

## Remarks Announcing the Teaching American History and Civic Education Initiatives

September 17, 2002

Thank you all very much. Welcome to the Rose Garden. Thanks for getting up so early.

I do want to appreciate David McCullough. It's an honor to be introduced by David McCullough. I appreciate his contribution to our Nation. He's made history come alive for millions of Americans. He's encouraged the teaching of history in our classrooms. He's made a lasting contribution to our Nation, and we're grateful for that contribution.

It is fitting that on the anniversary of the signing of the Constitution, the three branches of our Government are represented here.

Here in America, we see a broad renewal of American patriotism. And this is something to give thanks for; it really is. And it's something we must build on. To properly understand and love our country, we must know our country's history.

Today I am announcing several initiatives that will improve students' knowledge of American history, increase their civic involvement, and deepen their love for our great country.

I appreciate so very much Lynne Cheney, her—well, the fact she married a great Vice President, for starters. [Laughter] But she loves history. She has written books to encourage our children to understand history. Today she's hosting a celebration of the 215th anniversary of the U.S. Constitution at the Vice President's house; she kindly invited Laura to go.

I appreciate Justice Anthony Kennedy for coming. Not only is he a great Supreme Court Justice, he cares about the community in which he lives. He's worked with the American Bar Association on what they call a Dialogue on Freedom, an initiative to foster discussions in our Nation's classrooms about American civic values. Thank

you, Justice Kennedy, for that. [Applause] Delayed applause is better than no applause. [Laughter]

I appreciate so very much our Secretary of Education, Rod Paige. Rod is a—he's a straightforward fellow who cares deeply about our children. When we say no child should be left behind, he means it. He's doing a great job. Mr. Secretary, thank you for coming.

I do want to thank the Members of Congress who are here. I'm especially pleased that Senator Kennedy and Senator Gregg from the Senate have come. These two strange bedfellows worked together to pass one of the most comprehensive education reform plans in our Nation's history. They care deeply about our country. I'm honored that you two are here.

And also two fine Members from the House of Representatives, Chairman Jim Sensenbrenner and Congressman Tim Roemer, we're honored that you're here. Thank you for coming. And thank you for your deep concern about our country and its future.

I thank Bob Cole for being here, who's the Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. I thank John Carlin, who's the national Archivist, and Cathy Gorn, who's the executive director of National History Day. I thank Les Lenkowsky, who's the CEO of the Corporation for National and Community Service. I appreciate my friend Stephen Goldsmith, who's chairman of the board of directors of the Corporation for National and Community Service, for being here. And thank you all for coming.

In the last year, in this last year of American history, we have witnessed acts of sacrifice and heroism, compassion and courage, unity and fierce determination. We have been reminded that we are citizens

with obligations to each other, to our country, and to our history.

These examples are particularly important for our children. Children reflect the values they see in their parents and in their heroes. And this is how a culture can be strengthened and changed for the better.

During the last year, our children have seen that lasting achievement in life comes through sacrifice and service. They've seen that evil is real but that courage and justice can triumph. They've seen that America is a force for good in the world, bringing hope and freedom to other people.

In recent events, our children have witnessed the great character of America. Yet, they also need to know the great cause of America. They are seeing Americans fight for our country. They also must know why their country is worth fighting for.

Our history is not a story of perfection. It's a story of imperfect people working toward great ideals. This flawed nation is also a really good nation, and the principles we hold are the hope of all mankind. When children are given the real history of America, they will also learn to love America.

Our Founders believed the study of history and citizenship should be at the core of every American's education. Yet today, our children have large and disturbing gaps in their knowledge of history. Recent studies tell us that nearly one in five high school seniors think that Germany was an ally of the United States in World War II. Twenty-eight percent of eighth graders do not know the reasons why the Civil War was fought. One-third of fourth graders do not know what it means to "pledge allegiance to the flag." Graduating seniors at some of our leading colleges and universities cannot correctly identify words from the Gettysburg Address or do not know that James Madison is the father of the Constitution.

This is more than academic failure. Ignorance of American history and civics weakens our sense of citizenship. To be an American is not just a matter of blood or

birth. We are bound by ideals, and our children must know those ideals.

They should know about the nearly impossible victory of the Revolutionary War and the debates of the Constitutional Convention. They should know the meaning of the Declaration of Independence and how Abraham Lincoln applied its principles to flight—to fight slavery. Our children should know why Martin Luther King, Jr., was in a Birmingham city jail and why he wrote a magnificent letter from that place. Our children need to know about America's liberation of Europe during World War II and why the Berlin Wall came down. At this very moment, Americans are fighting in foreign lands for principles defined at our founding, and every American—particularly every American child—should fully understand these principles.

The primary responsibility for teaching history and civics rests with our elementary and secondary schools, and they've got to do their job. The Federal Government can help, and today I'm announcing three new initiatives spearheaded by the USA Freedom Corps and designed to support the teaching of American history and civic education.

The first initiative is called We the People—it will be administered by the National Endowment for the Humanities—which will encourage the teaching of American history and civic education. The program will provide grants to develop good curricula, hold training seminars for schoolteachers and university faculty, sponsor a lecture series in which acclaimed scholars like David McCullough will tell the story of great figures from American history, and enlist high school students in a national essay contest about the principles and ideals of America. We will use technology to share these important lessons with schools and communities throughout America.

The Federal Government conserves and protects some of our greatest national treasures, and we need to make them more

readily available to Americans in their schools and local communities. Our second initiative is called Our Documents, an innovative project that will be run by the National Archives and the National History Day. This project will use the Internet to bring 100 of America's most important documents from the National Archives to classrooms and communities across the country, to provide lesson plans, and to foster competitions and discussions about these defining moments in our history.

Students and their teachers will see documents online in their original form, well-known documents such as our Constitution or the Emancipation Proclamation or the Civil Rights Act of 1964. They will also see other important but less widely available documents, such as the Lee Resolution, which first proposed independence for American colonies, and Jefferson's secret message to Congress regarding the exploration of the West.

Third, early next year we will convene a White House Forum on American History, Civics, and Service. We will discuss new policies to improve the teaching of

history and civics in elementary and secondary schools and in our colleges and universities. We will hear from educators and scholars about ways to better monitor students' understanding of American history and civics and how to make more of our great national treasures—how to make them more accessible and more relevant to the lives of our students.

American children are not born knowing what they should cherish—are not born knowing why they should cherish American values. A love of democratic principles must be taught.

A poet once said, "What we have loved, others will love, and we will teach them how." We love our country, and we must teach our children to do the same. And when we do, they will carry on our heritage of freedom into the future.

Thank you all for coming.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:42 a.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to historian David McCullough; and Bruce Cole, Chairman, National Endowment for the Humanities.

## Remarks at a Luncheon for Senatorial Candidate Lamar Alexander in Nashville, Tennessee *September 17, 2002*

Thank you all very much. Thanks. Thank you. Thanks a lot. Thank you, "Senator." [Laughter] There's no doubt in my mind Lamar Alexander will make a great—a lot of great contributions to our Nation. But one of the lasting contributions he will make is a contribution he made before when he held office, and that is, he brought honor and dignity to the office to which he had been elected.

I'm proud to be back in Tennessee. I want to thank you all for having me here. I'm proud to come back and say as clearly as I can to the citizens of Tennessee,

Lamar Alexander should become the next United States Senator. And there's a lot of reasons why, and one of them is because he married well. Like me, he married a Texan. And like me, he married above himself. We appreciate Honey, and she's a class act like Lamar is, and I'm proud to know them both.

I wish my wife were here with me. You may remember, or maybe you don't know, but when I married Laura, she was a public school librarian. She didn't care for politics; she didn't like politicians. Now here she is, the First Lady of the United States.