

STATEMENT OF
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In my junior year in high school, I took advantage of a wonderful opportunity to spend a summer studying advanced science courses at a university. This opportunity was extended to me thanks to the National Defense Education Act, a targeted response to the need to spur and revamp science education in the aftermath of the Sputnik launching. Congress at that time believed that it was necessary to make special efforts to encourage students to sustain an interest in the study of natural sciences. In my case, the effort was successful, for I continued thereafter to study, and ever since have sustained an interest in and some knowledge of, the natural sciences (although I turned to the humanities and social sciences as my vocation).

The strong sense of national purpose that informed Congress' Act in the late 1950s is no less requisite now, in 2003. This time, however, our most glaring deficits lie in teaching (and preparing teachers of) traditional American history and Western civilization. Carol Allen and I, in our recently published book, *Habits of Mind: Fostering Access and Excellence in Higher Education*, have highlighted this specific need in explaining why undergraduate education requires renewed commitment and emphasis.*

Among the circumstances cited in that work we highlight the gradual disappearance of university requirements in traditional American history and western civilization. You should note that, parallel to a decline in university requirements for undergraduates, American higher education has also experienced a significant decline in the preparation

* I would call your attention particularly to pages 17-26, 37-49, and 58-73, the last of which specifically cites a general education curriculum that would respond to this need.

of professors and teachers in those areas and specifically pursuing the understanding of free institutions. While it is true that we continue to prepare graduate students of history and related disciplines, such as political science, such training has tended to reflect valuable but far more specialized concentration on advances in historical understanding and current policy alternatives (and on some occasions, merely faddish ideological indulgence). Concomitantly, our disciplines reduced their focus on recapitulating the foundations of national life as well as significant domestic and international developments in light of those foundations.

A direct consequence of this trend has been an erosion of the training of professors (and therefore K-12 teachers) to preserve broad familiarity with facts, texts, and significant dates affecting our civic existence. A targeted response to this situation, cutting across disciplinary distinctions, will meaningfully strengthen the academy's ability to play a central role in fostering content mastery regarding the significant moral, constitutional, political, intellectual, economic, cultural, and international influences revealed through American history. *H. R. 2336*, amending the *Higher Education Act*, is just such a targeted response, providing direct impetus for expanding awareness of the conditions of freedom and free political institutions.

It is perhaps safe to say that nowhere in the world are peoples so heedless of the need to perpetuate familiarity with the terms of their own political existences as we so often seem to be in the United States. General education curricula tend to treat the history of American constitutionalism as if it were merely one in a well-nigh infinite list of interesting facts that students might learn over the course of a university career, rather than as a necessary support for those who, in their own turn, must assume the management of free institutions.

When George Washington spoke and wrote of the need for an appropriate higher education for republican government, he made clear that he envisioned a preparation of citizens for the performance of the distinctive duties of self-government. He knew that we did not merely emerge from nature fully clothed in righteous devotion to liberty, just as he also knew that government itself could not supply a virtue that the citizens lacked. What was most insightful, however, was his awareness that those who begin the career of freedom, clothed with virtues that breed confidence in liberty, must omit no opportunity

to improve upon the likelihood that their offspring will be no less favorably situated than themselves. No single undertaking can provide for such success so effectively as regular instruction.

I, for one, would love to be able to think that my teaching, and that of like-minded colleagues, could reach beyond the few who self-select and instead nurture in students generally a disposition to take America seriously, to recognize its exemplary claims as well as its characteristic responses to its most enduring problems, and to appreciate the force of its powerful example for humankind.

The people are meant to rule. To that end they have no recourse but to their opinions. Their opinions, in turn, can sustain a rule no better than the value of those same opinions. Where the people's opinions are informed and grounded in genuine appreciation for the ardors of constitutional patriotism, we can all willingly rest our fates on the people's judgments. But this will not happen where a multitudinous people are exposed to no more than a random, haphazard introduction to the principles of the polity.

Finally, I would observe that such a targeted, special initiative would achieve important national objectives, which themselves are far broader and more important than the interests of any particular discipline. The National Defense Education Act encountered suspicions among those who thought that they alone should define scientific education. In the end, though, both science and the national interest were served by that dramatic venture. Doubtless, the eventual Apollo mission to the moon was its reward. And, so, in the present case, a deliberate effort to revivify national memory can serve the interests both of our nation and of the professional disciplines, which will benefit when the general public will have a better sense of how the present emerged from the past.