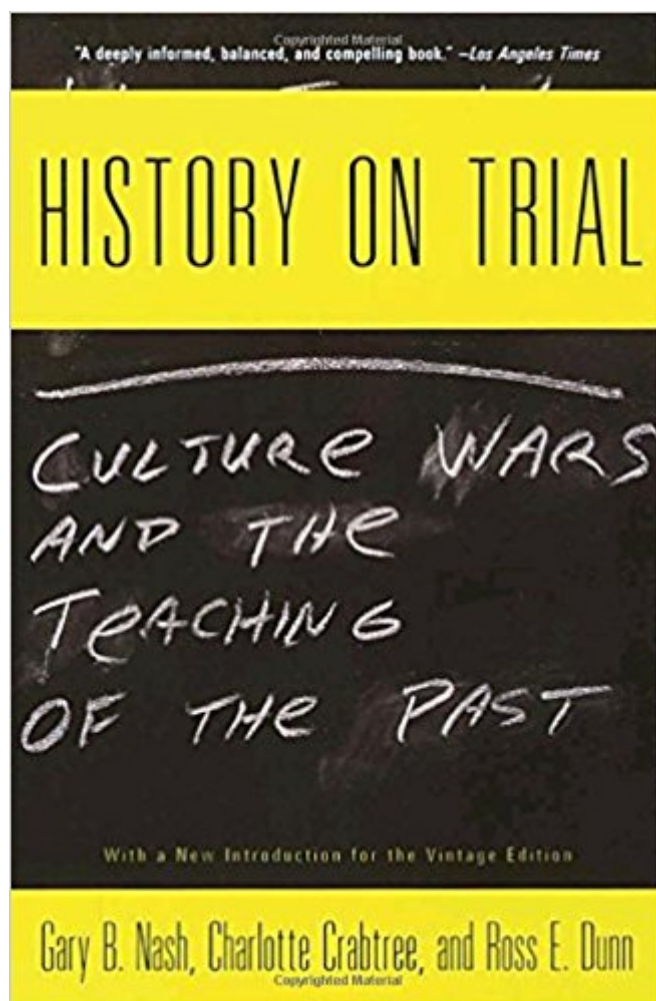


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# History On Trial: Culture Wars And The Teaching Of The Past



## Synopsis

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION "A deeply informed, balanced, and compelling book." --Los Angeles Times  
In *History on Trial*, authors Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn examine the controversy and criticism over how our nation's history should be taught, culminating in the debate about National History Standards. The book chronicles a media war spearheaded by conservatives from National Endowment for the Humanities veteran Lynne Cheney to Rush Limbaugh, posing questions with regard to history as it relates to national identity. What, the authors ask, is our objective in teaching history to children? Is the role of schools, textbooks, and museums to instill patriotism? Do we revise and reinterpret the past to tell stories that reflect present-day values? If so, who should articulate these values? Wonderfully clear, timely in its intentions, *History on Trial* provides a thoughtful account of the ways in which Americans have, since the beginning of the Republic, perceived and argued about our past.

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## Customer Reviews

The authors of *History On Trial* never would have imagined that they'd get caught up in a highly partisan national controversy. In 1992 they were enlisted by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to draw up standards for the teaching of history in America's schools. And in 1994, before their work was even published, it came under blistering attack from the political right. In *History on Trial* the professors argue that their work was hideously distorted and turned into a shockingly nasty political issue by agitators such as Rush Limbaugh and Lynne Cheney (who had

been director of the NEH when the project to create curriculum guidelines was begun). In presenting their story, Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn may go into too much detail for a general reader, but that is perhaps a necessary byproduct of fully presenting their case. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Three meticulous observers explore who decides what history gets taught to high-school students, with close attention to the current controversy over multiculturalism. When Lynne Cheney was head of the National Endowment for the Humanities, her organization funded a large and ambitious project to develop national standards for the study of history in high schools. Nash (History/UCLA), Crabtree (Education/UCLA), and Dunn (History/San Diego State Univ.) were all closely associated with the attempt to formulate a coherent, representative model of what "American high school students should understand about American and world history." But when the study appeared in 1994, Cheney was the first to vilify it publicly as an exercise in political correctness. Crabtree, Nash, and Dunn delve deeply and lucidly into the background of this highly contentious, highly politicized affair (high-school history as a patriotic indoctrination into an unchanging national essence vs. high-school history as a way of learning to make critical differentiations about thorny, mutable issues). In addition, they show that the debate about what kind of history should be learned in school has always been contentious and acrimonious. The authors--who staunchly defend the national standards they helped to establish, as well as the concept of history as a distinct discipline--also clarify the often aloof relationship between practicing historians in universities and the teachers of history in high schools. Finally, the authors deliver sensible, judicious, nuanced discussions of buzzwords (multiculturalism, Afrocentrism, identity politics) that have become confusing, and discuss the now loaded idea of Western civilization. A provocative, detailed, and illuminating explanation of how we got into the so-called "culture wars" and what is at stake in them. Essential reading for anyone interested in understanding the relationship between history as an intellectual discipline and as a subject in school. (8 illustrations, not seen) -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The culture wars of history are fascinating. Unfortunately, they are still with us. How we interpret the past will always be a matter of contention as the juxtaposition between memory and reality collide. Unfortunately, the way American politics work conflicts with the actual intelligent development of national standards and all levels of education. The culture wars of history go back many years, but

the battle in the 90s was particularly nasty just like it is today. The sad thing is that the culture wars appear to be completely political in nature with little factual basis to them. Gary Nash and Charlotte Crabtree (she passed away in 2006) were the lead developers overseeing the creation of the National History Standards in the late 1980s and 1990s. Funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), an organization then led by Lynne Cheney, wife of future vice president Richard Cheney, they and others developed a solid set of standards for use in K-12. By the time the standards were ready for release, Lynne Cheney had left the NEH and entered the political arena as a conservative Republican. As a result, Cheney would attack the standards, Nash, Crabtree, the historians and educator working on the project and anyone or anything involved with it via mass media. Nash and Crabtree show in this book how the standards were created, why they were created, and who was involved in them. They also show how Lynne Cheney supported the work up until she left for politics. In the process, Nash and Crabtree thoroughly debunk the smear campaign waged by conservative media. In fact, they expose the entire affair as nothing more than a political maneuver by conservatives jockeying for votes by playing on the fears of Americans. The process of creating the standards was begun by Republicans who wanted a set of national history standards. There were no problems until Cheney entered politics and used the work to further her own image and standing on the national stage. This book does a wonderful job in exposing the hypocrisy of the entire assault by Cheney and her clique including conservative media who were desperate for anything to present to their audiences in order to generate ratings. The talking points of those assaults are examined and easily rebutted in the book. Most of the time, it is painfully obvious that the people slamming the standards had not read them and were instead relying on someone else's opinions. Unfortunately, the same people are bringing up the same issues today. That makes this book particularly relevant. The arguments are the same, but this time involves Common Core or the new AP History course. Reading this book can help intelligent people rebut the distortions generated by those who wish to perpetuate the myth of American Exceptionalism. It is worth noting that all of the academic historical organizations in the US reject the conservative talking points. Why is it that people with degrees in history and careers spanning decades involving meticulous research into the many aspects of American History are derided and ridiculed by a group of people who often lack a college degree, or of the few that do have one, none of them are in history? That alone should indicate what is really going on in this discussion. Also, note how many of the detractors are either politicians or media figures that use the discussions to generate ratings. Once you examine the standards and the issues, it is painfully obvious that Nash, Crabtree, and Dunn are correct and that this book exposes the conservative attacks as nothing

more than political rhetoric. With that in mind this book gets four stars. I reserve five stars for truly great books and four for very good books.

Begun in 1989 as a bi-partisan initiative to enhance the teaching of K-12 history to America's students, the authors of this book--Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn--along with many others, prepared a set of guidelines and teaching examples that would guide instructors in the preparation of their classes. "History on Trial" is largely about the effort to prepare the guidelines and the furor that they caused in the mid-1990s, although there is a discussion in the early part of the book about the "culture wars" in general in the latter twentieth century. Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and aided by the Department of Education, the effort to develop these National Standards at UCLA's National Center for History in the Schools derailed in 1994 because of a conservative attack that characterized the effort as "hijacked" by political correctness and the agenda of the American Left. Led by Lynne Cheney, former head of the NEH, and aided by conservative commentators ranging from Rush Limbaugh to William Bennett to Charles Krauthammer, conservatives criticized the work of a large community of historians and teachers who developed these voluntary standards. They questioned the effort to challenge students to consider new ways of seeing the past, they criticized the reexamination of traditional interpretations, they abhorred a more multicultural and questioning approach to delving into history. It was during this era that "revisionist history" first entered the lexicon as a term of derision, as if understanding of the past could never be altered in any way. The opening salvo of this debate began in October 1994 in the pages of the "Wall Street Journal" when Lynne Cheney ambushed Nash and the others involved in the writing of the history standards. She questioned mostly, as did other critics, the teaching examples packaged with the standards. The standards themselves were relatively non-controversial and quite rigorous statements of what students should know at a given point in their education. Representative of the right's criticisms, Krauthammer wrote, "The whole document strains to promote the achievements and highlight the victimization of the country's preferred minorities, while straining equally to degrade the achievements and highlight the flaws of the white males who ran the country for its first two centuries" (pp. 189-90). As evidence, the critics mined the teaching examples for relative mentions of people and events (Speckled Snake, a Cherokee warrior, or Mercy Otis Warren, or any number of other non-traditional figures in American history texts), for challenges to students to reconsider traditional understandings (for example, questions about the relative place of Columbus in American history, as a vanguard of progress or conquest), as a statement of misplaced emphasis (shifting more toward world history rather than

stressing Western Civilization). For more than a year the onslaught continued, with Nash, et al., answering the challenges. This book details the debate, offers rebuttals by the advocates of the standards, admits some errors both in substance and in strategy to answering the critics, and discusses the revisions of the standards that eventually led to the jettisoning of the teaching examples and other changes. Most important, and this has been repeated many times in the culture wars, the facts of the controversy got lost in the media blasts. Never mind that many of the criticisms were groundless, few people actually read the standards. Even Congress got into the act, passing a resolution condemning the standards even though they were completely voluntary and not a part of any official educational requirement. What I found most interesting about "History on Trial" was the fierceness of the debate. Nash, et al., suggested, and I agree, that this was the case because of the need to redefine national identity and a concern that the bulwarks of traditional conceptions may be crumbling. This has recast historical inquiry as an intellectual battleground where the casualties are no longer theories about the past that matter mostly to historians but the overall "weltanschauung" of society in a post-modern, multicultural, anti-hierarchical age. The fundamental philosophical thrust of modern society has been a blurring of the line between fact and fiction, between realism and poetry, between the unrecoverable past and our memory of it. This raising of the inexact character of historical "truth," as well as its relationship to myth and memory and the reality of the dim and unrecoverable past, has foreshadowed deep fissures in the landscape of identity and what it means to be American. Truth, it seems, has differed from time to time and place to place with reckless abandon and enormous variety. Choice between them is present everywhere both in the past and the present; my truth dissolves into your myth and your truth into my myth almost as soon as it is articulated. We see this reinforced everywhere about us today, and mostly we shake our heads and misunderstand the versions of truth espoused by various groups about themselves and about those excluded from their fellowship. The desperation of competing claims on the past are played out very publicly, and not without rancor, in such large-scale settings as the debate over the national history standards. "History on Trial" is a very fine discussion of this debate, of course written from the perspective of the authors of the standards. I have read the standards in their various versions over the years, and I believe they are remarkably comprehensive and valuable, so I have my own positive perspective on this matter beyond reading "History on Trial." I would very much like to read a history of the debate written by Lynne Cheney or other critics of the standards. It would add to the offerings in the marketplace of ideas, a marketplace that I still believe has an important role in modern America despite those who would seek to limit its discourse.

This is a good read for the study of the 1980's culture wars over post modernism.

Yellowing pages but clean book in great condition.

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