

Full Committee hearing on Intellectual Diversity

Bill Number: Oversight

Hearing Date: September 24, 2003 - 10:00 AM

Witness:

Robert Hagopian

Teacher, Scotts Valley Middle School

Scotts Valley, CA

Testimony:

Mr. Chairman, Committee Members, and Staff:

I am indeed honored and grateful to have this opportunity to testify on the quality of history textbooks in our schools. Because I have been so involved in their selection and use over my 32-year teaching career and because I recognize their utility in history instruction, I applaud your interest. Today I find it necessary to describe the classroom context within which these books are used as I share my textbook selection experience. In the world of the ideal classroom, the course offering is history, not social studies. Even E. B. White's adventuresome mouse, Stuart Little knew this. When along his wayward journey Stuart was pressed into service as a substitute teacher, he offered comments to the students as they ran through their subjects. When the students brought up social studies, Stuart Little said, "Never heard of them." By implication, he—and his author—had studied history, the well-told story that aims to be comprehensive as it imparts civic literacy and public memory. Engaged in this real-world endeavor, students advance their reading, writing, public speaking, and reasoned judgment capabilities. Studying history, after all, is self-rewarding: the more you know, the more you want to know.

This ideal classroom is staffed by a HISTORY teacher. He or she has read and written history, broadly and deeply. History occupies a place of importance in his or her life, and, because of this, the teacher transmits a contagious enthusiasm about events, personalities, words, acts, deeds, the broad sweep—interwoven in nature—and the controversial aspect of this discipline. Activity varies: reenactment, essay writing, speeches, debates, document annotation, biographies, mapping, time-lining, researching, polling, interviewing, and comprehensive exams that help establish a platform of understanding. Exchange between students and teacher is as lively as the links between past and present are profound. In this saturated environment, students produce history as well as study it. They recognize history's uses and grow to realize that the subject offers invaluable background for any life endeavor. Careful reading and notation of understanding forms a basis for all the activity and outcomes I mention. These habits are conspicuous in the ideal history classroom.

We know that across the United States, high praise is in order for classrooms that match this description or whose scope and ambition exceed it. We also know that in too many classrooms something called social studies is offered, of which history is one little self-contained part, like one of many dishes on a buffet table. Sadly we know that too many history classrooms are staffed by teachers with too little background in or enthusiasm for the subject. We also know that in too many classrooms too much—and sometimes all—instruction is from the textbook, a condition captured in an old cartoon in which the teacher is saying to the class, "Today is February 5, so we must be on page 403."

Alarming, too, is something else of which we are aware: Careful reading and notation, as textbook expert Gilbert Sewell has observed, is a fast disappearing habit. Not surprisingly

the National Assessment of Educational Progress continues to show low student achievement in history and civics.

However dismal and discouraging these plain realities may be, I am heartened—and, I must say, energized—by great efforts I have seen over the past decade and a half to revitalize history study in the United States. The tremendous interest in pre-collegiate history instruction of numerous academic historians, great teachers in their own right, is so encouraging. Whether in those wonderful Gilder-Lehrman or National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminars, those insightful events sponsored by the National Council for History Education, those ambitious Teaching Grants in American History colloquia, or the ongoing enrichment provided by History Channel and PBS broadcasts and Ken Burns films, the growing partnerships of interested teachers, academic and park-service historians and others is casting a widening ray of light over history study in our nation. I have been so supported, as well, by my home state of California's History Framework. First published in 1988 and largely renewed with updates in 1997, this great guide offers a well articulated and planned K-12 curriculum, specifying content at all levels through its accompanying grade-level standards. For me my state's history framework has served as a bulwark against efforts and educational fads that otherwise might have succeeded at de-emphasizing history content.

Please make one more addition to that ideal history classroom I have been describing. Place there for each student a truly distinguished textbook. Its lively, sustained narrative, conveys to the learner through lean, vigorous prose, and peppery detail so telling that readers are transported to the times and sites of great events, crucial decisions, and legacies of all kinds. The author often lets history's eyewitnesses and documents of an era tell the story. The textbook's illustrative material tends toward original art, portraits, documentary photographs, related maps, and artifacts. And only modest space is given over to chapter reviews. The ideal book offers a clear historical chronology, but it presents our story in a seamless fashion. As outstanding as the book may be, students' reading and notation is not the end-all of their study but merely a prelude to historical engagement.

In reality, American students are increasingly issued textbooks that fall embarrassingly short of this ideal. The narration resembles, as David McCullough has noted, an old piano teacher's lament: "I hear you play all the notes, but I hear no music." Often, in the textbooks under my review, the narrative is shrunken, thin in detail, inaccurate in places, and, most bothersome of all, interrupted page after page by panels of poofs, puffs, color bursts, and by TV-screen-shaped, short, quick, get-your-history-on-the-go windows with little narrative in between. The overall format seems attuned to that of the tabloids, television episode sequencing, and, as I have said in other forums, the backs of cereal boxes. Today's history textbooks are increasingly unitized, and that is too bad. After all, the Civil War is a defining, transformative national experience; only in its most artificial sense is it a "unit of study." Books that break something so compelling as the story of American freedom into a series of units that place more emphasis on pedagogy, pre-tests, post-tests, scrambles, and other puzzles do dampen among learners what I believe is a natural ardor for history.

My own experience with California state-adoption and local selection of United States History textbooks for my eighth-grade students extends back though three cycles. I should say right here that I am fortunate to work in a school district that has supported the

text selections that I have made for my grade level. In 1983, I selected from among perhaps a half dozen state-approved texts, *A Proud Nation*. In format and approach, this was a comparatively simple, straightforward textbook. As I set its presentation of nine or ten important historical episodes side by side with the others on the market, I detected a good measure of its author Ernest R. May's vivid prose that had impressed me when I read several of his works in graduate school. I found more attention paid to detail, less to puzzles and games. And when there was some special feature, he developed a full, flavorful, and telling anecdote rather than the kind of fragmentary account often found in the competitors' books.

If *A Proud Nation* was historically meaty, *The Story of America*, which I named for selection in 1990, is even more so. The volume is heavy, perhaps weighing six pounds. So when I assign the book to my students, I ask them to keep them at home in a clean well-lighted place ready for use. And use the book we do. The students return from nightly readings with careful reading notes, or identifications, that we work toward improving throughout the year. While daunting at first for some of the students, most grow accustomed to the demands of the reading. No textbook is full-blown ideal. However, John A. Garraty's *The Story of America*, with its comprehensive narrative, document basis, rich art and portraiture comes closer to the ideal than any other entry in the last three adoption cycles. In fact, in the subsequent adoption year, 1997, when *Story of America* was replaced and I collected California's new adoptions for consideration, not one of them came even close to my history book gold standard. All in my opinion had embraced the thin, fragmented, distracting pitfalls I have already described.

It seemed to me that several of the new books exhibited another minus: they avoided controversy. And they were far from simple books in format and came with superfluous "kits." These text supplements more often than not amounted to extra puzzles and jumbles rather than documents or photo aids. And these books are absurdly expensive. I recall assembling a group of eighth graders and letting them compare the new books in the textbook sweepstakes according to an ideal-textbook criteria, and I asked them to include Mr. Garraty's book in the comparison. Hands down, they chose *Story of America*.

So, in 1997, I sought out Gilbert Sewell's advice as the time approached to make my textbook selection. Mr. Sewell recognized that with my own history and materials and documents, my students and I would fare just fine through another adoption cycle by purchasing from the publisher's warehouse enough extra copies of *Story of America* to have on hand for students through to 2004.

Back home, another promising school year has begun. Along with teaching duties, I will be involved in another foray into history textbook selection, as we have reached the end of another adoption cycle. I am not aware of any reversal in the book publishers' retreat from quality. Trying to think big the other night, I tried to envision how to precipitate movement along a path toward history textbook excellence. I determined that all it would take is some economic robustness and a governor in just one state who would take one bold step. Buoyed by the diverse efforts to revitalize history instruction I have previously mentioned, this governor would ask history professors at his or her various state university campuses to assemble the brightest, best, most articulate, and most enthusiastic history undergraduates. Then in an act of great foresight, this governor would personally recruit these promising collegians to the state's history classrooms and to careers as

history teachers. The governor would then call the leading school-system educators together and beckon them to in every way make the profession more attractive— attractive enough to divert away the customary traffic flowing to the law, business, and banking schools. History classrooms thus staffed would lead to a demand for better books. If we say we want to strive for the best, I believe we must think big!