

In the Fall of 1990, in response to the proposed revisions of curriculum in New York State, Diane Ravitch and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. prepared a statement issued by the Committee of Scholars in Defense of History. Those signing the statement at the end are listed as they were known on March 15, 1991.

STATEMENT: Of the Committee of Scholars In Defense of History

As scholars, we are gravely concerned about the proposed revision of the State of New York's history curriculum. We invite the attention of our fellow citizens both to the task force report of July 1989 calling for fundamental changes in the state's approach to the teaching of history and to the pending appointment by the Board of Regents of a panel to revise the curriculum along the lines demanded in the report.

The history taught to the children of the state must meet the highest standards of accuracy and integrity. We steadfastly oppose the politicization of history, no matter how worthy the motive. Therefore we have joined together to inform our fellow citizens about what is going on, to monitor the revision process, and to assess the projected changes in the teaching and testing of American and world history.

The situation is as follows. In July 1989 a task force on minorities, appointed by the New York Commissioner of Education, submitted a report to the Board of Regents calling for revision of the history curriculum. The task force did not include a single historian.

The report, a polemical document, viewed division into racial groups as the basic analytical framework for an understanding of American history. It showed no understanding of the integrity of history as an intellectual discipline based on commonly accepted standards of evidence. It saw history rather as a form of social and psychological therapy whose function is to raise the self-esteem of children from minority groups.

The Regents endorsed the report and authorized the revision of the history curriculum by a panel of twenty-one persons. Of this group, six to eight are to be scholars distributed among the seven fields; the panel might well end up with one historian. "Care will be taken," the Regents add, "to ensure that among the active participants will be scholars and teachers who represent the ethnic and cultural groups under consideration" — which sounds like an in-vitation to each group to write, or veto, its own history.

The members of the Committee of Scholars in Defense of History are, we believe, citizens well known for their commitment to equal rights and their rejection of any form of racism in the schools

and in society. We are also united in our belief in a pluralistic interpretation of American history and our support for such shamefully neglected fields as the history of women, of immigration, and of minorities.

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We have an equal commitment to standards of historical scholarship. We condemn the reduction of history to ethnic cheerleading on the demand of pressure groups. And we reject as unfair and insulting the implicit assumption in the task force report that minorities are incapable of absorbing first class education.

We have a further concern. The Commissioner of Education's task force contemptuously dismisses the Western tradition. Recognition of its influence on American culture, the task force declares, has a "terribly damaging effect on the psyche" of children from non-European cultures. No evidence is adduced to support his proposition, and much evidence argues against it.

The Western tradition is the source of the ideas of individual freedom and political democracy to which most of the world now aspires. The West has committed its share of crimes against humanity, but the Western democratic philosophy also contains in its essence the means of exposing crimes and producing reforms. This philosophy has included and empowered people of all nations and races. Little can be more damaging to the psyches of young blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Indians than for the State of New York to tell them that the Western tradition is not for them.

And little can have more damaging effect on the republic than the use of the school system to promote the division of our people into antagonistic racial groups. We are after all a nation — as Walt Whitman said, "a teeming Nation of nations" — and history enables us to understand the bonds of cohesion that make for nationhood and a sense of the common good: *unum e pluribus*.

Thus, because of the way this revisionism has

come about and because historians have thus far been seriously underrepresented in the revision process, we find it necessary to constitute ourselves as a professional review committee to monitor and assess the work of the Commissioner's panel. We will insist that the state history curriculum reflect honest and conscientious scholarship and accurately portray the forging of this nation from the experiences of many different groups and peoples.

The children of New York deserve no less than the best.

Diane Ravitch and Arthur Schlesinger, jr., joined by Thomas Bender, John Morton Blum, James MacGregor Burns, Jerome Bruner, Robert Caro, Kenneth B. Clark, Henry Steele Commager, Carl Degler, David Herbert Donald, Frances Fitzgerald, David L. Garrow, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Eugene Genovese, Henry Graff, Hugh Davis Graham, Paul Hollander, Akira Iriye, Michael Kammen, Stanley N. Katz, William Leuchtenburg, Arthur Link, Hubert G. Locke, Paul MacKendrick, William Manchester, William H. McNeill, Stuart Prall, Richard Sennett, Hans Trefousse, Richard Wade, Sean Wilentz, C. Vann Woodward. ■