



Celebrate Constitution Day Monday, September 17, 2007

by Deborah D. Thornton

*"I hope that you have re-read the Constitution of the United States in these past few weeks. Like the Bible, it ought to be read again and again."*¹

- Franklin D. Roosevelt, March 9, 1937

Unfortunately, we are failing to practice this directive today. A 2006 study by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) tested 14,000 college students from 50 schools on their knowledge of American history and government, and the market economy. The results of the 60-question multiple-choice test were abysmal. Seniors earned an average score of 53.2 percent – an “F” in anyone’s grade book. Students from colleges considered outstanding, according to the *U.S. News and World Report* 2006 rankings, scored no better than students from average schools.² Further, a study by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) found that four of five college seniors could not identify a passage from the Gettysburg Address.³

Unsurprisingly, civics knowledge was significantly greater at colleges requiring courses in American history, political science, and economics for graduation. An additional result is that students with a greater knowledge about their country and government participated more in citizenship activities, such as voting and community service.⁴

America’s high school students apparently aren’t learning much civics either. In a New York State test of eighth graders only 27 percent had basic knowledge of American history. Overall the number of civics courses taken in public high schools has declined by about half over the last 30 years.⁵ A New York City high school teacher found that his students were “indifferent” to reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, and didn’t know the most common patriotic songs, for example, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”⁶

In adults this lack of knowledge is demonstrated by the most basic measure of citizen participation, voting, or more correctly, not voting. Even with same-day registration, early voting, and absentee voting, voter turnout remains low. In the most recent Presidential election, with major efforts by both political parties and the expenditure of over \$350 million on turnout, only 59 percent of the registered voters actually voted.⁷ In Iowa the numbers were better, with 72 percent of 2.1 million registered voters casting their ballots in 2004.⁸

However, all is not lost. Pennsylvania State Representative Todd Rock recently introduced a bill making Pennsylvania the second state (after California) to require public schools to teach basic American documents as part of American history classes. Other states are considering similar measures. In Iowa, Social Studies teaching includes citizenship education, with “democratic beliefs and values” being specifically mentioned in the Jr. High curriculum.⁹ Several private and non-profit organizations, such as the ISI’s American Civic Literacy Program, the Center for Western Civilization, and the Bill of Rights Institute, are conducting educational programs on American history, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. ACTA has a “Defense of Civilization” Fund focusing on the study of American history and Western civilization. These programs reach many people, but there is still work to be done.

In an attempt to remedy these problems, the Public Interest Institute offers, free of charge, *The Iowa Civics Project*, a series of 12 lessons teaching the basic Iowa history and governmental knowledge informed citizens need. Materi-

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als include a free copy of the Iowa Constitution. To request your copy or copies for your class, please contact us at 319-385-3462.

At the national level, in 2004 West Virginia Senator Robert Byrd sponsored and passed legislation establishing September 17 as “Constitution Day.” As a result, all publicly funded educational institutions must provide information on the Constitution on that day. The National Constitution Center provides an excellent package of information, with a complete, downloadable “America Reads the Constitution” tool kit for staging a read-aloud event.¹⁰ As part of this effort, you can offer people – not just students – the ability to symbolically “Sign the Constitution.” As a demonstration of our support, Public Interest Institute will be providing a one-page “History of the Constitution” and a basic Constitution Fact Quiz to teachers currently using *The Iowa Civics Project* series. It will also be available to others upon request. The tools to stop and reverse the disturbing trends outlined above are available; it’s up to us to use them. With a month until Constitution Day 2007, we all still have time to plan, organize, and participate in events in our communities. We must take it, or not complain.

“An informed patriotism is what we want. And are we doing a good enough job teaching our children what America is and what she represents? Those of us who are over 35 or so years of age...were taught, very directly, what it means to be an American. And we absorbed,...a love of country and an appreciation of its institutions.We’ve got to do a better job of getting across that America is freedom -- freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of enterprise. And freedom is special and rare. It’s fragile; it needs [protection]. I’m warning of an eradication of the American memory that could result, ultimately, in an erosion of the American spirit. Let’s start with some basics: more attention to American history and a greater emphasis on civic ritual. ...And let me offer lesson number one about America: All great change in America begins at the dinner table. So, tomorrow night in the kitchen, I hope the talking begins. And children, if your parents haven’t been teaching you what it means to be an American, let ‘em know and nail ‘em on it. That would be a very American thing to do.”¹¹

– Ronald W. Reagan, January 11, 1989.

(Endnotes)

1. Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Fireside Chat on Reorganization of the Judiciary,” Washington, D.C., March 9, 1937.
2. “The Coming Crisis in Citizenship: Higher Education’s Failure to Teach America’s History and Institutions,” Intercollegiate Studies Institute, September 26, 2006.
3. “Losing America’s Memory: Historical Illiteracy in the 21st Century,” American Council of Trustees and Alumni, February 2000.
4. “The Coming Crisis in Citizenship,” A Report by The Intercollegiate Studies Institute’s National Civic Literacy Board, <www.americancivilliteracy.org/report/summary.html> (June 7, 2007).
5. Stephen Macedo, *Democracy at Risk, How Political Choices Undermine Citizen Participation and What We can Do about It*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, D.C., 2005.
6. Marc Epstein, “Sitting Out the Pledge,” *City Journal*, June 4, 2007.
7. Macedo, *Democracy at Risk*.
8. Iowa Secretary of State, <<http://www.sos.state.ia.us/pdfs/elections/2004/general/TurnoutStatistics.pdf>> (June 11, 2007).
9. Iowa Department of Education, Iowa Administrative Code, Chapter 12, December 27, 2006.
10. National Constitution Center, <<http://www.constitutionday.us>> (June 7, 2007).
11. The Patriot Post, <<http://reagan2020.us/speeches/Farewell.asp>> (June 8, 2007).

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