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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

BETH LESTER

202.962.3042

blester@ps-b.com

Americans don't know their Revolutionary history

WASHINGTON, D.C., December 7, 2009 – Who cares about the American Revolution and why should something that happened more than 200 years ago matter today?

These are among the questions raised by a recent national survey, sponsored by The American Revolution Center, which revealed an alarming lack of knowledge of our nation's founding history, despite near universal agreement on the importance of this knowledge.

The study, conducted in the summer of 2009 among a demographically representative random sample of U.S. adults, is the first national survey of adult knowledge of the American Revolution and its ongoing legacy. It reveals that Americans highly value, but vastly overrate, their knowledge of the Revolutionary period and its significance.

Asked to grade themselves on their knowledge, 89 percent of adults polled believed they could pass a basic test on the American Revolution. However, 83 percent failed the test that covered the underlying beliefs, freedoms, and liberties established during the Revolution. "The disappointing scores clearly indicate a need that ought to be addressed," notes Dr. Bruce Cole, president and CEO of The American Revolution Center. "This shouldn't be taken as an indictment of those who took the survey, but rather a wake-up call for all of us."

The survey findings, released today, are a call-to-action for The American Revolution Center and for its efforts to address this "historical amnesia." The American Revolution Center, a non-partisan, not-for-profit organization, plans to construct The Museum of the American Revolution in historic Philadelphia. This will be the first national museum to tell the entire story of the American Revolution and its enduring legacy. The American Revolution Center has already launched a website (www.AmericanRevolutionCenter.org) that provides resources on the American Revolution, including a searchable database of lesson plans, and links to over 70 American Revolution sites and organizations, and an interactive timeline.

"The American Revolution defined what it means to be an American. It forged those principles that unite us as a nation," says Dr. Cole. "Unfortunately, those principles that enabled the United States to flourish intellectually and economically are fading from memory." This is critical, Dr. Cole notes, because rights undefined and misunderstood cannot be defended or

appropriately conveyed to new generations. “Knowledge of the ideas on which our constitutional system is built is essential to maintain the relevance and vibrancy of our government that is of the people, by the people, and for the people,” he says. “Many Americans are unaware that the everyday freedoms and liberties they enjoy – reading newspaper editorials, expressing a dissenting opinion while attending a public meeting, or worshipping at a religious institution of their choice – are the legacy of the American Revolution. For future generations to continue to enjoy these freedoms, we must know and preserve the promise of the American Revolution.”

The survey reveals that more than 90 percent of Americans – across all major demographic groups – think it is important for U.S. citizens to know the history and principles of the American Revolution. “This is a compelling number,” observes Dr. Cole. “Other surveys tend not to ask this type of attitudinal question, which makes this finding truly significant. We are greatly encouraged by our citizens’ level of enthusiasm for teaching and understanding the founding principles of our nation.”

Some noteworthy findings from the report, titled “The American Revolution. Who Cares? Americans are yearning to learn, failing to know,” include the following:

- In spite of pledging allegiance to “the republic for which it stands,” equal numbers of American adults mistakenly believe the Constitution established a government of direct democracy, rather than a democratic republic. (While this basic fact is included on the naturalization exam for immigrants to qualify for U.S. citizenship, more than half of the Americans polled do not know it.)
- More than 50 percent of Americans wrongly attributed the quote, “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” to George Washington, Thomas Paine, or President Barack Obama, when it is in fact a quote from Karl Marx, author of “The Communist Manifesto.”
- Many more Americans remember that Michael Jackson sang “Beat It” than know that the Bill of Rights is part of the Constitution.
- 60 percent of Americans can correctly identify the number of children in reality-TV show couple Jon and Kate Gosselin’s household (eight), but more than one-third do not know the century in which the American Revolution took place. Half of those surveyed believe the Civil War, Emancipation Proclamation, or War of 1812 occurred before the American Revolution.
- Especially notable at a time when thousands of political protesters hold “tea parties” around the nation, more than half of Americans do not know that the outcome of the Boston Tea Party was not a repeal of taxes, but rather that it prompted British actions that ignited American patriotism and sparked the Revolution.
- One-third of Americans do not know that the right to a jury trial is covered in the U.S. Constitution’s Bill of Rights, while 4-in-10 mistakenly think that the right to vote is.

Many high schools now forego teaching the American Revolution and its enduring legacies in civics or American history classes in favor of more global studies, The American Revolution Center notes. In addition, other studies have reported that even the nation’s top universities and colleges do not include American history as a required course of study. Through a series of questions about major events in America’s War for Independence, the survey reveals that Americans do not have an even basic understanding of the chronology, scale, duration or human cost of the military conflict that secured our nation’s independence.

“You can’t remember what you don’t know,” remarks Dr. Cole, “so it is not hard to recognize why many adult Americans understand far less about the American Revolution than they think they do or think they should. What needs to be kept in mind is that knowledge of our nation’s founding principles is critical because it enables citizens to participate wisely in government, to

understand the historical global context of our country's origins, to embrace a diversity of ideas, and to commit to the quest for freedom and equal rights."

While planning for the new museum in Philadelphia, The American Revolution Center is expanding its virtual presence with educational outreach efforts capable of reaching millions through a robust website that offers a searchable database of lesson plans and online access to its collection through an interactive timeline. Classroom and interactive delivery of teaching resources for grades K-12 and students of all ages is also planned. "The American Revolution Center has the opportunity to bring together for the first time, in one place, a museum dedicated to enhancing understanding and perpetuating the legacy of our Founding Generation," says Dr. Cole. "The Museum of the American Revolution will honor the sacrifices of generations past, while engaging rising generations in the ongoing story that is America's democracy."

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About the survey

"The American Revolution. Who cares? Americans are yearning to learn, failing to know."

Survey respondents were asked 27 multiple-choice questions to gauge their actual knowledge of key documents, events, people and ideas from the revolutionary period. A few contemporary questions were included in an attempt to understand the magnitude of the difference in resonance between popular culture topics in headlines today and those pertaining to our nation's founding history and principles. Several questions were taken from the 2006 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in U.S. history for students in grades 4, 8, and 12. Also included was a question on Constitutional rights asked of adults and tracked for the last 10 years in other national surveys. The research was conducted in July of 2009, using telephone interviews of a random sample of 1,001 U.S. general population respondents, which included adults aged 18 and older, male and female, from all regions of the United States, spanning various income levels, education, and political affiliations. Sampling error is estimated at +/- four percent. The survey was developed with the assistance of notable authorities on the American Revolution under the guidance of Kenneth Dautrich, Ph.D., founder and former director of the Center for Survey Research and Analysis at the University of Connecticut, and administered by Penn, Schoen and Berland Associates, a research-based communications firm.

About Penn Schoen Berland

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About The American Revolution Center

The American Revolution Center is a non-partisan, not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to engaging the public in the history and enduring legacy of the American Revolution. It plans to establish The Museum of the American Revolution

— the first national museum telling the entire story of the American Revolution and its enduring legacy — in historic Philadelphia. The Museum will showcase the Center’s distinguished collection of objects, artifacts and manuscripts, highlights of which can be seen on its website and in special exhibitions.