

Americans are Ignorant of Their Own History

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Americans are so woefully ignorant of their own history that they cannot apply the lessons of the past to guide their foreign policy, the Dean of America's only college of history says.

"When one considers our profound lack of knowledge of our own past, combined with our unparalleled military might as the world's only superpower, it is easier to understand why countries as different as Mexico and Canada, Pakistan and New Zealand, look at us with wary eyes," says historian Michael Chesson, dean of the American College of History and Legal Studies in Salem, N.H.

"We are the thousand pound gorilla," Chesson continues. "Unfortunately, we can lash out as if we were both drunk and blind when provoked, whether by pesky foreign powers, or terrorists."

Chesson cites the best-seller "Imperial Hubris" (Potomac Books) by Michael Scheuer about the early fighting in Afghanistan to support his argument that the U.S. needs a more informed citizenry.

"Americans will have to read more books, journals, newspapers, and online commentary from a variety of sources, written from different points of view," Chesson says. "Then we have to think about what it all means, and make decisions based on that information."

He explains, "It is vital that we do a far better job of informing ourselves about the world than has been the case for much of our history," because "Two branches of our national government are headed entirely by elected leaders. Over time what are the odds that their qualities and strengths will be better than the general level of awareness among the broad electorate?"

Chesson states further, "We must supplement our formidable hard power with the soft power available to us, but only if we husband it, use it wisely, and know how to produce more of it," as former Assistant Secretary of Defense Joseph Nye wrote in his book, "The Paradox of American Power: Why The World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone" (Oxford University Press). Currently, Nye is dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

"For America to fare better in a perilous world Nye says will require some self-restraint from Congress. That seems a dubious proposition," Chesson observes. "It is, at best, one measure of how hard it is for a democratic republic to conduct foreign policy. A more constructive approach to our involvement in world affairs would also require some consistency from one presidential administration to the next, even when there is a transfer of power from one party to another."

ACHLS offers only the junior and senior years of undergraduate study and its curriculum focuses exclusively on American history, including aspects of legal history. Chesson's comments appear on the history college's Web site.

Created by the Massachusetts School of Law at Andover, ACHLS offers junior and senior years of undergraduate study. ACHLS provides students with a rigorous, affordable education and currently is offering free tuition to students entering this fall, a saving of \$10,000. ACHLS also allows qualified students to combine their senior year of college with their first year of law school, a saving of time and tuition.

ACHLS offers bachelor's degrees in history and legal studies, and all classes exclusively use the discussion (not lecture) method of teaching, requiring extensive student participation. (Further Information: Maureen Mooney) #

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