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The Chronicle Review

From the issue dated June 8, 2001

POINT OF VIEW

How Scholars Can Improve History Lessons

By ARNITA JONES

Historians today find themselves in an unusual position. Their field, for many years an ideologically charged battleground, now enjoys bipartisan congressional support. It's time to consider how to make the most of that opportunity.

It began last summer. First, Sen. Joseph Lieberman and some Senate and House colleagues unveiled a resolution decrying the historical illiteracy of the next generation of the nation's citizens. "When we lose the memory of our past, when we lose our understanding of the remarkable individuals, events, and values that have shaped this nation, we are losing much of what it means to be an American," Senator Lieberman warned. He then proceeded to read into the

Congressional

Record

information from a survey by the **American Council of Trustees and Alumni**, which found that more than 80 percent of seniors at 55 highly selective colleges were unable to answer basic questions about the nation's past. The senator also included supportive comments from leaders of such diverse groups as the National Association of Scholars, the National Council for History Education, and the Organization of American Historians, and from Lynne V. Cheney, the former head of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Then, days later, Sen. Robert C. Byrd sat at his desk on the Senate floor and wrote out an amendment to the Senate version of the fiscal-year 2001 appropriations bill for the U.S. Department of Education. His intention: to include \$50-million "... to develop, implement, and strengthen programs to teach American history." The theme resonated with other members of Congress, and the amendment eventually became law.

There was more good news. This spring, Senator Byrd proposed

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another \$100-million for the program for the 2002 fiscal year. Now, with the changing power structure in the Senate, Senator Byrd is in line to be chairman of the Appropriations Committee and is in an even better position to usher his proposal through the committee. Meanwhile, the Education Department has just announced the rules for the first round of grants in the 2001 Teaching American History Grant Program.

Naturally, historians are enthusiastic. Even \$50-million is, after all, far beyond the level of any other federal grant-making program to support history teaching. Indeed, it is nearly half as much as the entire budget for the current year for the National Endowment for the Humanities, a budget that has remained largely flat for several years. Nor can any of us who are historians remember a time when the discipline of history has been singled out for special programming at the Department of Education.

The language in the report on the 2001 appropriations bill raised some concerns, however, because it specified that all money go to "local education agencies," which would make grants to schools. There were no provisions for projects to be initiated or financed through colleges, universities, historical societies, or other such institutions. Moreover, the appropriations language spoke only to improving teaching, not to improving the knowledge and expertise of teachers, leaving the possibility open that the program might limit its focus to teaching strategies or curriculum development.

That should serve as a warning that college and university historians haven't made enough of a case for what they have to offer the nation's schools. More historians need to do what only some have done so far: pay more than lip service to playing a role in the education of elementary- and secondary-school teachers. In doing so, we might do well to take a page from our colleagues in the sciences.

For more than a decade, leaders in science education have collected and reported data that indicate the need for intervention. They have pointed out that there are serious "pipeline" issues: a decline in the number of undergraduates receiving degrees in science and mathematics and a decrease in the percentage of doctorate recipients in those fields who are likely to remain in the United States to work as our next generation of scientists and engineers. How, they have asked

legislators, can the United States maintain leadership in science and technology without an adequate pool of highly trained scientists and engineers, and how will we replace the large numbers of math and science teachers who will retire over the next several years? Such advocacy has been successful. The National Science Foundation's budget has included substantial funds for elementary and secondary education in the 1990's, and President Bush's first budget request suggests that funds will only grow. The president proposes more than \$365-million for the N.S.F.'s precollegiate-education programs in the 2002 fiscal year, a hefty increase over funds in the 2001 fiscal year.

One lesson is that we need good data about the pipeline for history teachers. We know that many teachers will retire in the coming decade and that increasing enrollments in many school districts will require an influx of newly trained teachers. College and university historians need to take responsibility for helping to train those teachers, and, to do so, they will have to have sound information on which to plan programs. We are lucky that the current Congress sees the need for history teachers; let's provide the background to ensure continued support.

Another lesson from the scientists: the value of partnerships across all educational levels. More than half of the dollars for science education in President Bush's 2002 budget request for the N.S.F. are to be used for his Math and Science Partnership Initiative, which is meant to encourage states and higher-education institutions -- including community colleges -- to form alliances with schools to help raise math and science standards for students and provide professional development for teachers.

Thanks to Senator Byrd, we now have the opportunity to make a case for similar partnerships in history. We can start by pointing out that historians -- at all educational levels -- have been working on reforming history education for many years. And they know what works.

History departments at dozens of colleges and universities, from California State University at Long Beach to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, have built productive relationships with local teachers, providing workshops and seminars, helping to develop classroom materials and lesson plans (often based on scholarly research by the teachers), and participating in the training and supervision of student teachers. Some national organizations are encouraging similar partnerships. A number of

historians, for example, are involved with the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation's Schools and Scholars initiative, which links school and college faculty members in individual school districts. Since 1980, many more scholars have been involved in National History Day, which offers local, state, and national competitions to spur junior-high and high-school students to learn history by engaging in their own scholarly research.

One of the best ways to make our case will be to respond to the Department of Education's call for proposals. It is important, and gratifying, that the Education Department's announcement says that its grants will "assist local educational agencies, in partnership with entities that have extensive content expertise." That's not going to be easy: With program rules just announced in the *Federal*

Register and posted on the Department of Education's Web site (<http://www.ed.gov/>), proposals will have to be developed in a very short period of time -- by July 23 -- because the funds will have to be awarded by September 30, the end of the federal government's fiscal year.

Beyond that, we also need to consider what can make more such partnerships happen. That will involve seeking out colleagues in schools of education and school districts; despite the many examples of such partnerships, they still reach only a fraction of the teachers of the country's history students. It will mean being sensitive to the needs of precollegiate teachers and the pressures under which they work; too often, college faculty members have tended to approach partnerships with schools with a view more to their own research specialties than to the needs of schoolteachers. And it will require college history departments to think hard about how such work by their faculty members fits into the professional reward system; to date, few departments have been willing to reward faculty members who devote professional time to such activities.

Senator Byrd means it when he extols the value of education and history. Raised by what he has described as poor but honest and hardworking foster parents, he struggled and failed to get a college education as a young man and only managed to complete law school at night. Not until 1963, when he was 45 and already a member of the Senate, did he graduate from American University's Washington College of Law. A great reader of history, he has, according to Senate staff members,

also taught himself to become a researcher and writer of history, and he regularly reads into the record of the Senate his essays on its history, as well as historical notes on the national and international context in which it does its work.

History has been a way for the senator to transcend the particular limitations of his upbringing and become a productive citizen and leader in the Congress. It's clear he sincerely wants to share the capacity for transformation that an understanding of history can bring with the next generation of Americans. Let us help him. The stakes are high.

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