghor's concept of Negritude, which in its original formulation saw blacks everywhere as genetically endowed with

distinctive human values, psychological makeup, and cultural style. "Emotion is Negro," said Senghor, "as reason is Hellenic."

But unless one is to yield to biological determinism and accept that the possession of black skin creates a unique black mentality and character, it is hard to see what living connection exists between American blacks today and their heterogeneous West African ancestors three centuries ago. And biological determinism—the theory that race determines mentality—is of course just another word for racism. Biological determinism is exactly the theory apologists for slavery used in the American South before the Civil War. It is ironic to hear blacks using the same theory today.

Until very recent times, few black Americans have regarded the African connection as a major theme in their lives. David Walker, in his 1829 *Appeal . . . to the Colored Citizens of the World*, said of America, "This land which we have watered with our *tears* and our *blood* is now our mother country." "No one idea has given rise to more oppression and persecution toward the colored people of this country," wrote the great Frederick Douglass, "than that which makes Africa, not America, their home. It is that wolfish idea that elbows us off the side walk, and denies us the rights of citizenship." When the freedmen after emancipation chose last names, they took not African names but the names of American heroes—Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Clay, Lincoln. "Centuries of residence, centuries of toil, centuries of suffering have made us Americans," a black high-school principal in

Ohio said in 1874. "In language, in civilization, in fears, and in hopes we are Americans."

"Neither my father nor my father's father ever saw Africa," recalled W. E. B. Du Bois, "or knew its meaning or cared overmuch for it." His own black associates in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Du Bois recalled, had a "fierce repugnance toward anything African. . . . They felt themselves Americans, not Africans. They resented and feared any coupling with Africa." Though Du Bois himself spent his last years in West Africa, he had earlier dismissed the African connection: "Once for all, let us realize that we are Americans, that we were brought here with the earliest settlers and that the very sort of civilization from which we came made the complete absorption of Western modes and customs imperative if we were to survive all; in brief, *there is nothing so indigenous, so completely 'made in America' as we.*"

From time to time, black leaders, notably Martin Delany in the mid-nineteenth century and Marcus Garvey in the 1920s, excited passing interest in Africa. But Delany's campaign was derailed by the Civil War, and Garvey was a Jamaican who developed his back-to-Africa vision in England; his American influence was short-lived. Mussolini's attack on Ethiopia in 1935 set off another spasm of interest, again short-lived.

I recall the 1956 presidential campaign. Adlai Stevenson, for whom I was working, had a weak record on civil rights in America but a strong record on nationalism in Africa. I suggested to a group of sympathetic black leaders that maybe if Stevenson talked to

black audiences about Africa for the Africans, he could make up for his deficiencies on civil rights. My friends laughed and said that American blacks couldn't care less about Africa.

"Nor can the American Negro," wrote Abram L. Harris, the radical black economist, "be considered in any logical way African." The black educator Horace Mann Bond spoke in 1959 of "the American Negro's traditional aversion to Africa and things African." In 1964 the sociologist Milton Gordon wrote about black Americans, "Their sense of identification with ancestral African national cultures is virtually nonexistent." "The Negro is an American," Martin Luther King Jr. told Robert Penn Warren. "We know nothing of Africa."

Countee Cullen's poem sums it up:

What is Africa to me:
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?

*One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?*

IV

Obviously attitudes toward Africa have changed markedly in the last 25 years. But American Afrocentrism is really a case of what the English historian Eric Hobsbawm calls "the invention of tradition." Alex Haley's compelling *Roots* helped create an audience for the tradition—though, as Ishmael Reed later observed, if Haley had traced his father's rather than his mother's bloodline, "he would have traveled 12 generations back to, not Gambia, but *Ireland*."

The great stimulus was less the civil rights revolution, which had rushed along without benefit of Afrocentrism, than it was the pride generated by the appearance of independent African states—for many American blacks a proof of racial virility, as the establishment of Israel was for many American Jews. The analogy is incomplete. Where Jewish-Americans can (or could until recently) look with pride on the achievements of Israel, African-Americans, hard put to find much to admire in contemporary Liberia or Uganda or Ghana, must instead seek moments of glory in the dim past.

The glorification of the African past was accompanied by a campaign to replace Anglo "slave" names with African names, to wear African costumes, to replicate African rituals. LeRoi Jones, who had said in 1962 that "history for the Negro, before America, must remain an emotional abstraction," now saw Africa more concretely and changed his name to

Amiri Baraka. Arthur Smith became Molefi Kete Asante and called on others to embrace African names: "only such a name reflects our consciousness."

At Asa Hilliard's conference "Infusion of African and African-American Content in the School Curriculum," John Henrik Clarke was honored by the Ashanti Enstoolment ceremony: first, the blowing of a shell-horn and the beating of drums, then the lowering of Clarke three times onto the seat of respect. "Five bare-chested men in sashes, with gold bangles around their heads, paraded in," reports Andrew Sullivan in *The New Republic*, "carrying a vast yellow parasol topped by a small ivory elephant."

In another session Abena Walker said that Afrocentric education in the District of Columbia would lean heavily on ritual, music, and mantras; children would "learn through rhythm and rapping." Wade Nobles, dressed in a lilac-blue robe, carried to the podium a fetish to ward off evil and observed the African custom of seeking the permission of elders before beginning to speak. "When we adopt other people's theories," he proceeded to say, "we are like Frankenstein [he meant Frankenstein's monster] doing other people's wills. It's like someone drinking some good stuff, vomiting it, and then we have to catch the vomit and drink it ourselves. . . . Don't become the vomit-drinkers!"

Surely there is something a little sad about all this—quite beyond the vulgar outburst that dismisses the European intellectual heritage as vomit. There is little evidence, however, that such invention of tradition is much more than the pastime of a few angry,

ambitious, and perhaps despairing zealots and hustlers. Their impact is greater on the guilt of whites than on the common sense of the black community.

The Africanization of black Americans has not got very far. Perhaps this is because, as the black historian Nathan Huggins has written, "An Afro-American and the grandson of a Polish immigrant will be able to take more for granted between themselves than the former could with a Nigerian or the latter with a Warsaw worker." As even Asante concedes, when black Americans visit Africa, Africans perceive them as plain Americans and hardly as African at all.

Anyone who knows anything about Africa, the black columnist William Raspberry of *The Washington Post* has written, knows that there is no single "African" culture from which black Americans are descended. "While some Africans were establishing a university at Timbuktu, others were engaged in slavery or tribal warfare or cannibalism. Some Africans were monotheists, while others were animists. As with their European counterparts, some were promoting brilliant philosophies, while others were savages." As for the Afrocentric curriculum, Raspberry adds, it is a "questionable assumption that black children, with only the vaguest notions of their African ancestry, can be inculcated with African culture more easily than the American culture to which they are daily exposed."

The fate of the campaign to replace "black" with "African-American" is instructive. "To be called black," Jesse Jackson has said, "is baseless. . . . To be called African-American has cultural integrity." The

term *Afro-American* has indeed been used intermittently in the United States since the 1850s, but it has never quite caught on, and black Americans are not rushing to embrace the hyphen now. A *Washington Post*-ABC poll in 1990 showed 66 percent favoring "black" over "African-American"; a 1991 survey by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a research organization specializing in black issues, found the vote 72 percent to 15 percent in favor of "black."

V

Even if black America had a spontaneous and authentic relationship with Africa, would learning about Africa improve the self-esteem of black children?

The New York curricular-revision task force claims that the monocultural Eurocentric bias has "a terribly damaging effect on the psyche of young people of African, Asian, Latino, and Native American descent." The idea that Europe has produced one homogeneous culture seems rather weird. What is so "monocultural" about the wild mix of people from Reykjavik to Athens and from Lisbon to Omsk? Can Henry Adams and the person he once described as "a furtive Yacoob or Ysaac still reeking of the Ghetto, snarling a weird Yiddish to the officers of the customs" be usefully regarded as products of a single culture? Churchill and Hitler, St. Francis and Machiavelli, Pericles and Dracula—monocultural?

In any event, the task-force report vouchsafes no proof for the assertion that a Eurocentric bias wrecks

the psyches of minority children. So far as I can find out, there is no scientific study showing any correlation between ethnic-studies programs and the self-esteem of ethnic groups. Asked whether the Afrocentric curriculum would improve the performance of minority children, even Asa Hilliard sounds uncertain: "I don't know that anyone has done the research to be able to say, other than by impression and opinion, what's going to happen."

The theory is that immersion in the history of one's own group will overcome feelings of racial inferiority both by instilling pride in past ethnic accomplishments and by providing ethnic role models to inspire future performance. Telling black children how marvelous old Africa was will make them work harder and do better. But does study of the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome improve the academic record of Greek-American and Italian-American children? Not so that anyone has noticed. Why is it likely to help black children, who are removed from their geographical origins not by 50 years but by 300?

Nor does the absence of historical role models seem to have handicapped two other groups in American society—Jewish-Americans and Asian-Americans. Nor are there Semitocentric or Asiatic public-school curricula glorifying the civilization of their ancestors. Yet Jewish-Americans and even more particularly Asian-Americans—3 percent of the population, 30 percent of the students at Berkeley—have academic success out of proportion to their numbers in the population.

After the original and immoderate task force re-

port in New York, the Commissioner of Education appointed a new committee that, in due course, produced a report a good deal more moderate in its argument but still somewhat divisive in its implications. Students, the report recommended, should be "continually" encouraged to ask themselves what their cultural heritage is, why they should be proud of it, "why should I develop an understanding of and respect for my own culture(s), language(s), religion, and national origin(s)." But would it not be more appropriate for students to be "continually" encouraged to understand the American culture in which they are growing up and to prepare for an active role in shaping that culture? Should public education strengthen and perpetuate separate ethnic and racial subcultures? or should it not seek to make our young boys and girls contributors to a common American culture?

One senses a certain inauthenticity in saddling public schools with the mission of convincing children of the beauties of their particular ethnic origins. The ethnic subcultures, if they had genuine vitality, would be sufficiently instilled in children by family, church and community. It is surely not the office of the public school to promote artificial ethnic chauvinism.

VI

< Why does anyone suppose that pride and inspiration are available only from people of the same ethnicity? Can only relatives be role models? Plainly this is not the case. At the age of 12, Frederick Douglass encour-

tered a book entitled *The Columbian Orator* containing speeches by Burke, Sheridan, Pitt, and Fox. "Every opportunity I got," Douglass later said, "I used to read this book." The orations "gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance. . . . What I got from Sheridan was a bold denunciation of slavery and a powerful vindication of human rights. The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts." Douglass did not find the fact that the orators were white an insuperable obstacle.

Nor did W. E. B. Du Bois shrink from contact with the Eurocentric tradition. "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. . . . I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the veil."

Or hear Ralph Ellison: "In Macon County, Alabama, I read Marx, Freud, T. S. Eliot, Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Hemingway. Books which seldom, if ever, mentioned Negroes were to release me from whatever 'segregated' idea I might have had of my human possibilities." He was freed, Ellison continued, not by the example of Richard Wright and other black writers but by artists who offered a broader sense of life and possibility. "It requires real poverty of the imagination to think that this can come to a Negro only through the example of other Negroes." As he added many years later, when the black writer

Charles Johnson won the National Book Award for *Middle Passage*, "You don't write out of your skin, for God's sake, you write out of your imagination."

When Sterling Brown, Arthur P. Davis, and Ulysses Lee brought out their influential anthology of black writing, *The Negro Caravan*, in 1941, they disclaimed the notion that black writing falls "into a unique cultural pattern. . . . Many contemporary Negro writers are closer to O. Henry, Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Waldo Frank, Ernest Hemingway, and John Steinbeck than to each other. The bonds of literary tradition seem to be stronger than race."

Martin Luther King Jr. did pretty well with Thoreau, Gandhi, and Reinhold Niebuhr as models—and remember, after all, whom King (and his father) were named for. The record hardly shows that "Eurocentric" education had such a terribly damaging effect on the psyche of great black Americans. Why deny it to black children today? Why not dwell with Du Bois above the veil? Is Lincoln to be a hero only for those of English ancestry? Jackson only for Scotch-Irish? Douglass only for blacks? Great artists, thinkers, leaders are the possession not just of their own racial clan but of all humanity.

As for self-esteem, is this really the product of ethnic role models and fantasies of a glorious past? or does it not result from the belief in oneself that springs from achievement, from personal rather than from racial pride? Cohesive Asian-American and Jewish-American families instill in their children a sense of self-respect and a determination to work hard. For

historical reasons, black families are often less cohesive, and in consequence many black kids often move into a mistrustful world with low self-worth and little self-confidence. Hearing about Africa won't change that.

VII

The use of history as therapy means the corruption of history as history. All major races, cultures, nations have committed crimes, atrocities, horrors at one time or another. Every civilization has skeletons in its closet. Honest history calls for the unexpurgated record. How much would a full account of African despotism, massacre, and slavery increase the self-esteem of black students? Yet what kind of history do you have if you leave out all the bad things?

Even if history is sanitized in order to make people feel good, there is no evidence that feel-good history promotes ethnic self-esteem and equips students to grapple with their lives. Afrocentric education, on the contrary, will make black children, as William Raspberry has written, "less competent in the culture in which they have to compete." After all, what good will it do young black Americans to take African names, wear African costumes, and replicate African rituals, to learn by music and mantras, rhythm and rapping, to reject standard English, to hear that because their minds work differently a first-class education is not for them? Will such training help them to understand democracy better? Help them to fit better

into American life? "General Powell did not reach his present post," Jacques Barzun reminds us, "by believing that Black English was sufficient for the career he wanted to pursue."

Indeed, it is hard to imagine any form of education more likely than Afrocentrism to have a "terribly damaging effect on the psyche." The best way to keep a people down is to deny them the means of improvement and achievement and cut them off from the opportunities of the national life. If some Kleagle of the Ku Klux Klan wanted to devise an educational curriculum for the specific purpose of handicapping and disabling black Americans, he would not be likely to come up with anything more diabolically effective than Afrocentrism.

Moreover, will it increase their self-esteem when black children grow up and learn that many of the things the Afrocentrists taught them are not true? Black scholars have tried for years to rescue black history from chauvinistic hyperbole. A. A. Schomburg, the noted archivist of black history, expressed his scorn long ago for those who "glibly tried to prove that half of the world's geniuses have been Negroes and to trace the pedigree of nineteenth-century Americans from the Queen of Sheba."

The black sociologist Orlando Patterson writes with similar scorn of black educators who "head for the civilizational big-time: to Carthage and Egypt and Nubia and the rest of the 'great' civilizations of ancient North Africa. . . . The role of the Black historian is to get the Black man back into the wonderful 'birth of civilization' story, to prove that white history has

been a big lie, that the Black man . . . was right there in all the major events of 'world history.'" Patterson calls it the three P's approach: black history as princes, pyramids, and pageantry.

The dean of black historians in America today is John Hope Franklin. "While a black scholar," Franklin writes, "has a clear responsibility to join in improving the society in which he lives, he must understand the difference between hard-hitting advocacy on the one hand and the highest standards of scholarship on the other." Serious black scholars like Henry Louis Gates Jr., chairman of Afro-American studies at Harvard, regard Afrocentricity with skepticism. "I don't see any of those things as being peculiar to African-Americans. They sound like very vague attributes to me, and all kinds of cultures and societies have those same values. . . . I am certainly not in the same camp as Molefi Asante and all these guys."

"These guys" are advocates not of cultural pluralism but of black ethnocentrism. Nor do they make much effort to disguise political motives. Asa Hilliard deals with scholarly critics not by responding to their criticisms but by calling any attack on the Afrocentric curriculum "an attack on the study of African people generally." Defending the New York task-force report, one of its authors called the proposed curricular revision "a powerful tool of cultural and political empowerment. I see a clear relationship in the effort to keep us weak and the recognition that we [the non-whites] will be the majority in the 21st century."

Academia has its Al Sharptons too. It is notable how few respected black scholars attended Hilliard's

1990 convention, "The Infusion of African and African American Content in the School Curriculum." The excesses of Afrocentrism are now threatening to discredit the whole field of African-American studies.

VIII

"Once ethnic pride and self-esteem become the criterion for teaching history," Diane Ravitch points out, "certain things cannot be taught." Skeletons must stay in the closet lest outing displease descendants.

No history curriculum in the country is more carefully wrought and better balanced in its cultural pluralism than California's. But hearings before the State Board of Education show what happens when ethnicity is unleashed at the expense of scholarship. At issue were textbooks responsive to the new curriculum. Polish-Americans demanded that any reference to Hitler's holocaust be accompanied by accounts of equivalent genocide suffered by Polish Christians. Armenian-Americans sought coverage of Turkish massacres; Turkish-Americans objected. Though black historians testified that the treatment of black history was exemplary, Afrocentrists said the schoolbooks would lead to "textbook genocide." Moslems complained that an illustration of an Islamic warrior with a raised scimitar stereotyped Moslems as "terrorists."

"One group after another," Ravitch recalls, "insisted that its forebears had suffered more than anyone else in history." American Indians, Hispanics, Chinese-Americans, homosexuals, born-again Chris-

tian fundamentalists, atheists—all protested that the schoolbooks had not gone far enough in celebrating their particular cultures or viewpoints. "The single theme that persistently ran through the hearings," Ravitch writes, "was that the critics did not want anything taught if it offended members of their group; whatever was taught, many claimed, must have a positive effect on the self-esteem or pride of their group. . . . The only villains in the history-for-self-esteem movement . . . are white males, who thus far have no spokesmen."

In New York the curriculum guide for 11th-grade American history tells students that there were three "foundations" for the Constitution: the European Enlightenment, the "Haudenosaunee political system," and the antecedent colonial experience. Only the Haudenosaunee political system receives explanatory subheadings: "a. Influence upon colonial leadership and European intellectuals (Locke, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau); b. Impact on Albany Plan of Union, Articles of Confederation, and U. S. Constitution."

How many experts on the American Constitution would endorse this stirring tribute to the "Haudenosaunee political system"? How many have heard of that system? Whatever influence the Iroquois confederation may have had on the framers of the Constitution was marginal; on European intellectuals it was marginal to the point of invisibility. No other state curriculum offers this analysis of the making of the Constitution. But then no other state has so effective an Iroquois lobby.

The debate over the New York history curricu-

every history book. Now we're getting, "The Hispanics are warm and joyous and have brought such wonder into our lives," you know, and before them the Jews, and before them the blacks. And the women. I mean, cut it out!"

Let us by all means teach black history, African history, women's history, Hispanic history, Asian history. But let us teach them as history, not as filio-distic commemoration. The purpose of history is to promote not group self-esteem, but understanding of the world and the past, dispassionate analysis, judgment, and perspective, respect for divergent cultures and traditions, and unflinching protection for those unifying ideas of tolerance, democracy, and human rights that make free historical inquiry possible.

lum produced thoughtful reactions from the state's history teachers. History, one wrote, "should not be a vehicle for pleasing or appeasing any social group, nor should teachers act as public-relations counselors for a cause. Writing history requires a critical analysis of a topic and not a laudatory exposition of its exploits." The Department of History at the State University of New York College at Brockport summed the question up in a circular letter to departments of history throughout the state: "We insist that the curriculum not be used as an instrument that is primarily designed to redress past injustices, however real. It is, rather, a tool with which to pursue the truths about our common past."

President Franklyn Jenifer of Howard University, while saying that "historical black institutions" like his own have a responsibility to teach young people about their particular history and culture, adds, "One has to be very careful when one is talking about public schools. . . . Public schools by their definition are schools that are open to all people, and should be cognizant of the needs of all of the people. . . . There should be no creation of nonexistent history."

When every ethnic and religious group claims a right to approve or veto anything that is taught in public schools, the fatal line is crossed between cultural pluralism and ethnocentrism. An evident casualty is the old idea that whatever our ethnic base, we are all Americans together.

Feel-good history, moreover, is a betrayal of a noble profession. "What I hate," Gore Vidal has well said, "is good citizenship history. That has wrecked