

PRESIDENT BUSH ANNOUNCES NEH AMERICAN HISTORY INITIATIVE

Washington, D.C. (Sept. 17, 2002) - President Bush today launched "We the People," an initiative by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to encourage the teaching, studying and understanding of American history and culture.

"Studies have shown that Americans of all ages have a dangerously poor understanding of American history and culture," said NEH Chairman Bruce Cole, who joined the President for the Rose Garden ceremony announcing the "We the People" initiative. "The President has identified this lack of understanding as a serious problem and has asked NEH to help combat it."

Cole added: "Last year's September 11 terrorist attack was designed to destroy not only thousands of people but also the American way of life. In defending our homeland we must fight to protect the democratic ideals and principles of freedom on which our nation was founded."

The three components of "We the People" include:

- A call for applications to NEH for projects designed to explore significant events and themes in our nation's history.
- An annual "Heroes of History" lecture by a scholar on an individual whose heroism has helped to protect America.
- An "Idea of America" essay contest for high school juniors.

Plans include expanding "We the People" through a grant program to support projects that help schools and universities improve their teaching of American history, government and civics. The Summer Seminar and Institutes program will be expanded to offer teachers more opportunities to study significant texts. Exhibits on "The Idea of America" will travel to small and mid-sized communities throughout America. NEH will also convene an annual national conference on civics education, the state of historical knowledge and ways to enhance the teaching of American history.

Cole said: "People increasingly are forgetting what shaped their past and led to a national identity. When a nation fails to know why it exists and what it stands for, it cannot be expected to long endure."

Historian David McCullough, the author of *John Adams*, agrees: "I don't think there is any question that students in our institutions of higher learning have less grasp, less understanding of, and less respect for American history than ever before. To our shame we're raising a generation of young Americans who are, to a very large degree, historically illiterate."

Two years ago a Roper poll commissioned by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) surveyed students attending the nation's top schools and found that 40 percent did not

know in what half century the Civil War occurred. A recent National Assessment of Education Progress test found that more than half of high school seniors thought that Germany, Italy or Japan was our ally in World War II.

A Columbia Law School survey found that 35 percent of voting-age Americans thought that Karl Marx's dogma, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs," was in the United States Constitution. Another 34 percent responded that they weren't sure.

An ACTA report released yesterday gives us part of the reason why. None of the nation's top 50 colleges and universities require students to study American history and only 10 percent require students to study history at all.

Cole said: "We are a people of many creeds, races and religions united by common purpose into a good and great nation. Our strength lies in our shared democratic ideals."

He added: "America's founders recognized the importance of an informed and educated citizenry for the survival of participatory democracy. James Madison said 'the diffusion of knowledge is the only true guardian of liberty.' The humanities tell us who we are as a people and why our country is worth fighting for. They are integral to our homeland defense."

For additional information about NEH's "We the People" initiative go to <http://www.wethepeople.gov/>. NEH's website is <http://www.neh.gov/>. For a transcript of the President's remarks, go to <http://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

Created in 1965 as an independent federal agency, the National Endowment for the Humanities supports learning in history, literature, philosophy and other areas of the humanities. NEH grants enrich classroom learning, create and preserve knowledge, and bring ideas to life through public television, radio, new technologies, museum exhibitions, and programs in libraries and other community places.

DETAILS ABOUT "WE THE PEOPLE"

- *Build Knowledge*

NEH encourages scholars, teachers, filmmakers, curators and librarians to submit grant applications that explore significant events and themes in our nation's history and that advance knowledge of the principles that define America. Proposals for the "We the People" initiative will be evaluated by NEH's grant review process. Application forms are available at www.neh.gov.

- *Celebrate Heroes*

September 11 reminds Americans of the significance of individual acts of heroism. NEH will offer an annual lecture on "Heroes of History." This nationally published lecture by a noted scholar will provide an opportunity for the public to learn about the lives and deeds of our nation's heroes.

- *Challenge Young People*

NEH will sponsor a nationwide essay contest for young people on "The Idea of America." Participating high school juniors will write a 1,200-word essay on a topic that asks them to think about the tenets that define our nation. The winner will be recognized at the "Heroes of History" lecture and will receive a \$5,000 prize.

BACKGROUND ABOUT THE HUMANITIES ENDOWMENT

"We the People" builds on a foundation of significant projects that NEH helped make possible over the years:

- Editions of the papers of ten presidents: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, John Quincy Adams, James Madison, Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk, Andrew Johnson, Ulysses S. Grant and Dwight D. Eisenhower.
- Editions of the journals of the explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, along with the papers of Thomas Edison, Benjamin Franklin, Albert Einstein, Henry David Thoreau and Susan B. Anthony.
- NEH has supported work that resulted in 15 Pulitzer Prize-winning books, including
Battle Cry of Freedom by James M. McPherson and *Jefferson and His Time* by Dumas Malone
- NEH has supported 800 film and radio programs, including Ken Burns's *The Civil War*, which set a PBS record of 38 million viewers when it first aired in 1990. Other films include biographies of presidents Grant, TR, FDR, Ike and LBJ and *Liberty! The American Revolution*.
- NEH has supported exhibitions nationwide in museums, historical societies and libraries, including "The Great Experiment: George Washington and the American Republic" and "A Slave Ship Speaks: The Wreck of the *Henrietta Marie*."