

# History and the Public Good: American Historical Association Presidential Addresses and the Evolving Understanding of History Education

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## Abstract

This article examines a sampling of AHA presidential addresses that collectively concern the purposes of studying history. As individual artifacts, they document the particular anxieties of each outgoing president. Together, they note the relevance of history to one's own life and to the life of the state even as they express concern for the diminished role of the discipline as a transformative force in society. This concern is also a contemporary one as history educators have continued to express concern for the place of history in the public sphere and in the formal curriculum of schools. The article considers the relationship between history and the public good as depicted over time in the AHA in relation to history and social studies education.

*History is important to us, and knowledge of the past can have a profound effect on our consciousness, on our sense of ourselves. History is a supremely humanistic discipline: it may not teach us particular lessons, but it does tell us how we might live in the world.*

—Gordon Wood, *The Purpose of the Past*, p. 6

## Introduction

Increasingly, history educators are attending to historical thinking rather than to the teaching of historical content exclusively. (Lowenthal, 2000; Ozment, 2005; Stearns, Seixas,

& Wineburg, 2000). Historical inquiry is at the core of social studies and history education in various US states and Canadian provinces (Girard & Harris, 2012; Monte-Sano, 2008; Monte-Sano & De La Paz, 2012; Sandwell and von Heyking, 2014). Students are asked to engage with history authentically. The cultivation of historical thinking and inquiry is useful in the history and social studies classroom but it is also a means of fostering engaged, critical citizenship (Feinberg, 2012).

The professionalization of history came late to the United States; up until the 1880s, most of the professional history written in North America was by a select few who had the time and the resources to devote to its study (AHA Brief History, 2014). The American Historical Association (AHA) was created in 1884 and began to financially subsidize the *American Historical Review (AHR)*, taking complete control of the journal in 1915. The *AHR* publishes an artifact that serves both as a vital source for understanding the historical development of the discipline: the annual presidential address of the AHA. Since 1884, these have served as “a microcosm of the interests and concerns of the profession in various stages of its development over the past century” (AHA Presidential Addresses Archive, 2014).

This article examines a sampling of AHA presidential addresses and AHA-sponsored initiatives that collectively concern the purposes

of studying history. As individual artifacts, they document the particular anxieties of each outgoing president. Together, they note the relevance of history to one's own life and to the life of the state even as they express concern for the diminished role of the discipline as a transformative force in society. This concern is also a contemporary one; history educators have continued to express concern for the place of history in the public sphere and in the formal curriculum of schools (VanSledright, Reddy, & Walsh, 2012).

### Select Historians and their Contributions

Addresses were selected for their engagement with the question 'why study history.' The six addresses concentrated upon here are inseparable from the particular intellectual passions and interests of their authors. The AHA presidents considered were, commensurate with their roles, high-profile academics from some of the United States' leading research institutions. Several have been pioneers in their respective fields and have won prestigious awards for their scholarship and service but those are peripheral considerations in light of a common theme found in each of the presidential addresses considered here: a personal defense of the study of history in an indifferent age. These addresses were all intended for a public audience and spoke to particular issues of immediate concern. Most importantly, these historians wrote at crucial periods for the discipline of history; each of the presidents considered here was explicitly addressing threat, real and perceived, from the vicissitudes associated with modernity, globalization, or postmodernism (cf. Carpenter, 2006; Evans, 2004; 2006; Harlan, 1990; Orrill and Shapiro, 2005; Wrobel, 2008).

These presidential addresses and AHA-sponsored initiatives hoped to raise public

awareness of the discipline of history in itself and as a subject of study in schools. Each, within their own context, expressed concern for the well being of both. Becker, for instance, in the early stages of the Great Depression, warned that history was on the brink of extinction. Pomeranz, in late 2013, observed that globalization is a force that has the potential to make history an anachronism. Attending to these addresses as sources is a means of exploring the evolving vision of history, as well as its purposes and relevance in our lives.

### Background: The History Academy and Progressivism, ca. 1890-1940

The annual presidential address given by Carl Becker in the winter of 1931, titled *Everyman his own Historian* (1932), garnered a great deal of attention. But why did Becker make this address at this point in time? What were the prevailing educational trends and how did they impact the study of history? These considerations are an important backdrop to understanding this particular presidential address, its significance, and its relevance to this article.

A progressive historian, Becker, like contemporaries Charles Beard and James Harvey Robinson, wanted to see the discipline of history move away from its traditional foundations, as embodied in the American Historical Association's Committee of Seven report, *The Study of History in Schools* (1898) and, instead, cast history within a social reconstructionist lens for the advancement of young students citizens-in-training (Orrill & Shapiro, 2005; Wrobel, 2008). The Committee of Seven's report was followed by a national commission, which culminated in the 1916 Commission on the Social Studies report. The 1916 CSS report symbolized the avant-garde of the progressive spirit in education and was adopted in the public schools (Dunn, 1916). The 1916 CSS report is, perhaps:

The defining [progressive] document of the period. It is not just an important part of our educational heritage, but of our national heritage as well because it demonstrates how progressive reformers reconciled the seemingly contradictory intellectual currents of the period. . . . [The CSS report was] was not only a representative document of progressive education but was also reflective of the entire progressive movement (Fallace, 2009, p. 603; 616).

John Dewey's influence upon the 1916 CSS report, too, is undeniable; though Fallace (2009) suggested that Dewey's influence and presence was for the purpose of pedagogy, Jorgensen (2010) argued that Dewey "was a much stronger influence on the 1916 committee than many modern scholars recognize" (p. 11). The progressive mindset, therefore, was inextricably tied to the report and, up until Becker's time, was the prevailing educational persuasion.

External forces, such as the Great War, the rise of isolationism in the interwar years, the Great Depression, and other economic and political factors adversely affected the progressive movement. The motivations for writing such a presidential address – a call to social action – come into sharper focus when external forces, like the Great Depression, the waning of the progressive movement, and the attack of the social studies, are taken into account. The AHA Commission on the Social Studies convened in 1929 to address some of the pressing educational issues associated with the teaching of social studies. The recommendations of the Commission, *Conclusions and Recommendations* (1934), were not politically motivated, as the resulting media frenzy implied, but was a clash over the role of objective (standardized) testing in the future of social studies (Schul, 2013). It is within this complex social milieu as well as the continuous struggle between the academy and

social studies advocates that Becker wrote his address.

### ***Carl Becker's "Everyman" (1932)***

Carl Becker's "Everyman" address was a call to action, which set an important precedent that led to other prominent historians to defend the study of history as an academic discipline. His presidential address is, perhaps, the most cited address in the scholarly literature but, aside from that, most academics know little else about him. Though a Europeanist who taught a diverse curriculum including ancient, medieval, and modern history, Becker studied under the progressive American historian Frederick Jackson Turner at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the creator of the controversial "Frontier thesis." Much like his mentor, Becker was a maverick who chafed against mainstream currents that advocated a scientific approach to the study of history. Becker distanced himself from this popular school of thought by denouncing scientific history in favor of subjective history. This idea of the creation of history by individuals and historians alike was something he refined over the course of his career and was the essence of his presidential address (Mancall, 1990).

Unlike many of the historians considered in this article, Becker is best known for his presidential address rather than for his general scholarship, though he had published his dissertation, *The History of Political Parties in the Province of New York, 1760-1776* (1909/2012) and *The Declaration of Independence: A Study of the History of Political Ideas* (1922/2013) which is often seen as his most significant work. Though Becker's work has come under intense scrutiny in recent years, his ideas remain as scholars reference his timeless presidential address (Mancall, 1990).

Becker made an astounding prediction: if historians were not careful, their work could be

relegated to the dustbin of history. He warned of a clear and present danger, as Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes (1919) famously remarked, which implicates the profession itself and is potentially inflicted by its own members. The public good demanded a “usable” past that it could comprehend; sophisticated analyses rich in confusing historical jargon were obfuscating and alienating (Cashion, 2013).

Becker argued in his address that history is a public, not merely an academic, good. Each member of the public at large, “Mr. Everyman,” is akin to an historian. Every citizen might not possess advanced degrees, disciplinary training, or professional status, but he or she practices the skills and habits of mind that characterize the historian on a daily basis. Each has a concern for the past. What distinguishes historians, Becker argued, is the burden of making history meaningful for others and helping to distinguish fact from fiction. “Mr. Everyman is stronger than we are, and sooner or later we must adapt our knowledge to his necessities,” Becker noted. Academic history, disconnected from the public interest and the public good, is likened to the dry and isolated work of a lonely antiquarian. It is “an imaginative creation, a personal possession which each one of us, Mr. Everyman, fashions out of his individual experience, adapts to his practical or emotional needs, and adorns as well as may be to suit his aesthetic tastes” (Becker, 1932, p. 228).

### ***William McNeill’s “Why Study History?” (1985)***

The years after World War II were relatively quiet for the AHA and they began to distance themselves even further from the public schools. While the history academy grew apathetic, the social studies advocates “New Social Studies” and “Newer Social Studies” movements of the 1960s and 1970s were in full swing (Evans, 2009). Though many of the programs outlined in these social studies

initiatives, such as inquiry-learning and using primary sources, were abandoned, this period of social studies resurgence was an important stepping-stone for the social studies as they experienced a creative phase that would influence the social studies in the twenty-first century. It was not until Arthur Link gave his presidential address at the annual meeting in 1984 that a renewed interest was publicly given in reestablishing ties between the academy and the public schools and renewing a once profitable partnership (p. 155). Link was highly influential in his role as president and afterward, as the head of the second National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools in the mid- to late-1980s (Harlan, 1990). Mehlinger (1988) referred to the calling of a National Commission for the Social Studies as an “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity” and likened it to the appearance of Halley’s Comet since “national commissions on the social studies may appear only once every 70 years or so” (p. 195; p. 196). Link’s determinative role in this period explains McNeill’s active involvement not only in AHA matters, but also in the use of his celebrity as the “Father of World History” to write a spirited defense of the study of history as well as serving in advisory roles to the National Commission and the Bradley Commission. The partnership of Link and McNeill led to traditional and to world history supplanting the social studies once again.

William McNeill is perhaps most responsible for laying the foundation for modern world history studies by creating modules in Western Civilization at the University of Chicago in the mid-twentieth century. McNeill, like many of the individuals considered here, was influenced both by his father, who was a theologian and an historian, and by his teachers in high school and in college. Learning about ancient and medieval history in high school and later anthropology in

college changed McNeill's conceptualization of history and it was here, he later observed, that he began to see history through a much larger, global lens. It was not until McNeill chanced upon Toynbee's monumental twelve-volume work, *A Study of History* (1934-61), that he began to devote his scholarship to world history. He began to seriously consider writing his own world history survey following his invitation to Chatham House by Toynbee himself. The distinctive difference was not only in the study's aim to publicize a new world history but also in a digestible single- rather than multi-volume format. This magisterial work would come to be known as *The Rise of the West* (1964) and won the National Book Award (Goodier, 2010).

McNeill was known for pursuing historical studies in unconventional ways and did not believe archival work was the only worthwhile endeavor. Indeed, McNeill's son, the historian John McNeill of Georgetown University, attributed his father's war-time experiences as the guiding force that changed the trajectory of his academic research. McNeill helped to legitimate other forms of academic research, such as oral histories and memoirs, and embraced complimentary disciplines to help construct narratives that would otherwise be problematic. McNeill's contributions are still widely disseminated today (Goodier, 2010).

William McNeill has been praised as a pioneer in the field of world history and wrote an award-winning book, *The Rise of the West* (1963) that was widely used as a college textbook. Still, his mission was not only to foster historical scholarship but also to promote the field of world history through a scholarship for promising educationists in secondary and tertiary education; this extant scholarship was named in his honor and is sponsored by the World History Association. Though written over fifty years ago,

*The Rise of the West* (1964) is still cited as one of a handful of definitive works in world history and, in 2009, McNeill was honored with the National Humanities Medal.

More than five decades later, William McNeill (1985) revived Becker's call to historians to make history accessible and meaningful for students and for the general public. In his article "Why Study History?" he observed: "the study of history is indeed worthwhile and necessary for the education of effective citizens and worthy human beings. As such it can both make us wiser in our public choices and more richly human in our private lives" (McNeill, 1985, para. 1). History, he argued, is the intellectual inheritance of humanity writ large. "Only an acquaintance with the entire human adventure on earth," McNeill argued, "allows us to understand these dimensions of contemporary reality" (para. 4).

McNeill's revitalizing essay was the result of a commission from the AHA who believed, as much as Becker did in 1931, that history was becoming marginalized not only from society but from public education and schooling. McNeill articulated a vision for history that emphasized its practical application to everyday life. Further, he argued that the challenges of everyday life demanded that history relates to the challenges faced by the public at large.

History, McNeill (1985) explained, had three aspects: a) public/local history; b) national history; and, c) global history. The discipline thus played a seminal role in cultivating local, but also global, citizenship. In a world shaped by internationalization, open markets, and information access, history had a humanizing role to play. At the core of the vision is a demand of self-knowledge. This was precipitated on a sensitive study of one's relationship to others and one's context.

Studying alien religious beliefs, strange customs, diverse family patterns and vanished social structures shows how differently various human groups have tried to cope with the world around them. Broadening our humanity and extending our sensibilities by recognizing sameness and difference throughout the recorded past is therefore an important reason for studying history, and especially the history of people far away and long ago. For we can only know ourselves by knowing how we resemble and how we differ from others. Acquaintance with the human past is the only way to such self knowledge (Level III: Global History section, para. 2-3).

#### **Peter Stearns “Why Study History?” (1998)**

Peter Stearns, a prolific author who has served as the Chair of the Advanced Placement World History committee, collaborated with a community of scholars in the late 1990s which produced a ground-breaking collection of essays titled *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives* (2000). This work was co-edited with Peter Seixas and Sam Wineburg, leaders in history education in Canada and the United States, respectively. In recognition of his abilities as both a scholar and teacher, Stearns was invited to present a lecture series sponsored by The Teaching Company on “A Brief History of the World,” selected from the top 1% of university professors in the United States.

In a complementary article commissioned by the AHA, Stearns (1998) argued for a “bottom-up” approach to the study of history. His tone is similar to that of Becker’s (1932) and McNeill’s (1985). He takes a practical and

utilitarian approach, arguing that the discipline of history holds the potential to unravel many of life’s most pressing problems. While Becker challenged his contemporaries to make history accessible to a popular audience to avoid annihilation or obsolescence, Stearns took a different approach; he argued that historical thinking served to meet the complexities of a new and modern age: “This, fundamentally, is why we cannot stay away from history: *it offers the only extensive evidential base for the contemplation and analysis of how societies function, and people need to have some sense of how societies function simply to run their own lives*” (Stearns, 1998, emphases added).

Stearns’ address touched upon various subject, including the “Importance of History in Our Own Lives,” “History Contributes to Moral Understanding,” “History Provides Identity,” “Studying History is Essential for Good Citizenship” and “History is Useful in the World of Work.” He itemized numerous skills that the study of history helped to cultivate, which were useful in the lives of every citizen, including: the ability to assess and to interpret evidence, conflicting interpretations, and historical continuity. The articulation of these basic competencies was conspicuously absent from previous *AHR* publications. Stearns’ eloquent defense of history illuminated the potentiality of history for considering the past but also for living thoughtfully in a world that was incessantly evolving. “Historical study,” he argued, “contributes to our capacity to use evidence, assess interpretations, and analyze change and continuities. No one can ever quite deal with the present as a historian deals with the past—we lack the perspective for this feat; but we can move in this direction by applying historical habits of mind, and we will function as better citizens in the process” (Stearns, 1998, 7.5; 8.2). For Stearns,

history amounts to a “laboratory of human experience” (8.2).

Becker (1932), McNeill (1985), and Stearns (1998) were concerned about the state of affairs in the history academy as well as its apathy and disconnect of the public good. Their calls to action garnered momentum in the mid-1990s when an abundant corpus of literature relating to the teaching of history and social studies education blossomed (cf. Stearns, Seixas, and Wineburg, 2000).

**Making Sense of the Future: The 21<sup>st</sup> Century**  
*James Sheehan “How do we learn from History?” (2005)*

James Sheehan is Emeritus Professor of modern European history at Stanford University. Sheehan has had a distinguished career as a teacher and a scholar. Sheehan wrote *Museums in the German Art World: From the End of the Old Regime to the Rise of Modernism* (2000) and *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone?: The Transformation of Modern Europe* (2008). Sheehan’s service to the profession includes being an editorial board member to several prestigious journals, a member of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University, and a corresponding fellow of the Royal Historical Society. Professional accolades include several celebrated fellowships, including a National Endowment for the Humanities and Guggenheim fellowship. Sheehan’s academic excellence has not been reserved to scholarship; he has won numerous teaching awards from several universities.

James Sheehan was president of the AHA in 2005 and he wrote a short address titled “How Do We Learn From History?” His address dovetails with others, noted above, particularly the contributions of Becker (1932), McNeill (1985), and Stearns (1998). While advocating the

value and merit of the study of history, Sheehan (2005) outlined its significance in making strategic and political decisions that affect polity at the national level. His two examples are noteworthy – the occupation of Germany in 1945 as a historical pretext for the occupation of Iraq in 2003 and the “Munich analogy” of appeasement against Hitler in 1938 and Saddam Hussein in the early 2000s. In both cases, history was misappropriated in order to suit preconceived notions and to manipulate a sensitive and emotional citizenry. The problem, Sheehan explained, is not that the comparisons were made but in *how* they were made and for *what* immediate purposes. These claims and comparisons needed to be “tested” in order to discern their applicability (Sheehan, 2005, para. 7). Historians, Sheehan continued, “do not need to be persuaded that studying history is worthwhile.” (Sheehan, 2005, para. 1). For others, the purposes of history should be more explicit and related to the broader aims of a state’s citizenry. This involves the cultivation of historical consciousness and knowledge in students; this aim is implicated in the aim of developing civic-mindedness.

The AHA presidential addresses noted share a conviction that historical consciousness equips students to confront the challenges and demands of an ever-evolving world. It is characterized as is an indispensable part of a worldview oriented towards civic engagement; no citizen can escape the grip of history:

We constantly tell stories about the past to our students, friends, children—and to ourselves—stories that are supposed to convey moral and practical lessons about how to behave . . . and, of course, historical lessons are a part of every political discussion and debate. Again and again, our political leaders use the

past to warn, admonish, and inspire the public; to criticize their opponents; and to justify their own policies (para. 3).

Sheehan acknowledged that we inhabit an increasingly complex world, while he testified that history was an essential tool that could enable citizens to decipher this world's complexities. These include increasingly interconnected work contexts, rapidly changing technologies, and 24/7 news networks that permeate every corner of society. Such complexities stand as tides and waves; being able to navigate the rough waters of civic life, we argue, is essential. History serves as a rudder in the storm for students cast upon a sea that is always in flux. Applying historical thinking skills to contemporary life is crucial in determining what is the correct course of action, whether in small matters or in the polling booth: "What we learn from history," Sheehan (2005) cautioned "depends entirely on how we do it" (para. 8). Sheehan thus attends to history education and to the teaching and learning of history as a seminal aspect of its health and vitality in the public sphere.

### ***William Cronon and Storytelling***

William Cronon came to prominence when he published his award-winning book, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (1991). His influence upon environmental history and the American West can be felt in history classrooms today, as his book is required reading across various educational contexts. Cronon has had an unwavering commitment to mentoring a new generation of future historians and scholars and has been an advocate for public history outreach and conservation.

In 2012, William Cronon offered one of the most authoritative presidential addresses in

the AHA's history; his aim was to draw the academy's attention to a number of pressing concerns, which included, primarily, the survival of history in a postmodern age. Cronon noted that only "a small handful explore the role of history in public life, and a still smaller handful (the fingers on one hand are probably sufficient to count them) discuss the *teaching* of history" (Cronon, 2013, p. 2). His presidential address took the form of a "meditation" on the current state of the field and its future (p. 3).

Cronon pulled no punches: "I feel even more strongly that the discipline as a whole is facing greater threats and challenges than at any time in the past half-century . . . public support and funding for history . . . are in decline" (p. 3). The greatest threat to history and to education in a broader sense, he argued, is a consequence of its encounter with the digital age. Cronon lamented the fact that cultural literacy is on the decline; students, he argued "no longer read books for pleasure" (p. 4). He continued: "Where texts and tweets and Facebook postings have become the dominant forms of communication, reading itself is more at risk than many of us realize" (p. 4). Search engines such as Google have transformed the ways that students of history search for and interact with knowledge and evidence: "If a piece of information cannot be Googled, it effectively does not exist for them" (p. 4). Cronon summed the problem facing 21<sup>st</sup> century historians and their institution as the following:

In a distracted world where even undergraduates at top universities are increasingly challenged to read the kinds of books we have traditionally written, and at a moment when there seems to be widespread public doubt about whether to continue supporting the study of the past as this organization has traditionally

understood that activity, what is the future of history? (p. 5).

The historian's future, Cronon suggested, depends on a solution that is both simple and complex: storytelling. The story of history, how it is written, and how it is communicated has gradually shifted away from the general public and toward the heart of the history academy. This epistemological "shift" has inadvertently isolated history from its lifeblood – the common person – resulting in historians "adopt[ing] vocabularies and ways of speaking that have the effect of excluding outsiders who do not belong to that profession" (p. 6). Not only has this "shift" alienated its greatest potential audience, but it has also forgotten its fundamental purpose: "to pass that love [of history] on to others who do not yet share it. Nothing we do is more important." (p. 6). In order to redress the balance, historians must make the effort to popularize history. "It is our job, not theirs," Cronon chides his colleagues in the academy, "to persuade them of its importance and teach them its fascinations. Other professionals can perhaps afford to be boring, but not us" (p. 7).

Popular venues for storytelling include notable books and films that connect the public with historical themes and personalities but one of the most basic, yet often underrated, venues is the classroom. A substantial portion of Cronon's (2013) presidential address is devoted to his undergraduate mentor Richard Ringle, who is remembered as a compelling teller of stories. Cronon admits that he was left "under the spell of this teacher" (p. 16). The classroom, Cronon continued, offers the opportunity to reconnect students with history in a forum that can engage them deeply: "We just need to keep looking for the best and most engaging ways to tell our stories, and to remember always to be on guard against boredom" (p. 16).

Teaching is not restricted to the physical classroom; in fact, the public outside the classroom itself is the perfect laboratory for teaching and storytelling. In a routine visit to Ringle's office, Cronon learned testified that he learned the most important lesson that his mentor had to teach him: academics are fallible, finite human beings. When Ringle pondered what Cronon believed to be a trivial question, Cronon was astounded when Ringle matter-of-factly said, "I don't know" (p. 17). Intrigued by the question Cronon posed, they worked side-by-side for the next half hour searching for answers. For Cronon, he recalled, this was a life-changing experience:

I do not remember what that question was. I do not even remember whether we actually answered it. What I do remember was that Dick Ringle—whom I regarded as the most brilliant and learned teacher I had ever known—had responded to a casual undergraduate question by saying 'I don't know.' He had then taken that question seriously enough to spend half an hour in my company puzzling through the process of figuring out what its answer might be. I will never forget that moment as long as I live (Cronon, 2013, pp.17-18).

Cronon noted that there were many morals to the story he was recounting yet one of the utmost significance was that the classroom is "where we can show our students—and, by extension, our non-professional readers and ourselves—the larger meanings of our work" (p. 18). Ultimately, as noted above, history's relationship to the public good must be meaningfully communicated to students. The alternative can be alienating. Echoing Carl Becker's 1931, address, Cronon observed: "Our ultimate responsibility is to living history, which withers into professional boredom

if we speak only with each other or with our graduate students. The digital revolution has created endless opportunities” (Cronon, 2013, p. 18). Yet, he continued, these opportunities – exemplified by blogs, websites, social media, and online video – will only be memorable when conveyed with care and with passion.

### ***Kenneth Pomeranz and the Future of History***

Kenneth Pomeranz’ book, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern Economy* (2000), won numerous awards and suggested that the Industrial Revolution could have just as easily occurred in China as it did in Great Britain. In short, it reconceptualized the way economic historians view China and its place in the early modern period. Like the other addresses examined here, Pomeranz relates history to his personal experience, but his thoughts stand out for the concentration on his own education and his motivations to encourage historical thinking (Laichas, 2007).

Pomeranz, Cronon’s successor as president of the AHA, persisted with a cautionary tone. His focus was not narrowly defined to the United States; the relationship between history and civic mindedness was a global concern. His address, titled “Histories for a less National Age” recognized the achievement and endurance of national histories; these narratives, he argued, come with a price, as they “include powerful political pressures to focus education more narrowly on what will supposedly yield immediate economic returns, rather than on nurturing knowledge and habits of thought relevant to the reflective citizen or individual” (Pomeranz, 2014, p. 3). For Pomeranz, who cited research by Rosenzweig and Thelen (1998), the growing divide between the present and the past

is in part due to the disconnect that average people feel with their own national histories. Pomeranz contended that what was missing was a clear sense of individual citizens’ historical consciousness, or, their sense that they are connected to and included in the national narratives that are told. Histories that are more international and global with respect to perspectives and warrants have the potential to be more inclusive. Such histories would entail confrontation between and reconciliation of several national narratives, each of which is necessarily biased and perspectival (Pearcy, 2011; 2013; 2014). Pomeranz’s quest for an “inclusive” and “coherent” history supersedes his loyalty to a national history that does not adequately define or encompass a diverse population’s corporate and individual identity (Pomeranz, 2014, p. 11).

History, he continued, is a “public service” that is unlike any other discipline other than literature that a diverse student population “can turn to for nationally based courses (p. 12). The principal purpose of history education is “preparedness for citizenship” (p. 13). Using language that permeates rhetoric descriptive of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Pomeranz defined this as an age of globalization, a world that is qualitatively quite different from the world experienced in previous generations, and a world that requires of its citizens constant and quick adaptation. History education that does not help students to understand, to frame, and to act within this context of dynamic change fails to perform its most basic yet essential function:

If globalization has an implication for us as civic educators, it is not simply that ‘once upon a time, history made national citizens; now it must make world citizens.’ Identities are multiple, and often mutually reinforcing rather than competitive; so, too, are the contexts for

public action. As David Hollinger put it, in a slightly different context, we also have obligations to ‘a public smaller than the species’ (Pomeranz, 2014, pp. 13-14).

Pomeranz, like Cronon, saw history as a lens for not only communicating the past but also for sharpening transferable skills to students for lifelong use. Historical consciousness is, in many respects, a second order skill, which depends on facility with reading, writing, and a general inclination towards critical thought. These skills are essential for analyzing and interpreting not only the past but also the present. Together, the application of first and second order skills is integral aspects of civic mindedness:

These are important tools for students to hone; they provide leverage on vital intellectual questions about structure, agency, and about possibilities for empathetic understanding of experiences remote from our own. But they are also highly practical skills that give students leverage on questions they might well confront in non-academic careers. This is not, of course, the only way history can matter, but it is one that should find ready takers, while actually moving our pedagogy closer to what we often, all too revealingly, call ‘our own work’” (p. 21).

History, in sum, serves a purpose in helping the polity understand the present, as well as the past. As the presidents of the AHA persistently acknowledged, history is not an antiquarian pursuit for the few but a necessity for the many. History’s necessity is amplified by the complexities of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. How might we use history and for what purpose? “Our discipline,” Pomeranz argued, “has a rather unusual relationship to time, space, and place, and

we live in a moment when many people wonder which pasts, if any, one must engage with in order to navigate something called ‘today’s world’” (pp. 21-22).

His response, while prescient, is not particularly novel. More than a century earlier, Captain John Paul Jones, writing to his friend the Marquis de Lafayette after the Revolutionary war in 1780 noted: “Here follows my political profession. I am a citizen of the world, totally unfettered by the little mean distinctions of country or of climate, which diminish or set bounds to the benevolence of the heart” (Mahan, 1898). Pomeranz might agree; national histories have served their purpose and are anachronistic in the present age, where imagined boundaries no longer divide. Histories are radically different in content, scope, and shape; a greater meta-world narrative whose sole focus is the human story.

### **History’s Response in the Schools**

“The goal of public education,” Feinberg (2012) argued, “is to renew a public by providing the young with the skills, dispositions, and perspectives required to engage with strangers about their shared interests and common fate and to contribute to shaping it” (p. 19). The act of renewal described by Feinberg is the desired outcome of studying history. Revitalizing and replenishing an apathetic public is achievable through history but challenges in and outside the classroom persist.

### ***Signature Pedagogies***

What is a signature pedagogy? Shulman (2005) described them as, “characteristic forms of teaching [and learning] . . . that organize the fundamental ways in which future practitioners are educated for their new professions” (p. 52). “In these signature pedagogies,” Shulman observed, “novices are instructed in critical aspects of the three fundamental dimensions of

professional work – to *think*, to *perform*, and to *act with integrity*” (p. 52). Proficiency, like learning, is achieved gradually over time where students are allowed to learn the fundamentals while exploring and creating a usable past that fills an immediate need in the present. History anchored in the past has little value for the present; extrapolating meaning and value from the past for use in the present is when history fulfills its true purpose and teleological function. Learning history, much like Shulman’s model, is a procedural process: beginning in elementary school and building upon that knowledge in secondary and higher institutions of education facilitate a maturation process that enables students to enter civic society as contributors rather than bystanders. “One thing is clear,” Shulman concluded, “signature pedagogies make a difference. They form habits of the mind, habits of the heart, and habits of the hand” (p. 59).

One notable example of a signature pedagogy in history that has gained traction is Calder’s (2006) “Uncoverage” model, which seeks to place the student, not the curriculum, at the center. Though a departure from the traditional history curriculum that stressed and tested for general historical knowledge, Calder’s model, instead, focused on bridging historical knowledge with historical thinking. Calder advocated for selected sampling – the “uncovering” of specific events, figures, and forces – rather than rushing to “cover” the whole textbook. While many applauded Calder’s suggestion, others were less than enthusiastic about rethinking the way history was taught in the classroom (Pace, 2004; 2011). It was, perhaps, easier for newer faculty to adapt to the paradigmatic shift demanded by a new approach to history education that demanded a degree of sensitivity toward learners displaying myriad learning pathways.

### ***Teaching American History Grant Program***

The Teaching American History grant program, funded by the federal government via the Department of Education since 2000, was an initiative to reinvigorate professional practice by focusing on professional development of teachers. Specifically, this program connected interested public school history teachers with history professors to increase their subject-matter knowledge, acquire greater content knowledge, and learn new pedagogical skillsets to create a more dynamic learning environment. But, some scholars have been skeptical of the Teaching American History grant program’s altruistic mission, which is simply a veiled attempt at discrediting the social studies and consolidating political clout through the agency of the National Council for History Education (Singer, 2005, p. 200). The push toward “traditional” American history is visibly present after 2003 but has this reorientation negatively affected the professional development of teachers and student achievement?

However, an unintended benefit, argued De La Paz, Malkus, Monte-Sano, and Montanaro (2011), emerged where “historians changed in their perspective of how they interacted with and supported teachers, and teachers gained a much deeper appreciation for teaching about historical information as well as an understanding of how to situate and analyze historical sources” (p. 495). De La Paz et al. (2011) studied the effects of one such TAH grant and examined its efficacy in terms of student outcomes (e.g., writing responses to document-based questions). The authors found that a “reasonable” amount of professional development can have a significant effect on student outcomes as teachers become more familiar with primary source material and their instructional value in the classroom. How much professional development is necessary? The

authors found that 30 or more hours of professional development over the span of 6-12 months was optimal; in cases where teachers engaged in less than 12 hours per year, there was no significant effect on student outcomes (pp. 520-521). The authors made four recommendations for future consideration in TAH-directed programs: 1) the analysis of primary source material in classrooms; 2) acquisition of historical content/knowledge; 3) professional development opportunities with academics/historians; and 4) instructional support implementing new lessons and the like (pp. 521-522). The Teaching American History initiative has served as a medium of professional development for public school teachers and, as evidenced by De La Paz et al.'s study, it has positively affected on student outcomes,

### ***The Problem of Textbooks in History***

The “textbook problem” is not new to history or the social studies. The first national controversy erupted over the Rugg textbook in the 1930s because of its alleged unpatriotic and politically charged content presentation (Evans, 2006). However, the content of textbooks has remained little unchanged since Rugg’s bold attempt to introduce a radical new textbook that used “lively and engaging” text accentuated by the “frequent use of photos, drawings, and cartoons” to capture the attention and imagination of students (p. 16). Proponents of the status quo quickly attacked Rugg’s vision and his novel ideas were dismissed and forgotten (Carbone, 1977; Karolides, 2006). The textbook-centered curriculum, however, has persisted in spite of its problematic nature.

The teacher recitation method of instruction, a favorite of history teachers and professors, is dominated by the textbook (Mehlinger, 1988; Wineburg, 2001). The

following excerpt is Mehlinger’s (1988) understanding of the recitation method in action:

Teacher assigns reading from a textbook; students complete the reading; teacher poses questions to determine if students understood the reading assignment. Some teachers ask their students to write answer to questions that cover the reading; some teachers intersperse the recitation with anecdotes and information that extend the textbook treatment; occasionally issues are framed that provoke lively discussion. But nearly everywhere it is the same: directed discussion is *the* method for teaching social studies. It is not surprising that social studies is among the most boring subjects for students. (p. 204).

Furthermore, this method, Mehlinger observed, is the “easiest way to teach” and “textbooks support [these] practices” (p. 204). The problem lies in that history and social studies instruction has changed relatively little since the introduction of the history textbook; though scholars have drawn attention to the glaring factual errors and omissions present in textbooks, not to mention the political and national biases in their narratives, the nature of textbooks remains the same (Altbach, Kelly, Petrie, & Weis, 1991; Anyon, 1979; Apple 1995; Apple, 2000; Apple, 2004; Cherryholmes, 1988; Foster, 2011; Foster & Howson, 2010; Paxton, 2002; Moreau, 2004; Zimmerman, 2002). This is a disturbing trend as though scholars have been critical of the textbook, its popularity and resilience are indisputable

Paxton (2002) argued that students ought to be at the heart of the curriculum and, consequently, textbooks, which were valuable curricular tools, need to evolve in order to meet

the needs of modern classrooms. The problem with textbooks, he argued, is that they are written in a peculiar “vernacular” that “is instantly recognizable to anyone whose youth was spent laboring within the walls of a public high school in the United States. This mode of writing has earned its own ignominious label: textbookese” (p. 198). Because of their intrinsic value, textbooks should abandon the voice of the “omniscient author” and insert a “visible author” who expresses “his or her point of view or personal beliefs about the content under discussion” (p. 198). This is an important step, Paxton argued, to kindle a mental conversation or dialogue between student and textbook (cf. Reisman, 2012a; Reisman, 2012b; Reisman, 2014).

Until the orientation of textbooks change, students will continue to be disengaged from learning history because textbooks “are the best-known historical text” and “serve a number of important roles in history classrooms . . . substantially influencing curricula” (p. 198). As noted above, Wineburg (2001) revealed that the vast majority of college students implicitly trusted the content of textbooks. This is a problem that should be garnering more attention and scrutiny; Paxton (2002) found that “through their choice of rhetoric, not to mention their sheer size and weight, history textbooks exude authority. By the time students reach high school, they know well the apparently sagacious voice of history textbooks, and they place their trust in it” (p. 233). As Wineburg, Paxton, and colleagues have argued, textbooks are a powerful curricular tool that not only affects classroom instruction, but also the attitudes, beliefs, and conceptions of impressionable students. In an extensive review of conciliatory and critical traditions within textbook analysis research, Foster (2011) concluded:

Textbooks are seen as powerful instruments with which to present a particular version of the nation’s past. At the heart of all critical research is the fundamental realization that all textbooks offer a selected version of the past. No books offer neutral knowledge. No textbook offers content that is objective and value-free. The authors of history textbooks deliberately include some information and exclude others. Very often these choices are made for ideological reasons and typically they reflect the values, beliefs, and attitudes of powerful groups with long traditions of dominance in society. As a result, therefore, textbooks have long been a major site for the construction and contestation of national, regional, and international identities and are, understandably, the constant subject of critical study by international scholars. (pp. 13-14).

Though scholars have been critical in their appraisals of history textbooks, discernible progress toward eliminating these deficiencies from history textbooks has been excruciatingly slow (Williams, 2014). As the primary curricular agent, the textbook shapes students’ understanding of the past in profound ways. The Rugg textbook, perhaps, might be just what is needed to revitalize history instruction as well as a narrative that is crisp and engaging and free of errors and outdated information.

There have been several defenses of the study of world history, popularized by such luminaries as William McNeill (1985) and Peter Stearns (1998) on behalf of the American Historical Association, but Jerry Bentley’s *Why Study World History?* (2007), argued forcefully

for reestablishing both world history's prominence as a discipline and as a school subject:

Of *all* the fields of scholarship, world history offers the deepest and richest understanding of the world and its development through time, it has excellent potential to promote constructive engagement with that which is *different*, and it has strong potential as well to foster the development of *good judgment*, with the possibility that good judgment will transmute in some cases into *genuine wisdom* about the fundamental issues confronting the contemporary world [emphasis added]. (para. 31).

For Bentley, the study of world history, and national history through a world-historical lens, was essential, a necessity for sober-minded individuals in a postmodern age. "World history," Bentley concluded, "is one of the big intellectual issues of our times" (para. 2). Thus, history is framed as a means of helping the public to understand the world beyond the nation state and one's particular place within a larger narrative. This marks a subtle shift from a national to an international perspective. While the presidential addresses were originally concerned with U.S. history and the role that it played in the public sphere, the addresses took an increasingly world-historical outlook and reflected on the realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century for a global citizenry.

### **Conclusions**

The AHA presidents profiled in this article attended to the role that history plays in a changing society. In the public sphere, the discipline has been challenged to demonstrate its value to the lives of citizens and to concentrate on

why the past is important to the present. This involves a paradigmatic shift from pure academic history to scholarship that is committed to the public good. How, in other words, can history be inclusive?

The cognitive learning models discussed in this article are relatively new in history and social studies education but the success enjoyed in related cognate fields is encouraging. Effective history education can help students of history and the public at large to think of the discipline beyond the confines of classroom and textbooks. As Barzun (1991) noted: "The truth is, when all is said and done, one does not teach a subject, one teaches a student how to learn it" (p. 35). Engaging students and the public alike in historical debate and dialogue are means of exercising the virtues of historical practice and thinking. The late medievalist Norman Cantor wrote a popular survey of medieval history that is still used in undergraduate classrooms today. A believer in popular history, Cantor (1967) wrote that the student of history "should be awakened to a deeper understanding of both himself and society; that excellence in historical study should be claimed by the student as a right that opens the door to an endless world of discovery and meaning" (p. 6). What is clear is that history's purposes and functions have been and will remain contentious. Yet a persistent concern within the AHA, as is made evident by its presidential addresses, is that history is inextricably linked to the public and to the public good. History, at its best, is an interactive, communal activity that facilitates reflection on what it means to be human in place and time; at its worst, it is an isolated and exclusive activity participated in by only a few.

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