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## ABSTRACT

Although many pressures have been brought to bear in the social studies curriculum over the past 70 years, the leaders of the country's society have maintained the middle ground. They have ensured that educators remain somewhat conservative in their approach to the social sciences, ensuring that the history of the culture be continually passed on to future generations. Currently, events in small developing countries are having a domino effect which include the developed countries. This paper discusses the role of the social studies today, stating that in some mythical place, in some mythical town in the United States, there lies a Chest of Treasures, which contains all the recorded history of the American colonies and states and their cultures through the present day. The paper asks how a child learns which of the words in the chest truly belong to him/her and will light the torch of freedom. It notes that teachers may use their positions in classrooms to severely slant and damage impressionable first through fifth graders. It contends that it is time to move on from this mythical place and this mythical Chest of Treasures to present-day United States. The paper discusses the Patriot Act of 2001, considering it a suspension of the Bill of Rights. It concludes by discussing William Bennett's "The Educated Child: A Parents Guide from Preschool through Eighth Grade," stating that it provides many useful and solid suggestions for the teaching of history, geography, and economics. (BT)

# Social Studies at the Beginning of the New Millenium: Teach Democratic Ideals, Geography, and History or Is That Objective Outdated?

Paul Wayne De Villier

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## **SOCIAL STUDIES AT THE BEGINNING OF THE NEW MILLENIUM:**

### **Teach Democratic Ideals, Geography and History or Is That Objective Outdated?**

**By Paul Wayne De Villier, November 9, 2002**

The thinking process that was prevalent in mainstream education in the 1920s was that of being able to think in a reflective manner. In the 1930s, a movement began questioning what should be included in the core curriculum post the Great Depression. Was it enough to know about the traditional subjects? Since our country had been devastated by the worst economic depression ever, was it time to include some newer content, possibly involving consumers, such as banking, supply and demand, and basic economics to learn how to budget our assets and expenses? In the 1940s, the educational movement changed to one that involved the life-adjustment education movement as an outgrowth of the World War II to serve returning military service members and the beginning of the baby-boomer generation. Money was easily available through government assistance for low down payment/no down payment housing and education became readily available, at government expense, to those returning veterans. The 1960s and 1970s gave birth to a new type of social studies education program which primarily focused on the critical analysis of public policy. That program wanted to ensure that all citizens of our "body politic" were properly educated in the democratic way of government and of life. The next decade our social scientists jumped up and demanded that reforms be made in the manner in which history, geography and economics was integrated into the core curriculum from the elementary grades through middle schools. Even though all of these pressures have been brought to bear over a seventy-year period in our history, the leaders of our American Society have maintained the middle ground. They have ensured that we remain somewhat conservative in our approach to the social sciences, ensuring that the history of our culture be continually passed on to future generations.

Unfortunately, that traditional approach has become more and more useless in our rapidly changing and interdependent international society. Events that occur in small third world countries are having a domino effect up to include the first world countries. Iraq, Saddam Hussein, Afghanistan, Osama Bin Laden, and Libya with Mohamor Khadaffi are but three examples. Historians, political scientists, and political leaders around the globe view the actions and reactions of these international actors with the utmost of concern. At any moment in time, their individual action may be the match that sets the globe on fire with planetary chaos and war.

The definition that is listed in this question is what I consider to be a strict constructionist view of the goal of social studies (prefer the term "Social Sciences). It is limiting the focus of our educators and other practitioners, to that of teaching only our democratic values, traditions and cultures. The definition does not provide the learner the opportunity to engage in critical and analytical thinking, versus the traditional reflective thinking, and to view how the events in other parts of the world have helped to create the society in which we live today. These past, present and future events are contained in the other sciences that involves our social sciences, that is to study in as scientific a method as possible, the creation, evolution, development and death of past and present civilizations in different parts of our world. That can only occur where history and geography become an integral part of the social sciences core curriculum. Both of these academic areas are viable, interwoven, and interdependent in the fabric of our society. Just as it would become an almost impossible task to remove only the blue threads woven into a seven-color woven area rug, it becomes just as difficult to separate out from the social sciences, disciplines that include historical references, geographical boundaries and disputes, creation of new societies around the world and the types of government these societies choose or have thrust upon them. We would have nothing with which to compare our civic ideals and the founders' beliefs and morals, if it did not include the worldwide view versus the narrow, monocular view.

I would like to convey to the readers what I hold sacred to the role of social scientists, and the responsibilities that society, ours and others' internationally, have laid upon the cartographers, the economists, the geographers, the historians and the political scientists of the United States of America. I convey to you the following story.

In some mythical place, in some mythical town in the United States of America, there lies America's Chest of Treasures. When we open our Chest of Treasures, we are in awe of the contents of this chest. It contains all of the recorded history of the American colonies and states and their cultures through the present day. It also contains the recorded history of other countries and their cultures (as much as they would allow us to gather). Also in the chest are the morals, values and traditions, which are truly American. Those would include the moral beliefs of faith, hope, charity, kindness and a belief in a Supreme Being. The values that we envelope ourselves in can include freedoms, such as speech, assembly and press, liberties, such as the right to bear arms, the right to resist unwarranted searches and penalties against those who would infringe upon our freedoms. The Chest contains a word by word record of the Constitutional Convention, held in the summer of 1776 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, as penned by James Madison using only candlelight every evening in his room at the Inn after the day's events had unfolded. This would ensure that future generations would come to know the truth of our founding. It details the struggles of our Founding Fathers, that against all odds, they could and would forge from the loosely confederated thirteen states, one united country called the United States of America. A country that would be founded on the principles that John Locke provided us in his "*Treatise on Two Governments*". Our United States of America was founded on the principles of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Locke uses "property" as his third value, however most political scientists agree that pursuit of happiness is a broader term, more politically correct, and in keeping with the spirit of the times. One's pursuit of happiness includes the owning of chattel property and the use of one's own person, freely owned, as each individual chooses. This chest contains all that is truly American, and those ideas and other artifacts that were brought to our

American homeland. The first colonists, the enslaved peoples and the four waves of immigration beginning in the late 1820's and continuing until this present day, brought their ideas and their cultures. The traditional and moral values that Americans, from the early colonial periods, have held in the highest of places, and upon which our country continues to grow and prosper, are scattered throughout the Chest and history. These are our freedoms, our civil rights, and the freedoms of each individual who visits our nation or for those who are fortunate enough, to become one of our permanent citizens. Inside the Chest we also find invaluable documents from the past such as the Code of Hammurabi, the Magna Carta, the Mayflower Compact of 1620, the Emancipation Proclamation of President Lincoln and his famous Gettysburg Address. As we continue to search the Chest, we also find the Treaty of Versailles, the Third Reich Citizenship Laws, and plans for the Final Solution. President Roosevelt's speech, declaring December 7, 1941 "a day of infamy" and the Inaugural Address of President Kennedy ("ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country") are waiting to be read again in the Chest.

The Chest of Treasures also contains principles and values of some other Americans that are not considered mainstream nor are they considered to be consistent with our founding principles. However they are there also, because they are part of what makes up the fabric of American society. Some of us call them inequalities, but some of our citizens place a high value on these principles. At the back center of the Chest there is a positive, nurturing, glowing white light that we call "Hope". Hope, that our mistakes of the past; that the inequities we placed against others; and that the violence we as Americans committed in the name of our moral rights and to safeguard, by whatever means necessary, will never occur again. We should always grasp for that light in troubled times. Interwoven within the history of our country and sitting side by side are words and events which signify valor, discrimination, honor, stereotyping, courage, racism, heroes and hate. Of invaluable importance in our Chest of Treasures, lies words that other of our citizens place such a high value on, that they are willing to shed blood, theirs and others, provoking violence and finally giving up their own lives to

“Death” (it is also found in the Chest). Since each and every American is guaranteed the Freedom of Speech, those who believe in the strength and power of those words, have every right to proclaim them as their rights and their ideals. I am referring to the words that are not consistent with our founding principles and those groups of white Americans hating other white Americans for one or more reasons. There are also American citizens who believe that people who are “people of color” are not truly Americans and are therefore substandard or inferior beings. These Americans consider it their duty to ensure that the power message contained in these words is perpetuated and that all that is non-white is of lesser value than are our white ancestors. They also believe that some whites are inferior to other whites, a distinction that can make a person’s skin crawl with goose bumps. They proclaim America to be a homeland for only the superior white people of the world. How one American can proclaim and sort out the superior members is somewhat vague, although they attempt to do so? However, within the white community, they make some societal distinctions and include only the truly white, superior Americans who espouse the standards for which they claim as their rights and freedoms. This too is in our Chest.

How does a child learn which of the words in the chest truly belong to him/her and will light their torch of freedoms? All of the words belong to each individual! All that is contained in the Chest of Treasures belongs to each and every child, of every color, who lives in the United States. Each American child, as they grow up as an American, goes through a process that we call “socialization”. It is through this process which covers the first twenty or so years of life as an American that a child picks from the Chest and from the history of America those words that will become the standard bearers of each one of them. We, however, do not pick blindly from the Chest of Treasures. No one of us is expected to make such a difficult decision at a young age. This process we go through will involve the effects of the values and traditions of our parents, our peers and what they have chosen from the Chest. We continually to be influenced in our choices by religious leaders, politicians, the educational system, and the news media, especially the television programs and news. If all we see of

the “people of color” (blacks as an example), are instances of rioting in Los Angeles, in Watts; before the Chicago Democratic Convention in Chicago; and the violence perpetuated by the Black Panther Movement, then our view of these people will be totally one-sided and fictitious without us even knowing it. This is known as “selective socialization”. Most people know this word by another name, also contained in our Chest. It is called propaganda and brainwashing.

Teachers may use their positions in the classrooms to severely slant and derange impressionable first through fifth graders. Those values that the teacher has selected from the Chest might become interwoven into some of these students “fabric of life”, forever. The children may become biased and close their minds at such an early age. Teachers may be of any color or non-color these days as many different cultures are represented in our classrooms. It is morally wrong to imprint the dominant person’s views on how and what the world is all about without giving each of them the power to choose from the freedoms and other words in the Chest. Who is the teacher to say that one culture or ethnic groups is superior to others, and then thrust upon these little adults falsehoods, misbeliefs, untruths, myths and outright lies? Just because our history books have glossed over our history of violence as Americans and manifested the new history books as the best ever, having been cleansed by a committee of “politically correct citizens”, they are further giving approval to the lies of our past and the deficiencies of our present. These too are contained in our Chest of Treasures.

It is time to move on from this mythical place and this mythical Chest of Treasures to present day America. What an astounding place! It too is filled with the same actions, reactions, values, and words that are contained in our mythical Chest. However, the difference now is that the reality of these words, the power behind them, and the violence that one or more of the words can bring, can cause irreparable damage and hurt to real, living American Citizens. People like your mother, your father, your siblings, and your grandparents can become victims. Your friends at school could become targets of discrimination, hate, hatred, racism, stereotyping and violence at an age when they are still trying to define who they are and what their values will be for the remainder of their useful and

productive lives. They too must be allowed choices from the Chest of Treasures. This happens because of one reason, and one reason only. They are people of color and are not of the dominant white culture currently in power. This group has defined who and what is white, and who and what comprise the “people of color” or the “non-whites”. The dominant white culture sets the tone for the rest of society. It delineates the rules for living in this country, the rules for buying consumer products in our merchants’ stores, what level of education can be attained, and where Americans can attend these institutions to get the best that America has to offer. Most of the best that America has to offer has already been predetermined by the luck of the draw, that is, the color of their skin at birth. White privilege is engrained into the fabric of American society and is also engrained in the fabric of American peoples’ of color. They do not, in reality, have the freedoms that are guaranteed to every American citizen by our United States Constitution (as amended). This is truly the beginning of the “peoples of color” American socialization. They find out quickly about prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, racism, and finally the results of one of the most powerful words ever to be used in the history of the world. That word is “hate”. Peoples of color become the victims of these words through the powerful forces of the dominant white culture, sometimes through whatever means is available and deemed necessary.

What then becomes the role of the social scientists? To continue the traditional only method of “reflective thinking”? Or do we teach our new generations how to analyze, how to question and to criticize in the right way, the history, the morals, the traditions, the values and the freedoms that our past generations have become so attached to? As our world continues to evolve and technology continues to outpace the laws of society at an ever-increasing pace, how will our futures be determined? If our new citizens have not been taught about the mistakes of the past and allowed to continually to visit the Chest of Treasures that social scientists have been given the responsibility for maintaining, how will they avoid the violence that may erupt over societal issues? The technological advances such as brain stem cell research, abortion, an individual’s right to assisted suicide, and the

erosion of one's privacy. I finish this section questioning a bill passed by the Congress of the United States in assembly on October 24, 2001. I consider this bill a "suspension of the Bill of Rights", the first ten amendments of our American Constitution, which had become the safeguard from excessive intrusion into the lives of its citizens. Power comes from the people and is given to the government by the "body politic". The Patriot Act of 2001 is an act "to deter and punish terrorist acts in the United States and around the world, to enhance law enhancement investigatory tools, and for other purposes. Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled". This document contains 342 pages with 1016 sections and numerous sub-sections, detailing authorities, provisions, and responsibilities for agencies within our central government. I fear the loss of even one fraction of the freedoms, liberties, and privileges that I have fought for in the service our country for 21 ½ years of my life including, two wars. Hopefully a large number of American citizens who truly value their previously fought for liberties and freedoms, are also highly concerned by the last part of the quotation stated as the purpose of the act, "and for other purposes". However, the Patriot Act has now become part of the Chest of Treasures in America. It does not sit without companions from the past. Through the work of the historians and our political scientists of the past and the present, we have the records of the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798; the criminal restrictions on speech in World War I; the internment of Japanese-Americans in World War II; and the blacklists and domestic spying of the Cold War. They are also in the Chest of Treasures. These acts were instances in which the government was granted (or assumed) summary powers in a time of a national crisis, such as the events of September 11, 2001. These previously passed acts; laws and traditions were inevitably regretted by later generations. Each of these acts later became to be viewed simply as an overreaction to a series of circumstances that were, at the time, terrifying to Americans around the globe. It was also proven by later generations that the United States Constitution (as amended) had provided necessary powers required to combat the actual or perceived threats of the day. These new laws and provisions were simply an overreaction by our central government as unnecessary

and may even have been dangerous. However, that is what continues to make our American Society what it is today. We pull on the experiences and mistakes of the past, add them to the present circumstances, perceived or real, and take actions that are considered necessary for our future survival. Sometimes, later they are proven to have been detrimental. Our lessons learned also become part of our Chest of Treasures.

The teaching of history, geography, and economics in our educational system today as part of our “core social sciences curriculum” serves three functions [Bennett 1990]. The studying of these three academic disciplines will assist our students to grow in three broad areas (functions); the intellectual, the civic and the moral areas of their lives. All of these functional areas have been detailed through the telling of the story of the “Chest of Treasures”. In his book “The Educated Child: A Parents Guide from Preschool through Eighth Grade”, William Bennett provides many useful and solid suggestions for the teaching of history, geography and economics. In regards to history, he advises parents at home to: talk about their personal pasts; watch videos about historical events; show your child copies of historical documents; make a time capsule; help your child find personal heroes; and turn family vacations into history lessons. In regards to geography, he suggests the following: keep an atlas and globe handy; put maps and pictures of interesting places on the children’s bedroom walls; give your child a compass and explore your town; get a taste of other cultures by eating at ethnic restaurants; and collect stamps or coins from other countries. The family is also responsible for, as part of the “socialization process”, to teach civics at home. Suggestions include teaching, sharing, and being responsible and proper behavior at home and in public. Knowing and helping your neighbor, participating in a community project, volunteering at school, voting regularly and discussing current events with your children after they have seen them on television or read about an event in the newspaper are recommended. Parents should tell their children about their own pride and love for America; telling them about the liberties, freedoms, traditions and symbols which have become known as American; and those which they have chosen from the Chest. Parents can take their children to visit

a trial in session; meet with a local legislator; or visit the county courthouse and pick up some background information on the various local agencies.

Parents should be the primary source of a child's economics lessons; that can start at a relatively early age. Teach your child how to save, how to track the money they spend, pick a stock and make an "imaginary investment" of a small amount of money and track that stock over a period of time. Encourage your child to buy something for some other member of the family and give it "just because" rather than on a special anniversary. This can serve to teach your child about virtues including generosity, kindness, and selflessness.

The author of the aforementioned book has, for the most part, sarcastically redefined the role and goals of the social sciences as follows:

**Social studies has been called the Great Dismal Swamp of today's school curriculum, a morass of trendy topics, education fads, and political correctness; a place to shape children's attitudes rather than teach them history. Sociology, political science, psychology, sensitivity training, critical thinking, values clarification, decision making, diversity education, environmental education, consumer education – you name it, and it probably comes under the broad umbrella of social studies". [William J. Bennett, 1999, Pg. 240].**



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