Taking America for granted

BY LIAM O'KEEFE
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"I am moving to Mexico, George W. Bush is the president." 

Quotes like this exemplify the ignorance that all too often plagues our nation’s people, and in particular our own generation. I can understand why many might be disgruntled with the outcome of November’s presidential election. And, I will not argue against the fact that there needs to be some sort of reform in our election process, but I have observed from this past election that our generation has undergone what sociologists would label "Cultural Amnesia." For, we as citizens of the greatest nation in the history of the world have begun to take our liberty and freedom for granted.

In 1816 Thomas Jefferson, recognizing our nation’s vulnerability to civic ignorance, was quoted as saying, "It is an nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be." Democracy is a particularly puzzling governmental system, for unlike communism or most other forms of government, it is dependent on its people to do the right thing in situations where citizens are free to act egocentrically, with no obligation to be civic-minded. The bottom line is that we, as the upcoming leaders of America, simply cannot assume that our freedom comes without a price. Simply enjoying the freedoms we possess does not guarantee that the same freedoms will exist for future generations.

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Stephen Bertman, the source of much of my information, and the expert on "cultural amnesia," suggests that, "If we are ignorant of the historic sacrifices that made these freedoms possible, we will be less likely to sacrifice and safeguard them for future generations." By no means am I implying that we are the source of this ignorance, nor am I trying to force upon anyone an overwhelming sense of patriotism. Instead, I ask you to consider for a moment, and hopefully longer, how this recent bout with cultural amnesia affects us. Recent studies are continually proving that Americans’ grasp of history is slipping precariously. We have all seen the skit, “Jaywalk All Stars,” or something similar, in which Jay Leno sheds light on our apathy and disinterest in current affairs and in world history. Questions like, "Who is our Vice-President?" go unanswered while people are able to answer questions such as, “How many types of marshmallows are in Lucky Charms Cereal?” A recent survey revealed that more American teenagers were able to name the Three Stooges than the three branches of the federal government. These are just two examples that suggest a recent "dumbing" of young Americans.

It is sad but true for our present and future generations that an undeniable cost exists for forgetting our past, as well as for our civic ignorance. Since a culture maintains its identity by passing values and experiences to the following generation, our children and their children are destined to live ignorant of our nation’s past unless we correct this present indifference. Since a culture maintains its identity by passing values and experiences to the following generation, our children and their children are destined to live ignorant of our nation’s past unless we correct this present indifference. America’s value as a country is dependent on its people to do the right thing in situations where citizens are free to act egocentrically, with no obligation to be civic-minded. The bottom line is that we, as the upcoming leaders of America, simply cannot assume that our freedom comes without a price. Simply enjoying the freedoms we possess does not guarantee that the same freedoms will exist for future generations.

The night the earth stood still

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The night began as most weekdays at Holy Cross do—with procrastination. Dinner was over and done with. I had checked my phone messages. My roommate had just returned from practice, so I didn’t have the option of harassing her. So, with twenty-five pages of mind-numbing literature ahead of me, I decided to do what most of my hall-mates were already doing: I plopped down in front of my computer and began talking on Instant Messenger. About thirty minutes later, I was engaged in a riveting discussion with a friend about leather pants, while also trying to find out exactly how cold it would be in Worcester the next day via weather.com. All of a sudden, the unthinkable happened: the Internet shut down...completely.

After shaking off my initial confusion, I tried to sign back on, but it didn’t work. So I tried again...and again. After repeating this process thirty-seven times, the urgency of the situation began to sink in. The Internet was down...all of it! This meant no AOL, no AIM, no Groupwise, and no pointless and time-consuming websites to visit! I was terrified, but this was exactly what I had been waiting for! For a brief second, the thought of starting my reading entered my head, but I quickly dismissed it. Instead, I ventured into the hallway and saw my panic-stricken feelings mirrored on the faces of my hall-mates, as they too began to confront this dire situation. What I had feared most was true; this wasn’t just my computer acting up—the whole hallway was sharing in my frantic feelings. We consolation each other, murmured that the Internet would pop back on, and resolved that we would start working...now.

I returned to my room to consider the facts and came up with a rather obvious, yet extremely disturbing conclusion: our young lives are highly impacted by, if not dependent upon, the Internet! As was brought to my attention, there are starving children in this world, but we were not complaining. We were not even aware that we were acting like spoiled brats, but we were okay with that. I mean, there are starving children in this world, but we, our Internet wasn’t working! It ended up being down all night and into the next day. When the man from IT’s came up to hall to restore our link to the outside world, I actually asked him, "Are you the Internet man?" with a huge smile on my face. He was a cheer and a cheer went up in the hallway. Although I survived this trying ordeal, I wasn’t happy about it. It frustrated me that I was unable to communicate and procrastinate in the way that we have become so accustomed to. It was an irritating experience, but losing the Internet definitely taught my hall-mates and myself to appreciate it and how much it simplifies and complicates everyone’s lives.

On the one hand, this lack of written communication is unfortunate. However, much historical knowledge comes from information gathered from letters. However, on the other hand, staying in touch with family and friends has most likely greatly increased due to email, a far more convenient mode of communication. I realize this is horrifying, but think about what our lives would be like without the Internet. Going back even just ten years ago, Holy Cross students managed to survive without the daily use of an instant message or the ever-present distraction of online shopping. I’m not sure how, but they did. On the positive side, without the Internet, most people would drastically reduce the amount of time spent on simpler tasks such as reading. Speaking from personal experience, I probably would have finished this article when it was actually due if I had resisted my compulsive instant messaging. However, without the valuable and speedy assistance of the Internet, other aspects of our education, like research, would become much more difficult than they are used to. We are so fortunate to have such a wealth of information at our fingertips, yet we take it for granted. Only when my hall lost the Internet did I realize our intense dependence upon it.

After such intense deliberations, I clearly deserved a break. So I tried to sign online again. No luck. My RA was bombarded with numerous complaints from work-shirk ing, online-addicted girls like myself, she put in a call to IT’s. So, being the ever-sensitive students that we are, we used the time to complain about how terrible it was. We were fully aware that we were acting like spoiled brats, but we were okay with that. I mean, there are starving children in this world, but we, our Internet wasn’t working! It ended up being down all night and into the next day. When the man from IT’s came up to hall to restore our link to the outside world, I actually asked him, "Are you the Internet man?" with a huge smile on my face. He was a cheer and a cheer went up in the hallway. Although I survived this trying ordeal, I wasn’t happy about it. It frustrated me that I was unable to communicate and procrastinate in the way that we have become so accustomed to. It was an irritating experience, but losing the Internet definitely taught my hall-mates and myself to appreciate it and how much it simplifies and complicates everyone’s lives.