During the academic year 2006–7, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, which sponsors *Modern Age*, administered a sixty-question multiple-choice examination on American history and civic institutions to more than 28,000 freshmen and seniors at more than eighty colleges and universities. The overall results were abysmal; even more telling, at the vast majority of institutions, the seniors did no better than the freshmen, and not infrequently a bit worse.

In 2008 ISI administered a similar examination to 2,508 adults: high school graduates averaged a score of only 44 percent—a score upon which college graduates only barely improved at a figure of 57 percent. In 2010 an ISI survey delivered more bad news about what now passes for a college education: while acquiring a degree fails to provide much familiarity with America’s history or institutions, it succeeds admirably in making degree holders more liberal or progressive in their political views. By contrast, those who are able to demonstrate more factual civic knowledge tend to prize our constitutional traditions.

What is more, a 2011 study by ISI shows that civic knowledge of the kind not acquired by attending college has positive practical consequences. Although higher education has no significant impact on civic engagement other than voting, what the study calls “civic self-education” encourages attending political rallies, writing letters to the editors of newspapers and magazines, working on electoral campaigns, and participating in other activities designed to further a political point of view. In this respect, self-education in American history and institutions—knowledge acquired by reading books and periodicals and discussing political issues with family and friends—not attending college—is what leads to public activity.

In the interest of what nowadays is called “transparency” or “full disclosure,” I should mention that I played a minor role in the 2006–7 study, by attending a conference or two as a consultant and offering a few questions. (If my memory is accurate, none of my excessively arcane questions were actually used on the exam.)

The series of surveys took on a far more personal interest for me last week, however, when my daughter casually mentioned that her husband—a naturalized U.S. citizen from England—was appalled to discover that most of their (numerous) children, including a couple of high school graduates, were incapable of giving a clear account of the American Civil War or, in some cases,
even of identifying it. (Yes, we are talking
about the grandchildren of the editor of
Modern Age. The faint red glow emanating
from the page is a blush of embarrassment.)
Worse still, the evidence suggests that send-
ing them to college will hardly remedy the
deficiency.

It will probably come as no surprise to
Modern Age readers that the race/class/gender
ideological program that currently domi-
nates most American institutions of higher
learning is strikingly ineffective at what
ought to be one of the chief goals of higher
education—namely, steeping students in the
history of their nation and illuminating its
political, moral, and spiritual culture. From
the perspective of the wider society, however,
why does it matter? How is this ignorance
of the past, of the traditions of the Found-
ing and of the great struggles to preserve it,
important in the context of contemporary
political controversy?

We may begin by observing that the
tendency of our current version of higher
education to neglect civic literacy while
encouraging a progressive political perspec-
tive is unlikely to be fortuitous; an ideology
is precisely a scheme for producing a perfect
society from the ground up by abolishing all
past institutions and practices as hopelessly
inadequate, if not downright wicked. Given
the overwhelmingly progressive mentality
of most college and university faculties, the
biased presentation of political history—or its
simple omission—is exactly what one might
expect. Conservatives ought to be alarmed
that college students are being deprived of
the kind of learning that enhances conserva-
tive arguments.

More subtly, a deep, impartial knowledge
of history could well go far toward allevi-
ating the bitterness of our current debates and
mitigate, at least, the contemptuous dismissal
of opposing arguments that so often sullies
political discourse. A genuine familiarity
with the Civil War and its historical back-
ground, for example, in all its complexity,
while unlikely to change many minds about
the propriety of displaying the Confederate
battle flag, ought to predispose partisans on
both sides of the issue not to attribute the
worst possible motives to their opponents.

The essays in this issue of Modern Age are
all in their various ways embodiments
of the conservative inclination to seek an
understanding and appreciation of social
and political institutions in historical con-
text. The careful accumulation of knowledge
of the past as a foundation for the prudent
assessment of issues and controversies of
the present is the conservative way. It is the
antithesis of assuming that one can simply
construct a reductive government contrap-
tion for every problem, which usually ends
in disillusionment and indignation in the
face of the flaws and failures inevitable in
any system.

Many on the left today assume that
any qualification of freedom and equal-
ity amounts to an affront to democracy.
E. Christian Kopff offers a much-needed
consideration of the meaning and limits of
American freedom by studying the influence
on the Founders’ conception of liberty of
Germanic culture. His contribution to our
understanding of the gradual development
of equal political rights is a model for how
to put contemporary preoccupations in his-
torical context. Samuel Goldman’s response
provides salutary example of civility in dis-
cussion and debate, which progressives call
for incessantly without practicing it.

William Peirce asks us to consider
the problem of taxation in terms of both effi-
ciency and justice. While there may well
be numerous readers who question Peirce’s
arguments and conclusions, everyone ought
to recognize the value of his treating the income tax as a debatable issue. One may conjecture with a fair degree of probability that an ISI survey would find that most Americans assume that the income tax is an essential and irrevocable element of the nation’s constitutional order. Direct taxes such as our current income tax were, in fact, forbidden by article 1, section 9, of the original Constitution, and only became a permanent part of the governmental revenue stream with the passage of the Sixteenth Amendment, a little over a century ago.

Daniel Hein invites us to contemplate George Washington’s slow, difficult attainment of the virtue of patience. The contemporary relevance of this virtue need hardly be stated, but we should also recall the value of biographical reflection upon the virtues of the Founding Fathers of our country. Liberal skeptics have long ridiculed, and not without some justification, the kind of biography of men like Washington and Franklin that I read as a boy because of their unrealistically idealistic portraits. Hein’s careful account hardly presents Washington as superhuman: the importance of this discussion is precisely the flaws in his character—pride, impulsiveness, ambition—that required his best efforts to overcome. We are thereby enabled to see Washington realistically while still admiring him.

Finally, Thomas Lynch furnishes us with a green shoot of hope amid our contemporary political wasteland by recounting William F. Buckley Jr.’s highly effective and influential campaign for mayor of New York. This is comparatively recent history, but it again helps us see our current troubles in a broader context. Although he was not elected, Buckley’s witty and engaging rhetoric dominated the debate during the campaign and proved there is an audience for intelligent conservative discourse. It is on account of this hope that we continue to publish *Modern Age.*

—RVY