

DAVID M. SCHRAVER

## “For the Survival of the United States as We Know It”

We hear a lot these days about education, the “core curriculum,” and the importance of STEM education (science, technology, engineering, mathematics). I support STEM education – my son teaches AP chemistry and statistics. My daughter majored in mathematics. But what about civics, humanities and the social sciences? This month we celebrate Presidents’ Day, and this provides an opportunity to focus on the critical importance of civics education.

Presidents’ Day was originally established in 1885 in recognition of George Washington’s birthday, but unofficially it began in 1800, the year after Washington’s death. Since 1971, the day of remembrance has been changed from February 22 to the third Monday in February, and we now celebrate both Washington’s and Abraham Lincoln’s birthdays on that day.

Both of these great presidents’ writings emphasize the importance of civics education and relate to the activities and core values of our Association, and more particularly to our advocacy and programs promoting understanding of and respect for the rule of law.

In his 1796 Farewell Address, Washington recognized that with its new Constitution and government structure, the United States was very much an “experiment.” While acknowledging important regional differences, Washington repeatedly urged “carefully guarding and preserving the union of the whole”:

This government, the offspring of our own choice, uninfluenced and unawed, adopted upon full investigation and mature deliberation, completely free in its principles, in the distribution of its powers, uniting security with energy, and containing within itself a provision

for its own amendment, has a just claim to your confidence and your support. Respect for its authority, compliance with its laws, acquiescence in its measures, are duties enjoined by the fundamental maxims of true liberty. . . . The very idea of the power and the right of the people to establish government presupposes the duty of every individual to obey the established government.

In 2013 we marked the 150th anniversary of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, delivered November 19, 1863. In this address, given 67 years after Washington’s Farewell, Lincoln spoke of “a new nation” that was “engaged in a great civil war,” which was “testing whether that nation . . . can long endure.” Although Lincoln did not expressly refer to the government of the union of the whole as an experiment, he urged the nation to “resolve . . . that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth.”

The preservation of our democratic government of constitutional value depends on a citizenry educated about the history and government of the United States, our democratic values and the importance of responsible participation by thoughtful citizens in the democratic process. This past fall, the State Bar was one of the sponsors of a speech in Albany by former U.S. Supreme Court Justice David Souter. Justice Souter spoke forcefully of the need for education in the humanities and social sciences as vital “*for the survival of the United States as we know it.*” (See *State Bar News*, November/December 2013 at 8.)

To this end, the Association’s Law, Youth and Citizenship (LYC) Program has since 1974 promoted civics and



law-related education in New York’s public and private schools. The LYC Program assists educators in preparing students, prekindergarten through 12th grade, for active, engaged roles as citizens who have the knowledge, skills and civic attitudes fundamental to a healthy democracy. Its purpose is to provide programs, training and materials that enhance student understanding of the law, our constitutional form of government, and the rights and responsibilities of citizens. Resources and current program information can be found at [www.lycny.org](http://www.lycny.org). We congratulate the Committee on Law, Youth and Citizenship and the Program staff on receiving the New York State Council for the Social Studies’ Partners Award for the Program’s work in civic education and education advocacy. The award will be presented at the Albany Institute of History and Art on March 27, 2014.

Yet, promoting understanding of and respect for the rule of law is not only the business of the LYC Program. All of us can and must seize opportunities in our local schools and communities to do our part, because we understand it is vital for the survival of the United States as we know it. ■

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