

Lynne Cheney in the “Culture Wars”

“What images of human possibility will American society put before its members? What standards will it suggest to them as befitting the dignity of the human spirit? What decent balance among human employments will it exhibit? Will it speak to them only of success and celebrity and the quick fix that makes them happy, or will it find a place for grace, elegance, nobility, and a sense of connection with the human adventure? – Charles Frankel, quoted in *Humanities in America*, 1988.

“There is a great cultural gang war [going on] and [Lynne Cheney] is standing up to the mob, and she is taking flak for it. If you take that job, they [the traditional humanities community] will come after you and try to bust your knees.” – William Bennett, 1991.

“In the long run, neither individuals nor societies flourish when truth becomes the servant of politics.” – Lynne Cheney, 1992.

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Introduction

The proposed National Standards for United States History[‡], released in October 1994, provoked a firestorm of criticism from conservatives that continues to the present.¹ The public leader of this reaction has been Lynne Cheney, who has written several editorials in *The Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* denouncing the standards and even stating that the standards are one example of why the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the agency she once headed, should be abolished.²

The controversy over the American history standards is one of many the controversies in “the culture wars” that have raged in the humanities and in the arts for the last 30 years between conservatives and liberals. In the humanities, these wars have had their battlegrounds in how history should be portrayed in schools, how literature should be taught, and, especially, whether religion has a role in public life.³

What I will examine in this paper is Lynne Cheney’s role on the conservative side of the culture war battle, making special reference to her role in the debate over the American history standards. I will discuss who Cheney is, what her views on the culture wars in the humanities have been, how these views changed after she left the NEH in January 1993, and whether her 1995 book *Telling the Truth* does, in fact, tell the truth.

[‡] The controversy over the proposed National Standards for World History is relevant to this paper, but is not discussed in it.

¹ Cheney, Lynne; 2 May 1996.

² Cheney, Lynne; 24 Jan 1995.

³ Jensen, among other sources.

Lynne Cheney at the NEH

When Lynne Cheney replaced William Bennett as head of the NEH in May 1986, she had already had a long career in both the humanities and in politics. After receiving her doctorate in British literature from the University of Wisconsin in 1970, Cheney taught English at several different colleges in both her home state of Wyoming and in the Washington, DC area, where her husband, Dick Cheney, was influential in national Republican politics. Lynne Cheney also had written or co-written three critically well-received books and been a magazine editor before being hired at the NEH.⁴

As chairman of the NEH, Cheney was in charge of an agency whose purpose is “to promote scholarship, research, education, and public programs in the humanities, including history, philosophy, language, literature, archaeology, jurisprudence, art history and criticism, ethics, and comparative religion.”⁵ She used the bully pulpit of her chairmanship to a degree to which it had not been used before,⁶ focusing her energies on gaining public support to increase the rigor and depth of humanities education in high schools and colleges. Of the six major reports released by the NEH under her name, five focused on how the humanities are taught in schools (and even the sixth, her 1988 report *Humanities in America*, dealt at length with colleges and universities.)

In her 1987 report *American Memory*, Cheney discussed how grade schools transmit cultural memory through generations, and why this transmission is a vital part of their purpose. Her report examined

⁴ Current Biography Yearbook 1992, pg. 121

⁵ *ibid*, pg. 122

⁶ Burd, 4 Nov 1992

how history, literature, and foreign languages are taught (and ignored), focusing in turn on the roles textbooks and teachers play in this process. Cheney made three recommendations: “More time should be devoted to the study of history, literature and foreign languages,” “Textbooks should be made more substantive,” and “Teachers should be given opportunities to become more knowledgeable about the subjects that they teach.”⁷

The next year, Cheney released a report on *Humanities in America*, a broader overview of the process of cultural transmission that discussed how museums, libraries, television, public lectures, and other fora can be and are used as a kind of “parallel school” to spread the fruits of the American humanities. “In a democratic society,” Cheney wrote, “the humanities [...] should be part of every life.”⁸

Cheney’s 1989 report, *50 Hours: A Core Curriculum for College Students*, was the first of her reports to address an area of real controversy within the humanities: the debate about whether colleges should have a core curriculum at all, and, if it should, what that curriculum should consist of. Cheney emphatically reaffirmed the value of a core curriculum, arguing that such a core could “ensure that students have opportunities to know the literature, philosophy, institutions, and art of our own and other cultures [as well as] encourage understanding of mathematics and science.”⁹ She proposed a model core of 50 hours of courses: 18 hours in “cultures and civilizations,” 12 hours in foreign language, eight hours in natural

⁷ Cheney, *American Memory*, pg. 28

⁸ Cheney, *Humanities in America*, pg. 31

⁹ Cheney, *50 Hours*, pg. 11

science, six hours in mathematics, and six hours in “social sciences and the modern world.”¹⁰

Cheney went further into controversy with her next report, *Tyrannical Machines*. She argued that schools and colleges had developed ingrained habits and practices which discouraged effective teaching. In grade schools, the main sources of this problem were insipid teacher training, bland textbooks, and insufficient standards, for which Cheney recommended that alternate paths to teacher certification be allowed, in-service training be broadened, and parents be allowed more choice in where their children go to school.¹¹ For colleges, Cheney recommended that fewer classes be taught by graduate students, that teaching play a greater role relative to research in hiring and promotion decisions, and that parents have more information available to them about the teaching quality of colleges.¹²

Cheney’s final report (I’ll briefly discuss her penultimate report, *National Tests*, later), released six weeks before the 1992 election, was perhaps her most controversial. The report’s title, *Telling the Truth*, conveyed a double meaning: That a growing politicization on campus has made telling the truth difficult, and that unwarranted theoretical changes in the study of the humanities have made the search for truth to seem itself a political agenda.¹³ Cheney cited several articles in which liberals or radicals supported imposing their politics in their classrooms, but she never presented any sort of statistical evidence to support her case that politics in the academy was a growing trend

¹⁰ *ibid*, pgs. 19, 29, 35, 43, 51

¹¹ Cheney, *Tyrannical Machines*, pgs. 5-24, 50

¹² *ibid*, pgs. 34-41, 51

¹³ Cheney, *Telling the Truth* (1992), pgs. 5, 7

rather than a constant presence. Because the existence of a trend cannot be proven by anecdotes, this lack of scholarly rigor hurts Cheney's case.

Ironically, it was *Telling the Truth* that brought to a head charges that Cheney herself was politicking inappropriately. When a columnist for the *Washington Post*, Amy Schwartz, asked the NEH for the origins of three provocative and uncredited quotations from "politically correct" professors that were included in the pre-release publicity for *Telling the Truth*, the NEH refused to say who had said them or where (the press release had only identified the speakers with generic labels such as "Princeton professor.") Schwartz finally had to resort to database searches to get the information, and found that the quotes were not nearly as egregious as the NEH press release had portrayed them as being. She noted the irony of this distortion and its cover-up appearing in a press release that claimed that "Lynne Cheney, chairman of the NEH, will dare to tell the truth."¹⁴

A few months later, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* noted that to help out President Bush's re-election campaign, Cheney had "campaigned in New Hampshire and attended and spoke at the Republican National Convention [... and] addressed party events in California, Michigan, New York, and Wyoming." Critics noted that the chair of the NEH is supposed to be non-partisan.¹⁵

Historian Richard Jensen later charged that "Cheney had been lackadaisical about management of the Endowment, letting political aides make the decisions while she accompanied her husband, the

¹⁴ Schwartz, 8 Sept 1992

¹⁵ Burd, 4 Nov 1992

Secretary of Defense, on numerous trips making the contacts that would be needed for his possible presidential bid.”¹⁶ (Dick Cheney dropped out of the presidential race on January 3, 1995¹⁷)

After Bush’s defeat in the 1992 election, Lynne Cheney decided to resign as head of the NEH on Bill Clinton’s inauguration day, even though the “[l]egislation authorizing the NEH does not allow an incoming President to remove the endowment’s chairman.”¹⁸ One critic of Cheney’s speculated that she resigned because had she stayed she would be “defending a Clinton Administration budget, pursuing a Clinton Administration reauthorization strategy, and, perhaps running NEH without key trusted aides.”¹⁹

Since leaving the NEH, Cheney has been a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think-tank in Washington, DC, and has founded the National Alumni Forum, which Cheney describes as a “charitable organization” that, among other things, “point[s] alums who are tired of having their gifts used to perpetuate the radical revisionism that is becoming common on our campuses toward the sound and serious scholarship that is also being undertaken.”²⁰

The controversy over the National History Standards

At a 1990 budget hearing, Cheney described history as “her pet topic.”²¹ She seemed to take a personal interest in the plan to develop national history standards, a project that was rewarded in 1992 (along

¹⁶ Jensen, pg. 23

¹⁷ Benedetto, 4 Jan 1995

¹⁸ Burd, 9 Dec 1992, pg. A19

¹⁹ *ibid*, pg. A25

²⁰ Cheney, 24 Jan 1995

²¹ Povich, 18 Jun 1990, pg. 5-3

with \$525,000 in NEH funds and \$865,000 in Department of Education funds) to UCLA's National Center for History in the Schools.²² The previous year, Cheney had devoted her annual report to the ways that other nations administered national testing²³, and was now ready to examine whether such tests were feasible in the United States.²⁴

The National Standards for U.S. History that were developed during the next two years under the guidance of co-directors Charlotte Crabtree and Gary Nash, and with the input of hundreds of teachers and professors, including such distinguished historians as Joyce Appleby, Eric Foner, Bernard Lewis, and William McNeill.²⁵

The professed goal of the standards is to integrate historical understanding with historical thinking, thereby giving students the facts of history as well as tools to interpret them.²⁶ For historical understanding, there are 31 major standards and more than 100 minor standards spread across 10 eras describing what facts students are expected to learn. Within each standard are included ways for teachers to instill in students the five standards for historical thinking about those facts: chronological thinking, historical comprehension, historical analysis and interpretation, historical research capabilities, and historical issues-analysis and decision-making.²⁷ Appended to each standard are recommended exercises that teachers can use to involve students more deeply in their learning.

²² Cheney, 20 Oct 1994

²³ Cheney, National Tests

²⁴ Cheney, 2 May 1996

²⁵ National Standards, pgs. 263-71

²⁶ *ibid*, pg. 8

²⁷ *ibid*, pgs. 18-19

By the time these standards were released on October 25, 1994²⁸, Cheney had already attacked them in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*. In a column titled “The End of History,” Cheney claimed that the standards were “politically correct,” slanted toward liberal views, and disrespectful of American achievements.²⁹

Rather than discuss the main content of the National Standards – namely, the standards themselves – Cheney spent most of her column attacking a few of the more than 1000 teaching recommendations included with the standards. Nowhere in her column did Cheney remind readers that these recommendations are, in fact, just that: recommendations, not requirements. Instead, Cheney implied that the recommendations would become “official knowledge” if the standards were to be certified by the federal government.³⁰

The only time when Cheney commented on the standards themselves, her comments were astonishingly misleading. Cheney wrote that “the general drift of the document becomes apparent when one realizes that not a single one of the 31 standards mentions the Constitution. True, it does come up in the 250 pages of supporting materials. It is even described as ‘the culmination of the most creative era of constitutionalism in American history’ – but only in the dependent clause of a sentence that has as its main point that students should ‘ponder the paradox that the Constitution sidetracked the movement to abolish slavery that had taken rise in the revolutionary era.’”³¹ The

²⁸ *New York Times*, 26 Oct 1994

²⁹ Cheney, 20 Oct 1994

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹ *ibid*

implication is that the majesty of our Constitution has been relegated to a grudging mention in a “dependent clause.”

Cheney fails to mention (and could hardly have failed to overlook) that Standard 3 of Era 3 (a major standard) calls for students to understand “the institutions and practices of government created during the revolution and how they were revised between 1787 and 1815 to create the foundation of the American political system.” That would certainly seem to include the Constitution, and, indeed, it does: Standard 3B (a minor standard) calls for students to “demonstrate understanding of the issues involved in the creation and ratification of the United States Constitution,” and Standard 3C (another minor standard) adds that students should “demonstrate understanding of the guarantees of the Bill of Rights and its continuing significance.”³² Cheney was simply wrong.

The firestorm of criticism that Cheney’s comments sparked energized conservative activists such as Phyllis Schafly, Gary Bauer, and Rush Limbaugh (who suggested that the new standards “be flushed down the toilet”³³), and even reached as high as the United States Senate, which passed a non-binding “sense of the Senate” resolution by a 99-1 vote on January 19, 1995 asking that the Clinton administration not certify the standards.³⁴

Many of those who developed the history standards were outraged by the style and content of Cheney’s criticism. Cheney, they say, knew what was going on, and her protests to the contrary are dishonest.

³² National Standards, pgs. 82, 84, 86

³³ Woo, 3 Apr 1996, pg. A1

³⁴ United States. Cong. Senate. Paragraphs (a), (b)

Gary Nash, a co-editor of the standards, said that he thought Cheney was “confusing a curriculum guidebook with a history textbook”³⁵ and that “it is incomprehensible why, against 271 pages of evidence in the standards to the contrary, Mrs. Cheney claims that these standards fail to include the great people, events and accomplishments that traditionally have been a central part of U.S. history in the schools.”³⁶

Douglas Greenberg, president of the Chicago Historical Society, adds: “Cheney was herself deeply involved in the [history standards] project from its inception; she chaired the NEH when the contract was signed, visited the project at UCLA and spoke and wrote glowingly of it throughout her NEH tenure. She now claims that she was hoodwinked and that the NEH did not get what it paid for [...] Cheney is using the standards as an excuse to initiate a discussion that has nothing to do with education and has everything to do with politics.”³⁷

In the aftermath of the history standards controversy, the foundations which helped fund the original standards decided to fund a review and revision of them by the Council for Basic Education rather than get rid of the standards altogether.³⁸

In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Cheney expressed disappointment that the standards weren’t being scrapped: “If they didn’t exist at all, I don’t think it would be, given the flawed state they’re in right now, a great loss. If the whole project were junked at this point, it would not be a great loss.”³⁹

³⁵ New York Times, 26 Oct 1994

³⁶ Nash and Crabtree, 21 Nov 1994

³⁷ Greenberg, 9 Jan 1995

³⁸ Chronicle of Higher Education, 30 June 1995

³⁹ Noriyuki, 25 Oct 1995

A revised version of the standards that added “a more detailed treatment of the Declaration of Independence and the role of George Washington and a continuing emphasis on the role of science, mathematics, medicine and technology”⁴⁰ was released on April 3, 1996 to mostly favorable reviews. Cheney still objected to what she saw as the ideological bent of the standards, but said they were “an improvement over the original,” citing the removal of “the often tendentious teaching examples” as a major reason why.⁴¹ Nash liked the changes, saying “I do think the standards are improved. They’ve added material that’s important.”⁴² Diane Ravitch and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. wrote that the revised standards had “remov[ed] every legitimate cause for complaint.”⁴³

Inconsistencies in Cheney’s positions

Greenberg’s charge that Cheney changed her position on the national history standards since leaving the NEH is not the only charge of that type which could be made. Since 1993, Cheney has altered many of her positions on issues, and even some of her positions on the facts of what happened during her tenure at the NEH.

In the preface of *National Tests*, Cheney wrote a favorable account of the benefits of national testing in other countries. Though she did not explicitly endorse such testing in the United States, she did make comments such as “Many educators in the United States are coming to believe that it is a great mistake to limit achievement testing

⁴⁰ Thomas, 3 Apr 1996

⁴¹ Cheney, 2 May 1996

⁴² Thomas, 3 Apr 1996

⁴³ Ravitch and Schlesinger, 3 Apr 1996

to a small group. A system that now benefits a few of our students should be put to work for all.”⁴⁴

By 1996, Cheney had soured on the idea. “Appalled that students in the U.S. seemed to know less about history every year, I concluded in the early 1990s that it might be possible to reverse this trend with national standards of the kind that exist in France and Japan [...] but the way those standards [the National Standards for U.S. History] turned out showed that I was wrong.”⁴⁵

As head of the NEH, Cheney worked diligently to get the federal appropriation for her agency increased. Between 1986 and 1993, the budget authority for her agency kept up with inflation, rising from \$134.6 million to \$177.4 million⁴⁶ (an increase of 31.83%) during a time period when the price level rose 31.8%.⁴⁷ This doesn’t seem like an impressive enough increase to warrant the tributes that Cheney’s “administrative adroitness”⁴⁸ and her “wheedling more funds for her agency”⁴⁹ have received until one considers that during the same time period the NEH’s sister agency, the National Endowment for the Arts, saw its budget authority lose 16.5% of its real value.⁵⁰

In any event, Cheney had by 1995 changed her mind about the value of increased funding to the NEH, calling on the Republican Congress to “cut funding for cultural elites.”⁵¹ Cheney argued that the

⁴⁴ Cheney, National Tests, pg. 6

⁴⁵ Cheney, 2 May 1996

⁴⁶ Budget of the United States 1988, pg. I-Z61; Budget of the United States 1995, pg. 932

⁴⁷ Inflation figures from Bureau of Labor Statistics; calculation by author

⁴⁸ Collins, 3 Dec 1992

⁴⁹ Current Biography Yearbook 1992, pg. 123

⁵⁰ Budget of the United States 1988, pg. I-Z59; Budget of the United States 1995, pg. 931; calculations by author

⁵¹ Cheney, 24 Jan 1995

good things that the NEH funds could be supported through private funding “if the arts and culture lobbyists now working to increase public subsidies were instead to turn their energies to securing private funds.”⁵²

According to a 1992 biographical essay on Cheney, “Applications for NEH grants are reviewed by panels of scholars drawn from around the nation as well as by a national council appointed by the president. Recommendations are forwarded to Cheney, who has the final say [...] Cheney typically disagrees with the recommendations of the national council less than one percent of the time.”⁵³ So it would seem that while Cheney was chief of the NEH, she was happy with the overwhelming majority of the projects that were funded.

After Cheney left the NEH, however, this sense of comity seems to have been sent down the memory hole. In a 1995 column, Cheney wrote that during her time at the NEH “there was a flood of applications from academics who wanted to use taxpayers’ money to advance their agendas” but that, brave as she was, she was “willing to turn down projects that had politics as their goal – though, of course, my doing so only further enraged the academic elite.” However, Cheney sadly related, “one can hold back the ocean only so long.”⁵⁴ (Which raises the question: If Cheney really wanted to continue to “hold back the ocean” – assuming that there was an ocean to hold back – then why did she quit her post at the NEH 16 months before the end of her term?)

When Cheney was heading the NEH, she resented comparisons between that agency and its sister agency, the oft-attacked National

⁵² *ibid*

⁵³ Current Biography Yearbook 1992, pg. 122

⁵⁴ Cheney, 10 Mar 1995

Endowment for the Arts. According to a 1990 interview with Cheney in the *Chicago Tribune*, “If Lynne Cheney [...] could change the world, she would pair her agency in the public mind with something a tad less controversial than the National Endowment for the Arts,” adding that Cheney wished that the NEH would be paired with the National Science Foundation instead.⁵⁵

But by 1995, Cheney was leading off one of her columns with the phrase “In defense of the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, a parade of notables have offered up stirring words and lofty sentiments” and going on to write “So long as the humanities and arts communities are what they are [...]”⁵⁶

In Cheney’s defense, she does frequently state that she has changed her positions on some of these issues (“As chairman of the [NEH], I signed a grant to help develop national history standards. But the way those standards turned out showed that I was wrong.”⁵⁷), but I have not yet found an explanation from her as to why her positions transformed so rapidly and completely after leaving the NEH. The explanation that makes the most sense to me is that Cheney believed that the federal government had a role in funding and controlling the humanities as long as there were Republicans and conservatives deciding what was funded and controlled. As soon as Democrats and liberals took the reins, federal funding and federal control became bad ideas.

⁵⁵ Povich, 18 Jun 1990, pg. 5-1

⁵⁶ Cheney, 10 Mar 1995

⁵⁷ Cheney, 2 May 1996

Was Cheney *Telling the Truth*?

The nature of Lynne Cheney's 1995 book *Telling the Truth* is well summarized by Anthony Day, a book reviewer for the *Los Angeles Times*: "[T]his is not an analytical book; it is a polemic hurled from the right against what its author sees as the left. It settles old scores, revisits old ground and raises some new bogypeople to frighten us. It will please the righteous, but will it convert the sinners? I don't think so."⁵⁸

The central theme of *Telling the Truth* is that we live in a postmodern age in which people are coming to believe that there is no objective truth; that there are only stories – each of equal validity – that we construct for ourselves and for our gender, race, or class.

Cheney writes of the scholarly views that underpin this movement: "What I gradually came to understand was that in the view of a growing number of academics, the truth was not merely irrelevant, it no longer existed. They had moved far beyond the ideas that have shaped modern scholarship – that we should think of the truth we hold today as tentative and partial, recognizing that it may require rethinking tomorrow in light of new information and insight – to the view that there is no truth."⁵⁹

Telling the Truth is Cheney's attempt to show how this trend toward relativism is having a broad effect on our lives. Cheney's main focus – about half the book – is on education, but she also discusses signs of relativism she sees in law, museums, film, psychology, and the press.

⁵⁸ Day, 23 Oct 1995

⁵⁹ Cheney, *Telling the Truth* (1995), pgs. 15-16

Cheney's observations on several subjects (Afrocentrism, "recovered memories," and critical legal studies among others) convincingly hit their mark and her paeans to the beauty of the traditional humanities are heartfelt and moving, but the book as a whole is marred by shoddy scholarship unworthy of a Ph.D. holder and former NEH chief. Cheney frequently uses anecdotes as her only proof that trends exist, uses questionable statistical data (when she uses data at all), cites obscure journals for quotes that she claims are mainstream and trendy ideas, uses the passive voice even in situations when the identity of the subject is germane, and sometimes seems to distort the meaning of comments when she cites them. All of this in a book whose rationale is to "tell the truth"! The mind reels.

Cheney's partisanship comes out clearly in her penultimate chapter, "The Press and the Postmodern Presidency." Before reading it, I would not have thought it possible to write 16 pages about the history of political press manipulation and soundbites without once mentioning Lee Atwater, but Cheney pulls it off. Despite not having the room to even mention Atwater, Cheney does pack in about 10 pages attacking the Clintons and their relationship with the press.

I would have much more respect for this book if it did not claim with such fervor to be "telling the truth." It is a shallow partisan work that does not have the discernment of truth and fairness as its primary goals, though it does raise many issues that are worthy of better study than Cheney gives them.

Cheney and the “culture wars”

Lynne Cheney has played a prominent role on the conservative side of the “culture wars” for 10 years, and her writings can be divided into two halves. During her first five years (1987-91), Cheney focused on extolling the beauty and depth of traditional scholarship in the humanities, and urged people to seek the benefits of its rigors. In her second five years (1992-96), with Republican control of the executive branch (and, through it, the NEH) first threatened then ended, Cheney left the ivory tower, descending into shrill, oft-inaccurate attacks on people she believes to be the enemies of the humanities. Cheney’s assault on the National Standards for U.S. History is an example of the sad degeneration of her later writing.

Cheney’s advocacy for the conservative side has mainly focused on education (and particularly education in humanities), but with the publication of her book *Telling the Truth*, Cheney covers a wide range of subjects that worry conservatives.

For all of her expressed concern for the truth, Cheney consistently fails to be forthright in her writing about the fact that she is an active political partisan (though one can argue that her readers are already aware of it, and therefore it doesn’t need to be said). According to an article in the Republican magazine *Rising Tide*, Cheney is a member of the Republican Speaker’s Forum, which “is working hard to see that our party message is carried far and wide.”⁶⁰

In *Telling the Truth*, Cheney began every chapter with a quote from George Orwell. Sadly, her own definition of truth is itself something out of *1984*.

⁶⁰ Rising Tide

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