

Schools of the Americas

Don LaCoss

In *The Underground History of American Education*, the renegade educator John Taylor Gatto traces the genealogy of compulsory public-school education in the US back to the system of pedagogy created in the nineteenth-century northern European state of Prussia. Prussia is often seen by historians as the architect of German nationalist unification; after the Napoleonic invasion of 1806, the Prussian military aristocracy decided that it needed to reform education in that kingdom so that new, centralized schools could produce “obedient soldiers to the army; obedient workers for mines, factories, and farms; well-subordinated civil servants, trained in their function; well-subordinated clerks for industry; citizens who thought alike on most issues; and national uniformity in thought, word, and deed.” The Prussian education model became heavily geared toward patriotism and civic virtue after the near-success of the Revolution of 1848; the ruling class in Prussia wanted to insure that the contagion of revolutionary ideas was not being picked up in the schools.

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 have triggered a similar response in the US to the one in Prussia that was precipitated by Napoleon’s invasion and the uprisings of 1848. One of the most influential of these education reformers is Chester E. Finn, Jr. Finn is an advisor to Bush on the ghastly “No Child Left Behind” project and on matters of curriculum and public school privatization. Finn presently runs the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, an organization concerned with funding rightist and reactionary efforts to overhaul the elementary and secondary public school system in the US. One of their fundamental efforts is to create and enforce “a solid core curriculum” that includes lessons on civics, citizenship, character building, and patriotism.

This year, the Foundation targeted the way that “controversial episodes in US history” (notably the September 11th attacks and the 2003 invasion of Iraq) are taught in K-12 classrooms. To aid elementary and secondary school teachers in this endeavor, the Fordham Foundation offers many free materials for classroom use, such as the 108-page booklet of 29 essays called *Terrorists, Despots and Democracy: What Our Children Need to Know*. In the introduction to *Terrorists, Despots and Democracy*, Finn explains that the essay collection is meant as “an antidote to some of the dubious advice and pernicious ideas that are all too widespread within the education field” about 9/11 and Iraq spread by extremist organizations like the National Education Association, the American Red Cross, and PBS. To stave off the dangers wrought by K-12 teachers who do not “love our country and the ideals for which it stands,” *Terrorists, Despots and Democracy* offers up plenty of the Fordham Foundation’s ready-to-xerox gospel truths.

Some of the choice morsels in this booklet include Victor Davis Hanson’s “Preserving America, Man’s Greatest Hope”; an odd article on “intellectual freedom” by Lynne Cheney (the US vice-president’s wife); a piece on the importance of teaching the differences between right and wrong by gambling addict and chairman of the pro-war pressure group Americans for Victory Over Terrorism William J. Bennett; and an argument in favor of “The Doctrine of Pre-Emption” by Stanley Kurtz, formerly the director of the Moshe Dayan Center (!!) for Middle Eastern Studies at Tel Aviv University and an especially truculent neo-conservative editor for *The National Review*. The booklet concludes with a bibliography of “recommended resources” that includes items like Michael Novak’s *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, Thomas G. West’s patriotically-correct and historically inaccurate *Vindicating the Founders: Race, Sex, Class and Justice in the Origins of America*, and the URL for “a wealth of information on the

Middle East” assembled by the Zionist war-monger and Bush’s personally selected chairman for the US Institute of Peace, Daniel Pipes. Finally, under the section of the bibliography list called “Character Development,” the Fordham Foundation recommends a biographical polemic by the 1950s HUAC show-trial superstar and ratfink Whitaker Chambers, and, even weirder, a website listing for the “American Girls Collection,” a ludicrously expensive doll and toy catalog.

The Fordham Foundation is just one of the many far rightist think-tanks and non-governmental (or so they claim) organizations that are exploiting the collapse of US public school funding. By offering free classroom materials and re-education camp teacher-training seminars, they have developed a means for delivering a venomously nationalist ideological payload under the guise of pedagogy. Thanks to the standardized strait-jackets of “No Child Left Behind” performance testing, it may be only a matter of time before indoctrination into the tenets of American exceptionalism replaces social studies education in elementary and high school classrooms.

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