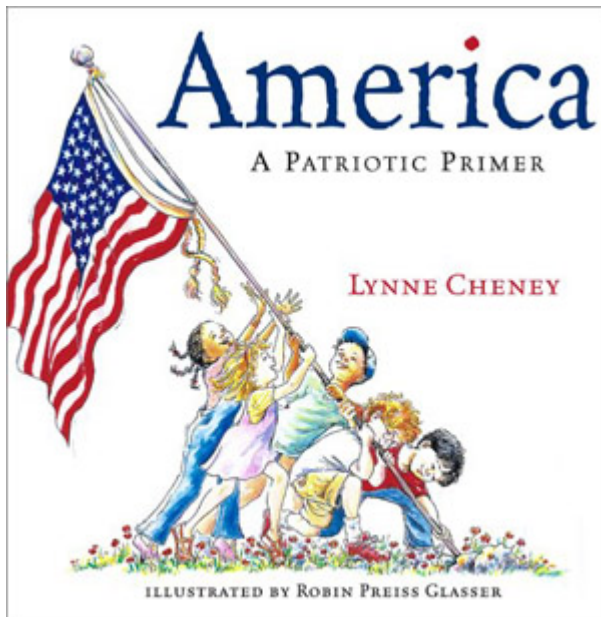
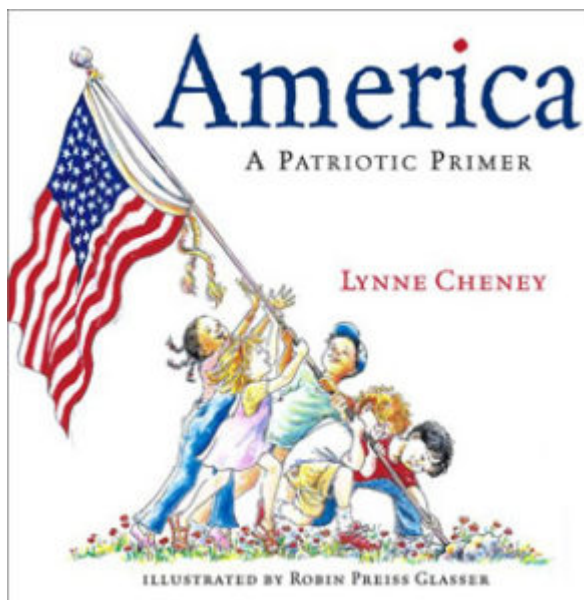


The Sandbox of Iwo Jima



My two little boys love the kids' sections of megabookstores, so a trip to Borders to get out of the heat seemed in order during our annual Fourth of July visit to their grandparents. Naturally there was a table full of patriotic books for children, and what should there be in the middle of the display but the latest opus by our Second Lady and longtime professional culture warrior, Lynne Cheney. It's called [*America: A Patriotic Primer*](#) (New York, 2001), and it signals its intentions with its cover art: a rainbow coalition of kids hoisting a flag in the style of the Iwo Jima monument. What Cheney offers up here is good old-fashioned Cold War mythology repackaged for today's youth.



Lynne Cheney, *An American Primer*

One's expectations cannot help but be low. The author, after all, is a woman who has made a career out of savaging some of America's most vulnerable institutions—from the NEH to public universities—for cheap political points. Her response to 9/11 was to whip up hatred of pinko professors by sponsoring a collection of rhetoric bites (under the title, [*Defending Civilization: How Our Universities Are Failing America*](#)) purporting to show that higher education hated America because some teachers and students actually exercised the rights we are defending and did something other than sing hosannas to El Presidente. The basic procedure was to set poll results and quotations showing the monolithically ecstatic response to the war on terrorism from all other quarters—"Fifty Million George W. Bush Fans Can't Be Wrong!"—against critical but often not especially incendiary remarks coming out of college classrooms and teach-ins. As she has in the past, Cheney was waging war on the very thing that makes academia most valuable to our society: its ability to provide dissenting or speculative voices at the times when they are most needed. But so what? Lynne Cheney was only following the Dick Cheney administration playbook in using one of the worst tragedies in American history to advance her preexisting agenda.

Not content simply to target universities, though, *Defending Civilization* also signaled Cheney's intention to go after our kids—and our history: "At a time of national crisis . . . [o]ur children and grandchildren—indeed, all of us—need to know the ideas and ideals on which our nation has been built. We need to understand how fortunate we are to live in freedom." Fine sentiments on their face, if Cheney had any respect for histories that told of times when the U.S. had to be forced to live up to its own values or even change them.

What version of American history does Cheney serve up with her ABC's? As the Cheney *oeuvre* goes, the *Patriotic Primer* is a fair-minded and moderate production. A bland Bushian multiculturalism is in evidence throughout—indeed, the same tokenistic kind displayed by culture-war *bêtes noires* such as mainstream television and children's books. If nobody has two mommies, wheelchairs in crowd scenes and black female judges are featured, and nary a glowering white Dick Cheneyesque visage can be found. The letter "R" doesn't stand for Franklin Roosevelt, but it doesn't go to Ronald Reagan either. (In fact, Ronnie is only mentioned once as far as I can see, though he does get the last word.)

Of course, mindless patriotism and hero worship abound: "A is for America, the land that we love," "B is for the Birthday of this nation of ours," "F is for Freedom and the Flag that we fly," "H is for Heroes," "P is for Patriotism that fills our hearts with pride," "Q is for America's Quest for the new, the far, and the very best," "V is for Valor." J, L, M, and W go to the appropriate presidents, and great leaders are emphasized throughout.

On the other hand, various American values that the current administration does

not seem to have uppermost in mind also get letters, including Constitution, Rights, Equality, and Tolerance. There is even the occasional flicker of unintentional humor, such as the moment in Cheney's introduction where she paints a picture of herself and her husband home-schooling the grandkids, presumably at an undisclosed, secure location: "I want my granddaughters . . . to love this country. Their parents want this for them too, and so what they do, and what the Vice President and I do, is teach them about the United States, about its geography and its people and its history." I would definitely pay to see Dick Cheney snarling his way through George Washington and the cherry tree. Or maybe in Dick's version, Washington's dad would congratulate him for having the courage to consume a natural resource?

In sum, the reactionary message of the *Patriotic Primer* is much subtler than it might have been. But it is still there, both in things left out and in those misplaced. K does go to Martin Luther King Jr., and S does go to women's suffrage. Beyond that, there is almost nothing here to suggest to children that American citizens themselves have or should play much of a role in protecting Freedom other than chanting the alphabet, waving the flag, and serving in the military. D is not for democracy. And though I is for Ideals, most of the pictures evoke great men and militarism: Mount Rushmore, the Alamo, and the Tomb of the Unknowns. The most mischievous image in the "I" section is a little drawing of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, whose featureless black slabs were clearly designed to overwhelm the visitor with the horror of so many dying for so little. Indeed, that was why conservatives attacked the memorial when its design was first publicized.

Similarly, "C is for the Constitution" is illustrated not to evoke constitutional provisions or principles, but with pictures of the document's shrine in the National Archives and other Washington, D.C., monuments. In this way, the Constitution gets converted from a set of rules limiting government power to a sacred relic validating whatever "America" might decide to do.

Cheney has systematically avoided historical situations where fundamental criticisms of American society and government were made, or where mass movements or violence were involved in fighting some American evil. I is not for internment, nor is S for slavery or A for abolitionism. In fact, slavery appears only on the "L" page, where Lincoln is credited with the Emancipation Proclamation, and in a tiny "Equality Time Line" on the E-F pages that references the Thirteenth Amendment (though not the thornier Fourteenth). Significantly, the time line is literally engulfed by a wraparound feature on showing proper respect for the flag. "U" does not stand for unions, the existence of which children will never suspect after reading this book. I guess those presidents and corporate directors just woke up one morning and decided to shorten the working day and week on their own! Oh, and pay people enough to live in nice suburban houses and spend seventeen bucks on a children's book.

The *Patriotic Primer's* overall philosophy is the soporific one that things have gotten progressively better over the centuries without ordinary Americans doing

anything other than going to work, following orders, and rallying around their leaders. "Over the years, more and more of us have been able to enjoy these rights equally," explains Cheney on the "E is for Equality" page, dropping out the parts where her ideological forebears worked against the changes that made the happy multicultural scenes in her book possible. As long as we are good little boys and girls, and do what the authority figures say, she coos, we will all get just as much freedom as we deserve. OK, I agree with that part.

Nevertheless, our boys got a picture book on the Declaration of Independence instead; it actually explains what one of those holy relics says, and even touches on some of the evils from which the Founders wanted to be free. Look, guys, a funny cartoon on civilian control of the military! Of course, they were more interested in playing with the store's train set than in being propagandized by Thomas Jefferson, Lynne Cheney, or me.

Further Reading:

For additional, late-breaking comments on this and other historical-political topics, see "[Public Occurrences Extra](#)."

The book we bought is [The Declaration of Independence](#) by Sam Fink (New York, 2002), which I find cute, informative, and not remotely agenda driven. It breaks down the Declaration phrase by phrase, illustrating the meaning of each with a sometimes comically literal drawing. There is also a chronology of the Revolution up through July 1776 and a glossary of terms.

The origins of the Iwo Jima flag-raising image, and its cultural history as a commemorative motif, are analyzed by Karal Ann Marling and John Wetenhall in *Iwo Jima: Monuments, Memories, and the American Hero* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991). They described the book's culture-war tour of duty in [a 1993 article](#). The controversy revolved around an exaggeration of their claim that the famous photograph captured a restaging of the flag raising done specifically for the cameras.

Lynne Cheney is hardly the only conservative to parlay cultural politics into children's merchandise. William Bennett has been hawking "Book of Virtues" products for years, including [the original book](#) and [an animated television series](#) that seems to be packaged for educational use. The culture war itself sometimes seems to be at least half a marketing pitch for "alternative" educational materials and entertainment, with the alleged demoralization wrought by public schooling and children's television standing in for halitosis as the invented social ill to be alleviated by the offered nostrum. No doubt years of conservative attacks on liberal bias at PBS had some influence on a Bennett-inspired show making the PBS schedule.

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