



Published on *Washington Examiner* (<http://washingtonexaminer.com>)

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By *Mark Tapscott*

Created *Mar 9 2011 - 9:05pm*

Individual liberty cannot survive a republic of dunces

In an era noteworthy for Muslim terrorists plotting future 9/11s and nukes in the hands of fanatical nut jobs like Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and North Korea's Kim Jong il, you might think there couldn't possibly be a more serious problem to ponder.

You would be wrong.

Consider what happened recently when the Intercollegiate Studies Institute gave a 60-question civic literacy test to more than 28,000 college students:

"Less than half knew about federalism, judicial review, the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, and NATO. And this was a multiple-choice test, with the answers staring them right in the face," said political scientist Richard Bake, co-chairman of ISI's Civic Literacy Board.

"Ten percent thought that 'we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal' came from the Communist Manifesto," Bake added during a recent interview with my *Examiner* colleague Barbara Hollingsworth.

Even the smart kids at Harvard failed the test, scoring on average 69, which is a D. Since the vast majority of the students tested are products of public schools, the results represent a comprehensive indictment of public education, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers.

These are the people who year after year graduate classes in which one of every four kids cannot read at even a basic level. If you can't read the Constitution, or the Declaration, or The Federalist Papers, you won't understand their essential concepts or why they represent so much wisdom.

When even our elite colleges and universities aren't teaching the next generation the basic concepts of the American republic like federalism or the difference between Thomas Jefferson and Karl Marx, it ought to be obvious that American public education is failing American democracy.

Does anybody on America's college faculties remember or care that once liberty is lost, it is almost never regained?

As with so much else, James Madison captures in a wonderfully succinct couple of sentences the profoundly serious implications of raising a generation that is politically crippled by its gross civic ignorance. Madison wrote of the difference between Europe and America, saying: "In Europe, charters of liberty have been granted by power. America has set the example ... of charters of power granted by liberty."

If you don't grasp how Madison's simple equation makes all the difference in the world for the manner in which this country is governed, then you probably don't understand why liberals and conservatives disagree on just about everything that is fundamental to contemporary public policy.

Take health care. Liberals love the European welfare state, epitomized by Britain's National Health Service, aka a "single-payer system" or the "public option." That is why Obamacare erects hundreds of new bureaucratic agencies to regulate every detail of health care research, delivery and pricing.

That includes hiring thousands of new Internal Revenue Service agents to enforce the individual mandate federal District Judge Roger Vinson just declared unconstitutional. And those 1,040 waivers granted so far under Obamacare are the modern illustration of those European "charters of liberty ... granted by power."

For conservatives, the ideal health care reform is embodied in the Health Savings Account that puts the power of choice in the hands of individuals. That makes insurance providers compete to satisfy customers instead of government bureaucrats.

The bureaucrats are limited to enforcing contracts honestly made and assuring sufficient transparency of services and products to enable individuals to make informed choices. Or, as Madison would say, those with liberty grant a limited charter of power to government to do specific things and only those things.

But a generation that is not taught to recognize the irreconcilable differences represented by the Declaration of Independence and the Communist Manifesto, between Madison and Marx, the Federalist Papers and Rules for Radicals is doomed to be ruled, not to rule.

Individual liberty will not long survive in a republic of civic dunces.

Mark Tapscott is editorial page editor of The Washington Examiner and proprietor of Tapscott's CopyDesk blog on washingtonexaminer.com