

# We the People Forum on American History, Civics, and Service

The USA Freedom Corps, as part of its mission to promote a culture of service, citizenship and responsibility in America's communities, has worked with federal agencies to find ways government can support the teaching of American history and our democratic traditions. Today's "We the People" forum is part of that effort.

- On September 17, 2002, the 215<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the U.S. Constitution, President George W. Bush announced new government efforts to improve the teaching of American history and civics and make national treasures more accessible to teachers and students – including a "We the People" Forum on American History, Civics, and Service. At the forum, members of his Administration announced the National Endowment for the Humanities will ask Congress to provide \$100 million over the next three years to support this effort, and the Department of Education is accepting applications for nearly \$100 million in competitive grants this year to raise student achievement by improving teachers' knowledge of American history.

## Background on Today's We the People Forum

- Today's forum, co-hosted by the U.S. Department of Education, Corporation for National and Community Service, and National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) with the USA Freedom Corps, also included the inaugural NEH "Heroes of History" lecture and the presentation of the first "Idea of America" medals to outstanding high school students.
- Historians, educators, college and university professors, education policy experts, school administrators, and state policy makers assembled at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. President Bush addressed the forum by video, and other featured speakers included Mrs. Laura Bush, Mrs. Lynne Cheney, and historians Robert Remini and David McCullough. The forum also included panel discussions on the state of cultural and historical literacy, and promising practices for promoting American history, civics, and service in schools and through cultural institutions. Forum participants also watched students demonstrate well-regarded learning methods.

## The Need for Better Instruction in History and Civics

America's second president, John Adams, said "Liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people." Unfortunately, data on the historical and civic knowledge of America's students tells us that too few of our students are learning those lessons well.

- The U.S. Department of Education's National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), which tracks both Civics and American History understanding among K-12 students, shows less than one quarter of America's students are proficient in either subject.
- According to an Albert Shanker Institute study, 48 states have standards for learning in American history and civics, but only 12 states have standards that include the depth and breadth of the history of democracy students ought to learn.

## Training Educators to Teach History and Civics

- In September 2002, President Bush announced the NEH would administer a new "We the People" initiative to enhance the teaching, study, and understanding of American history and civics, and today his Administration announced that it would seek \$100 million over the next three years, beginning with the \$25 million installment President Bush requested as part of his fiscal year 2004 budget.
- The NEH will use a significant portion of that funding to support teacher training and instruction to improve student knowledge and understanding of American history, including the following new resources to improve instruction:
  - ✓ The NEH is expanding its seminars and institutes program to provide teachers with additional opportunities to study significant texts on American history under the guidance of distinguished scholars and educators in the field.
  - ✓ To support the development of model curriculum projects to help schools establish or improve course offerings in

- American history, culture, and civics, the NEH is launching a new grant competition as part of “We the People.”
- ✓ The NEH is also supporting new grants for intensive two-week residential academies for school principals and teachers centered on American history, culture, and institutions. Universities and other educational organizations will compete to sponsor and host these academies in 2004.
  - The Education Department announced the start of its latest annual grant competition to support enhanced instruction in American history with nearly \$100 million. “Teaching American History” grants will support elementary and secondary schools working to improve the quality of history instruction through innovative professional development programs carried out in partnerships with colleges and universities, humanities and nonprofit organizations, museums, and libraries.

## **National Treasures in Communities and Classrooms**

In September, President Bush noted the federal government “conserves and protects some of our greatest national treasures, and we need to make them more readily available to Americans in their schools and local communities.” That day he announced “Our Documents,” an initiative to share the resources of the National Archives and Records Administration with teachers and students. Since then, almost 100 educators have requested copies of the materials each day. In addition to those resources:

- A pilot project at the NEH called “Landmarks of American History” will support summer enrichment programs for teachers at important historical sites across the nation, such as presidential homes, battlefields, and archaeological sites.
- A number of federal agencies are already having great success helping teachers, such as:
  - ✓ The Library of Congress American Memory program, which makes nearly eight million original documents from American history available online, as well as new oral histories of our veterans.
  - ✓ The National Park Service, which offers students ways to learn about national treasures such as Mesa Verde, Jamestown, Thomas Edison’s laboratory, the Statue of Liberty, and the Kitty Hawk.
  - ✓ The National Museum of American History, where today’s forum took place, which offers educational resources online that give teachers and students virtual access to its exhibitions.

## **Resources for Teaching History, Civics, and Service**

- The Education Department announced today it is developing a new video series for schools across the country that will teach students the origins and significance of our national holidays.
- The Learn and Serve America program at the Corporation for National and Community Service has received dozens of applications for a new set of competitive grants dedicated to supporting schools, community-based organizations, and colleges that are developing and implementing curricula that link student service with the study of history and civics.
- Students across the country will be able to participate in a new “National History Bee” to be sponsored by the NEH, including statewide competitions, followed by a national championship.

## **Honoring Excellence**

As part of “We the People,” the NEH is already working to recognize excellence among historians and students.

- At the forum, Robert Remini, the author of a three-volume biography of President Andrew Jackson and of biographies of Henry Clay and Daniel Webster, and a dozen other books on Jacksonian America, delivered the NEH’s inaugural “Heroes of History” lecture.
- Mrs. Bush recognized the first six winners of the “Idea of America” high school essay contest, a new annual competition sponsored by the NEH.