IDEOLOGICAL DISSONANCE

During the academic year 2006–7, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, which sponsors *Modern Age*, administered a sixty-question multiple-choice examination on American history and civic institutions to more than 28,000 freshmen and seniors at more than eighty colleges and universities. The overall results were abysmal; even more telling, at the vast majority of institutions, the seniors did no better than the freshmen, and not infrequently a bit worse.

In 2008 ISI administered a similar examination to 2,508 adults: high school graduates averaged a score of only 44 percent—a score upon which college graduates only barely improved at a figure of 57 percent. In 2010 an ISI survey delivered more bad news about what now passes for a college education: while acquiring a degree fails to provide much familiarity with America's history or institutions, it succeeds admirably in making degree holders more liberal or progressive in their political views. By contrast, those who are able to demonstrate more factual civic knowledge tend to prize our constitutional traditions.

What is more, a 2011 study by ISI shows that civic knowledge of the kind not acquired by attending college has positive practical consequences. Although higher education has no significant impact on civic engagement other than voting, what the study calls "civic self-education" encourages attending political rallies, writing letters to the editors of newspapers and magazines, working on electoral campaigns, and participating in other activities designed to further a political point of view. In this respect, self-education in American history and institutions—knowledge acquired by reading books and periodicals and discussing political issues with family and friends—not attending college—is what leads to public activity.

In the interest of what nowadays is called "transparency" or "full disclosure," I should mention that I played a minor role in the 2006–7 study, by attending a conference or two as a consultant and offering a few questions. (If my memory is accurate, none of my excessively arcane questions were actually used on the exam.)

The series of surveys took on a far more personal interest for me last week, however, when my daughter casually mentioned that her husband—a naturalized U.S. citizen from England—was appalled to discover that most of their (numerous) children, including a couple of high school graduates, were incapable of giving a clear account of the American Civil War or, in some cases,

even of identifying it. (Yes, we are talking about the grandchildren of the editor of *Modern Age*. The faint red glow emanating from the page is a blush of embarrassment.) Worse still, the evidence suggests that sending them to college will hardly remedy the deficiency.

It will probably come as no surprise to *Modern Age* readers that the race/class/gender ideological program that currently dominates most American institutions of higher learning is strikingly ineffective at what ought to be one of the chief goals of higher education—namely, steeping students in the history of their nation and illuminating its political, moral, and spiritual culture. From the perspective of the wider society, however, why does it matter? How is this ignorance of the past, of the traditions of the Founding and of the great struggles to preserve it, important in the context of contemporary political controversy?

We may begin by observing that the tendency of our current version of higher education to neglect civic literacy while encouraging a progressive political perspective is unlikely to be fortuitous; an ideology is precisely a scheme for producing a perfect society from the ground up by abolishing all past institutions and practices as hopelessly inadequate, if not downright wicked. Given the overwhelmingly progressive mentality of most college and university faculties, the biased presentation of political history—or its simple omission—is exactly what one might expect. Conservatives ought to be alarmed that college students are being deprived of the kind of learning that enhances conservative arguments.

More subtly, a deep, impartial knowledge of history could well go far toward alleviating the bitterness of our current debates and mitigate, at least, the contemptuous dismissal of opposing arguments that so often sullies political discourse. A genuine familiarity with the Civil War and its historical background, for example, in all its complexity, while unlikely to change many minds about the propriety of displaying the Confederate battle flag, ought to predispose partisans on both sides of the issue not to attribute the worst possible motives to their opponents.

The essays in this issue of *Modern Age* are all in their various ways embodiments of the conservative inclination to seek an understanding and appreciation of social and political institutions in historical context. The careful accumulation of knowledge of the past as a foundation for the prudent assessment of issues and controversies of the present is the conservative way. It is the antithesis of assuming that one can simply construct a reductive government contraption for every problem, which usually ends in disillusionment and indignation in the face of the flaws and failures inevitable in any system.

Many on the left today assume that any qualification of freedom and equality amounts to an affront to democracy. E. Christian Kopff offers a much-needed consideration of the meaning and limits of American freedom by studying the influence on the Founders' conception of liberty of Germanic culture. His contribution to our understanding of the gradual development of equal political rights is a model for how to put contemporary preoccupations in historical context. Samuel Goldman's response provides salutary example of civility in discussion and debate, which progressives call for incessantly without practicing it.

William Peirce asks us to consider the problem of taxation in terms of both efficiency and justice. While there may well be numerous readers who question Peirce's arguments and conclusions, everyone ought

to recognize the value of his treating the income tax as a debatable issue. One may conjecture with a fair degree of probability that an ISI survey would find that most Americans assume that the income tax is an essential and irrevocable element of the nation's constitutional order. Direct taxes such as our current income tax were, in fact, forbidden by article 1, section 9, of the original Constitution, and only became a permanent part of the governmental revenue stream with the passage of the Sixteenth Amendment, a little over a century ago.

Daniel Hein invites us to contemplate George Washington's slow, difficult attainment of the virtue of patience. The contemporary relevance of this virtue need hardly be stated, but we should also recall the value of biographical reflection upon the virtues of the Founding Fathers of our country. Liberal skeptics have long ridiculed, and not without some justification, the kind of biography of men like Washington and Franklin that I read as a boy because of their unrealistically idealistic portrayals. Hein's careful account hardly presents Washington as superhuman: the importance of this discussion is precisely the flaws in his character—pride, impulsiveness, ambition—that required his best efforts to overcome. We are thereby enabled to see Washington realistically while still admiring him.

Finally, Thomas Lynch furnishes us with a green shoot of hope amid our contemporary political wasteland by recounting William F. Buckley Jr.'s highly effective and influential campaign for mayor of New York. This is comparatively recent history, but it again helps us see our current troubles in a broader context. Although he was not elected, Buckley's witty and engaging rhetoric dominated the debate during the campaign and proved there is an audience for intelligent conservative discourse. It is on account of this hope that we continue to publish *Modern Age*. —*RVY*