Who Is a Famous American?

CHARTING HISTORICAL MEMORY ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

For a refreshing change, Mr. Wineburg and Ms. Monte-Sano designed a survey to find out what young people know about history — not to prove what they don't know. And then they administered the same survey to adults. Readers will find the results as fascinating and surprising as the authors did.

BY SAM WINEBURG AND CHAUNCEY MONTE-SANO

WHO ARE the most famous Americans in history, not including Presidents or First Ladies? We asked this question of 2,000 high school juniors and seniors across all 50 states.[1] Take a moment before you read on to think who might have topped their lists.

If names like Paris Hilton, Britney Spears, Tupac Shakur, Michael Jackson, Barry Bonds, or Tiger Woods come to mind, you would be like most of the adults we asked to make such a guess. Such predictions speak to a view of young people so addled by a reality-TV-saturated, iPod-blaring present that history for them starts with Halo 1.1 and Lindsay Lohan's first attempt at rehab. And why wouldn't we think this way? With each new history test, the media characterizes kids in ways ("dumb as rocks" and "a nation of nitwits" are just the start) that reinforce this view ceaselessly.[2]

Our approach to whom today's teens consider a "famous American" differed from the hoary ritual of "do you know what we know" inflicted annually on American schoolchildren. Instead of trying to expose what kids don't know, we tried to find out what they do know. Faced with a survey asking a simple question followed by a series of blank lines, what would young people say? The answer is one few would expect.

A DIFFERENT APPROACH

Our questionnaire contained 10 blank lines, split into part A and part B. "Starting from Columbus to the present day," we asked, "jot down the names of the most famous Americans in history. The only ground rule is that *they cannot be Presidents*."[3] After students filled in the five lines in part A, teachers read these instructions: "Look at part B. On these five lines, write down the names of the five most famous *women* from American history. The only ground rule is that they can't be the *wives* of Presidents." While students could list either men or women in part A, part B restricted their choices to women, a feature of the questionnaire that obviously inflated the total number of women that appeared on students' final lists.

Of the thousands of figures whom students listed on their questionnaires, only five names appeared on

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A glimpse into the workings of a historian's mind:
Sam Wineburg shares the "back story" of how a loose thread in a previous project led him and his colleagues to discover a surprising and significant shift in the historical consciousness of Americans.

Also
An expanded list: **The Top 100 Famous Americans**

TABLE 1.

Top 10 Famous Americans Named by Students

Famous American	Percentage Naming
1. Martin Luther King, Jr.	67
2. Rosa Parks	60
3. Harriet Tubman	44
4. Susan B. Anthony	34
5. Benjamin Franklin	29
6. Amelia Earhart	23
7. Oprah Winfrey	22
8. Marilyn Monroe	19
9. Thomas Edison	18
10. Albert Einstein	16

a quarter of all lists. The top three were all African Americans: Martin Luther King, Jr. (far and away the most famous person in American history for today's teenagers), Rosa Parks (close behind), and Harriet Tubman. Although 67% of the 2,000 respondents named King, only about half as many (34%) mentioned the first white name on the list, Susan B. Anthony. The list of the top 10 names appears in Table 1.[4]

We used logistic regression to analyze patterns in students' responses.[5] Students' geographic region had almost no influence on their responses, while gender played a somewhat larger role.[6] But the most pronounced differences in students' responses were between races — particularly between African American and white students.[7] For example, even though King appeared on 64% of all white students' lists, he appeared on 82% of all black students' lists. Students' race also predicted the likelihood of their naming other figures in the top 10. For example, white students named every white figure at significantly higher rates than did blacks. The differences between white and black students can be seen in their respective top-10 lists. Five names overlap: the four African American figures and Anthony. Whereas black students' top 10 consisted of nine black figures and one white, white students' top 10 included six whites and four blacks.[8]
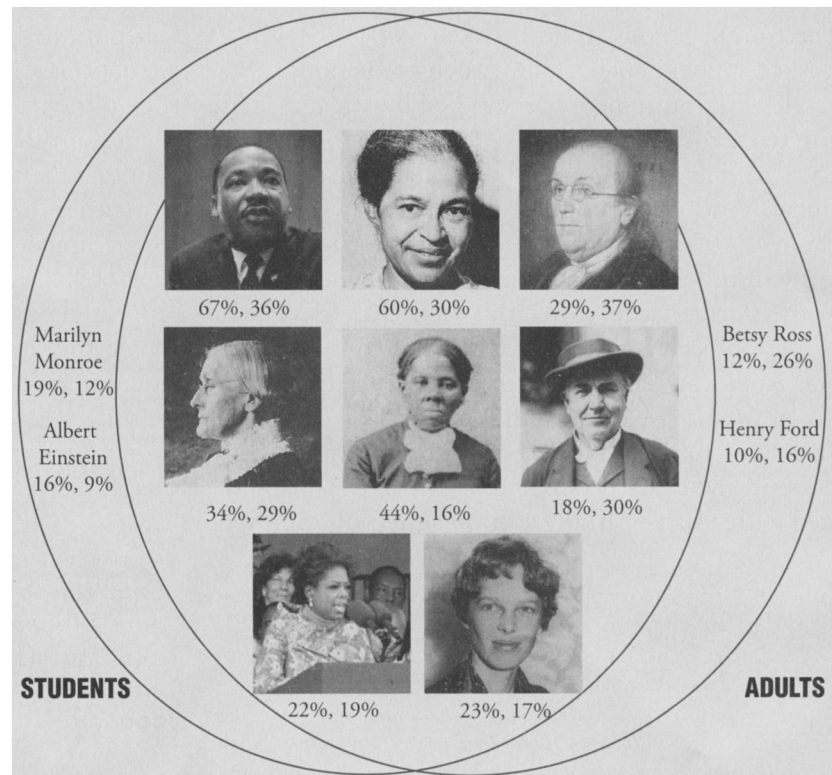
A COMMON PANTHEON

Such findings might suggest that

changes in the curriculum in the last several decades have had a profound impact on young people's sense of historical fame. There's no doubt that the curriculum has been transformed since 1926, when Carter Woodson first proposed designating the week that included the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln (February 12) and Frederick Douglass (February 14) as "Negro History Week." Prior to the civil rights movement, one searched in vain to find black Americans represented in mainstream history textbooks, but today, as a 1995 textbook study found, African Americans and women have "moved to the center of American history."[9] If changes to the contemporary curriculum are the reason behind young people's answers, then we would expect a very different selection from Americans of older generations.

To test this proposition, we surveyed 2,000 American-born adults aged 45 and over. We gathered data in 13 population centers, administering surveys in a host of venues: shopping centers, downtown pedestrian malls, hospitals, libraries, adult education classes, business meetings, street fairs, and retirement communities. The demographics of the adult sample corresponded roughly to the 2000 census, and the questionnaire for adults was identical to the one we used for students, except that it asked respondents to provide

FIGURE 1.

Overlap in Famous Americans Named by Students (%), Adults (%)

67%, 36%   60%, 30%   29%, 37%

Marilyn Monroe 19%, 12%

Albert Einstein 16%, 9%

34%, 29%   44%, 16%   18%, 30%

Betsy Ross 12%, 26%

Henry Ford 10%, 16%

22%, 19%   23%, 17%

STUDENTS   ADULTS

the year and the place of their birth.[10]

Instead of a wide divergence separating young people from adults, we found remarkable overlap. Among the 10 most often named figures for young people and adults, eight were identical (see Figure 1). For adults, no name approached the overwhelming percentages of King or Parks on the students' lists (67% and 60%, respectively, compared to 36% and 30% on adults' lists). Anthony was the only figure in the top five whose presence was comparable for young people and adults.

As with students, the most striking difference among adults was by race. Black adults shared with white adults five names in the top 10, one white and four black: Benjamin Franklin (who appeared in the first position for whites and the 10th for blacks), King, Parks, Oprah Winfrey, and Tubman. Whites were significantly more likely than blacks to name the white figures in the top 10; blacks were significantly more likely to name black figures. The effects of race are noteworthy, but so too are the effects of age. Overall, students were more than four times as likely as adults to name King and Tubman and almost four times as likely to name Parks.

School obviously plays a role in these results — not only for today's students but for their parents and grandparents. Children, especially elementary school children, bring home biographies of famous people and share these books with the adults in their homes.[11] When these adults go off to work and there is an occasion to think about a figure from America's past, they are bound to be influenced by the materials encountered through their school-age children. At the same time, the curriculum both influences and is influenced by larger social trends. It was not school librarians but members of Congress who decreed that Rosa Parks would lie in state in the Capitol Rotunda in October 2005, the first woman in American history to do so. Nor was it teachers but officials at the United States Postal Service who honored Harriet Tubman as the first black woman to appear on a U.S. postage stamp (February 1978) and then honored her again with a second stamp 17 years later. This larger "cultural curriculum," while difficult to measure, surely shapes our perceptions about history as much as any textbook or teacher's guide.[12]

THE CHANGING FORTUNE OF FAME

A questionnaire is a blunt instrument, and ours was no exception. Beyond some basic characteristics —age, gender, region of the country, race, and ethnicity — we know little about our respondents. Asking people to name "famous" Americans combines the virtues of open-endedness with the defects of imprecision. Although we tested this and other prompts with teens and found few differences among the alternatives, we used the same prompt with adults, a decision dictated less by the belief that "famous" means the same thing to adults as to teens than by the press for consistency with a survey instrument. Prompting respondents for five women's names obviously inflated the number of women listed, but we are at a loss to say by precisely how many. As we look back, we are humbled by the complexity of the question we addressed — Who defines the historical canon for contemporary Americans? — and the imperfect tool we used to address it.

Yet despite those many qualifications, we are struck by a pattern impossible to miss in the responses of our 4,000 Americans. Even our questionnaire's many shortcomings cannot obscure the clarity of consensus that emerged among Americans of different generations. Some 80 years after Woodson initiated Negro History Week, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks have emerged as the two most famous figures in American history, with Harriet Tubman close behind. While some of the old standbys still appear — the perdurable Benjamin Franklin defines resilience in our time no less than in his own — the prominence of African Americans at the top of our lists is the most remarkable finding of this survey. Whether our 4,000 respondents truly embrace diversity in their hearts is a question no computer rifling through strings of numbers can answer. But the simple thought experiment of imagining such results four decades ago, on the eve of the 1964 Civil Rights Act — a time when the Federal Bureau of Investigation was wiretapping King's house and bugging his hotel rooms; when a 430-page National Educational Association guide for teachers promoting "critical thinking" ignored black Americans except for three pages on slavery; when a search under T in the index of a typical history textbook would have failed to turn up a single "Tubman, Harriet" — brings into crisp focus just how dramatic this shift has been.[13]

In the process of turning King, Parks, and Tubman into icons of freedom's struggle, other struggles get left behind. Susan B. Anthony achieves prominence, but other leaders of women's suffrage go unlisted (Elizabeth Cady Stanton appeared on only 5% of teens' and adults' lists). César Chávez appeared on 13% of California students' lists but on a scant 2% nationwide. Four out of 2,000 students and one of 2,000 adults named the muckraking journalist Upton Sinclair. Prominent figures from American labor were nonexistent on both teens' and adults' lists. America's multihued movement for equality — that variegated and textured

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struggle enlisting Americans of all stripes, colors, and political persuasions and encompassing Native Americans, Chinese and Japanese, Hispanics and Irish, Jews and Catholics, and successive waves of immigrants, laborers, union organizers, and reformers of all social classes — seems to have been reduced to an equation of black and white.

TAKING STOCK

Although a few students, like a few adults, clowned around, most took our questionnaire seriously. (About an equal number in both groups put down "Mom" as one of their famous Americans; from students — obviously adolescent boys — we learned that Jenna Jameson is the biggest star of the X-rated movie industry.) However, when we step back from our findings, we see the same small set of names at the top of all lists. Although the biggest variations were recorded between white and African American respondents, the extent to which all Americans now place black Americans at the top of their lists is a finding few would have predicted. In this regard, our results suggest that those who fretted that opening up the historical canon to women and minorities would be the downfall of our national historical culture were wildly off the mark.

The late Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., sounded the worriers' call in his best-selling book *The Disuniting of America*. Drawing on the statements of the most extreme multiculturalists and Afrocentrists of the 1980s and early 1990s, Schlesinger warned that, left unabated, the belittling of *unum* at the hands of a pugnacious *pluribus* would tear our schools asunder — and with them our communities and national identity. "If left unchecked," he wrote, "the new ethnic gospel" would lead inexorably to the "fragmentation, resegregation, and tribalization of American life."[14]

If we trained our gaze today on the most strident and extreme views out there, we too could come up with a similar prediction of impending doom. But that is not what we did. We looked for ordinary people — teenagers in public school classrooms and adults eating lunch in downtown Seattle, taking a break on a bench in a pedestrian mall in Oklahoma City, or shopping for crafts at a street fair in Philadelphia. What we found was the opposite of "fragmentation, resegregation, and tribalization": different generations and different races congregated around five or six common names with astounding consistency. While it is not sur-

prising to learn that one of these names was Martin Luther King, Jr., who would have predicted Rosa Parks would be the second-most-named American? Or that Harriet Tubman would be third for students and ninth for adults? Or that 40 years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the three most common names appearing on students' surveys in an all-white classroom in Columbia Falls, Montana, would be those of African Americans? For many of those students' grandparents, this moment would have been unthinkable.

Our findings are put into perspective when we compare them to the results of other surveys addressing the same general question. In 2006 the *Atlantic Monthly* asked 10 distinguished historians, including Doris Kearns Goodwin, David Kennedy, and Robert Dallek, to nominate the 100 most "influential" Americans.[15] Recognizing the many problems associated with comparing "influential" to "famous," it is still instructive to look at the similarities and differences between the *Atlantic* list and our own. Eliminating Presidents and Presidents' wives from the *Atlantic* list, we registered overlap with several names: Benjamin Franklin; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Thomas Edison; and Henry Ford.

But number three on the historians' list was John Marshall — a name mentioned just twice by our 4,000 respondents. Conversely, Rosa Parks and Harriet Tubman (the number-two and number-three slots for teens and the third and ninth slots for adults) did not even make it into the historians' top 100 (although Lyman Beecher and James Gordon Bennett did). Susan B. Anthony, near the top of our list, languishes at number 38 on the historians' list, behind Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Walt Disney, Jackie Robinson, and Jonas Salk. Among living Americans, Bill Gates, James Watson, and Ralph Nader appeared in the historians' top 100.

Oprah Winfrey's absence from the historians' list points to the gaping differences between academic historians and the ordinary Americans who took our survey. In contrast to historians, our 4,000 respondents made Winfrey the seventh-most-named famous American — indeed, the only living figure to appear in the top 10, crossing divisions of age, race, region, and gender.[16] Although the other African Americans in the top 10 — King, Parks, and Tubman — are present largely because of their role in the struggle for racial equality, Winfrey's message of self-improvement, personal responsibility, and overcoming adversity transcends race. Today's Horatio Alger story features a poor girl who shuttled between her mother in Milwaukee, her

grandmother in Mississippi, and her father in Tennessee; who was raped by a teenage cousin and molested by one of her mother's boyfriends; and who, after starting as a newscaster for a Tennessee radio station appealing to black listeners, achieved phenomenal success against stacked odds.[17] Less than 70 years ago, the Daughters of the American Revolution canceled a performance by Marian Anderson at Constitution Hall when they realized she was black. It is highly probable that their granddaughters and great-granddaughters make up part of the subscription base of *O Magazine* and were among the audience members who each paid $185 to attend Winfrey's "Live Your Best Life" tour.

OLD HEROES, NEW HEROES

Another study similar to ours was undertaken by Michael Frisch, who over a 14-year period asked college students at the State University of New York at Buffalo to list "the first 10 names that popped into their head" from the beginning of American history to the end of the Civil War. Students completed the exercise twice, once including Presidents and then excluding "Presidents, statesmen, and generals." Like us, Frisch was struck by the consistency of his results across cohorts of undergraduates between 1975 and 1988. On the list without Presidents, two names — Betsy Ross and Paul Revere — lodged at the top, barely budging from the top two spots for the better part of a decade. "Betsy Ross," Frisch wrote, "exists symbolically as the Mother, who gives birth to our collective symbol." Paul Revere, "the horse-borne messenger of the revolution," exerted a similar hold.[18]

But not here. To be sure, Ross and Revere are present among our responses, but their stars have dimmed. Overall, Ross appeared on 12% of students' lists (13th overall), but for adults (many of whom were the same age as Frisch's college students in 1984), she still occupies the sixth slot, appearing on 26% of all lists. Revere has fallen from his horse. He places 43rd for students (appearing on only 3% of lists) and 36th for adults (on 5% of lists).

If to a previous generation of Americans Revere and Ross were the symbolic father and mother of one national narrative, surely King and Parks are the founding couple of another. But change comes yoked to continuity, the historians tell us. If it's true that the civil rights movement has replaced the American Revolution as the defining moment in our history, that would constitute a significant shift. But as historians James McPherson and Eric Foner remind us, the abo-

lition of slavery and the struggle for equal rights — from the right to vote to the right to sit down in a bus seat one has paid for — form a continuum with, not a break from, the ideals of the founders.[19]

The chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Bruce Cole, recently worried that today's students are ignorant of the history that provides a common national bond. To remedy this, he has commissioned 40 laminated posters to be distributed to high

schools across the country, including Grant Wood's 1931 painting *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere.* "You can call them myths if you want," averred Cole, "but unless we have them, we don't have anything."[20]

Cole needn't worry about an impending myth shortage. Myths inhabit the national consciousness the way excited gas molecules fill a vacuum. When has our stockpile of myths been so depleted that we needed an emergency infusion of laminated posters? As one set of myths goes backstage, others jostle in the wings, waiting for their moment in the limelight. In a nation as diverse as ours, we instinctively search for symbols — in children's biographies, coloring contests, the next Disney movie — that allow us to rally around a common name, event, or idea. As the historian Alon Confino has written, national memory demands compromise and requires adulteration. Rather than consistency, this collective memory is "constituted by different, often opposing, memories that, in spite of their rivalries, construct common denominators that overcome on a symbolic level real social and political differences."[21]

The common denominators that today draw together Americans of different colors, regions, and ages look somewhat different from those of former eras. While there are still some inventors, entrepreneurs, and entertainers, the people who come to the fore are those who acted to expand rights, alleviate misery, rectify injustice, and promote freedom. The fact that Americans, young and old, in places like Columbia Falls, Montana; Cranston, Rhode Island; Oklahoma City; Saratoga Springs, New York; Minneapolis; and Anchorage put these figures at the top of their lists seems to be deeply symbolic of the national story we now tell ourselves about who we are . . . and perhaps whom we aspire to become.

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1. We identified schools using demographic data available on the GreatSchools.net website and administered surveys in junior and senior social studies classrooms. While our sample was not random, our final sample of 2,000 corresponded closely to the ethnic and racial breakdown of the 2000 U.S. census.

2. Lee Bockhorn, "History in Crisis," *Weekly Standard,* 13 May 2002.

3. We experimented with different wording for the prompt, substituting "significant" and "important" for "famous," but these changes had little effect on students' responses. Eliminating Presidents made students devote a bit more time to generating their lists. We also noticed that whenever they listed a President's name, many students tended to attach a First Lady's. This persuaded us to eliminate First Ladies from consideration, as well as to prompt specifically for women's names in part B of the questionnaire.

4. Our analyses looked at the total number of times a particular name appeared on students' lists, not whether a name appeared in part A or part B. Because some students who had spontaneously listed women in part A erased them when they reached part B, rewriting those names in that section, it is a safer bet methodologically to count the absolute number of times a name appeared on the survey rather than where it ap-

peared.

5. Logistic regression is a statistical technique that compares the effects of two or more factors ("independent variables") on an outcome of interest (a "dependent variable"). This technique predicts the likelihood that people possessing a particular set of attributes (e.g., gender, ethnicity, region) will name a particular historical figure. The results of this test are reported as an adjusted odds-ratio or the likelihood that a person possessing attributes A, B, and C will list a particular name compared to someone with attributes D, E, and F.

6. Alpha was set to <.05 for all statistical analysis. For further information about the study's methodology, see the detailed methodological appendix at www.indiana.edu/~jah/textbooks.

7. Nine percent of participants checked Hispanic as their racial/ethnic group. However, the responses of Hispanic participants did not form any clear pattern. This is certainly a growing population that warrants more careful study.

8. Black students' top 10 included King, Parks, Tubman, Malcolm X, Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan, Madame C. J. Walker, Anthony, Maya Angelou, and Sojourner Truth. In addition to King, Parks, Tubman, Winfrey, and Anthony, white students' top 10 included Benjamin Franklin, Amelia Earhart, Marilyn Monroe, Thomas Edison, and Albert Einstein.

9. Robert Lerner, Althea K. Nagai, and Stanley Rothman, *Molding the Good Citizen: The Politics of High School History Texts* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1995), p. 71.

10. Adult data were collected between June 2005 and August 2006 in the following cities: San Francisco, Seattle, Los Angeles, Phoenix, Oklahoma City, Houston, Miami, Philadelphia, Knoxville, Providence, Boston, Detroit, and Minneapolis.

11. To better understand how trade books might have influenced the responses, we correlated the top 100 figures listed by students with the number of juvenile biographies published about each figure from 1984 to 2003. This analysis yielded a correlation of .64, an unusually high correlation in social research.

12. On the cultural curriculum, see an earlier *Kappan* article: Sam Wineburg et al., "*Forrest Gump* and the Future of Teaching the Past," *Phi Delta Kappan,* November 2007, pp. 168-77.

13. William H. Cartwright and Richard L. Watson, Jr., eds., *Interpreting and Teaching American History* (Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, 1961).

14. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (Knoxville, Tenn.: Whittle Direct Books, 1991), p. 23.

15. "The Top 100," *Atlantic Monthly,* December 2006, available at www.theatlantic.com/doc/200612/influentials.

16. When students completed the survey, Parks was alive. Her death (24 October 2005) occurred during data collection for adults, when 46% of the surveys were still outstanding. Before October 2005, 25% of adults named Parks; after her death, that number increased to 37%.

17. Nancy F. Koehn and Erica Helms, "Oprah Winfrey," Harvard Business School (case no. 9-803-190), 2003, available at Harvard Business Online, http://harvardbusinessonline.hbsp.harvard.edu. Search on "Oprah."

18. Michael Frisch, "American History and the Structures of Collective Memory: A Modest Exercise in Empirical Iconography," *Journal of American History,* March 1989, pp. 1130–55, esp. pp. 1146-47.

19. James M. McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998).

20. Judith H. Dobrzynski, "Our Official History Scold: The Head of the National Endowment for the Humanities Stands Up for American Exceptionalism," *Wall Street Journal,* 22 May 2007, www.opinionjournal.com/la/?id=110010109.

21. Alon Confino, "Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method," *American Historical Review,* December 1997, pp. 1399-1400.