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Why don't we know much about history?

Even Harvard seniors test poorly on the topic.

Contributing Editor Kenneth C. Davis shares ways to bring the past to life -- and understand our present.

By Kenneth C. Davis

The founding fathers would not approve of this report card at all.

A report released last year showed that when more than 14,000 seniors and freshmen at 50 American colleges and universities were tested on some basics of American history and civics, the average score was about 52% -- a failing grade by any measure -- with the seniors scoring slightly higher than the incoming class. The best results came from Harvard, where seniors scored a 69.6% -- passing, but still a high D.

The news was not much better in February 2008, when it was reported that only 43% of teenagers in another survey knew the Civil War was fought between 1850 and 1900. (To be precise, it was fought from 1861 to 1865.)

Is our nation just history-challenged?

The test scores seem to say so, but Americans love history. Just as long as it's on a big screen and popcorn is involved.

From "300" and "Braveheart" to "Elizabeth" and "Charlie Wilson's War," it's clear that audiences prefer learning about the past when it's not in textbook form. Mel Gibson in a kilt is way cooler than remembering the constitutional line of succession. And a lot more fun.

Yes, I said "fun."

That's the point. To many Americans, the words "history" and "fun" don't belong in the same sentence. History, some people will quickly tell you, is "boring." At least that's how it's stereotypically portrayed in school, with students victimized by rote-learning of dates and battles in sleep-inducing college lecture halls.

That, by the way, is not an argument for learning history from Hollywood -- which has never placed a premium on accuracy. But American history is anything but boring. If people only heard real stories of real people in real places, nobody could possibly claim to be bored by history.

For instance, did you hear the one about the 20-something American officer who disobeyed orders, led an ambush of some sleeping French soldiers, then signed a document amounting to a confession of assassinating a French diplomat and ignited a world war in the process? That's actually a true story about an ambitious, headstrong George Washington in 1754. And it's much more interesting than the hokey legend about the cherry tree.

And if you wonder whether history still matters, take a look at today's headlines. In the midst of a history-making presidential campaign, many people grumble about negative campaigns and yearn for the "good old days" when gentlemen debated the finer points of politics and were never caught slinging mud.

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Really? In 1800, critics warned that if Thomas Jefferson were elected president, adultery and incest would be practiced openly. That was the same year John Adams was accused of sending his running mate to procure a pair of pretty girls as mistresses for each of them. During his 1864 re-election campaign, Abraham Lincoln was derided as a thief, a monster and a "butcher." It also should be noted, as the current candidates debate "experience," that when he first ran in 1860, Lincoln was a tall, one-term congressman from Illinois who had openly opposed the Mexican-American War. Besides proving that some things never change, each of these stories demonstrates that history is about real people -- not marble statues.

And to improve that iffy report card, we need to bring history to life, connect it to everyday politics and current events and ensure that the soul of the subject is as vivid as Mel Gibson baiting the English army by lifting his kilt.

Grab some popcorn. The real story is quite a show.

Kenneth C. Davis is the author of "Don't Know Much About History" and the recent "America's Hidden History: Untold Tales of the First Pilgrims, Fighting Women and Forgotten Founders Who Shaped a Nation."

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