

How Can Educators Prepare for Teaching Controversial Issues? Cross-National Lessons

“Research & Practice” features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. Here, I invited Judith L. Pace to share her cross-national research on college and university educators preparing preservice teachers to teach controversial issues. Her observations and suggestions have implications for teacher educators, mentors of beginning teachers, and classroom teachers.

—Patricia G. Avery, “Research and Practice” Editor, University of Minnesota

Judith L. Pace

In her Citizenship methods course in Northern Ireland, Paula Barstow (a pseudonym) asks her 24 preservice teachers to write down, on post-its, all the controversial issues they can think of related to their major subject (Politics, Sociology, Religious Education). Individuals express their comfort or anxiety with teaching each issue by placing the post-its on a spectrum, laid out on the floor, with “happy to teach” at one end and “wouldn’t touch with a barge pole” at the other. The issues on the spectrum include sexuality, suicide, abortion, refugees, immigration, and the Troubles (the 30-year period of violent conflict in Northern Ireland). The room buzzes as preservice teachers discuss what they see on the spectrum.

With everyone back in their seats, Paula asks the class to identify the factors that influence the controversial nature of these topics and how people feel about teaching them. People talk about the role of religion, student ages, parental attitudes, school location, school ethos, and political climate. Paula affirms that anxiety about teaching controversies is appropriate but promises that in the day’s workshop she will provide practical tools to make teaching controversial issues “safer.”

I recently published a book, *Hard Questions: Learning to Teach Controversial Issues*, based on a study of Paula Barstow and three other university educators and their preservice teachers

located in Northern Ireland, England, and the Midwestern United States. With the eruption of political, racial, and pandemic-related conflicts and unprecedented threats to U.S. democracy, educators have raised their voices about the need to teach controversial issues in social studies classrooms. But understandably, many teachers feel unprepared to take up this challenging practice. They may also avoid it because they fear loss of control, classroom conflict, harm to students, recriminations from parents and community members, and sanctions from their administration. With the pandemic crisis, a reckoning with systemic racism in the United States, an unimaginably contentious presidential

election, an assault on the U.S. Capitol, and massive disinformation, the urgency and fear of teaching controversial issues have grown exponentially.

The social studies education literature contains abundant scholarship on teaching controversial issues. The November 2018 issue of this journal and the September 2020 inaugural issue of the *Annals of Social Studies Education Research for Teachers* are filled with gems, based on research and written for practitioners. However, little has been written about learning to take up this practice. In this article, I summarize essential lessons from my study for teachers wanting to learn to teach controversial issues during these fraught times.¹ These lessons are also useful for those supporting teachers as they learn to do this work.

What Are Controversial Issues and Why Should They Be Taught?

Scholars have defined controversial issues as “those problems and disputes that divide society and for which significant groups within society offer conflicting

explanations and solutions based on alternative values.”² They include contemporary political issues³ and contested histories.⁴ Understanding different types of controversial issues, such as “settled” versus “open,” is vital for deciding which issues to teach and how to teach them.⁵ Determining the reasonableness of competing perspectives on a particular issue is critical to deciding which viewpoints should be “given a fair hearing” in the classroom.⁶

Typically, controversies are framed as questions pertaining to policy issues, such as what to do about climate change, undocumented immigration, and fake news on social media. Or they may be framed as historical inquiries on matters such as the causes of the Dust Bowl or key factors in the Rwandan genocide. In divided societies such as Northern Ireland and Cyprus, many educators link controversial issues with contentious historical events, political questions, and cultural expressions that evoke

emotional reactions tied to community allegiance and identity.⁷

Studying controversial issues calls on students to critically analyze sources, discuss different perspectives, and develop positions on significant questions. Researchers have found that open classroom discussion of issues is correlated with increased political efficacy, interest, tolerance, and knowledge.⁸ Exploration of issues from multiple perspectives is integral to promoting media literacy, civic reasoning and discourse, informed independent thought, and other capabilities of democratic citizens.

But teaching controversial issues is highly complex and demanding work. Back in 1996, James Banks wrote: “In a postmodern world characterized by competing interests, a lack of civility, and enormous diversity, democracy is an extraordinarily ambitious and difficult ideal.”⁹ Today, extreme divisiveness, the proliferation of misinformation, and radical threats to democracy fuel what I

call *the charged classroom*, where the co-existence of critical possibilities for democratic teaching and challenging tensions is intensified by current events.¹⁰ Banks’s statement hits close to home and underscores why teaching controversial issues is both necessary and hard.

Unequal opportunities to explore issues are a serious concern as they contribute to a “civic opportunity gap.”¹¹ Students privileged by socio-economic status, race, and high-track classes have greater access to discussion of controversial issues than their less privileged peers. One factor is an assumption that students in the latter group cannot handle the intellectual and behavioral requirements of studying controversy. But research has found that discussing controversial issues in racially diverse schools yields great benefits, such as opportunities for “intergroup dialogue that can deepen students’ understanding of structural inequalities and develop empathy and motivation to work across

TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

A Framework for Reflective Practice
Judy Pace



This graphic offers a framework for teaching controversial issues, a cornerstone of democratic education. It is grounded in cross-national research presented in *Hard Questions: Learning to Teach about Controversial Issues*. The framework includes eight elements for creating powerful curricula and supporting reflective practice.

JUDY PACE is professor of teacher education at the University of San Francisco. She studies classroom teaching and its sociopolitical, cultural, and institutional dynamics. pace@usfca.edu

To learn more, read *Hard Questions: Learning to Teach Controversial Issues*. 30% discount code: RLFANDF30




Cultivate a supportive environment
through community building, norms, openness to dissent, individual affirmation, and humor.



Prepare thoroughly
with attention to student identity and development, teaching contexts, subject matter, purposes, and methods.



Think through teacher stance
including pedagogical roles, positions on issues, and pros and cons of disclosing teacher views.



Communicate proactively
with students, parents, colleagues, and administrators about issues that will be studied.



Select authentic issues
and frame questions to promote student engagement and inquiry, progressing from cooler to hotter issues.



Choose resources and pedagogies
that challenge assumptions, include diverse voices and perspectives, and foster participation.



Guide discussion
with tools for analyzing sources, exchanging ideas, moving from small groups to whole group, and attending to equity.



Address emotions
by creating space for processing them, using de-escalation moves as needed, and developing self-awareness.

differences.”¹² Demographic and political diversity enriches democratic discussions that in turn can heighten student engagement.

How can more teachers be prepared to take up the challenges of teaching controversial issues, in various school contexts, in ways that aren’t too risky, too daunting, or too unrealistic? My study yields some answers.

Cross-National Study on Teacher Preparation

In 2016–2018, I conducted a cross-national research project at four major universities in politically polarized regions to discover how expert teacher educators prepare their preservice teachers to teach controversial issues.¹³ In Northern Ireland, I studied two teacher educators’ methods courses at different universities—Paula Barstow’s citizenship course and Mark Drummond’s citizenship and history courses. In England, I studied Ian Shepherd’s history course. In the Midwestern United States, I studied Liz Simmons’s “advanced” social studies course. All courses served graduate-level preservice teachers preparing to teach students at the secondary level (ages 11 to 18).

I was a participant observer during the 2016–2017 academic year, observing each teacher educator for several class sessions. I resided in each location twice during the year. I conducted a series of three individual interviews with each teacher educator and with three to four preservice teachers from each course. I gathered curricular-instructional and policy documents related to the courses and their institutional contexts. I asked the preservice teachers I interviewed to send me lessons they developed and taught on controversial issues and pertinent university course assignments.

A major finding was that all four teacher educators taught strategies for containing the risks of teaching controversial issues while also encouraging preservice teachers to venture into this important territory. Another major finding was that, in the classroom, preservice

teachers learned to teach controversial issues by adapting pedagogical tools they took from the methods courses. The following sections flesh out these findings and their significance for addressing the paradoxical problem of urgency and anxiety related to teaching controversial issues.

Contained Risk-taking

The teacher educators in my study both taught and practiced what I call *contained risk-taking*.¹⁴ They encouraged tackling hard questions with democratic pedagogies and provocative resources. But they also addressed the risks of teaching controversial issues, such as difficult reactions from students, parents, and school leaders, through several strategies.

The concept of contained risk-taking draws on prior research. Kitson and McCully interviewed history teachers in Northern Ireland and categorized them on a continuum ranging from Avoiders to Containers to Risk-takers.¹⁵ At one end were teachers who avoided all controversy and were not concerned with the social aims of history teaching. At the other end were teachers who embraced social aims and took risks to encourage students to empathize across differences and explore contemporary interpretations of history. Risk-takers used immersive approaches such as role playing and provocative resources such as political wall murals. The Containers taught historical events that were potentially controversial, but only used historical sources and thereby minimized chances of emotional volatility. Some taught controversies that were analogous to Northern Ireland but were from distant locations.

On this continuum, the four teacher educators I studied taught approaches that land between the Containers and the Risk-takers. Collectively, they taught eight strategies to prepare novices to select and frame issues content, use democratic pedagogies, and build a supportive atmosphere.¹⁶ These strategies also protect students against harm

and safeguard the teacher from potential threats such as classroom management problems and hostile reactions from administrators or parents. They overlap with and extend recommendations identified by other scholars.¹⁷

1. *Cultivation of warm, supportive classroom environments.*

Teachers affirm students’ ideas, build group cohesion, and engage students in collaborative learning. Their classes establish norms such as respectful listening. Humor contributes to bonding and trust building.

2. *Thorough preparation and planning.*

Teachers continually expand their content knowledge. They develop a robust purpose, rationale, and goals for lessons and units. They create developmentally appropriate curriculum that fosters conceptual understanding, revolves around key questions, and utilizes rich resources and active pedagogies. In their planning, they incorporate knowledge of their students, school communities, and other contextual factors such as social, cultural, and political polarization in their society.

3. *Reflection on teacher identity and roles.*

Teachers are facilitators of inquiry, and they must not impose their views on students, but instead let them reach their own conclusions. Teachers must reflect on their positionality, the roles they adopt (for example advocate or devil’s advocate), and whether, when, and how to disclose their views.

4. *Proactive communication with parents, other teachers, and administrators.*

Student teachers must let mentor teachers and department heads know when they are planning to teach controversial issues. All teachers must be ready to communicate their rationale

to parents and administrators. They should let students know in advance the controversial issues they will be studying.

5. *Careful selection, timing, and framing of issues.*

Teachers should start with less contentious issues in the curriculum that do not hit close to home and build to those more deeply felt. Issues are framed in public versus personal terms to promote understanding of different perspectives instead of debating personal opinions.

6. *Emphasis on creative resources and group activities.*

Teachers introduce issues through creative resources to stimulate thinking and provide entry points to discussion. They use structured small group discussions to reduce threats to classroom management, decrease the demands of whole class discussion facilitation, and allow more opportunities for all voices to be heard.

7. *Steering of discussion.*

Teachers pose questions to guide students' thinking. Questioning, discussion formats, and protocols provide structure to discussion, which typically starts in small groups and moves to whole class plenaries.

8. *Dealing with emotional conflicts.*

Teachers either avoid arousal of emotions or balance affective and intellectual engagement. They use de-escalation techniques when things get heated. They get students to think metacognitively about emotionally entrenched perspectives and social divisions.

Diversity of Approaches

I observed an important difference between Mark's, Paula's, and Ian's courses in Northern Ireland and England and Liz's in the United States regarding class discussion. Liz's course was explicitly focused on *teaching with and for*

discussion.¹⁸ She made discussion an object of study as well as the primary method. Discussions in her course were often lengthy, some lasting an hour, and often steered by students. She was the only one to use whole class discussion formats such as Town Hall and Socratic Seminar.

By contrast, the U.K. courses emphasized *teaching with* small group discussion activities but did not involve preservice teachers in the study of discussion's purposes, value, and challenges. While democratic inquiry and discourse played a central role in teaching controversial issues, whole class discussion was mainly reserved for walking debates, debriefs, and reflective conversations, and was steered by teacher questions and comments. And in Northern Ireland, students were not necessarily expected to verbally participate in open discussions, particularly if these could expose their personal identities and views.

A second intriguing difference was the approach to emotions. Preservice teachers in Mark's, Paula's, and Liz's classes were taught different ways to deal with potential emotional conflicts in response to controversial issues. Paula taught her class how not to provoke emotions by focusing on political understanding versus personal views and experiences. Liz's penultimate class was devoted to creating safe classroom spaces, and preservice teachers reviewed de-escalation techniques to use in case emotions became heated.

Mark was the teacher educator most interested in dealing with emotional conflict and taught strategies for critical analysis of conflicting views of history and their connections to emotion and identity. He showed how juxtaposing divergent views through different resources, such as fictional characters from popular culture, could disrupt deep-seated biases and open students' capacity for empathy and critical thought. By tacking back and forth between emotional responses to Irish history and intellectual analysis, students could engage more deeply and develop transformative

insights that might transcend the "us vs. them" mindset of a divided society.

Adaptive Appropriation

The 15 preservice teachers I interviewed learned to teach controversial issues through *adaptive appropriation of pedagogical* tools.¹⁹ They selected specific practices and adjusted them to fit their teaching contexts and identities. The concept of adaptive appropriation draws from Grossman, Smagorinsky, and Valencia's analysis of learning to teach and the uncertain influence of university-based teacher education.²⁰ They explain that learning occurs through problem solving and is mediated by social interactions, practices, and tools located in distinct yet related settings.

Conceptual tools include principles, theories, and frameworks that guide teaching. Practical tools are methods, strategies, and resources that teachers use. Novices learn to teach by appropriating tools—adopting them in their practice and making sense of what they do and how they should be used. As novices utilize new tools in the classroom, their actions are mediated by myriad influences from university courses; school placements; and their own identities, which are shaped by their sociopolitical, cultural, and educational backgrounds. These influences can either support or constrain efforts to appropriate these tools.

In my study, preservice teachers were equipped with a pedagogical toolkit that included conceptual tools such as definitions of controversial issues, inquiry-based learning, and civic discourse as well as practical tools such as Structured Academic Controversy,²¹ walking debate, key inquiry questions, ranking activities, source analysis, and digital resources. In the classroom, they chose tools they wanted to use and modified them to fit their lessons, students, school conditions, political climate, and their own teacher identities.

For example, Andrew, in a citizenship class in Northern Ireland, taught a lesson on freedom of expression versus censorship of racism on the Internet.

Constricted by 35-minute periods, he had to modify the Structured Academic Controversy format and have students deliberate in pairs. In contrast, Margaret, in a politics class also in Northern Ireland, conducted a two-day lesson on compensating victims of violence during the Troubles. She had students examine a packet of resources, gather more for homework, and then deliberate using the Structured Academic Controversy method on the second day.

The concept of adaptive appropriation highlights the importance of having an adaptable toolkit for a challenging practice that is highly influenced by context. In addition to the sources cited above, professional development toolkits developed by educators in Europe are easily available and extremely helpful.²² Contextual factors make adaptation necessary. In fact, there are some factors—along with teachers’ motivation—that are needed to foster this learning process. School conditions such as sufficient instructional time for social studies, unobstructed by pressures to cover a “mile-wide, inch-deep” curriculum or prepare for exams, are key. Teacher autonomy and professional support from colleagues and administrators also are vital. This indicates that school leaders must also be educated about what teaching controversial issues entails, why it is so important, and how to nurture it.²³

Preservice Teachers’ Advice to Teacher Educators

The preservice teachers had insightful advice for teacher educators who want to prepare their students to teach controversial issues. One suggestion was to follow the examples of the teacher educators I studied. Northern Irish and English teachers most valued modeling by the teacher educator, particularly when it got them to explore issues using practical tools. The vehicle that U.S. teachers valued most was rehearsing the planning and teaching of discussion-based lessons.

Other suggestions included the following:

1. Have preservice teachers develop curriculum, perhaps collaboratively, and give them feedback.
2. Give preservice teachers opportunities to teach controversial issues lessons and get feedback.
3. Have classes dive deeper into discussions of current, close-to-home controversial issues.
4. Schedule classes to convene during and after student teaching so preservice teachers can discuss their experiences and get support.
5. Provide more explicit definitions to clear up ambiguities regarding the meaning of controversial issues and model the best ways to teach them while addressing developmental and academic differences as well as students’ emotional reactions.

In Summary

The violent assault on the U.S. Capitol in 2021 made it clear that democratic government in this nation has been threatened like never before in our lifetimes. The world is rocked by conflicts even as we struggle to get past a global pandemic. Research finds that the teaching of controversial issues yields great benefits for students and society. Although it may seem daunting, teaching controversial issues can be practiced using many different methods and curricular-instructional resources. Teachers working in polarized political climates would be wise to adapt a “contained risk-taking” approach with strategies for mitigating potential harm to teachers and students. These strategies address creation of a supportive classroom atmosphere; the selection, timing, and framing of issues; pedagogical choices; reflection on practice; and communication with parents and administrators.

Teachers in diverse contexts need support for teaching controversial issues in thoughtful ways that work for them, their students, and their school communities. The research presented here aims to contribute to that support. Contained risk-taking and adaptive appropriation of tools are especially helpful concepts for teaching controversial issues in polarized societies through practices that are developmentally appropriate for novice teachers. They encourage a “Yes we can” mindset among teachers impacted by an unimaginably difficult year yet still determined to educate the well-informed, open-minded, and concerned critical thinkers desperately needed to strengthen our democracy. 🌍

Notes

1. This research was funded by the Spencer Foundation.
2. Robert Stradling, Michael Noctor, and Bridget Baines, *Teaching Controversial Issues* (London, UK: Edward Arnold, 1984).
3. Diana E. Hess, *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2009).
4. Stuart Foster, “Teaching Controversial Issues in the Classroom: The Exciting Potential of Disciplinary History,” in *Controversial History Education in Asian Contexts*, eds. Mark Baildon, Kah Seng Loh, Ivy Maria Lim, Gül Inanç, and Junaidah Jaffar (London, UK: Routledge, 2014); Katrina Kello, “Sensitive and Controversial Issues in the Classroom: Teaching History in a Divided Society,” *Teachers and Teaching* 22, no. 1 (2016): 35–53.
5. Hess, 2009.
6. Wayne Journell, “Controversial Decisions within Teaching Controversial Issues,” *Annals of Social Studies Education Research for Teachers* 1, no. 1 (2020): 5–9.
7. Alan McCully, “Practitioner Perceptions of Their Role in Facilitating the Handling of Controversial Issues in Contested Societies: A Northern Irish Experience,” *Educational Review* 58, no. 1 (2006): 51–65; Michalinos Zembylas and Froso Kambani, “The Teaching of Controversial Issues During Elementary Level History Instruction: Greek-Cypriot Teachers’ Perceptions and Emotions,” *Theory & Research in Social Education* 40, no. 2 (2012): 107–133. doi:10.1080/00933104.2012.670591.
8. Patricia G. Avery, “Teaching Tolerance: What Research Tells Us,” *Social Education* 66, no. 5 (2002): 270–276; Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2015); Judith Torney-Purta, “The School’s Role in Developing Civic Engagement: A Study of Adolescents in 28 Countries,” *Applied Developmental Science* 6, no. 4 (2002): 203–212.
9. James A. Banks, “Foreword,” in *Educating the Democratic Mind*, ed. W. D. Parker (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1996): xi–xiii.

10. Judith L. Pace, *The Charged Classroom* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2015).
11. Meira Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012); Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh, "Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in High School" (Boston, Mass.: Tufts University, 2008), https://circle.tufts.edu/sites/default/files/2019-12/WP59_TheCivicOpportunityGapinHighSchool_2008.pdf
12. Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg and Peter Levine, "Challenges and Opportunities for Discussion of Controversial Issues in Racially Pluralistic Schools," *Social Education* 79, no. 5 (2015): 271–277.
13. I have published my findings in the following articles and book: Judith L. Pace, "Preparing Teachers in a Divided Society: Lessons from Northern Ireland," *Phi Delta Kappan* 99, no. 4 (2017): 26–32. doi:10.1177/0031721717745552; Pace, "Contained Risk-Taking: Preparing Preservice Teachers to Teach Controversial Issues in Three Countries," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 47, no. 2 (2019): 228–260; Pace, *Hard Questions: Learning to Teach Controversial Issues* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021); Pace, "Learning to Teach Controversial Issues in a Divided Society: Adaptive Appropriation of Pedagogical Tools," *Teaching and Teacher Education* (forthcoming).
14. Pace, 2019; Pace, 2021.
15. Alison Kitson and Alan McCully, "'You Hear About It for Real in School.' Avoiding, Containing and Risk-Taking in the History Classroom," *Teaching History* 120 (2005): 32–37.
16. Carole L. Hahn, *Becoming Political: Comparative Perspectives on Citizenship Education* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1998).
17. Terence A. Beck, "Identity, Discourse, and Safety in Controversial Issues Discussions," *Annals of Social Studies Education Research for Teachers* 1, no. 1 (2020): 48–52; Hess and McAvoy, 2015.
18. Walter C. Parker and Diana Hess, "Teaching with and for Discussion," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 17 (2001): 273–289. doi:10.1016/S0742-051X(00)00057-3.
19. Judith L. Pace, "Learning to Teach Controversial Issues in a Divided Society: Adaptive Appropriation of Pedagogical Tools," *Teaching and Teacher Education* (forthcoming).
20. Pamela Grossman, Peter Smagorinsky, and Sheila Valencia, "Appropriating Tools for Teaching English: A Theoretical Framework for Research on Learning to Teach," *American Journal of Education* 108 (1999): 1–29. doi:10.1086/444230.
21. Patricia G. Avery, Sara A. Levy, and Annette M. Simmons, "Deliberating Controversial Public Issues as Part of Civic Education," *The Social Studies* 104 (2013): 105–114. doi: 10.1080/00377996.2012.691571.
22. Lesley Emerson, Mary Gannon, Conor Harrison, Valerie Lewis, and Ann Marie Poynor, "Tackling Controversial Issues in the Citizenship Classroom (CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit, 2012), https://developmenteducation.ie/media/documents/tackling_controversial_issues.pdf; David Kerr and Edward Huddleston, eds., *Living with Controversy: Teaching Controversial Issues Through Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights* (Council of Europe, 2015), <https://rm.coe.int/16806948b6>.
23. Edward Huddleston and David Kerr, *Managing Controversy: Developing a Strategy for Handling Controversy and Teaching Controversial Issues in Schools* (Council of Europe, 2017), <https://rm.coe.int/16806ecd25>.



JUDITH PACE is Professor of Teacher Education at the University of San Francisco. Her research focuses on social studies teaching within its institutional, policy, cultural, and socio-political contexts.

Her latest book, *Hard Questions: Learning to Teach Controversial Issues*, is published by Rowman & Littlefield. She can be contacted at pace@usfca.edu.

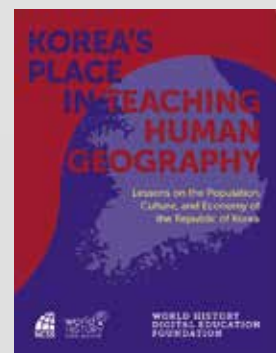
Korea's Place in Teaching Human Geography: Lessons on the Population, Culture, and Economy of the Republic of Korea.

World History Digital Education Foundation

This book goes beyond the political headlines to provide readers with a greater understanding of the country itself as it faces the challenges of population growth, a changing cultural landscape, and rapid economic development. The first of the book's three modules examines the country's changing demographic structure and population policies. The second reviews the Korean cultural landscape, noting the continuing influence of Korea's tradition of geomancy on the "why of where" in the landscape, and examining the diffusion of Korean culture to other countries. The final module tracks the transformation of South Korea into a country with a highly developed economy after being one of the poorest nations in the world at the end of the Korean War.

This book is co-published by the National Council for the Social Studies and the World History Digital Education Foundation, with the support of the Korea Foundation.

Member price: \$19.95 / List price: \$29.95
NCSS Item Number 200800



Purchase 10 or more copies and save 20% off the non-member price. Order online at www.socialstudies.org/store. To order by phone, call 1-800-683-0812. To order by purchase order, please email as attachments to bookstore@ncss.org; fax to 301-779-8596, or mail to NCSS Publications, 3570 Bladensburg Rd., Brentwood, MD 20722. Any order including a check as payment should be sent to: NCSS, P.O. Box 79078, Baltimore, MD 21279-0078.