



Neglecting History . . .

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A question for you before you set off your fireworks: Who was the American general at Yorktown? You have four guesses: William Tecumseh Sherman, Ulysses S. Grant, Douglas MacArthur or George Washington. When that question was asked late last year of 556 randomly chosen seniors at 55 top-rated colleges and universities, one out of three got it right. Stunningly, more of those about to graduate from great liberal arts colleges such as Amherst and Williams and Grinnell and world-class universities such as Harvard and Duke and the University of Michigan named Grant, the victorious general in the Civil War, than Washington, the commander of the Continental Army, as the man who defeated the British in the final battle of the Revolutionary War.

That was not the worst. Only 22 percent could identify the Gettysburg Address as the source of the phrase "government of the people, by the people, for the people." Most thought it came from the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution.

The results of this survey, using 34 questions normally asked of high school students, not elite college and university seniors, justify the term "historical illiteracy." That is what four members of Congress called the situation in a joint resolution they introduced last week warning that "the next generation of American leaders and citizens is in danger of losing America's civic memory."

Congress can do nothing but decry the situation. As Sen. Joe Lieberman of Connecticut, one of the sponsors, said, "We are not here to establish a national curriculum." But the challenge to parents and to educators is not to be ignored.

The college student poll was taken for a private group, the **American Council of Trustees and Alumni**. Its report makes two points: If these high school questions were used as a college test, 65 percent of the college students would flunk. Equally troubling, it said, none of the 55 elite colleges and universities (as rated by U.S. News & World Report) requires a course in American history before graduation.

This, I would add, despite the fact that it has been known for a long time that high school students aren't learning much about our history from their teachers. The most recent report from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) was in 1994, and it too was devastating. That massive survey found that even though most students reported having taken American history in the eighth and 11th grades, little of it stuck. "Few students (11 percent) reached the proficient achievement level--defined as solid grade-level performance--and only 1 or 2 percent reached the advanced achievement level," the report said. Fully 57 percent of the high school seniors failed to demonstrate a basic level of understanding of American history and institutions--the lowest category in the test.

The Council of Trustees and **Alumni**, whose chairman is Lynne V. Cheney, is engaged in an ongoing debate with academics over a range of curriculum issues. But on this one, I found the heads of the major historical groups largely in agreement.

Dr. Arnita Jones, executive director of the American Historical Association, told me, "Of course, students should be taking American history, and I would extend that to world history as well." But she said that on too many campuses, "resources are being pulled away from history and given to areas that seem to be more practical."

The reaction of Kenneth T. Jackson, the president of the Organization of American Historians and a professor at Columbia University, one of the elite schools whose students were surveyed, was more skeptical. He said, "The best colleges and universities have strong history departments and high enrollments. The smarter you are and the better college you attend, the more likely you are to take history."

But he said that in his first message to his fellow academics as association president, "I said we don't take our teaching seriously enough. We may be too free to teach our own speciality, rather than what students need to know. If you have a big department, it usually works out, but sometimes the only course that's open may be a history of 19th-century railroads in Tennessee."

As Lieberman said, "With the Fourth fast approaching, I can think of no better way to celebrate the anniversary of America's independence than for us to remember what moved a determined band of patriots to lay down all for liberty, and then to promise never to forget." Of course, you can't forget what you never learned.

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