

Senator Lamar Alexander was Secretary of Education under George H.W. Bush and currently represents Tennessee in the Senate.

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Nearly twenty years ago the then-president of the University of Notre Dame, Monk Malloy, silenced a meeting room full of educators with a simple question: “What is the rationale for the public school?” Albert Shanker, leader of the American Federation of Teachers, finally responded: “The public school was created to teach immigrant children the ‘three Rs’, and what it means to be an American, with the hope that they would then go home and teach their parents.”

From the signing of the Declaration of Independence, America has been built around a set of principles that unite us as a country, like freedom, democracy, and equality under law. To become a citizen, one has to formally swear allegiance to these principles, and the Constitution that contains them. We are defined not by who our parents were, but by what we believe.

The Founding Fathers understood the importance of passing along these unifying principles, and did their part to begin the process; Thomas Jefferson, in his retirement at Monticello, would spend evenings explaining them to overnight guests. Various waves of immigration since then have prompted the civic-minded to teach new arrivals the meaning of their American citizenship. The Kohler Company of Wisconsin actually housed German immigrants together so that they might be “Americanized” during non-working hours.

But the most important Americanizing institution, as Mr. Shanker reminded his peers, was the new common school. There, McGuffey’s Reader introduced a canon of literature, patriotic speeches and historical references to so many classrooms in the early part of the last century that it sold more than 120 million copies by the time the “greatest generation” faced down the Depression and won World War II.

After those great victories, however, Americans’ traditional emphasis on teaching our historical principles began to wane. Unpleasant experiences with McCarthyism in the 1950s, the discouraging war in Vietnam, and dull textbooks that ignored or distorted the history of African-Americans made many educated people skittish about promoting an obviously imperfect “Americanism.”

Changes in community attitudes are always reflected in our schools. Historian Diane Ravitch says the public school system has virtually abandoned its role as chief Americanizing institution, going from one extreme (simplistic patriotism and incomplete history) to the other— “an adversary culture that emphasized the nation’s warts and diminished its genuine accomplishments.” Meanwhile, many of our national leaders have promoted multiculturalism, bilingualism and “diversity” at a time when we need more emphasis on unity, a common culture and a common language.

America’s variety and diversity are great strengths, but it is not our greatest. The Balkans, after all, are diverse. Our greatest accomplishment is that we have found a way to assimilate so many disparate peoples into one united country. E pluribus unum: out of many, one. That is our unique history and what makes us truly exceptional.

**Our students need to know that Kunta Kinte came to this country in the belly of a slave ship and that his seventh generation grandson, Alex Haley, wrote *Roots* about the struggle for equality and freedom. They also need to know about the Pilgrims, and my Presbyterian ancestors, the Scotch Irish who fought a Revolutionary War because they were tired of paying taxes to support the bishop of a church to which they didn’t belong. They need to know about the religious character of our**

country and about the importance of the separation of church and state. They need to know about our love of liberty and about the incarceration of Japanese Americans in World War II.

America is a work in progress. We have never been perfect. But our history is worth studying, not only to learn from our mistakes, but to put the present into perspective. Those who say this is the most dangerous time in our history have not studied enough of it. What about the Pilgrims who died in their first winter? What about the soldiers at Valley Forge who walked across the ice with their bare feet? What about the brothers who killed each other in the Civil War, or the millions who stood in soup lines during the Great Depression? What about in the 1950s and 1960s, when we all stood within 30 minutes of a nuclear missile from the Soviet Union?

The danger we face today is real and of great concern, but hardly unprecedented. It is time that we put the teaching of our national history back in its rightful place in our schools, so our children can grow up learning what it means to be an American. If we are to protect our values and way of life, we need our next generation to understand clearly just what those values are, and where they came from.