Three Rs Dominate Public Discussion of History and Education

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The Mitch Daniels/Howard Zinn controversy caught my attention in Texas for two reasons. First, while on a one-year appointment in 2007-2008 at the Kokomo campus shared by Purdue University and Indiana University, I assigned Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States* as one of many readings for an introductory U.S. history course. Had Zinn died a few years earlier, and had his death prompted Governor Mitch Daniels to exchange emails similar to those he sent to Indiana Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Bennett and others in 2010, then I too might have been caught in the dragnet.

Second, I was amazed at how quickly some commentators made facile connections between this email exchange and another episode about which I know a fair bit: the 2009-2010 controversy in Texas over K-12 social studies standards—a struggle marked by political posturing, public protests, death threats (in the name of our children’s future), a $1 billion textbook contract, and the state-level statutory authority with

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which to punish schools and fire teachers.\textsuperscript{1} The scope and stakes of these two contests were laughably incongruous, and yet there were important underlying similarities that went unobserved by the huffing and puffing of activists and pundits, right and left.

What really mattered in the Daniels/Zinn controversy? Three things: the redirection of attention away from education toward academic freedom, the reduction of multiple significant issues into a media-friendly “two sides” model, and the vague retorting plea for some kind of openness to controversy. These three Rs—redirection, reduction, and retort—dominated the discussion because, for better or for worse, Daniels and his allies, as well as Zinn and his supporters, operate in a public arena that is both politicized and mediatized. The evidence for and implications of the three Rs merit parsing out because they influence every public attempt to promote or proscribe the study of history. Despite their widespread import, the three Rs are little understood by most who dare to do history in public.

1) Redirection. The first thing that struck me on reading the Daniels emails (having already seen the considerably simplified coverage given them in various media) was the number and range of issues that he raised. Yes, Daniels called Zinn’s book “a truly execrable, anti-factual piece of disinformation that misstates American history on every page,” but he also asked for a statewide review of K-12 and college teaching, asserted the need to “get rid of” Zinn’s book, inquired about jurisdiction for teacher professional development programs, solicited a volunteer to “clean up” professional development, authorized a “quiet” review of school and college curricula, and suggested privatizing teacher training by moving it from schools of education to some kind of software package. And he wrote all of this in the 51 minutes between 10:54 and 11:45 a.m. on February 9, 2010!\textsuperscript{2} So then it became very interesting to see that on July 17, 2013, after the Associated Press broke the story, the official statements by both Daniels and his board of trustees declared the sole issue to be “academic freedom,” which, they emphasized, Daniels ardently defended. Daniels further stated baldly that his correspondence had “nothing to do with higher education.”\textsuperscript{3} In a split second, attention had been redirected away from

\textsuperscript{1}For a thorough analysis of the controversy and its implications, see Keith A. Erekson, ed., Politics and the History Curriculum: The Struggle over Standards in Texas and the Nation (New York, 2012).

\textsuperscript{2}The emails are available at http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/documents/daniels1.pdf.

\textsuperscript{3}The statements are available at http://www.purdue.edu/president/messages/2013/130717-statement.html.
systemic education reform (supremely important but also complicated and
dull) to academic freedom (a hot button issue certain to deflect attention).

2) Reduction. The efforts to redirect public attention toward academic freedom was accompanied by a simultaneous reduction into a simple “de-
bate” between “two sides” over Zinn the historian. Daniels struck first in his official statement by condemning Zinn’s “falsified version of history,” citing historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and referring to “many more such condemnations” that would be “available upon request.” Daniels very skillfully framed the terms, subject, and methods of the debate—there would be only two terms (true or false), the subject would be Howard Zinn (redirected away from Daniels and education), and the methods would involve piling up witnesses for or against Zinn. The media accepted Daniels’s framework, and so the debate unfolded. Subsequent commenta-
tors opined on the discussion about Zinn, invoking yet other voices, with special excitement given to “liberals”—Sean Wilentz, Michael Kazin, and Sam Wineburg among them—who criticized Zinn, the assumption being that their testimony from the “false” lent more strength to the “true.” Kudos to Daniels and his savvy team for so successfully redirecting and reducing the conversation. Since at least the 1990s, conservatives have skillfully outmaneuvered liberals in framing public discussion via the media—wit-
ess their successful rebranding (redirection) of the term “liberal” itself as a bad word (reduction) to the point that even some “progressive” liberals now retreat from its use.

3) Retort. In light of such skillful redirection and reduction, how did the enemies of Daniels/defenders of Zinn respond? In short, they were trapped. The redirection away from education reform stole their rhetorical ground, and since they could not reject the “academic freedom” that Daniels claimed to defend, they could only argue for some variety of vaguely better academic freedom. Following the reduction of the debate to a binary matter of truth or falsity, the rhetorical counter to the charge of Zinn’s falseness would be to claim that he was “true.” But this is a dif-
ficult case to champion. Zinn’s work has been riddled for decades by both factual and interpretive errors, and many historians had already publicly taken him to task (duly noted by Team Daniels). Perhaps no response illustrates the feebleness of opponents’ retort as well as that of the American Historical Association. The AHA leadership waded right into the trap with an official statement that first condemned violations of academic freedom, and then offered the vague observation that “relevant facts of this case remain murky, and it is not entirely clear what in the end hap-
pened, or did not happen.” From that foundation followed the retort: “The
AHA deplores the spirit and intent of former Governor Daniels’s e-mails” and “we believe that the open discussion of controversial books benefits students, historians, and the general public alike.” The statement is nothing short of a generic platitude cast in religious language and promising unspecifiable benefits. Other vague retorts took the form of op-eds, blog posts, and read-ins advocating “thinking for oneself” or celebrating the “danger” of recovering marginalized voices—none of which succeeded in reframing the public conversation (reforming the American education system, anyone?) or articulating the nature and benefits of history education in American public life.

Years before the Daniels story broke, the pattern of redirection, reduction, and retort had been followed in the Texas social studies standards controversy. Republican politicians elected to the state’s board of education, aware that they were simply revising standards produced ten years earlier by another Republican-dominated state board, chose to redirect the controversy with language that cast their work as a culture-war battle in which they were standing up to liberals. Board members also reduced the significant task of curriculum revision into a simple balancing act—add more conservatives to the laundry list of names and dates and throw in enough liberals to keep opponents in place. César Chávez or Christmas? Add both. “Balance” was to be the guiding principle, no matter how many more facts were added or how little attention was paid to history learning and teaching. Opponents of these self-styled “true Christian conservatives” retorted by signing petitions and publishing statements—the AHA wrote one then, too—while generally remaining outside of and irrelevant to the process of reform (will this R ever be addressed?).

So what is the solution to the dominance of the three Rs? Educators in general, and historians in particular, must first do a better job of framing the public conversation so that we can do more than vaguely retort to the skillful redirection and reduction of others. We need a better argument for the value of what we do, one that jettisons stale shibboleths about fostering citizenship and promoting critical thinking. We need a sophisticated and clear understanding of what it means to know, think, and write about the past—an understanding tuned not to personal anecdote but to scholarly

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evidence. If historians cannot publicly frame and teach history, then they will have no choice but simply to deplore spirits with murky facts. And if that is the best that can be done by the nation’s largest professional organization devoted to the study and promotion of history and historical thinking, then how can we criticize governors or school board members or journalists for doing no better?