

Diane Ravitch: Now is the Time to Teach Democracy (2001)

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How can we defend our democratic way of life if we don't even understand it?

On the morning of September 11, 2001, I was sitting at my kitchen table, enjoying a second cup of coffee and reading the morning paper. A friend called to tell me that a plane had just crashed into the World Trade Center. I live about three blocks from the waterfront in Brooklyn, directly across the river from Lower Manhattan, so I ran to the harbor. Just as I arrived, the second plane crashed into the south tower of the World Trade Center. Along with about six others, I stood there wordless as we watched huge balls of flame and smoke erupting from the two buildings. On that bright blue, cloudless morning, the air in the harbor was filled as far as the eye could see with tiny bits of paper, like confetti in a ticker-tape parade, the paper blown off the desks of people who worked in the upper floors of the burning buildings. All that day, ashes and soot rained down on my neighborhood. Cars were coated with the airborne ash, and a distinctive sickening smell, something akin to burning plastic, permeated the air. Thousands were killed in the conflagration. They were people of all races, religions, ethnicities, and social origins. Most were Americans, some were not. The hundreds of rescuers who died when the buildings collapsed were trying to save human lives, without distinction to anyone's color, beliefs, or national origin. By day's end, New Yorkers were lining up at emergency centers to give blood or to offer supplies or to volunteer in any way that seemed useful. The outpouring of volunteers was so large that many were turned away. So much for those who have decried the decline of civic participation in the United States. Since the mass murders, educators have been opining about how we must change what we teach our children. We must teach tolerance, they say, as if our children were somehow responsible for what happened because their teach-

ers had failed to teach them tolerance. Of course, we must teach tolerance and we do teach tolerance, but we must not teach children to tolerate those who hijack commercial jetliners and kill innocent victims. We must not teach children to tolerate fanaticism, be it political or religious. Perhaps we could engage in civic dialogues with educators in the countries that the terrorists came from, to share what we know about teaching tolerance. Other educators have said that the events of September 11 demonstrate the necessity for a multicultural curriculum. Again, the implication is that this unprecedented atrocity was caused by a failure in the schools' curriculum, rather than by heartless, inhumane terrorists.

I beg to differ. I have long urged that American students need to learn more world history (and American history that includes accurate accounts of the experience of our diverse people). In the late 1980s, I helped to draft the California history/social science curriculum, which is the only one in the nation that requires three years of world history. That curriculum includes the study of Western, Islamic, Indian, African, Asian, and Latin American civilizations. Certainly our students need a solid grounding in world history. This kind of knowledge is invaluable for everyone, but I reject the view that the murderous behavior of terrorists was linked in any way to what our students did not know about the terrorists' culture or worldview. If curriculum reformers agreed on more time for the study of world history, that would be a major improvement in all our schools. However, what they have in mind is not more world history but more "multiculturalism," more attention to our own racial and ethnic differences.

No one addressed this issue more forcefully than the late Albert Shanker, the president of the American Federation of Teachers. I was with him in 1995 in Prague, when he discussed multiculturalism with educators from Eastern and Western Europe. Shanker warned that multiculturalism, as it is taught in the United States, is dangerous for a democratic, multiethnic society because it encourages people "to think of themselves not as individuals, but primarily in terms of their membership in groups." By focusing on differences instead of commonalities, Shanker said, this kind of education does not increase tolerance; on the contrary, it feeds racial and ethnic tensions and erodes civil society, which requires a sense of the common good, a recognition that

we are all members of the human race. Shanker noted that multicultural education teaches cultural relativism because it implies that “no group may make a judgment on any other.” Yet all societies must establish basic values and guidelines for behavior. Now, in the wake of the terrorist attacks, we hear expressions of cultural relativism when avant-garde thinkers tell us that we must try to understand why the terrorists chose to kill thousands of innocent people and that we must try to understand why others in the world hate America. Perhaps if we understood why they hate us, then we could accept the blame for their actions.

I suggest that we reject this blame-the-victim approach. I suggest that what our schools must do is to teach young people the virtues and blessings of our democratic system of government. Our ability to defend what we hold dear depends on our knowledge and understanding of it. If we value a free society, we must know about its origins and its evolution. If we value our rights and freedoms, we must understand how we got them and what it would mean to live in a society that did not have them. To be sure, our democratic practices are not universal, even though almost all of them were clearly articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was endorsed by the United Nations in 1948. It is true that there are many societies that treat women as beasts of burden, many societies that do not choose their leaders, and many societies where the government and religious authorities decide who is allowed to speak and write. There are societies where free public education does not exist, where homosexuals are rounded up and imprisoned, and where our Western legal concepts of due process are unknown.

Some of these societies hate us because they hate our way of life. They think it is decadent. They think we are decadent because we protect freedom of speech, allowing people to read, say, and write whatever they want; because we protect freedom of religion, allowing “truth” and “untruth” to be taught without any regulation; because we grant equal rights to men and women, allowing women to be educated to the same extent as men and to advance in the same professions. Certainly other generations of Americans understood that these rights and freedoms were part of the American way of life. The members of the “greatest generation,” which saved the world from fascism and

Nazism, knew that they were defending these rights and freedoms. The Cold War generation that helped to bring down Soviet totalitarianism understood the importance of these rights and freedoms. We do not know what sacrifices will be required of us in the months and years ahead. What we should know is the importance of teaching our children about democracy, freedom, human rights, the principle that every person is equal before the law, and the value of the individual. These are ideas with a long history. Our children need to know them.