

**Marciano, J. (1987). *Civic illiteracy and education: The battle for the hearts and minds of American youth*. New York, NY: Peter Lang. 9-39.**

### **National Reports**

More than 30 national reports on U.S. schools were published in the 1980s; a few addressed the "crisis of civic literacy." To challenge the dominant-elite view of the crisis, education, and the country, reference to some reports, influential figures, and guiding principles is necessary as the foundation for the discussion and challenge in later chapters to our society and civic literacy in the schools. The primary concern of this book is what educational and political leaders assert about the crisis in civic literacy and the nation—not pedagogy or the manner of presentation.

Concern over civic literacy is not a recent development of the 1980s and 1990s: historian of education Donald Warren reminds us that a "crisis in civic literacy" is a recurring theme in our history. The lack of civic knowledge about societal issues and principles has been a constant concern in education throughout this century. Warren states that those who are presently concerned about the state of civic literacy seem to have "a short memory." Whether the goal is to get beyond the dissent and disruption of the 1960s, or to deal with the demographic changes in the nation and educational system (e.g., increasing racial diversity), there is a desire on the part of political officials and educators to create a "unifying socialization" for our youth. Thus, civic literacy is vital because it will presumably bring us together as one people with common beliefs in a time when stress and multicultural traditions are breaking us apart. Warren believes that those who advocate civic education "tend to agree that somehow we have lost our way, that originally citizenship preparation mattered more and was accomplished more *effectively*. Historical evidence suggests, however, that rather than a bygone 'golden' era, we find a tradition of recurring conflicts and messy consensus over the purposes of public education."

Distress is a common theme in the reports that address civic literacy. The late Ernest Boyer, former U.S. Commissioner of Education and author of a major Carnegie Foundation report on the American high school (1983), lamented the fact that "the Jeffersonian vision of grass roots democracy fueled by education increasingly is viewed as Utopian, and what's especially disturbing is that the school reform movement of the 1980s has paid insufficient attention to educating students about the nation's history and institutions."<sup>2</sup> Why don't we educate youth about the important issues affecting the survival of the Republic—about civic literacy in a democracy? Does the answer lie in what has been termed "mindlessness" (see page 15), because leaders and educators don't think carefully or deeply enough about the purposes of society and schools? Perhaps the deeper and true reason is that genuine civic literacy would undermine the elite's ability to maintain effective control. Boyer contends that we have not shown much concern for citizenship education, and that "for those who care about government 'by the people,' this lack of concern cannot go unchallenged. . . . What we urgently need today are groups of well-informed, caring individuals who band together in the spirit of community to learn from one another and participate as citizens in the democratic process."<sup>3</sup> His concern essentially misses the target: educating youth in this spirit would threaten existing power arrangements in the country. Boyer claims that civic illiteracy is growing, and that

unless we find better ways to educate ourselves as citizens, we run the risk of drifting unwittingly into a new kind of Dark Age—a time, when, increasingly, specialists will control knowledge and the decision-making process. In this confusion, citizens would make critical decisions on the basis of blind belief in another set of professed experts.<sup>4</sup>

This is an ironic claim, especially when one considers that the Boyer Report and other major educational studies in the 1980s were made by elite experts, with only rare participation by citizens, parents, and teachers. Although *High School* is perhaps the best of the major reports in terms of its concern about equality for poorer youth and civic literacy, it still reproduces the same

elitism of experts that Boyer decries. He contends that "civics is an important part of the core of common learning. In a world where human survival is at stake, ignorance about government and how it functions is not an acceptable alternative."<sup>5</sup> Boyer is right, but only at the most abstract or general level where no one could disagree: a sound and vibrant democracy cannot afford such ignorance about history and institutions. In the concrete and real world in which we live, however, he is wrong and naive. Given the choice between ignorant and uninvolved youth or those who actively challenge our country's history and policies, the elite and influential allies will choose the former and avoid the conflicts that emerged when too many youth became infected with "democratic distemper" in the 1960s.

Asserting that "civic education, by its very nature, means helping students confront social and ethical concerns and applying what they have learned," Boyer joins conservatives like William Bennett and radicals such as Michael Parenti who argue that adults "must help them [students] to understand that not all choices are equally valid."<sup>6</sup> The problem arises, however, when the choices made run counter to those reflecting the needs and views of the elite and its influential allies. No reasonable thinker on civic literacy and education claims that all views are equally truthful—the fundamental issue remains to decide from among competing claims which one is the most truthful. Despite rhetorical support for the "free marketplace of ideas," however, it is clear that the marketplace has been limited to the ideas that benefit those in power, especially when it comes to designing high school history lessons and textbooks.

According to Boyer, civic literacy is absolutely crucial in this era when fast-paced technological change profoundly shapes our daily existence. "The study of history" is especially needed because it reveals an awareness of a "larger reality beyond the present." He pleads for "a sense of continuity with the past [that] can provide a kind of lifeline across the scary chasm of our contemporary situation." Through civic education, "all high school students deepen their understanding of our national heritage through a study of United States history, with special emphasis on the people, ideas, and issues that have shaped the nation."<sup>7</sup> This outcome depends, of course, upon whose version of history our youth learn, and its substantive truth claims, an idea that is not discussed by Boyer, the major educational reports, or influential theorists.

In *Democracy's Untold Story* (1987), a joint effort of the American Federation of Teachers, Education for Excellence Network and the Freedom House, historian Paul Gagnon asserts that young people are not learning the commitments essential for a democracy. These commitments, which are the foundation for civic literacy—are actually undermined because "among some educators . . . there appears a certain lack of confidence in our own liberal, democratic values, an unwillingness to draw normative distinctions between them and the ideas of non-democratic regimes."<sup>8</sup> This is because some educators and citizens insist "upon maintaining neutrality among competing values [a] tendency to present political systems as not better or worse but only different."<sup>9</sup> Gagnon argues that this neutrality is a mistake: there is a right and wrong historical position on international conflicts that civically-literate youth should understand and embrace, and educators and citizens in a democracy should not fall into the historical or value relativism that Allan Bloom bitterly criticizes. Gagnon and Bloom are both correct, though not for the reasons they state, as I shall discuss in chapter 3. According to Gagnon, a critical examination of American democracy "must rest on a solid base of factual knowledge" which rejects the notion that "no particular body of knowledge is worth knowing than any other."<sup>10</sup> Both of these assertions are true as abstract principles; however, a basic issue not addressed by Gagnon, the national reports, and influential theorists, is whether U.S. practices are actually, as they claim, "democratic and liberal." This claim is not examined with critical historical evidence.

In a report for the National Endowment for Humanities (NEH): *American Memory: A Report on the Humanities in the Nation's Schools* (1987), the chair of the Endowment, Lynne V. Cheney, supports the concerns expressed above. She believes, with Nobel Prize-winning poet Czeslaw Milosz, that "'a refusal to remember' is a primary characteristic of our age. Certainly there is abundant evidence that this is a primary characteristic of our nation. . . . Nationwide polls show startling gaps in knowledge." Cheney claims that "cultural memory flourishes or declines for many reasons, but among the most important is what happens in our schools. Long relied upon to

transmit knowledge of the past to upcoming generations, our schools today appear to be about a different task. Instead of preserving the past, they more often disregard it." She also claims that our nation is "at risk" because young people do not know

how the society in which they live came to be. Knowledge of the ideas that have molded us and the ideals that have mattered to us functions as a kind of civic glue. Our history and literature give us symbols to share; they help us all, no matter how diverse our backgrounds, feel part of the common undertaking.<sup>11</sup>

Cheney insists that when we allow youth to suffer an "erosion of historical consciousness, we do to ourselves what an unfriendly nation bent on our destruction might."<sup>12</sup>

Again, in the abstract or general sense, she is correct: we should teach youth to "remember" the past with all its tragedies and triumphs. But in the concrete reality of what *is* learned about patriotism and war in the nation, for example, young people have a long educational apprenticeship in historical amnesia that has been fostered by those like Cheney who are intellectual apologists for the dominant elite. She is right about the need for historical consciousness, a theme echoed by many other influential theorists who support the dominant-elite view; but a truthful historical consciousness for youth that might help them to undermine the national security state and culture that she supports is not what she has in mind. The irony is that Cheney never reflects on the role that Reagan-Bush conservatives played in the destruction of real historical memory by their violence and contempt for the truth.

In *A Report on the First Assessment of History and Literature* (1987), educators and former Department of Education officials (under Bush and Reagan) Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr. share their deep distress over students' lack of civic knowledge, especially history. A representative sample of high school juniors scored barely above 54 percent on the history portion of the assessment, leading Ravitch and Finn to conclude: "If there were such a thing as a national report card for those studying American history . . . [these] eleventh grade students earned failing marks."<sup>13</sup> They are justifiably upset by these results and claim that it is foolish to believe "that students can think critically or conceptually when they are ignorant of the most basic facts of American history," an important point that should not be ignored. They conclude that if "educators, parents, and citizens allow [civic] literacy" to diminish, the "quality of public . . . debate in our society will suffer," and this decline will surely undermine civic literacy.<sup>14</sup> Their judgment is blunt: "We merely conclude that it [the 'younger generation'] is ignorant of important things it should know, and that it and generations to follow are at risk of being gravely handicapped by that ignorance upon entry into . . . citizenship."<sup>15</sup> They remind us that not all youths are at risk, because some have a "decent reservoir of knowledge of history . . . and these . . . tend to be the children of the well-educated, the well-employed, the well-motivated, and the well-off." This elite will "do its best to equip its own children with this knowledge and to send them to schools that furnish substantial quantities of it. But neither our culture, our politics, our civic life, nor our principles of equal opportunity can be satisfactorily maintained if larger numbers of youngsters enter adulthood with little knowledge of this kind."<sup>16</sup>

Although I differ profoundly with Ravitch and Finn about civic literacy and this country, and will argue that they and the elite they cite fear an informed and activist youth, their basic conclusion on the factual knowledge of history is true. Students can't challenge anything if they don't know anything; they can't criticize national and international policies if they don't have the basic information upon which such judgments are made. In a co-authored article on civic literacy, Finn and Ravitch expand on the thesis of the elite nature of historical understanding and tracking in our schools. They assert that:

elites have always understood that to be master of one's own affairs and the affairs of others requires a rigorous education in the humanities. While knowledge of literature, history, and poetry and the command of languages may not substitute for brute force or tribal loyalty . . . determined members of the 'ruling class' have consistently seized every opportunity for their children to acquire such knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

Thus the authors point out the class nature of education in the United States. Some demand and obtain the best education so they can govern the society and manage its social, economic, and cultural institutions. They will do their best to buy such education for their children, most of whom will study in elite private schools and prestigious institutions of higher education. While the course of study for those who are trained to govern and those who are trained to be governed is different, it is essentially similar when it comes to the basic civic lessons about war, patriotism, and the country. "My country right or wrong" is still the operative principle.

Although not intended as a study of civic literacy, Charles Silberman's report on U.S. schools for the Carnegie Corporation, *Crisis in the Classroom* (1970), examined issues that are crucial to the current discussion. Silberman, then an editor of *Fortune Magazine*, contended that our schools do not help students because they "keep youngsters in a state of chronic, almost infantile, dependency."<sup>18</sup> Schools do this because most are "organized and run to facilitate order."<sup>19</sup> This depressing state of affairs is not the result of a deliberate effort on the part of educators and other public officials—it does not happen because of "venality or indifference or stupidity" but is caused, rather, by "mindlessness." Mindlessness, "the failure or refusal to think seriously about educational purpose, the failure to question established practice," is found throughout the society.<sup>20</sup> Simply put, we are so bogged down in the details of governing the country and schools that we don't have the time to think clearly about such crucial matters as basic purposes and practices. Silberman's thesis captures the dominant-elite perspective, the worldview of influential leaders who shape the civic debate in the nation. I will challenge Silberman's thesis on every point, arguing instead that the crisis in civic literacy is not caused by mistakes that flow from humane and worthwhile premises and policies, but the logical result of organizing society and schools so that most youth will display the docility and civic illiteracy that Silberman, Ravitch and Finn, and other leading educators lament.

### **Leading Dominant-Elite Theorists**

The crisis in civic literacy and the underlying foundational principles have gained the attention of a number of influential intellectuals. These include William Bennett, former Secretary of Education and a leading conservative spokesman; the late Allan Bloom, philosopher and author of the controversial *The Closing of the American Mind*; R. Freeman Butts, an historian of education who has written extensively on the subject; and E.D. Hirsch, Jr., author of *Cultural Literacy*. Their views have received wide distribution in the mass media and academe, and have influenced the debate on civic literacy in the country.

Bennett is deeply distressed by the civic illiteracy that is common among our youth. He quotes Paul Gagnon, who states that many come to college "after twelve years of school (presumably in the 'college track'), knowing nothing of the pre-Plymouth past, including the Bible! . . . They often know . . . next to nothing of the history of science, technology, industry, of capitalism and socialism, of fascism and Stalinism, of how we found ourselves in two world wars, or even in Vietnam."<sup>21</sup> These students are simply unprepared to engage in an intelligent dialogue about issues crucial to the country, and Bennett's dissatisfaction is blunt and uncompromising: "The point is clear. Our young people are woefully ill-educated about history and the basic principles of our nation and our civilization. For those who believe, with Thomas Jefferson, that a knowledge of history belongs at the very center of every American's general education, this lack of knowledge is cause for alarm."<sup>22</sup> What is not discussed by Bennett and those who agree with him, however, is whether the government wants students to be educated along these lines.

Bennett illustrates the fundamental principles of civic literacy by showing how an historical controversy should be handled.

We'll consider an example from a turbulent era in our own history. . . . What manner of men were the abolitionists? A number of perfectly respectable historians have branded them as "extremists," "impractical," "trouble-makers" and "not free of racial prejudice themselves."

Other historians, equally respectable, have defended the abolitionists as "men of conscience," "courageous," and "Christian." As it is not likely that this controversy will ever be definitely resolved, the only way that a student can arrive at a useful judgment ... is by reading different histories . . . reading the actual words of the abolitionists and their critics, by being exposed to different points of view, and then by thinking out the problem for himself. . . . And in the process . . . , he acquires what is surely one of the most important skills of democratic citizenship: the ability to think critically about society and its affairs."<sup>23</sup>

First of all, students and citizens would not know from this statement that many of the abolitionists, including some of the most famous, were women. Also, Bennett's historical and moral relativism in his claim implies that there are no criteria and evidence that might allow one to move beyond the view that critical and laudatory perspectives on abolitionists are "equally respectable." This is not the same Bennett who argues that there are evil nations and acts in the world and we should teach our youth about them—strong and truthful perspectives which oppose these things, and they should not be equated with untrue and immoral political views (see chapter 2). Would this serious approach to evidence and critical thinking hold if it challenged the fundamental policies of the U.S. and thus blocked its ability to wage war against the Third World? When truth challenges the power of the state, Bennett and other conservatives who decry the excesses of big government fall into line to support it, as witnessed by their defense of U.S. aggression in the Third World.

Bennett stresses the crucial importance of historical understanding for democratic citizenship, quoting Jefferson, who believed that history was essential to the civic education of citizens because, "by apprizing [Americans] of the past, [it] will enable them to judge of the future; it will avail them of the experience of other times and other nations; it will qualify them as judges of the actions and designs of men; it will enable them to know ambition under every disguise it may assume; and knowing it, to defeat its views."<sup>24</sup> For Bennett, such a judgment indicates that "running through our nation's history like a golden thread" has been a deep commitment historically to "certain ideals and aspirations. We believe in liberty and justice and equality. We believe in ... the betterment of the human condition."<sup>25</sup> While these ideas are professed in a general sense, and Jefferson's thoughts on civic knowledge and responsibilities should be studied carefully, Bennett's assertion of the golden thread totally distorts the actual history of the country (see chapter 3).

Bennett's views are echoed by a conservative academic who enjoyed widespread public exposure: the late Allan Bloom. In *The Closing of the American Mind*, Bloom bitterly criticizes the changes in schools and colleges brought on by the reforms of the 1960s, and claims that they caused a steep decline in civic illiteracy among youth because "civic education turned away from concentrating on the Founding."<sup>26</sup> Educators spent too much time on contemporary political concerns and making students feel good about themselves, and not on the basics and origins of our system of democracy and the ethical questions that are absolutely essential to a civically literate population. Rather than helping students understand and appreciate the great figures and principles of the nation, especially the inspiring political ideas of those great men who created it, civic literacy for youth today often consists of "hearing [that] the Founders [are] racists, murderers of Indians, representatives of class interests."<sup>27</sup> The key issue, however, is not whether students *hear* that these Founders were "racists [and] murderers of Indians": It is whether that assertion is *true*, and why it is rarely debated in classrooms, texts and the media so that youth can develop the skills and values of civic literacy many argue are crucial to an informed and democratic citizenry. If dissenting views are rarely examined, how and where will youth gain the intellectual skills they need to become such citizens?

Bloom states that contemporary civic literacy actually reflects "the new language . . . of value relativism," which allows educators to avoid helping youth to deal with the "perpetual tyranny of good and evil, with their cargo of shame and guilt."<sup>28</sup> He bitterly opposes the notion that all opinions about the country, the Founders, and ethical issues are equally valid; and he criticizes those who refuse to take a truthful and courageous position on the issues of right and wrong, guilt and evil. Even though he vastly exaggerates the extent to which "relativism" occurs in our schools and history textbooks, Bloom raises an important principle about good and evil in the country and the world, one that he does not apply to his own government. For example, there is no suggestion that

the U.S. might be evil because of its genocidal treatment of African slaves and American Indians. Each day, educators make political judgments and take sides on issues; however, they invariably end up supporting the government on matters of state—actively or through their silent acquiescence. They may criticize the means used or excessive means, or suggest that mistakes were made because things did not work as planned, as in Vietnam and the Gulf War, but they seldom oppose U.S. violence on the principle that it is fundamentally wrong or criminal. The assertion that youth grow up without hearing clear right and wrong statements on moral and political issues is simply untrue. Virtually everything that they heard in schools and the media about the Gulf War, for example, lauded it as a patriotic and wonderful moment in our nation's history; they rarely heard any educator, political official, or media commentator condemn it. Civic literacy fundamentally consisted of yellow-ribbon support for the decisions that had already been made.

Another Bloom claim is that "almost every thoughtful observer knows that it is in the U.S. that the idea of rights has penetrated most deeply into the bloodstream of its citizens."<sup>29</sup> But the noble idea of civil rights was extended to American Indians, slaves, persons of color, women and workers only after long and arduous struggles that forced the substance of the ideal upon the dominant elite. The dominant elite and influential spokespeople espouse lofty principles and claims about civic literacy and the society; but these ideal notions of civic reflection are not applied in schooling and textbook history lessons, nor are they used to uncover the truth about the actions of the U.S. government in past wars.

A concluding thought from Bloom on civic education: "Prejudices, strong prejudices, are visions about the way things are. They are divinations of the order of the whole of things, and hence the road to a knowledge of that whole is by way of erroneous opinions about it. Error is indeed our enemy, but it alone points to the truth and therefore deserves our respectful treatment."<sup>30</sup> He is correct about the road to knowledge; thinkers on the right like Bloom and Bennett, however, have their claims of truth and error passed on in the schools while those on the left, like Chomsky, are not—even though an objective assessment of Bloom's and Bennett's views would reveal support for the most horrible policies, justifiable in the name of the national security state.

The historian of education R. Freeman Butts has devoted years of study to the issue of civic literacy, and writes with concern and passion about the social and educational crisis that he finds in our country. In "Public Education in a Pluralistic Society," he argues that many among the public "are losing confidence not only in the particular officials in the government, but in the basic regime itself. [There is] widespread disillusionment, disenchantment, discontent, distrust of public men in public institutions, with corresponding paucity of public knowledge of political affairs, apathy, cynicism, and lack of participation."<sup>31</sup> Education has a special obligation to turn these discouraging developments around, recapturing the legitimacy and moral authority that has been lost, and promoting vigorously "the basic values of the American civic community: liberty *and* equality *and* justice. It might just be, too, that not only was the future of public education at stake, but also the existence of the democratic political community itself."<sup>32</sup>

Butts raises important issues; the problem, however, is that his belief in the essential soundness of our political institutions and values undermines the very nature of what he defends. He asks, for example, "How are citizens to be prepared to judge the merits of public policies in domestic and foreign affairs conducted by officials in office or proposed by candidates. . . ." But think about the secrecy and the imperial presidency that we have witnessed, especially since the Vietnam War, that did not allow citizens to make informed and reasoned judgments, by blocking the quest for that information under the excuse of national security. Butts argues that meritorious policies "can best be achieved only by careful judgments informed by a reasoned historical perspective and a meaningful concept of the best values underlying our constitutional order."<sup>31</sup> Although it is true that we do need to bring a reasoned perspective to deliberations on the civic order and the fundamental issues that guide us as a people, we cannot make such reasoned judgments when the President and the Executive Branch continually and routinely break the constitutional safeguards on war, maintain secrecy, and oppose substantive democratic involvement by citizens.

Although E.D. Hirsch, Jr.'s *Cultural Literacy* is broader in scope than civic literacy because it also includes literature, I mention his concerns because he shares the dominant-elite view of the national reports and influential theorists. Some have challenged Hirsch's version of cultural literacy, with its Eurocentric, male, and white perspective, and I will not add anything here to criticisms of his work.<sup>34</sup> Hirsch asserts that "to be culturally literate is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world. . . . Many young people strikingly lack the information that writers of American books and newspapers have traditionally taken for granted among their readers of all generations. . . . Our children's lack of intergenerational information is a serious problem for the nation."<sup>35</sup> As others who support the dominant-elite perspective, he too identifies some basic knowledge that youth must have to take their place as citizens in a democracy. But once again, there is no suggestion that such knowledge and a critical challenge to it might not be in the interest of those who govern our nation and educational system, and that a truly democratic and civically-literate education would actually subvert the status quo.

Hirsch rests his assertions about civic literacy on the fundamental, traditional, and time-honored precepts laid out by the Founding Fathers, who preached the "idea of a literate and informed citizenry." Hirsch states that essential to this concept is the principle that, when desirable, [national issues] can be explained to literate and educated citizens. Economic issues can be discussed in public." Arguing that it is not "undemocratic or intolerant to make nationwide decisions" about what is studied in schools, he states that "to repudiate the idea of a shared . . . curriculum is necessarily to accept the idea of an *unshared* . . . curriculum."<sup>36</sup> His reflections on the decentralized nature of educational curricula must be examined, however; the United States has a de-facto national curriculum when it comes to the premises and principles of patriotism and war, and particular events such as the Gulf and Vietnam wars. There is little genuine pluralism and fragmentation when it comes to the national security state: an uncritical "pro-American" perspective flows throughout school history lessons, essentially a dominant-elite version.

Addressing the principles of civic literacy in *The Genius of American Education*, the late Lawrence A. Cremin, one of the most influential historians of education in the twentieth century, writes that "what the school is uniquely equipped to do . . . is to make youngsters aware of the constant bombardment of facts, opinions, and values to which they are subjected; to help them question what they see and hear; and ultimately, to give them the intellectual resources they need to make judgments and assess significance."<sup>37</sup> The school may be ideally equipped to do these things, but if we examine actual practice—the only true test we have of whether it is doing what Cremin claims it can do—we find another story. The teachers who used the Gulf War as a means of furthering the kinds of thinking that Cremin, Bennett, and others laud in the abstract, for example, were a small minority (chapter 7). Most teachers were silent on the war or cheered the troops on to victory, as sympathy for the troops replaced any real analysis of why they were there in the first place.

Cremin also lauds Jefferson's views on civic literacy and education. In the Rockfish Gap Report on the program at the University of Virginia, Jefferson argued that the "objects of primary education . . . were: To understand his duties to his neighbors and country, and to discharge with competence the functions confided to him by either; To know his rights; to exercise with order and justice those he retains; to choose with discretion the fiduciary of those he delegates; and to notice their conduct with diligence, with candor, and judgment."<sup>38</sup> Cremin makes an eloquent appeal based on Jefferson's conception of citizenship education: "On the basis of prudence alone, no modern industrial nation can fail to afford every one of its citizens the maximum opportunity for intellectual and moral development. . . . And beyond prudence, there is justice. No society that calls itself democratic can settle for an education that does not encourage universal acquaintance with the best that has been thought and said."<sup>39</sup>

Cremin's political perspective, however, does not allow him to confront what it is about America that has undermined the ideal of civic literacy for citizens and youth. He concludes with "Jefferson's faith—and the faith on which any democracy must rest . . . that the average man, properly educated, could indeed render such a judgment."<sup>40</sup> But the "average" citizen's insights on national power and war have been distorted because the skills and sentiments that are necessary for

democracy have been undermined by the media and school history lessons. As my Foundations of Education colleague at Ball State University, Richard A. Brosio, has eloquently and persuasively argued, the conflicting imperatives of capitalism and democracy act upon the school, state and other arenas of civic life in ways that undermine the ethical and political vision and democratic ideals and principles that we pass on to youth.<sup>41</sup> Educators continue to do the very opposite of Cremin's ideal; to do otherwise is to confront power and hierarchical rule—something that no one in authority wants.

The social-political theorist Morris Janowitz opposes a "civic education [that is] limited to inculcation of traditional patriotism or conventional nationalist ideology [because it is] obviously inadequate for an advanced industrial society and a highly interdependent world." However, he still upholds the essence of the elite indoctrination view: after citizens shed their distorted chauvinism, they still end up supporting the national security state. What would Janowitz think if national chauvinism were not "inadequate for [our] advanced industrial society"? He finds "the words nationalism and patriotism limiting and [prefers] the term *civic consciousness*. It refers to positive and meaningful attachments a person develops to the nation-state. Civic consciousness is compatible with and required for both national and international responsibility and obligations."<sup>42</sup> Nothing in Janowitz's work suggests that the violent national security state does not deserve "meaningful attachments" but determined and principled opposition. Those who challenge an aggressive America are simply dismissed, and the "debate" over patriotism or hyper-patriotism can go on in a civically-literate manner.

In the research for this book, I did not find a single influential educator or national report that even considered the critique of the national security state violence made by Noam Chomsky (see chapter 3) or George Bradford (see chapter 6). Perhaps the image of American GIs as liberators during World War II remains the prevailing one for many in the U.S., thus blocking their ability to ask fundamental questions about the purposes of educational and other state institutions in furthering and explaining away the international aggression and violence of the present American garrison state.

### **Some Summary Reflections on the Dominant-Elite View**

The influential reports and intellectuals cited in this chapter express deep concern about what they see happening to the country, educational system, and youth; they are quite accurate in many of their descriptions of the problems of knowledge facing youth and older citizens who need to think critically about the issues of patriotism and war. While they are long on description and lamentation, however, they are short on critical and theoretical insights into why things are as they are.

Before I discuss and then challenge the dominant-elite perspective on our country, human rights, and war in chapter 2, I wish to leave the reader with some beginning thoughts and questions on the crisis in civic literacy from a dissenting point of view which forms the basis for my profound disagreement with the dominant-elite. In *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey asks some questions that must be raised if the civic literacy that is critical to the well-being of the country and schools is to be nurtured. Can we have education that is "conducted by a national state and yet the full social ends of the educational process not be restricted, constrained, and corrupted? How [do we] reconcile national loyalty with 'superior devotion to things which unite men in common ends, irrespective of national political boundaries?'"<sup>43</sup>

The crisis in civic literacy and the underlying conflict of ideals and problems that are at the heart of this debate, are reflected in Dewey's questions. They have also been examined by Barbara Finkelstein, Professor of Education at the University of Maryland, who raises some disturbing ethical issues that must be confronted by those who are concerned with what is happening in the country and schools. Finkelstein believes that we need to think of civic literacy in terms of deeper "commitments to justice, freedom, and dignity" that strengthen "civic bonds built on mutuality and interdependence, cooperation and harmony, sociality and love."<sup>44</sup> I applaud her sentiments and vision, but we must ask why these fine ideals are not the guiding principles that



move educational and social practice for all people in our country, especially youth. Is it not true that a genuine civic literacy built upon ethical ideals has been and remains a threat to the dominant elite's power? Finkelstein calls for a holistic vision of democratic citizenship and draws from the work of Robert H. Brown, who claims that for a true civic literacy to flourish we must involve ourselves as moral agents in the public arena.<sup>45</sup> Finkelstein contends that "if the conditions of modern life prevent the political exercise of moral agency—if the political economy precludes it, government ceases to require it, and education fails to model it—freedom and justice are threatened." People must show their personal commitment to a just society in a public manner. If they do not, "they cease to be citizens. ... As a moral matter, their commitments to freedom, justice, and dignity become empty pieties, or worse, demagogic invocations of socially ungrounded rhetoric."<sup>46</sup>

Edward H. Berman of the University of Louisville has analyzed the major national educational reports of the 1980s in light of what is at risk for the nation-state and the dominant elite that runs it. Berman asserts that although

there are indeed differences among the most influential of the several reports, the commonalities are more striking: the decisive role of the United States in the world capitalist economy must be arrested and the nation's schools have a central role to play in order to accomplish this.<sup>47</sup>

The dominant elite has influenced the current educational debate in a number of ways. First, most of the reports were "initiated, sponsored, or guided" by those who represent important government agencies, multinational corporations, or influential foundations, which pass on the beliefs that shape the country, schools, and civic literacy. The seemingly democratic dialogue on crucial issues ends up supporting the rules established by the dominant elite. Intense discussion and disagreement often take place, but within premises that are taken for granted and not open to critical challenge. The important concerns that face us—such as "social justice, the realization of individual potential, democratic empowerment [and] critical [or civic] literacy"—are essentially ignored by the major educational reports, aside from the usual expression of concern about the importance of these qualities helping to foster economic growth.<sup>48</sup> Berman concludes on a note that should be kept in mind by the reader of this book: If the school were to educate "the majority of its students to analyze society's current organization it would perhaps encourage a possible reappraisal of—and perhaps revolt against—the existing arrangement that favor the few and disadvantage the majority."<sup>49</sup>

I close this chapter with some words from the influential American historian, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., the Kennedy advisor whose views on multiculturalism complement Diane Ravitch's. He articulates the dominant-elite view on civic literacy, and is absolutely right on one count: "A struggle to redefine the nation's identity is taking place in many arenas . . . and in no arena more crucial than our system of education. The schools and colleges . . . train the citizens of the future. They have always been battlegrounds for debates over beliefs, philosophies, values. The debate about the curriculum is a debate about what it means to be an American. What is ultimately at stake in the shape of the American future."<sup>50</sup> He puts it well, for the school history lessons of the past represent what those in power and their educational allies wish to have passed on to youth—all in the name of historical objectivity, critical thinking and civic literacy. As I will show in chapter 3 and beyond, none of the above goals are fostered by the kinds of lessons that have been taught.

## Notes

1 Donald Warren, "Original Intentions: Public Schools as Civic Education," *Theory into Practice*, Vol. 27, No. 4, Autumn 1988, 243-44.

2 Ernest Boyer, "Civic Education for Responsible Citizenship," *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 48, No. 3, November 1990, 5.

3 Ibid.

4 Ernest Boyer, *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America*. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 105-6.

5 Ibid.

6 "Civic Education," 7.

7 *High School*, 101.

8 Paul Gagnon, *Democracy's Untold Story: What World History Books Neglect* (Washington: American Federation of Teachers, Democracy Project, 1987), 15.

9 Ibid., 16.

10 Ibid., 19. The two democracy reports (the other was *Democracy's Half-Told Story: What American History Books Should Add*, 1989) were co-sponsored with the Education Excellence Network and Freedom House, both of which support the agenda and policies of the dominant elite. The working relationship of the AFT with such organizations is yet another admission of the educational and political bankruptcy of its leadership, personified by its president of nearly 30 years, Albert Shanker. It is also a sad commentary on the civic literacy of many of its rank-and-file members. Gagnon was also the chief investigator for the *Bradley Commission Report on Historical Literacy in the Schools*—supported by the same Bradley Foundation that has funded the rightist work of the Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, and Charles Murray's classist and racist *The Bell Curve*. The AFT and Bradley Commission reports agree on basic societal and educational premises and principles that are shared by influential conservatives and liberals, who support the policies of the national security state. As used throughout the book, the term refers to, in the words of Noam Chomsky, the United States as "global enforcer." It has unleashed unrivaled violence throughout the Third World, especially since the creation of the Central Intelligence Agency in 1947. This military power, however, is the means used to maintain American corporate hegemony in the world. The ultimate goal of the national security state is to maintain corporate class control over the world's resources, keeping them in the hands of the U.S. and major capitalist nations by undermining and destroying any viable alternative to efforts by poorer nations to leave the global capitalist order. The reader should study the history of U.S. economic and military aggression against Chile, Cuba, El Salvador, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Vietnam to test this thesis.

11 Lynne Cheney, *American Memory: A Report on the Humanities in the Nation's Public Schools* (Washington: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1987), 5.

12 Ibid., 7.

13 Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr., *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?: A Report on the First National Assessment of History and Literature* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 1.

14 Ibid., 17,20.

15 Ibid., 201.

16 Ibid., 251-2.

17 Finn and Ravitch, "Conclusions and Recommendations: High Expectations and Disciplined Effort," in *Against Mediocrity: The Humanities in America's High School*, eds. Finn, Ravitch and Robert T. Fancher (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1984), 240.

18 Charles Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom: The Remaking of American Education* (New York: Random House, 1970), 134.

19 Ibid., 126.

20 Ibid., 11.

21 Paul Gagnon, quoted in William Bennett, *Our Children and Our Country: Improving America's Schools and Affirming the Common Culture* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 160.

22 Ibid., 161.

23 Ibid., 163-4.

24 Thomas Jefferson, quoted in Ibid., 160.

25 Ibid., 165.

26 Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 29.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 141-2.

29 Ibid., 166.

30 Ibid., 43.

31 R. Freeman Butts, "Public Education in a Pluralistic Society," *Educational Theory*, Vol. 27, No. 1, Winter 1977, 9.

32 Butts, *Public Education in the United States: From Revolution to Reform* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), 395.

- 33 Butts, *The Civic Mission in Educational Reform: Perspectives For The Public and The Profession* (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 1989), 280.
- 34 See Stanley Aronowitz and Henry A. Giroux, "Schooling, Culture and Literacy in the Age of Broken Dreams," *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 58, No. 2, May 1988.
- 35 E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 7.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 144.
- 37 Lawrence Cremin, *The Genius of American Education* (New York: Random House, 1965), 23.
- 38 "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Fix the Site of the University of Virginia," in Roy J. Honeywell, *The Educational Work of Thomas Jefferson* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1931), quoted in *Ibid.*, 37.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 46-7.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 61.
- 41 Richard A. Brosio, *A Radical Democratic Critique of Capitalist Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994).
- 42 Morris Janowitz, *The Reconstruction of Patriotism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), x.
- 43 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 113-14.
- 44 Barbara Finkelstein, "Rescuing Civic Learning: Some Prescriptions for the 1990s," *Theory into Practice*, Vol. XXVII, No. 4, Autumn 1988, 251.
- 45 R.H. Brown, *Society as Text: Essays on Rhetoric, Reason and Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), cited in *Ibid.*
- 46 Finkelstein, 251.
- 47 Edward Berman, "The State's Stake in Educational Reform," in Christine Shea, Ernest Kahane, and Peter Sola, eds., *The New Servants of Power: A Critique of the 1980s School Reform Movement* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 58. See also his "Civic Education in the Corporatized Classroom," *Theory into Practice*, Volume XXVII, No. 4, Autumn 1988.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 59.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 61.
- 50 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "The Disuniting of America.," *American Educator*, Winter 1991, 14.