

# Get Up, Stand Up, Don't Give Up the Fight: Know Your Rights or You Will Lose Them

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*["If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."](#)*—Thomas Jefferson

If America's schools are to impart principles of freedom and democracy to future generations, they must start by respecting the constitutional rights of their students

Take the case of Lucas Hudson.

With all the negative press being written about today's young people, it's refreshing to meet a young person who not only knows his rights but is prepared to stand up for them.

Lucas is a smart kid, a valedictorian of his graduating class at the Collegiate Academy at Armwood High School in Hillsborough County, Fla.

So, when school officials gave Lucas an ultimatum: either remove most of his speech's religious references from his graduation speech—in which he thanked the people who helped shape his character, reflected on how quickly time goes by, and urged people to use whatever time they have to love others and serve the God who loves us—or he would not be speaking at all, Lucas refused to forfeit his rights.

That's when [Lucas's father turned to The Rutherford Institute](#) for help.

In coming to Lucas' defense, attorneys for The Rutherford Institute warned school officials that their attempts to browbeat Lucas into watering down his graduation speech could expose the school to a First Amendment lawsuit.

Thankfully for Lucas, the school backed down, and he was able to deliver his speech as written.

It doesn't always work out so well, unfortunately.

Over the course of [The Rutherford Institute](#)'s 42-year history, we have defended countless young people who found themselves censored, silenced and denied their basic First Amendment rights, especially when they chose to exercise their rights to free speech and religious freedom.

In case after case, we encounter an appalling level of ignorance on the part of public school officials who mistakenly believe that the law requires anything religious be banned from public schools.

Here's where government officials get it wrong: while the government may not establish or compel a particular religion, it also may not silence and suppress religious speech merely because others might take offense.

People are free to ignore, disagree with, or counter the religious speech of others, but the government *cannot* censor private religious speech.

Unfortunately, you can only defend your rights when you know them, and the American people—and those who represent them—are utterly ignorant about their freedoms, history, and how the government is supposed to operate.

As Morris Berman points out in his book *Dark Ages America*,

“70 percent of American adults cannot name their senators or congressmen; more than half don't know the actual number of senators, and nearly a quarter cannot name a single right guaranteed by the First Amendment. [Sixty-three percent cannot name the three branches of government.](#) Other studies reveal that uninformed or undecided voters often vote for the candidate whose name and packaging (e.g., logo) are the most powerful; color is apparently a major factor in their decision.”

More than government corruption and ineptitude, police brutality, terrorism, gun violence, drugs, illegal immigration or any other so-called “danger” that threatens our nation, civic illiteracy may be what finally pushes us over the edge.

As Thomas Jefferson warned, no nation can be both [ignorant and free](#).

Unfortunately, the American people have existed in a technology-laden, entertainment-fueled, perpetual state of cluelessness for so long that civic illiteracy has become the new normal for the citizenry.

In fact, most immigrants who aspire to become citizens know more about national civics than native-born Americans. Surveys indicate that half of native-born [Americans couldn't correctly answer 70% of the civics questions on the U.S. Citizenship test.](#)

Not even the [government bureaucrats who are supposed to represent us](#) know much about civics, American history and geography, or the Constitution although they take an oath to uphold, support and defend the Constitution against “enemies foreign and domestic.”

For instance, a couple attempting to get a marriage license was recently [forced to prove to a government official that New Mexico is, in fact, one of the 50 states](#) and not a foreign country.

You can't make this stuff up.

Those who gave us the Constitution and the Bill of Rights believed that the [government exists at the behest of its citizens](#). The government's purpose is to protect, defend and even enhance our freedoms, not violate them.

It was no idle happenstance that the Constitution opens with these three powerful words: "We the people."

Those who founded this country knew quite well that every citizen must remain vigilant or freedom would be lost. As Thomas Paine recognized, "It is the responsibility of the patriot to protect his country from its government."

You have no rights unless you exercise them.

Still, you can't exercise your rights unless you know what those rights are.

"If Americans do not understand the Constitution and the institutions and processes through which we are governed, we cannot rationally evaluate important legislation and the efforts of our elected officials, nor can we preserve the national unity necessary to meaningfully confront the multiple problems we face today," warns the Brennan Center in its [Civic Literacy Report Card](#). "Rather, every act of government will be measured only by its individual value or cost, without concern for its larger impact. More and more we will 'want what we want, and [will be] convinced that the system that is stopping us is wrong, flawed, broken or outmoded.'"

Education precedes action.

As the Brennan Center concludes

"America, unlike most of the world's nations, is not a country defined by blood or belief. [America is an idea, or a set of ideas, about freedom and opportunity](#). It is these ideas that bind us together as Americans and have kept us free, strong, and prosperous. But these ideas do not perpetuate themselves. They must be taught and learned anew with each generation."

There is a movement underway to [require that all public-school students pass the civics portion of the U.S. naturalization test—100 basic facts about U.S. history and civics](#)—before receiving their high-school diploma, and that's a start.

Lucas Hudson would have passed such a test with flying colors.

On graduation day, Lucas stepped up to the podium and delivered his uncensored valedictorian speech as written, without any interference by school censors.

As Lucas's father relayed to The Rutherford Institute:

"In the end, Lucas got to give his entire speech the way he wanted to give it, and

everybody was paying attention. Nobody got hurt. Nothing bad happened. It was just a young man using the First Amendment rights to speak his mind regarding his personal beliefs. [Lucas] never thought a few sentences in a speech would create such a controversy in his world, but this speech turned into a defining moment for him. He will never be the same after this experience, but this permanent change is a good thing. When it mattered, Lucas stood up for himself, and when those he stood up against tried to push him down, [The Rutherford Institute] came to his aide and backed him up to make it a fair fight. I am comforted to know you are defending the rights of the people. These fights matter. Every time you defend the rights of one person, you defend the rights of every person. You helped my son fight for his rights against the school, and, in doing so, Hillsborough County Public Schools will think twice before infringing on the rights of future students. Your defense of Lucas became an inspiration for the students in his school and sparked a healthy and meaningful debate among the teachers, students, and parents about the value of the First Amendment and the need for limits on government control over our personal beliefs. You are fighting for good and doing important work. Don't ever stop. Thank you, Rutherford Institute, for being there for my son when he needed you most."

America needs more freedom fighters like Lucas Hudson and The Rutherford Institute.

It's up to us.

We have the power to make and break the government.

We the American people—the citizenry—are the arbiters and ultimate guardians of America's welfare, defense, liberty, laws and prosperity.

We must act—and act responsibly.

A healthy, representative government is hard work. It takes a citizenry that is informed about the issues, educated about how the government operates, and willing to make the sacrifices necessary to stay involved.

As I make clear in my book [Battlefield America: The War on the American People](#) and in its fictional counterpart [The Erik Blair Diaries](#), it's our job to keep freedom alive using every nonviolent means available to us.

As Martin Luther King Jr. recognized in a speech delivered on December 5, 1955, just four days after Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to relinquish her seat on a Montgomery city bus: "[Democracy transformed from thin paper to thick action is the greatest form of government on earth.](#)"

Know your rights. Exercise your rights. Defend your rights. If not, you *will* lose them.

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