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Just in time for the nation's recognition of Independence Day, a Washington-based nonprofit group that favors the study of liberal arts in college tossed a stink bomb into the celebration. In a sobering but welcome report, the **American Council of Trustees and Alumni** released the results of an American history test taken by 556 randomly selected seniors at 55 of the nation's elite universities, including Harvard, Duke, Michigan and Princeton. A majority of the 34 multiple-choice questions represented material the students should have learned in elementary school, and no question went beyond the high-school level. In a word, the results were appalling, representing yet another indictment on the elementary and secondary public education system. Altogether, 65 percent of the college seniors failed a test that was based on the most basic American historical facts, most of which the students should have learned in the fifth grade. The average score was a mere 53 percent, and if it were not for two gimme questions asking students to identify Beavis and Butthead and Snoop Doggy Dog, which 99 percent and 98 percent, respectively, were able to do, the students on average would have answered incorrectly more than half the questions.

Forty percent of the test-takers failed to identify the half-century (1850-1900) during which Americans fought the Civil War. More than 70 percent did not know what was meant by the term Reconstruction. Less than 25 percent could identify James Madison as the "Father of the Constitution." Two out five did not know that the Constitution established the division of powers between the states and the federal government; and nearly half did not know that the Federalist Papers were written to gain ratification of the U.S. Constitution. While more than half could not identify the 20-year period (1860-1880) that included the Lincoln presidency, a measly 22 percent knew that the Gettysburg Address was the source of the phrase, "government of the people, by the people, for the people." About seven out of 10 could neither connect Frederick Douglass with the Abolitionist movement nor Woodrow Wilson with the League of Nations. More than half did not know that George Washington warned against the dangers of entering into permanent alliances with foreign governments in his farewell address. Asked to identify the American general at Yorktown, the final major battle of the Revolutionary War, more respondents named Ulysses Grant of Civil War fame than George Washington. One in three did not know that it was Patrick Henry who said, "Give me liberty or give me death." Barely a third knew that Harry Truman was president at the beginning of the Korean War. More than six out 10 did not know that the Battle of the Bulge occurred during World War II.

The abysmal performance recalls the equally poor results reflected in the most recent (1994) National Assessment of Educational Progress history test, which revealed that 39 percent of eighth graders and 57 percent of high school seniors scored below the basic level, demonstrating less than minimum competency. A mere 11 percent of high school seniors scored at or above the proficient level. Non-public schools, it's worth noting, outperformed public schools by significant margins across the board.

The New York Times published the 34 questions on Sunday. Interestingly, juxtaposed to the questions was the weekly essay by American Federation of Teachers President Sandra Feldman, which contained the usual heavy doses of propaganda and whining. Titled "Uproar Over Testing," Mrs. Feldman's essay complained that some states and districts have developed standards-based tests without establishing a curriculum based on the new standards or without equipping teachers with the classroom skills and methods the new curriculum requires. Those shortcomings - excuses, really - may apply to geometry and physics. But what do they have to do with teaching basic American history? What history curriculum could conceivably exclude the fundamental facts about the American Revolution, the Constitution, the Civil War, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln - facts that students clearly do not know? What "classroom skills and methods" do teachers need to convey these facts? In

other words, what are Mrs. Feldman's excuses for the profound failure of elementary and secondary school teachers to teach basic history? Why, nearly 20 years into the so-called education reform movement precipitated by the 1983 "A Nation at Risk" report, do American schools continue to graduate historically illiterate students? Just how complicated can it be to teach grade school and high school history?

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