



History of the United States

Charles A. Beard

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As things now stand, the course of instruction in American history in our public schools embraces three distinct treatments of the subject. Three separate books are used. First, there is the primary book, which is usually a very condensed narrative with emphasis on biographies and anecdotes. Second, there is the advanced text for the seventh or eighth grade, generally speaking, an expansion of the elementary book by the addition of forty or fifty thousand words. Finally, there is the high school manual. This, too, ordinarily follows the beaten path, giving fuller accounts of the same events and characters. To put it bluntly, we do not assume that our children obtain permanent possessions from their study of history in the lower grades. If mathematicians followed the same method, high school texts on algebra and geometry would include the multiplication table and fractions. There is, of course, a ready answer to the criticism advanced above. It is that teachers have learned from bitter experience how little history their pupils retain as they pass along the regular route. No teacher of history will deny this. Still it is a standing challenge to existing methods of historical instruction. If the study of history cannot be made truly progressive like the study of mathematics, science, and languages, then the historians assume a grave responsibility in adding their subject to the already overloaded curriculum. If the successive historical texts are only enlarged editions of the first text—more facts, more dates, more words—then history deserves most of the sharp criticism which it is receiving from teachers of science, civics, and economics. In this condition of affairs we find our justification for offering a new high school text in American history. Our first contribution is one of omission. The time-honored stories of exploration and the biographies of heroes are left out. We frankly hold that, if pupils know little or nothing about Columbus, Cortes, Magellan, or Captain John Smith by the time they reach the high school, it is useless to tell the same stories for perhaps the fourth time. It is worse than useless. It is an offense against the teachers of those subjects that are demonstrated to be progressive in character.

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