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The Washington Times

Can we keep the republic?

July 11, 2000

Section: A

COMMENTARY

Edition: 2

Page: A16

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According to legend, a lady stopped Benjamin Franklin as the Framers of our Constitution emerged from their deliberations. "What kind of a country have you given us?" the lady inquired. "A republic, Madame, if you can keep it," came the reply.

You might ask seniors of our top colleges in vain about the country given to us by the Founding Fathers. On June 27, Sen. Joseph Lieberman, Connecticut Democrat, informed a small gathering of the Washington press corps about the disastrous state of history teaching in today's America. The **American Council of Trustees and Alumni** commissioned a simple, basic quiz consisting of questions normally asked of high school students. Not even a quarter of those about to graduate from great liberal arts colleges like Amherst and Williams, or from world-famous universities such as Harvard and Duke, passed the test.

Flanked by historians, Mr. Lieberman spoke eloquently about "what moved a determined band of patriots to lay down all for liberty." Alas, he also pointed to the Capitol behind him, and referred to it as "this great symbol of our Democracy."

References to the United States of America as a "democracy" have been symptomatic of the gradual, systematic distortion of past and present, if Benjamin Franklin is to be believed. There are fundamental differences between a representative republic and a democracy. By and large, democracy means universal suffrage and free elections. There are many such countries.

There is but one United States of America and no other country even comes close.

Ours is a complex, highly sophisticated system of electing representatives who,

in turn, run our affairs for specific lengths of time. As well as the three independent branches of government, their respective terms of office - two years for congressmen, four years for the president, six years for senators (staggered to elect only one-third every two years) - have produced a stability and continuity unknown in the annals of history.

Will the generations now growing up in our schools know that?

Those speaking at the press conference bemoaned the lack of history teaching. My impression is that plenty of "history" is being taught in our schools. Only, it is not about Yorktown or Valley Forge; it is not about George Washington or James Madison; it is not about the Constitution or the Gettysburg Address.

Our young are told plenty about slavery, oppression, exploitation. They are told how the Europeans have robbed Native Americans of their land. They are told how Africans arrived in chains and became the property of European settlers. They are told how women had neither rights nor possessions. They are told how corporations ruin the environment. They are told that Americans, by definition, are greedy racists, sexists, polluters.

Then they are told about all the great deeds, discoveries and inventions of the aforementioned victims, and how they had been ignored by previous historians, for "it is always the victors who write the history."

Of course, I, too, was told all those things enumerated in the last two paragraphs.

But that happened in Hungary, after our proper history books had been replaced by operatives of the Soviet Union, buttressed by armored divisions of the Red Army.

Who replaced the history books of America?

The next step might be no books at all. President Clinton is now promoting "oral history." Oral history, of course, is story-telling. How credible is it? Just line up half-a-dozen people out of earshot of one another. Tell a story to the first and ask that it be told to the next person, and so down the line. Then have the last person in the lineup retell the story. Any similarity to the original will be coincidental.

After Mr. Lieberman and the attending historians concluded with an urgent call for the greatness of the Founding Fathers - and others of genuine importance -

to be taught once again, the floor was opened for questions. A young black woman reporter asked the standard "who-would-decide-what-kind-of-history-would-be-taught." One of the scholars retreated immediately and - instead of informing the questioner that history will be taught by those who have actually read it - assured her that the "warts" would all be included, and that American history would not be presented "in a celebratory or triumphalist manner."

In one sense, we may call everything that has happened "history." Clearly, there is no time to inform every student about everything that has ever happened. Thus, historians select those events and personalities that have had the most relevance for their own time, for posterity, or both.

The cultures that have produced written histories are relatively small in number, and fall into two categories. The larger of these contains the unreliable, the smaller the reliable ones. Entries from the English-speaking world tend to be in the latter category. The reasons are twofold: There has been a longstanding, honest attempt to rise above personal bias, and evidence is continually examined and re-examined.

The great events and deeds did not take place according to a quota system. A truthful examination of what we use and enjoy reveals that an extraordinary proportion of them comes to us from what the intellectually challenged refer to as "dead white males." There are two possible responses to the facts. One can continue griping and hope the resulting free ride will go on indefinitely. Or one can sit back, relax, and thank Providence for the immense benefits that are ours to enjoy by the gift of those men.

If America's history survives the fatal blow struck by the so-called "National Standards for U.S. History," it will surely take account of everything that mattered. No doubt, slavery will be thoroughly explored, hopefully including the fact that Africans came to be - and continue to be - enslaved and sold by other Africans in the first place. Hopefully, it will report the countless factors that have changed a woman's position in society, of which the women's movement was but one.

But if you know history, you will also know that wherever America has fallen short, it was exclusively by American standards - by none other.

And that is most assuredly something to celebrate, for it is an unprecedented triumph.

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