

Social Studies

WALTER C. PARKER

U.S. History: The Best Is Back

The high school U.S. history course, sometimes inspired but often not, is getting help. A nonprofit organization of historians, educators, and social scientists is publishing a new, somewhat easier-to-use version of the famed *Public Issues Series*.¹ The original version, developed by Fred Newmann and Donald Oliver and published as the *AEP Public Issues Series*, was among the best known of the "new social studies" curriculums of the 1960s and '70s. Though it won rave reviews from teacher-users and curriculum scholars alike, it went out of print.

The aim of the *Public Issues Series*, as explained by its authors, is:

to help students analyze and discuss persisting human dilemmas related to public issues. We would emphasize that the term *public issues* is not synonymous with current events. By public issues, we mean problems or value dilemmas persisting throughout history and across cultures. The situations of Christian martyrs in Rome, a bureaucrat in Nazi Germany, a slave in 19th century America, or an Ethiopian refugee in Texas in 1988 represent important public issues. We believe that most of the important current events can be clarified by reference to public issues in other places and other times. Thus, all the units in the series suggest parallels between historical illustrations of persisting human dilemmas and present issues in the United States and the world.²

This statement reveals the program's strengths: its clarity; its emphasis on perennial issues that tie current problems to classic tensions faced by people in other eras; the higher-order emphasis on discussion and analysis; the expectation that students grapple with ethical dilemmas and that their judgments on current issues be informed by historical parallels; the global perspective promoted by linking U.S. problems to worldwide concerns. Historians who are convinced that the study of history breeds

judgment³ must appreciate this program's explicit treatment of historical parallels. Moreover, the program engages students in important history, and it's not all presidents and wars. Let's look into it a bit more.

The units in the series, each of which comes with its own student booklet and teacher's guide, deal with issues and events typically covered in U.S. history courses; consequently, teachers are not thrown onto unfamiliar terrain. To date, six units are available: *American Revolution: Crisis of Law and Change*; *Immigration: Pluralism and National Identity*; *The Rise of Organized Labor: Workers, Employers, and the Public Interest*; *The Civil War: Slavery and the Crisis of Union*; *The Progressive Era: The Limits of Reform*; and *The New Deal: Government and the Economy*.

As an example, let's look at the immigration unit. Like the other units, this segment uses primary and secondary sources and fictional accounts, both historical and contemporary. After reading personal accounts of immigrants coming to the U.S. in the late 19th and early 20th century, students

examine the living and working conditions of the families. They then consider whether the immigrants were treated unfairly and, if so, who or what was responsible. Immigration policies, now and then, are compared and contrasted. All the while, students grapple with the following core questions:

1. What has motivated people to pull up roots and undertake a potentially hazardous journey to a place that may—or may not—be more hospitable? Why have so many migrants chosen the United States as a destination?

2. Are immigrants and their descendants treated unfairly or hampered by discrimination? Who is responsible for redressing such problems?

3. What is an American? Have some groups been viewed as more "American" than others? Can immigrants strike a balance between their traditions and the "American Way"?

4. Should the United States still be a refuge for the oppressed? Do we still see ourselves as a nation of immigrants? What should our immigration policy be?⁴

As students work through these questions, they must think critically about broad issues. For example, as they determine who is responsible for solving problems faced by immigrants, they must examine values and beliefs about social responsibility. This exercise, in turn, requires them to distinguish between individual and governmental responsibility. As students grapple with the third question, they must define "American" and the "American Way."

Throughout the unit, students are encouraged to practice stating an issue explicitly, clarifying their position, and using analogies. Consider this sample discussion on "The Children of Immigrants."

Student 1: I guess John Nichols was right to change his name because it was the only way he could get a job teaching English.

Student 2: But wasn't that a concession to those people who are prejudiced against "foreigners"?

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Student 1: Sure it's a concession, but it didn't hurt anyone, and it helped John get ahead.

Student 2: Suppose you were applying for a job and you knew it would help to say you had finished high school, but actually you had dropped out. Would you tell the employer you graduated?

Student 1: That's different because the job may require skills or knowledge you would have only if you had graduated from high school. John had the skills needed to teach English. It was just prejudice that kept him from getting a job before he changed his name.

Student 2: You're saying that changing his name was relatively unimportant—just a ploy to get a job. But John's feelings about himself changed after he changed his name, so I don't think it was such an unimportant action. I want to discuss how giving in to prejudice affects people.⁵

While still only a trend among some of the very best history teachers, the issues-centered approach may very well spread. According to one curriculum scholar, it is an inevitability.⁶ The schools are no longer the sanctuary from real life issues that they once may have been. Drugs, crime, and violence, for example, are becoming common in city schools. It is only a matter of time, he argues, before social forces press teachers to help students grapple rationally with issues. □

¹Social Science Education Consortium, 855 Broadway, Boulder, CO 80302.

²*Immigration: Pluralism and National Identity. Teacher's Guide*, (1989), p. 1.

³Paul Gagnon argues this point in *Democracy's Half-Told Story: What American History Textbooks Should Add*, (1989), (Washington, D.C.: American Federation of Teachers).

⁴*Immigration: Pluralism and National Identity. Teacher's Guide*, (1989), pp. 1-2.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶B.G. Massialas, (September/October 1989), "The Inevitability of Issue-Centered Discourse in the Classroom." *The Social Studies*: 173-175.

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