

Dr. Kevin T. Brady  
“In Search of Common Ground”  
Address to EUROCLIO, March 27, 2010

Good evening,

My name is Dr. Kevin Brady, and I am president of the American Institute for History Education. I am pleased to be with you this evening to partake in this wonderful conference. I also bring you greetings from United States history and social studies professionals. I would like you to know that American history and social studies teachers are very much interested in the topic of this conference and its relevance and importance to the teaching of United States history as well.

The title of my talk tonight will be “In Search of Common Ground: Education, Global Citizenship and the Importance of History.”

I begin this evening by talking about one of the principle things European and American educators share in common with regard to history: the quest to help students appreciate the importance of the past. “The wonderful and daunting thing about the young,” American historian James Axtell observed in a 2001 article, “is that they live so thoroughly and energetically in the present with much more attention to the future than to the past.” Axtell clearly illustrates what we all undoubtedly recognize as one of the major obstacles to getting students to appreciate the past ... their slim knowledge of history, coupled with their utter disregard for its importance to their own lives.

Addressing this problem in the United States has been a large part of my work over the past decade. After years of working with students and teachers who seemed to be less and less informed about the past and its relevance to the present, I founded the American Institute for History Education in 2005 to promote the substantive teaching of American and world history to address this issue. We were fortunate to launch our efforts at the same time the U.S. Government began a massive funding effort to address test scores that underscored American students’ woeful lack of knowledge about history. The Teaching American History grants program grew out of the work of two United States senators who combined, in a bipartisan effort, to advocate for federal funding to promote the teaching of American history. Their campaign came in the midst of growing concerns over the failure of American schools to adequately teach United States history and a growing body of data that suggests students in the United States are less informed about United States history than in previous years.

If American students are not knowledgeable about American history, they are even less so about world history, particularly those areas where U.S. and world history intersect. European educators would likely be surprised at how American teachers once treated key turning points in world history, such as the American Revolution, which are often divorced from their larger global significance. This has changed in recent years, with many school districts adopting a more global framework at least in the teaching of

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the Age of Exploration and Discovery in a unit which is commonly titled the “Atlantic World” or “Three Worlds Meet.” What is encouraging and unique about this unit is that it is conscientiously international. Teachers are encouraged to stimulate students to consider the global impact and exchange of the three continents that came together and the numerous cultures that were fundamentally altered as they came together during the Age of Discovery, witnessing the transfer of everything, as historian James Axtell famously observed from “microbes to man.” While we have seen significant changes in the teaching of this early exchange of cultures, our treatment of modern history remains compartmentalized.

This is especially true of World War II. I would like to take some time to discuss one of the problems associated with compartmentalized history. Typically, in the United States, teachers approach World War II from a largely American perspective.

This is problematic as you well know because the European experience of World War II is fundamentally different from the American experience of World War II. In the United States, for instance, World War II is still referred to as the “good war.” Unlike most American wars, there was very little dissent. Both the more conservative voices, along with the American Left supported the defeat of the Nazis, especially after Germany had invaded the Soviet Union. For Europeans, however, it represents utter physical destruction and emotional/ideological catastrophe. The reasons for this difference in interpretation are obvious, they are nonetheless significant. While World War II lifted the United States out of the Great Depression and laid the foundation for its status as a superpower, it killed Europeans by the millions and diminished Europe’s status as a global power and as a colonial power. Historian Mark Mazower estimates that some 44 million Europeans were killed and more than 46 million Europeans were displaced during the World War II era (1939-1948). While Americans bookend the 20<sup>th</sup> century as prewar and post war, the European civilians typically experienced World War II as one or more occupations (first by the Nazis, then by the Soviets in the East; first by the Nazis, then by the Allies, etc. in the West). And, of course, there was the systematic killing by the Nazis (and their European collaborators) of 6 million European Jews and 6 million others (among them not only 3 million Soviet prisoners of war, but also many Catholics, Orthodox, Roma and Sinti, Bosnian Muslims, Communists, you name it). Therefore, a comparative European-American view of World War II underscores how unique and fortunate the American experience on the home front was. I would argue that this is equally important for both Europeans and Americans to understand.

For Europeans, it is important to realize that “war” carries fundamentally different associations in the United States than in Europe because of World War II (but not exclusively so). I think one needs to look closely at the opportunities that World War II provided for minorities in the United States, for instance, in order to appreciate why American historians would debate the question of whether or to what extent war can be an agent of social progress. Or, one needs to look at the economic benefits that World War II brought for many Americans, in order to appreciate not just the label and public memory in the United States of World War II as the “good war.” Many Catholic ethnics

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and American Jews were able to move out of urban, working class enclaves and into new sprawling suburbs. They used the G.I. Bill to receive a college education and enter the American middle and even upper-middle class. Also, Americans developed a more general acceptance, after World War II, to use war measures as a means to pursue political ends (at least until Vietnam). From a European perspective, it is hard to imagine that one can contain war; from an American perspective it is easy to imagine that one can contain war (because it so rarely negatively affected the mainland and because it never destroyed American society — with the exception of the Civil War, but that was a “civil” war, not an international war).

For Americans, it is important to realize the irony that the war they remember as the “good war” was, in reality, the worst war in all of human history (in terms of overall casualty figures, between 40-60 million globally). Again, this should underscore the uniqueness of the American experience. After all, the United States did not enter the war in order to end the Holocaust (which is what one of my honors students argued a few years ago); it entered World War II because it was attacked at Pearl Harbor, but also because it was an unavoidable war. One should not conflate cause and effect here (which is, of course, the effect of various myths built around World War II), while, of course, acknowledging the critical importance of the U.S. military in ending the Holocaust. In other words, if Americans can understand how unique and fortunate their experience of World War II was (in relative terms, as compared with Europeans), then it may be easier to see European war-weariness not just as an expression of anti-Americanism (whether applied to Vietnam or Iraq).

This underscores one of the basic reasons why we need to address the dual issues I discussed at the start of this talk. We at the American Institute for History Education sincerely believe that EUROCLIO is doing groundbreaking work in this area with regard to the teaching of European history.

Dr. Regina Gramer, who does work for AIHE, serves as a historian from Temple University in Philadelphia, and is a native of East Germany, relayed to me: “*While you find in the U.S. sometimes this notion that if something is in the past, it is ‘irrelevant,’ in Europe you often have the opposite reaction; if it is in your past, it is even more relevant [the past is present]. ‘Old’ tends to be more often associated with respect and prestige as opposed to ‘over the hill’ and ‘outdated’ and this applies to things and people.*

*“European public opinion tends to be more liberal than U.S. public opinion and this bears on the teaching of history. European history teaching tends to aim more at critical thinking skills and an appreciation for democracy [as opposed to citizenship/character building or national pride]. In some respect, the approach is less pragmatic and there is more of a sense to study history ‘for its own sake.’ For example, the U.S. ritual for public school students to be asked to ‘pledge’ to the flag is completely foreign to me; which, in part, is simply a reflection of Germany’s disassociation from all things ‘national’ after Hitler.”*

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But, even as many American educators move away from the “good war” approach, the curricula becomes more myopically insular. The newer social history focuses more on the introduction of women into the industrial workforce, than on international political or military issues of the 1930s and 1940s. Students study about the internment of Japanese citizens and compare it with the Holocaust. In most state standards, there is no mention of the internment of Italian and German nationals; California is a notable exception. While some American textbooks might mention “Operation Market Garden,” virtually none mention Nijmegen, yet you rank Nijmegen alongside of Normandy, Stalingrad, and Berlin. American curricula focus on the African-American and Mexican-American communities during the war, and they might study the Zoot Suit Riots between American servicemen and Mexican Americans in Los Angeles at the expense of what is taking place during the war. We also have to give equal treatment to the Pacific theater in America’s war against Japan. There is a lot to cover for American teachers in such a short time, and much of the international historical content is eliminated.

The point is that many American states’ history content standards claim to have a “global outlook,” but they ignore many critical global issues and revert to the study of more parochial social issues.

We at AIHE know there is a tremendous need to increase American students’ appreciation of international histories and cultures, and we are encouraged by what we see here at this meeting in Arnhem. “Since its foundation EUROCLIO has placed balanced history at the centre of education of responsible national and global citizens, of fostering international understanding, respect and cooperation. The overall aim of EUROCLIO is to promote and support the development of history education so that it strengthens peace, stability, democracy and critical thinking. EUROCLIO strives to shift the history and civics education in Europe toward inclusion of multiple perspectives, innovation, critical thinking, and connecting across boundaries of countries, ethnicities and religions. Recognizing that history is a powerful mobilizing force in societies, EUROCLIO promotes the sound use of history education toward building and deepening of democratic societies.

“EUROCLIO does not only focus on diminishing tensions between countries but it also tries to bring together different communities within countries by exploring the sometimes painful past through a safe environment and through a closely guided and monitored process” and we see this happening with this continental conference of serious history educators.

## **Conclusion**

In a recent article in the *Journal of World History* historian Robert Shaffer proposes what I believe to be the antidote to this historical amnesia and compartmentalized history. Shaffer discusses the growth of a movement to internationalize the teaching and research in U.S. history since the early 1990s.

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Shaffer points out that the effort to integrate U.S. history into world history is based on three changes in analytical perspective: 1. comparing U.S. society with other societies; 2. studying the U.S. impact on the world; 3. tracing global patterns within U.S. history. As mentioned this morning, maybe we should all come up with a canon that can be taught by teachers throughout Europe and also be used in the United States.

In the United States we have to begin to look at American history in the context of world history. This checks and controls the idea of hyper-American exceptionalism and, on the other hand, it also controls the other extreme so prevalent today in certain corners of academia or the media — that America is the source of all the world’s evil. As an American, I believe that looking at American history in the context of world history will shine brightly on many American accomplishments, but it will also control irrational and over-the-top claims of American national superiority.

New York University professor Thomas Bender, one of the leading figures in this movement earlier mentioned with Shaffer, recently wrote in the *La Pietra Report* for the Organization of American Historians that the knowledge of teachers about foreign assessments of U.S. history is rather slim.

At the American Institute of History Education we agree. In fact one of the original pillars of our program was not simply to incorporate but to *integrate* world history into the American History curriculum.

I believe that a partnership between educators from the United States, Europe and Asia can produce the type of substantive history education that will make a real difference in the way students across the globe see the world in which they live.

I end today with the words of President Barack Obama in his address last summer to the Muslim world. “All of us,” Obama explained, “share this world for but a brief moment in time. The question is whether we spend that time focused on what pushes us apart, or whether we commit ourselves to an effort — a sustained effort — to find common ground, to focus on the future we seek for our children, and to respect the dignity of all human beings. It’s easier to start wars than to end them. It’s easier to blame others than to look inward. It’s easier to see what is different about someone than to find the things we share. But we should choose the right path, not just the easy path. There’s one rule that lies at the heart of every religion — that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us.”

The study of history is unquestionably the glue that binds us together and illustrates the pathways to peace and justice. The presentations and conversations at this conference are certainly advancing this cause.

Thank you.