

## Dangerous ignorance

Bill of Rights changes harm democracy

On Sunday the Bill of Rights turned 200 years old. Unfortunately, the document that guarantees American freedoms is barely known by the average American.

A recent survey conducted by the American Bar Association showed that many Americans don't know the sections of the Bill of Rights. And, they don't agree with them.

Thirty-three percent of the 507 individuals interviewed by the ABA could not identify correctly the Bill of Rights as the first 10 amendments to the Constitution.

But more appalling than mere ignorance are the changes in the Bill of Rights some would favor. Forty-one percent would allow law enforcement officials to search the homes of suspected drug offenders without a search warrant. Fifty-one percent would have the government bar speech that demeans anyone's sex, race, religion or national origin. Forty-six percent would ban the news media from reporting national security issues without prior government approval.

Proposed changes such as these are reactions to real problems that plague American society today. The war on drugs, for instance, leaves some Americans with a sense of helplessness. But the answers do not lie in the knee-jerk chipping away of our basic freedoms.

The greatest danger of democracy is the rule of the majority. Perhaps many have forgotten that to protect the innocent, America first must protect the guilty. This basic principle is what American law and the Bill of Rights are all about.

Surely the people in this survey did not realize the ramifications of the alterations they would have made. Or did they?

The truth is that many, if not most Americans, just disagree with the Bill of Rights, as shown by the ludicrous flag-burning fiasco. Some seem to contend that the Bill of Rights only applies to those activities that the majority support.

When delegates at the ratifying conventions of the original 13 states looked at the product of the Constitutional Convention, they recognized that something was missing. Remembering the abuses they had suffered under the British system of unwritten common law, leaders of the new republic wanted to prevent government from taking advantage of the populace. Government power would have to be limited, once and for all, by setting down in writing specific actions it could not take.

What the early leaders came up with, what they demanded to be included in the new Constitution, was the Bill of Rights.

They were not paranoid, or shortsighted — they simply knew the corrupting power of government.

Former Supreme Court Justice William Brennan Jr. once said the First Amendment is the most important part of the Constitution.

"Its enforcement gives us this society," he said. "The other provisions of the Constitution really only embellish it."

How ironic it is that so many people would change the document that for 200 years has provided the foundation for all of our rights. It is those people we must guard against, because there would be no going back once rights are stripped away.

—A.J.P.



GARY LONGSINE

## Marketplace needs numeracy

"How much for some inspiration?" I asked.

"Fifty bucks," replied the grey-eyed Goddess of Information.

"That's a bit out of my price range. Do you have any used inspirations?" I asked, humbly.

"Sorry, I sold our last used inspiration to the White House last week. President Bush called and asked us to send it via overnight courier. Cost him more than fifty, and it was worn pretty thin."

"Hmm . . . then, how much are tips?"

"Advice is free, but you need to sign a waiver releasing the Student Union and all employees acting in their capacity as employees from any and all liability as a result of your correct or incorrect use of any advice provided, actual or hypothetical. Sign here."

I signed, saying, "I need to know what to write about."

She thought for a moment and replied, "Write about something different, write about . . . accretion disks in interacting binary stars, or . . . how to route a warp field through a phase conductance transporter coil to boost the mava-gain and beam the Enterprise out of danger when the warp engines are cold, or . . . innumeracy."

"Innumeracy . . . that's being illiterate about math-things, right?"

"Exactly. It has been championed as the root cause of America's declining ability to compete in a global marketplace. John Allen Paulos wrote about it in his book, 'Innumeracy: Mathematical Illiteracy and Its Consequences.' Get a copy."

I did. Paulos says that people don't understand simple things like "one cup of water plus one cup of popcorn are not equal to two cups of soggy popcorn."

He notes that many people can't tell you how tall a building is when given the number of stories it has. (Multiply the number of floors by 10 to get a measure in feet of the building's approximate height.)

Innumeracy leads to widespread belief in silly things. Astrology, for example, has few adherents among people who understand simple statements about probability. My reputation relative to Jeane Dixon's aside, I am every bit as good at predicting the future. So are you.

Astrologers get reputations in supermarket tabloids that fail to follow up thousands of completely inaccurate predictions made each year and



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herald widely the few unremarkable statements that come to pass. Long lists of failed predictions are not printed at the end of the year.

Astrologers are lousy at predicting world events. Last year Elvis did not return to Earth on a UFO bringing a fusion technology that would provide free energy from kitchen scraps. Elvis also failed to address the United Nations and propose a world government. Elvis was not discovered running a discotheque in a small town in Wyoming. Elvis didn't father a child with a convenience store clerk in California.

My successful prediction rate has been much higher. Unlike astrologers all over the world, I made only one prediction about Elvis: Elvis stays dead.

I also predicted that there would be continuing turmoil in the Soviet Union, including challenges to Gorbachev's rule of the nation. However, I didn't predict the coup attempt, nor the rapid disintegration of the Soviet Union that followed.

Even people presumed intelligent otherwise often suffer from innumeracy. According to Paulos, a close friend of Freud named Wilhelm Fliess invented biorhythmic analysis. Fliess based it on an unremarkable mathematical assertion using the numbers 23 and 28, which were supposed to represent some male and female metaphysical trait.

Fliess noticed that if you add and

subtract appropriate multiples of 23 and 28, you can express any number. Freud was so impressed with Fliess that he expected to die at age 51. Neither noticed that many pairs of numbers can be used to express any number.

In fact, any pair of numbers that have no common factors can be used to express any number in the equation  $23X + 28Y$  — given suitable X and Y values.

Innumeracy has a terrible impact on national policies. It results in continued spending on the B-2 bomber, even though the delays in procurement have driven the cost of the missionless plane to over \$1 billion each. That's a thousand piles of a million dollars for each plane.

I could go to school forever on the interest from \$1 billion and take all of my friends with me.

For a decade we've sent hundreds of millions of dollars to El Salvador each year. There are only a few million people in that tiny country. The overwhelming majority of them are poor and will remain poor despite the fact that they receive one of the highest per-capita aid packages ever sent by the United States.

The money was sent to support military oppression of impoverished and desperate people. If it had been used to provide hospitals, schools and jobs, El Salvador would be the envy of Central America. Instead, it is locked in the grip of violence and poverty.

The same could be said for our inner cities. The leading cause of death for young black males in inner cities is homicide. To put this in perspective, if you're a University of Nebraska student, your odds of getting killed by gunfire are only slightly higher than getting struck by lightning.

Innumeracy has not completely undermined rationality. However, if we expect living standards to increase, if we want to live in a peaceful and prosperous world, we must develop our understanding of problems and solutions. Simple applied mathematics must be taught as vigorously as reading.

In a world of limited resources, we all need to do our part to be literate, not just about the problems, but about the solutions as well. This means knowing something about the relative sizes of different problems and the relative costs of different solutions. When you read, don't skip over the numbers.

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