

Ignorance is Not Bliss

Thomas Jefferson was well into his 70s when he founded the University of Virginia and issued this warning: "Self-government is not possible unless the citizens are educated sufficiently to enable them to exercise oversight."

Wow. If only President Jefferson could take a glance at the country he helped create. 43% of Americans are unable to define the Bill of Rights, conceived in large part by Jefferson's fellow Virginian James Madison. Meanwhile, the same number of people actually believe the U.S. government may have known about 9/11 in advance. That's a pithy summary of modern American – equal parts ignorance and looniness.

The question about the Bill of Rights was included in a survey taken by "Newsweek," which gave Americans the same test administered to foreigners applying for citizenship. 29% of the native-born respondents could not identify our vice president, 40% did not know our adversaries in World War II, and 67% were unaware that our economic system is a capitalistic one. That's a total, unadulterated disaster!

So what's going on? It's clear that the public school system is one major culprit. Schools are no longer teaching history, geography or civics in an effective way. Too many curricula are more focused on America's alleged past sins, not on the wonders of this grand experiment.

Number two, the Internet and popular culture have created a generation of self-absorbed, distracted and ignorant people. The allure of texting, watching cat videos, and keeping up with the Kardashians has diverted a lot of Americans away from real life. Simply put, millions of us are wasting a huge amount of time pursuing trivial things, and if a citizen is not interested in the outside world, he or she will simply not be equipped to make intelligent decisions.

More than two-thirds of Americans lament that we are a country in decline, and that is partly because citizens just aren't paying attention. They do not seem to be interested in the welfare of their country. Those of you reading this column are almost surely not in the "ignorant" category. But if you add up all the Americans who watch TV news and read the newspaper, it is a minority.

If there is one small bright spot, it's that 93% of those applying for U.S. citizenship pass the test, meaning they get at least six out of the ten questions correct. We are not talking about the hordes of desperate people now coming across the Rio Grande into Texas, but immigrants who take the legal route to citizenship. They generally know the workings of this country better than native-born people who were "educated" in our woeful public schools.

Unfortunately, Americans' ignorance does not stop at the water's edge. Just this week the intrepid Jesse Watters asked some New Yorkers to describe what's happening in the Middle East. "I know there's a lot of stuff going on," one woman told Jesse, "but I don't like to pay attention to it." Another man said this: "I gotta be honest with you, I haven't been up to date." Hey, at least he was honest.

Some accuse Watters of picking the dumbest, most ill-informed people to interview. Sure, he seeks out folks who look "interesting" and are willing to talk to him, but their ignorance is in no way surgically enhanced for the cameras. To verify that, just read some of the polls that seek to determine what Americans know, and what they don't know.

If Thomas Jefferson stood in for Jesse Watters one day (and he did have kind of a turned-up collar), he would probably be severely depressed. After all, Jefferson also said this: "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free ... it expects what never was and never will be." America is in danger from without, faced with a host of enemies wishing to do us harm. But we are

also in danger from within, the result of our growing obliviousness. Which threat is more frightening?