

Putting the Teaching of American History and Civics back in the classroom

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Witness:

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Chairman
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Testimony:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and the members of this Committee, for the opportunity to testify today.

This hearing helps raise awareness of an important issue – the need to increase and enhance knowledge and understanding of American history.

It is crucial that we understand the principles, events, and ideas that have defined our past and that will shape our future. Democracy, unlike other forms of government, is not self-perpetuating. Its ideas and principles must be taught and transmitted. Indeed, we cannot defend what we do not understand. But even as our country is at war, numerous studies indicate that many students lack even a basic knowledge of their country's past.

I'll give you just a few examples:

A recent survey of students enrolled at the 55 of our nation's most elite colleges and universities found that 40 % of our brightest young people cannot place the Civil War in the correct half-century. More than a third of these students could not identify the Constitution as establishing our government's division of powers.

At the secondary school level, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test found that over half of all high school seniors scored "below basic" – that is, below the bare minimum level of proficiency in history. To illustrate what that means: 18 percent of seniors thought Germany was a U.S. ally in World War II. Less than half correctly identified the Soviet Union as an ally.

In speaking to various groups, I have called this loss of memory and lack of understanding of our history our American amnesia. The consequences are serious. Citizens who do not know their rights are less likely to protect them. And if young Americans cannot recall whom we fought, and whom we fought alongside, during World War II, there is no reason to expect that they will long remember what happened on September 11.

As Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, one of my top priorities for the agency and its able staff is to address this challenge of American amnesia. We are aiming to do this through a new initiative called We the People.

On Constitution Day, September 17, 2002, in a special Rose Garden ceremony, President Bush announced the launch of the We the People initiative, to be spearheaded by the NEH. We the People is designed to broaden and deepen Americans' knowledge of their nation's history. We are honored that the President has chosen the Endowment to play a leadership role in the Administration's American history and civics initiative, and we look forward to serving in this capacity. This initiative is an important part of the President's USA Freedom Corps, which is working to promote a culture of active, engaged citizens who have a better understanding of their democratic traditions and their duties to serve our communities and country.

We the People aims to cultivate an enhanced understanding of American history among students, teachers, and the public at large. We the People will enlist the efforts of scholars, professors, curators, librarians, filmmakers and others engage in a wide variety of projects, including the creation of model history curricula, the digitization and dissemination of historical documents, the expansion of our acclaimed summer seminars for school teachers, and new programs that bring history to our citizens.

Already, the endowment has undertaken several exciting efforts as part of this initiative. This year we launched a nationwide solicitation of grant applications to address We the People themes and topics throughout the NEH's divisions. On May 1, we will host the Inaugural "Heroes of History" lecture, featuring acclaimed historian Robert Remini, who was authorized by the House of Representatives to write its official history. In addition, we recently held the first "Idea of America" essay contest, where more than 1,300 high school juniors submitted essays on key events in America's history.

I should also mention that on May 15th the NEH will present the Thirty-Second Annual Jefferson Lecture, delivered by distinguished historian David McCullough. He is a first-rate scholar and a leading champion of American history.

Each of these NEH efforts aims at enhancing and increasing knowledge and understanding of American history among teachers, students, and the general public.

This hearing is another important step. I want to express my appreciation to Senator Alexander for his work to address this issue, both in his home state of Tennessee, and from the Capitol. He has been an effective and dedicated advocate for excellence in education, and I look forward to working with him toward that shared goal.

The American History and Civics Education Act authorizes the establishment of Presidential academies for teaching history content to teachers, and Congressional academies for teaching history to gifted students. It would place the responsibility for selecting those academies within the purview of the NEH, and its highly respected merit review system.

It is a truism of teaching that one cannot teach what one does not know. As someone whose life was changed by the inspired teaching of a college professor, I can attest to the transformative power of quality teaching. But studies also show that secondary school history teachers receive less instruction and training in their discipline than teachers of any other subject, except the natural sciences. In fact, one recent Department of Education study found that 58% of high school history teachers neither majored nor minored in history.

There are many reasons for the “content gap” in history teaching. Many education schools focus more on the theory and methods of teaching, rather than what is being taught. The emphasis that Undersecretary Hickok, Senator Alexander and others have placed on teaching history content, as opposed to pedagogy, is exactly right. Teacher certification requires that teachers take a variety of courses on pedagogy – in other words, teaching how to teach. But all too often, this emphasis shortchanges instruction in content itself.

But regardless of the reasons, the challenge is clear: we need to enhance and extend the teaching of history to teachers, so that they can pass it on to their students.

One way in which the NEH addresses this challenge is through its widely-respected summer seminars and institutes for school teachers. Each summer, the NEH sponsors numerous summer seminars and institutes on a variety of humanities topics. Each seminar or institute sponsored is selected by the NEH’s rigorous merit review system, and each concentrate on teaching the teachers history and humanities content. In the testimonials we’ve received, many teachers have claimed that the experience was extremely helpful and rewarding, and that learning more about a subject naturally enabled them to teach it more effectively.

Mr. Chairman, the Administration and the NEH share your concern with ensuring that our nation’s history is well understood by teachers, students, and all citizens. The ideas, ideals and institutions that comprised our founding and form our nation should be well and widely taught. With nearly forty years of experience as the federal government's agency for advancing education, scholarship, public programs, and preservation in history and the humanities, NEH is well positioned to contribute to this important effort.

Again, I want to express my appreciation for the willingness of this committee to address the issue of American amnesia, the work and experience Senator Alexander has invested in this legislation, and the opportunity to testify today. I would be glad to answer any questions.