

**Testimony of Anne D. Neal,  
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Before the Subcommittee on Federal Workforce, U.S. Postal Service and Labor Policy  
House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

Wednesday, February 29, 2012

**Honoring George Washington's Legacy: Does America Need a Reminder?**

I cannot tell a lie. Too many Americans – particularly our youngest ones – are suffering from a severe case of historical amnesia. Do Americans need a reminder – about George Washington and American history in general? The answer is an emphatic yes.

*E Pluribus Unum*, a report issued in 2008, lays out the problem succinctly: “America is facing an identity crisis. The next generation of Americans will know less than their parents know about our history and founding ideals.” As we move forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, too many of our future leaders are graduating with a profound historical illiteracy that bodes ill for the future of the republic.

There was a time in the past when we did celebrate George Washington's birthday. But now it is engulfed in a meaningless Presidents' Day – more focused on mattress discounts and car sales than the great heroes of our past. It is essential that we as Americans remember what we owe to this remarkable leader. We must learn from example and celebrate and appreciate our heroes. Restoring the official celebration of Washington's birthday to his real birthday, February 22, would be a great place to start.

Our Founding Fathers and subsequent leaders were surely clear on this point. President John F. Kennedy: “History is the means by which a nation establishes its sense of identity and purpose.” Or President Harry Truman: “The only thing new in the world is the history you don't know.” Or President Ronald Reagan: “Let's start with some basics: more attention to American history and a greater emphasis on civic ritual.”

Distinguished scholars agree. University of Chicago professor Amy Kass has suggested the creation of an American Calendar to enhance Americans' civic education by marking individuals and events that have defined the nation. Historian Gordon Wood has advocated a similar idea – Sites of Memory. He notes that young people no longer can identify the significance of Fort Sumter, or Appomattox, or Yorktown.

And these professors are not alarmists! Their concerns are based on troubling and undisputed evidence of growing historical amnesia. Recent surveys of students and citizens across the country indicate that knowledge and appreciation of George Washington – and American history generally – are fast fading from the American consciousness.

In a survey of teenagers conducted by Colonial Williamsburg, one in 10 teens didn't know that George Washington was the first president of the United States.

More teenagers could name the Three Stooges than could name three branches of government, in a 1998 survey by the National Constitution Center.

And the most recent NAEP report card, issued in 2010, finds that only 12 percent of 12<sup>th</sup> graders are at or above “proficient” in historical knowledge and understanding, with 55% “below basic.” According to Dr. Jeremy Stern, co-author of a survey of the 50 states’ K-12 history standards, this ignorance should come as no surprise: “[M]any states’ standards are so vague that they say nothing at all about the Revolutionary/founding era, or about anything else, either!”

The situation in our colleges and universities is equally dire.

In a survey of public and private colleges in George Washington’s home state – Virginia – only two universities – James Madison and Regent – require a survey of American history or government of their graduates.

Of more than 1,000 colleges and universities ACTA reviewed across the country, [www.whatwilltheylearn.com](http://www.whatwilltheylearn.com), not a single leading university expects its students to take a survey of American history. Overall, 80% of the colleges we surveyed don’t require students to take even a single foundational course in American history or government.

These findings might be tolerable, of course, if students were otherwise knowledgeable. But they are not. The Center for Survey Research and Analysis at the University of Connecticut found that even amongst highly selective colleges – the so called elite colleges – seniors could not identify the father of the Constitution, the Battle of the Bulge, or the General at Yorktown. (Although nearly 100% could identify the rapper Snoop Dogg and cartoon characters, Beavis and Butthead).

A mere 34% of elite college seniors could identify George Washington as the general at the Battle of Yorktown. 37% thought the answer was Ulysses Grant; 22% thought it was William T. Sherman; and 6% said it was Douglas MacArthur.

But let’s be clear. This is not just about memorizing facts or avoiding embarrassment on the Jay Leno show. This is about the obligation of Americans to be informed citizens – knowledgeable about their history and heritage – since our system demands it.

On this subject, there is no one better to quote than General George Washington: “A primary object should be the education of our youth in the science of government. In a republic, what species of knowledge can be equally important? And what duty more pressing than communicating it to those who are to be the future guardians of the liberties of the country?”

To live day to day, without a solid connection to our government and our history leaves us poorly prepared to face America’s many challenges, and constitutes a tragic slap in the face of the men and women who formed America, and defended her since.

It’s time our educational institutions got their priorities straight.

But restoring America's memory is not simply the task of our schools and colleges.

That is why this bill – H.R. 2268 – is so important. The current disconnect between America's founding heroes and the American people is almost certain to grow wider and more difficult to change, unless a concerted effort is made to reverse this trend.

H.R. 2268 would do just that. It would follow the recommendations made by *E Pluribus Unum*, a project informed by a diverse array of historians, journalists, public figures and educators, to eliminate the generic Presidents' Day celebration in favor of distinctive birthday celebrations.

Unlike other countries, as Gordon Wood has oft noted, we in the United States are not tied together by race, religion or ethnicity. We are bound together by ideas – and the men and women behind those ideas. A shared memory gives us all a common foundation – what Abraham Lincoln called the “mystic chords of memory” – a common bond that, in this day of bickering and dissent, we need more than ever.

George Washington is no mere president, to be jumbled with Millard Fillmore and Chester A. Arthur. He is the standard bearer, the precedent setter. He is, to use the words of historian James Flexner, the “indispensable man.”

By marking George Washington's birthday on its real day, Congress can underscore the importance of knowing our real history and its heroes. It can rightfully single out our first president for his courage, leadership, and character. Teachers and students can use the day to return Washington's portrait to its rightful place of honor in our schools. This real-time birthday celebration can encourage families, schools, business and civic organizations – and governments at every level – to keep American memory alive by treating national holidays, not as shopping days, but as opportunities for civic education and celebration.

### **Resources:**

American Council of Trustees and Alumni, *Diffusion of Light and Education: Meeting the Challenges of Higher Education in Virginia* (January 2012)  
<https://www.goacta.org/publications/downloads/VirginiaReportFinal.pdf>

American Council of Trustees and Alumni, *What Will They Learn?* [www.whatwilltheylearn.com](http://www.whatwilltheylearn.com) (2012) (Survey of core curricula requirements at more than 1000 colleges and universities). See also, *What Will They Learn? 2011-2012*,  
<https://www.goacta.org/publications/index.cfm?categoryid=7E8ADC7F-D3EE-892B-9740A83D92E0FA4F#50B815CD-C2C5-CA4E-84F798DD8CC0E551>

Anne D. Neal and Jerry L. Martin, *Losing America's Memory: Historical Illiteracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (American Council of Trustees and Alumni, Feb. 16, 2000).  
<https://www.goacta.org/publications/downloads/LosingAmerica'sMemory.pdf>[www.goacta.org](http://www.goacta.org).

The Bradley Project on American National Identity, *E Pluribus Unum* (The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, 2008), [www.bradleyproject.org](http://www.bradleyproject.org), coordinated by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni.

“History Eludes 1 in 5 Teens” (*Daily Press*, July 2, 2001) [http://articles.dailypress.com/2001-07-02/news/0107020010\\_1\\_10-question-survey-colonial-williamsburg-foundation-teen](http://articles.dailypress.com/2001-07-02/news/0107020010_1_10-question-survey-colonial-williamsburg-foundation-teen)

John F. Kennedy, quoted in *The American Heritage New Illustrated History of the United States*, Volume I, The New World (New York: Choice, 1988), 5.

Merle Miller, *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman* (Berkley Publishing Corp., NY, 1974), p. 142.

National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), U.S. History 2010 Assessments (Washington, DC, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, May 2011), p. 37.

National Constitution Center, “More Teens Can Name Three Stooges Than Can Name Three Branches of Government,” <http://constitutioncenter.org/Files/stooges.pdf> (Accessed February 28, 2012).

Ronald Reagan, “Farewell Address” Oval Office remarks (January 11, 1989), <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/3418>

Sheldon M. Stern and Jeremy A Stern, *The State of State U.S. History Standards 2011* (Thomas Fordham Institute, February 2011). [http://www.edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2011/20110216\\_SOSHS/SOSS\\_History\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2011/20110216_SOSHS/SOSS_History_FINAL.pdf); Email communication from Jeremy A. Stern to Anne D. Neal (November 28, 2011).