



PENNSYLVANIA VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS TESTIMONY

Legislative Hearing on House Bill 1858 to Require High School Graduates to Take a Civics Examination on the basics of the United States Government Structure, History and Geography

*Testimony presented by Pennsylvania VFW State Commander Thomas A. Brown
during a Joint Public Hearing of the House Education and
Veterans Affairs and Emergency Preparedness Committees
held on Monday, September 26, at the State Capitol*

Department of Pennsylvania Veterans of Foreign Wars
4002 Fenton Ave., Harrisburg, PA 17109-5943 P - (717) 234-7927 F - (717) 234-1955
Web site: WWW.VFWPAHQ.ORG Email: ADJUTANT@VFWPAHQ.ORG

Good morning, to the leadership and members of the Pennsylvania House Education and House Veterans Affairs Committees. I am Thomas Brown of Swarthmore, the State Commander of the Pennsylvania Veterans of Foreign Wars. I am a Korean War Veteran. I represent our VFW organization that has 85,000 members who served in combat zones, special operations areas and UN peacekeeping theaters.

Our State and Nation were founded on some very important principles that have stood the test of time. From the very first days of America's independence, these key principles shaped our country's government to become the most free and representative nation on earth. And, these principles remained true and strong during periods of tremendous growth in population, industry, technology, economy and military service.

These principles are not mere words on paper. Our Founding Fathers exerted great effort and emotion in defining how America differs from other nations. These statements provide a living, breathing philosophy of freedom that works for citizens with varied backgrounds. These words weave together a framework for freedom that has endured for 240 years since our independence was declared.

In fact, the uniqueness of our nation's structure has created the longest surviving democracy on the face of this earth.

That is why the Veterans of Foreign Wars strongly supports House Bill 1858. We thank the prime and secondary sponsors of this bill for realizing that to preserve America's history, our citizens soon old enough to vote should have a basic understanding about how their lives—and the lives of millions of Americans—are impact by our form of government.

One of the Veterans of Foreign Wars' student scholarship programs—called the *Voice of Democracy*—clearly shows the value of educating teenagers about America's history and the responsibility citizens have to uphold our nation. By spending a little time doing research about our nation and writing a short speech to enter into this scholarship program, high school students express their understanding about America's unique governing structure and why it should be preserved.

Here are a few quotes from the first-place national winner of our *Voice of Democracy* contest: He said and I quote, "I was born into freedom and I have been afforded rights and opportunities that so many around the world will never experience. What I wasn't born with was the heart of an American. My patriot's heart journey began many years ago, when I was a middle school student attending a Veteran's Day ceremony."

“At a veterans’ event, I watched an old veteran take off his veteran's cap, place his hand over his heart and stand in honor of Old Glory, and why tears filled his eyes as the speaker talked about World War II.”

“By studying history, my heart for this country transformed as I learned how our country was woven from threads spun from conflicts, and how our nation was built on the backs of those who sacrificed much and carried the colors for all of us.”

This high school student continued, saying “My vision for America is that each citizen of this outstanding nation will have a patriot's heart. For a patriot's heart knows and appreciates our history, and will never want to forget how we got here or whose shoulders we stand on. A patriot's heart knows what our flag stands for and will not dare sit when "Old Glory" is presented.”

“A patriot's heart loves this country, defends its liberty, seeks the greater good, and will never allow our God-given, inalienable rights to be restricted. A patriot's heart realizes the sacrifices that it took to make our nation great, and will never allow those who have defended freedom to be forgotten.”

“That is why my vision for America is that each citizen of this great nation will have a patriot's heart, because then, just like in generations past, we will be able to overcome any struggle.”

The student ended this speech quoting President Ronald Reagan:

“Freedom is never more than one generation from extinction; we didn't pass it to our children in the bloodstream. It must be fought for, protected, and handed on for them to do the same.”

As veterans and lawmakers, we must recognize that patriotism and American history do not get automatically passed down through the bloodstream. Therefore, we must make a concerted effort to elevate high school students' knowledge of the important aspects of our history. This will help us to graduate students who have the knowledge—and hopefully a patriot's heart—to be responsible and active citizens.

Knowledge is the lifeblood of any ideal worth pursuing and protecting. That knowledge—and knowledge of the schemes that freedom's enemies force onto others—is what emboldened and inspired men and women to risk their lives defending America. Veterans shed their blood and gave their lives to show their loyalty to their nation. Today's troops leave family and the comforts of home behind to stand on the shoulders of those veterans, to serve the greater good of protecting America.

I cannot imagine students graduating high school without knowing America's history, our government structure and basic geography. Will they ever know how special our governing structure is? Will they consider following in your footsteps as lawmakers to maintain and build our democratic heritage? Will they see America as worth defending?

Graduating seniors with a basic understanding of our history, our government and the land we love will create a desire to not only preserve America, but to improve our country. Some students may be so inspired by these key ideals that they include public service in their future. Some will hold these principles so close that they are willing to join our Armed Forces to defend the nation they want to preserve.

Lastly, if we require immigrants going through the legal process of becoming Americans to pass an exam about civics and citizenship, why would we not also make sure our graduates have that same knowledge?

Ensuring a promising future for Americans will require citizens to accept and embrace roles as leaders, public servants and protectors. Let's give them the knowledge that inspires service and develops patriot's hearts.

Please support and pass House Bill 1858. The VFW thanks you.