



Should we laugh or cry when Leno goes ‘Jaywalking’?

By Jim Waters

America’s founders knew an uninformed citizenry presented a greater threat to freedom than military power.

Thomas Jefferson wrote: “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”

While Jefferson may be one of the most aggrieved victims of “revisionist history,” even the most “politically correct” clod would have to acquiesce to his assertion that citizens cannot be both ignorant and adequately preserve, much less defend, their freedoms.

Jefferson and his fellow signers of the Declaration of Independence would not have pledged, as they put it, “our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor” for a cause they didn’t believe in.

But it goes much deeper than just binding themselves to freedom’s sacred cause based on blind faith. They pledged themselves to a movement they *knew* was a rare experiment in liberty.

They understood the uniqueness of our representative democracy – a government that still separates ours from every other nation in history. It makes America the envy of the world.

But I’m concerned that many Americans may be forgetting Jefferson’s admonition that an ignorant nation and freedom cannot co-exist.

Last year, only one in 1,000 American adults who responded to a survey from the new [McCormick Tribune Freedom Museum](#) could name all five freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment. Only *one-tenth of 1 percent* – of respondents knew that freedom of speech, religion, assembly, the press and to petition for redress of grievances are offered by the First Amendment.

“Say it ain’t so, Joe!”

Oh, but it is so. Only 8 percent of survey respondents could name at least three of those First-Amendment freedoms. Yet, a whopping 52 percent of the same group could name at least two members of “The Simpsons” TV-cartoon family and more than four in 10 could name two of the three “American Idol” judges.

What chance do Kentuckians have of regaining liberties lost and stemming the tide of government encroachment into our lives when we know more about “American Idol” and “The Simpsons” than our constitutional rights?

Think I’m overreacting?

Doesn't it raise concern when you wade into the void of late-night television to find Jay Leno with camera rolling in our nation's capital, with the Washington Monument in the background, asking people simple questions about basic government – only to find abject ignorance?

One night Leno asked several people: How many U.S. senators represent your state? One guy – a teacher from Atlanta with a group of his students looking on – stated confidently that Georgia sends “30” senators to Washington, D.C.

I nearly fainted.

Leno asked several people the same question. No one in the broadcast answered the question correctly. (In case *you* don't know, each state sends two senators.)

Several people Leno queried flagged on this question: “How many sides to the Pentagon?”

Mr. Atlanta teacher: “Three.”

Civic illiteracy may make for good late-night television laughs. But it drains my hope that America and especially Kentucky can turn the tide any time soon on unresponsive government and the entitlement culture that pervades our society.

Granted, not knowing the number of sides on the Pentagon doesn't ensure anarchy. But remaining uninformed about the role, rights and responsibilities of citizens is no laughing matter.

You may never take up arms to defend your freedom. But you still have a part to play: Find out what our country is all about. Study its history, its purpose. Become conversant about its heroes.

Kentuckians owe it to themselves and their children to shun a lack of knowledge by checking out the information provided by groups such as the Bluegrass Institute, which provide sound, nonpartisan analysis on public issues and believe passionately in the commonwealth's potential.

Only by refusing to wallow in our ignorance can we pass on the blessings of liberty conceived in our courageous founders' noble sacrifice.

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