



Remarks by John LeFeber
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Americans All® Press Conference, November 6, 2003
Wichita, Kansas

Being here this morning is quite an experience for an old social studies teacher from southwest Nebraska, because we rarely have the opportunity, outside of the classroom, to explain just how important this work is. But I did promise my wife and four sons that I would be concise and hold my remarks to just a few minutes.

The late James Mitchener once said, “I believe that one of the lasting values of social education is that, if well organized, it prepares one to grapple with the wild fluctuations of his time. Any young person well grounded in the scholarship of the various fields, who has learned to explore developing problems, and identify likely sore points, and commit himself to their solution, comes away with an insight into our society that prepares him to face recurrent crisis.” Mr. Mitchener, who interestingly enough was a social studies teacher in his early years, has very eloquently expressed not only why we teach, but also why social studies plays a very important role in the education process.

I believe the main task of education in a democratic society is to produce citizens who are neither apathetic nor cynical (i.e., those who feel problems can be solved and wrongs can be righted) and, most of all, who believe they can personally participate and influence society’s direction. The social studies curriculum must show students how to participate and convince them that their efforts can truly count. We have to demonstrate, through opportunities such as community service and action learning, that individuals and organizations can exert power in ways that improve society.

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* deals with social studies by omitting it from the new nationwide education accountability system. This was not meant, heaven knows, as a hostile act. The authors of *No Child Left Behind* are all patriots, and the Bush administration has undertaken commendable efforts to rekindle civic education and deepen historical understanding. Rather, the authors seem to have concluded that the country would do well to start by getting kids proficient in reading and math (and eventually science), with other valuable (and, compared with social studies, less controversial and more difficult-to-measure) subjects left for a later time.

In any case, the omission of social studies—and, more importantly, of civics, economics, geography and history—from *No Child Left Behind* is beginning to have serious effects. It’s causing some states and schools to downplay these subjects in favor

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of those for which they'll be held publicly accountable. As the old educator's truism clearly states: "What gets tested is what gets taught." We are seeing this firsthand as states experience cutbacks, readjustments of job assignments and, in some cases, the lack of support for social studies at the state level. These actions have carried to the local levels, because local jurisdictions typically follow the lead of the state.

Moreover, as social studies sinks below the watchful eyes of governors, legislators, business leaders and others who are apt to take a commonsense view of it, the profession becomes buried even deeper by the very system it seeks to teach. We have seen a strong decline in state support for the social studies profession and I have seen it firsthand. I serve as the executive secretary of The Council of State Social Studies Specialists (CS4). This organization is composed of state-level educators in charge of coordinating social studies programs within the state. Founded in 1965, it is designed to represent all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Unfortunately, although we do have 107 members, we have 12 states that do not have a social studies content person assigned at the state level. This provides a void in the coordinated effort to disseminate information not only within those states, but also across the nation.

One of the major efforts of CS4 has been to publish a survey of course offerings and testing in each state's social studies area. This survey is updated every few years, and the 2003 edition is now complete. It can be viewed and downloaded from our Web site at <http://www.cssss.org/survey2003.html>.

At the very time we most need our current and future citizens to learn what it means to be American and why America is worth defending, to become more conscious of the world they inhabit and the conflicts that rock it, to grasp the differences between democracy and totalitarianism and between free and doctrinaire societies, the part of the school curriculum that we should rely on is in a state of flux. As a former classroom teacher, I see a tremendous benefit in being involved with the People of America Foundation. The Foundation has the potential to provide resources to each state that would facilitate the instruction of social studies and thus provide our students with the tools they will need and the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they will require to make informed decisions in a culturally diverse and interdependent world.

In 1992 the National Council for the Social Studies defined social studies as the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Within the school program, social studies provides coordinated, systematic study drawing on such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics and natural sciences. The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people develop the ability to make

informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world. That definition is increasingly more important in today's world.

Finally, I have heard it said that anyone can make a difference, a positive difference. I believe that everyone should try!

Thank you.



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John E. LeFeber is the curriculum and instructional developer for the National Council on Economic Education. His duties include maintaining the EconEdLink web page, training educators on how to use the Internet as an instructional tool, and developing projects that enhance learning through the use of the Internet.

Previously, Mr. LeFeber was the director of social science education for the Nebraska Department of Education. His duties included providing statewide in-service for social studies education, serving as area administrator for the Close Up Foundation, coordinating the state We the People program, and administering the U.S. Youth Senate Program. He also coordinated the development of a statewide strategic plan for social studies; developed and disseminated a K-12 Social Studies Framework; developed and disseminated materials that support strategies for students with diverse learning needs; developed materials that support the study of Nebraska history; and developed a social science resources home page on the World Wide Web. Prior to his service in education administration for Nebraska, Mr. LeFeber taught at the college, high school, middle school and elementary school levels.

Active in several career-related organizations, he is the executive secretary for the Council of State Social Studies specialists. He is past-president of the Nebraska State Council for the Social Studies, was on the Steering Committee of the Geographic Educators of Nebraska, and served on the advisory board of the Law-Related Education Committee of the Nebraska State Bar Association.

Mr. LeFeber holds a bachelor's degree in education and psychology from Judson College and North Park College and earned his master's degree in curriculum and instruction at Northern Illinois University. In addition, he holds a middle school endorsement in social science from the University of Nebraska-Kearney.