

Newsmax

The Constitution as Educational Tool

Tuesday, February 22, 2011 08:05 AM

By: Jason Ross

Back in 1947, still in the glow of post-war peace, it may have been possible to speak of “living rightly and well in a free society” without sparking debates about the meaning of virtually every word in the phrase. Now, not so much.

Civic education — education for citizenship — was always held out as the purpose and promise of the public education system in America. Now it has been allowed to languish. And that is especially true when it comes to teaching the Constitution and the principles of the Founders.

At the Bill of Rights Institute, we’ve talked with high school teachers around the country and found they lack the resources necessary to teach the Constitution and the Founders in their classrooms. The Bill of Rights Institute is committed to the work of helping U.S. history, civics, and government teachers across the country.

Indeed, the institute exists for no other reason than this: Educating young people about the Constitution.

Current events, and current trends, only seem to underscore the need for such education. See the recent debates occasioned by the decision to open the new 112th Congress with a reading of the Constitution. For some, it was welcome and long-overdue. For others, it was scorned as tantamount to a declaration that the Constitution is a “sacred” text.

Some, represented by one young journalist, saw it as an exercise in irrelevance since “the text is confusing because it was written more than 100 years ago” and means different things to different people (a claim he later said he clarified).

Either way, if it is a novel and controversial thing even for the United States Congress to read the Constitution, which reminds citizens and our representatives of the source and limits of its powers — we should not be surprised to see young people, and citizens generally, ignorant of the sources and limits of the powers of our government.

Worse than ignorance are the active efforts to teach today’s student that the values of the Founders are, well, valueless. For example, there’s the Howard Zinn project that provides to thousands of schools curricular materials which teach that the founding was essentially a criminal enterprise and asks, “Why hold up as models the 55 rich white men who drafted the Constitution as a way of establishing a government that would protect the interests of their class — slaveholders, merchants, bondholders, land speculators?”

Such an approach utterly ignores the significance of the debate surrounding the framing and ratification of the Constitution. This was the most important debate in human history about whether men are capable of self-government.

If students are not taught about this debate, or worse, taught to condemn the men who engaged in this debate, our efforts as Americans to maintain a free and self-governing society are at risk.

A 2010 civic knowledge survey by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) found high school graduates woefully deficient in their civic education and unfamiliar with ideas like judicial review and the separation of powers.

ISI found that “half of the 14,000 incoming college freshmen tested failed the 60-question multiple-choice test, getting just half the questions right. Worse, they barely know any more when they graduate.”

A recent survey done for the Bill of Rights Institute by Harris Interactive provides a more distressing example. When asked, more than 40 percent of respondents said that Karl Marx’s famous phrase, “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs,” was to be found, instead, in the writings of America’s Founders.

They placed it either in the Bill of Rights or elsewhere in the Constitution, the Federalist Papers, or the Declaration of Independence.

Let's be blunt. Marx's slogan is a declaration of dependence. The fact that so many Americans assumed this statement was the product of one of America's Founders should be troubling for those of us who seek to cultivate a self-governing people and perpetuate a free society.

The Bill of Rights Institute is unabashedly a partisan of the Constitution. But, otherwise, it is non-partisan, non-ideological, non-profit, and committed to preparing and disseminating materials that are professionally-produced and scholar-reviewed. More than ever, current events and trends convince us of the need for such an outreach.

Recent weeks have seen the Constitution itself emerge as a category of popular debate and discussion. Again, this underscores the challenge and the opportunity — and the critical need — for ensuring that these debates are informed and that our young people can “live rightly and well in a free society.”

Jason Ross is vice president of Education Programs at the Bill of Rights Institute. Visit BillofRightsInstitute.org to learn more.