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**USA TODAY.com**

### What they don't know can hurt them ; Many young Americans would like to see the press muzzled, if just a bit. If only they knew history's lessons, they would surely see a free press in a different light.; [FINAL Edition]

Kathleen Parker. **USA TODAY**. McLean, Va.: Mar 15, 2005. pg. A.13

#### Abstract (Document Summary)

Yet, we might begin to worry when the nation's collective memory fades such that the freedoms we take for granted are no longer understood by a rising generation of Americans. Recent studies, surveys and tests indicate that a growing number of students, both high school and college, are poorly informed on matters of heritage, especially concerning the Founding Fathers -- though a pop quiz on Marilyn Monroe would leave almost no child behind.

Those would be the smarter ones who somehow have connected the dots between our constitutional protection of free speech and their right to lizard-gaze at MTV. Unfortunately, the rest, the ones who flunked connect-the-dots but who, thanks to our caring-if-ineffective public education system, nevertheless will be spared an encounter with low self-esteem.

Doubtless those surveyed by the Knight Foundation associate this other sound with scary movies and Halloween pranks. I associate it with five memorable words from Whittaker Chambers' book, Witness, in which he describes his departure from communism. He is recalling a story in which the daughter of a fellow communist explains to him why her father, too, changed his mind:

#### Full Text (819 words)

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The Forum; Your right to know: a weeklong series

Freedom of speech and the idea of a free press are so intricately woven into America's DNA that few of us give much thought to the origins of our freedoms or ponder an alternative life without them.

With gratitude, we can admit that we don't worry much about jackboots kicking in our doors at night because we've spoken ill of El Jefe. Indeed, criticizing government is sport within our borders.

Every day, pundits, cartoonists, radio broadcasters, bloggers and others take potshots at public officials with impunity, if not always with logic or sound arguments. But so goes freedom, American-style. Even the ignorant are invited to democracy's brawl.

And yet, we might begin to worry when the nation's collective memory fades such that the freedoms we take for granted are no longer understood by a rising generation of Americans. Recent studies, surveys and tests indicate that a growing number of students, both high school and college, are poorly informed on matters of heritage, especially concerning the Founding Fathers -- though a pop quiz on Marilyn Monroe would leave almost no child behind.

In one high school textbook, Monroe gets 213 lines of text compared with fewer than 50 dedicated to George Washington, according to James Rees, executive director of Mount Vernon, Washington's home in Virginia. (Footnote for high school students: George Washington was the first president of the United States.)

In a recent study, the largest ever of its kind, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation attempted to measure high school students' understanding of the First Amendment and the free press. Among the more depressing results:

\* More than a third (35%) said the First Amendment goes "too far" in the rights it guarantees.

\* Close to a third (32%) think the press has too much freedom.

\* Only half of students surveyed (51%) said newspapers should be allowed to publish stories without prior government approval.

Loosely extrapolating, we might conclude that close to half of America's teens would be just as happy living in North Korea, Cuba, Iran or some other totalitarian state. No, they didn't say so outright and probably would be aghast at the suggestion. "Dude, are you crazy? Give up MTV?"

Those would be the smarter ones who somehow have connected the dots between our constitutional protection of free speech and their right to lizard-gaze at MTV. Unfortunately, the rest, the ones who flunked connect-the-dots but who, thanks to our caring-if-ineffective public education system, nevertheless will be spared an encounter with low self-esteem.

And to think: Many of these nascent citizens will soon be casting ballots, not to mention making your elder-care plans. Such bodes well neither for us here nor for others elsewhere as we seek to export freedom and democracy abroad.

In seeking explanations for the survey's findings, we can point to a number of factors, including the educational shift in emphasis from subjects such as history and science to math and language arts, the latter two being necessary to meet the growing demand for better standardized test scores.

There's a downside to higher scores, as other statistics provided by Rees confirm: A recent test of high school seniors found only one in 10 proficient in American history. When seniors at the nation's top 55 universities were asked to name America's victorious general at the Battle of Yorktown, only 34% named Washington.

While no one seriously expects high school kids to sit around discussing their fortuitous birth in the cradle of freedom or debating the nuances of the First Amendment, we might at least hope to raise children who understand that free speech is about empowering people, not government.

The lesson we apparently have failed to teach is that without access to information and a free press, there are no other freedoms, at least not for long. When the People's Voice is stifled, what follows isn't silence, but a different sound.

Doubtless those surveyed by the Knight Foundation associate this other sound with scary movies and Halloween pranks. I associate it with five memorable words from Whittaker Chambers' book, *Witness*, in which he describes his departure from communism. He is recalling a story in which the daughter of a fellow communist explains to him why her father, too, changed his mind:

"One night he heard screams."

Those five chilling words may be the best response to any who think government should have more control over information. For the alternative to a free press inevitably is totalitarianism, after which come screams in the night.

History has taught previous generations that the human longing for freedom can be suppressed only by force. The next generation needs to learn that lesson well, lest they be condemned to learn it the hard way.

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Kathleen Parker, an Orlando Sentinel columnist, is syndicated by Tribune Media Services.

**[Illustration]**

GRAPHIC, B/W, Alejandro Gonzalez, USA TODAY (ILLUSTRATION)

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Subjects: Series & special reports, Public opinion, American history, Freedom of the press, History education  
Locations: United States, US  
Document types: Commentary  
Section: NEWS  
ISSN/ISBN: 07347456  
Text Word Count 819  
Document URL:

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