

**Statements submitted in conjunction with
the Congressional Press Conference
on Historical Illiteracy in America**

June 27, 2000

**David McCullough
Historian
West Tisbury, MA**

“The place given to history in our schools is a disgrace, and the dreadful truth is very few of those responsible for curriculum seem to care, even at the highest level of education. Anyone who doubts that we are raising a generation of young Americans who are historically illiterate needs only to read *Losing America’s Memory: Historical Illiteracy in the 21st Century*.”

**Oscar Handlin
University Professor Emeritus
Harvard University
Cambridge, MA**

“History is a discipline in decline. There is a profound ignorance not only among students but among their teachers as well. This study [*Losing America’s Memory: Historical Illiteracy in the 21st Century*] confirms that.”

**Lynne V. Cheney
Former Chairman
National Endowment for the Humanities**

“It is regrettable that over the last decade we have seen a continuing decline in emphasis at the college level on core subjects such as literature, math, and history. ACTA’s recent report, “Losing America’s Memory: Historical Illiteracy in the 21st Century,” confirms this disturbing trend and underscores a profound historical illiteracy amongst our future leaders that bodes ill for the future of the Republic. Sen. Lieberman and Cong. Petri deserve our praise for raising this important issue. We must begin to restore America’s memory. If our best and brightest are graduating without a grounding in the past, we are on our way to losing the understanding that makes us all feel part of a common undertaking, no matter how diverse our backgrounds.”

**John Patrick Diggins
Distinguished Professor of History**

**The Graduate Center
City University of New York**

“We cannot escape history,” Abraham Lincoln warned Americans more than a century ago. According to the American Council of Trustees and Alumni report, students have escaped it and remain happily ignorant of their own ignorance in an educational establishment that has surrendered its mission to popular culture.”

**Stephen H. Balch
President
National Association of Scholars**

“More than most nations, America is defined by shared memories. Great deeds, stirring moments, inspiring heroes, hard-won victories, occasional defeats, and, most significantly, lofty ideals – declared, attacked, and ultimately vindicated – map our collective identity. ACTA’s study, *Losing America’s Memory: Historical Illiteracy in the Twenty-First Century*, thus strongly suggests that we are also in danger of losing America itself. Its findings should be a wake-up call for our educators who have been clearly shirking their responsibilities.”

**Walter A. McDougall
Pulitzer prize-winning professor of history
University of Pennsylvania**

“The findings of this excellent ACTA report are deemed ‘shocking.’ In fact, they are all too predictable, which is why they deserve the widest dissemination. Americans simply cannot expect rigorous history instruction in their K-12 schools so long as the nation’s elite colleges and universities delete history from their curricula.”

**Thomas Egan
Chairman of the Board
State University of New York**

“ACTA’s recent report *Losing America’s Memory: Historical Illiteracy in the 21st Century*, is alarming proof that our graduates are failing to receive a strong grounding in their past. At SUNY, we are pleased to be among the vanguard of university boards to require U.S. history as part of a core curriculum demanded of all our graduates. Congressional action today confirms what we have already concluded: students must be familiar with their history in order to be engaged participants in the civic life of our nation.”

Candace de Russy
Member of the Board
Chairman, Academic Standards Committee
State University of New York

“As part of their duty to ensure the academic excellence of their institutions, the nation’s higher-education governing boards are beginning to promote U.S. history requirements. We trustees of the State University of New York have accomplished this by mandating the study of American history as part of a larger core curriculum which all SUNY undergraduates must now pursue. This mandate is consonant with our determination to raise academic standards. It also reflects our commitment to help ground students in the fundamental norms and ideals we as citizens need to hold in common in order that this free society endures.”

Gordon Wood
Professor of History
Brown University
Providence, Rhode Island

“We Americans have a special need to understand our history, for our history is what makes us a nation and gives us our sense of nationality. A people like us, made up of every conceivable race, ethnicity, and religion in the world, can never be a nation in the usual sense of the term. Instead, we have only our history to hold us together; McDonald’s can never do it. It’s our history, our heritage, that makes us a single people. Up until recently almost every American, even those who were new immigrants, possessed some sense of America’s past, however rudimentary and unsophisticated. Without some such sense of history, the citizens of the United States can scarcely long exist as a united people.”

Theodore K. Rabb
Chairman
National Council for History Education, Westlake, Ohio
Professor of History
Princeton University

“Since the focus of the National Council for History Education (NCHE) is on the improvement of history education in the schools—indeed, our one postsecondary initiative has been to recommend that teachers of history be certified only if they have a college major or at least a minor in the subject – we are not in a position to comment on the findings of *Losing America’s Memory* except to add our voice to those who are concerned about the growing problem of historical illiteracy in the United States. We have long argued that history should occupy a large and vital place in the education of

both the private person and the public citizen. As historian Kenneth T. Jackson has written,

Unlike many people of other nations, Americans are not bound together by a common religion or a common ethnicity. Instead, our binding heritage is a democratic vision of liberty, equality and justice. If Americans are to preserve that vision and bring it to daily practice, it is imperative that all citizens understand how it was shaped in the past, what events and forces either helped or obstructed it, and how it has evolved down to the circumstances and political discourse of our time.

Indeed, the office of citizen cannot be filled properly in today's democratic society without an understanding of American history, nor can students afford to go into the twenty-first century ignorant of the history and culture of other nations.”

Eugene W. Hickock
Secretary of Education
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

“ACTA’s recent study, *Losing America’s Memory: Historical Illiteracy in the 21st Century*, is deeply troubling for many reasons.

The findings suggest to me that the teaching of our nation’s history has taken a back seat in our elementary and secondary schools, likely replaced by failed fads or trends that have permeated our education system for decades. But, we cannot expect K-12 education to take full responsibility; our higher education institutions often have replaced the study of our American culture with watered down programs and curricula that focus more on our popular culture.

It is time for Americans from all walks of life—parents, educators, students, and local, state, and national leaders—to step up their efforts to reverse this disturbing trend and to make sure our nation’s history is a key part of the curriculum at every level.

I applaud Senator Lieberman and Congressman Petri for their strong commitment and bold efforts to reverse this trend and to make sure every student knows and appreciates our Republic’s rich history.”

James C. Rees
Executive Director
Historic Mount Vernon
Mount Vernon, Virginia

“With each year that passes, it becomes more and more evident that the people entering our gates at Mount Vernon know next to nothing about the real George Washington. They usually recognize his image from the dollar bill, and sometimes they’re familiar with the age-old myths about the cherry tree and the silver dollar toss across the Rappahannock River. But when it comes to even the most rudimentary facts—what war he was in and when he was president—it is incredible how many people draw a blank. And it’s not just the kids in grade school who have somehow lost touch with George Washington. It is their parents as well. This most recent survey of college students confirms our worst fear: that the next generation of parents will continue this trend of ignorance. To put it as simply as possible, it would be naïve to think that George Washington could be first in the hearts of this generation, because it simply doesn’t know and appreciate his remarkable leadership and character.”

Dr. Balint Vazsonyi
Founder and Director
Center for the American Founding

“Having grown up in Hungary, in turn under German National Socialist and Russian International Socialist terror, I have learned the absolute need of socialists to erase the national memory as a precondition for disseminating their own fictitious history.

The so-called *National Standards for U.S. History* demonstrate that the second stage of this process is already under way. Alone clear identification of the ideology that mandates the erasure of national memory can provide a meaningful response to the crisis. It is then up to the advocates of that ideology whether they desire continued identification with it.

Incorporating more of the current, mostly fraudulent histories in the curriculum only serves those who have created the crisis in the first place.”

Marc Berley
President
Foundation for Academic Standards & Tradition
New York, New York

“While students may not know as much as they should about American history, they do know what they’re missing. And they want their colleges to do exactly what Senator Joseph I. Lieberman and Congressman Thomas E. Petri are urging. In “Student Life,” a national survey of 1005 randomly selected college students conducted by Zogby International and released last week by the Foundation for

Academic Standards and Tradition, 8 out of 10 college students said their schools need to ‘do a better job teaching students the basic principles of freedom in America.’”

Michael C. Quinn
Executive Director
James Madison’s Montpelier
Montpelier Station, VA

“America is forgetting its heritage, and it does matter. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni has recently taken a survey of college seniors, and has exposed the failure of our universities to teach our nation’s history. Only 23 percent of the college seniors surveyed could correctly identify James Madison as the “Father of the Constitution.”

Why does this matter? It matters because the American nation exists through its heritage. Americans have only one thing that unites them as citizens: a shared vision of democracy. Citizens of almost every other country are united by a shared language, a shared religion, a shared geography, or a shared ethnicity. In America, we join together as a people because of nothing more than an idea. Yet the idea we share as a people—the constitutional democracy pioneered by James Madison and other founding fathers—is one of the most powerful ideas on earth. No other form of government has guaranteed so much individual liberty and economic opportunity to its citizens.

The failure to teach American history, with its lessons of struggle and idealism, of inspiring leaders like James Madison, is failing our nation. Each generation has an obligation to instill the shared idea of democracy into the next generation. And American history—the story of the birth and success of that vision of democracy—makes our shared idea a lasting, meaningful part of every new citizen’s life.”