PS1 for 5/14/87#PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE OF THE CONSTITUTION

Although we are conditioned to accept newspapers as the daily bearers of bad news, the Hearst Corporation has fired a real blockbuster at us.

Since this is the year of the Constitution's Bicentennial, Hearst decided to find out how much the American people know about our nation's founding document, its contents, meaning and evolution. So Hearst commissioned a national survey on the American public's knowledge of the U.S. Constitution.

As you digest the depressing results, you can determine whom to blame. But it shouldn't be Hearst; Hearst is just the messenger for an important survey conducted by Research & Forecasts, Inc.

Only half (54%) of the American people know that the purpose of the Constitution was to create a Federal Government and define its powers. The other half think that the Constitution was written for a variety of other purposes, such as to declare independence from England, to create the original 13 states, or to make George Washington the first President.

The American people have wild, even ""way out,'' ideas about what is in the Constitution: 80% think it says ""all men are created equal,'' 82% think it says ""of the people, by the people, for the people,'' 77% think it says ""life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,'' and an incredible 45% think it includes Karl Marx's dictum ""from each according to his ability, to each according to his need.'' Of course, none of these expressions is in our Constitution.

Nearly half (49%) of the American people think that the President can suspend the Constitution in time of war or national emergency. A third (35%) think the President can adjourn Congress when he sees fit. Three fourths (75%) think the Constitution guarantees every citizen the right to a free public education through high school.

The American people are unaware how radical are many significant Supreme Court decisions. Half (50%) do not know that the Supreme Court has made it illegal for public schools to establish a moment of silence for purposes of prayer. More than half (57%) do not know that the Supreme Court has made it illegal for schools to require children to pledge allegiance to the U.S. Flag.

Less than half (41%) of the American people know that the Bill of Rights is the first ten amendments to the Constitution. A big majority (64%) think that the Constitution establishes English as our national language and requires public schools to use it.

The Commission on the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution was created by Congress to direct the observances of its 200th birthday this year. The Commission's chairman, former Chief Justice Warren Burger, has said he hopes that the Bicentennial will be the occasion of a ""national civics lesson'' in the Constitution.

To that end, he wants every American to own his own copy of the Constitution, to read and reread it, and to be able to discuss it. In a recent speech, Attorney General Edwin Meese III added, "It would be great to have people be able to point to a particular provision in their vest pocket copy of the Constitution as the source for their arguments or their particular analysis."

Earlier this year, the eastern metropolitan newspapers carried a spate of snide comments from academicians about Warren Burger's idea. Several of these self-appointed spokesmen of the intelligentsia ridiculed the notion that copies of the Constitution might be made available at super market checkout counters along with chewing gum and razor blades.

The great U.S. Constitution was not written by professors or lawyers. It was written by educated farmers and soldiers (23 of the 39 signers had fought in the American Revolution). These men had read

the classics, studied history, and personally fought for freedom.

The Constitution was written by and for "we the people." The checkout counter of the supermarket is one of the great democratic check points of our society, the stopping place where the most number of people and the greatest cross-section of people can be reached.

There's no better place to sell or distribute copies of the U.S. Constitution than the great American supermarket. Chief Justice Warren Burger has a great idea about everyone reading the Constitution, and the Hearst survey proves why.