

# P.S.

THE FALL, 1982, EDITORIAL, "History at the Crossroads," by Rhoda R. Gilman, evoked thoughtful responses from some readers who share her concern with the "revitalization of history teaching." In line with our desire to stimulate reaction and encourage discussion, the editors are pleased to reprint two letters that address the issues Gilman raised.

FROM ROCHESTER social studies consultant Robert Beery of Independent School District No. 535 wrote to express the following views:

"I read 'History at the Crossroads' with particular interest. I share concern about history as a school subject. However, I question a couple of your key points.

"While individual cases do stand out, the coach-as-poor-history-teacher is an unfortunate stereotype that gets in the way of thoughtful efforts to improve the field. If I were to identify a group of first-rate history teachers, it would include many individuals who happen to be coaches.

"My second concern is with your apparently critical view of the social studies. Some topical courses of the late '60s and early '70s were inappropriate alternatives to more traditional content. Economics, sociology, geography, psychology, anthropology, area studies, and civics/government/political science, however, have long been recognized as having much to offer as perspectives appropriate in a citizenship education program.

"There is an urgent need to work toward upgrading teacher training and restoring a required course in world history. We must, however, avoid a history *vs.* social studies posture. As I read your report and consider the title of your committee (Minnesota Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History), I am concerned that it may be a relatively narrow advocacy effort that needs a broader base of support among public school teachers.

"Certainly there is a need to rethink and sharpen our focus in school history. That can best be done by thoughtful exchanges involving history teachers with

academic and other professional historians. Explorations of this kind must recognize that the purpose and nature of school history are not the same as those of academic history."

ROBERT A. SCHANKE, retired teacher and administrator in the St. Paul public school system, offered these comments:

"Three statements in the editorial provoke response:

- 1) 'In small school districts [in Iowa] . . . there is a premium on staff who can handle a wide variety of subjects. Yet, as the Iowa study points out, state certification requirements give no clear definition of "social studies" or "social sciences," leaving open the possibility of someone teaching American or world history who has had no specific training in either.
- 2) 'More disturbing yet is the fact that less than half of Iowa's high school history teachers have undergraduate majors in history.
- 3) 'Of all Iowa history teachers, 39 per cent are also coaches. Although many of these coach/historians indicated a preference for teaching history if given a choice, they reflected a solid conviction that their jobs depended more on their coaching than on their teaching.'

Overriding these statements is the assumption that Iowa and Minnesota are similar in accreditation, licensure, and demographics.

"Information available to me seems to indicate that Minnesota and Iowa cannot be compared as the editorial states. Minnesota's large school population centers are more urban and suburban than Iowa's. Seventy-five per cent of Minnesota high school youth attend schools that are members of the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools and, perforce, teachers in these schools may not teach in their minor fields even for part of their school day. North Central schools are usually large schools with sizable staff, with a greater variety of background, and with more advanced degrees than their counterparts in small schools.

"A majority of those teaching history in Minnesota are teaching in their major fields, and it is by and large in the traditional history offerings. The recent college graduates have indeed a broader background of course work (humanities, urban studies, anthropology, for example), but many of these have departed our schools because of severe staff reduction occasioned by falling enrollments. The surviving veteran staff members teaching history are much more traditional in their academic backgrounds.

"To use a cartoon depicting the social studies/physical education/coach combination teacher in largely nega-

tive terms is a stereotype (never proven by study) that does a great injustice to many very fine scholars among our active and former teacher/coaches. That these two endeavors cannot be handled successfully is just not true. Education is changed behavior, and many coaches have proved that success with students is not confined either to just the playing field or to just the classroom.

"There is no quarrel with the need for more history in our schools programs along with more science and mathematics. Curriculum changes, however, lie in the hands of school boards, professional staffs, state departments, certification and licensure boards, and many other interested groups.

"I appreciate Ms. Gilman's concern and support it."

*RHODA GILMAN responds:*

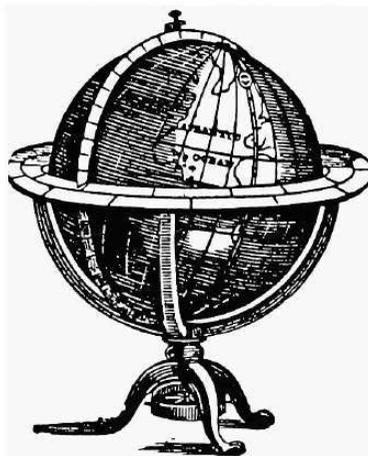
I appreciate the thoughtful comments of Mr. Beery and Mr. Schanke. Both are prompted by a lively concern for the quality of education in Minnesota and for improvement in the teaching of history.

I certainly never intended to imply that a coach cannot also be a first-rate teacher of history. The qualities and skills that make a person an outstanding coach are unquestionably the same as those that lead to fine teaching in any subject. A coach who has a genuine interest in history (and I pointed out that many do) should certainly not be downgraded for being a coach. My argument, however, is that priority in the hiring of history teachers should not be given to the candidates' skill and training in coaching sports. Nor should a teacher feel that his job depends more on his success in coaching

than in the classroom — as many Iowa teachers indicated they do feel. Neither correspondent denies the existence of the coaching/history link. Outside of Iowa, I am not aware that statistics have been collected on this. However, any woman who has sought a job teaching history or social sciences at the secondary level can testify to its pervasiveness, especially in the smaller school districts.

If I appear to be critical of the social studies, it is not that I question the value of subjects like economics, geography, anthropology, and area or minority studies. The objections that many historians have to the teaching of social studies are the present-time/current problems orientation and the lack of any coherent historical framework. How can one understand world problems today without some connected sense of the world's past? The fact that this perspective is not provided and that history has not expanded to embrace the other social sciences is as much the fault of historians as anyone else. Teaching history as the story of nations and their governments, which is still done in most places, is a narrow and outdated approach to the human past. This is the challenge that I see and that I referred to in my last paragraph.

Finally, I feel that Mr. Schanke has raised a valid objection in questioning how closely Iowa can be compared with Minnesota in the matter of teacher preparation. Minnesota is a more urban state, and therefore more of its school population is concentrated in large districts that can afford high standards and stringent requirements. In small rural districts the parallel with Iowa is probably close — but there are fewer of them in Minnesota than in Iowa.





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