



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on July 13, 2011

## Failing Liberty 101

A recent Superman comic book has the hero saying, “I am renouncing my U.S. citizenship” because “truth, justice, and the American way — it’s not enough anymore.” Though not addressing Superman’s statement, Stanford University professor and Hoover Institution senior fellow William Damon explains how such a vision could emerge today but not yesteryear. The explanation is found in his article “American Amnesia,” in *Defining Ideas* (7/1/2011), based upon his most recent book, *Failing Liberty 101: How We Are Leaving Young Americans Unprepared for Citizenship in a Free Society*.



The National Assessment of Educational Progress reports that only 1 in 4 high-school seniors scored at least “proficient” in knowledge of U.S. citizenship. Civics and history were American students’ worst subjects. Professor Damon said that for the past 10 years, his Stanford University research team has interviewed broad cross sections of American youths about U.S. citizenship. Here are some typical responses: “We just had (American citizenship) the other day in history. I forget what it was.” Another said, “Being American is not really special.... I don’t find being an American citizen very important.” Another said, “I don’t want to belong to any country. It just feels like you are obligated to this country. I don’t like the whole thing of citizen.... It’s like, citizen, no citizen; it doesn’t make sense to me. It’s, like, to be a good citizen — I don’t know, I don’t want to be a citizen.... It’s stupid to me.”

A law professor, whom Damon leaves unnamed, shares this vision in a recent book: “Longstanding notions of democratic citizenship are becoming obsolete.... American identity is unsustainable in the face of globalization.” Instead of commitment to a nation-state, “loyalties ... are moving to transnational communities defined by many different ways: by race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, and sexual orientation.” This law professor’s vision is shared by many educators who look to “global citizenship” as



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the proper aim of civics instruction, de-emphasizing attachment to any particular country, such as the United States, pointing out that our primary obligation should be to the universal ideals of human rights and justice. To be patriotic to one's own country is seen as suspect because it may turn into a militant chauvinism or a dangerous "my country, right or wrong" vision.

The ignorance about our country is staggering. According to one survey, only 28 percent of students could identify the Constitution as the supreme law of the land. Only 26 percent of students knew that the first 10 amendments to the Constitution are called the Bill of Rights. Fewer than one-quarter of students knew that George Washington was the first president of the United States.

Discouraging young Americans from identifying with their country and celebrating our traditional American quest for liberty and equal rights removes the most powerful motivation to learn civics and U.S. history. After all, Damon asks, "why would a student exert any effort to master the rules of a system that the student has no respect for and no interest in being part of? To acquire civic knowledge as well as civic virtue, students need to care about their country." Ignorance and possibly contempt for American values, civics and history might help explain how someone like Barack Obama could become president of the United States. At no other time in our history could a person with longtime associations with people who hate our country become president. Obama spent 20 years attending the Rev. Jeremiah Wright's hate-filled sermons, which preached that "white folks' greed runs a world in need," called our country the "US of KKK-A" and asked God to "damn America." Obama's other America-hating associates include Weather Underground Pentagon bomber William Ayers and Ayers' wife, Bernardine Dohrn.

The fact that Obama became president and brought openly Marxist people into his administration doesn't say so much about him as it says about the effects of decades of brainwashing of the American people by the education establishment, media and the intellectual elite.

*Walter E. Williams is a professor of economics at George Mason University. To find out more about Walter E. Williams and read features by other Creators Syndicate writers and cartoonists, visit the Creators Syndicate Web page at [www.creators.com](http://www.creators.com).*

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