

 [Print This Article](#)

Posted on Tue, Jan. 22, 2013

JAMISON: All children need to learn about our noble experiment

By *Daniel O. Jamison*

last updated: January 22, 2013 09:45:07 PM

Columnist Dan Walters recently observed that California has the most ethnically diverse population in the nation. A report from the U.S. Department of Education states that only 76 percent of California high school students graduate. This puts the state No. 32 in the nation.

According to Walters, California's Asian and Pacific Islander students graduate at a rate of 89 percent, whites at 85 percent, Latinos at 70 percent and blacks at 63 percent. Those with limited English proficiency have a 51 percent graduation rate. Walters argues that much of Proposition 30's new money should be directed toward the poorer performing students. He doesn't address whether it should be spent for vocational education, smaller class sizes, student-teacher personal attention, charter schools or parent initiatives.

Overemphasis on vocational education, along with math and science, risks leaving us all behind. On standardized tests, California's fourth-graders and eighth-graders score fifth from the national bottom in vocabulary. It is crucial to national unity that all students have capacity for and a basic understanding of their nation's history and what Washington called "the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people." The American Revolution is a process in which we all must participate, not some distant irrelevant event.

As the links to America's past dim with time and diversity of cultures is ever increasing, it is more critical than ever that all students and teachers learn about the times and ideas of great Americans such as Washington, Madison, Jefferson and Lincoln.

Lincoln's appeal in 1861 to the nation's "mystic chords of memory" in his first inaugural address surely harkened back to these words, written with Madison's help, in Washington's first inaugural address: "There is no truth more thoroughly established than that there exists in the economy and course of nature an indissoluble union between virtue and happiness; between duty and advantage; between the genuine maxims of an honest and magnanimous policy and the solid rewards of public prosperity and felicity ... the propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which Heaven itself has ordained. ..."

But it is not just increasing diversity that demands greater attention to American history.

Extreme political polarization threatens our basic unity. Washington warned of this in his Farewell Address: "The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself frightful despotism ... (that) leads at length to a more formal and permanent despotism. The disorders and miseries which result gradually incline the minds of men to seek security and repose in the absolute power of an individual; and sooner or later the chief of some prevailing faction ... turns this disposition to the purposes of his own elevation, on the ruins of public liberty."

We cannot heed these teachings if they are not passed from generation to generation.

Can we still say that we are one with the great experiment entrusted to us?

The statistics are grim, the polarization disheartening. But it is imperative that Lincoln's "mystic chords" not be lost and that as a people, we remain capable and worthy of self-government. Education is the key to our past and our future.

Jamison is chairman of the health law section of Dowling Aaron Inc. law firm in Fresno.

THE FRESNO BEE