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By **MICHAEL POMERANZ** | February 20, 2011

The Ash Bin of History?

We used to celebrate Washington's Birthday and Lincoln's Birthday: each in February, and each worth celebrating. But now we have a Presidents Day—a deliberately vague holiday—that apparently fails to distinguish between Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Millard Fillmore. So who's teaching about presidents? You'd think that higher education in our democracy would lead the way in the sophisticated study of American ideas and institutions. Quite the contrary: American schools have relegated American history to—shall we say it?—the dust bin of history.

Presidents Day—Washington's Birthday, if I may—is the perfect time to focus on the role of colleges in teaching American history.

According to *What Will They Learn?*, a national survey of over 700 college general education requirements, fewer than 20 percent of schools require a class in U.S. history or government. In a number of our major states, that number is quite a bit lower: 19 percent in New York, 11 percent in Florida, 5 percent in Illinois, 4 percent in Virginia (only James Madison University, of the schools reviewed). Of the 40 schools studied in Pennsylvania, not a single one required American history or government.

If not required to study American history, college students are likely to study something else: something narrower or trendier, something that meets at a later hour or is more obviously “relevant” to their 19-year-old perspectives. We send students to college

because we think they don't know everything, and can learn from those who know more. Why do we expect them to know how to create their own curriculum?

Every incentive on campus encourages students to deny the thought-provoking and nationally important classes for the easier, more comfortable and, if you'll excuse the phrase, sexier classes. We've taken the cafeteria approach to food—offering veggies, pizza and ice cream, without direction—and, too often, students go for dessert. We want them to go for civics.

Nor is this question merely academic (pun intended). The lack of a rigorous curriculum impacts our students' knowledge. A survey by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni showed that only a third of graduating seniors knew who commanded American troops at Yorktown. (Washington did. The one whose birthday is Feb. 22.)

So where does that leave us? Benjamin Franklin, after the Constitution was signed, famously proclaimed to a fellow citizen that America is a republic “if you can keep it.” Central to “keeping” our republic is understanding its government and its history.

Colleges should start by requiring students to take a survey class in American history or American government. It's not enough to know that we have had presidents. Students—college students, especially—should know who they were, how they differed from one another and what characteristics they shared,

how the presidency has changed over two centuries, and proposals for changing it further. Such knowledge is part of their birthright as Americans and surely essential to their obligations to govern America in the future. Colleges might look to the University of Texas at Austin. All Longhorns take an introductory and a higher-level course in American government and two further classes in American history.

Ultimately responsible for college curricula are trustees, who have the fiduciary responsibility for the financial and academic health of their institutions. Trustees—especially of public schools, appointed by governors—have an obligation to determine whether theirs is a school with an American history requirement and, if not, to require American history or government. They might develop, with the faculty, an exemplary program of their own. If you are an alumnus of such a college or university, write letters to your board and to your alumni association. Tell them you fear for the value of your degree—and for the future of your country.

President Thomas Jefferson wrote, “[I]f a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.” Surely we can't ignore that presidential caution in regard to the knowledge of history. On this Presidents Day, our colleges and universities can do something great about the 44 presidents and for the next 44: They can teach them.