Point of View

The Coverage of the Holocaust in High School History Textbooks

David Lindquist

♦ he Holocaust is now a regular part of high school history curricula throughout the United States and, as a result, coverage of the Holocaust has become a standard feature of high school textbooks. As with any major event, it is important for textbooks to provide a rigorously accurate and valid historical account. In dealing with the Holocaust, however, textbook authors face particular challenges. The Holocaust had complex causes, both immediate and long-term; different groups played roles in perpetrating or assisting it; and the meticulous accuracy required in detailing its occurrence imposes many demands on authors. Unlike many other events listed in history textbooks, students have often heard of the Holocaust and may bring considerable prior conceptions of it to the classroom but, as Samuel Totten has noted, many of these impressions may come from sources for whom historical accuracy is of little concern.1 Textbooks are often the first recourse for teachers and students interested in dispelling inaccurate notions and seeking to acquire valid knowledge. In addition, the existence of Holocaust denial makes it crucial that textbook narratives should be completely accurate because deniers often contend that the presence of any error calls into question the actual occurrence of the Holocaust.

This article presents the results of a study I conducted of the treatment of the Holocaust in major history textbooks. While the textbooks provide substantial coverage of the Holocaust, there are also problems in the coverage that can foster inaccurate perspectives about the event. I recommend that substantive changes be made in future editions of these textbooks to ensure that accurate, comprehensive Holocaust units are presented to students.

Defining the Holocaust

Textbooks should provide students with a definition that enables students to respond accurately and knowledgeably to the question, "What was the Holocaust?" The teaching guidelines provided by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in 2001 offer the

following definition:

The Holocaust was a specific genocidal event in twentieth-century history: the state-sponsored, systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Jews were the primary victims-6 million were murdered; Gypsies, the handicapped, and Poles were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents, also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.²

Deconstructing the museum's definition leads to a consideration of eight questions: (1) What? (2) When?

(3) Where? (4) How? (5) By whom? (6) Against whom? (7) Why was each group selected for persecution targeted? and (8) To what extent (i.e., what was the Nazis' intended result for each targeted group)? Opening a Holocaust unit with this analysis introduces students to the structure of the event as well as its perpetrators and diverse victims.

Teachers who present a full definition of the event can dispel incorrect prior information at the start of their students' experience with the topic. A good definition offers an entry into the subject's complexity, an important factor if students are to understand that simple answers to complex questions do not lead to historical understanding. It also enables students to identify the Holocaust's intentional, process-driven structure, thus avoiding the view that the Holocaust was a random, accidental event.

When I examined how many components of the USHMM definition were included in textbooks, it was clear that there is a general failure in both textbook narratives and glossaries to provide an accurate basic definition. While limited elements of the USHMM definition are present in the narratives of different textbooks, none of them provides a comprehensive definition of the Holocaust. For example, near the end of its discussion of the event, *Anthem* (Holt) defines the Holocaust as "the genocidal campaign against the Jews during World War II." *Present* (Pearson) states that

the Holocaust was "the Nazi attempt to kill all Jews under their control." These superficial definitions fail to provide adequate introductions to the complexity that should be inherent in any study of the event. *Vision* (Glencoe) provides no definition at all.

A similar problem exists with the glossary definitions of the Holocaust. Two textbooks (*Vision* [Glencoe] and *World History* [Glencoe]) do not offer a glossary definition. The glossary definitions found in the other four—*Anthem* (Holt), *Present* (Pearson), *World History* (Pearson), and *Legacy* (Holt)—do not provide the dense definition of the Holocaust that should be central to any study of the event (see the Table on p. 300). All the definitions identify the Nazis as the perpetrators, but there are divergencies in the identification of the victims and the description of the nature and progression of the Holocaust.

Contextualizing the Holocaust within World War II

The Holocaust must be situated within the greater framework of World War II. However, the sections of the textbooks dealing with World War II make only tangential references to the war's progression even though they place their primary Holocaust coverage in chapters devoted to the war. The effect is to decontextualize the Holocaust. For example, Anthem (Holt), Legacy (Holt), and World History (Glencoe) all note that mass murders of Jews occurred as the German army was invading the Soviet Union; however, none of these textbooks explains why the invasion of the USSR was the critical factor that allowed mass murder to be implemented at that time and in that place. World History (Pearson) and Vision (Glencoe) do not identify any connection between the invasion of the USSR and the inception of mass murder. Only *Present* (Pearson) notes the importance of the fact that large numbers of Jews lived in the USSR, and none of the textbooks mentions that the presence of long-standing, virulent antisemitism in Eastern Europe gave Nazi Germany considerable latitude to implement mass

murder once the Soviet Union had been invaded

Students must comprehend two factors about the Holocaust's setting. First, the Holocaust and the war are not synonymous and, second, the Holocaust must be viewed as "a war within a war" because it could not have occurred without the umbrella the war provided.³ For this reason, Bergen notes that "War provided killers with both a cover and an excuse for murder; in wartime, killing was normalized, and extreme, even genocidal measures could be justified with familiar arguments about the need to defend the fatherland. Without the war, the Holocaust would not-and could not—have happened" or, to paraphrase Bergen, "No war, No Holocaust."4 Placing Holocaust-related references at appropriate places in the textbooks' coverage of the war and adding references to the course of the war in Holocaustspecific sections would help students understand this critical concept.

Coverage of Antisemitism

For students to understand the role of antisemitism in the Holocaust properly, it is important for textbooks to provide background about the historical evolution of antisemitism, its presence in Germany, and its link both to racial ideologies and religious prejudice. All the textbooks mention Nazi antisemitism and its effect on events occurring from 1933–1945, but their coverage is insufficient in four ways.

First, the long-term history of antisemitism is decontextualized. The world history textbooks all discuss antisemitism prior to 1933, but most of that coverage focuses on medieval events and the Dreyfus Affair, which occurred in France in 1894. Missing, however, is the critical link between pre-1933 antisemitism and Nazi ideology and policy. The textbooks fail to discuss the centuries-long evolution of antisemitism as it moved through its three forms (religious, cultural [economic/social], and racial). Not tying the various phases of antisemitism to each other makes it difficult for students to see how antisemitism evolved through different time frames and in diverse historical, political, and economic situations.

Second, all three U.S. history textbooks move directly into the discussion of Nazi antisemitism without first establishing that antisemitism existed

Textbooks Surveyed

Textbook publishing has changed dramatically in recent years. As a result of corporate mergers, the primary players in the secondary school social studies market are Glencoe, Pearson and Holt McDougal (formed through a merger in December, 2007 of McDougal Littell and Holt, Rinehart and Winston). Thus, the following list identifies the high school history textbooks that are used most frequently in the United States. Three U.S. history and three world history textbooks were reviewed for the current study.

United States History Textbooks Reviewed*

Textbook Title	Article Reference*	Publisher
The American Vision	Vision (Glencoe)	Glencoe
American Anthem	Anthem (Holt)	Holt McDougal
United States History: Reconstruction to the Present	Present (Pearson)	Pearson

World History Textbooks Reviewed

Textbook Title	Article Reference	Publisher
World History: The Human Legacy	Legacy (Holt)	Holt McDougal
World History	World History (Pearson)	Pearson
World History	World History (Glencoe)	Glencoe

^{*} Full publication information can be found in the references section at the end.

TABLE: Content of Glossary Definitions of the Holocaust

	Anthem (Holt)	Present (Pearson)	World History (Pearson)	Legacy (Holt)
Systematic murder		Х	Х	
Genocide			Х	
Jews		Х		
Other Groups	Х			Х
Europe				
Nazis	Х	Х	X	Х
Before World War II				
During World War II	Х		X	X
Killing of millions of Jews	X		X	X
Extermination Camps				
Systematic elimination				
Mass slaughter				

long before 1933. Because this omission creates false impressions about the long-standing social and political context that the Nazis were able to exploit, students may not became aware of the reasons why many ordinary Germans were willing to accept the Nazis' views about the Jews.

Third, the advent of racial antisemitism within the larger context of racial science in the late 1800s should be discussed. Failing to do so infers that the Nazis' obsession with race was a unique circumstance. Given this inaccurate view, the Nazis' deadly strain of antisemitism can be viewed as an aberration, a misstep in history, instead of an extension of pre-existing beliefs about race, many of which were legitimatized by the political and scientific communities of many Western societies during the late 1800s and early 1900s. This view does not imply that racial science caused Nazi antisemitism; rather, legitimized antisemitism served as a preliminary step upon which the Nazis' eliminationist antisemitism could be built. 6

Fourth, while several textbooks mention the long history of Christian antisemitism, none of them discusses the charge that the Jews throughout history were responsible collectively for Jesus' death. Given the potentially

controversial nature of any discussion of this centuries-old church dogma, the comment that "Trying to teach adolescents about the roots of anti-Semitism in Christianity, however, even in the secular schools of a secular state, is like leading a tourist party across crocodile territory" still seems to affect textbook discussions of the Holocaust.7 However, both academic honesty and historical validity demand that this topic be presented to students. (World History [Glencoe] does mention the deicide charge but only in its sections on the Crusades and Zionism in the late nineteenth century; no tie to the Nazi era is proposed.)

Establishing Roles in the Holocaust

Many Holocaust educators frame their curricula around the roles played by individuals during the event, thus following the pattern Hilberg used in his seminal work *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe 1933–1945.* Teachers often add collaborators, rescuers, and resisters to this list, thus establishing a solid framework for studying the Holocaust. While care must be taken to avoid stereotyping individuals along lines defined by these roles, this approach is an effective means

of introducing critical questions about human behavior into Holocaust curricula.

The textbooks reviewed do not establish this structure. For example, while some key perpetrators (e.g., Mengele in Legacy [Holt], Himmler and Heydrich in World History [Glencoe]) are discussed, adding the term "perpetrators" to the narratives would provide an extra dimension, thus identifying who was involved in implementing the Holocaust as well as the personal culpability that may be attached to the actions of the perpetrators.

Similarly, the textbooks do not use the word "bystander," although Legacy (Holt), Present (Pearson), Anthem (Holt), and Vision (Glencoe) devote full sections to large-scale responses, mainly on the national level. Conversely, World History (Glencoe) and World History (Pearson) each make superficial references to the fact that most individuals ignored what was occurring. The fact that the overwhelming majority of people in Germany and, later, German-occupied Europe were bystanders should be a central feature of Holocaust curricula because questions about the bystanders "... broaden the scope of study and raise questions as to the culpability of certain individuals and groups whose roles students come to realize were much more than ancillary." ⁹ The textbooks should emphasize this point at the personal level while using the term "bystander" in order to introduce students to important discussions about individual and group responsibility, group solidarity, and the complexity of living in oppressive societies.

The Holocaust is an excellent topic through which students can consider the dilemmas that individuals confront when faced with difficult choices about what they should or should not do. For example, the curriculum resource "How Was It Humanly Possible?" addresses this question by stating, "The plan to murder the Jews was conceived by a small circle of dedicated Nazis. In order to implement their plan, how-

ever, they required the collaboration of a large number of people. The purpose here is to put a face on these individuals, to examine the circumstances that contributed to their becoming killers, and to take a closer look at them." ¹⁰ Challenging questions that probe the perpetrators' beliefs, characteristics, decision-making processes, prior and contemporaneous influences, and moral responsibility are then proposed, giving students the opportunity to evaluate the perpetrators' actions. However, the textbooks do not capitalize on this opportunity.

Little of the complexity that makes studying the Holocaust compelling is evident in the textbooks. The event is depicted in straight-forward terms that do not suggest that multiple layers of decision making had to occur if the Holocaust were to take place and, conversely, if the Holocaust were to be opposed. The interlocking cultural, economic, political, social, professional, and legal processes that all had to come together for the Holocaust to occur are only suggested, at best, and are absent from the textbooks for the most part. Little sense of what the perpetrators, victims, bystanders, collaborators, rescuers, and resisters thought or felt is depicted.

Instead, the coverage by textbooks of the Holocaust places undue emphasis on Hitler's role in the events that occurred. While Hitler was certainly the central figure during the Nazi era, constant references to him may lead students to believe that Hitler, and Hitler alone, planned and implemented the Holocaust, a perspective that ignores both the systematic, bureaucratic nature of the event as well as the willingness of tens of thousands of people at all levels of German society to participate willingly and, in many cases, enthusiastically in the implementation of Nazi policies. This myopia makes it difficult for students to develop valid judgments about the Holocaust in specific and the Nazi era in general.

The Role of Hitler

The textbooks' obsession with Hitler may be illustrated by noting that all six books use large (and, in several cases, full page) pictures of Hitler to introduce their chapters on pre-war events or on the war itself. *Present* (Pearson) provides an extreme example of this pattern by opening its chapter "The Coming of War 1931–1942" with a full-page picture of Hitler that is followed by four more photographs of him on the next seven pages. Yet another Hitler picture is found in the chapter summary. These visual cues suggest that Hitler and only Hitler is the story of the Holocaust.

This pattern also occurs in the text-books' narratives. Such phrases as "Hitler's action" and "Hitler's Final Solution" (*Anthem* [Holt]) and "Hitler's Germany" and "Hitler's army" (*Legacy* [Holt]) reinforce the "Hitler did this, and it was done" perspective that many students bring to their study of the Nazi era, World War II, and the Holocaust.

Criticism of the textbooks' overemphasis on Hitler is not designed to negate or ignore the crucial role that Hitler played in the events in question. However, overemphasizing that role leads to "The 'One Man' or 'Evil Man' Theory," namely that:

..., many students are under the assumption that the Holocaust was the result of a single individual's (Hitler's) will, plan, ideas, and "drive."

That simply is not so.

To assume that the Holocaust was perpetrated by a single individual constitutes a naïve and simplistic view of history. Although Hitler played a central role in the Nazis' views of the Jews and served, as some historians have put it, as "the spiritual force" behind the Final Solution, he did not act alone. 11

Totten also notes that accepting this approach exculpates high-ranking Nazi officials, the thousands of perpetrators

who played active roles in the Holocaust, and millions of "average Germans' and others who, early on, looked the other way as the Jews were stripped, piece by piece, of their basic civil and human rights." ¹² As a result, students may conclude that the Holocaust was "an aberration, something that was the result of 'one sick individual,'…" a view that is counterproductive to developing an accurate understanding of the Holocaust.¹³

Use of the Word "Race"

The textbooks frequently use various forms of the word "race," a necessity if Nazism and the Holocaust are to be discussed adequately. However, using "race" in general or with reference to the Jews specifically without qualification or explanation may lead students to believe that the Jews do, in fact, constitute a distinct race. As Totten cogently notes, "... when students read anything in which the Nazis refer to the Jews as a race, they are likely to accept, at face value, that the Jews are a race," a fallacious idea that distorts the study of Nazism and the Holocaust. This acceptance leads to many historical and pedagogical problems, not the least of which is that it "... plays into the Nazis' way of thinking...." 14 Thus, students must have a thorough understanding of the word "race" in general and of the Nazis' use of the word in particular so that they can understand the dominant effect that racial ideology had on Nazi policy as well as the unscientific nature of the idea of race in general.¹⁵ None of the textbooks confront this complex, controversial topic, a circumstance that could lead to the validation of Totten's "face value" thesis.

Factual Accuracy

While the current editions of textbooks reviewed in this study contain fewer mistakes than earlier textbooks did, several factual errors still exist.

For example, Anthem (Holt) states that American troops liberated death camps, which was an impossibility since all six killing centers were located in parts of Poland that were conquered by the Soviet Red Army as the war was coming to an end. Similarly, in *Legacy* (Holt), the discussion of the liberation of camps by American soldiers ends with a reference to death camps, implying a connection that did not occur. In these cases, the textbooks violate the USHMM's teaching guideline that educators must "strive for precision of language" when teaching about the Holocaust.¹⁶

Present (Pearson) includes a picture of German soldiers humiliating a Jewish boy and his father, stating that the event happened in 1933. Given the event that is occurring and the clothing that the Jews are wearing, it seems likely that the picture was taken somewhere in Poland or Eastern Europe, a situation that could not have occurred until at least 1939. With reference to pre-war concentration camps in Germany, this textbook also errs in stating that "Camp administrators tattooed numbers on the arms of prisoners ..." (p. 495). In fact, only prisoners incarcerated in Auschwitz and some of its satellite camps were tattooed, and this process was not implemented until March 1942 (www.ushmm.org).17

An egregious factual error occurs in *Present* (Pearson), which states that "In fully functioning death camps, the bodies of murdered prisoners were further desecrated. Human fat was turned into soap; ..." (p. 496). While reputable historians treat this story as false, students using *Present* will be told that it is actually true.¹⁸ Upon learning that the story is false, these students become prime targets for deniers of the Holocaust, who use the "false in one thing, false in all things" argument in proposing that the Holocaust never occurred.¹⁹

Inferential Accuracy

Inferential accuracy, which refers to whether or not facts are presented in ways that valid conclusions may be drawn from them, is of crucial importance if students are to understand the complex nature of historical situations. The textbooks reviewed contain numerous examples of factual statements that are presented in ways that could lead students to develop

inaccurate perceptions of what occurred. Several examples illustrate the point.

In Anthem (Holt), coverage of the Holocaust begins with "The Inside Story: A Life-Saving Effort," a discussion of the rescue of 5,000 Jews that occurred in the French village of Le Chambon. The narrative is accurate, and the story of Le Chambon is certainly noteworthy. However, placing this story at the start of the Holocaust section and devoting a large amount of space to it might lead students to believe that rescue played a much larger role in the Holocaust than was actually the case. The book does not provide any information that would allow students to develop an accurate perspective regarding the limited scope of rescue that occurred during the Holocaust.

Lack of specificity in using terminology also affects the textbooks' level of inferential accuracy. For example, *Anthem* (Holt), states that concentration camps were "basically prisons," and that the ghettos were "neighborhoods in a city to which a group of people are confined" (p. 780). Referring to the camps and ghettos as prisons and neighborhoods suggests that these places were something less than places of persecution, dehumanization, and death.

Present (Pearson) describes Hitler as being "on the brink of madness" (p. 438), a labeling that ignores the fact that Nazi policies were developed and implemented by rational individuals who were fully aware of what they were doing. Similarly, World History (Pearson) discusses "Hitler and his henchmen" (p. 916), a reference that obscures the fact that many Nazi officials came from respected professions such as education, law, and medicine. Students can easily rationalize brutal behavior when performed by henchmen; it is a far different and critically important matter that they come to realize that the Holocaust was, to a considerable degree, the work of highly educated persons.

In discussing Nazi Germany's antisemitic policies, World History (Glencoe) discusses the Nuremberg Laws and then states, "Eventually, German Jews were also required [bold-faced in the original] to wear yellow Stars of David ..." (p. 809). The narrative then discusses Kristallnacht. The sequence provided implies that the implementation of the yellow star order in Germany occurred sometime between September 1935, when the Nuremberg Laws were enacted, and November 1938, when Kristallnacht occurred. In fact, German Jews were not ordered to wear the yellow star until September 1941. The narrative thus distorts students' understanding of the Holocaust's chronological evolution.

A serious inferential inaccuracy occurs in World History (Glencoe) in the subsection "Children in the War" (pp. 876-877), which is located within the book's Holocaust section. This segment begins with a discussion of what happened to Iewish children and then moves to a narrative that describes what happened to children in Germany, Japan, Britain, and Eastern Europe. It ends with a short paragraph that describes Hitler Youth who fought near the war's end and Soviet adolescents who spied on the German army and participated in various resistance movements. Including all of these diverse situations in a section titled "The Holocaust" distorts both the Holocaust and what happened to these children.

On the other hand, narratives that suggest accurate and sophisticated inferences help students understand history's inherent complexity while helping them develop critical thinking skills. Such inferences provide teachers with examples on which to build challenging lessons that allow students to study, analyze, and debate historical events at advanced levels. Two examples of properly framed inferences found in the textbooks may be noted.

In discussing the deportations of Jews from Greece and Hungary near the war's end, *World History* (Glencoe) states, "In spite of Germany's desperate military needs, even late in the war when Germany was facing utter defeat, the Final Solution still had priority in using railroad cars to ship Jews to death

camps" (p. 876). This thesis, which parallels Katz's salient phrase "Trains to Auschwitz, not to the front," illustrates a unique historical circumstance in which the most critical function of any government, preserving its own existence, was overridden by the dictates of "the racial state." ²⁰ Properly framed, this concept could lead to sophisticated discussions about the nature of power, decision making, and the dynamics of the modern, depersonalized bureaucratic state.

Several textbooks mention that the Nazi party gained power through legal means. For example, Anthem (Holt) states, "When he got out of prison, Hitler was determined to gain power through peaceful means. Seizing on public discontent and offering an appealing vision of German greatness, Hitler gradually built support" (p. 741). Raising important questions about the fragility of the democratic process, a lesson based on this statement is one that American students should confront. The essay "Why Teach Holocaust History?", published by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, supports this approach, stating that "Through a study of the Holocaust, students can come to realize that democratic institutions and values are not automatically sustained, but need to be appreciated, nurtured, and protected."21

Discussion

I would like to make several recommendations regarding the use of textbooks so that Holocaust education may be improved. First, organizations that provide professional development in Holocaust education for teachers must be aware of issues related to textbook coverage of the event. To improve such programs and to provide an increasing level of sophistication for attendees, it is recommended that individuals planning such programs:

- 1. Become familiar with the coverage of the Holocaust in frequently used high school U.S. history and world history textbooks;
- 2. Become familiar with strengths and weaknesses of that coverage, with an

- emphasis on the textbooks' inferential accuracy;
- 3. Identify aspects of Holocaust history that are currently absent from or not developed sufficiently in textbooks;
- 4. Develop protocols for including those aspects of Holocaust history in other curricular materials;
- 5. Consider ways that problems encountered with the use of the text-books may be overcome, including the use of technology to access sources of accurate and comprehensive Holocaust information;
- 6. Include detailed discussions of the textbooks' coverage of the Holocaust as part of professional development programs that focus on the event; and
- 7. Present conference workshops on using textbooks to teach about the Holocaust.

Second, institutions involved in Holocaust education should initiate dialogues with the publishers of high school history textbooks. These discussions would stress the need for comprehensive and sophisticated coverage of the Holocaust in the textbooks, with special emphasis being placed on the need for inferential accuracy.

Third, social studies methods professors should include discussions about textbook coverage of the Holocaust in their courses. These discussions would ensure that pre-service teachers become aware of problems associated with textbook coverage of the Holocaust in particular while providing opportunities for them to learn techniques for evaluating history textbooks in general. Various research projects could evolve from this approach.

Fourth, as with the case of methods professors, high school history teachers should develop lessons in which their students analyze textbook coverage of the Holocaust, thus providing their students with a realistic experience analyzing historical sources while developing Holocaust-specific knowledge.

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In conclusion, although textbooks provide substantial coverage of the Holocaust, the effectiveness of this coverage is limited in ways that can lead students to develop inaccurate perspectives about the event. Dealing with the Holocaust within the confines of a history textbook spanning centuries is a challenge, but it is possible for publishers to provide a historically accurate and valid account by drawing on the best available specialized publications and arranging for Holocaust scholars and experts to review the relevant sections of textbooks. Through greater efforts in this direction, the quality of Holocaust

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education in the United States can be significantly improved.

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of culture that are highlighted in the NCSS Standards Expectations of Excellence and the National Geography Standards Geography for Life, both of which stress the importance of learning about other Multiculturalism cultures. makes the nation stronger as we learn from each other. Philip McClung's eighth graders learn about multiculturalism when they assist with the NSU Creole Heritage Center's festival each year. Taking learning out into the "real world" helps the students contextualize the information they learned about Creole culture, heritage and history.

Creoles are anything but a "mythical race." Understanding a cultural group that draws upon various backgrounds and is at the heart of a landmark Supreme Court decision is important. Each culture and ethnic group within the United States helps make us the nation we are, and overlooking or marginalizing an aspect of our culture is unacceptable.

Notes

- Alan Richman, "Yes, We're Open," GQ, November 2006
- 2. Kim Severson, "'Faerie Folk' Strike Back With Fritters," *The New York Times*, December 6, 2006
- The definition used by the Creole Heritage Center can be accessed at www.nsula.edu/creole/definition.
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- See Mary Stone Hanley, "The Scope of Multicultural Education," written in 1999, and accessible at the New Horizons for Learning website, www.newhorizons.org/strategies/multicultural/hanley.htm.
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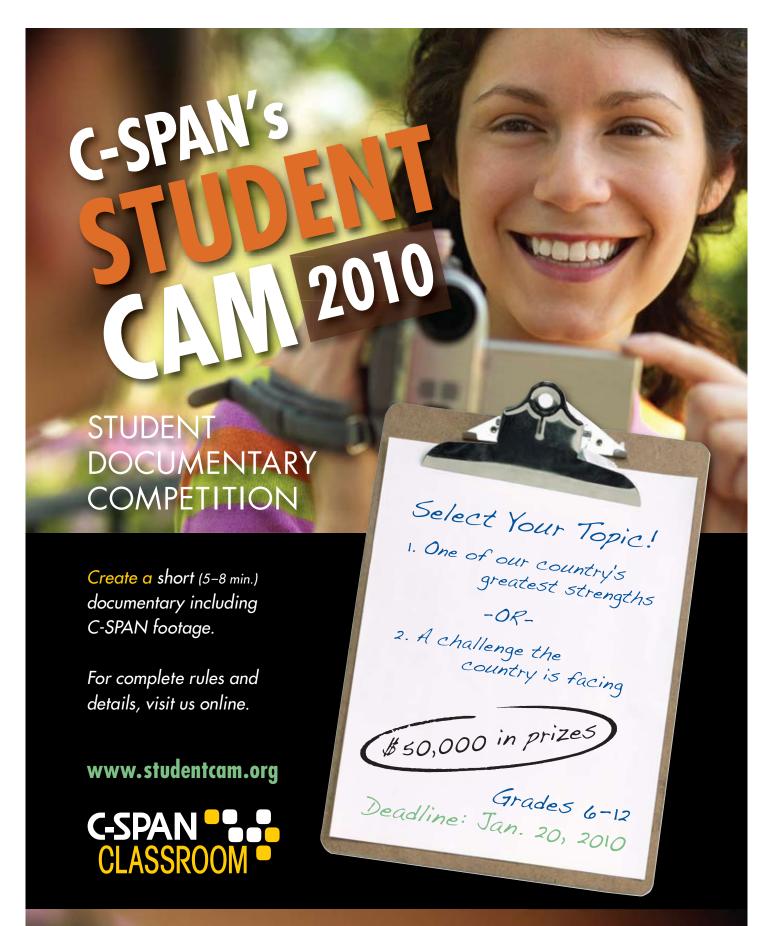
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