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## Who are we as Americans?

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President Obama, in his May 21 speech at the National Archives Museum in Washington said that "we can defeat Al Qaeda ...if we stay true to who we are...anchored in our timeless ideals." A much more somber note, however, was in a warning by retiring Supreme Court Justice David Souter the day before at Georgetown University Law Center.

Deeply concerned at how little knowledge Americans have of how this republic works, Justice Souter cited as an example that the majorities of the public can't name - according to surveys - the three branches of government.

Who we are, Souter continued, "can be lost, it is being lost, it is lost, if it is not understood." What is needed, he said, "is the restoration of the self-identity of the American people. ... When I was a kid in the eighth and ninth grades, everybody took civics. That's no longer true. (Former Justice) Sandra Day O'Connor says 50 percent of schools teach neither history nor civics." Justice Souter continued that when he was in school, "civics was as dull as dishwater, but we knew the structure of government."

This alert to the citizenry was almost entirely ignored by the press.

Admirably, O'Connor is trying to engage students in learning who they are as Americans through her Web site: Our Courts - 21st Century Civics ([www.ourcourts.org](http://www.ourcourts.org)). The site asks students what part of government they would most want to be a part of. And she invites teachers to click and "find lesson plans that fit your classroom needs."

Two years ago, David Boaz of the Cato Institute (where I am a senior fellow) quoted from a Washington Post article by Naomi Wolf: "Teenagers and young adults ... have little idea what liberty is. Few (young Americans) realize that 'due process' means that they can't be locked up in a dungeon by the state and left to languish indefinitely."

And the 2008 annual "State of the First Amendment" survey by the First Amendment Center ([www.firstamendmentcenter.org](http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org)) reported that 66 percent of Americans at least mildly agreed that the government should require TV broadcasters to offer an equal allotment of time to conservative and liberal broadcasters, and that 62 percent of Americans would apply the same requirement to newspapers.

In this republic, the government must regulate the fairness and balance of what we free citizens see and read? Not even King George III insisted that Tom Paine, Samuel Adams and Thomas Jefferson must be fair and balanced.

It was Jefferson - as you can see near the main entrance of the Library of Congress' James Madison Memorial Building - who told future generations of Americans how to never forget who they are:

"What spectacle can be more edifying or more seasonable, than that of Liberty and Learning, each leaning on the other for their mutual & surest support?"

Jefferson also counseled: "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be. ... Let our countrymen know that the people alone can protect us against the evils (of misgovernment)."

How deep our ignorance of who are has grown since Alexis De Tocqueville wrote in 1831 ("Democracy in America"): "In New England, every citizen receives the elementary notions of human knowledge; he is moreover taught the doctrines and the evidences of his religion, the history of his country, and the leading features of its Constitution.

"In the States of Connecticut and Massachusetts, it is extremely rare to find a man imperfectly acquainted with all these things, and a person wholly ignorant of them is a sort of phenomenon."

Am I exaggerating in speculating that now in our schools, homes and streets, there are many such phenomena largely ignorant of why they are Americans. Also, I would add the many in our state legislatures and in Congress.

And Obama, asking us to be "anchored in our timeless ideals," says nothing about his National Security Agency's accelerating attacks on our individual privacy as its enormous supercomputer (code name: "Black Widow") devours the Fourth Amendment in our Bill of Rights. The Baltimore Sun's national security correspondent, David Wood (Oct. 26, 2008), reports:

"(The Black Widow) scans millions of domestic and international phone calls and e-mails every hour" as it extracts "key words and patterns" of our communications to harvest and database possible threats to national security.

There's no way to get your name removed from that bottomless hole of suspects because you can't find out whether it's there. Imagine Jefferson's reaction if he'd been able to foresee the Government Black Widow at large in this republic.

The National Center for Constitutional Studies' book, "The 5000 Year Leap: A Miracle That Changed the World," tells of a popular textbook for children, a "Catechism of the Constitution" - with questions and answers on the foundations of who we are as citizens. It was published in 1828! Any such children's books now?

In the continuing debate on amending No Child Left Behind - and other federal surges in educational reform - I have seen hardly any mention of the imperative need of what Justice David Souter calls for: "the restoration of the self-identity of the American people."

On the eve of the American Revolution, James Madison spoke of a "spirit of liberty and patriotism animating all degrees and denominations of men." What happened to it?

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