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## Re-educating Americans about our identity

*BY NAT HENTOFF*

My favorite magazine by far was "Constitution," published by the Foundation for the U.S. Constitution. No longer in existence, it was full of riveting stories -- for students and adults -- with beautifully reproduced historic documents, portraits and paintings of how we came to be distinguished from all other nations.

Such a magazine, in print or digitally, is sorely needed now. Interactive civics classes have been replaced by testing and retesting assembly lines of students so that the state can evaluate whole schools rather than individual, evolving citizens. David Souter warned in May, as he was retiring from the Supreme Court, that surveys show many Americans cannot name the basic three branches of government (executive, legislative and judicial). He stressed that "(we need) to start the re-education of a substantial part of the public."

Souter's concern about "the restoration of the self-identity of the American people" was the urgent theme in the first issue of "Constitution" (Fall 1988) in Lynne Cheney's article "A Fading Heritage."

At the time, she was chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and we used to share, in phone conversations, our forebodings of the growing spread of "political correctness" on campuses and at large -- a compulsory conformity of opinions that would have been foreign to such free-thinkers as James Madison and Thomas Jefferson.

I have not spoken with Lynne Cheney for a long time, figuring she would hardly welcome my call after what I've written about her husband, former vice president Dick Cheney. But I continue to find her article in "Constitution" energizing and disturbingly contemporary.

"Consider," she wrote then, "how little history is required of our students. Once it was taught every year kindergarten through 12th grade; now many states require but one year." If that, these days.

Today, in a contemporary book that should be in every school, and certainly within reach of members of Congress and the Obama administration, "The Genius of America: How the Constitution Saved Our Country and Why It Can Again" (Bloomsbury USA, New York) -- Eric Lane and Michael Oreskes write: "We are not burdened by a sense of history, our own or anyone ... Our sense of our own past, to put it politely, is thin and growing thinner. The evidence for this is all around us."

Lynne Cheney, in the magazine "Constitution," quoted a political philosopher who had been chosen in 1986 as the Jefferson Lecturer by the National Council on the Humanities. Leszek Kolakowski emphasized in that lecture that among America's young, "the erosion of a historically defined sense of 'belonging' plays havoc in their life and threatens their ability to withstand possible trials of the future."

"Havoc," for example, surely exists among those of our young whose acute need 'to belong' somewhere brings them into the increasingly brutal gangs, not only in urban centers.

And many other youths, including in prestigious lower schools and colleges, would be very hard put to say why we have the First, Fifth, Fourth and Ninth Amendments in our Constitution, let alone tell why they could be so important in their own lives. Where are their moorings as Americans?

And how many in or out of school have a meaningful or even scant knowledge of such contributors to the roots of this nation as George Washington (except maybe for the cherry tree), Tom Paine, John Marshall, Frederick Douglass, Mark Twain or Elizabeth Cady Stanton?

"Ideally," Lynne Cheney advised, "there would be fewer textbooks used in our schools. Teachers would enlighten their students with current and classic works of literature or historical documents. But to find and bring these into the classroom takes a breadth of knowledge that may be beyond some teachers ... because their preparation has been misdirected ... taking just courses in education. Because time spent taking these types of courses is time that cannot be spent studying 'content' areas like history, teachers find themselves knowing less than they should about the subjects they are teaching."

This includes knowing less about what students should know about this nation so that they can begin to feel they "belong" to it.

If an American roots coalition can be formed -- across political and professional lines -- with maybe Lynne Cheney involved, our history can be brought off the pages and into Americans' lives. David Souter is already showing the way, having joined a committee in his home state that is changing the civic curriculum for New Hampshire's public schools.

During his retirement speech at Georgetown University Law Center, Souter looked at his audience, saying: "If I can do it, you can do it, too."

A book I would love to see come into all Americans' lives is by a master narrator of our identities, Ray Raphael, whose abundant volume, "Founders: The People Who Brought You a Nation" (New Press) has the reverberating impact of the former CBS-TV series "You Are There!"

When, for instance, in 1772, at Faneuil Hall in Boston, as Samuel Adams, James Otis and other patriots formed a Committee of Correspondence to inform all the colonies of British abuses of these Americans' privacy rights in their homes and offices, you too are there in a meeting that was vital in precipitating the American Revolution. That's how to make the Fourth Amendment come alive again! Not only in schools.

As Kathryn Sinclair, a high school student in Murfreesboro, Tenn., engaged in a First Amendment battle with her principal 25 years ago, asked me: "Why don't the schools teach why we're Americans? So few people know."

A quarter-century later, sadly, there still isn't a reassuring answer for her.

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