

Student needs for understanding our freedom and liberty

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In 1947, two years after our final victory in World War II, President Harry S. Truman and other prominent national leaders were interested in reminding Americans why our country had fought so hard to prevail against the Axis powers. Truman, along with others in the Federal Government, had hoped our nation would embrace a "rededication" of the principles that underlay the founding of our country. From that desire came the idea of the Freedom Train.

The Freedom Train, for approximately sixteen months, journeyed over 37,000 miles across America. Well over three million people visited the Train to view our nation's hallowed documents: the Declaration of Independence; the Constitution, including the Bill of Rights; and the Gettysburg Address. When the Freedom Train arrived in Philadelphia on September 16, 1947, the day before the 160th anniversary of the Constitution, a message was read from President Truman, crediting those documents as representing "our common heritage of freedom."

Americans again celebrate Constitution Day, with, among other commemorations, school programs throughout the land.

Are American schoolchildren really learning the lessons about the struggles our forefathers endured to bequeath to young Americans the liberty and freedom so often taken for granted?

A survey released in February 2000 by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), conducted by the Center for Survey Research and Analysis at the University of Connecticut, surveyed seniors at some of the most outstanding colleges and universities. The findings were disappointing. Questions were formulated from material presented in high school lessons. The survey's analysis declared, "Four out of five — 81% — of seniors from the top 55 colleges and universities in the United States received a grade of D or F. They could not identify Valley Forge, or words from the Gettysburg Address, or even the basic principles of the U.S. Constitution." Over one-third of the survey's respondents were unaware that the Constitution provides for the separation of powers within the Federal Government. We must hope that today's students in all levels of education, in this post-9/11 era, have a greater understanding of the importance of our Declaration of Independence and Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

How pertinent those words are for the struggle we are now facing with Islamic fundamentalists, terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda, and governments such as Iran, North Korea and possibly China.

The ACTA report calls for stricter standards to be established at colleges and universities, requiring study of the most important documents of our nation's history. Students and their parents would be

well-advised to select a college or university that has a core curriculum which includes intensive instruction in the founding documents of our country. Alumni can use their leverage to establish programs to deepen the understanding of the American founding.

America now faces a threat not as readily apparent as that which we faced during World War II, but one that, in this age of terrorism, is potentially more dangerous.

Each American citizen has a responsibility to develop an understanding of the unique times in which we live and also to place that knowledge in context with the beliefs that have guided America so well for over two centuries. "Freedom," declared President Truman, in his message read in Philadelphia, "is everybody's job." At a time like this the wisdom of the American Founding Fathers is all the clearer to those citizens who care to learn about the principles of freedom and liberty that underlie the governance of our nation.

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From 1989 to 1996, Mr. Weyrich served as President of the Kreible Institute of the Free Congress Foundation, responsible for training democracy movements in the states comprising the Former Soviet Empire. He is a founder and past director of the American Legislative Exchange Council, the founding president of the Heritage Foundation, and the current National Chairman of Coalitions for America.

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He has been married since 1963 to the former Joyce Smigun, is the father of five children, and serves as a deacon in his church.

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