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'Losing America's memory'

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Suzanne Fields THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Once upon a time in the bad old days you couldn't graduate from most colleges and universities without taking a course in both American and European history. Nobody grumbled about it. We were prisoners of a system that honored Abraham Lincoln's famous caution: "Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history." In those bad old days such cautions became cultural clichés and paraphrased as part of nearly everybody's conventional information. History makes men wise, it teaches the future as well as the past and enables us to understand the present. The past is not dead, as William Faulkner said every Southerner knows, because it is not even past. Sometimes history even prevents our repeating the mistakes of other peoples, other times.

An appreciation for history was considered indispensable to a democracy. "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free," said Jefferson, "it expects what never was and never will be."

This kind of thinking has not been totally lost, but it sure is hard to find in the places you'd most expect it see it kicking and screaming. At 55 colleges and universities, including some of the most elite - Harvard, Princeton, Dartmouth, Duke, Michigan and Stanford among them - absolutely none requires a course in American history. Only 22 percent requires a course in any history at all.

Even more bizarre is what is required. At many colleges students must take two courses in a "non-Eurocentric culture or society." These don't have to be history courses. Cultural studies requirements can be met with courses in anthropology, human development, sociology, theater, dance, film and video courses. "Historical studies" and "social science" requirements are satisfied with

courses in women's studies and public policy.

State requirements for California college students mandate an American Cultures course, but not necessarily history. Course choices include "No Body's Perfect" (in the English Department), "Alternative Sexual Identities and Communities," and "Cultural Landscape of the San Francisco Bay Area."

Even those who support diversity can't be happy (can they?) that a Peoples and Cultures requirement can be met with a course in "Afro-American Music" and "Emotions and the Self."

All these examples are taken from a most troubling report called "Losing American's Memory: Historical Illiteracy in the 21st Century," released by the **American Council of Trustees and Alumni**, a nonprofit organization which advocates more requirements for a liberal arts education. The report shocked a lot of parents who shell out \$20,000 a year (and more) to educate, to use the term loosely, their children at America's best schools. They learned that only 34 percent of the 556 randomly selected seniors surveyed knew that George Washington was an American general at the Battle of Yorktown; 37 percent thought such a general was Ulysses S. Grant. Only 23 percent correctly identified James Madison as "Father of the Constitution" - 53 percent chose Thomas Jefferson.

Despite all the black studies, only about one in four could identify Frederick Douglass as a black abolitionist leader. Seventy percent didn't know that the Emancipation Proclamation freed no slaves, because it applied only to the Confederate states in rebellion and excluded loyalist slave states.

The pop culture, no surprise, gets the highest marks, with "Beavis and Butthead" garnering 99 percent recognition, and rapsters Snoop Doggy Dogg getting 98 percent identification. (If the students had been asked about the source of a character known as Big Brother, the bet here (I'll lay 100 to 1 odds) is that majority would name the new television show of that name, not George Orwell's novel, "1984."

The report set off school alarm bells in Washington where education is the topic of urgency in this election year. It even provoked a rare burst of bipartisanship in Congress. Sen. Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut, a Democrat, and Sen. Slade Gorton of Washington, a Republican, introduced a resolution urging the nation's colleges to adopt American history requirements. A similar resolution has been introduced in the House. Our civic life, our common purpose, our freedom, depends on it.

Jacques Barzun makes exactly this point with trenchant dismay in his best-selling book, "From Dawn to Decadence." Says he: "When the nation's history is poorly taught in schools, ignored by the young, and proudly rejected by qualified elders, awareness of tradition consists in only wanting to destroy it."

Suzanne Fields, a columnist for The Washington Times, is nationally syndicated. Her column appears here Monday and Thursday.

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