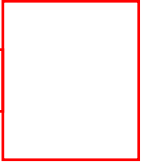


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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Pilgrims' Magna Carta

Americans can't defend a history they don't know.

Friday, November 23, 2001 12:01 a.m. EST

If college students have a clear-eyed view of the battle in which the nation is now engaged, we'd wager it doesn't have a lot to do with what they're learning at school. A survey just out from the American Council of Trustees and Alumni reveals just how little history students are asked to study today even at the highest-ranked colleges and universities.

But before we relate the depressing findings of the Council's latest survey, we'll take a moment to mention some good news on campus. Which is, that after years of exposure to the fog of political double-think and victimology that produced speech and harassment codes (not to mention hostility to all things related to the U.S. military), students somehow have managed to stay connected to the real world. The anti-war teach-ins arranged by the impresarios of the tenured left after September 11 have for the most part fallen on deaf ears. We see instead a healthy core of student opinion firmly behind the nation's war aims--and increasingly vociferous about it.

"Persevere Through Ramadan," urges the headline of a Harvard Crimson editorial earlier this month. At Columbia, students have formed a group called United 4 Victory as a way of showing their support for the U.S. military and the war. The Columbia Daily Spectator delivered a scathing assault on Reuters news, the head of which recently banned the use of the word "terrorist" on the grounds that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter."

This is a heartening indication of the common sense of this generation of students. But it's all the more reason to recognize that students deserve to be grounded in the history and civilization of their nation, something educators have failed miserably to provide. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni puts the matter succinctly: "What is not taught will be forgotten, and what is forgotten cannot be defended." The Council, founded by Lynne Cheney, is a group of scholars and historians committed to academic freedom and the maintenance of strong education standards.

How much is not taught was painfully evident in its survey. The Council asked the Roper organization to assess what college seniors know and don't know about American history and Western civilization and which institutions of higher learning actually required students to learn something of these subjects.

The results may surprise more than a few parents now shelling out \$30,000 a year to send their children to one of the nation's elite institutions of higher education. Just three of the top-ranked 55 schools--Columbia, Colgate and the University of the South--require a course in Western civilization. None of the 55 requires a course in American history. ([Click here](#) for a full list.)

So at colleges such as Amherst, Yale, Duke, Stanford, Dartmouth, Rice and the University of Michigan--to name a few--graduates can now leave as ignorant of Western civilization as they were when they entered. Other schools on the list do have history "requirements" but it turns out these are the sort of requirements that aren't in fact required. Rather, the student can satisfy them by completing a high school history course or by choosing a non-history college-level course. At Berkeley, students who earned a C or better in high school history are exempt. At M.I.T., students can satisfy the historical studies "requirement" by

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All this goes a long way toward explaining why the college seniors queried by Roper in an earlier Council survey had so much trouble with even the most basic history questions. No more than 22% had any idea that "government of the people, by the people, for the people" came from the Gettysburg Address. More than half could not identify the Constitution as the source of the separation of powers. This being the day after Thanksgiving, we're too embarrassed to print the percentage who thought the Magna Carta was what the Pilgrims signed on the Mayflower. Remember, these are students from the nation's top 55 colleges.

Facts about America's wars were also in short supply. Just four out of 10 seniors could identify the Battle of the Bulge as having taken place in World War II. Only 34% knew George Washington was the general commanding the Americans at Yorktown, the ultimate battle of the Revolutionary War. A higher percentage--37%--thought it might be Ulysses S. Grant.

About one fact most students did seem clear--that they are citizens of a nation now at war. In turn, university administrators, long cowed by the multiculturalists and pressure groups hostile to anything that might smack of Western culture, ought to consider getting up off their knees to provide young Americans with a serious education in their history and civilization.



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